The Inclusion of People with a Learning Disability in the Church: A Case Study

Ross E. Hamilton

This paper is a case study of Dumbarton Baptist Church's response to a particular ethical issue within their local Scottish community.[1] The article will include a description of the ethical issue and the church's response, explaining the theological and social reasons that have led the church in its thinking. Subsequently, a thorough evaluation and critical assessment of the ethical stance taken will be included, with the purpose of offering suggestions regarding ways in which such ethical challenges might be handled in the future and the impact these may have on current practices. This is intended for multiple audiences interested in theological social ethics and the involvement of those with a learning disability in church life.

Keywords

Theology; social ethics; learning disability; church

Learning Disabilities and Social Needs

In 2011, a Scottish Government census estimated that out of approximately 5,000,000 people residing in the country, roughly 26,000 had a learning disability.[2] For many of these communicating, concentrating for long periods, and processing new information can be very stressful and difficult to cope with.[3] As a result, church services in their current format, which may cause little issue for the vast majority of the congregation, risk excluding those with a learning disability.[4] Although Scottish Baptist church services are not denominationally bound to a specific structure, they generally adopt some variation of 'scripture, prayer and sermon, interspersed with hymns' –

[1] It would be appropriate to mention my own self-involvement with this project, as this is the church community of which I am a member.

[2] 'Population Characteristics', <https://www.sldo.ac.uk/> [accessed 10 May 2018]

[3] 'People with Learning Disabilities and the Scottish Criminal Justice System', *Learning Disabilities and the CJS*, 5 (2011) <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/03/21142925/5> [accessed 13 May 2018]

[4] The National Health Service (NHS) describes learning disabilities as ranging between 'mild, moderate and severe'. For some this means learning new skills may take longer than usual, though they are able to look after themselves and communicate easily. For others, however, they may not be able to communicate at all, requiring help for simple everyday tasks. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/learning-disabilities/#mild-moderate-or-severe-learning-disability> [accessed 13 May 2018] Importantly, it must be recognised that a learning disability is *not* the same as a learning difficulty or mental illness.

a fair description of a standard Sunday morning at Dumbarton Baptist Church (DBC).[5] As a result, an ethical question is raised: what can the church community do to involve and serve those with a learning disability?

There are various social reasons which have led this particular church to become involved in this issue. In 2018, a minimum of £1.2 million future social welfare cuts were announced in West Dunbartonshire alone.[6] With the town of Dumbarton already listed 'among the most poverty stricken in the country', there is increasing pressure on those who require special services and support.[7] The pressure is felt more strongly in relation to *isolation* and *connection*. Though cuts vary from region to region, a reduction in day services has generally led to increased loneliness and disconnectedness among the disabled community, heaping additional pressure onto family and professional carers. According to Mencap (a UK charity whose vision is a world where people with a learning disability are valued, listened to, and included), a drop in social welfare support means these people 'can be left socially isolated, bored and lonely', losing important friendships and support networks in the process.[8] For this reason, there is a strong social need for the church in this area.

Theological, Biblical, and Charitable Inspirations

There were two primary theological 'inspirations' which have led the church in their ethical thinking. The first of these occurred in the summer of 2017, when I spent a month in my old home city of Tunis with my mother. Extreme heat and limited internet connection led her to pick up (and not put down for the entire stay) the wonderful book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* by Miroslav Volf.[9] For Volf, the church is founded on the generosity of her own self in Christ, making it 'a community founded on generosity'.[10] As a result, 'giving' must be at the core of its very identity. Not only giving, but giving selflessly, with enthusiasm and without pride, forgetting the self and his sufferings for the sake of the other.[11] My

---

[5] *New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. by Paul Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 482.
[6] Andrew McNair, '£1.2million axe falls on West Dunbartonshire health and social care' (2018) <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/12million-axe-falls-west-dunbartonshire-12501609> [accessed 10 May 2018]
[7] Carla Donald, 'Revealed: The most deprived areas in West Dunbartonshire', (2016) <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/local-news/revealed-most-deprived-areas-west-8749261> [accessed 10 May 2018]
[8] 'Stuck at home: the impact of day service cuts on people with a learning disability', (2016) <https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-08/Stuck_at_home.pdf> [accessed 10 May 2018]
[9] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2005).
[10] Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 87.
[11] Ibid., p. 103.

mother was compelled to share this with the church body, asking them to consider what it means to give selflessly and, more specifically, what it means to give to 'those who cannot repay the favour'.[12] For love to truly be 'self-giving' – without agenda - it must be practised 'in God'.[13] If practised 'in God', the gift becomes both 'for God' and 'from God', bearing fruit in a 'bountiful harvest', even when the receivers are unable to reciprocate the gift.[14] From this theological perspective, the church was compelled to offer the gift of time and resources for those who needed it.

The second theological inspiration was the *Sermon on the Mount*. One line was particularly influential: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.' (Matthew 5.8). As the idea progressed, others became involved, many of whom had first-hand experience with vulnerable adults. Several of this group had been touched by the 'uncomplicated clarity' sometimes held by people with a learning disability and connected this with the above beatitude.[15] Together they agreed that the church could learn a great deal from people with a learning disability and suffer a tremendous loss without them. Though not always the case, their experience had taught them that people with a learning disability are generally not bound by the cultural norms and expectations with which many high-achieving people find themselves bogged down. The dynamic of their social and physical powerlessness means that interactions occur on a far simpler level and therefore without hidden agenda. It is through such interactions that a form of purity of heart and kindness can be felt and experienced in a very real way. For the group at DBC, they see their calling as not only to include these people for the joy of it, but to enable them to see God in a clearer way.

Over the next few months, the idea developed from the creative thinking of a few to a serious project, desiring to make all aspects of church life more accessible to people with a learning disability. To do so, DBC partnered with *Prospects: Access to Life*.[16] *Prospects* was an independent Christian organisation (now under the *Livability Group*) working with local churches, offering training and resources to ensure that people with a learning disability have the opportunity to celebrate and journey in the

---

[12] *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2011), p. 379.
[13] Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 103.
[14] This is not to suggest that no enjoyment or moral benefit can be experienced, but it is not the reason for the giving.
[15] Debra Dean Murphy, *Happiness, Health, and Beauty: The Christian Life in Everyday Terms* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), p. 27.
[16] Jonathan Edwards, Executive Ambassador for *Prospects*, does acknowledge that every person is unique, and it is difficult to generalise people's individual needs. However, their programme is designed to be as accessible as possible to as many people as possible. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbiSfgqUhcA> [accessed 5 May 2018]

Christian faith.[17] Using these resources, the church attempted to create a ministry group in which anyone can worship, learn, and build relationships, no matter what their intellectual, literary, or social capacities. Though still in its early stages, the Dumbarton group meets every month at the local community centre – familiar and known to the group – where there is simple, sung worship, a strong emphasis on visual learning involving props and actions, crafts, and biblical texts explained in a simple and inclusive way. Everyone has the chance to give and receive support and make connections they otherwise would struggle to find within the current community conditions.

Assessment of the Ethical Stance

The next part of this article will provide a thorough evaluation and critical assessment of the ethical stance taken, then I will offer suggestions for ways in which such ethical challenges might be handled in the future and what impact these suggestions may have on current practices.

1. Learning Disability and the Capacity for Spiritual Development

An excellent starting point would be to explore the capacity for spiritual development and its importance among those with a learning disability. In order to critically evaluate the ethical response of DBC, this part of the discussion will allow the practical benefits of their actions to be evaluated. To do so, we turn first to John Swinton. Swinton claims that the spiritual needs of the learning disabled community have been largely neglected, stifled as an 'underused resource' in their lives.[18] To investigate this claim, he was commissioned by the *Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities* to conduct a qualitative research paper, the result of which allowed him to conclude that spiritual care has had immense benefits for those with a learning disability. The research reported that people were left 'feeling happier' and feeling a 'sense of strength and support' as a result.[19] On this basis, people with a learning disability are certainly capable of experiencing spirituality and spiritual development. Furthermore, the development of spiritual 'meaningfulness' is of huge importance, and

---

[17] <https://livability.org.uk/celebrating-40-year-journey-charity-prospects-people-learning-disabilities/> [accessed 29 August 2019]

[18] John Swinton, 'Spirituality and learning disabilities: a qualitative study', *British Journal of Nursing* (2002), Vol. 11, No. 14, p. 949.

[19] Ibid., p. 951.

contrasts with the often shallow support they receive.[20] Meaning or meaningfulness is an aspect of social care which has received increased attention over the last two decades and has seen growing benefits alongside it. Examples of this involve an increased focus 'on what "good" looks like' within 'community, education, employment and leisure activities' for those in care.[21] Rather than moving from one source of entertainment to another, carers are encouraged to help those with a learning disability find something important or meaningful which has proven to be 'an important determinant of psychological wellbeing'.[22]

This holistic approach is what DBC wish to adopt, bringing an intentionality and practical quality to their missional endeavours. This approach is holistic in the sense that it seeks to approach more than one aspect of the needs of those with a learning disability. It could be asked, however: to what extent can this be achieved without involvement in Sunday services? More specifically, to what extent will they benefit from it? Within a greatly simplified definition, the benefits of church are twofold: social and educational.[23] Australian education expert Slee insists that social inclusion and educational benefits go hand in hand, for everyone involved in the community. For him, an inclusive approach to education has huge social benefits, where 'every child is valued and experiences a sense of belonging'.[24] From this perspective, people with a learning disability would certainly benefit from attending Sunday morning services. However, despite Slee's confidence, his opinion is not widely accepted. It is perhaps slightly idealistic to presume that inclusion on every level will be universally positive. In 2015, the Guardian revealed some of the damaging effects such an 'inclusion […] at all costs' approach can have in educational contexts.[25] 'Behavioural difficulties', particularly among children with a learning

---

[20] Jenny Webb, *A Guide to Psychological Understanding of People with Learning Disabilities: Eight Domains and Three Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 164.
[21] Jim Mansell, 'Raising Our Sights: Guide to What People do in the Day', in *Raising Our Sights* (2010), No. 9, p. 5.
[22] Webb, *A Guide to Psychological Understanding of People with Learning Disabilities*, p. 164.
[23] Arguably, 'spirituality' should have its own category. For this section, however, it has been placed under 'education'. In order for spiritual development to occur, there requires some shift in knowledge or 'learning'.
[24] Cited in Cathy Cologon, 'Students with and without disability: it's always better when we're together', (2013) <https://theconversation.com/students-with-and-without-disability-its-always-better-when-were-together-21014> [accessed 18 January 2019]
[25] 'Secret teacher: I am all for inclusion in principle, but it doesn't always work' (2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/may/23/secret-teacher-support-inclusion-but-not-at-any-cost> [accessed 18 January 2019]

disability, can be very difficult to manage for those who have not had the necessary training – which most church-goers will not have had.[26]

Harshaw is a prominent figure within the area of learning disabilities and theology and is a worthy contributor to this discussion.[27] Harshaw has been critical of the church's engagement with people with a learning disability and the various 'prevailing assumptions' upon which their exclusion has been justified.[28] Using the social model of disability as a starting point, she sets out a theological challenge to the church to practise 'genuine inclusion, […] recognizing and valuing their relationships not only with *us* but with *God*'.[29] The social model is an encouraging starting point, but Harshaw is convinced that further development is required, particularly if the goal is to 'respect their capacities for spiritual experience as individuals in their own right'.[30] Perhaps Rachael Sharman's suggestion (an expert in Psychology and Education) that people 'find the right balance' when merging people of vastly different social and educational capabilities is a wise one.[31] This seems an appropriate approach, particularly in light of both the mixed reviews of contemporary research and the uniqueness requirements of each individual.[32] In this way the ethical response of the church is meeting a spiritual need amongst those with a learning disability and they are certainly capable of benefiting from it on a very deep level. However, given the potential challenges which may follow, the church may have to confront difficult situations in the future which will require further thinking.[33]

---

[26] The purpose of exploring these issues is to avoid tackling the ethical issue 'in theory' without acknowledging the, often difficult, realities that such practices contain. See 'Secret teacher: I am all for inclusion in principle, but it doesn't always work' (2015).

[27] She is helpful, given that only educational perspectives have been considered thus far. Jill Harshaw, *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experiences of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016).

[28] Jill Harshaw, 'Autism and Love: A response to "Autism and Love, Learning What Love Looks Like" by Professor John Swinton', *Practical Theology* (2012), Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 1.

[29] Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, p. 50 (italics original). The social model of disability 'proposes that what makes someone disabled is not their medical condition, but the attitudes and structures of society', found in <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/s/social-model-disability> [accessed 28 August 2019]

[30] Harshaw, *God Beyond Words*, p. 50.

[31] Rachael Sharman, 'Can inclusive education do more harm than good?', (2015) <https://theconversation.com/can-inclusive-education-do-more-harm-than-good-43183> [accessed 18 January 2018]

[32] Experiences are generally both negative and positive. See Gary N. Siperstein and others, 'A National Study of Youth Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities', *Council for Exceptional Children* (2007), Vol, 73, No. 4.

[33] Later in this paper some suggestions for future practice will be presented.

2. 'Humanhood' and Value

'Humanhood' and human worth have been widely discussed in contemporary bioethics.[34] In order to navigate troublesome ethical situations, bioethicists have been forced to consider the essence of humanity and its implications for medical procedure.[35] Hauerwas sees humanity as far too complex to be reduced to a 'criterion', claiming many traditional definitions have had exclusionary consequences for those with 'developmental disabilities'.[36] As an example, Joseph Fletcher's 'indicators of humanhood' intended to measure human value through factors which include 'self-awareness' and 'self-control', controversially stating that 'any individual who falls below the I.Q. 40 mark in a standard Stanford-Binet test […] is questionably a person'.[37] Such a perspective attributes human worth to people 'based on their ability to perform', a stark contrast to the biblical narrative.[38] A biblical perspective reveals that we are all human created in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), each given value by God himself through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[39] In this way, people with a learning disability are in no way less-than-human, but live as 'icons of the crucified son' in whom we find the 'ultimate foundation of human existence'.[40] In fact, at the very heart of Jesus, we see a God who 'disabled' himself for the sake of humanity.[41] In his life he took upon himself the rawness of human experience and the trials which accompany them, disabling the fulness of his own power (Luke 4.9-12), and in his ministry walked alongside those who were socially considered less-than-human, built friendships with the rejected, and invited the marginalised to his side. According to Brett Webb-Mitchell, this is the challenge to which more churches should be rising, by 'inviting, welcoming and accepting' those whom society has left outside (Luke 14.15-24). On this basis he claims that both those with and without disabilities are called by the power of the Holy

---

[34] For example, see *Source Book in Bioethics: A Documentary History*, ed. by Albert R. Jonsen and others (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1998), pp. 22-28.
[35] *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, ed. by John Swinton (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 127.
[36] Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Retarded and the Criteria for the Human', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* (2004), Vol. 8, No. 3/4, p. 127.
[37] Joseph Fletcher, 'Indicators of Humanhood: A Tentative Profile of Man', *The Hastings Centre Report: Institute of Society, Ethics and Life Sciences* (1972), Vol. 10, No. 5.
[38] *Graduate Theological Education and the Human Experience of Disability*, ed. by Robert Anderson (London: Haworth Press, 2003), p. 62.
[39] Neil Messer, *Theological Neuroethics: Christian Ethics Meets the Science of the Human Brain* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), p. 134.
[40] Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Illinois: IVP Books, 2008), p. 39.
[41] Jennifer Anne Cox, *Jesus: The Disabled God* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2017), p. xii.

Spirit, 'regardless of our abilities or limitations, toward the Kingdom of God', affirming the ethical response of the church community.[42]

3. Otherness and Diversity

This case study raises some significant areas for theological reflection, including matters of otherness and diversity in the body of the church. According to a UK government report (2014), people with disabilities are 'significantly more likely to experience unfair treatment at work' and a 'substantially higher proportion of individuals who live in families with disabled members live in poverty'.[43] In addition to this, there is overwhelming evidence of social discrimination towards those with a learning disability.[44] For this reason, the 'self-giving love' described by Volf, which has underpinned much of the church's theological ethical reasoning, is an excellent starting point to begin bridging this social division. In *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf writes of the 'self-giving love which overcomes human enmity and the creation of space in the self to receive estranged humanity' demonstrated by Christ on the cross, which is to be modelled by his followers.[45] This vision Musekura interprets as one in which Christ is open and inclusive – 'accepting the other in others'.[46] It is a vision which inspires the members of such a community to cross the boundary between alienation and acceptance, engaging in 'mutual affirmation' through the enrichment of their own humanity.[47]

Through the *Prospects* group at DBC, people with a learning disability will be affirmed in their worth, accepted for who they are, and engaged in a way which enables the development, and flourishing, of their spirituality. In encouraging a community to welcome the 'other', it demonstrates an ethical practice which seeks to follow the command of Jesus to love one another in the same way that he has loved them (John 13.34). For Hays, this is the 'one clear directive that Jesus issues for his followers', bearing testimony to the

---

[42] Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Unexpected Guests at God's Banquet: Welcoming People with Disabilities into the Church* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), p. 19.

[43] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/disability-facts-and-figures/disability-facts-and-figures> [accessed 10 May 2018]

[44] This will be expanded later in this paper. See, for example, Jane Kirby, 'People with learning disabilities face NHS discrimination' (2010) <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/people-with-learning-disabilities-face-nhs-discrimination-2006395.html> [accessed 10 May 2018] and Rachel Williams, 'Poll reveals widespread discrimination against people with learning disabilities' (2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/jul/14/discrimination-learning-disabilities> [accessed 10 May 2018]

[45] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1996), p. 127.

[46] Célestin Musekura, *An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 98.

[47] Ibid., p. 93.

love of God through the 'humble service of others'.[48] The benefits of this will be twofold – it will be informative and transformative. It will be informative for those currently involved in the church as well as those with whom they connect, gaining a richer understanding of the experiences of those with a learning disability and raising their awareness of alternative forms and streams of spiritual development. However, it will also be transformative, as prejudices, attitudes, cultural perspectives, values, and theological interpretations will be challenged, pushing for a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, to be a community, and what it means to be a follower of Christ for everyone involved.[49]

4. The Sermon on the Mount as the Basis for Christian Ethics

Having established that the church's ethical response will challenge those within the church, one could ask whether the Sermon on the Mount *should* be the basis for the development of theological ethics. For Glen Stassen, much of 'malformed Christian practices, moral beliefs and moral witness' can be directly linked to what he terms a 'Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount evasion'.[50] What this means is that this area of scripture in Matthew's gospel is rarely used in developing and forming church practices. Seeking to change this, Stassen calls on the church to 'let Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, set the agenda for Christian ethics.'[51] In their book, *Kingdom Ethics*, Gushee and Stassen cleverly present the teachings of Jesus as the foundation of ethical practices, elevating the Sermon on the Mount as 'the charter document for Christian living'.[52]

Scholars such as Weiss and Schweitzer differ slightly in their view, interpreting the sermon rather as an interim ethic, 'developed and proclaimed as a temporary way of life by Jesus under the pressure of an imminent Parousia'.[53] Weiss, especially, interpreted the sermon as 'otherworldly' and not a 'present reality', claiming that to interpret it as such 'is to violate its enthusiastic mood'.[54] There is certainly an eschatological aspect of this passage, but Lawson shares the concern that the Sermon on the Mount could

---

[48] Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 144.
[49] John Swinton, 'Disability Theology', in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Ian A. McFarland and others (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[50] David Gushee and Glen Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2016), Preface.
[51] Ibid., p. 12.
[52] Ibid., p. 31.
[53] Cited in Raymond Collins, *Christian Morality: Biblical Foundations* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p. 224.
[54] Cited in Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 95-97.

be reduced to a set of 'rules, regulations, and requirements that a believer must rigidly keep in order to qualify for heaven'.[55] Instead it should be a 'way of life that governs, guides, and saturates the character of the individual believer as well as the faith community in general', echoing Stassen's hope that it could halt 'the vicious cycles of greed, judgment, lust, hatred, and violence', certainly not fuelling oppressive legalism.[56]

Fedler also believes the Sermon on the Mount has been underused in Christian practice, but cites a Niebuhrian position as the cause.[57] Fedler claims that many believers would rather accept Niebuhr's, arguably nihilistic, claim that 'the goodness of man is too corrupted by sin' to adhere to such principles,[58] in order to 'avoid the hard work of trying to transform their lives'.[59] Though this is a strong statement to make, like Stassen, Fedler convincingly insists that what Jesus taught were 'practice norms', intended for transformation and redemption.[60] For this reason, it would be fair to say that 'the Sermon on the Mount cannot be isolated from the Gospel, nor from the life and person of Jesus', and therefore must function as part of the basis for the development of theological ethics.[61]

Evaluation, Concerns, and Suggestions for Future Practice

Considering what has already been discussed, there is a clear need for the church to involve those with a learning disability in various areas of its practice and community, and it may be well-timed within the UK context – considering recent social welfare cuts. Since the introduction of austerity measures in 2010, 'cuts to social security and public services, falling incomes, and rising unemployment' have heaped pressure onto the poorest areas in the country.[62] According to Oxfam, 'austerity will increase inequality in what is already one of the most unequal developed countries', widening the gap between those at the top of the wealth bracket and those near the bottom. This is of great social and theological significance, as many instances across the globe point to inequality as a breeding-place for

---

[55] Dan Lawson, 'Transforming Initiatives: Leadership Ethics from The Sermon on The Mount', in *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* (2008-2009), Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 30.
[56] Lawson, 'Transforming Initiatives', p. 30.
[57] Kyle D. Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics: Biblical Foundations for Morality* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2006), p. 171.
[58] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2013), p. 31.
[59] Fedler, *Exploring Christian Ethics*, p. 171.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Lawson, 'Transforming Initiatives', p. 30.
[62] <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/cs-true-cost-austerity-inequality-uk-120913-en.pdf> [accessed 2 April 2018].

otherness and exclusion.[63] In this case, it could be argued that, in order to overcome otherness and alienation, there needs to be some form of systemic change. It could be argued further that, if this is not on the agenda for DBC (and other churches in the area), its 'transformative' potential could be limited. This would be the position of Bradshaw, who believes the key to social transformation is through 'transformative subordination', in which Christians 'influence social institutions by simultaneously submitting to (them) […] and maintaining the integrity of their own moral agency'.[64] This is not to diminish the work of DBC, but to highlight ways in which this transforming initiative and its theological reasoning may be further developed.

At this point Volf's social vision of giving comes into question, in which he believes society will be changed by the individual social agents themselves,[65] whereas others have a more structural outlook. That is, Volf feels social change will be achieved through the changing of hearts, one by one, while Swanson and Williams' statement that '*everything* is affected by politics' suggests they operate within a wider social paradigm (although they do not directly contradict Volf).[66] Liberation theologian Boff would also approach this scenario differently from Volf, insisting that oppressive systems and structures which draw society further from God's image must be challenged and called out.[67] In light of this, the critique to DBC's ethical stance is that to overcome social otherness you also have to challenge the practices which have led to social inequality in the first place.

Considering this evaluation, it would be appropriate to suggest three specific ways in which this ethical challenge might be handled in the future:

1. The implementation of a *Prospects* group is inherently good, marking an enormously positive step towards the church's commitment to inclusivity and hospitality. However, in an interview with CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International), Jonathan Edwards acknowledged the need for Sunday morning services to also become more accessible to those with a learning disability.[68] For instance, a

---

[63] For example, the experience of the Roma people, see *Social Inequality & The Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape*, ed. by Celine-Marie Pascale (Washington: Sage, 2013), p. 71. Also the Haitian hierarchy, see *Elite Perceptions of Poverty and Inequality*, ed. by Elisa P Reis and Mick Moore (London: Zed Books, 2005), p. 127.

[64] Bruce Bradshaw, *Change Across Cultures: A Narrative Approach to Social Transformation* (Michigan: Baker Publishing, 2002), p. 142.

[65] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, p. 21.

[66] Eric Swanson and Sam Williams, *To Transform a City: Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole City* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2010), p. 159 (italics original). However, they do acknowledge that means that '*every* person in *every* domain can be engaged in the process of kingdom transformation' (italics added).

[67] Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), p. xvii.

[68] A Vision For An Inclusive Church: Jonathan Edwards, *Prospects*, online video recording, YouTube, 28 April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbiSfgqUhcA> [accessed 5 May 2018].

Sunday service which is 'more visual' can help on a number on levels, taking the emphasis off written material for those who cannot read, allowing others to maintain concentration levels for longer periods of time. In this respect, some considerations should be made to involve and include people with a learning disability in all areas of church life, especially a Sunday morning. Although inclusion and participation are largely dependent on individual abilities and limitations, the church has a duty of hospitality to all those who attend.

2. A second suggestion for future practice is the use of 'Makaton'. Makaton is 'a language programme using signs and symbols to help people to communicate' in a flexible and personalised way.[69] Three ways in which Makaton can be used are to 'share thoughts, choices and emotions', 'take part in games and songs', and 'listen to, read and tell stories' at a level suitable to the person communicating.[70] Makaton training is highly useful for those who wish to work among people with a learning disability, as it greatly enhances communicative possibilities. Training is available through online resources, textbooks, and sessions which are delivered in person if there is a tutor nearby.[71] Makaton training sessions would be a highly useful and beneficial way of using church resources, enabling those involved in the church group to feel more skilled and prepared for the work they intend to carry out. A related suggestion is the creation of a liaison between those with a learning disability and the rest of the church community – even having one trained Makaton volunteer or member of staff could be hugely beneficial.[72]

3. Thirdly, having explored the potential social implications of challenging the current systems which are in place, suggesting that 'otherness' is not only a natural cultural condition but caused in part by social inequality, DBC could challenge the public health system in one form or another. This is particularly pertinent, given that 38% of people with a learning disability will die of avoidable causes, compared to 9% of the general population.[73] The case isn't softened by the fact that over half the doctors working within the NHS believe

---

[69] <https://www.makaton.org/aboutMakaton/> [accessed 10 May 2018].
[70] Ibid.
[71] <https://www.makaton.org/training/> [accessed 10 May 2018].
[72] This is an approach which many hospitals have taken, appointing trained nurses to act as a liaison officer between people, but also to train other people with learning disabilities to represent the needs of their community. See in *Learning Disabilities: Towards Inclusion*, ed. by Helen Atherton and Debbie Crickmore, 6th Edn (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2011), p. 233.
[73] <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/concerns-over-lack-clinical-training-causing-avoidable-learning-disability-deaths> [accessed 29 August 2019].

the learning disabled community receive poorer care than other groups.[74] The significance of transforming individual hearts cannot be underestimated, and the church certainly has a responsibility to model the love of God to wider society. Furthermore, it could be argued that an aspect of this responsibility is to communicate the sentiments of injustice of those who cannot do so themselves. Believers are bound by their covenant with the oppressed, following Christ who suffered in solidarity with the oppressed.[75] On this basis, going forward, I would suggest that DBC become active, not only partnering with those with a learning disability, but speaking on their behalf.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study of Dumbarton Baptist Church's response to a particular ethical issue within their local Scottish community. Inspired by the Sermon on the Mount and by Miroslav Volf's book *Free of Charge*,[76] the church was challenged to become more accessible for people with a learning disability. In the midst of increased government cuts and social isolation among those with a learning disability, this paper has sought to explore and critically examine the social and theological factors which have inspired the church's timely new project, concluding by offering some suggestions for future practice.

I have examined the impact of spiritual development among people with a learning disability, to explore whether the church's response would have any tangible impact on those invited. Drawing from John Swinton's research and a new move towards meaningfulness within social care, it became evident that spiritual care is extremely beneficial to people of all intellectual abilities. Secondly, I have argued that a biblical understanding of human worth requires all people to be viewed as created by God and called by him through the Holy Spirit towards his Kingdom. Thirdly, I raised the question of otherness and diversity, and how bearing witness to Christ, whose love welcomes the other into the self, could have both informative and transformative effects upon the church community and those with whom they connect. Fourthly, the church's use of the Sermon on the Mount as a basis for ethical practice was explored, based on Stassen and Lawson's work, who argue that it is underused in matters of moral practice. Finally, suggestions for the future were offered, considering the potential issues

---

[74] Kirby, 'People with learning disabilities face NHS discrimination', (2010).
[75] *Images of Christ: Ancient and Modern*, Ed. by Stanley E. Porter and others (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 188.
[76] Volf, *Free of Charge*.

raised in earlier sections, proposing that more accessible Sunday services, the use of Makaton, and the implementation of a liaison member could greatly benefit the church in its project.

In the final section, a challenge was laid to the church members to confront the systems and structures which have led to the ostracisation of the learning-disabled community in the first place. However, this suggestion does not take away from the work already in place and may not be the route they wish to take. In conclusion, as this project progresses, it offers a fascinating opportunity for future qualitative research.

Ross E. Hamilton is a Glasgow-based MA graduate from the International Baptist Theological Study Centre Amsterdam.