

34/09 People affected by disability

(A progress report from the Social Issues Executive.)

Introduction

1. In 2009, Synod passed resolution 34/09 People affected by disability (see Appendix I below). It recognised the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, their families and their carers. It noted the many obstacles they face in participating in Christian fellowship. It requested all parishes and organisations in the Diocese to 'develop and implement a plan to remove those obstacles that currently prevent people affected by disability from hearing the gospel and sharing in Christian fellowship'. It also requested further advocacy on behalf of these people.

2. The Resolution reflects a Christian account of human personhood. Its goals are a straightforward expression of Christian obedience. A day will come when those in Christ receive a 'spiritual body', raised imperishable, glorious and powerful (1 Cor. 15:42–44). It will be patterned on the beautiful body of our risen Lord, who will 'guide them to springs of living waters', while God wipes away 'every tear from their eyes' (Rev. 7:17, HCSB). Until then, we all experience many bodily challenges. People with disability include those born with disabilities and those whose bodies have changed due to accident, illness or age. Our Lord did not only care deeply for such people (e.g. Matt. 11:5; 12:10–13; 15:30–31; 21:14). He knew that our treatment of people with disability reflects our estimate of ourselves before God. Those who know their poverty before God, and their need of his kindness, learn to welcome others with disability (Luke 14:1–24). This teaching, and Jesus' earthly practice, formed a church that may no longer gravitate only to those who look impressive (James 2:1–4). In the age of abortion, it becomes especially important for Christian churches to become oases of welcome for those with disability, and for their carers.

3. The purpose of this report from the Diocesan Social Issues Executive (SIE – www.sie.org.au) is to apprise the Synod of further developments. In the final paragraphs of the report, some initiatives of ANGLICARE Sydney are recounted on behalf of that agency. The main emphasis of the report will be on activity undertaken by and for parishes. If other organizations of the Diocese have responded to the Resolution, the relevant information is currently beyond the SIE's reach.

Improved access

4. Part (c) of Resolution 34/09 called upon parishes and organisations to remove the obstacles that prevent people with disability from hearing the gospel and sharing in Christian fellowship. These obstacles are found both in the *culture* of church groups, and in

the *built environment*. We refer to this removal of both cultural and built obstacles simply as *improved access* for people with disability.

5. As was highlighted at last year's Synod, the *Luke14* initiative of the Christian Blind Mission (CBM – www.luke14.cbm.org.au) has become an invaluable resource for improving access. It includes good Bible study material, and spotlights a church's cultural blind spots. CBM has also gathered practical advice for changing the built environment.

The survey

6. The SIE implemented a plan to assist parishes to improve their access. The plan has two parts. In the first part of the plan, the SIE developed a questionnaire for parishes in consultation with several experts. The Diocesan Secretariat hosted the questionnaire online, and invited each Rector or his delegate to respond during June 2010. Representatives of one hundred and thirty nine parishes (out of a total of 267 parishes) gave responses in respect of one hundred and fifty ministry centres.

7. The questionnaire is included below as Appendix II of this report. Synod members might find it a helpful guide for improving their own church's accessibility. As one respondent put it, 'this survey made me see more we could do.'

8. The survey reveals a mixed picture of accessibility to our churches. In the built environment for example, 22% of centres do not have accessible carpark spaces; 27% do not have a sealed path to their front door; and 15% do not have a wheelchair-accessible church building. Once inside, 62% have doors that cannot be opened easily by a wheelchair user or other person with a disability. In 42% of these centres, one or more doorways is interrupted by a step. Only 9% of centres met the four main requirements for ramp access that the questionnaire tested, and 17% met none of these requirements. Without repeating all the results here, the overall picture was of a generally inhospitable built environment, with many good and clear exceptions. Of course this result concurs with a repeatedly expressed theme: that old buildings, and low cash-flow, present significant challenges.

9. In terms of church culture, 59% of the centres have welcoming teams that could be described as 'adept' at welcoming people with disability and their carers. No centres (0%) had Braille Bibles or other Braille literature available, and only 4% had bookshop material on hand that related to disability. Centres that reported having even minimal disability-related material on their website totaled 4%.

10. These results are not intended to reflect badly on those parishes that undertook to complete the survey. Indeed, no survey can entirely capture the real state of a church's awareness of people with

disability. (For example, ministries that travel to such people are not reflected in the survey.) Also, the fact that about half the parishes of the Diocese even made a response may signal a high level of goodwill across the Diocese toward people with disability. The results simply act as a snapshot of our current levels of awareness of the needs of these people. However, the results also indicate two broad generalizations that can be made about our current practices.

11. Most respondents thought that obstacles to accessibility in the built environment would cost a lot of money to remedy, and would involve massive changes to (generally) old buildings. These concerns can be true. However, it is often the case that *many simple changes* can make a centre more accessible. The removal of a door handle; attention to a trip-hazard; use of a consistent, large-font PowerPoint template; the installation of inexpensive portable ramps – all are examples of the kind of ‘low hanging fruit’ that can be easily missed. Our consultants (see below) have already helped churches by pointing out such simple, low-cost changes.

12. In terms of church culture, many respondents unwittingly expressed a mistaken idea that is prevalent in every church culture. The thought appeared in two guises. For some, their church did not need to take active steps for people with disability, because their congregation had no such people. Others spoke of handling problems as they arose for those people with disabilities who currently attend. But of course the challenges faced by people with disabilities mean that *they simply cannot begin to participate if an environment is inhospitable to their form of disability*. The blind are not helped by wheelchair accessibility; those with perambulatory disability are not helped by a hearing loop; and so on. Just as no able-bodied person would come to church if the doors were locked, for people with disability, *the doors are effectively locked in the absence of a plan to cater for them*. One respondent noticed this habit of thought: ‘We do things OK from a reactive point of view but are not proactive at this time.’ This kind of thinking is understandable: it is hard enough to keep a church running for those who are there, without thinking about hypothetical others who are not. But the survey revealed the very great need for a new culture that approaches disability access proactively and intentionally, not reactively. As things stand, only about 8% of parishes responding had the beginnings of a disability action plan.

13. This response is at odds with the large number of people with disabilities found in the general community. In the 2003 Australian Bureau of Statistics *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers* (www.abs.gov.au cat. no. 4430.0), **one in five** people had a reported disability, defined as any limitation, restriction or impairment lasting for at least six months. (84% of these people experienced a physical disability; and the mental or behavioural disorders experienced by the other 16% were even more debilitating.) The rate of profound or severe

core-activity limitation was 6.3% of the population, or about **one in sixteen**. About **one in ten** Australians provided carer assistance to those who needed help because of disability or age. About **one in fifty** were primary carers. The survey did not directly test for the numbers of carers and people with disability present in churches. But when compared to the wider community, people with disability and their carers are probably underrepresented in most churches.

Consultations

14. Recognising that it would be hard for parishes to grapple with these complex issues, the second part of the SIE plan has been to support parishes with the offer of **free on-site consultations**. The questionnaire offered each parish the opportunity for such a consultation. About fifty consultations were requested. Two volunteers, Louise Gosbell and Lara Oram, are expert at improving access and have kindly offered their time to assist parishes to change. (The SIE is reimbursing Louise and Lara for costs they incur.)

15. Louise's academic and teaching skills enable her to help improve access across a broad spectrum. She helps churches to adopt a more intentional culture for improving accessibility, and offers to follow up the church's activity. She analyses what prevents churches from connecting with the large number of people with disabilities hidden in every local community. She orients teaching staff to *Luke 14* resources.

16. Lara is an occupational therapist, and her expertise is in adapting built environments. Lara's audit is intended to give a clear idea of how premises can be modified to accommodate people with disabilities. She suggests everything from minor modifications to major building modifications, and alerts parishes to equipment that may assist. At the end of her consultation, she gives a list of Accessible Design Resources. This document names and explains key items of specialized equipment, and notes where they can be purchased in the Sydney area.

17. It will take several months to work through the initial requests for consultations. However, both will accept requests for further appointments, and can travel to centres **anywhere in the diocese**. Louise can be contacted on 0413 994131. Lara can be contacted on 0423 777651.

Some parishes improving their access

18. The following paragraphs list some interesting activity in several churches. The list is only representative, not exhaustive. The survey revealed many other excellent initiatives that were already underway. These initiatives, mainly arising from the consultations, are offered to fire our imaginations about what is possible.

19. The Parish of Yagoona has bought the *Luke14* bible studies. Even before Lara audits these centres, a ramp at the front door of St Mark's and accessible toilets at St Clement's are being implemented. The church is putting up signage around the property that concurs with Vision Australia guidelines. The parish is keen to start thinking more intentionally about the issue of disability.

20. St Hilda's Katoomba has held a six-week sermon and study series on the issue of disability that was very well received. The series was based on the *Luke 14* Bible study material. Visiting speakers like Allan Windley and Louise Gosbell shared their stories to congregations that include people with a range of disabilities. Mental illness is a particular issue in the mountains and the church seeks to reach out to people in half way houses and those living alone. Ministries like *Cafe Manna* raise the profile of the problem and address how to care for people who struggle with disability.

21. St Peter's Seven Hills is starting to plan changes to church plant. A new ramp to the hall is underway. After the women's Bible study group completes the *Luke14* material, they will consider how to be more intentional about the needs of people with disabilities. As local council plans emerge for disability housing nearby, this church is preparing itself to connect with those who will live there.

22. St Marys at St Marys has booked consultation to try solve daunting problems relating to its difficult heritage building. Several young people with autism and related conditions attend this church, and training options for how better to relate to them are being sought.

23. Christ Church at Lavender Bay plans to install Tactile Ground Surface Indicators. These devices enable independent and safe ascent and descent of staircases for people with vision impairments. They alert people that stairs are approaching, and provide orientation and directional information. They can be easily retrofitted.

24. St James' Turramurra has bought copies of the *Luke14* Bible study series. The whole church will work through the studies, and will then observe a Disability Awareness Sunday.

25. St Mark's Sadleir already has several excellent accessibility features. In one collaborative partnership, an accessible toilet was initiated by ANGLICARE Chesalon (which operates a dementia day care centre in the building); it attracted significant government funding. The parish is planning several more changes to enhance accessibility. The existing accessible parking space does not meet the Australian Standard and will be altered. A portable ramp will temporarily rectify problems at entry points to the buildings. A more permanent ramp is being considered to deal with another long and uneven pathway. A garden bed will be raised. These and several other planned

improvements, small and large, have arisen after consultation with Lara.

26. St Clement's Mosman runs a monthly respite program called *Saturday Care*. It cares for children with several challenges, including autism, Down syndrome, Angelman syndrome, and total visual impairment. When the service began, some thirty church members volunteered to assist. According to carer Kate Hurley, these people were nervous to start with but 'are now very confident and capable.' Kate says that *Saturday Care* has shown carers that their families are welcome at church, and can fit in. The program is 'easily transferable to other churches' and Kate and program co-ordinator Gill Robinson are willing to help other churches begin such a program. Kate can be contacted on hurleykate@bigpond.com and Gill on gillianr@tpg.com.au.

Advocacy

27. Part (d) of Resolution 34/09 called for ongoing advocacy 'for Government policy that promotes the wellbeing and interests of people with disabilities and their families and carers.' Such advocacy has been ongoing for many years. Its technical complexity resists easy summary here, and is generally within the ambit of ANGLICARE Sydney (AHMS). For example in February 2010, ANGLICARE Sydney prepared a major *Submission to the Legislative Inquiry into the Provision of Education to Students with a Disability or Special Needs*

28. In April 2010 ANGLICARE'S Social Policy and Research Unit prepared a *Disability Advocacy Strategy* for the benefit of AHMS Council. It presents an overall methodology for advocacy in a variety of programs and projects concerning people with different kinds of disability. This Strategy Paper complements the AHMS Council's ongoing consideration of a major internal *Discussion Paper on Disability and Theology*.

29. ANGLICARE Sydney is also an official Supporter of the interesting proposal for a *National Disability Insurance Scheme* (www.ndis.org.au). The SIE concurs with this support. Of course the national political environment over the past twelve months has not been conducive to progressing the debate over this important proposal.

Conclusion

30. The survey, the consultations, the interesting stories and ANGLICARE'S advocacy are only glimpses of what is possible. The process of improving accessibility across the Diocese will take time. It could take several years to achieve a cultural and built environment that consistently welcomes people with disability across the Diocese.

31. Although these changes seem daunting, they will gradually build to become a fitting adornment to the gospel of grace. The SIE is committed to promoting Resolution 34/09 over the long haul, and would be glad to continue reporting on changes pursuant to this Resolution.

For and on behalf of the Social Issues Executive

THE REV DR ANDREW CAMERON
Chairman

16 September 2010

Appendix I

Resolution 34/09 – People affected by disability

Synod, mindful that meeting together in Christ, we learn of receiving our bodies as given by God; we continue to discover practices of love towards all people in their particular circumstances; we discern with them how to 'carry each other's burdens' (Gal. 6:2); and we each learn together how to 'carry our own load' (Gal 6:5), therefore –

- (a) recognises that for people with disabilities, their families and carers, daily life can be practically, financially, socially and emotionally more difficult than it is for most people,
- (b) notes that there are many obstacles for people with disabilities, their families and carers, which prevent them hearing the gospel and sharing in Christian fellowship, which we have not always considered,
- (c) requests that all parishes and organisations in the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church develop and implement a plan to remove those obstacles that currently prevent people affected by disability from hearing the gospel and sharing in Christian fellowship, and
- (d) requests Sydney Anglicans and the Diocese in particular to continue to advocate for Government policy that promotes the wellbeing and interests of people with disabilities and their families and carers.



Appendix II

The church accessibility questionnaire

(This online survey was made available to parishes in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney during June, 2010. Options for answering have been omitted.)

A. PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF YOUR CHURCH PLANT

1. Location:

Our church can be seen easily from the street.

Our church is well signed.

We have accessible car park spaces.

There is rain cover from our car park to church entrance.

From street to front door, our church is _____ metres
You can get from car to a seat in church without step/stairs.
Our church is on a hill.
We have a continual sealed pathway from car park to church entrance.
Our pathways are relatively flat.

2. Transport:

Most people get to church by (foot / car)
Our church has a car pool.
Our church is serviced by good public transport.
The nearest bus or rail station is _____ metres away.

3. Physical Access:

At least one major entrance of the church building is accessible to wheelchairs.
At least one major entrance of the church hall is accessible to wheelchairs.
Main doors in all key buildings have a clear opening of 850mm or more.
Doors can be opened easily by a wheelchair user or other person with a disability.
Floors are level on each side of all doors.
Ramps offer access to all elevated entrances.
Ramps have a slope no greater than 1:14.
Ramps have a width of no less than 1 metre.
Ramps have handrails on both sides.
There are wheelchair accessible toilets on the property.
Our kitchen is wheelchair accessible.
There are designated wheelchair spaces in our church auditorium.
There are multiple places where people with a disability can sit, which have clear access and view to screens and stage, and which enable social interaction.
Our welcoming team is adept at welcoming people living with disability (i.e. people with a disability and their carers).
A hearing loop is installed and operative.
Lighting on those speaking/leading eliminates shadows.
Seats with arms and/or extra legroom cater for people with mobility impairment.

We have seating that can be easily moved and configured.
There are no steps to communion rail.
We have seats and tables in our morning tea area.

B. COMMUNICATION

4. Printed material:

Large print bibles are available.
Other large print material is available.
Braille Bibles are available.
Other Braille material is available.
Large-print and online versions of sermons and bulletins are available.
Some of our bookshop material directly addresses people with a disability.

5. Audio-visual:

We use PowerPoint for songs.
We use PowerPoint to aid sermon delivery.
Our PowerPoint usage receives positive feedback from people with a disability.
Large print material augments PowerPoint.
We use Auslan interpreters for regular church services.
We use Auslan interpreters for particular events.
Our church provides closed captioning of services.

6. Website:

Website has disability-related information for people living with disability (i.e. for those with a disability, and/or for their carers).
Website describes disability-friendly features of church plant.
Webstream / podcast of sermons or talks is available.
Website design is accessible to people with a disability.

C. GENERAL

7. Briefly describe your church: e.g. its character or culture; age groups; cultural diversity; number of regulars with a disability.
8. Briefly describe the format of your church service(s) – length? music? formal/informal?
9. What kind(s) of care is your church offering to the carers and families of people with a disability?
10. What is done to include people with a disability in the following programs: Children's ministry; Youth ministry; Women's

ministry; Men's ministry; Senior's ministry; Small group ministry; Pastoral care program; Other.

11. Do you have any special links with community based organizations that provide services to people with a disability, and if so, what are they (e.g.: special schools, supported accommodation, respite providers, specific disability support groups)?
12. Does your church have a disability action plan?
13. Any other things you would like to say about your church in relation to this area?
14. Would you like to receive a consultation, to help you begin making some changes?