

## **WILL YOU BE MY FRIEND? HOW CAN FRIENDSHIP ENABLE THE INCLUSION OF PHYSICALLY DISABLED PEOPLE IN BAPTIST CHURCH COMMUNITIES?**

**Martin Hobgen**

**Luther King House, Manchester**

By way of introduction, the publicity for *Theology Live! 2017* got the title of my paper slightly wrong—it dropped the word “people” after the words “physically disabled”. Whilst this may initially seem trivial, it is I believe more significant than it might at first appear. You see when I moved to Coventry in 2001 my new GP asked “What are you?” rather than “Who are you?” The difference between ‘what’ and ‘who’ I am got me reflecting on my experiences and I think reflects whether disabled people are seen in terms of Martin Buber’s ‘I-It’ relationship, ‘what are you?’, or in terms of ‘I-Thou’ relationship, ‘who are you?’.<sup>1</sup>

A note on language—Impersonal (the disabled) or Personal (disabled people), positive (disability) or negative (handicap/cripple), based on assumptions (often of what disabled cannot do) or understanding (knowing what disabled people can do), inclusive (“Please stand if you’re able...”) or exclusive (“Please stand...”)?

Reflecting on my personal experience to begin the pastoral cycle/spiral: I was born in the mid-1960s before tests for my medical condition were available; therefore unexpected and significant challenges came to light. Counter to expectations of the time I was raised in a loving family, rather than in an institution; mainstream educated to Masters level, rather than special school;<sup>2</sup> trained as a teacher but worked in the computing industry, rather than living on benefits; married rather than single, pretty independent rather than totally dependent. Throughout my life I have been positively shaped by ‘who’ people see me as, however ‘what’ people see me as does have a negative impact at times.

While going through Baptist Ministerial Recognition Committee, and ministerial formation in a Baptist College, ‘who’ usually dominated over ‘what’. However I have found that in a couple of periods of ministerial settlement the ‘what I am’ (a disabled wheelchair user) dominated over the ‘who I am’ (a Minister, academic, married person, brother, friend, etc.) Partly due to being in mainstream education I see myself as ‘a-non-disabled-person-sitting down’ rather than ‘a-disabled-person’. It has enabled me to form deep friendships with non-disabled people, with greater ease than some disabled people do.<sup>3</sup> One way that I would sum up my experience of disability is the phrase, “When I am among friends I am least disabled, when I am among strangers I am most disabled.” However this relational view is not how disability has been

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<sup>1</sup> Recent experience of railway staff radioing platform “There’s a wheelchair on its way to you.” No acknowledgement of the person using the wheelchair!

<sup>2</sup> Which tended at the time to focus on physical independence at great cost to educational attainment.

<sup>3</sup> Observations and discussions when I lived in a Shaftesbury Society hostel and John Grooms housing complex.

understood and even today such an understanding has not been properly applied to disabled people with physical impairments.

Christian and secular contexts reveal some troubling problems with the inclusion of disabled people in church community life and secular society. A 2015 UK survey of disabled people attending a range of churches 'All of us complete in Christ'<sup>4</sup> showed that there are many disabled people in churches who want to be more active in the life of the church. For various reasons, however, they are not encouraged or enabled to do so. Initial analysis of a Baptist Union of Great Britain Disability Justice Group survey from 2013 shows similar evidence. A very recent secular survey on loneliness and disability indicates a significant problem with isolation in the wider community.<sup>5</sup> If churches are good at including disabled people then they can play a part in addressing this wider issue, which has implications for outreach that is inclusive of disabled people.

I want to explore some of the possible reasons for exclusion and point towards the potential for friendship with God and one another to facilitate the inclusion of disabled people in the life of Baptist churches, Associations, and in our Union. This will have a much wider impact, enabling the inclusion of various 'others' and may have ecclesiological impact as well. This might be particularly relevant to the current language of 'Baptists Together' as it might enrich our understanding of the family, body and covenant language that we use.

Historical and sociological perspectives are revealing. In order to see how disability is understood and how we can see things from a more inclusive perspective we need to understand something of how disability has been understood, historically<sup>6</sup> and sociologically, noting the role of friendship. Prior to the industrial revolution disabled people, if they survived childhood, would have lived among their family and neighbours in a rural based economy, participating in the life of the local community as far as they were able.<sup>7</sup> They were as likely as anyone to attend the local church. They were, however, at greater risk of poverty, their impairments might be linked to sin, curse or magic,<sup>8</sup> or they were labelled 'the village idiot'.<sup>9</sup> Friendships between disabled and non-disabled people, however, were at least a possibility in this setting.

The industrial revolution brought huge changes, as society shifted from rural to urban, with industrialisation. Disabled people were dislocated from the local community among family and friends, as they were less productive in an industrial society. They usually ended up in some form of institution with

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.throughtheroof.org/abd/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/All-of-US-Complete-WEB-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Someone Cares If I'm not There*. Report of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, 2017

<https://www.sense.org.uk/umbraco/surface/download/download?filepath=/media/1460/campaign-loneliness-someone-cares-if-im-not-there.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> David M. Turner, *Disability in Eighteenth-Century England: Imagining Physical Impairment* (New York: Routledge, 2012); David M Turner & Kevin Stagg, eds., *Social Histories of Disability and Deformity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) and others have argued how hard it is to investigate disabled people historically because of their marginalisation. Evidence has therefore to be gained indirectly rather than directly.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Marks, *Disability: Controversial Debates and Psychosocial Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Victor Finkelstein, *Attitudes and Disabled People* (New York: World Rehabilitation Fund, 1980); Dan Goodley, *Disability Studies* (London: Sage, 2010); Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Michael Oliver & Colin Barnes, *The New Politics of Disablement* (London: Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2013), 61-62 suggests this is the origin of the phrase.

the asymmetric relationships that this entails.<sup>10</sup> The rise of modern medicine saw the medicalization of disability, focussed on healing/curing the individual to enable them to participate productively in ‘normal’ society. Disabled people were seen as dependent, passive and reliant on charity, often from churches or other religious organisations.<sup>11</sup> This way of understanding disabled people is now known as the medical or individual model of disability. Since this approach emphasised the difference between disabled and non-disabled people, friendship has often been dismissed as being a way of understanding disabled people and their relationship with non-disabled people. This situation dominated until the late twentieth century, and vestiges of it often persists today.

The late twentieth century saw another shift. In the early 1970’s disabled campaigners and academics within sociology triggered a major change in the understanding of disability. Instead of focussing on the individual and seeing their impairment as the problem, the focus shifted to society and located the problem with the attitudes and practises that exclude disabled people.<sup>12</sup> This approach is broadly called the ‘Social Model’ which has many variants; common to all is that disability is seen as a social construct.<sup>13</sup> The inclusion of disabled people is therefore achieved by changing society rather than changing disabled people. It has been noted by one author that friendship has not been linked to physically disabled people either in sociology of disability or within the broader interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies.<sup>14</sup>

Moving to a theological perspective there is a long history of disability and disabled people being mentioned ‘in passing’ throughout the history of the church.<sup>15</sup> It can be argued that from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards churches unintentionally adopted the medical/individual understanding of disability, leading to disabled people being seen as ‘other’—either because they were being judged/tested, were unforgiven sinners, or at the other extreme were seen as examples of virtuous suffering.<sup>16</sup> In some traditions this leads to an over emphasis on the need for healing prior to be allowed to exercise their gifts within the church.<sup>17</sup> This also reinforces the ‘working/doing for’ approach to disabled people, sometimes in segregated forms of ministry.<sup>18</sup> These approaches inhibit relationships such as friendship and tend to exclude rather than include disabled people.

It was only with the publishing of Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*<sup>19</sup> in 1994 that there was any coherent focus on theological reflection upon disability and from there disability theology has grown as a

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<sup>10</sup> A. Borsay, “Returning Patients to the Community: Disability, medicine and economic rationality before the Industrial Revolution,” *Disability & Society* 13.5 (1998): 645-663.

<sup>11</sup> David Braddock and Susan Parish clearly shows that religious institutions were providing care and support for disabled people throughout phase 1& 2. See David L. Braddock and Susan L. Parish, “An Institutional History of Disability,” in *Handbook of Disability Studies*, eds. G. L. Albrecht et al. (London: SAGE, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer, *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley, 2010), 30 and David Johnstone, *An Introduction to Disability Studies* (London: David Fulton, 2001), 14.

<sup>13</sup> See Marks, *Disability*; Oliver, *Politics*; Oliver & Barnes, *New Politics*.

<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare notes no significant change between the two editions of his book, *Disability Rights and Wrongs*.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Brock & John Swinton eds., *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> My personal experience of people assuming God will heal me and if not then I lack faith or am an unforgiven sinner. Anecdotally this is the experience of some other physically disabled people who I have talked to about this issue.

<sup>18</sup> Disabled Christian Fellowship, services for healing of disabled people etc.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

field, in the UK and US in particular. Eiesland relies heavily on Liberation Theology and gives disabled people a voice for the first time within theology.<sup>20</sup> Her central argument that the risen Christ bears the marks of impairment and that victory is obtained through weakness and sacrifice, is significant for disabled people.

Here and now is not the place to survey the field but work has been done on making church accessible in the broadest sense,<sup>21</sup> of acknowledging that all human beings have limits,<sup>22</sup> and challenging the so called 'cult of normalcy'.<sup>23</sup> Others have wrestled with scripture and its interpretation.<sup>24</sup> These approaches all use, implicitly or explicitly one of the social models of disability. Others have focussed not on showing disabled people as being 'like' non-disabled people but on understandings of God as one who welcomes all people, disabled and non-disabled, all made in the *imago dei*, to be included within His church.<sup>25</sup> Emerging from this line of thinking is the idea of the offer of friendship with God, and consequently of friendship with others.

A relational perspective can help here. We are primarily relational beings, made in the image of a relational God.<sup>26</sup> As we've seen, with regards to physical disability this relationality has been forgotten or ignored within both sociology and theology of disability, with one major exception. There has been a significant amount of work on friendship and people with learning disabilities, with the work of Jean Vanier and the development of L'Arche communities being the most obvious, together with the work of Hauerwas.<sup>27</sup> I have drawn on work by Hans Reinders<sup>28</sup> as a way of understanding friendship as a means of including all disabled people within the wider faith community. He suggests that friendship is a gift of grace from God such that *all* people are able to respond and have a relationship with God and other people.

So why do I think friendship is important as a means of fostering inclusion? There are many characteristics of friendship that have been identified by contemporary writers exploring a theology of friendship.<sup>29</sup> I want to focus briefly on three characteristics that can foster the inclusion of disabled people in church life. These can be connected to a Baptist understanding of church as a gathered covenant community, which is the particular context for my research.

Intentionality is important because spontaneous friendships occur between people who are 'like' each other in some way, who share something in common. Among fellow believers a common faith is often, but not always, a ground for developing friendships that might not occur beyond the faith community. However

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<sup>20</sup> Also uses Minority Group Model, a version of Social Model of disability.

<sup>21</sup> Jennie Weiss Block, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Deborah B. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology* (New York: OUP, 2009)

<sup>23</sup> Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*.

<sup>24</sup> See for example the work of Hector Avalos, Sarah J. Melcher, & Jeremy Schipper, *This Able Body* (Atlanta: SBL, 2007) and Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2011).

<sup>25</sup> For other examples see Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) and John Swinton, "Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 14.2 (2011): 273-307.

<sup>26</sup> The debates about the relational understanding of Trinity are complex and beyond this short paper. See Jason Sexton ed., *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, (Zondervan, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> John Swinton ed., *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability* (N. Y.: Hayworth Pastoral, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*. He focuses on the friendship relationships with People with Learning Disabilities.

<sup>29</sup> Steve Summers, *Friendship* (London: T & T Clark, 2009); Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002).

there are some characteristics and visible disability is one example,<sup>30</sup> where even common faith does not overcome the perception of difference, reinforced by the factors already discussed.

God, through Christ's life, death and resurrection, has intentionally restored our relationship with our creator, a relationship that is described as friendship by Jesus in John 15:15. God offers friendship to all who are made in his image, disabled and non-disabled. This social distinction can be added to the lists, in Galatians 3:26-29 and Colossians 3:11, of the social barriers removed through faith in Christ. Just as we are called to share our faith with others, God calls us to intentionally share friendship with others who are 'unlike' ourselves, in ways that overcome the barriers created by spontaneous friendships between 'like' people.<sup>31</sup>

The social models of disability and the theological approaches that use these are interested in the general relationship between disabled and non-disabled people, often treating both as homogenous groups.<sup>32</sup> Disability, like many other experiences, is however very diverse.<sup>33</sup> It is one thing to say that the church welcomes all disabled people and often a very different matter to welcome particular disabled people.<sup>34</sup> Friendship is *particular*, it is between *particular* people (although understood properly this is open to others and not exclusive), and the power to include particular 'others' arises from this focus, rather than a broad desire to include non-specified 'others' in a universal way.

One of the reasons that particularity in friendship is a positive characteristic is that it fosters responsibility for the good of the 'other' rather than a relationship based on being present with the other.<sup>35</sup> This is reflected in the 'being with' nature of friendship, contrasting with the 'doing for' nature of charitable attitudes towards disabled people.<sup>36</sup> There is also a significant link between particularity of friendship and hospitality that further fosters inclusion of 'others'.<sup>37</sup> There is a debate here, for another day, about the particularity of friendship and God's universal love.<sup>38</sup>

Since the early eighteenth century disabled people have experienced highly asymmetric relationships, with institutions, professionals, charities and non-disabled people. Disabled people have been seen by non-disabled people as passive recipients of care (pastoral, medical and social), a notion that often persists today.<sup>39</sup> As a counter to these perceptions the mutuality of friendships is vital.

A significant impact of mutual friendships is that this enables two or more people to work together for the benefit of one another and others.<sup>40</sup> This means that disabled people are not just present in a church community but work with others to be empowered and to empower others to participate in the life and

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<sup>30</sup> Others include race, culture, class, gender, age, sexuality.

<sup>31</sup> Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*. See also numerous works by Vanier, Hauerwas and others

<sup>32</sup> For example the sweeping reference to 'the disabled'.

<sup>33</sup> There are a wide range of impairments. Congenital/Acquired makes a big psychological difference.

<sup>34</sup> This is potentially an issue in ministerial settlement.

<sup>35</sup> Summers, *Friendship*, 125-27.

<sup>36</sup> An idea examined by Samuel Wells, *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), though not directly mentioning disabled people.

<sup>37</sup> Summers, *Friendship*, 146-50.

<sup>38</sup> Based around issues raised by Anders Nygren and others

<sup>39</sup> Narrative of disabled people as scroungers, dependent on the state, burden to society etc.

<sup>40</sup> Guido de Graaff, *Politics in Friendship* (London: T & T Clark, 2014), 164-172 where the body of Christ proposed in Romans 12 is examined through mutual relationship within a church community.

ministry of the church. In addition this challenges the very individualistic understandings that have in the past fostered groups that 'work for' disabled people, instead fostering an approach of 'being with' disabled people.

I am currently working on how our contemporary understanding of the role of covenant relationships within and among Baptist churches can be seen through the lens of friendship. At a recent Baptist Union Council meeting I was in discussion with someone who said "It's all well and good saying we are a covenant community but what does that look like in reality?" I suggest that it looks like a community of friends of God, called by God into friendship with others, marked by Baptism and the Breaking of Bread.

This needs a significant theological underpinning and I am currently examining Paul Fiddes' work on relational Trinity, which I believe will provide that grounding. This will in lead to an understanding of covenant relations in the church community that can be enriched by the concept of friendship. In turn this will enable the church to be an inclusive community, of disabled people and of others to tend to be kept on the edge or outside our churches.

So, we have seen that there has been very little work on the role of friendship and physical disability within either sociology of disability or the wider field of disability studies. Theological reflection of friendship and disabled people has so far been restricted to considering relationships with people with learning disabilities. My hope is that by focussing on friendship as a means of inclusion, then physically disabled people within Baptist (and of course other) church communities at local, Association and Union level, will be empowered to exercise their God given gifts in all forms of ministry. In addition there is an impact on the inclusion of other marginalised people and groups – since we seek to include our friends.

So finally I suggest that by enabling disabled and non-disabled people to become friends rather than remaining as strangers the commonly held myth that 'disabled people are passive recipients of pastoral care' can be challenged and a far more empowering understanding of and relationship with disabled people can foster proper inclusion in all aspect of Baptist Church communities.