

More Than Welcome

A journey to help churches support the participation of disabled people.

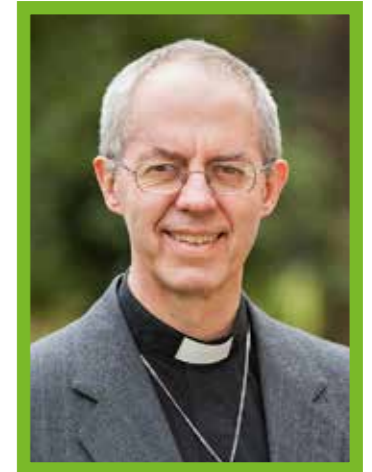
Welcome
+ Inclusion
- Isolation
- Barriers
+ Participation
+ Your church

It all adds up to

Livability



Justin Welby: In support of 'More Than Welcome'



When we look at Jesus' ministry, we see that he related to each person as valuable, worthy and made in the image of God. He loved, lived and travelled with all kinds of people. His community often had little in common. From the excluded, to the broken, to the well-educated, all of them found new life and hope through their relationship with him.

If we truly seek to follow the example of Christ in our churches today, then we must seek to love, live and travel together with all those who are following him too.

This means our churches must be places where all can belong together. They need to be places where disabled people can minister and share in the mission of God in the world.

Without the presence, experience and skills of disabled people, we are incomplete. That is true in the church and in wider society. It is our calling to work to build the most effective routes to participation at every level.

It is a privilege to be President of Livability, and I'm delighted that this new resource will help churches not just welcome disabled people – but enable them to participate fully in every aspect of church life.

The resource is a wonderful affirmation of all the good work churches are already doing across the UK. But it also provides practical and hopeful support to go further on the journey. Perhaps you are just getting started by considering the accessibility of your church building. You might be developing your responses for how to support people living with mental illness. Or maybe you are growing leadership opportunities for disabled people. Every step of the journey brings something to celebrate.

Working together, it's my hope, my personal commitment and my ongoing prayer that we create the kind of communities that Jesus would recognise. Communities where everyone is precious, everyone is welcomed, and where in shared worship and life together, everyone flourishes.

Justin Welby,
The Archbishop of Canterbury and President of Livability

Welcome to 'More Than Welcome' - Livability's new resource to help your church deepen relationships with disabled people, and build a church where everyone belongs.

Based on the idea of a journey – the resource will help your church go through three important stages, from a place of welcome, to inclusion, to participation.

Not just enabling people to enter church buildings, but ensuring that their gifts, talents and experiences are expressed.

Throughout the Bible, the practice of 'welcome' has been a mark of God's people. From Abraham and Sarah's welcoming of the three visitors; Lot's welcome of angels in Sodom; or Mary and Martha's welcome of Jesus, the hospitality and significance of welcome is a consistent Biblical theme.

When we read Biblical accounts of welcome, we see that welcome is all about having a deep recognition of the shared humanity of a guest. Guests are both other, and us. And we must also recognise that at any moment in our lives, we may be the visitor – and someone else may be the host.

This recognition of shared basic needs and identity, is particularly important when we consider disability. Every disabled person has many stories of how they have been treated as different, as less important, or even as non-human. By simply welcoming, we are acknowledging that fundamental truth that we are all important because we are all God's people.

Wherever your church is on the journey at the moment, we hope that this resource is both an encouragement and an inspiration.

Welcome is only the beginning of the journey. We encourage you to recognise the positive contributions that can be made at each stage, and also consider the next steps you can take.

Where do we begin the journey?

Sometimes disability is unseen

As Livability visits churches and Christian events all over the country, church leaders often tell us that disability is not an issue affecting their church: 'We don't have any disabled people in our church.'

For 99% of churches this is just not true. Here's why:

- The UK government recognises 11 million people as having long term illness, impairment or disability. That's one person in six.
- The prevalence of disability rises with age, so that almost half of all people over state retirement age are disabled.
- Disability is dynamic. People become disabled every day. Some are born with a disability. Some become disabled in a crisis, over time, through illness or old age. But today's 'able-bodied' church member is tomorrow's disabled church member.

If your church thinks that disability is not an issue, it's much more likely that you just can't yet 'see' disability.

For those unfamiliar with the lives and experiences of disabled people, we may assume that disabled people are easy to 'spot' – they use a wheelchair, white cane, walking frame or guide dog.

But many people experience 'hidden' or 'invisible' disability in the form of mental illness or chronic condition.

And often disability is less about a person 'having a condition' than it is about having to overcome all sorts of barriers in their lives and opportunities.

These could be barriers of other people's lack of understanding and prejudices; or barriers to their opportunities and access to a wide range of activities and experiences.

To work towards a church where everyone participates, we need to recognise that those sitting in the pews may be disabled in seen and unseen ways.

We need to make sure we take time to listen, understand the barriers they face and investigate how best to involve and support them.

Who is disabled?

Disabled people are all different, but here are some things to consider.

- **People who find mobility hard:**
this is what first comes to mind for many people when they think of disability: people using aids like wheelchairs or crutches to get around. This only represents between 6-8% of disabled people in the UK.
- **People with sensory impairments:**
sight or hearing loss can be very isolating and extremely frustrating, especially if they occur in later life. Older people may struggle to accept that they are becoming disabled, even as they rely more on hearing aids and stronger glasses.
- **People with intellectual disabilities:**
some might call it learning disabilities. There may be challenges with complex concepts, lists of instructions, or communication.
- **People who are non-neurotypical:**
this includes people who identify with Autism or Aspergers: people who experience the world in a different way.
- **People with poor mental health:**
a non- exhaustive list could include depression, mood disorders, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder. The impact of these conditions may be episodic, or require ongoing support.
- **People with dementia:**
dementia is the umbrella term for the group of diseases, such as Alzheimer's, which cause memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem-solving or language.
- **Carers / families:**
those involved in day to care of people with ongoing support needs and it is estimated that there are over 7 million carers across the UK. Many carers may face isolation and experience difficulty in accessing appropriate support.

Within each area everyone faces different barriers to becoming fully part of your church family – but it's important that we respond.



What does the journey look like?

Creating churches where everyone is welcomed, included and can truly participate is a journey. In the pages that follow, we provide tips, stories and inspiration for the journey.

Welcome →

Things to think about to create a place of welcome at your church

What does it mean?	What does it look like?	What are the challenges to overcome?
Everyone can get into the room.	Accessible building, confident welcome team, accessible toilets.	Changing buildings can be expensive.

Inclusion →

Things to think about when working for inclusion at your church

What does it mean?	What does it look like?	What are the challenges to overcome?
Everyone can get involved.	Practical resources to help build involvement – using sign language/symbols, audio loop, large print, accessible language.	Can be labour-intensive.

Participation →

Things to think about when working for participation at your church

What does it mean?	What does it look like?	What are the challenges to overcome?
Everyone is encouraged to develop and use their gifts.	People feel that they belong and because they belong, they feel they can take part. They use their gifts to the benefit of the whole church.	Can challenge ideas of 'good' or 'professional' church.

Real life stories

Working for welcome

Mary used to live in a flat five minutes from her church. But she was forced to move away when her mobility decreased. Her new residence was more accessible and helped her quality of life. But it was further away from church and transport was difficult. With minimal disposable income, private transport was not an option. The church vicar and church community therefore found the funding to pay for suitable transport. Now Mary makes it to church every week.



Working for inclusion

Tim plays an active role in his church community. Tim has set up a local ministry group. Called 'Lighthouse', it creates a place of welcome for people with learning disabilities in his church and the surrounding area. Tim says 'I'm happy when I'm at Lighthouse. I always enjoy it with all my friends, and all the leaders. It's really nice. When the group started I got a lot of friends. There's not any more days now when I get lonely. My life is too busy to be lonely.'



Working for participation

At Greenbelt 2017, the crowd was wowed by the amazing story shared by Becky Tyler, who spoke as part of an inclusive communion service in partnership with Livability. Becky says: 'The Greenbelt invitation was totally out of the blue and I was like "wow!". I wasn't sure what to say at first because it was such a big deal but I decided to be brave and give it a go! I was overwhelmed by how well my message was received. I wasn't expecting that! I got a big standing ovation. Some people have said that it was a bigger standing ovation than the Archbishop of Canterbury got the year before!'





What adds up to creating welcome at your church?

Attitude

- + When you talk to disabled people, you'll hear that nine times out of ten, it's attitude, not architecture that says you are welcome.
- + Churches don't have to be perfect. In fact, there is no such thing as a perfectly accessible building, ready for every single type of disability, as what helps one person may hinder another. You need to look at infrastructure.

Conversation

- + If you want to make your church more welcoming, the best place to start is a series of conversations with disabled people within your church. What would make their visits easier?
- + Speak to carers and family members. What are their insights on how to welcome disabled people?
- + If you're looking for extra help, speak to a local carers group, stroke association, deaf club and ask how you could do better. You may be surprised what comes out of the conversation.
- + Something as simple as having a member of the welcome team on the pavement outside the church, rather than waiting inside.


Research


- + There are many cost effective or free ways of improving welcome, including publicising access information on the church website, or reserving accessible parking spaces.
- + Ask questions about your current church membership. Who is here and who is missing? How could your church better reflect your community?


What are the barriers in the way?

- An underlying attitude where a disabled person may be seen as a 'problem'.
- A lack of shared understanding and practice across the church - the minister may be on board, but the welcome team are not.
- Thinking that welcome can be solved with an accessible toilet - a building that all can access is important. But a heart of welcome is so much more than a building project.
- The attitude of welcome can have its cost. If you welcome disabled people, then others may feel uncomfortable, confused, or unhappy. These feelings are powerful and they need to be carefully addressed. If we don't, we risk perpetuating the barriers that continue to exclude.

Things to think about to create a place of welcome at your church

 What does it mean?
Everyone can get into the room.

 What does it look like?
Accessible building, confident welcome team, accessible toilets.

 What are the challenges to overcome?
Changing buildings can be expensive.


Welcome says 'everybody can get in to the room'


'Everybody Welcome' – How many churches have a sign outside that makes this claim? But so many churches unwittingly negate their welcome with physical barriers that prevent disabled people from entering and using the building. Whether it's steep steps, narrow doors, inaccessible toilets, music too loud, or confusing signage, many disabled people actually feel discouraged from entering church.


At its most basic, welcome says 'we want you to be here with us'. If we honestly want to welcome disabled people, then we must demonstrate it. We need to make it easier for people to get in the room. That means removing the physical barriers that stop people coming in. And it means not offering inferior alternatives.



Things to think about when working for inclusion at your church

 What does it mean?
Everyone can get involved.

 What does it look like?
Practical resources to help build involvement – using sign language/ symbols, audio loop, large print, accessible language.

 What are the challenges to overcome?
Can be labour-intensive.

Inclusion says everyone can get involved

Inclusion is the vital next step of the journey. We don't want disabled people to be simply sitting inside our church building, unable to join in or share their gifts. We want to see disabled people worshipping, praying, learning and building community with everybody else.

To be inclusive, we need to start tackling some of the barriers that disabled people may face in their church and congregational experience. This may involve a range of things.

It might be as simple as a large-print hymn book which allows people with visual impairments to sing along. It may be a decision to sing more old familiar songs, so that people with intellectual disabilities, or living with dementia don't feel challenged to cope with unfamiliarity. What about people who struggle to sing? Could your church occasionally use songs that can be signed alongside singing?

One of the challenges of inclusion is to avoid getting stuck in a 'deficit model' of disability. This can result in focusing on what the person can't do – rather than recognizing the barriers that may be preventing them take part. We need to focus on their strengths and identify ways in which they can share gifts with the church.

What adds up to inclusion at your church?

- + Consider your church life from the viewpoint of disabled people. Does anything need to change?
- + Involve members of the congregation in sharing the vision for inclusion.
- + Consider how being inclusive may involve getting out of the building: Live stream services, seeking to run services in another context, such as care homes.
- + Develop bible studies that build understanding around disability, and involves the voice and experience of disabled people.
- + Visiting other churches and learning from other contexts can be a helpful way to commit to the journey of continual change.


What are the barriers in the way?


- Time. Churches have many conflicting priorities and a time commitment will be needed.
- Concern of being overwhelmed with need. 'If we do this for one person, we'll need to account for everybody. 'Seeing changes as a one-off, rather than an ongoing process- 'If we just do this, we'll be inclusive.'
- Lack of knowledge about particular conditions or situations, and not knowing where to start, or access to suitable resources.
- Special provision – like groups for people with learning disabilities – can be useful. But it's vital these groups are still represented within the full congregational life and not sidelined to a separate group.
- There is a danger of an 'us and them' approach where we congratulate our efforts, but fail to see the power dynamics at play.




The journey arrives at:
Participation →

Things to think about when working for participation at your church

 What does it mean?
 Everyone is encouraged to develop and use their gifts.

 What does it look like?
 All members are encouraged to discover their gifts and given opportunities to develop and use them to the benefit of the whole church.

 What are the challenges to overcome?
 Can challenge ideas of 'good' or 'professional' church.

Participation says everyone's gifts are important

Participation is active. Unlike being welcomed or included, it's not something that is done to a person. It's something a person does for themselves, because they have a sense of belonging. They are not being invited by another. They belong, therefore they participate.

Participation should be a developing discipline and a changing culture. Every church member should be encouraged to explore their gifting and use those gifts for the building up of the whole church family. This is a mark of healthy church. But too often, disabled people are left out of our thinking.

Opening up participation can be challenging for some churches who hold tightly to ideas of professionalism. If for you, a good church should never have a musician that plays the wrong note, or a reader that stumbles over a word, then you might find that the cost of participation feels high. But focusing on the benefits of building a church that models a way of authentic community may help overcome this.

What adds up to participation at your church?

- + Continual commitment to talking and listening keeps this on the agenda.
- + Recognise that there isn't a simple tick-list. To grow participation involves remaining alert to all that God is doing in the lives of church members.
- + Expect development. God is on the move. The Bible shows us story after story of women and men who felt settled, only to discover that God had much more in store for them. The same is true for every person in your church – regardless of the barriers we face, God has more for us all.
- + Willingness to step into the tension of exploring difficult questions and decisions about resources.
- + As we see what God has called each person to do, we must accept that it may be a gifting that challenges the status quo. As a result, the church that really embraces participation must be willing to accept unexpected gifts!
- + Encouraging courageous experimentation takes the pressure off.
- + Meeting people in their day to day lives and looking at how they're using their gifts.

What are the barriers that get in the way?

- An unwillingness to see church change.
- As we broaden participation it can become less predictable, and this can challenge our ideas of presenting 'perfect worship'.
- We may feel over-protective and be concerned we are exposing people to risk.
- Extra planning and conversations will be needed, which may seem excessive.
- We forget that there will be new gifts discovered, and not merely challenges along the way.

Travelling further

Want to support the participation of disabled people at your church?

Do you want to take the journey forward?

Livability is running 'More Than Welcome' training courses for churches across the UK.

Contact Livability today for more information.

Joinin@livability.org.uk

Livability.org.uk/MoreThanWelcome

A prayer

The journey to participation is at the very heart of God. As you embark on this journey at your church, we invite you to join us in prayer.

God we thank you that you have made us all different and that you know and love us.

God, we thank you for your good gifts.

Forgive us, when we fail to love and accept people because they are different from us. Please open our hearts.

Forgive us and restore us.

Lord we thank you for the places we can be fully ourselves and the people we share them with.

God, we thank you for your good gifts.

Forgive us when we value being busy above including one another- please help us to slow down.

Forgive us and restore us.

We thank you for everyone in our neighbourhood who lives with disability, for no one is forgotten by you.

God, we thank you for your good gifts.

Forgive us when we have failed to offer friendship to those who are isolated and lonely in our community.

Forgive us and restore us.

We long for the time when we can all share our gifts for the common good.

God, we thank you for your good gifts. Help us see your kingdom come.

About Livability

Livability is helping churches build communities that are livable for everyone.

Livability is the disability charity that connects people with their communities. We tackle social isolation and the barriers that can cause this in the lives of disabled and vulnerable people. Through a wide range of disability, education, training and community services, we promote inclusion and wellbeing for all.

Together, we work to see people take part, contribute and be valued. We put the elements in place that all add up to connected lives and communities.

It all adds up to

Livability

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With thanks to Nancy Honey for some photos featured.

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