

Guidelines for including Persons with Intellectual Disabilities in Worship

[especially the Service of the Lord's Day or Holy Communion]

A Brisbane group of Crossroads Queensland, a fellowship of people with disabilities, meets regularly on a Thursday morning for a service of Holy Communion at the Albert Street Uniting Church in the centre of Brisbane. This has been happening for over ten years. A majority of the worshippers would be people with intellectual disabilities, but when people with physical disabilities have been part of a Crossroads touring group, sometimes for international travel, they may continue their participation with Crossroads by attending this service. [1].

[The present leaders, Rev. Heather Palmer and Mrs Janette Minchin], have raised with the Commission on Liturgy questions about the appropriate ordering of this service, the use of certain words and levels of intellectual content. They are continually experimenting with the best ways to lead this service so that all may participate to the full limit of their capabilities. Members of the Commission have joined them on occasions. The preparation of these guidelines arises out of this context while drawing also on the experience of others ministering with different groups of people with intellectual disabilities.

The ideal is that people with intellectual disabilities are welcomed as part of any congregation of the church. A warm welcome and invitation to all to join in the worship of God, and, as baptised people, to come to the Lord's table, should enable them to take their place within the people of God. However, there are several factors for consideration by leaders of worship when people with intellectual disabilities are regular participants in services for the whole congregation, and these factors assume even greater importance when the majority of the congregation have intellectual disabilities. They are factors which may also permit a more profound participation in worship amongst the wider membership of the congregation.

Words, concepts and language.

There is the recognition by those who work with people with intellectual disabilities, that much of the cognitive content of the language of services of worship is beyond their comprehension. Does this mean that one tries to reduce the liturgy to a minimum of words which are concrete and simply understood by many intellectually disabled? The Commission does not believe that this is the approach to take while acknowledging that long services are usually inappropriate. The service/liturgy can be complete without being too wordy.

Language functions at several levels and is important not just for its cognitive meaning. Because any congregation will contain people with a range of intellectual ability, including one comprising mostly people with intellectual disability, words and concepts should not be reduced to the lowest common denominator. The spoken word has rhythms and patterns which people can relate to and participate in. [2]. Rev. Dr. Wendy Dabourne, from her ministry with people in the final stages of Huntington's disease, has come to the conclusion that familiarity is far more important than simplicity,[3] a point illustrated clearly by the universal use of The Lord's Prayer in the Christian church. This is not to give a licence for excessive wordiness but to encourage thoughtful use of the longstanding words of the service.

One specific matter of concern is the way that the words accompanying the distribution of the elements, 'the body of Christ' and 'the blood of Christ' are interpreted concretely and elicit a reaction of revulsion from some.

This is also sometimes noted in thoughtful, sensitive children. Some leaders of worship have chosen to use words such as 'the cup of Christ' or say, 'Receive this gift of Christ', when the difficulty has arisen. Others are wary of introducing new terminology at this point. The Commission members are not of one mind.

The language of the service is to be valued for more than its cognitive content. We are in a society which treats language more literally than many a previous generation. It is a society which watches films and TV and language is often minimal in these. The point is seen in the comparison between a novel and a screen play based upon it. From this people argue that we should diminish much of the language of the liturgy until it parallels such media usage. But in doing that so much would be lost. Careful use of the language blended with several other aspects of the ritual will speak far more to the whole person who offers it as worship to God.

The length of the service

The matter of the length of the service is important for people with a limited attention span as a result of disability or illness. The development and movement of the steps of the service is crucial as people participate and move with it. All the essential elements of the service can be present in a service that lasts less than half an hour.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving can, of course, vary considerably in length. The important steps in it, even if each is brief, are the opening dialogue, praise of God for creation and redemption, the 'Holy, Holy', praise for and remembering Jesus' life, death and resurrection, [the anamnesis], the retelling of what he did at the last supper, [the words of institution, used within or just before the whole prayer], and the prayer for the Holy Spirit, [the epiclesis].

The sermon and the prayers of the people can vary also in length according to people's attention span and participation. Crossroads worship leaders in Brisbane find that the sermon can be five to seven minutes provided there is an accompanying visual focus and a good story element within it. Many people have prayer requests in the prayers of the people and the leader needs to include each one specifically.

The setting, visual symbols and symbolic gesture

The setting for worship, the communion vessels and cloths, the gestures used by the leaders of worship when giving the greeting and sharing the peace, dramatic expression in conjunction with the reading of the Bible or the message, the use of candles in appropriate ways and other symbols can help convey a sense of reverence in the worship of God and a sense of community amongst God's people in ways which enhance what is conveyed by words alone. The use of colour with flowers, banners and stoles communicates the feeling of the church season. Works of art can communicate aspects of the gospel which elude the words used to explain them. Churches with a style of worship with a strong emotional and/or sacramental emphasis will speak more fully to the person with intellectual disabilities than those where the emphasis is solely cerebral.

Participation in the ritual and the movement of the service

Participation in the ritual wherever the whole congregation participates is vital, though it is important to recognise that participation can be also observation in stillness. Elaine Ramshaw says, 'Most people who are cognitively impaired can still participate in ritual and find it meaningful, and in fact many experience it more intensely through its concrete and symbolic dimensions than do most cognitively "normal" people.' [4]

Some with intellectual disability are able to use words, others participate without. The Nambour Crossroads group has participated in the Tenebrae Service on Maundy Thursday with enablers reading the seven tenebrae passages and people with intellectual disability extinguishing the candles after each reading. Some people with intellectual disability will also have physical disability. Not all may be able to come to the communion rail, though this is usually of great significance for those who can.

Music

Music often speaks most powerfully to those with intellectual disability and the use of music which is simple and profound is most desirable. Trite music and words need not be used. Many of the longer hymns and songs of the church will not be suitable, but songs/hymns with a chorus may be most suitable if a soloist sings the verse. Some choruses may be used as a sung response to prayer, e.g. 'O come let us adore him.'

Preparation

Those who have not grown up in the life of the church will need help to participate. Deacon, Rev. Leanne Leggett, recounts her experience in preparing people from the Rydalmere Campus for the Developmentally Disabled to participate in weekly services of Holy Communion. [5]. The group were used to only a sing-a-long but came to participate in specially organised communion services at the Centre for Ministry at North Parramatta and other local churches with great joy and enthusiasm.

Rev. Janet Dawson, reflecting on her own involvement in these services refers to the principles of planning as follows:-1. developmentally delayed people are to be treated with love and respect; 2. the standard movement of the liturgy [gathering people into the presence of God, providing a safe place for the divine/human encounter through both words and symbolic forms, and then guiding them back into ordinary time and space] had its own integrity and would not need to be altered; 3. we would incorporate rituals and music with which the Rydalmere people were familiar, e.g. the skill of greeting people incorporated into the passing of the peace. She concludes that this ministry is both possible and rewarding, but it is also time consuming and emotionally costly. 'The presence of our Rydalmere guests freed members of an academic institution to worship and proclaim the gospel in its profound simplicity.' [6] Wendy Dabourne writes too of the detailed work of preparing an institution for such regular worship to occur in that setting. [7]

There is also the need for the one leading worship to prepare fully. This involves preparation for what is said and done and working with others to be included. But it also includes the personal preparation in prayer. Again Wendy Dabourne writes, 'The ministry was grounded in prayer, both mine and other people's....the ministry included the prayers of a fellow-minister who has profound experience of an unusual and severely disabling disease...' [8]

Confirmation

It is Uniting Church understanding that the baptised people of God are to be encouraged to come to the Lord's Table. Confirmation is not a prerequisite. However the question is asked about material to help prepare people with intellectual disabilities for confirmation. This has now been done in several places with the adaptation of material according to people's ability. Their faith in Jesus Christ can be expressed in more simple language than that of the confirmation service vows and they can take their place as confirmed members of the church. Others, who are members of the church through baptism anyway, may learn to participate at the Lord's Table without undertaking the formal preparation and rite of confirmation.

Conclusion

The approach recommended here is not the stripping of the service to a few words which would be within the cognitive reach of most of the people with intellectual disabilities participating in the service, but to see the service as a whole through which God may communicate in various ways and by a variety of means to the people as they offer their worship through a range of human activities and rituals. It is not a reduction of the liturgy but an expansion of the means available through which people offer their worship to God.

Footnotes

[1] The late Bishop Ian Shevill was one such participant after experiencing a stroke, but able to travel through the support of Crossroads.

[2] When leading Sunday worship at Goodna which was attended by several Crossroad members who lived at Parkhaven, an Endeavour home for people with intellectual disabilities, I and the whole congregation were always aware of and encouraged by the participation of one member who had little language but who joined loudly and heartily in every hymn, congregational response and prayer with a rhythmic utterance.

[3] Wendy Dabourne, an unpublished paper entitled 'When Words Fail - Ministry with some adults in the later stages of Huntington's disease.' p.7.

[4] Elaine Ramshaw, 'Ritual and Pastoral Care', Fortress Press 1987 p.78

[5] 'The Gifts of God', Newsletter of the Weekly Celebration of Communion Movement, Volume III No I.

[6]. Rev Janet Dawson in a letter to me in relation to material for this article.

[7]. Wendy Dabourne. op.cit.

[8] ibid.

adapted from paper presented by Rev Dr Geraldine Wheeler, Commission on Liturgy.
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