

Learning Disabilities Consultation 2013/14 Report

Executive Summary

There are many people with learning disabilities in Scotland and it was recognised that there was a need to provide an evidence base from which to develop sustainable ways to connect, resource and inspire congregations to be communities in which these people can meaningfully belong. In response the Learning Disabilities Working Group (LDWG), operating within the Mission & Discipleship Council (MDC) of the Church of Scotland, engaged in a consultation process.

The findings were that:

- There are many examples of good practice and resources already available for ministry in this area and there are individuals keen to serve. However, a variety of approaches should be employed (events, resources and online provision) to enable individuals to engage in learning and development and be supported as they serve.
- Those with learning disabilities can bring much to a church community and indeed there is a gospel imperative to involve all. Resources should be provided by which congregations can consider the 'why' of involving those with learning disabilities in the full life of church.
- There is little to no clarity regarding the role and remit of those appointed by presbytery to the role of Presbytery Disability Adviser (PDA). MDC will propose a new way of working direct with congregational contacts that have a passion for the role.

Background

The Learning Disabilities Working Group (LDWG), operating within the Mission & Discipleship Council (MDC) of the Church of Scotland, has the following remit from the 2011 General Assembly:

- to encourage and support local churches in the inclusion of people with learning disabilities;
- to establish and maintain a network of people interested and willing to help; and
- to keep aware of new developments and new agencies in this field.

The group has representatives from Ministries Council, Church & Society Council, Mission & Discipleship Council and Crossreach.

*There were 26,455 adults with learning disabilities known to local authorities in Scotland in 2013.
[Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability]*

People with learning disabilities have a significant, lifelong, condition that started before adulthood, which affected their development and which means they need help to:

- understand information;
- learn skills; and
- cope independently.

[A definition from 'The Keys to Life, Improving quality of life for people with learning disabilities' The Scottish Government 2013]

In order to fulfil its remit the LDWG recognised that it needed to undergo a consultation process so as to better understand the needs and make appropriate evidence-based recommendations. This report describes the consultation process that was carried out, the key findings and proposals arising.

Consultation Process

Aim of the consultation:

To provide an evidence base from which the MDC can develop sustainable ways to connect, resource and inspire congregations to be communities in which those with learning disabilities can meaningfully belong.

Consultation methodology:

The LDWG devised a set of questions that it decided would form the basis for the consultation process. This provided a consistent approach to the information gathering whilst enabling the format of the questions to be adapted to suit different audiences. The questions were:

1. What is happening in our churches and what experiences do congregations have of people with learning disabilities engaging with church life or just coming along?
2. What are the perceived barriers for those people?
3. Are there success stories to share? What works well?
4. What support would be welcomed from the Church?
5. Are there named contacts with a heart for serving in the area of learning disabilities that the Mission & Discipleship Council could work with?

A number of avenues of consultation were utilised, namely:

- A face-to-face gathering on 22 March 2014 of individuals who were identified to the LDWG as Presbytery Disability Advisors (PDA). The delegates provided feedback via facilitated focus groups. 29 attended this event from 21 presbyteries (from Caithness to England).
- Focus group type meetings with individuals with learning disabilities. This also included seeking feedback from parents and unpaid carers where possible. Focus groups were carried out with:
 - Brightons Parish Church Friends of Jesus group, Falkirk, on 29 May 2014
 - The Haven, Fetteresso Church, Stonehaven on 26 July 2014
 - A number of churches from the Dunfermline area on 23 August 2014
 - Crossreach Service Users Forum, Motherwell on 25 August 2014
- A questionnaire for Support Agencies providing care services for those with learning disabilities. Questionnaires were sent out to agencies in:
 - Glasgow
 - Falkirk
 - Scottish Borders
- Seeking insights from experts in the field and other agencies, namely:
 - Colleagues from Prospects (Ivy Blair)
 - Urban Saints
 - Scripture Union
 - SPRED (Special Religious Development) in Glasgow
 - World leading academics in this field from Aberdeen University, School of Divinity, History and Philosophy (John Swinton and Brian Brock)
 - The Church of England Disability Advisor (Roy McCloughry)
 - The L'Arche Community
 - The Iona Community

- LDWG members carrying out study of a variety of relevant literature. A sample of which is:
 - Roy McCloughry; *The Enabled Life, Christianity in a Disabling World* (SPCK, 2013)
 - Stanley Hauerwas, Jean Vanier, and John Swinton; *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Voice of Weakness* (InterVarsity Press, 2008)
 - Stephanie O Hubach; *Same Lake Different Boat* (P&R Publishing, 2006)
 - Frances Young; *Arthur's Call, A journey of faith in the face of severe learning disability* (SPCK, 2014)
 - Brett Webb-Mitchell; *Beyond Accessibility: Toward Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Faith Communities* (Church Publishing Inc., 2010)
 - Brian Brock and John Swinton ed.; *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012)
 - John M. Hull; *Disability, The Inclusive Church Resource* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2014)

Key Findings from Consultation

1. **Examples of good practice:** There are many examples of good practice. These encompass situations where those with learning disabilities are involved with various church activities, including the regular diet of worship, and/or with specific 'alongside' ministries established specifically for their needs. Some common 'good practice' themes that were identified are: welcoming; accepting and valuing of difference; a chance to make and meet friends; being able to contribute.
2. **Ample time required:** Building relationships with those with learning disabilities and in turn developing the appropriate provision and modes of involvement can take a good deal of time and it is important to be aware of that.
3. **Variety of needs:** There are needs in every parish, but they can vary considerably. There is no single way to do ministry with those with learning disabilities but the widely varied needs will require varied (possibly individualised) approaches.
4. **Taking an active part:** There is a need to enable all, including those with learning disabilities, to have the opportunity to take an active part in the whole life of a church community. For those with learning disabilities this includes the need to enable participation in the regular diet of worship and in separate provision.
5. **Multidisciplinary approach:** A multidisciplinary approach is required to meet needs. It was noted with concern that on many occasions the spiritual needs of those with learning disabilities are not given appropriate attention in their care plan. However, examples of good practice would indicate that when sufficient time is given to building relationships with care agencies and carers then individual spiritual needs are often given much better attention.
6. **Specialist needs:** There is a clear requirement to enable congregations to better understand how to respond to the often specialist needs of those with learning disabilities, whether in ways of doing things or utilising specific resources.

7. **Awkwardness:** There is a degree of awkwardness around disability such that there can be a fear of 'getting it wrong', for example in communicating effectively. When we understand that loneliness and isolation are significant experiences for those with learning disabilities then utilising specialist resources etc. is not the only answer, but seeking to build two way friendships can be a significant response. Indeed, approaching all from the perspective of wanting to build friendship is likely to lead onto a natural heartfelt response to meeting any needs through more formal provision as described in the above point.
8. **Growth for all:** Those with learning disabilities can bring much to a church community. As we enable all to be involved in the life of our church communities the mistake can be to approach it in a one-sided fashion, e.g. we should do this because it means others can benefit from what we do. It would seem that for congregations to be truly representing Jesus's body then all need to be truly together. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche Community, described the amazing growth and transformation, as disciples of Christ, that has been experienced by those when they have sought to be with, learn from, grow with and become friends with those with learning disabilities, however profound disabilities are. The recently launched Learn Eldership publication includes a starter paper touching on such themes, written by John Swinton and titled 'Creating Communities of Belonging'.
9. **Vocation:** There is a good deal of consideration given to inclusion of those with disabilities in many different realms, professional or otherwise. However congregations can go further and, for example, ask: What it is that people with even the most profound disabilities can offer to the mission of the congregation? In other words: What has God called them to do and to be? This moves beyond inclusion. The shift is from considering how people with learning disabilities might be included to the more creative consideration of what their vocation might be in God's mission and how the congregation might support and partner them in that.
10. **Resources:** There are many helpful resources etc. already available for ministry in this area.
11. **Willing individuals:** There are a number of willing individuals keen to serve the Church to meet the needs of those with learning disabilities. However, they expressed the necessity of being supported and resourced by a Council of the Church as well as through informal network arrangements.
12. **Presbytery Disability Advisers:** When the remit for the LDWG was first agreed in 2011 presbyteries were asked to appoint Presbytery Disability Advisers (PDA). Unfortunately MDC underwent significant staff changes at that time so that no real collaborative activity occurred between it and presbyteries. The consultation process has identified that a wide variety of response occurred following that 2011 directive. For example, some presbyteries have no PDA whilst others have appointed someone to the role but often the focus has been essentially on physical disability. In most cases there is little to no clarity regarding the role and remit of what was intended to be a Learning Disabilities Adviser. Furthermore MDC has also undergone consultations with presbyteries in 2013 and 2014 in various areas of its work and one of the most significant findings is that presbytery appointed roles are often difficult to sustain and often don't serve their intended purpose.
13. **Call to action:** There was a request that MDC should assist by raising awareness and calling to action through Kirk Session and Presbytery contacts.

Proposals Arising

1. Ensure that the LDWG continues to operate in order to support and progress this area of church life.
2. A variety of approaches should be employed (events, resources and online provision) to share working examples of inclusion that are having a positive effect.
3. Provide mechanisms for sharing or signposting resources that are already available.
4. Provide the means by which congregations can consider the 'why' of involving those with learning disabilities in the full life of church, including the gospel imperatives for our church communities and the disciples of Christ that they are made up of.
5. Communicate to presbyteries the findings about presbytery appointed roles (including the PDA) and propose a new way of working direct with congregational contacts that have a passion for the role.
6. Raise awareness and call to action Kirk Sessions and presbyteries concerning their call to enable all to belong to their church communities. This might need to involve developing relationships with care organisations.

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