

## **OFFERING A WELCOME TO ALL**

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It is with some trepidation that I tackle the issue of disability, for unfortunate it has become such a minefield of political correctness, that I fear even to open my mouth lest I offend. I've known for some time that it is wrong to speak of the 'handicapped' – for the term which derives from going "hand-in-cap" for help, is deemed patronising. But recently I have discovered that it is equally patronising to speak of the 'disabled'. We should, I am told, be speaking of 'difference' rather than 'disability'! Whatever, the fact is that many people in the UK are 'disadvantaged' as a result of their 'difference' – 8.7 million to be precise. The question is: how can we ensure that they are made truly welcome in our church? For instance, today most churches make provision for people with hearing problems – loops for hearing aid users are the norm. But what about life beyond the formal church services? What provision do we make at church meetings for people who are hard-of-hearing? Most church meetings do not take place in rooms where there is loop system; and even if they do, to what extent do we insist that all those taking part in discussion actually use the microphone? Then there is the challenge presented by the advent of the overhead projector and now PowerPoint. In the past people with sight problems could use large-print hymnbooks; and for the blind there were Braille editions of the hymnbook. But few churches confine themselves to a hymnbook today. What then? In our church for every service we produce large-print editions of the songs due to be sung: thanks to modern technology, production is easy, but it does require discipline to ensure that the songs are chosen sufficiently ahead of time to ensure their production. Songs remind me of another new challenge – the requirement in many a church for the congregation to stand for 20 minutes or more worshipping God. It really is far too long for older friends, and if one sits down, the people standing normally obscure the screen. Then there is the challenge of accessibility – to what extent are our churches truly accessible to all? Even where ramps are built to gain access to the 'sanctuary', often much of the rest of the premises are off-limits to wheel-chair users because there is no lift or ramp. This in turn can really militate against children with walking difficulties. And what about toilet provision – is the door wide enough, is the room big enough, are all the necessary adaptations in place? And what about parking provision for Blue Badge holders? And having made all the adaptations, do we ensure we actually make eye contact with the wheel-chair users and speak to them – or do we address their carers instead? Yes, if God loves us all (and he does!) then we must ensure that we in turn welcome all.

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