

Can These Bones Live? Disability, wilderness, hope & God

Reflections from this year's conference - October 2025

The 14th annual conference on disability and the church, a partnership between St Martin-in-the-Fields and Inclusive Church, took place over the weekend of 18 – 19 October 2025. Krysia always marks out these gatherings in the diary well ahead of time, as an opportunity to enjoy meeting friends and colleagues and to come together and be. The ethos of the conference is important; being able to come as we are, including lying on the floor, wearing ear defenders and stimming in Krysia's case! In many ways, it's a space which actively turns the usual conference expectations on their head, as Krysia and colleague Renasha Khan have [written](#).

This was our first 'hybrid' event and the first time the conference had been back at St Martin's since the pandemic began, following eight years on site and five years online. On Saturday 45 people joined on site at St Martin's, and 60 online from around the UK, Europe, North America and New Zealand. Being able to join in person or online provided choice and different types of community for delegates – and was a challenge for the planners, onsite and online production teams.

An important aspect of this event is building access into the day rather than adding it on. Visual material was audio-described, BSL and captions were available online and BSL onsite. Mindful of our own disappointing experiences of hybrid conferences, where joining online has been simply watching what happened in the building, we had worked to balance content delivery from each place. We wanted to ensure that all those present could see each other on the big screen whenever possible, building a sense of one community across the two spaces.

Saturday began with a welcome from Fiona as conference chair, who said, 'Wilderness is not the end; God always has other plans' and quoted Vaclav Havel on hope as not as optimism but 'as an orientation of the heart'. We had a few minutes to talk with an onsite neighbour or in online small breakout room, sharing why we'd come and our hopes for the day or weekend, before Andrew Woodward, the onsite chaplain, led an opening prayer.

The first storyteller, Laura Gilbert, echoed the theme of the conference of wilderness and hope by sharing her experiences of Long Covid. Laura spoke of how her capacity had been stripped away and she'd had to learn to live a more fragile life, turning inward towards the wilderness and finding a new understanding of herself and of God.

Keynote speaker Rabbi Professor Julia Watts Belser joined live from the US via Zoom. Julia shared some of her work in progress her talk entitled 'God of Crows'. As a visual person, Krysia can still recall the images of the crows Julia shared, along with the sonographs and sounds of the crows' calls. It was beautiful, poetic and striking presentation and gave much food for thought. Participants spent time considering the ideas in facilitated breakout groups, a valuable space for sharing experience and ideas.

After lunch storyteller David Trelawny-Ross told of more than 20 years in the wilderness of ME and the ways in which he had found hope, even amidst the illness and death of close loved ones. Participants then moved into their choice of 5 workshops – two online, two onsite and one hybrid. Krysia helped to facilitate Dr Emma Swai's hybrid workshop which explored a biblical discussion of Ezekiel 37, challenging participants to think about wilderness and exile. Online participants could also choose from Revd Chantel Noppen's workshop on being called in the wilderness or Rachel Holdforth holding creative space based on work by Emma Major. Onsite participants explored community as space for sharing and resistance while sewing slogans onto fabric, with El Dewar and Nat Clayton, or considered self-care in difficult times with Emily Richardson and Rev Dr Hannah Lewis. Krysia always enjoys the conference workshops as a chance to explore a part of a topic related to the conference theme in a way personal to you. The day ended with a gentle hybrid liturgy which included Cole Arthur Riley's breath prayers and 'butterflies of hope' created in the onsite art space with Belinda Scarlett and Jane Ware.

On Sunday morning the conference theme was explored in St Martin's main Eucharist, live-streamed with BSL interpretation. The service was written by members of St Martin's Disability Advisory Group with a powerful sermon from Dr Naomi Lawson Jacobs. Conference participants joined St Martin's congregation in their regular monthly theology group, discussing wilderness and hope with Revd Dr Sam Wells.

The weekend concluded with a hybrid screening of the feature-length documentary *Defiant Lives which* maps the history of the disability rights movement across the USA, the UK and Australia. It is a difficult but important film to watch. Afterwards Krysia took part in a panel discussion with Dr Naomi Jacobs and with Revd Dr Lamar Hardwick in Georgia, USA, responding to the complex issues raised from both the UK and US contexts.

Feedback from participants has been hugely encouraging, both [longer reflections](#) and the immediate: 'joy in being together and feeling part of the community', 'priceless and so needed', 'made me realise I'm not alone', 'refreshing to see the spiritual, political reality of our lives being brought together and making theological sense of this all'. Already we're looking forward to next year!

Report by Dr Krysia Waldock with Fiona MacMillan, members of the planning team for this conference on disability and church. Krysia is a postdoctoral researcher at Swansea University and co-hosts the Autism and Theology podcast. Fiona is a practitioner, advocate, speaker and writer, member of the Church of England's national Disability Task Group and Neurodiversity working group.