

## HEBA Symposium March 2022– Disability, Friendship and Inclusion

### Session 3 – How can Disabled People be actively included?

In this final session I want to outline an approach that can facilitate the participatory inclusion of disabled people in Baptist church communities. The sociological models we've explored are secular and the disability theologies are not specifically within a Baptist ecclesiological framework. I suggest that Baptist church communities have some characteristics which are particularly conducive to the development of a relational approach to the inclusion of disabled people.

We're going to think about Baptist covenant communities, a Trinitarian foundation, and covenant friendships that are intentional, mutual and particular. Then another discussion breakout groups before our final plenary Q&A

#### Baptist Covenant Communities

Baptists are essentially a relational church community, within the local church, within each association, across the nation in the BU/Baptists Together, and internationally through EBF and BWA. These relationships are rooted in the biblical and historic idea of covenant relationships, initiated by God, that are at the heart of each gathered church.

Metaphors of walking and seeing have a deep resonance in a Baptist context. Historically we have expressed ideas of our covenant relationship with God and one another in terms of 'walking together' and 'watching over one another'.<sup>1</sup> These metaphors have a rich biblical context and occur throughout the Old and New Testaments.

There can be problems if metaphors are taken literally and there are some discrepancies in translation. Take, for example, the use of 'walk' in some New Testament texts.<sup>2</sup> There are many occasions when 'walk' is used as a verb referring to the physical act of moving about.<sup>3</sup> The references to "the lame walk",<sup>4</sup> are seen as a messianic sign, have both literal/descriptive and metaphorical senses, since Jesus did heal the physically lame and enable them to walk, while those made metaphorically lame by their burdens are enabled

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<sup>1</sup> (Fiddes, 2003, pp. 21-24)

<sup>2</sup> According to my search for *peripateō* there are 105 occurrences in the New Testament.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Matt. 4:18.

<sup>4</sup> See Matt. 11:5 fulfilled for example in Matt. 9:1-8 and 15:31.

to live lives free from these. There are other occasions when ‘walk’ is used only in a metaphorical sense with regards to the relationship between believers and God.<sup>5</sup> Some of these occurrences are translated inconsistently: the NIV translates some occurrences of *peripateô* as ‘walk’ and others as ‘live’.<sup>6</sup>

In the Old Testament there is a similar issue where ‘walk’ usually refers to a person’s ongoing relationship with God, found in the phrase ‘walk before/with God’.<sup>7</sup> There are similar issues of difference in translation between NASB and NIV over the translation of the Hebrew as ‘walk’ or ‘live’.<sup>8</sup> In the Psalms there are occurrences of parallelism between ‘walk’ and ‘stand’, both referring to the psalmist’s relationship with God as well as between ‘walk’ and ‘righteousness’, ‘living’ and ‘trust’ among others.<sup>9</sup> In Psalm 26:3, 4 there is a contrast between “walking in God’s ways” rather than “sitting with deceitful people” and in Psalm 56:13 a contrast between ‘walking’ and ‘stumbling’.<sup>10</sup> If we are not careful these inconsistencies may give rise to a negative view of those who cannot walk or stand, at least implicitly and on occasion explicitly.

The use of ‘walk’, ‘see’ and ‘hear’ affects the inclusion of disabled people when there is a blurring or confusion over whether these terms are used in a literal/descriptive or metaphorical sense. John Hull, in his book *In The Beginning There Was Darkness*,<sup>11</sup> examines the connection between the description of blind people in both Old and New Testaments, and the negative way that the metaphors of sight and blindness are used. He identifies the recurrent assumption of being sighted, even when sight/blindness is not explicitly mentioned.<sup>12</sup> He points out that the Bible was written by sighted

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, Mark 7:5 referring to keeping the Jewish traditions or Rom. 8:4 referring to living lives according to God’s ways not those of the world. Jesus uses ‘walk’ in this sense in John 11:9-10 and 12:35. A theme picked up in 1 John 1:6,7; 2:6,11; 2 John 1:4,6; 3 John 1:3,4.

<sup>6</sup> NASB has minor exceptions to this consistency, for example Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:18. NIV translates as ‘live’ in the following verses – Mark 7:5; Acts 21:21; Rom. 6:4; 8:4; 2 Cor. 5:7; 10:2-3; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 2:2; 4:1; 4:17; 5:2,8,15; Phil. 3:17,18; Col. 1:10; 2:6; 3:7; 1 Thess. 2:12; 4:1. In Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 3:3 NIV translates ‘walking according to love’ as ‘acting in love’. In John 6:66 NIV translates ‘walk’ as ‘follow’.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Gen. 17:1 referring to Abraham’s relationship with God.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Exod. 16:4 NASB uses ‘walk in my instructions’ and NIV uses ‘follow my instructions’. Exod. 18:20 is a closer parallel with NASB using ‘walk’ and NIV using ‘live’. My brief survey suggests the NASB and NIV are more consistent in the Old Testament.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Pss. 1:1,2; 15:2; 23:4; 26:1. ‘Stand’ is also used literally and metaphorically throughout the Old Testament.

<sup>10</sup> Ps. 82:5 uses a metaphor of ‘walking in darkness’ to refer to not understanding something. This is similar to the ‘seeing is knowing’ metaphor with respect to those who are blind not knowing something. See also Ps. 89:15. Ps. 101:2, 6 links walking and purity. Ps. 115:7 suggests that idols are powerless because ‘they have feet but cannot walk’.

<sup>11</sup> (Hull, 2001)

<sup>12</sup> (Hull, 2001, p. 3)

people, who were also usually non-disabled. If this is not recognised, then “... blind and partially sighted people are likely to find themselves alienated from the Bible without understanding why.”<sup>13</sup> There are assumptions, either implicit or explicit, that are made about how people’s physical ability to walk, see and hear, is directly related to their relationship with God. Disabled people may be unintentionally excluded if such confusion occurs. As indicated in the first session, this may happen even through the commonly used phrase ‘Please stand ...’ prior to congregational singing or other forms of response to God. A more inclusive phrase might be ‘Please stand if you are (comfortably) able to ...’

Although the metaphors of walking and watching may raise issues for some disabled people if interpreted literally, I suggest that for Baptists in covenant relationship, the metaphors of ‘walking together’ and ‘watching over one another’ are helpful in fostering a relational approach to the inclusion of disabled people.

#### Trinitarian Foundations

##### Social Trinity

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the twentieth century largely focused on the concept of a Social Trinity, although this view is not uniformly held. This is a range of understandings gathered around the idea of relationality, and the concept of ‘persons in relationship’.

The concept of ‘Person’ can also be problematic in several ways considering relationships between disabled people and non-disabled people. Some writers on disability doubt that the personhood of disabled people has been considered carefully enough. Sometimes it is not clear that the term ‘person’ is inclusive of disabled people at all. For this reason, if no other, it is doubtful whether the concept of a Social Trinity is a good starting point at all, if we are serious about the inclusion of disabled people in faith communities.

If you imagine a triangle, then the focus of the Social Trinity is on the corners of the triangle. There is another way to think about this.

The Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes has proposed an understanding of the Trinity where the focus is on the sides of the triangle rather than the corners.

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<sup>13</sup> (Hull, 2001, p. 67)

In his book *Participating in God* Fiddes says that he aims to:

... develop an image of God which is appropriate to the demands of experience in pastoral care for others, whether we exercise that care as ordained or lay members of the Christian church, whether as members of the 'caring professions' or as those who have been called, through circumstances, to devote their lives as unpaid 'carers'.<sup>14</sup>

In a contribution to the book *Two Views of the Trinity*, Fiddes says:

... the most adequate and appropriate language we have available to speak about the 'persons' of the Holy Trinity is that they are relations. More dynamically, they are movements of life and love that have some resemblance to the relationships that we recognize between finite persons.<sup>15</sup>

The Social Trinity understood the Trinity as 'persons in relationship' to one another, with the focus on the nature of the persons. Fiddes understands the Trinity in terms of 'persons as relation', with the focus being on the dynamic relationships within the Trinity. Fiddes puts it like this:

"... It is not human individual persons but relations between them, in all their diversity and depth, that offers a helpful analogy to what we call divine 'person'."<sup>16</sup>

The move from 'persons in relation' to 'persons as relation' is helpful for the inclusion of disabled people. It shifts the focus away from discussions about the personhood of disabled people and puts the emphasis on the relationships between disabled and non-disabled people. The focus shifts from the intrinsic, internal characteristics of disabled people [fostered by the Individual Medical Model of Disability] to the extrinsic, external factors [fostered by the Social Model of Disability] that shape the experience and inclusion of disabled people in faith communities and society.

There is a second element of Fiddes' understanding of the Trinity that is helpful. This is the idea of 'participation' He writes:

... the point of Trinitarian language is not to provide an example to copy, but to draw us into participation in God, out of which human life can be

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<sup>14</sup> (Fiddes, 2000, p. 7)

<sup>15</sup> (Fiddes, 2014, pp. 159-160)

<sup>16</sup> (Fiddes, 2014, p. 105)

transformed. But the language of Trinity certainly encourages the values of relationship, community and mutuality between persons. It is about interdependence and not domination.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of participation in God draws on the idea of *perichoresis* as a way of understanding God's invitation for us to participate in his covenant relationship with us and all of creation.

In a much-quoted definition Catherine LaCugna writes:

*Perichoresis* means being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. No person exists by him/herself or is referred to him/herself; this would produce number and therefore division within God. Rather, to be a divine person is to be by nature in relation to other persons.<sup>18</sup>

Together with the idea of 'persons as relation' Fiddes uses the idea of *perichoresis* to develop a metaphor of dance to help us understand the radical relationship with God that we are invited to participate in.

When it comes to the 'divine dance', Fiddes suggests that the focus shifts to "... perichoretic movements in human life, not with the movers."<sup>19</sup> This is helpful when considering the participatory inclusion of disabled people, because the focus shifts to their dynamic relationships with non-disabled people, and participation in the divine life.

Fiddes points out that while *perichoresis* is not derived from the verb *perichoreuo* "... to dance around",<sup>20</sup> he does develop the motif of a dance that is either closed, static and exclusive or open, progressive and inclusive.

If we think of a church community as an inward facing circle, it would be relatively easy to exclude disabled people, and others on the margins, from participation in such a dance. If, instead, the dance is a 'progressive dance' into which others are invited, then it becomes possible to imagine the life of the church as open to the inclusion of those on the margins. Richard Kidd says that in the progressive dance:

... breaking the circle is actually necessary to enable the complex weaving and exchanging that makes the dance progress. This kind of

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<sup>17</sup> (Fiddes, 2000, p. 66)

<sup>18</sup> (Sutcliffe-Pratt, 2017, p. 9) quoting (LaCugna, 1993). This definition is also quoted by (McCall, 2010, p. 157).

<sup>19</sup> (Fiddes, 2000, p. 72) (*Italics original*)

<sup>20</sup> *Perichoreuo*, which Fiddes points out is related to *choreia* from which we derive 'choreography' (Fiddes, 2000, p. 72).

dance invites a much more dynamic metaphor and opens the possibility of conceiving a very different understanding of God's relationship with the world and its creatures.<sup>21</sup>

An example comes to mind as we run with these images of a church as either a 'circle dance' that sustains exclusion, or a 'progressive dance' that encourages inclusion. The 'circle dance' reminds me of those Baptist churches that, historically, have opted for 'closed membership', requiring believers to be baptised by full immersion on confession of faith before reception into membership. If this was rigorously applied to disabled people, elderly people, and others for whom immersion in water is simply not possible, they would find themselves excluded from membership and full participation in the life of a church.<sup>22</sup> This could be considered an example of a 'circle dance' at its very worst. As a wheelchair user, I was baptised as an adult upon confession of my faith in God in the Anglican Church I attended as a University student in the 1980s. Making arrangements to baptise me by immersion proved impractical at that time. When I sought membership of a Baptist church in the 1990s, one that had been founded in the early nineteenth century as a closed membership church, it was agreed that my earlier Anglican baptism could be recognised as valid, because I would have been immersed then had it been a viable option.<sup>23</sup> This, I suggest, was an example of a church modelling itself much more clearly on a 'progressive dance'. Had there not been flexibility and a willingness to 'break the circle', I would have been excluded from membership, so the possibility of becoming a deacon or elder, and eventually an ordained minister, would have been closed down.<sup>24</sup>

### Covenant Friendships

Recognising that Baptist churches are covenantal communities which participate in the covenant relationship that God has with all of creation provides a foundation for an understanding of covenant friendships. These have the potential to foster the participatory inclusion of disabled people in Baptist church communities.

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<sup>21</sup> (Kidd, 2014, p. 13)

<sup>22</sup> (Whitt, 2012)

<sup>23</sup> The Baptist church where I am currently a member is constructing a new church building which has provision for the temporary installation of a hoist system to allow people with restricted mobility to be lowered into the baptistry. It is a significant challenge to fit such equipment to an existing building.

<sup>24</sup> When people did not want to be baptised by immersion without a physical or other significant reason for this not being possible then supplementary membership was possible. This enabled participation in all aspects of the life of the church except leadership roles.

The long history of the investigation of the nature of friendships, stretching back to Aristotle, indicates that it is rather difficult to pin down its characteristics. Friendships exist within a continuum of relationships, from the most distant to the intimate. Within the overall concept of friendship this continuum also ranges from fleeting and casual short-term friendships to intimate and long-lasting friendships. In the contemporary setting they also exist in both face-to-face and on-line contexts.

I suggest that there are three key features of what we might call covenant friendships. Firstly, they are 'undistorting', in that they recognise the value, contribution and well-being of all participants. They seek to draw out the best in the other person, to enable the other to become more Christlike.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, that friendships are an expression of God's agape love and that one can be the foundation for the other. In other words, an experience of God's agape love for us can enable us to develop covenantal friendships with others. Alternatively, an experience of covenantal friendships draws us into God's agape love. Thirdly, I think there is no fundamental difference in the nature of friendships between Christians and between non-Christians. The presence of faith in one or more of those involved in a friendship can be thought of as deepening the significance of the relationship, rather than changing it in a fundamental way.

Some of the discussions about the extent of friendships are echoed by those concerning the nature of covenant relationships, primarily concerning the extent of God's covenant relationships with humans and creation. At one end of the scale some argue that they only exist within a local gathered church community who explicitly agree to covenant together. Others argue for covenant relationships existing within a Christian tradition or within the whole Christian church of all traditions. At the other end of the scale some, such as Paul Fiddes, have argued that God has entered into covenant relationship with all of creation.<sup>26</sup>

I suggest that the concept of friendship as part of a continuum of relationships can be a helpful way to understand the different intensity and scope of covenant relationships. The most intimate friendships of family and those we have with close friends are comparable to the covenant relationships that exist

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<sup>25</sup> (McFadyen, 1990) Discusses how communication between people can distort (p. 314) or undistort (p. 319) their personhood, making the other less like or more like Christ.

<sup>26</sup> (Fiddes, 2000) argues for this last position and together with a distinctive relational trinitarian theology explores how this shapes how we understand a range of pastoral issues (Intercessory prayer, suffering, forgiveness, death, spiritual gifts and sacramental lives) within faith communities.

within a local church congregation. It has been argued that the maximum number of such friendships that we can meaningfully sustain is 150.<sup>27</sup> Friendships with a lower level of intensity exist with a wider group of people, such as within a Baptist Association. More distant friendships can exist within and between the national and international networks of churches. While perhaps not being understood as friendships between individuals the relationships between different elements of organisations and between organisations can have the characteristics of friendships.

In light of this I propose that we can talk about covenant friendships, within and between our gathered local congregations. It is these friendships that have the potential to foster greater participatory inclusion of disabled people. In order to do this most effectively these friendships need to be intentional, mutual and particular.

Intentional – in formation and in being inclusive. Intentionality is needed to overcome the perceived differences between disabled and non-disabled people. The intention of the friendship is to empower the participatory inclusion of disabled people. It is likely to do this for all participants in the friendships, since they are mutual.

Mutual – this is to overcome the asymmetric relationships that many disabled people experience. This has occurred particularly in relationships with the medical and related caring professions but is also assumed in society and within churches. For instance through the use of ‘carer’ rather than ‘companion’ when offering concessionary admission to venues. Within churches there can be an assumption that disabled people are passive. The emphasis of the friendship needs to be the contribution that all participants make to the relationship.

Particular – this counters the generality of seeking to include ‘the disabled’ as a homogenous group and takes into account the particular context of the relationship. It enables the various factors, such as the participants gifts and needs, the physical and social context, the role of faith and the church tradition that forms the complex context for a friendship, to be taken into account.

In the second session I identified some theological approaches to the understanding of disability and the inclusion of disabled people. I want to

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<sup>27</sup> This is often referred to as Dunbar’s number after the work of evolutionary anthropologist Robin Dunbar, see (Dunbar, 2011)



briefly suggest how friendship, that is intentional, mutual and particular, engages with these theological approaches.

Firstly, there is the relationship between the authors of these theological approaches and disabled people. Not all of the authors are disabled people and their approach ranges from non-disabled 'doing for' disabled people (Hauerwas and Vanier) to that of 'being with' other disabled people (Eiesland).

Secondly, the proposal of friendship as outlined above engages with the approach of Eiesland, Reynolds, Black, Block and Creamer to varying degrees. Some mention friendship but assume that we already understand the nature of friendship in general and between disabled and non-disabled people in particular. It is commonly assumed that the experience of friendship is the same for disabled and non-disabled people, when this is often not the case.

I suggest that covenant friendships encourage 'being with' one another rather than 'working for'.<sup>28</sup> In his book *The Nazareth Manifesto* Sam Wells emphasises the importance of 'being with' one another rather than 'doing for, doing with or being for' others on the margins of society and church communities.

Rather than suggest covenant friendship as an alternative approach to those outlined in session 2, and others, what I am suggesting is that these approaches would all benefit from the fostering of friendships between disabled and non-disabled people. This needs to be intentionally inclusive, emphasise the mutuality of disabled and non-disabled people, and pay attention to the particularity of the context of each expression of Baptist church community.

Covenant friendships are not a panacea – this approach does not work for all disabled people.

Space and time do not allow an exploration of the way such covenant friendships can play a role in local Baptist congregations, Associations, Baptists Together, our colleges and wider ecumenical settings. You'll have to wait for the book of my thesis to be published!

Please have a look at the following link on the Baptists Together website for a variety of resources regarding disability and Baptist church communities. BU Disability site [www.baptist.org.uk/djblogs](http://www.baptist.org.uk/djblogs)

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<sup>28</sup> The shift from 'doing for' to 'being with' draws on the work of Sam Well's in *The Nazareth Manifesto* (Wells, 2015)

### Breakout Group Questions

1. How important do you think the idea of covenant is to the inclusion of disabled people, and others who are marginalised by society and churches?
2. To what extent do you agree that friendships between Christians and non-Christians are fundamentally the same?
3. How might we encourage the formation of such friendships between disabled and non-disabled people in our churches and local communities?
4. How might this be expanded to offer covenant friendships to other marginalised people?

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