

Quotes from a friend of mine, Victoria Holdridge, with a child with severe autism and multiple disabilities.

Thanks for inviting me yesterday, it was reassuring to know there are other people out there who have some understanding of living with disabilities and inclusion (or lack of) and I was particularly taken by one of the ladies (whose face I can see but whose name I cannot recall!) who was talking not just of making both a building accessible AND worship, but also how a person with disabilities can ENHANCE the worship life of a church! And not only that as an add on, she went straight in at that level!

We have sadly experienced very obvious discrimination within our own church family but that was thankfully dealt with on an informal level without our involvement, although the person in question did not offer apologies which I think were in order, so I was pleased that the strategy is going to look at that process (we are all fallible and misjudgements will continue to be made). Other discriminations are more subtle or "why do we have to do that, we haven't got one of those people?" Sometimes I have not even recognised the discrimination until it was pointed out to me! Our minister was told at a church meal that she "couldn't sit there as that table was where they put the vegetarians"

I was also heartened by someone talking about the wordyness of worship and recall having several discussions (and some expositions met with stoney silence) about outdated language that Jimmy would not have the slightest hope of understanding and how the use of it Denys him access to worship eg KJV and the "proper old hymns in their original format" so goodness only knows how people would actually respond to adjusting communication specially!

Sometimes things like this go unaddressed for the fear of rejection or the lack of physical and emotional energy to potentially have to fight yet another battle over inclusion and just wanting to be accepted.

Then there is the middle ground where people who are genuinely lovely just do not understand through lack of education and lack of engagement with the person with disabilities. Engagement can take extra effort but is worth it. Very few people engage or express any desire to engage with Jimmy, he won't be the only one. How much do we cause or exacerbate disability? How is Jimmy's communication going to improve without practice? We deny people ability by not making reasonable adjustments eg suitable toilet facilities, ramped access, practicing good and appropriate communication.

There is ignorance about "invisible" disabilities and special attention needs to be given to this area and those who do not have a label.

"He needs a good hiding" in an angry and disgusted voice.

"But you don't know what his abilities or disabilities are as they are not always obvious"

"Oh he's not like Jimmy, he just needs taking in hand" etc etc

There has been discrimination against children and young people for years in our chapel, I am sure we will not be the only place where that exists, how can we be inclusive to people with disabilities if we cannot recognise the differing needs of the full spectrum of those who are "mainstream"?

I recognise that there are people in this group who have suffered and are nursing wounds old and new and who may still be working through anger at how they have been mistreated. I hope that this group of people can understand that although as individuals we may not currently understand how discrimination has affected one another and may make mistakes and fall into traps, that we all want to understand which is why we are having this discussion and we therefore need to be forgiving , and that actually by falling into the traps ourselves through this process we will be able to see where education needs to be focused.