

The Lord looks at the heart

by Bernice Hardie



God doesn't look at what people see. People judge by what is on the outside, but the LORD looks at the heart. [1 Samuel 16:7]

Labelling is usually helpful. Labels give you a clear sense of what to expect such as what's on the inside of the container or even the quality and value of an item. However, when it comes to people, labels are not always very helpful. In fact, labels often get in the way of us properly connecting with and appreciating people as individuals.

Learning Disability (LD), in my experience, is one such unhelpful label.¹

The fact is that rather than help to give a clear sense of what to expect from a person, it sometimes leads to the wrong expectations or the lack of any expectations at all.

As a society, we have come some way from the days when individuals with disabilities were deliberately treated as outcasts. Despite progressive legislation and policy, we still see the label before we see the potential that lies within each person created in the image of God.

When my daughter was born 31 years ago with Downs Syndrome, much of the sadness that I felt at the time was in anticipation of her future – the possible rejection and loneliness that she would face as an adult with LD in our society. Our experience as she went through mainstream school and college fuelled that concern, as few friendships were made. You may have had occasions where you have felt left out, ignored or overlooked because you were 'different' in some way – imagine if this was your reality the majority of the time.



Bernice Hardie leading and signing during a WAVE Church service

Research has shown that the attitudinal barriers to inclusion of people with LD (fear, ignorance and lack of confidence) are only eroded when people with and without LD spend time together and get to know each other. Places that enable this to happen are few and far between. The need for our church to be such a place became increasingly evident through our personal experience.

My daughter loved the worship and quiet times in our church services, but the teaching was delivered in a way that made it hard for her to maintain concentration and understand God's heart for her. She says:

'I felt like I was the only one with additional needs in the whole church and everything there was for people without LD. It tried to be inclusive but the language was too complicated for me, there was too much detail – I couldn't understand the main point.'

Surely we could not be the only family in this situation? The more I thought and prayed about this, the stronger

the sense I had that God wanted this to change!

'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' [2 Corinthians: 12:10]

So, in March 2009, a small group of us – parents of young people with LD at our church and friends with Special Educational Needs (SEN) experience – met together to pray and discuss what, if anything, we might be able to do.

This was the start of our journey toward setting up WAVE (We're All Valued Equally) Church – a community of people with and without LD, who enjoy leading and participating in worship together each month. At the core of WAVE is the recognised benefit of bringing people with and without learning disabilities together in places where we can do things 'with' and not 'for' each other – enabling unexpected friendships to develop. As parents of a person with learning disability, there is such deep comfort that

comes from discovering the sacrificial love that Jesus has for our often-under-valued children and the comfort we can find in relying on his strength for their ultimate care. We particularly want to share this love and acceptance with those who might never think it possible to attend church or who may have given up on church because it is just too hard for their family member with LD to attend formal services.

At WAVE Church, we have seen how the LD label is actually irrelevant when it comes to knowing and sharing our love of God.

The charity Prospects helped us greatly at the outset. They had groups providing inclusive church meetings all over the country but, for some reason, none in inner London. With great encouragement from the Prospects team, we mustered the resolve to start a group in Muswell Hill!

Prospects groups were started back in the 1970s to provide accessible Bible teaching for individuals with LD who



WAVE Church service with Helen and Ian leading, far left.

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IN MAIN CHURCH THERE IS A FORMAL ORDER WHERE THE CONGREGATION LISTENS, AT WAVE CHURCH WE RELAX AND TALK TO EACH OTHER MORE – YOU KNOW WHO'S DOING WHAT AND WHY – IT'S FRIENDLIER.

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¹The official definition of learning disability is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities, which affects someone for their whole life. The politically correct terminology inevitably changes. In the nineteenth century, it was acceptable to use the term lunatic or imbecile whereas more valuing and descriptive terms are now emerging to describe learning disability e.g. 'creative learners'. Individuals with autism may, or may not, also have a learning disability.

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I FEEL GOD'S PRESENCE MOST WHEN WE ARE SINGING AND MAKATON SIGNING AND WHEN WE PRAY FOR EACH OTHER.

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were mainly living away from their families in care settings. We felt it was important though that WAVE Church also welcomed parents, carers, family members and friends of individuals with LD to worship together.

We gathered a team of people, from across different denominations, who were either parents of children with SEN, friends or professionals who understood the great need for this ministry. None of our team had experience in church leadership, but we had a heart for inclusion and simply wanted to provide meetings where those coming would feel accepted and relaxed. 'Where could we learn together, grow in faith and friendship with Jesus, as well as have fun together?

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. [Romans 8:2]

We needed to find an accessible place to meet, that was close to public transport links, with a safe, calm and intimate space. We discovered that our local Methodist Church in Muswell Hill had recently invested sacrificially in a refurbishment of their building to improve accessibility and were delighted to welcome our group to meet there each month.

We were also blessed by a start-up grant and mentoring from a local Christian charity but in fact most of what we needed was, and still is, given freely – whether it be donated meeting space, materials or financial gifts from friends and team members. This has allowed us to acquire percussion instruments, Bible teaching and craft resources, a Makaton license (allowing us to use symbols alongside words on

our song sheets) and to produce a printed meeting calendar postcard for members.

The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are the ones we can't do without.

[1 Corinthians 12:22]

We started with three members with LD, their parents and our small nervous team at our first meeting. We originally envisaged that WAVE Church would mainly attract young people with mild to moderate LD – it took several months before any new members joined us. The first new members that did join were older adults with profound LD, who were non-verbal. This took us well outside our area of familiarity and comfort.

There were times when we questioned whether these new members were getting anything out of our meetings, beyond enjoying the tea and cake. The signs of connection with something deeper were subtle but evident and such an encouragement



Wave Church members in 2017.

when noticed. For example, there was one member that often arrived agitated and upset, but over the course of the meeting she would gradually settle and by the time we were singing our regular final song (The Father Himself Loves You) she would be calm and smiling as she joined in, swaying along with the music. We regularly have to remind ourselves that we do what we can and then simply have to trust the Holy Spirit to do immeasurably more than we can imagine – God does not have a problem with disability! We are now a group of 30 to 40 most Sundays, about one in three of whom have a learning disability.

The acronym that we use when planning our meetings is SSIV, which we apply to the key message we are focusing on in the Bible: i.e. to make it *short, simple, interactive* and *visual*. The service is divided into five-minute segments to maintain attention. We use a visual timetable so that those who need to can feel secure in knowing

what stage we are at in the meetings. Members respond to the Bible through drama, creative activities, discussion and sensory experiences.

At one service, fragrant essential oil was passed around the room while the story of the woman who anointed Jesus was told. Even complex theological concepts can be made interactive and accessible. At another service, we explored what holiness means through comparing ordinary, imperfect and unclean items with special, precious and perfect items; some members grasped the meaning of holiness in a way they never had before.

We were especially blessed by being able to meet on Zoom during the pandemic given that many of our members were shielding throughout, and some still continue to do so due to underlying health conditions. The mixed-ability WAVE family looked out for and encouraged each other through the lockdowns.

Sometimes people imagine that the

sort of meetings we have are similar to Sunday School. It's easy to forget that, irrespective of intellectual age, our members with LD have a lifetime of lived experience, with different perspectives on life that help to deepen our understanding of how we are all called as friends of Jesus to follow him.

People with LD have many paths closed to them and, most sadly, are often overlooked in regard to their equal need for spiritual growth, for active participation and recognition of the contributions that they too can make to church life and well-being. We have discovered along the way that we all benefit spiritually from this ministry and that even individuals without any direct LD connection are drawn to join us at times. Maybe this is because some of us can feel more at home in a place where the majority are openly vulnerable, where there is little pretence and it's OK to be fully open about our struggles in life.

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TRADITIONAL SERMONS
PRIMARILY ADDRESS THE
INTELLECT AND ARE OFTEN
TOO ABSTRACT FOR OUR
MEMBERS' UNDERSTANDING
– CRAFTS AND DRAMA
WORK WELL FOR ALL LEVELS
OF ABILITIES.

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² See here for the Makaton UK Blessing on YouTube <https://youtu.be/va048-XxFTI>

³ We are now classified as a Fresh Expression and were recently featured as an example of 'ordinary people planting new churches' in the book *Send Me* edited by John McGinley, published by the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication (CCX) ccx.org.uk/content/send-me/



Something from the Spirit can be seen in each person. The Spirit gives this to each one to help others. [1 Corinthians 12:7]

A new WAVE Church group in Little Ilford started last year. But WAVE Church has sprouted other initiatives too: WAVE Club began as a social group for young adults with and without LD, and for those of any faith or none, and has grown into WAVE Café (a pop-up arts café) in Muswell Hill.

Unexpected blessings have rippled beyond learning disability connections. Sue (not her real name) first started coming to WAVE Church because she was losing her voice through throat cancer. She missed being able to join in with the singing at her regular church but was able to participate in worship using Makaton at WAVE Church. Sue discovered that she loved signing and started to lead this for us. She went on to introduce signing to her main church where it has become a regular part of their

services, with everyone benefitting from the deeper engagement in worship that Makaton signing evokes.²

We are not alone in wanting to encourage and enable other communities to experience the blessing of mixed ability worship, and to this end WAVE for Change (a charity that has emerged out of this work) has developed WAVE in a Box. This resource provides practical guidelines and templates so that others can do something similar. We have also worked with a Makaton Ambassador to create an accessible resource for teaching about the fruit of the Spirit.

‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’ [Jeremiah 29:11]

We have faced challenges and doubts over the years as to ‘if’, ‘how’ and ‘where’ the work of WAVE sits in the wider church. Thankfully, there is a

growing recognition that we don’t need to necessarily ‘fit’ traditional models. Dr Seuss put it beautifully: ‘why fit in when you were born to stand out’!

We have discovered how God could actually use our tough experiences of being parents/carers of a child with special needs to bear good fruit. I had a lovely picture of God using all the tears we have shed as parents – tears of sorrow and frustration – to build a well of experience that others have come to benefit from and be refreshed by at WAVE Church. Sometimes our purpose comes from our greatest hurt and we are truly alive when we find the thing bigger than us that God wants us to do.

Bernice Hardie

Bernice is Co-Founder of WAVE for Change, an award-winning charity that uses the experience gained from starting inclusive church and social groups in North London, to help other communities to mix. (All photos © WAVE Church.)



A Wave Church gathering.