

Disability Awareness Sunday



Service outline and practical resources

Theme: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

The reflection is supplied separately so that this order of service can be adapted easily for different congregations.

Resources needed (if you want to do the interactive version of the intercessions)

- A video version of the reflection – the wording is slightly different to the text included below but covers the same themes. <https://youtu.be/B8GnCaXUo9I>
- Blank re-markable puzzle pieces
- Pens
- A central surface, cloth or board on which the puzzle can be assembled during the intercessions
- Six pre-written pieces: Christ, Fellowship, Belonging, Worship, Support and Service

Puzzle layout: place Christ at the centre, with Fellowship, Belonging, Worship, Support and Service around it.

Hymn suggestions

Gathering / Call to Worship

Original: Come, People of the Risen King

- Come, Let Us Sing of a Wonderful Love
- All People That on Earth Do Dwell

Response to opening prayers

Original: StF 50: Great Is the Lord and Most Worthy of Praise

- Great Is Thy Faithfulness
- To God Be the Glory

Worship / Offering

Original: StF 332: Lord, I Lift Your Name on High

- Majesty, Worship His Majesty
- There Is a Redeemer

Response to the reflection

Original: StF 611: Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You

- A New Commandment I Give unto You
- The Church of Christ in Every Age

Closing hymn

Original: StF 676: Christ, from Whom All Blessings Flow

- The Church's One Foundation
- Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation

Order of service

Welcome – As people come in, they receive a blank puzzle piece and a pen.

Call to Worship

As we gather, we come as different people, with different stories and different gifts, called together in the love of Christ.

Hymn:

Opening prayers

God of love,
you call us together as the body of Christ,
different people, with different gifts and different ways of being.

We thank you for the ways your love is made known among us,
and for all we receive from one another.

We confess that we do not always live as one body.
We overlook people,
make assumptions about what is normal,
and fail to notice barriers because they do not affect us.

Forgive us.

Help us to recognise the gifts among us,
to listen to voices we have not heard,
and to remember how much we need one another.

Remind us that in Christ we are forgiven, loved and welcomed,
and draw us together in worship.

Amen.

Hymn / worship response:

Hymn / offering:

Offering prayer

God of generosity,
receive the gifts we offer:
our time, our money and our worship.
Use them to help us share your love,
support one another
and serve your world.

Amen.

Reading

1 Corinthians 12:12–27

Reflection

Use the separate reflection resource, or another reflection based on the passage and the theme of interdependence.

Hymn / response to reflection:

Intercessions and Lord's Prayer

(These intercessions also work well as a standard prayer without the puzzle pieces)

As we begin our prayers, we are going to build a small picture of the church.

At the centre, we place Christ.

Around Christ, we place Fellowship, Belonging, Worship, Support and Service.

These are already part of the life of the church. They are already present among us, although never perfectly.

As we pray, we will add our own pieces around them: people, situations, hopes, needs, and things we want to place before God.

If you write the name of an individual, please use their first name only.

You may also choose simply to hold your piece and pray silently.

God of the whole body,

We pray for your Church.

For communities where people find fellowship, belonging, worship, support and service.

For those who have felt overlooked, excluded or unable to take their place.

Help us to notice, to listen, and to make room.

Pause for people to write.

We pray for those who give and receive care and support.

For those living with disability, illness, pain or exhaustion.

For carers, families and friends.

Remind us that needing one another is part of being human, and part of being the body of Christ.

Pause for people to write.

We pray for the barriers people face.

Barriers in buildings, communication, transport and systems.

Barriers created by assumptions about what is normal.

Give us the courage to change what can be changed, and the humility to listen before deciding what others need.

Pause for people to write.

We pray for our wider world.

For disabled people affected by poverty, conflict and discrimination.

For those struggling to access care, support, education or work.

For all who campaign for dignity, justice and belonging.

Pause for people to write.

And now we bring before you the people and situations closest to us.

The names we have written.

The hopes we carry.
The things we cannot put into words.

Longer silence. Pieces are collected or placed into the puzzle.

God of the whole body,
receive the prayers we have written,
the prayers we have spoken,
and those we cannot put into words.

Teach us to recognise our need for one another,
to offer help and to receive it,
to notice the gifts among us,
and the barriers we still need to remove.

May we grow together as the body of Christ,
different members, each belonging to the others.

And so, as one body, we pray together:

Our Father...

Closing hymn:

Blessing

We go out as the body of Christ,
ready to give and to receive,
to notice, to listen and to make room,
to live out God's love together.

Amen.

Reflection

To the church in the United Kingdom, from Paul. Sorry, not that one. Your brother in Christ.

To those who gather week by week, who sing and pray and break bread together, who care for one another and try in their ordinary and imperfect ways to follow Jesus. Grace to you and peace.

I've wanted to write to you for some time. I've witnessed the way we care for and support each other. The meals carried to a neighbour's door. The gift of presence offered to someone who is struggling. What we do when we turn up for one another week after week is a genuine act of resistance and of hope. There's already a lot of care, friendship and support among us, but that doesn't mean everyone is able to belong in the same way.

Who is not here?

Around one in four people in the UK live with some form of disability. Physical disability. Sensory impairment. Chronic illness. Mental health conditions. Neurodivergence. That figure is almost certainly an underestimate, because stigma and fear of marginalisation mean many disabled people never name their experience as disability.

Of course, not everyone who is missing from a church building has been excluded. Some disabilities and illnesses make attending in person difficult, and for some people it simply isn't possible. No amount of ramps, hearing loops or changes to worship will alter that. Belonging to the Church can't depend on being able to get into a church building on a Sunday morning.

But there are still people who could take part if some of the barriers were different. It's easy to assume that disabled people have simply chosen not to come, that the invitation has been open and they haven't taken it up, without noticing the things which have made that invitation difficult to accept.

Maybe not deliberately. Through years of not quite noticing, though, we've sometimes built, sung and prayed as though the body we had in mind was always the same idealised body. Many church buildings are still difficult to access for wheelchair users or people with limited mobility. Hearing loops don't always work. Sometimes somebody has to ask for the ramp, find the person with the key, or enter through a different door. These things can seem small when they don't affect us personally, but they're much less small when they happen every week.

The same assumptions can be carried in some of the words we use, including hymns many of us have sung since childhood.

I once was blind but now I see.

Stand up, stand up for Jesus.

He walks with me.

Some of these are amazing hymns. I'm not asking us to abandon them. But blindness is often used to represent ignorance, sight becomes understanding, standing represents commitment and walking becomes discipleship. Repeated week after week, these images become part of the way we imagine Christian faith and Christian bodies.

In John 9, the disciples encounter a man who's been blind from birth and ask Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" They meet a person and immediately turn his body into a theological question. Somebody must be responsible. But Jesus refuses the explanations they offer. Neither this man nor his parents sinned.

We still ask versions of that question. Illness can become a battle to be won or lost. Suffering must have a purpose. Disability becomes a problem awaiting a solution, or something God has given somebody so that everyone else can learn a lesson from them. I've encountered enough of that kind of theology over the years to know how damaging it can be.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul, and yes, that Paul, describes the Church as a body and says that the parts which **seem** weaker are indispensable.

We live in a culture which puts a lot of value on independence. Being able to manage by ourselves is treated as something to aim for, while needing other people can feel like failure. I've heard people say many times that they don't want to be a burden, and I've probably said it myself. But bodies don't work independently. The hand needs the eye, the eye needs the hand, and the head needs the feet. Every part depends on other parts.

Our faith has often become quite individualistic as well. We talk about *my* faith, *my* relationship with God, *my* salvation and what Jesus has done for *me*. You can hear the same thing in plenty of the songs we sing, with a lot of *I*, *me* and *my*. None of that is necessarily wrong. Faith is personal, but Paul is talking about **us**. We are the body of Christ, we belong to one another and we need one another.

Sometimes I'll be the person offering help and sometimes I'll need somebody else to help me. Quite often both things will be happening at the same time. The balance changes as our lives change. Bodies change, illness happens, circumstances change, and things which were once easy can become difficult. None of that changes whether we belong. We can fall quite easily into imagining care as something which travels in one direction. There are people who help and people who need help. There are strong people and vulnerable people. There are those who give and those who receive. Paul's picture of the body doesn't divide quite so neatly.

Disabled people aren't a group outside the Church who need to be brought in and cared for by everybody else. We're already part of the body, and our belonging doesn't depend on what we can do, what we can contribute, or whether we're able to take on particular roles. Churches can be very good at caring for people, and I've seen extraordinary kindness, friendship and practical support in church communities. But care can still become paternalistic if we quietly divide people into those who give and those who receive. Paul doesn't say that the parts which seem weaker matter because they might turn out to be useful. He says they're indispensable. Their worth doesn't depend on what they can contribute, and neither does their belonging.

For those of us who've spent years valuing independence, receiving help can be difficult. We may be far happier helping somebody else than admitting that we need them. We can worry that needing help makes us less useful, or that we've become a burden. But none of us was ever really independent. We depend on other people throughout our lives, even when that dependence is easy to hide.

We belong to one another, and we need one another.