

The aim of this session is to consider together how to reach and care for more people in our community – including those who live with disabilities.

Discussion Question: When thinking about disability, is it:

- a) an *abnormal* part of a *normal* world?
- b) a *normal* part of a *normal* world?
- c) a *normal* part of an *abnormal* world?

What are the strengthens and downfalls of each position?

Defining Disability

How do we define 'disability'?

This is not a simple task and runs the risk of being reductionistic. Any definition will be dependent to some degree to the context in which a disability is demonstrated.

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* defines disability as:

- total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions
- total or partial loss of a part of the body
- the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness
- the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person's body
- a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction
- a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behaviour

There are many different kinds of disability which may affect mobility, ability to learn things, or ability to communicate easily, and some may experience more than one of these factors (both hidden and visible).

In some ways, the word 'disability' defines a person by what they can or can not do. As such, this can actually be a fairly broad group – you only have to spend a moment to consider what you may or may not be able to do.

Australian Bureau of Statistics in a 2018 record says that the percentage of people living with a disability in the Blue Mountains, Sydney is 22.4%. What percentage do we need to be at for this to be considered 'normal'?

Discussion Question: Does our church reflect this demographic statistic? Why/Why not?

Disability Realities

Those who live with disabilities are a diverse group – it is not easy, and in fact may be unhelpful to use the category of ‘disability’ as if we are talking about a single homogenous group. That said, those living with disabilities experience:

- Challenges that can be - spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, psychological, financial.
- Functional impairment - through bodies/minds which do not work as some might expect.
- Social restriction – interactions or relationships that do not respect, support or affirm - sometimes ‘going it alone’ without genuine family or friendship support.
- Spiritual limitation – the vast majority are unchurched.
- Historical bias – there is a range of worldviews that may be in play when it comes to disability (see *Appendix 1: World View Models* by Su Lowe)
- Linguistic challenges – ‘Disability’ can imply dysfunction, disease, disfigurement, disorder.

Yet...

- Disability is not exclusively a negative experience. There can be much joy and significance each person can draw in life.
- And there are a great many blessings and gifts which those who live with disabilities can and do bring to any community.

Reflection Questions:

How comfortable are you talking to someone who lives with an obvious disability? How or why might someone feel more or less comfortable?

How willing would you make efforts to include them in a part of your life? What benefits and challenges are there in including people living with disability into our lives?

A Theology of Disability

Let’s consider some key doctrines which speak to the way we can think about Disability.

Exercise: Following at some key moments in salvation history. Are there aspects of these moments recorded in biblical history that will help shape our understanding of disability?

Creation

- Genesis 1-2 - The pinnacle of creation is the creation of humanity, made in the image of God and God saw all he had made and it was very good.
 - *Is there any reason to believe that disability was not part of the created order?*
 - *Does God make mistakes?*
 - *Is God's image in people with a disability damaged?*
- Exodus 4:11 – The Lord questions Moses: Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'
 - *If not part of God's design, could disability be part of his plan or his purpose?*
- Psalm 139:13-15: Everything God weaves together in the human womb is good – fearfully and wonderfully made.
 - *If every life is good, fearfully and wonderfully made – does it matter how that life is packaged?*

The Fall and Sin

- Genesis 3 – the fall and introduction of sin damages created order.
 - *Do we believe that disability is a product of the fall? And if so, do we then believe that disability is the result of the person specifically sinning (hard call for the person born with a disability)?*
- Romans 3:9 – all people sin.
 - *Is disability a mark of sin? Does that mean all have a disability? Or that those who have a disability have sinned more (watch the heresy in how you answer)?*
- John 9:1-2 – Jesus sees a man born blind, so the disciples ask: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?' Both may have sinned, but Jesus makes clear that neither did in a way that contributed to his blindness. Jesus restored his sight.
 - *Each person may be born with limitation to some degree, blindness, deafness, paralysis are more obvious examples of those limitations. And while it is this limitation that is removed on many occasions with Jesus, his key concern was that a) God would get the glory (Jn 9:3) and that sin was addressed (Jn 5:15).*
- Romans 8:20-22 – creation subjected to frustration and groans as in the pains for childbirth. Everyone experiences some degree of difficulty and brokenness in every area of our lives.
 - *Should not all people share with all people in the frustration and groan – or should some, like those with disability, experience more? Why?*

Jesus

- Isaiah 52:13-53:6 – in the suffering servant we see disfigurement, damage, no beauty or majesty. He was despised, rejected, suffered. Yet in his suffering, he stood in our place.
- In meeting Jesus, it does not take long to see how he regraded and treated those with disabilities – in grace, he includes, restores, defends, touches, heals (Mt 4:23-24; 8:1-

17; 9:1-8; 9:18-34; 15:29-31; 17:14-21; 20:29-34; Mk 1:29-34; 1:40-45; 2:1-12; 3:1-6; 5:1-43; 7:31-37; 8:22-26; 9:14-29; 1:46-52; Lk 4:31-44; 5:12-26; 7:1-17; 8:26-56; 9:37-43; 13:10-17; 17:11-18; 18:35-43; Jn 4:43-54; 5:1-15; 9:1-34; 11:38-44). Externally, he removed the obstacles that would have prevented them by law from taking their place in a religious (or Jewish) community, but internally he often addressed an even greater need – addressing their soul.

- Furthermore, he modelled who his disciples should live before all others. The apostles did, and in turn called all other disciples to imitate him. (1 Cor 11:1; 4:16; 2 Thess 3:9; 1 John 2:6)

Church

- 1 Cor 12:12-31 – calls the church to be one in Christ, one body, no division, with all parts having equal concern for each other.
 - *Are we attempting to function without all the intended parts of the body?*
 - *How do we have equal concern for one another if we don't work to help all people serve and play their part?*
- Togetherness depends on genuinely different people being unified
- Being a Christian is not individual (only), it is collective, community.
- People with a disability are not a 'problem to be solved'.
- The gifts that people have (all people: able people, disabled people) has less to do with ability but much to do with acts of service for a community.
- In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, the way the Lord's Supper is described is as something that the church family does together, waiting on one another, to ensure all are included.
 - *Are we waiting and accommodating those who might move slower due to disability?*

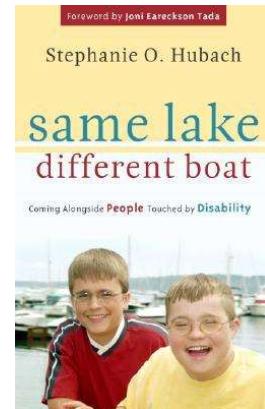
Heaven and New Creation

- Matt 22:1-14 (c.f. Luke 14:15-24) – Jesus tells a parable of a great royal banquet 'a feast in the kingdom of God'. Some were invited - we are not told who, but we are told that they were distracted. And so he reissued the invitation but this time to those you would not expect at a royal table (that is if you are the kind of person that looks down your nose at a person of lesser means) – those on the street, bad and good – anyone willing to come. The parable represents a heavenly celebration open to all (not because of status), accepted by a few (because of faith).
- Outsiders and outcasts are not changed into social elites when they enter the man's banquet.
- If we said that outsiders or outcasts have at times been those who live with a disability?
 - *Does this give us reason to recognise that our view of beauty, or function, or perhaps disability should not be what we externally see or judge but is in what God sees and knows about us – all of us.*

- Revelation 21-22 gives a picture of the Garden restored. A new heaven and earth, a holy city where death, mourning, crying, pain are removed and all things new.
 - *Is there any reason to believe that disability will not be part of this recreated order?*

Book Suggestion: *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* by Stephanie O. Hubach (P & R Publishing, 2006)

When the church attempts to function without all of its parts, the body of Christ becomes disabled. *Same Lake, Different Boat* is a transformational work--designed to renew our minds to think biblically about disability in order that our lives, our relationships, and our congregations might wholly reflect Christ.



How might a Theology of Disability shape our practice at LMAP?

It needs to happen at both a formal and informal level. Formally in our *policies and ministry practices*, and informally in the *culture* that we embody.

LMAP Policy - Our Goal

We envisage accessible, inclusive, missional church locations engaging and engaged by people with disabilities. We yearn for hospitable and healthy church gatherings that intentionally seek to:

- End the isolation and disconnectedness of persons with disabilities and their families
- Nurture the spiritual lives of people with disabilities so that they become professing and active members and
- Encourage the gifts of people with disabilities so that they can serve God fully.

Our Commitment

The Anglican Parish of Lower Mountains believes that everyone should have the opportunity to participate, contribute and belong to our community. We also believe the people with disabilities, the aged, and parents of children with disabilities, positively enhance human diversity and community life. Therefore, in keeping with biblical teachings, with doctrinal standards, and decisions of our denomination regarding people with disabilities, we the Parish Council of the Lower Mountains Anglican Parish adopt the following policy.

1. In all our church locations, we value people with disabilities as created in the image of God.
2. We consider all people - with disabilities and without - to be equipped by God for his service and we encourage those of gospel character and conviction to enrich our lives

by serving the gospel of our Lord Jesus to the fullest extent possible for them within the context of our parish life.

3. We will endeavour to integrate and include people with disabilities into all the ministries and activities in the Lower Mountains Anglican Parish.
4. We will modify policy, practice, procedure or architecture (when appropriate) that tends to exclude those of us with disabilities from any aspect of congregational life.

LMAP Culture

A church operates like an open family in that we recognise that we belong together, and will be open to anyone, yet we at times will operate independently and individually! As we gather voluntarily around the gospel cause, it is the gospel that should obligate us to act in particular and helpful ways – not the church per say that makes or forces each person to act.

As such, our gospel culture is paramount. As we continue to respond to the gospel both individually and collectively which should be constantly looking at the way we relate to others. To be effective as a church in shaping our practices to be more inclusive of those with disabilities we can ask ourselves some diagnostic questions.

1. Am I (and us as a church) being respectful and humble in the way that we approach all people?

- Genuine welcoming and a sense belonging is something which all should be offered
- Belonging is more than inclusion. To belong, you have to be missed. People need to long for you, want you to be there. When you are not there, they go looking for you.

2. Am I (and therefore we) being neglectful, ignorant or indifferent to those who live with disabilities?

3. Have I (as well as we) asked those living with a disability what they would find helpful?

- Those living with disabilities should have a say in defining what they need and want in a church family.
- Parents should be consulted regarding the best supports/accommodations that need to be made for their child. Special programs may be great and helpful – but what else? (See *Appendix 2 – Framework Approach*)
- There may be particular needs that could be addressed at transition points – arriving, during the gathering, following and in between gatherings, leaving.

- There may be barriers (physical/social/structural) that could be removed or adapted so that people are not prevented from participating fully.

4. How can I (and we) serve together with others?

- 1 Cor 12:12-31 speaks of the church as a body of any parts each with gifts that can be used to serve one another. That should include those who live with disabilities and as such there should be ways within our church body where we can all serve.
- Those with disabilities are not projects for ministry, they are partners in ministry.

5. Are there ways to do life together outside of what we do in our church context?

- Choose to intentionally enter the lives of individuals and families touched by disability.

Application Exercise: Picture a church, our church, where our congregations and ministries have a Christian perspective of disability supported by a gospel culture – now paint that picture.

- What will it look like for a person who lives with disability?
- What will that look like for that person's family?
- What will that look like for our church family?
- What will that look like for me?

- What one thing am I now thinking differently about this topic?

- What one thing might I now do differently?

And then...

- How can this practice be sustained in my individual life/our corporate church life?
- How can we support/encourage each other to be sustainers – those who keep this going? Do we need help to put this into practice? What help?

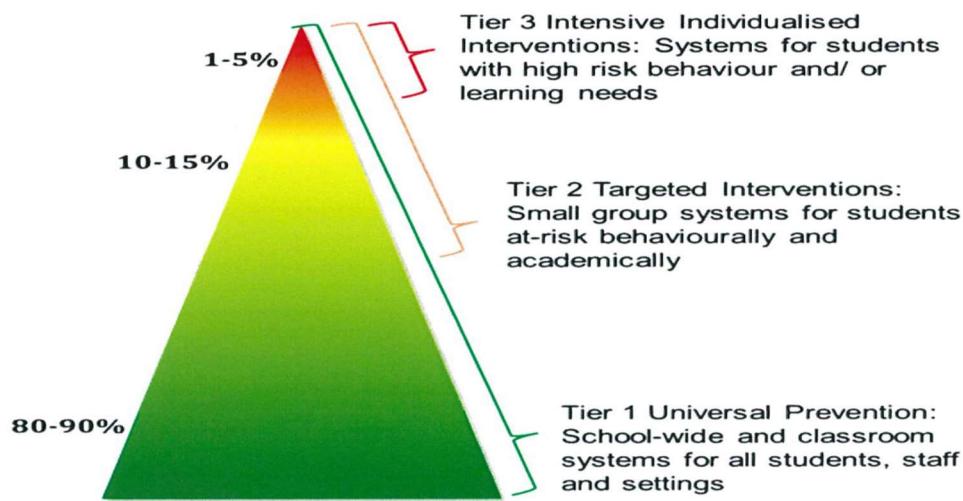
Appendix 1: Disability - World View Models

(Compiled by Su Lowe)

- Historical: *Abnormal part of life in an otherwise normal world*. An aberration!
- Karma: Some Eastern religions
- Moral: Curse (Some African cultures), Sins of the Fathers (some religious extremists), What did I do to deserve this?
- Medical: Typically think of what bodies and minds can and can't do; what is wrong with a person; healing takes place when that wrong is removed or fixed
- Sanitise: Disassociating ourselves from discomfort and difficulty
- 'Super Spiritual':
 - Blaming people, particularly those with mental health difficulties, for lacking the faith to be well.
 - Stating that suffering is God's will for their lives, that God chose them to suffer
- Charity/Paternalistic:
 - Doing good deeds **to** needy people
 - Operating from position of power and strength, ministering to others in weakness by us strong selves to meet a 'perceived need'
- Social: Nothing is wrong with me. Entire problem is society.
 - 'Disability is something imposed on top of impairment by the way people are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society' For example: I'm only disabled because society has not provided ramp access (physical impairment) or differential teaching (intellectual impairment).
- Integration/Inclusion:
 - Still has connotations of 'them' and 'us'
 - Often individuals are physically present but not engaged/connected/have sense of belonging
- Celebration:
 - *Normal part of life in a normal world*
 - Disability is a difference in same way hair colour is a difference
 - Dismisses difficult realities and grief some people experience
 - Tends to celebrate the disability, not the individual

Appendix 2: Framework Approach (rather than a band aid approach)

- A framework allows a church/minister to triage the love and care that we can offer across a series of tiers:
 - **Tier 1** applies to all people.
 - **Tier 2** adds some further support for some needing targeted but not isolating supports.
 - **Tier 3** introduces individualized plans to support and help.



TIER 3: INDIVIDUAL

Strategies used for **one individual child** receiving 1:1 support within class

For example: 1:1 support to guide child through the visual schedule, maybe with a 'Visual Count Down Timer'

TIER 2: TARGETED

Strategies used for **some children** within class

For example: alert at least 24 hrs before Kids Church via WhatsApp/Email re change to the visual schedule

TIER 1: UNIVERSAL

Strategies used for **all children** within class

For example: visual schedule