

Seeing Things My Way

An article written by Glen Graham, minister of Cullompton Baptist Church, for the Baptist Ministers' Journal – October 2014.



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by Glen Graham

It has been my privilege to be the moderator of the Disability Justice Group of the BU for the past three years.

When I took on the role, I never imagined the journey I would go on! We have sought to identify areas where disabled people may feel that they are not included in regular church and to find practical and creative ways to help.

Barriers to inclusion are many, but can be:

**Theological:* assumptions about the origins of disability and the connection with sin. We need to rediscover what it means to be human and made in God's image—which includes disability at its heart.

**Practical and attitudinal:* where people, because of the physical environment or attitudes of others, feel they do not have a part to play in the body of Christ.

We have challenged these issues in a number of ways. The seminar at the Baptist Assembly in 2013 was a defining moment of this process, which resulted in other opportunities to raise awareness about the real issues disabled people face.

In this article, I want to do a number of things. First, I want to share my experiences as a minister who is blind. I use this term rather than 'blind minister', because this is how I see myself. I do not minister primarily to blind people. My calling is the same as any other accredited Baptist minister. I am also keen to point out that I am a minister first, who just happens to be blind—thus putting the emphasis in a deliberate place.

Second, I want to make some general remarks about blindness itself; and finally, I want to draw attention to some specific issues that ministers may need to think about when ministering to blind people—I need to think about them as much as anyone else.

Ministry experience

So what is ministry like for me? I would be a rich man indeed if I had a pound for everyone who has asked me 'what is it like being a blind minister?' My glib but true reply is, 'much the same as being any other kind of minister but with a twist'. There is no doubt that I have to do things slightly differently, but the beauty of the ministry is that each person called brings her or his own unique twist to ministry.

We minister out of our experience of God, of ourselves and the way we are made, and also of the world. The blindness forms a part of the experience of being myself which comes to the role as does being middle-aged or having been brought up on a rough council estate. All our experiences help inform how we see our vocation and to some degree how we interact with God and the world. When I get together with my colleagues, I never talk about my particular experiences of being a minister who is blind, but rather share the joys and frustrations common to all ministry.

My passions and drives are much the same as others. I am concerned about the decline in the western church. I am passionate about creating healthy churches which are true and living communities of faith that offer the welcome of Christ to all. I am concerned about whether I am encouraging missionary disciples who are real

about themselves and their faith so that they can live a life that reflects the image and character of Christ. I am passionate about opening the Bible to people so that the story of faith comes alive in their hearts. My disability is very much in the background of all these other concerns. When I am asked what is it like to be a blind minister, I have to think really hard, for I am me, and I bring my personality and weakness to the table for God to use graciously.

Of course there are some things which make the task of ministry a little different, but I have never found my blindness getting in the way of effective ministry (whatever that may mean). Thanks to modern technology, I can keep up to date with the latest theological books and ideas—it is the same technology that other people use, but with a Dalek-like voice reading it. I am typing this article on an ordinary laptop without voice recognition since I can touch-type.

When it comes to getting around, I rely on my trusty yet playful guide dog, Robson, and a SatNav. When I arrive at someone's home, I listen carefully to what is said and pick up from the inflection in the voice what is going on in their heart. I have also learnt to hear what is not being said, because that gives away so much. In terms of church meetings, I am fortunate that I enjoy chairing—which I know is a little odd, and I probably need prayer for it! The congregations have learnt to break the rules they were taught at school—you have to shout out! I can honestly say I have never fallen down a hole in a churchyard yet, which was a concern at my Ministerial Recognition interview.

To me, ministry is the fulfilment of a dream I had as a teenager. I cannot imagine doing anything else. I am fortunate to do something I really love and that enthusiasm comes across to people I meet. I am sometimes made to feel guilty by other blind people that I am in work at all, never mind the fact that I enjoy it. According to the latest figures I picked up somewhere, 90% of blind people of working age do not have a job.

Getting into ministry in the first place was not easy. It is all very well for me to know what I can do, but getting that across to others is an uphill task. It took the best part of two years for me to get a call to a church when I left college, and it has always taken time to find a church when I have sought a move. I am currently in my third church and I can look back at my years in ministry with happy memories. Hopefully the odd life has been changed by the transfiguring grace of God. I am hoping to become an accredited spiritual director within the next couple of years. How many people in any walk of life can say they really live the dream? I can.

Do I ever wish life had taken a different turn? Absolutely not. I have never resented my blindness or wished I were different. It has given me perspectives on life which I may not otherwise have had. I do not mind boasting of my physical limitations, for God is powerfully at work through them. I just long for a churches to celebrate difference and be flexible enough to make roles fit the people who are called to fill them. I have always been fully involved in church so I can only imagine what it is like for those who have not. I just pray that I may be of some use to God and grow in the process.

General points

I want to make some general points about blindness. One might assume that to be blind means to see nothing and read Braille, but I can see shadows and know the difference between day and night. My wife is registered blind although she has a degree of useful vision, but her field of vision is very poor. In familiar places she is confident but she has trouble telling depths of pavements or how deep a flight of stairs is. She also struggles with crowds, so three years ago she got her first guide dog, Kate. I tell you this to illustrate the differing levels of sight within the blind spectrum. For my wife, the colour of a room and the quality of the lighting helps, but she is considered blind. Regarding Braille, the number of readers is falling. I read recently that there might only be 6000 heavy users of Braille in the UK (of which I am one).

There are two types of blind person—first, those who have been blind for all or most of their lives, like myself. We are often known as 'lifers', which always raises a smile. Second, those who lose their sight during their adult lives, often towards the end of their lives. This distinction is important when considering how best to minister to blind people and we will turn to that now.

How can we ensure that blind people feel they belong in our churches? We do not need to panic straight away that we cannot provide Braille. The most important thing is that people feel welcomed and wanted. Listening is the minister's greatest asset in this area—let the person tell his/her story, then ask them what they need. If they tell you a solution, do not question it as they truly know best. Ask questions of those with limited sight how best to facilitate the worship experience. Sometimes large print books are easier than screens, but if you use a screen, ask what colour the writing should be and how large. Also bear in mind the difference that colour contrasts and sunny weather may make to everyone (not just the visually impaired). Further, the blind person before you will not be able to initiate conversation, so make sure you are the one to do it. I guess the golden rule is, listen, ask and respond.

I asked around to see how blind Christians and those who worked with them would answer the question: 'what do you want our churches to do for you?', and three issues came to the fore.

First, we just want to serve and use our gifts to the glory of God. We don't want things done to or for us. Many blind people describe the real pain of not being able to serve in the local church alongside sighted church members. There are many stories of good practice, but from my limited experience these are the exception rather than the rule. If you have examples, then do let me know so they can be shared.

The second major issue is how do we minister to folk with sight loss or indeed any sensory loss? It is a real grieving process and needs to be treated as such. Often these people are very lonely and isolated and all they need is a friend. The Torch Trust for the Blind is working hard to produce resources and training events under the umbrella of their programme *Journeying with people with sight loss*.

Finally there are access issues, to do with information and services (buildings are not so much of an issue). Many of these access issues can be overcome by listening, asking and acting. The Torch Trust is the first port of call for any issue concerning blindness and the Christian faith.

For many of us, this article may be the beginning of a journey. I have spent my life mainly in the sighted world so I have to think quite hard about what it is like for other blind people. My journey of faith and ministry has largely been a positive one, and this is why I am involved in the work to make our churches more inclusive. I have no real axe to grind or points to score. When I read of the kingdom of God, I see a place of hope where the richness of diversity is an expression of that hope. The story of the great banquet in Luke 14 always captures my imagination. Those who have everything 'sorted' including their beliefs, refuse to come to the banquet so the King opens his doors to those he may of wanted in the first place? Why wait till the end of time for this vision to be fulfilled? May this kingdom where the least and the lost take pride of place break out among us now. We are here to redeem the cosmos not wait for the bus to heaven. Every time we take the time and welcome those who are different from ourselves and share their lives with ours, we are redeeming the cosmos—and who doesn't want to do that?

Glen Graham is minister of Cullompton Baptist Church, and would be glad to help readers further. The Torch Trust can be contacted on 01858 438260 or email them on info@torchtrust.org.

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