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“Hidden in the shadows”

While the Christian church states we are all equal before God, in practice the Church often believes that an individual's faith is dependent on their intellectual ability. This results in those with learning disabilities being seen and treated less equally and often excluded from the Christian Church. Why is this happening and how can we ensure that individuals with learning disabilities and their families are included and theologically included in the Christian church?

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Abstract

Including individuals with learning disabilities in the Church and ensuring they and their families feel a sense of true belonging in the Christian community is crucially important as its attitudes and actions towards this vulnerable group becomes a mirror of the Church and touches at the heart of Christian beliefs and principles. There is a belief within the Church that faith is dependent on knowledge of the scriptures and intellectual ability and to address this misconception, theology of disability has evolved to try and explain disability and facilitate inclusion. Models of disability have historically influenced theologians in the development of the theology of disability, and I agree with those who suggest that a new theology is necessary, one that is driven by theologians with a lived experience of learning disabilities so that inclusion becomes meaningful. Inclusion must acknowledge the existing spiritual lives of individuals with learning disabilities for it to become a reality. Building meaningful bridges within the church requires us to ask questions, which potentially may be uncomfortable to ask. Why is inclusion not happening? Why are individuals with learning disability being excluded spiritually? and how can we instigate change?

This dissertation will explore these questions and advocate a need to move towards true belonging, hence the title borrowed from Swinton (2021) who stated that individuals with learning disabilities have been hidden in the shadows (p.35). Sadly, they continue to be hidden and excluded today.

It is hoped that this dissertation will facilitate further discussion on ways to build bridges towards theological inclusion and a sense of belonging for individuals with learning disabilities and their families within the Christian church.

Introduction:

Sadly, individuals with learning disabilities have become one of the most “powerless groups in the population”(Shea 2019,p.1) and I believe we have a duty as a Christian church to be a voice for those who have no voice, otherwise as Williams (2000) warns if we only mirror our own image, we endanger human dignity itself.

The belief by many able-bodied Christians, that knowledge of the scriptures and intellect is a pre-requisite of attaining faith has resulted in those with learning disabilities being seen as inferior and incapable of having a spiritual relationship with God. This belief has further disempowered individuals with learning disability and as someone who has the personal experience of a family member with learning disability, the injustice of this has driven this dissertation.

It is important at the outset, to note that I have chosen for this dissertation, to adopt the term ‘Learning Disability’ which refers to individuals with an ‘intellectual disability’ who meet the international criteria of a diagnosis of a learning disability which consists of an intellectual impairment (IQ);social or adaptive dysfunction combined with IQ, and it is of an early onset (Emerson et al 2010,p.2).

It is an accepted term and important to note that the terminology has changed over the years and continues to evolve. In the past terminology like ‘idiots’;’ feeble minded’ were used which had hugely, damaging, derogatory and dehumanising effects on the way individuals with learning disabilities were viewed.

The term ‘Mental handicap’ was adopted in 1948 by the newly formed NHS and with the publication of the Community Care Act in 1990, the term changed to ‘learning disabilities. ‘Learning difficulties’ is also used within the education system to describe individuals who have dyslexia, for example, but do not have any impairment of their intellect. This is also why I have chosen to use the term ‘learning disabilities ‘ for the purpose of this dissertation, as it refers specifically to those individuals with ‘learning disabilities’ as noted in the above international criteria, which notes intellectual impairment.

The use of the word 'disability' is used mindfully throughout this dissertation as again, many individuals prefer to use the term 'learning difficulties', this term being first used by the 'People First Independent Advocacy Organisation' in 1984. The reasons for this are based upon the need to move away from seeing the person as being disabled/having an illness, to a term which suggests that it is our society which in fact, is disabling.

This discussion on terminology is relevant and important as the emphasis through-out this dissertation - will be on the individual themselves and not on a label that is attached to a person. Brock (2019) states clearly and emphatically that the most important thing for him, is that his son Adam, who has Down's Syndrome and autism, comes alive through the pages as an individual in his own right. The many and varied labels which are often used when people with learning disabilities are discussed e.g. able; disabled; profound disabilities or high functioning, create a barrier to seeing the person as an individual, irrespective of their disabilities. These labels perpetuate the assumption that individuals with learning disabilities are less able, based often on inherent belief systems, influenced historically by the way we view individuals with learning disabilities, these beliefs have developed over time and need to be questioned for their validity.

Our thinking and perceptions of people with disabilities have been negatively and positively influenced by the Models of Disability and the terminology/labels used when referring to individuals with learning disabilities, originate from those perceptions. They will be explored and how they have influenced theologians in the evolving theology of disability and influenced us in the way we perceive individuals with learning disability. Certain models have perpetuated the negative perception that individuals with learning disability are less human, often creating a patronizing attitude, which has and continues, to offend and hurt those with learning disabilities and their families.

Exploring the theology of disability is important to better understand the context of the present discussion as many theologians, who have a lived experience of learning disability, are suggesting that theology of disability needs to further develop if inclusion and theological inclusion is to be achieved. Two of these theologians

with a lived experience of learning disability are Jurgen Moltmann and John Swinton and they both provide a clear, positive way forward for the church with their work, providing a strong foundation for why individuals with learning disabilities should be included on all levels, in the Christian church, physically but as importantly theologically, and not treated less equally.

It is suggested by Swinton (2001) that we now require a theology of belonging and they both emphasise the importance of acknowledging that individuals with learning disabilities can attain a spiritual dimension to their lives and need therefore to be theologically included in the Christian church.

I will explore this negative perception of individuals with learning disabilities, being less able in relation to spirituality, as this must be addressed to begin to facilitate inclusion within the church. I will ask the question, why is there this assumption that individuals with severe learning disability are unable to attain a spiritual level to their worship. From a lived personal experience of being present with my younger brother (who has severe learning disability and autism) in church services, I would certainly question the validity of this assumption. This question has been asked too by Maliszewska (2019) - 'why, then do we find it so difficult to believe that a person with profound intellectual disability may have a personal relationship with God?' (p.202). She states that the church believes that all people whether they are disabled or not are seen as equal before God which emphasises that an individual's faith is not dependent on their intellectual ability. There are many families and carers who also contest this view and their experiences will be shared in this dissertation. Changing this perception of individuals with learning disabilities, being unable to attain a spiritual level in their lives, is fundamental in achieving theological inclusion.

Physical inclusion has improved to some degree but I would like to suggest that theological inclusion, is far from being reached and finally, I will explore the attitudinal, environmental and organisational barriers to inclusion and suggest that there is a need and responsibility for the Christian Church to reflect on how individuals with learning disabilities are being included in their church, if they are not being included, we need to ask ourselves why this is not happening and how we can change and ensure they are not treated less

equally? The Christian Church must now move forward to create a theology of true belonging for individuals with learning disabilities and their families.

Chapter 1 –Theology of disability.

Historically, literature notes that people with disabilities have existed in all cultures and societies from ancient to modern times and it is interesting and important to explore how they have been viewed and treated by society and the church. Sadly, predominantly, they have been viewed as lesser beings, often ostracised, and misunderstood and the models of disability have evolved and shaped societies' views of people with learning disabilities and the terminology, as mentioned previously, when referring to them. They were created to try and define impairment and for providing a basis upon which government and society devised strategies for meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities. It is crucial to be aware of the models of disability because they have not only influenced theologians but also us and our views and perceptions of individuals with learning disabilities and as such provide the context for further discussion on theology of disability.

1.1.Models of disability:

There are numerous models of disability with some more familiar than others.

Briefly, the moral and /or religious model suggests that disability is an act of God, believing that sin was committed by the individual or their parents and this was the cause of the disability, a form of retribution by God. Most theologians reject this old model, but sadly it continues to exist in some extreme evangelical sects.

The charity model is linked to the previous model with pity being the dominant element and as a result this model is seen as extremely negative by individuals with disabilities themselves and most predominant model until recent years has been the medical model where disability is viewed as a disease. This belief underpins the notion that there needs to be a cure and the emphasis is on the person with the disability being the one who needs to change or be fixed. This model like the charity model is insulting and offensive to those with disabilities and again it is important to be aware of them and the ways they have and potentially affect our perceptions of individuals with learning disabilities, in particular.

A recent model is the social model which suggests that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon, and the disability movement was instrumental in the 1960/70 to instigate this new model to replace the medical model. It is a model that shifts the thinking from the individual with a disability needing to change to the responsibility of society to make the necessary adjustment to enable a person with disabilities to feel included.

These models of disability have evolved, and it is worth exploring some in more detail as they provide a context in which theologians have developed the theology of disability and how they continue to influence the Christian church's views today of individuals with learning disability.

Letosa et al (2018) have suggested there are nine models which they believe, continue to influence the views of able-bodied people of disabled people and require careful consideration: -

- The moral and /or religious model: Disability as an act of God. This model suggested that a sin was committed by the individual or their parents and this was the cause of the disability as a form of retribution by God. Most theologians reject this model thankfully, but it continues to exist in some extreme evangelical sects.
- The medical model: Disability as a disease. This belief underpins the notion that disability is a disease or illness needing to be cured and the emphasis is on the person with the disability being the one who needs to change or be fixed. Having worked as a Learning Disability Nurse prior to the 'All Wales Strategy' in 1983, individuals with learning disabilities were living in long-stay hospitals away from society. This perpetuated the medical model creating the belief that they were ill and needed to live in a hospital. This culture slowly changed with the 'All Wales Strategy' and the closure of these long-stay hospitals and people being moved into the community. This was a very positive and historical time but unfortunately physically moving into the community did not always equate with being truly included in the local community. This is an interesting theme which is prevalent in relation to the Christian church which will be looked at when inclusion is discussed later, being physically included in the church does not always ensure theological inclusion and attitudes need to change fundamentally as it did in the community settings for people re-settling from the long-stay hospitals.
- The social model: Disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. The disability movement was instrumental in the 1960/70 to instigate a new model to replace the medical model. A model which would shift the thinking from the individual with a disability needing to change, to the responsibility of society to make the necessary adjustment to enable a person with disabilities to feel included. Eminent theologians like Eiesland (2002) and Block (2002) have embraced this model suggesting that

the church needs to adhere to this model as many individuals with disabilities have been prevented from accessing the Christian community. Some individuals with disabilities have raised concerns that the social model often does not acknowledge the painful realities of a disability and I would agree that caution needs to be exercised when generalisations are made. Each person and each situation must be viewed individually to ensure a person-centred approach is always followed.

- The identity model: Disability as an identity. This model builds on the social model but takes it a step further by stating the positivity of a disability which in turn has created pride in the disability. Again, it is important to note here that some individuals with disability have raised concerns regarding this model suggesting that there is a danger of not considering the reality of the economic struggles faced by disabled individuals.
- The human rights model: Disability as a human rights issue. This model again builds on the social model but provides an added dimension which emphasises human dignity and the rights of every individual irrespective of any disability. This is especially true in relation to individuals with learning disability whose disability is not always as visible as a physical disability and can be missed. Their human rights are as important as everyone else.
- The cultural model: Disability as culture. This model offers a broad approach which encompasses the culture. An example of this is the deaf culture.
- The charity model: Disability as victimhood. This model is linked to the first model noted, the moral/religious model as charity and pity are the dominant elements. This again is a very negative model and one which is demoralising and degrading for individuals with disabilities.
- The economic model: Disability as a challenge to productivity. This model sees the person with disabilities as being an economic burden on society emphasising the previous medical model of assuming the individual with disability is incapable of meaningful employment. This feeds into the perception that the individual with a disability is less than human. Again, emphasising the disability rather than encouraging a positive outlook on what the strengths and capabilities everyone possesses, irrespective of their disabilities.

- The limits model: Disability as embodied experience. This is a theological model developed by Creamer (2012) who suggests that everyone experiences limits in their lives to varying degrees and should not be viewed as something which is negative but rather a natural part of being human.

I believe it is important to be, not only aware of these models of disability, but reflect honestly and critically on how they may have influenced our own perceptions of individuals with learning disabilities before we begin a discussion on the theology of disability. These models have played a part in shaping our thinking and the thinking of theologians so the context in which the theology of disability has evolved will become clearer. It will enable us to ensure, as we move forward, to consider the theology of disability critically and question, meaningfully, is there a clear focus on Christ being at its centre and is it evolving positively so that it is inclusive and understands and respects the rights of people with learning disabilities and their families?

1.2 Theology of Disability:

Theology has been described by Towey (2013) as a “thoughtful conversation about God” (Pxxi). This conversation about God is not exclusive to those who are able-bodied but should be inclusive of all and theology of disability was created to build bridges between those with disabilities and those without, but many feel that individuals with disabilities have not been encouraged to take part in these conversations.

Building bridges is one of the reasons for a theology of disability but disability itself needs to be looked at in a more positive way, so that we can walk on the journey with individuals with learning disabilities and their families in the Christian church. Reynolds (2008) suggests we need to concentrate “on wholeness and ability, measured not by productive power and individual competence but by vulnerability and interdependence” (p15). Understanding the theology of disability and how, as mentioned previously, the models of disability has influenced its development, will increase our understanding and our perceptions of individuals with learning disabilities. It is hoped that this increased understanding will facilitate a more positive attitude towards the building of these bridges towards the inclusion of individuals with leaning disability in the Christian church.

One of the many questions that I personally find difficult to answer is how can I discuss theology of disability when a mere student and not an eminent theologian? but Jurgen Moltmann (2000) has given me the confidence to attempt to articulate my ideas and feelings when he said, “theology is the business of all God’s people.” (p.11). We all have a responsibility to contribute to the evolving theology of disability, as having a theology of disability, Mc Reynolds(2016) suggests, is needed because disability is lifelong, not like an illness or a crisis in life, which can potentially have an end, therefore we need to have a theology which can portray the way in which the Church should “share in the journey” (p.176). It is a journey in which the family or carers are an integral part and as such, the Church needs to ensure the whole family is included and supported along this journey.

Theology of disability was influenced by the charitable ethic towards people with disabilities, namely the religious and charity model was prevalent in post Constantine era with Stainton (2008) stating that this resulted in institutions being created e.g. the Alms Houses which offered positive practical assistance, but these organisations perpetuated the notion of pity being offered to individuals with disabilities and created a “positive reflection on those giving rather than those receiving” (p.494).

Some churches sadly, have projected disability as being evil with the need to eradicate it and Bryan et al (2011) cited in (Letsosa 2018) note that some believe that some disabilities are the result of lack of adherence to social moral values and religious guidance which had warned against certain behaviour. Others believe that some disabilities are the result of punishment from an all-powerful being or punishment for parents for their presumed sin. This is important to be aware of in relation to the way the church interacts with parents of children with learning disabilities, as they may have been confronted in the past with this belief, which in turn would have created great pain and trauma for them.

Another view which has had a profound negative impact on parents has been Tillich’s views (cited in Wilder 2012) suggesting that sin and disability are linked with the individual making a choice of being less able.

These views have had a destructive effect on parents and has created further barriers to inclusion and increased the marginalisation of this vulnerable group.

In addition, some churches in Zimbabwe for example, and other African countries have emphasised negative text from the Bible e.g. Deut.28.28. and this has re-enforced the concept of the need to heal those with disabilities suggesting that they are lesser beings which has then perpetuated social marginalisation. (Clausnitzer 2021). This view perpetuates the religious and charity model, but it is important to note that other texts in the Bible e.g. Lev 19 :14.and Deut. 27:18 show another side to disability, emphasising positivity and the need for social inclusion and Bowa (2022) notes the importance of discouraging the negative perspective of disability as it influences the inclusion agenda in the church.

Theology of disability has evolved to try and move away from these negative perceptions, but the Christian church has sadly perpetuated the medical model over the years. This model believes that disability is a medical problem, one that needs to be cured but Swinton (2008) succinctly and powerfully disagreed when he said that “if any healing is required it is a healing of our perceptions and understandings----”(p.48) it is only when this happens will individuals with learning disabilities become accepted and included in the church. Grandin (2011) wrote “I find great value and meaning in my life and have no wish to be cured of being myself. If you help me don’t try to change me to fit in your world. Grant me the dignity of meeting me on my own terms- recognize that we are equally alien to each other----work with me to build bridges between us”.

As an eloquent young woman with autism, she has provided a voice for those with learning disabilities and autism who do not have a voice, like my brother. Grandin has shown us the need to build those bridges of understanding based upon the realization that individuals do not need to be cured but rather understood and respected for who they are and as my mother said of my brother, if he was healed, he would not be the same person, he would be different. In her eyes he was an individual just like her other two children and of the same value.

In response to the medical model, Eminent theologians like Eiesland (2002) and Block (2002) have instead embraced the social model suggesting that the church needs to adhere to this model as many individuals with disabilities have been prevented from accessing the Christian community due to the medical model and its perceived restrictions. They advocate that adopting this model is the way forward to achieve inclusion within the church as the social model believes that the problem is with society and not the individual. I agree that the social model has relevant aspects which can encourage positive inclusion but like some individuals with disabilities, I have concerns that the social model often does not acknowledge the possible painful realities of a disability. It is vitally important to accept these without becoming negative, it is acknowledging every human being, as an individual.

Eiesland (1994) has offered a theology of disability which suggests a new and progressive view of Jesus as being “disabled too, after the crucifixion” (p.146) and the Church must enter a meaningful and dignified conversation with disabled people. She states clearly and emphatically “ when the church shuts disabled people outside the gates, it shuts Christ outside with us” (p.223). Eiesland (1999) emphasises that we all need to confront our differences but in a way which does not result in prejudice and that individuals who are able-bodied and those who have disabilities need fresh images, values, and new ways of thinking about theology of disability.

Interestingly Glyn (cited in Guittin 2022) suggests that there is a danger here of Eiesland conceptualisation being potentially narrow and I would agree, as he believes that human life has limitations, and he suggests there is a need to see “disability as an inherent part of life rather than as flawed humanity”(p.4). Understanding of disability needs to be at the heart of our understanding of humanity otherwise as Brock (2019) warns words about disability will remain just words and the lives of individuals with learning disabilities will remain undervalued and misunderstood.

Also, interestingly, it is important to note here that Eiesland (1994) suggested that her theology of disability is in fact for those with physical disabilities and Swinton (2012) notes the irony in this, stating that “there is a strange irony in the fact that a theological model of disability designed to overcome exclusiveness should end

up being exclusive of certain people with disabilities” (p.177). When we explore inclusion, this becomes a predominant theme in that individuals with physical disabilities are included easier into the life of the church than those with learning disabilities.

This suggests again that there needs to be a fresh look at a new theological model of disability which addresses the needs of people with learning disabilities, they need to be seen as individuals.

Encouragingly, Mc Reynolds (2016) offers a positive theology of disability and suggests that the Gospel of Saint Luke provides a clear picture that Christ’s ministry was directed towards the vulnerable and those in the shadows of our community and provides a “model and a mandate for the church to reach out to those with disabilities” (p.173). She suggests that the key to a theology of disability is actually to be found in the Gospel of Saint Luke in the teachings of Christ where those with disabilities become unexpected disciples, accepting Christ without expecting anything in return.

It is not merely an option for the church to include individuals with disabilities, but it is essential and what is expected, according to the gospel.

Conclusion:

I believe we need to begin to create a shift in religious beliefs about disability and Guittin (2022) agrees that this is the only way to ensure inclusion and a true sense of belonging for individuals with learning disabilities and their families. We need a different way of thinking about disability so that we move away from seeing people with disabilities as being different, needing to be pitied or needing to be cured, as implied in the medical model. We need to see individuals with disability for who they truly are, see them before we see their disability and value each person’s uniqueness. Bond et al (2003) agrees, suggesting we need to move toward a wider horizon for theological thinking about disability, “in theological terms, disability need not be denied, decried, or overcome as an incomplete humanity, a defect indicating failure or sin”(p.43). Every person is unique and vulnerable, and we all share in the humanity of God .

I believe it is vitally important to move away from the negativity of the pity; charity, economic and medical models because this is when we will begin to see individuals with learning disabilities as whole human-beings who deserve and have a right to be treated equally and with dignity.

The gap between the theology of disability and theological inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities, is explained by recent theologians, as being the lack of personal experience of learning disabilities, underpinning their theology of disability. Brock (2019) is one of those individuals who has challenged the scholars who have written about disability, without the lived experience and suggests it is imperative for those in the field of disability theology to practice inclusive research in this field. He has a son with Down Syndrome and autism, and he challenges linguistic and cultural presumptions regarding what knowing God might look like for people with intellectual disabilities. Barton (2021) admires Brock's approach and describes it as "witness to a process of Christian togetherness" (p.138), his family life ,with his son Adam, has been lived continuously together and this lived experience provides an immeasurable depth to his work. There is an intrinsic need for the lived experience, which provides truth and validity to the theology of disability and Harshaw (2016) agrees, as she has a daughter with profound learning disabilities and warns that there continues to be an "inadequate connection between theological theory and ecclesial practices " (p.190). This inadequate connection is perpetuated by some of the present thinking of some theologians, where it becomes evident that the influence of certain models of disability have and continue to influence the way they perceive individuals with learning disabilities.

Theology of disability needs to be in touch with the reality of life for individuals with learning disability and I believe if the theologians who write and discuss the theology of disability, to be truly authentic and in touch with the day to day lives of individuals with learning disability and their families, need to have the personal first-hand experience themselves. This personal experience will ensure that they reflect on the ways that models of disability have influenced the development of theology of disability and can contribute meaningfully to its ongoing development from an authentic personal viewpoint.

To further this point, I will explore the work of Jurgen Moltmann and John Swinton who are two theologians who have the lived experience of learning disability and as such they provide a strong, empathic, and positive foundation for the theology of disability to continue to evolve, providing the Christian church a clear way forward in relation to the inclusion and theological inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities.

Chapter 2 – The work of Jurgen Moltmann and John Swinton

I believe the Christian church needs to re-visit the work of Jurgen Moltmann and John Swinton because both offer a theology of disability which emphasises hope and belonging for individuals with learning disability. Their work provides the bridge to overcome this gap between theology and the reality for individuals and their families within the Christian church and creates a strong foundation for the future inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities and their families. Both offer similar principles and a powerful guide to making it a reality. They both have a lived experience of learning disability which provides a particular depth and sincerity to their work. They too believe that it is possible for every person to have a spiritual relationship with God and that it does not depend on knowledge of the scriptures or possessing intellect and that each person is an individual who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity (Hunneysett, 2006)

The L 'Arche Community's principles provides a strong mandate for ensuring that individuals with learning disabilities are treated with dignity, which states that they have a right to life; care; home; education; work and especially a right to friendship, communion, and a spiritual life (Young 1997). I believe that any theology of disability needs to have its foundation based on these principles and Moltmann (1999) suggest for this to be achieved, a fundamental, essential component, is necessary, which is empathy, and this is necessary for true mutual understanding and forms "community in the diversity and diversity in the community" (p.145).

Empathy is essential in this process of discussing a theology of disability and Gillibrand (2010) refers to Father Eric Franklin who said to his theology students, when discussing disability in the New Testament, "get it in your guts" suggesting that there was more than responding intellectually, it needed to resonate with the reality of day-to-day life (p.13). This again reflects the need to be in touch with the reality of life for individuals with disability and their families and Bunday (2011) suggests that when developing a theology of disability for the church, major life periods need to be taken into consideration-loss of control; depression; anger; injustice and discrimination; crisis of identity and financial impact. These difficult periods in one's life can touch everyone but for those with learning disabilities and their families they can have a profound effect and may require sensitive and empathic support from the Church community.

Moltmann (1973) on the one hand provides his belief in the strength and power of hope, in which he advocates the possibilities of linking the past to an improved future. His work will be explored in relation to the inclusion of those with learning disabilities and the more recent work of John Swinton also needs careful consideration as he builds upon Moltmann's theology of hope to emphasise the need for the church to create a true sense of belonging for individuals with learning disabilities. Both these theologians, I believe, offer the Christian church a way forward to ensure that inclusion for individuals with learning disabilities and their families, becomes a reality. This is not a choice for the church to make but a necessity if it is to follow in Christ's footsteps as Moltmann suggests "the light coming from the cross sheds a light on those suffering" and illuminates those who are consigned to the "shadows of the cross" (Moltmann 1971 p.20).

This resonates with the title of this dissertation "hidden in the shadows" (Swinton 2021) and forms a natural bridge between his work and the work of Swinton.

2.1 Jurgen Moltmann:

His theology is especially relevant to this dissertation as he also had a brother with severe disabilities called, Hartwig, who sadly became one of the 10,000 disabled people who fell victim to the Nazi euthanasia program. Moltmann (1997) described how this experience makes him especially sensitive to the ways in which our world and the church tend to treat those individuals with disabilities. He notes that "the church must consist of the disabled and not-disabled persons. A congregation without disabled persons is a disabled church"(p.68). He emphasises the need to bring individuals with disabilities and their families into the church because in his view, they are all images of Christ and that every person has a relationship with God, which is found in friendship. His belief that every person has a relationship with God touches on the earlier discussion on spirituality and individuals with learning disability and he is clear in his belief that intellect is not a pre-requisite of having a relationship with God.

He emphasises that this connection with God, cannot be lessened by disability or sin and God can be discovered in every person. His positive belief in the need to see people with learning disability as individuals

possess the integrity of a person who has had this lived experience, and he goes on to say that individuals with disabilities are in fact disabled by those in society who are able. As discussed previously, this view is in keeping with the medical model of disability, insisting that their loss of independence can occur as they are ostracised by the community and by being over protected by care. Moltmann (1997) advocates the social model of disability, again, emphasising the need to see the person before their disability explaining that often those who are able, measure value based on their own perceived set of values, which places importance on what is lost rather than on the dignity and value of the individual person.

His own personal experience of having a brother with profound learning disabilities emphasised the importance and value for him and his family of having known Hartwig, even for a painfully short time. He compares this to the Church and the need for the church get to know, value, and include individuals with learning disabilities and their families in a way which gives them the dignity and understanding they truly deserve. Moltmann (1971) reiterates the words used previously that individuals with learning disabilities should not be hidden in darkness or in the shadows of the cross but welcomed into the church and be included.

Slade cited in Adiprasetya (2021) suggests that open friendship lies at the very heart of Moltmann's theological model, the church and God. As mentioned previously bridges need to be built between the church and individuals with learning disabilities and their families and Moltmann offers us a way forward. His concept of hope was one of realism and finding realistic ways of showing God's love to others (Moltmann 1972). This bridge of friendship is extremely important for individuals with learning disabilities and their families who often find themselves ostracised and disempowered, for him, hope is in the resurrection of Christ not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very earth on which his cross stands. His theology provides the hope for building these bridges from the past to the future.

Interestingly many believe that God is above creation and therefore is not able to suffer with us when we suffer but Moltmann refutes this, and I find this an important element of his theology because this ability of God to feel the pain and distress of others creates a compassion and empathy beyond words.(Moltmann

1972). This capacity for profound empathy provided a bridge between institutional religion and a person who was suffering when he reached out to Gissendaner on Death Row in 2010, sending her initially his handkerchief and then later meeting her before she died. Through this interaction he has provided an example of creating bridges, with the belief that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. Hinojosa (2020) reiterates this by emphasising that within the reality of these difficult situations is immense possibilities for hope and Neal (2006) suggests that Moltmann's theology is infused with hope, "hope is his method" (p.225). His encounter with Gissendaner, a death-row prisoner, was an example of his profound empathy of another person's pain, which shows the way for the church to open its doors to individuals with learning disabilities appreciating that we are all the same value and worth. *(Refer to Footnote 1)*

Reynolds (2008) suggests that Moltmann sees individuals with disabilities as just lessons in morality, providing at the same time, encouragement, and inspiration for non-disabled individuals and that there was a danger in this approach becoming patronising. I disagree with Reynolds interpretation, as Moltmann does not suggest that individuals provide moral lessons, rather, he appears to state that insight can be gained into our own world through our improved understanding of individuals with disabilities.

Moltmann goes further by challenging Christians, stating that if we hope in Christ then we are peace with God but this in turn means that we will continually be at odds with the world, as we should aim for reverting the inequality we see in His world. We cannot and should not put up with reality if it involves suffering and inequality. Moltmann explains that this "makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realisation of righteousness, freedom, and humanity in the light of the promised future that is to come" (Moltmann cited in Brown (2022) p.2).

Footnote 1:

A moving example of his strong held belief of hope and reconciliation which emphasises his continued relevance today in the field of political theology is the account of his encounter with Kelly Gissendaner. She had been sentenced to death in 1998 for recruiting her boyfriend to kill her husband. During her time in prison, she became interested in theology, and she enrolled on a course twelve years later in 2010 and was the only student from death row. She described herself as someone who had come into prison having allowed herself to fall into evil but over time had come to realise that she could place her hope in God and that there was redemption for her even though she had committed such a horrific crime. During her course under the direction of Professor Jenny Mc Bride, she began to read the works of Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, and recalls his words, that it is only through facing the past through healing and restoration can the future be rebuilt. She also read the Theology of Hope by Jurgen Moltmann and was profoundly moved by it and decided to write to him. His journey through the reality of being a prisoner of war to becoming a famous academic was centred on the belief in hope and this resonated with her. He in return, after receiving her letter sent her one of his handkerchiefs saying she could hold it when she felt her tears falling.

This act personified his belief in reconciliation and in 2011 he visited her in prison while visiting the Candler School in Atlanta to give a lecture and proceeded to travel seventy miles to give an address at her graduation ceremony.

This is especially true in relation to individuals with learning disabilities and their families who have not in the past and are not today, receiving an equitable service within the Christian church. He says that the Church is about righteousness and justice and emphasises that Christian theology is not just for people who are within the church but also for those on the outside. (Moltmann et al 2017).

His views of fifty years ago on ensuring equality for everyone are extremely contemporary and relevant in relation to the way the Church responds to those with learning disabilities today, they have a right to be included and theologically included in the church.

John Swinton, a contemporary theologian also emphasises this belief that individuals with learning disabilities have been oppressed by society and the church and ensuring righteousness and an equitable service within the church is their right and a right we should and must uphold. He shares the same value base as Moltmann (1997), insisting that individuals with learning disabilities are human beings and that they do not have problems which need to be solved. Rather, they should be seen as humans who have been made in the image of God and the body of Christ and Swinton states clearly that not including individuals with learning disabilities in the church affects Christ's own image. Both he and Moltmann believe that disability theology has tried to be meaningful for individuals with learning disabilities, but it has not succeeded fully and there is a need to continually emphasise that the church needs to change. Swinton (2001) asks how the church can change, so that it ensures a feeling of belonging for individuals with learning disabilities and becomes a 'church for strangers' suggesting that presently the church is not there for those individuals who are finding it difficult to gain access.

2.2. John Swinton

Swinton like Moltman, has a lived experience of understanding, first hand, learning disabilities. He is a registered Learning Disability nurse, like myself, and believes passionately that individuals with learning disabilities should be treated with respect, dignity and compassion and this fundamental belief is one that the Church must adopt to ensure the inclusion of people with learning disabilities.

The social model has influenced Swinton, throughout his career as a nurse for individuals with learning disabilities. He has seen, from first-hand experience, how the medical model has had a profoundly negative effect on their lives and states that “disability is therefore not a personal tragedy; it is a social situation in which a person finds themselves” (Swinton (2012) p. 279). There is a fundamental need to create a church that values each human being for who they are. Swinton states that “when society fails to see the beauty of those who are different, it fails to recognise the nature and beauty of Christ”(p.47) and echoes Moltmann’s view that Christ’s image is marred if any individual is excluded (2013). Individuals with learning disabilities must be treated with understanding, empathy and included with dignity into the church and he advocates a move from a theology of disability to a theology of belonging. It has been suggested by Mc Reynolds (2008) also, that we need a new theology of disability namely a Theology of Belonging.

Swinton (2011), like Moltmann, places great weight on empathy in relation to individuals with learning disability and their families, stating that it is only through ensuring true empathy will the church, not only include individuals with learning disabilities, but ensure they know that they belong in the church. He describes an encounter with a lady called Mary who initially was shouting during the beginning of prayer, but once others began to be silent, she also became silent. He suggests that she moved towards an experience of sharing and in turn others shared with her in the experience, “God in her speaks to God in others’ (p.341). He believes that if the Christian church is filled with a love that is just and empathetic, then prejudice and discrimination cease to be.

Swinton was commissioned by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities (2011) to conduct a qualitative research paper on spirituality and people with learning disabilities and the result concluded that individuals with learning disability had benefited immensely from receiving spiritual care, conveying feelings of happiness and contentment. The study concluded by stating that, where meaningful spiritual support had been implemented, it also highlighted the inadequate and poor support these individuals often receive. His work reiterates that individuals with learning disability can attain a spiritual dimension to their lives and again

his theology of belonging emphasises the need for individuals with learning disabilities to be included theologically in the Christian church.

He also emphasises the importance of the Church offering friendship to those with learning disabilities, a “friendship that models Christ”(Swinton 2011 p.277) and the way that friendship will be the building blocks of the bridges between individuals as noted earlier by Moltmann. Thornburgh (cited in Bolduc 2013) as the mother of Peter, her son with learning disabilities, conveys this beautifully when she says, “this is what church is- it’s the sacred gift of friendship”. She describes her son, as bringing so many gifts to the church and when she asked him “when you think of God what words do you think of” his reply was ‘Nice’(p.3). She suggests that he learned this from the love he receives not only from his family but also from the church community that he belongs to. Swinton asks for a “Christian community where discrimination and prejudice is abandoned, and uncompromising love is embraced”(Swinton 2011 p.306) and Peter is an example of this in practice, as is the church community my brother belongs too. This reality of equality and inclusion can be achieved in more churches if the Christian church adopts a theology of inclusion and belonging because if we do not, we will fail to see “the beauty of those who are different, we fail to see the beauty of Christ” (Swinton 2008,p.47).

Conclusion:

The work of both these theologians provides a clear and positive way forward for the church in beginning to answer the question of why we must ensure the inclusion and theological inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities in the Christian Church. They are both theologians with a lived experience of learning disability and as a result their work conveys a deep level of compassion and understanding of the need to ensure individuals with learning disabilities and their families feel a sense of belonging.

They have emphasised that spirituality can be a dimension of the lives of individuals with learning disability and this understanding and acceptance is key if the church is going to work towards including individuals with learning disability theologically. If the church does not move towards this belief as discussed earlier,

theological inclusion will become a shallow insincere attempt towards belonging within the church, and individuals with learning disabilities and their families deserve more.

We often, as individuals gain strength and comfort from our spiritual being, the ability to engage with God on a personal level and why should individuals with learning disabilities be different? We need to question our negative perceptions, influenced by those various models of disability, discussed previously, which can make us believe that individuals with learning disabilities are unable to attain a spiritual level to their lives. Wright (2022) suggests that there are different routes to spirituality but that some appear to be very reliant on the ability to understand, which potentially poses difficulties for those individuals with learning disabilities. Many of these routes tend to exclude people with learning disabilities because there is an emphasis on the intellectual process. Though many of the routes exclude individuals with learning disabilities, I, and many others including Moltmann and Swinton, believe that understanding and intellect are not necessary for attaining a spiritual dimension to one's life. Spirituality will be explored as it is a fundamental part of the Christian faith and individuals with learning disability need to be understood as being able to experience this important element of the Christian faith so that the church can move forward to include them physically but as importantly theologically.

Chapter 3 - Spirituality and Individuals with Learning Disabilities

The Christian church does not pay enough attention to the spiritual dimension in lives of individuals with learning disability, as discussed previously, there is a belief that they are unable to attain a spiritual dimension to their lives because of a lack of understanding of the biblical texts and intellectual difficulties. These beliefs need to be questioned for their validity, are they based on researched evidence or a lack of understanding and influenced by the negativity of the many models of disability? To be fully included in the church, and theologically, individuals with learning disability must be treated as equal on all levels, including spiritually.

3.1a -Spirituality

Spirituality itself is difficult to define because it is something mysterious and not easy to quantify.

Carr (1997) suggests that spirituality is inherently elusive and mysterious, noting that it is not the exclusive property of any one religion and can be achieved separately from religion and “there is a spiritual dimension to human existence” (p.17). This points to the belief that every human existence has an element of spirituality and as such all individuals including those with a learning disability are no different. Hardy 2003 (cited in Wright2022) agrees and suggests that by nature humans are spiritual but emphasises Carr’s point, that one needs to appreciate that it can be an important element of many religions, not only Christianity. This again validates the belief that there is a spiritual dimension to each individual person.

It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for ‘spirit’ is ‘ruah’ and this word has its roots in the notion of the movement of air and in Saint John’s Gospel there is a description of God’s spirit, being like the wind which ‘blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3.8. cited in Wright 2003). The idea portrayed is that it is intangible and something that it extremely difficult to quantify. Hull 2003 (cited in Wright 203) takes this idea a step further by suggesting that spirituality does not exist inside a person, but it is something which is found between individuals. It becomes increasingly clear that the concept of spirituality is difficult to comprehend and to this end Jones (2009) has suggested that religion and spirituality are separate concepts. She states that religion involves

beliefs and rituals, but that spirituality is an intrinsically personal experience, but she feels that both are connected to each other.

Spirituality can be understood as part of the human experience and does not require to be cognitively acknowledged Tracey 2015 (cited in Hills et al 2019) and once one tries to express the experience of spirituality to others, this is when language then becomes necessary. Hills et al (2019) agrees and that being unable to express this does not, in fact, mean that it has not existed, because spirituality is an important part of the human experience and as such does not need to be acknowledged cognitively. This is an important viewpoint in relation to people with learning disabilities who may find it difficult to articulate their feelings or understanding through language. A lack of cognitive ability does not therefore imply that they are unable to experience spirituality.

Gandhi (2009) reiterated this when he stated that a profound spiritual experience leaves everybody unable to adequately describe the depth of the encounter. Interestingly the Native American Indian and other traditional mystics (Hoffman 1997 cited in Wright 2003) also shares this theme of deep spiritual experiences being an experience which cannot be conceptualised through language, which suggests as mentioned previously, language becomes necessary only when one needs to describe the experience. Others believe that as humans we find it impossible to reflect on an experience as it is happening (Yamane 2000) and by the time we try and explain an experience in words the experience itself has gone by.

The important point here is that language is not required to have the spiritual experience in the first place, which brings me back to the question, why do we assume that individuals with learning disability are unable to attain a spiritual level to their worship. My younger brother who has a severe learning disability and autism becomes totally engrossed in the church service, even though he does not understand what is being said he becomes still and calm during the prayer and conveys a faith beyond words. Dow (2021) describes the capacity for spiritual encounters like my brother's experience, as a "communion of relational reciprocity"(p.456) and an encounter with God which goes beyond words and is extremely difficult for us to explain. Gillibrand (2010) similarly shares his personal reflection on his son Adam ,saying that his silence is his way of being, for which

he does not need a reason. Here we hear from a theologian with a lived experience emphasising that there is no need for words and an admission that it is in fact difficult for us as able-bodied individuals to fully comprehend the experience.

Rohr (cited by Burnett 2022) describes spiritual practices like ‘Centring Prayer’ which states that it focuses purely on being in the presence of God’s love. There is no expectation of achieving anything, letting go of what is in your mind, being at peace or having a spiritual experience, the success of Centring Prayer comes from returning time after time and finding God’s love. There are differing ideas and descriptions of spiritual experiences, and the experience is unique to each individual and no words are necessary to explain it. This strengthens the belief that individuals with learning disability can have a spiritual dimension to their lives.

3.1b- Spirituality and individuals with learning disabilities

This discussion on spirituality itself, emphasises that even though it is a complex concept it is a personal experience and as such raises the question as to how can we dispute the existence of an experience for another individual whether they have a learning disability or not?

Rahner cited by Fletch (2005) states that humanity in its entirety is the work of God and as such ‘there is no form of human living in which an encounter with God does not take place’(p.236) This again strengthens the argument that disabled people and able-bodied individuals are equal in the sight of God. This belief forms the basis for the way we should approach spirituality and individuals with learning disabilities and this view must be adopted by the church if individuals with learning disabilities are to be included theologically, spiritually and treated with the dignity, they deserve.

Encouragingly, the World Council of Churches (1983) in Vancouver stated that individuals with disabilities can have a spiritual understanding of the sacrament and can take part in their own individual way in the spiritual life of the church. Involvement in the church congregation provides important links and community support and Carter et al (2017;2019) suggests that these connections, if meaningful, become a valuable source

of spiritual connection for the individuals with learning disabilities and their family. This involvement in the congregation reiterates Hull's previous view that spirituality exists and is deepened with interpersonal relationships. I see this valuable and meaningful connection when I attend church with my brother who has learning disabilities and autism, he is accepted and respected, his spirituality is deepened by the very special interpersonal relationships he has developed with the other members of the congregation.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with the World Council of Churches statement as Kwan (2009) cited in Shea (2019) stated that "believing in Jesus involves a complicated self-reflective and cognitive process" and for those with learning disabilities understanding the Gospel is too complicated and unattainable (p.239).

I disagree and welcome Shea's (2019) view, who argues against this viewpoint, by asking the question of how can grace be free if an individual must be able to know or comprehend certain information before receiving it? This in my view is a logical question which emphasises the words of Christ when he welcomed children, he did not specify that they needed to understand or be children without learning disabilities. She states that individuals with learning disability will continue to be marginalised within the church if this belief for the necessity of knowledge of the scriptures to be able to form a spiritual connection with God. This presumption has led in her view, and I agree, for Christians without disabilities, to incorrectly view individuals with learning disabilities as being unable of achieving faith, or being inferior where faith is discussed. Willows and Swinton (2000) give a poignant example of this, where a young girl with Downs Syndrome was refused communion, which sadly implied that a person's ability to love God and be loved by Him in return, was dependent on the person's intellectual ability. They suggest that this is not a true reflection of Jesus' open inclusive community of love and one can but agree and accept that this lack of understanding and inclusion is the reality that individuals with learning disabilities find themselves in today.

When faced with the assumption that individuals with learning disabilities are unable to attain a level of spirituality in their lives Swinton (2008) describes a young man called Stephen who has learning disabilities and has shown him that "God is with him in a way that transcends my intellectualised world view and makes me feel ashamed of the deep questions I ask of the theological implications of his situation" (p.28).

Interestingly he notes that his encounter with Stephen has shown him that God is more mysterious and unpredictable than he is comfortable with imagining. This feeling of being uncomfortable is a recurring theme where individuals who are able bodied report feeling uncomfortable in the presence of individuals with disabilities, they find it difficult to see past the disability and see a person who can have a meaningful connection with God.

People very often cannot see Stephen and others like my brother as a person, because they tend to see the disability first and foremost and it is only with time, empathy and understanding that they will begin to see how the disability has clouded their vision from seeing the person with learning disabilities an individual. Bolduc (2013) also shares how her son Joel, who has autism is often excluded because of his outward manifestations of his disability. He is unable to read, finds it hard to concentrate and struggles to remain still, which in turn makes some individuals feel very uncomfortable. The other point here to reflect on is that these feelings of being uncomfortable are often conveyed, unintentionally or intentionally to the person with learning disabilities and their families, which create feelings of immense sadness.

To further this view Swinton (2001) suggest that there needs to be a way in which a person with learning disabilities is seen as a complete individual with needs, just like any other individual, which includes physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. He goes on to say that if individuals with learning disabilities are accepted to be spiritual beings, then we can see them not as a problem to be sorted but as a person to be cared for.

I believe that we need to be mindful here, as there can be a tendency to generalise which does a dis-service to individuals with learning disabilities. If they are described as individuals who need to be cared for, as a blanket statement, there is a danger of assuming every person needs to be cared for. The sentiment is well meaning and in many cases individuals with learning disabilities need to be cared for, but the danger is losing sight of each person as an individual, seeing the person rather than their disability, every person with learning disabilities is unique and as such their level of care and support will be different, according to their individual needs.

Understanding the way an individual with learning disabilities communicates is vitally important to support them to participate in church activities which will enable their spiritual development. Individuals with learning disabilities can relate in more ways than just the spoken word, it can involve other senses like touch; smiles; gaze etc, all emphasise the holistic nature of communication.

The nature of holistic communication is explored further by Hills et al (2019) where it is noted that individuals can have heightened abilities which appear to compensate for their disabilities e.g. an individual who has visual impairments can sometimes possess acute hearing or increased ability to memorize, so compensating to an extent, their disability. It is suggested also by Hills et al (2019) that some individuals with learning disabilities spend increased time in silence and this can potentially result in increased spirituality.

Interestingly there is a school of thought which suggests that individuals with nonverbal autism can offer us neurotypical individuals' ways to encounter and express spirituality. Shaywe cited in Hills et al (2019) suggests that this group of individuals are possibly more spiritual than first imagined and Barber (2011) an individual with autism, explains that even though individuals with autism find it difficult to connect with other individuals, it is incorrect to assume that they are unable to connect with God.

Many individuals with autism, like Barber (2011), with the ability to use language to communicate, have provided valuable insight into their lives with autism providing a more accurate picture of those individuals who have learning disability and autism, like my brother. Autistic people are just as capable of giving and receiving love, but it is our misunderstanding of them that causes difficulties in perceptions as mentioned previously, with us as neurotypical people assuming that they are incapable of a spiritual dimension in their lives. Harshaw (2016) reiterates this saying, that we do a disservice to individuals with learning disabilities and autism because we over think faith in an intellectual way. Again Barber (2011) emphasises the need to create spaces in our churches for 'autistic spirituality'(p.211) and he explains that this is not always easy because he and others with autism will find it difficult to pray from the heart and that he finds it easier to pray from the head, but he argues that they are not incompatible. He shares my vision of the church becoming autism friendly on all levels ,including theologically and spiritually.

Spirituality is an overlooked dimension of the lives of people with learning disabilities, but spirituality is in fact a human right as noted in Article 9 of the Human Rights Act:

“Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others”.

This implies that the freedom to express one's spirituality is a basic human right and therefore has significant implications in terms of the human rights of people with learning disabilities and the Christian church needs to acknowledge and facilitate this right.

An important point is raised by Shea (2019) that religious experiences of individuals with learning disability are researchable if the methodology used is appropriate with action research and spiritual mapping methods, as these have proved to be effective, but sadly the spirituality of people with learning disabilities continues to be an under-researched area.

In 2002 the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities published its 'Space to Listen' report, was based on a ten-year review of the literature on spirituality and people with learning disabilities, combined with a series of interviews with people with learning disabilities, carers, and support workers. The report found evidence to suggest that spirituality plays a significant role in the lives of many people with learning disabilities but that carers were often unaware of its importance for individuals they cared for and as a result they were not adequately supported in this area of their lives. To address this, training was advised and a need to understand the important significance of spirituality in the lives of individuals with learning disabilities.

This report has important themes for the Church to acknowledge, with one being very relevant, that of friendship being a basic component of spirituality with the need for connections to be developed. There is a potential here for the Church community to explore ways that individuals with learning disabilities can be enabled to develop friendships which in turn will further their spiritual growth.

I believe it is important to acknowledge that it is possible to research the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities and the report “Space to Listen” is extremely valuable as it documents those individuals who have been able to participate but Harshaw (2016) warns that we need to be mindful that those with profound learning disabilities may not be able to tell us and share their feelings. She states that when we accept this fact then “genuine engagement with their spiritual experience begin to take place”(p.180). She explains further, and has put in words my feelings too, when I am in church with my brother who has severe learning disabilities and autism, we may find it difficult to hear “God say he has a meaningful personal relationship with people with profound intellectual disabilities, does not mean that he is not saying it”(p.181).

Burnett (2022) as an individual with autism has provided further insight in relation to those with learning disability and autism, she states that 30% of autistic people are non-verbal, “not able to participate in church activities in the conventional way but that does not mean they can’t experience spirituality”(p.44). Being non-verbal does not mean that an individual is unable to communicate as there are other individual ways in which a person can communicate their wishes and feelings, the important factor here is to know the individual well and understand how they communicate e.g. through gestures, particular sounds or words or use augmented forms of communication. Burnett (2022) describes how Ingela Visuri, from Gavle University in Sweden explained, often non-verbal autistic people find prayer meaningful as it does not require them to communicate using language or having to follow social rules.

It is not necessary to provide evidence of spiritual experiences, what is important is facilitating these spiritual encounters and Harshaw (2016) believes that the way to do this with individuals with profound intellectual disabilities is through actions and interactions, which nurtures these spiritual experiences. Experiences which can reinforce to us that the mysteries of God cannot be diminished and that these encounters between Him and individuals with learning disabilities are beyond what we can describe in words. This is why inclusion and theological inclusion is so important for the Christian church to facilitate for individuals with learning disabilities and their families.

Conclusion:

Spirituality is difficult to quantify and explain but there needs to be an acknowledgement that intellect is not a requirement for a relationship with God and as such, individuals with learning disabilities need to be included theologically in the Christian church. Spirituality is important for the wellbeing of individuals with learning disability and the church must respect everyone and facilitate their spiritual development in a way that accepts that each relationship with God is unique. Narayanasamy et al (2002) found in their study, that spiritual care has had immense benefits for those with learning disabilities so there needs to be therefore, a move towards improving inclusion for individuals with learning disabilities within the Christian church so that they can also become included theologically.

I believe that to deny the spirituality of individuals with learning disabilities is to deny their humanity and the theology of disability needs to reflect the experience of the individual with learning disabilities and their family, and the church must work towards lessening the gap that exists theologically.

Inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities and their families cannot be achieved without the church accepting each person with learning disabilities as an equal, spiritual individual. It is essential for the church to move away from the negative, dehumanising perceptions created by the various models of disability and work towards creating a new theology of disability which believes in the humanity of every person. The Church of Scotland states this clearly “the body of Christ is only the true body of Christ when all peoples have a place where they belong”(p.249).

It is, therefore, important to acknowledge the need for opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities to be involved in the culture and life of the church and thoughtful education is required to ensure their inclusion which in turn will enable opportunities for the experience of spirituality and theological inclusion.

Swinton (2012) suggests, we need to “shift our thinking from inclusion to belonging and to reframe our practices from politics to love’ (p.172). We need to move away from the idea of just inclusion towards the

experience of belonging, creating a theology which embraces a non-judgemental and empathic view which will enable the inclusion and theological inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities and their families into the Christian church. We need to ensure inclusion becomes a sincere reality for individuals with learning disabilities and their families.

Chapter 4 – Inclusion.

Inclusion is a complex issue for the Church and Ibrahim (2023) suggests that unless the members and leaders of the Church are “convinced theologically of the necessity and the goodness of welcoming people with disabilities into the life and educational pursuits of the church, true integration will remain, mere wishful thinking” (p.67). The Christian Church to function effectively and meaningfully, according to the teachings of Christ, needs to be inclusive for all, irrespective of everyone’s differences or needs, it must embrace everyone’s strengths and ensure they feel included with a sense of true belonging. Moltmann quoted in Reynolds (2008) says as mentioned previously “excluding one member of the body of Christ mars its image” (p 237).

Inclusion is more than a physical presence in the church, inclusion is a sense of belonging. Carlson (2018) agrees and notes that many theologians have emphasised that inclusion is ensuring that individuals with learning disabilities feel they truly belong, not only having a sense of a physical presence. Without this sense of belonging, theological inclusion cannot be attained because individuals will continue to be on the periphery and marginalised. This has led to individuals with disability, and particularly those with learning disability, to become extremely vulnerable and isolated. Similarities can be observed when studying the background to the persecution of other minority groups within society and the Christian church e.g. issues of sexuality, indigenous peoples, the travelling community and others.

Inclusion is more than being present or seen, it is belonging, and for an individual with learning disabilities to be meaningfully included within the Christian Church, they need to be seen, first and foremost as a person, friend, neighbour, and an integral part of the community of the church. Swinton (2012) cited Vanier’s (1998) point which clearly describes this as – “to be included you just need to be present. To belong you need to be missed” (p.183). Tomko (2006) also said inclusion is being a part of what everyone else is, being welcomed and embraced as a member who belongs, but sadly research suggests that the Christian Church has a long way to go, to fully embrace the inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities. One study in America by Cartel et al (2023) interviewed 37 Christians with a range of disabilities to gain their views on how accessible they

found worshipping in their churches. The study found a prevailing theme that services were designed without the involvement of the individuals with disabilities and that there were no systems in place within the churches to facilitate this communication about what was required.

4.1a.Barriers to Inclusion

I would like to draw attention to and discuss the relevance of discrimination for individuals with learning disabilities in relation to the Christian faith and the barriers to inclusion.

Discrimination is a word used to cover many situations where discrimination and prejudice is encountered, and it can come in different forms:-

- Direct discrimination refers to treating someone with a protected characteristic less favourably than others.
- Indirect discrimination refers to creating rules that apply to everyone, but which put someone with a protected characteristic at an unfair disadvantage.

Examples of discrimination can be varied e.g. refusing to provide a service to disabled people that is provided to non-disabled people; refusing to make reasonable adjustments to a provision, service or physical feature of premises, that disadvantages a disabled person, so that it is unreasonably difficult or impossible for them to participate; when providing a lower standard of service to disabled people than non-disabled people; when implementing different terms of service for disabled people, compared to the terms of service for non-disabled people (Equality Act 2010).

Making reasonable adjustments within the church for individuals with learning disabilities is their right and it is more than just creating churches which are physically accessible, it means a “fundamental re-symbolising of the tradition a re-symbolisation of God” (Eiesland 1994 p.281). Even though it is the right of every individual to be included, it will not become a reality until there is a fundamental change in the hearts of the those in the Christian church.

Copland (2001) noted that “accommodation is not a favour, or it becomes pity”(p.71). This perspective of charity has been discussed previously and the rights-based approach cannot be over emphasised as Armstrong

and Baron (2008) states, in relation to people with learning disabilities, it is especially important. The Disability Right Movement has been and continues to be a strong movement but tends to favour those individuals who are able to represent themselves verbally and sadly does not always represent those individuals with intellectual disabilities /learning disabilities. Ibrahim (2023) notes that Reinders believes that the Disability Rights approach is insufficient for the Church because it “poses severe limitations for people with profound disabilities”(p.65). This emphasises the need to address inclusion, specifically, in relation to individuals with learning disabilities and for inclusion to be addressed positively by the church so that it becomes open for everyone (Bolduc 2013). For this to become a reality for individuals with learning disabilities the church needs to understand the barriers to inclusion so that it can begin to remove them and create a sense of belonging for everyone on an equal footing.

These barriers to inclusion can be grouped into three areas -attitudinal; environmental and organisational barriers and in relation to including individuals with learning disabilities within the Christian Church, it is evident that these barriers continue to exist. The time has come to address these barriers and this immediacy is effectively conveyed when Eiesland (1999) who stated that there is a need for “changing the subject from ‘why’ to ‘how’ (p.56). So, the church has a responsibility to relook today at the way it treats individuals with learning disability and their families.

Attitudinal Barriers:

As discussed previously the main attitudinal barrier, is the misconception that individuals with learning disabilities are not spiritual beings and that knowledge of the scriptures and intellect is essential. This barrier must be overcome by the Christian church so that there is an acceptance of equality and justice.

Empathy and understanding are required to get to know individuals with learning disabilities and if this is not done the danger is only to see the disability and not see the person themselves and to continue seeing them as a problem. A dehumanising attitude then prevails which results in subtle prejudice of not acknowledging that individuals with learning disability have lives, personalities, and aspirations. This attitude is negative and dehumanising which in turn create physical barriers where Eiesland (1999) states makes individuals, and their

families feel they are not wanted. These negative attitudes have become engrained, as discussed previously, by the medical model where the person with learning disability was seen as having a problem or illness that needed to be cured. It is only when non-disabled people take the time to look for and get to know the person behind the disability will these attitudes change and individuals with learning disabilities will be valued for who they are.

There is a need to understand the way each person communicates and not to assume that communication is only achieved through the spoken word. Many individuals with learning disabilities will communicate through other ways and we need to learn and understand so that we can communicate with them. Also, negative attitude towards individuals who are autistic and non-verbal can lead to incorrect assumptions that they are unable to understand and are unintelligent (Hills et al,2019). To break down these attitudinal barriers the Church needs to provide enlightened, positive, and empathic leadership that exemplifies friendship and “inclusive community of hospitality”(Yong 2016,p.225).

The church needs to spend time getting to know each individual and understand how each individual with learning disabilities communicates so that they can be genuinely included. It is from the experience of knowing individuals with learning disabilities that these attitudinal barriers are removed, as often they are the result of ignorance and sometimes fear of the unknown, as discussed previously, resulting in feelings of uncomfortableness. If attitudes towards individuals with learning disabilities change, they can then be seen as individuals who can contribute positively to the life of the church.

Environmental Barriers:

To facilitate this experience of getting to know and building friendships with individuals with learning disabilities and their families they need to be able to physically attend church services which involves ensuring that any potential environmental barriers which could prevent them from joining the congregation are removed.

There can be many and varied environmental barriers from the basic issue of getting into the church building i.e. the church door not wide enough or one without a ramp which precludes wheelchair users' entry to many other barriers once in the church e.g. the seating can be unsuitable, with families unable to sit near their family member who is in a wheelchair; distance and unsuitability of seating; lack of a loop system for those with hearing difficulties; poor insufficient lighting for those with sight difficulties; the lack of braille service books for those who require them or the lack of quiet spaces and dignified toilets for individuals with physical disabilities.

There are, of course, many other physical barriers can then have a knock-on effect on the overall participation of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of church life and church policies and practices need to be inclusive otherwise they become themselves organisational barriers.

Organisational barriers:

As mentioned previously the Equality Act requires that the church, like all other establishments must make "reasonable adjustments" to reduce these barriers but also there is a need for an 'anticipatory requirement' and this I believe is the key to creating an inclusive church.

It is not only reacting to situations in which there is an immediate need to make those reasonable adjustments but there is a need for the church to be proactive in ensuring that it is ready to always welcome individuals with learning disabilities and their families. This will require the church to have systems in place that can provide the basic anticipatory adjustments and ensure that each situation is looked at individually and steps taken to facilitate the inclusion of everyone with learning disabilities and their family. Bolduc (2001) suggests that the way forward is for the church to firstly acknowledge there may be differences between us but not only accept those differences but embrace them so that inclusion can truly begin, which in turn will begin to create the foundation for theological inclusion. Throughout the organisation of the church the voice of individuals with learning disabilities and their family's needs to be heard, their views need to be actively sought so that a partnership can begin to work together to build those necessary bridges to facilitate inclusion.

As Carter et al (2016) suggests, there needs to be a combination of actions which will ensure individuals with learning disabilities and their families are included which involves being “invited; welcomed ;supported; and connected”(p.591). These actions will begin to overcome the attitudinal, environmental and organisational barriers which presently exist for individuals with learning disabilities and their families and enable them to integrate fully into the life of the Christian church.

4.1b. Physical and Spiritual Inclusion.

Swinton (2012) noted that “thin definitions of disability and thin understandings of disabled people lead to thin forms of inclusion”(p.180) and he went on to give the example of Kevin who received more attention in local coffee shop than he did in the church. The Church of Scotland states clearly that this situation needs to change because ‘the body of Christ is only truly the body of Christ when all peoples have a place where they belong’(p.140). Vanier (2013) notes that the L’Arche community reiterates this saying, that the church needs to welcome people with disability which then bears witness to the power of God through vulnerability and weakness and Vanier states “we are all part of the same body”(p.249).This welcome that the families of individuals with learning disabilities refer to, is true hospitality which is a two way process between the church and themselves and if this is achieved, physical and spiritual inclusion is achieved.

Bonhoeffer cited in Gruchy (1999) states that Christ is present in this two-way action, how we respect, and honour God is reflected in the way we respect and honour our fellow man/woman. “Christians are the people who love”(p.249) and Bonhoeffer described his desire for the Church to become like Christ, emphasising the importance of prayer and action for justice. He stated the Church is only a church when it exists for others and his work is relevant to the Christian church today, when we are working towards inclusion, because it is an injustice for individuals with learning disabilities and their family to be excluded from the church.

To work towards physical and spiritual inclusion and overcome the existing barriers, Mc Reynolds (2016) suggests that there are seven key areas of ministry which are built upon the dignity of the individual with learning disabilities and a recognition of their value as an individual.

These seven key areas of ministry, he suggests are:-

- 1.The importance of jointly sharing the journey and moving away from the rituals to being authentically present with individuals with learning disabilities and their families.
2. A need to move away from the present emphasis on the numbers of people who attend church services to the importance of the quality and accessibility of the services itself.
3. Ensuring that systems within the church are not there merely for convenience but there for the right reason even though this might be far more difficult to attain.
4. Acknowledging that if individuals with disabilities are not welcomed into the church that a part of Christ's body is not being acknowledged.
- 5.The church needs to ensure that it is available for individuals with learning disability and their families beyond the services, as mentioned previously, it needs to be supportive in a practical way.
6. The importance of listening is emphasised, ensuring we are listening to the issues, thoughts and needs of those individuals with learning disabilities and their families.
- 7.The need to embrace the idea that in addition to the church teaching it can also learn from individuals with learning disabilities and their families. They have a great deal to contribute to the church and its congregation if included as equal participants.

I agree with Mc Reynolds (2016) that these key areas are vitally important but as mentioned previously, it is also important to remember, it needs to be a two-way process, involving individuals with learning disabilities and their families. The research study by Carter et al (2022) involved gaining the viewpoints from the lived experience of individuals with learning disabilities and their families, which stated that churches need to be proactive in listening and learning from the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities and their families and engage in "authentic dialogue"(Richard 1984,p.407). Individuals and families need to feel listened to and this is two -way conversation and the only way to build bridges of understanding.

The study also suggested that reflection was also an important way in which they believed the church could encourage inclusion, being honest in the way that the various barriers can prevent inclusion from happening,

in a meaningful way for individuals with learning disabilities and their families. It was suggested that this reflection could take different forms, from small group discussions and I would suggest, that ensuring that individuals who find it difficult to use the spoken language, their views need to be captured in other ways, using their individual means of communication e.g. visual communication boards; Makaton; sign language etc. Also seeking input from local advocacy groups; L'Arche; Mencap and the National Autistic Society so that the process of reflection becomes meaningful with positive outcomes for everyone with learning disability and their family. (Refer to Footnote 2).

The church can take these positive steps to encourage physical inclusion and as discussed previously, theological inclusion will then become more attainable for individuals with learning disabilities. Picket et al(2020) carried out a study of children with and without disabilities in relation to their spiritual health and concluded that faith leaders have an important role to play in ensuring the inclusion of individuals within each faith community. Health and well-being of children and adults with learning disability also needs to include spiritual health so that a holistic approach is adopted for everyone in the church equally.

Burnett (2022) as an individual with autism, makes some excellent suggestions in relation to supporting inclusion, ones which I can relate to with having a brother with learning disabilities and autism. Predictability of the order of service is key so that there are no unplanned changes which could prove to be anxiety inducing and as mentioned previously ensuring that there is no reference to God wanting to cure people with autism but rather emphasising acceptance of difference.

Footnote 2:

There are examples of inter-faith good practice which is also important to share in the diverse communities we live and as Sykes (1971) stated 'the fact that a Christian may believe that his own faith is true does not relieve him of the responsibility of trying to understand the faith of another'(p.111). Recently the Jewish Siddur (prayer book) has been created using the Picture Exchange Communication System and in addition it has been produced in different sizes of fonts to assist those with visual difficulties also. To complement this new translation, they have also created videos to assist with its introduction into schools and so this siddur is a practical resource which will help those with learning disabilities and their families, encouraging understanding, respect, and inclusion in the Jewish church. Also, there are examples within Islam where many mosques have adapted to ensure their members who have disabilities are included e.g. in Singapore a mosque there as created an area for those who use a wheelchair so that they do not need to come out of it and special facilities for the wheels to be cleaned in accordance with their beliefs.

In Sydney, Australia there is a church which ensures their services are accessible but also that the community of the church welcomes individuals with learning disabilities and their families to ensure they feel a sense of belonging.

She suggests linking with various organisations to gain advice of others with the lived experience e.g. Centre for Study of Autism and Christian Community, which is a research centre at the University of Aberdeen and the Autism Faith Network -USA founded by Tonya Nash, parent of two autistic sons (p.26). She goes on to describe how many adults with autism often live very isolated lives and the church can offer ‘a community of inclusive love for such individuals’(p.40).This should be the goal for the church, showing positive and practical ways, not merely through words, how they are working towards inclusion.

Along with the above suggestions and recommendations for facilitating inclusion for individuals with learning disability and autism the most important element is unconditional acceptance and empathy as discussed previously. A mother describes this, beautifully, in Hills et al (2019) when she talks about her son and how they share laughs and tease each other but that physical expressions of love are rare but when they do come, they are truly genuine and spontaneous. She explains “love is present and expressed in our acceptance and respect for each other’s difference rather than by more conventional ways” and she goes on to say, “we enjoy a mutually invested relationship, although it is unlike any I observe between other parents and their children”(p.12).The experiences of parents, siblings and other family members of individuals with learning disability can provide a wealthy resource for the church so that these bridges, mentioned previously, become a reality, and inclusion and a sense of true belonging can be achieved for individuals with learning disability and their families in the Christian church and we have duty to achieve it.

Conclusion:

I believe the barriers to inclusion which restrict individuals with learning disabilities and their families from belonging in the Christian church can be overcome with empathy and understanding. Ensuring that inclusion happens is vitally important so that the future experiences of individuals with learning disabilities are no longer negative and excluding as Vanier (2013) stated clearly “it’s especially difficult for those with learning disability to find a harmony in their lives if they are not in a true community”(p.189). He believes that individuals with learning disabilities need to be included in genuine community life and the church is a part

of that community. Diversity enables unity of humanity and Young (1997) advocates that we need to ensure inclusion as ‘communities without disabled people are disabled communities’(p.151) and the church now needs to accept responsibility for practices which, over the years, have been oppressive and discriminatory. Brock(2019) states that the time has come for the church to change its methods, structures, policies and relook at the way its theology is conveyed so that individuals with learning disability can, at last, be accepted and included.

Conclusion -The Way Forward

It is hoped that this dissertation will encourage further reflection on the way the Christian church can continue to work together to encourage, enable and support individuals with learning disability move from the shadows and become included and gain a sense a belonging and friendship- the “sacred gift of friendship” (Thornburgh 2013). This in turn will facilitate theological inclusion which, I believe passionately, and the misconception that faith and spirituality is dependent on intellect, will be dispelled.

Theology of disability has been explored and how it has been influenced by the different models of disability and it became evident that the theologians with a lived experience of learning disability like Moltmann; Swinton and others, provided, and can continue to provide, an additional level of credibility and empathy to the ongoing development of disability theology. As an individual with a brother with learning disabilities and autism I believe the Christian church needs to hear the voices of those with learning disability and their families and respond to them positively and empathically.

Inclusion is happening in some areas within the church but there is a long way to go to achieving theological inclusion. Individuals with learning disabilities are sadly continually excluded from the Christian church and its community, they continue to be “hidden in the shadows”. Gillibrand (2010) describes it as the “unspoken conspiracy of exclusion” and this vulnerable group of individuals have a right to be included in every sphere of the life of the church and in addition the church has a responsibility and duty to ensure that they are also included theologically. He shares the experience of living with a person who has difficulty in communication and understanding which has made him realise that there is something which is impossible to explain and goes beyond understanding. Harshaw (2016) also tries to explain this experience of living with her daughter, explaining that she has taught her, one’s worth as a person is not determined by health or being independent and economically productive but rather, her worth is in being human.

This belief that individuals with learning disabilities are dignified human beings is re-iterated by Reinders (2008) who states that “people with profound disabilities are people just like us and that we are all defined as

dignified human beings not by what we do but by our congenital relationship with God” (p.59). When terminology was discussed at the beginning of this dissertation it was emphasised that there is a danger in giving labels to individuals with learning disabilities which can then obstruct their humanity. Volpe (2009) agrees and notes that an individual with profound intellectual disability does not take away their humanity but rather it shows and emphasises our joint humanity. We are all similar but different, those with disabilities and those who are able bodied and as Moltmann (1997) said “there is no differentiation between the healthy and those with disabilities. For every human life has its limitations, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. We are born needy, and we die helpless”(p.68). He goes on to say that it is society which sees those with disabilities as being disabled and this is why we need to change the way we view individuals with learning disabilities and see beyond their differences and see the person.

To enable this to become a reality the church needs to open its door and be a warm, understanding, and empathic host so that friendships can begin to develop and faith communities have, according to Swinton and Mowat (2016), the ability to enable these friendships but need to be mindful that certain practices within the church can be exclusive and create situations where individuals with learning disabilities feel excluded. Friendship needs to be sincere and meaningful for both parties and the challenge for the church is to replicate the unconditional friendship offered by Jesus.

As the Church of Scotland (2014) clearly states -“Friendship, belonging, noticing, guesting, and hosting: these are not complicated gifts we offer to one another. But in their simplicity, we will encounter Jesus and, as we encounter Jesus, we can truly become a Church”(p.3). These gifts also form the mission statement of the L’Arche community and Vanier emphasises the need for an “intelligent, wise ,love’ (cited in Ford 2014,p.357) which will create diverse communities which welcome individuals with learning disabilities. In so doing, this love, Carr (1997) suggests, will portray the church, truly showing love to one’s neighbour. As mentioned previously hospitality is the vehicle for this unconditional love and the church needs to nurture “communities of abundant hospitality”(Reynolds 2008.p.14) and when discussing inclusion, this is more than just a passive act of welcoming, it needs to be befriending a person with learning disabilities so that they feel a sense of belonging.

Showing compassion is a proactive emotion and Willows and Swinton (2000) suggest that it provides acceptance and a love, as mentioned previously, which is wise and meaningful and ensures it is not received as pity. There is a need for a “wise and intelligent love”(Vanier cited in Ford 2014,p.357). It is easy to convey kindness, which is well-meaning, but it does not convey thoughtfulness which then denies the individual with learning disabilities the dignity and respect they deserve. Moltmann(1978) conveys this sentiment in just a few words “friendship unites affection with respect (p.106). It has been suggested by Mc Reynolds(2016) that we need a new theology of belonging which encompasses this sense of friendship which will assist the church to move from just the act of including individuals with learning disabilities but ensuring that they and their families feel a sense of belonging in the church.

Jacobs and Richardson (2022) in their book “At the Gates” is an extremely powerful book which documents the stories of more than fifty Christians with various disabilities who share their experiences of being excluded in church. It is a challenging and at times uncomfortable read but one which every church should read so that individuals with disabilities including those with learning disabilities can experience a true sense of belonging and a feeling of being valued. There is one section where they make a powerful statement that “toilets are theological”(p.59) which at first glance is startling and possibly unclear but the chapter progresses, and the personal experience of the individuals involved in relating their stories brings light on its meaning. It emphasises the importance for the church to be practical and not just use words to convey inclusion and there are many examples where individuals have been excluded but the issue of being able to access a toilet when required, a basic human right, stands out starkly e.g. an individual describes how they were shown a toilet which was situated in a storage cupboard in the church with other furniture etc blocking the path to the toilet and when this was mentioned, the response was that they had a baby’s changing area and a toilet was rarely necessary.

Another example was that a toilet was outside the church and the key could not be found; another time a person with a disability was looking for an accessible toilet in a Christian festival while at the same time

prayers were being said in relation to healing those with disabilities! The individual relaying the story just said simply that they did not need to be cured, a theme discussed earlier in relation to the medical model, but that they just needed to be treated with respect and valued as a human being and a member of the church, who needed a toilet they could access, like every other able-bodied person. The issue of accessing the toilet was clearly a prime example and a metaphor for the varied aspects of exclusion individuals with disabilities felt in relation to the Christian church.

There are examples of good practice in existence, in certain Churches, but they are sadly in the minority and need to be shared across the country. Some churches take time to get to know the individual with learning disabilities and their family and find out, not only the potential difficulties they may have in accessing and being included in the church but also, as important, find out their strengths too. They make those ‘reasonable adjustments’ e.g. ensuring physical access into the church is possible, ensuring easy access to rooms within the church is possible, like the toilets, making available quite spaces “autistic friendly areas” for those who may suffer from sensory overload, using augmented communication as required e.g. Sign Along; Makaton (an unique language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate or PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System-Azaroff et al 2009). These are all some examples, and many churches are successfully using them which enriches the experience for everyone in the congregation ensuring the process of building those bridges, mentioned earlier, is a positive one for all involved believing that a disability -positive church is one which not only preaches the words but shows its intent to be inclusive through actions.

As one disabled person said, “when the church shuts disabled people outside the gates, it shuts Christ outside with us” (p.233) and this is why it is imperative for every church to share good practice so that inclusion of individuals with learning disabilities becomes the norm rather than the exception.

As Eiesland (1999) stated “persons with disabilities must gain access to the social-symbolic life of the church and the church must gain access to the social-symbolic lives of people with disabilities”(p12). She emphasised that we ignore life if we do not acknowledge disability, and as discussed earlier, we need to

move further than merely acknowledging disability, we need to accept our responsibilities to build those bridges within the church to create what Bonhoeffer (1991) called a “just and humane society”(p.111). Yong (2020) suggests it’s time to revise our existing theological understanding, “especially of people with disabilities, we must take up the task of reimagining theology and renewing the church in late modernity” (p.295).If we fail and do not revise our understanding, then the gap between theology and actual practice within the Christian church will increase.

It is hoped this dissertation will encourage further discussion on the theology of disability and I believe optimistically, as Fern (a lady with autism, who contributed her story to the book “At the Gates”) said “an accessible and inclusive Church is possible. I remain hopeful that these changes will happen”(p.240). If these changes are not happening and if theological inclusion is not happening, then we need to ask why it is not happening and more importantly what can be done to ensure it does happen. Bridges must be built to ensure inclusion and a sense of belonging for individuals with learning disabilities and their families within the Christian church so that they do not remain ‘hidden in the shadows’.

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