

The Participation of the Physically and / or Mentally Disadvantaged in the Music of Christian Worship.

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I had noted that I seem to be the only wheelchair / deaf person, with an assistance dog, that used her musical gifting within Christian Worship Groups. To help and bless others by leading them in the worship of our wonderfully benevolent God; and to initiate a response from the believer or non believer towards the most blessed Trinity.

Rev Canon Arthur J. Dobb (1932 - 2010), states in his publication Dobb, A. J, '*The Biblical Foundations of Church Worship*', (revised edition 2020), page 2, The Guild of Church Musicians Publication S 004) that 'Worship is seen throughout the Bible as the corporate activity by which the People of God respond to the revelation of God'. I believe that by 'People of God', Canon Dobb and The Bible meant everyone even if they are physically or mentally disadvantaged. And in studying for The Archbishops' Certificate in Church Music I have been given the opportunity to research if I am truly a lone disabled church musician, or if there are others like myself, and if not, why not.

Such research took the form of visiting twenty three different churches in twenty three weeks and writing a report on each church. In speaking with parishioners from the research sample of churches before or after their church service, I gleaned the impression of an agreement from many that music in church, as a part of a church service, can raise the spirits of all individuals present, whether they are disabled

people or able bodied, so that the whole body of the church is worshipping as one being. Even the musicians' voluntary being played at the beginning and the end of the church service has its place if the whole congregation, whatever their physical and mental circumstances, remains quiet and listens. Likewise, the first voluntary before the service is intended to quieten the individual spirits of the congregation from the hassle of the human world, creating a sense of calm as a spiritual move is made into a communal worship of God.

Ultimately at the end of the observance, the grace filled congregation listens to the organ, or other musicians, in a manner that might resemble the emergence of a caterpillar (the parishioner) leaving its chrysalis (the church building) in the form of a butterfly as it enters the outside world.

But whereas the above two 'voluntary' performances may be played as a performance, the music during the ceremony cannot be a performance where the musicians are exercising total control. Because here the musicians need to bond with the congregation so that they become a part of the congregations' worship and all in the church are then worshipping as one body with participation from all who are present. A perspective that must continue throughout the worship of a church service, with musicians, congregation and clergy glorifying Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the angels. This act of adoration does not place clergy or musicians above the people of the congregation, but all living components should represent the *whole* body of the particular church in which they are making their music offering or sacrifice. All of this unity must include the physically and mentally disadvantaged as equals in the church. Even though, in the congregation, the participation of mentally

or physically disadvantaged people might not be as thorough or the same as those without mental or physical disadvantages.

I know of a blind married couple who sing the tune to hymns that they do not know the words of, because they cannot read the written words in a hymn book and their church does not provide braille books. The participation of this couple, on their level, is equally as valid as the best able bodied singer (using words from a book), or someone joining in by using sign language, or a mentally disadvantaged individual that partakes in bits of the service due to lack of concentration. All are accepted by God, and all are as God has made them.

Therefore it might be suggested that if there are disabled and mentally disabled people within the laity, the group of church musicians should reflect this, and the music group should be a mixed group of able bodied and disabled people. In the same manner that if a group of people were a mixture of coloured and white faces then it would be reasonable that both colours of faces were represented in the minstrels of that particular place of worship.

So it is very sad that within my research group of churches (recorded in the portfolio) all physically disabled or mentally disadvantaged people seemed to be completely absent from all the church music groups. I suggest that if the church is to worship as one body and emphasise the equalness and worthiness of all believers before God, it is imperative that physically and mentally disabled individuals are encouraged to serve God by joining their church worship group, not just in weekday services (if any) but for Sunday and special services as well; as such a diversity

represents the worldwide church as well as the local church and provides universal, spiritually enriching worship of our fantastic God.

Sadly the root of the physically and mentally disabled not taking part may very well be found in the continued debate between church musicians as to whether their remit should be 'performance' when leading congregational singing. And maybe this is why impaired folks seem not to be indulged in a desire to contribute their musical gifts. As marginalised people seem to see their music as a gift to God, not a performance, and due to the nature of their invalidity many find it impossible to 'perform' anyway.

To give an example. Part of what I do is to play flute for church services for the Blind, at which many who attend are Torch Trust members (Torch Trust provides Christian services for blind and visually impaired people). For a long time it would be me leading the worship as a solo instrumentalist and the congregation (30 - 50 strong for each service) would sing from large print or braille copies of 'Mission Praise' - some muddling more than others. I prayed about how I could form these worship times into an easy and comfortable way of worshipping for all (no performing).

Firstly I felt it right to load the car with any instruments I had for each service. This included guitar, drums, ukulele, spare flute, and before each service I would ask individual folks if they sang or played a musical instrument. Before long I had a totally blind person playing guitar alongside myself playing the flute. And it sort of increased from there as I enlisted a singer and ukulele player, when all are present we make quite a band.

Then I raided the charity shops and accumulated rattles and shakers that one might use for music with a preschool child, and these rattles and shakers are a great hit and are

given out before the service begins. The result is that no one who finds singing difficult feels they are compelled to sing because they are joining in with a shaker.

Just this last weekend a blind couple, where the wife had been in bed for the last ten months, reappeared at the Blackpool service. I asked the wife if she played drums and she told me that she had never played drums but would like to try. So for the service there was the wife (Cathy, blind in a wheelchair) at the front of the service with me and a disabled keyboard player. Everyone agreed afterwards that totally blind and wheelchair Cathy is the best drummer ever, and that she has just found a new job. But I don't think any able bodied church would allow Cathy to play because of what she looks like - how unfair is that!!! Why can't all our mainstream churches meet people at their own level as shown above?

Even more horrific was that the portfolio work showed that disabled people are not participating in mainstream church. When they do come, in general, they seem to be condemned to being kept on their leash by their able bodied carers. Whilst on the odd occasion that a lone disadvantaged person attends mainstream church, they are considered to be 'joining in' if they put their bum on a back row pew, or situate their wheelchair at the back of the church, and keep quiet; which is the expected behaviour from a disadvantaged person in church as the majority of congregation members seem to surmise that all physical and mental disadvantaged people have brain damage and lack cognitive ability.

Such congregation members even ask personal health questions of the disadvantaged first time attendee person (that they would not ask of an outwardly able bodied person). In my humour, I am just waiting for churches to start to produce a health questionnaire which they insist disadvantaged people fill in before they are allowed in a church

building. It is not taken into account that autistic people are very intelligent as are many other groups in the categories that are being addressed as disadvantaged.

Even neuro-divergent people and those who have behaviour that able bodied people find disturbing or frightening must be accepted in the congregation and (if possible) in worship groups. This is a difficult area but if a child suddenly shrieks in the middle of a church service, or shouts, screams and runs around all the way through the service no one minds, and the vicar / minister will just raise his / her voice over the noise. All accept the situation because it is a child; and that child may even be integrated into a worship group where it will be wondered at as the creation of God that it is.

So what is the difference if an adult has behaviour similar to that child, why should the disadvantaged adult be less wanted than the child? Surely all the enforced and expected behaviour of social obedience from the physically and mentally disadvantaged in our churches only creates a situation that puts unnecessary stress on both the disadvantaged and able bodied people in the congregation.

I have experienced such assumptions about my behaviour and mental cognitive state. But by persevering and attempting to educate those that see themselves as 'normal' I have found that I can participate by playing ukulele, descant recorder and flute in Holy Trinity Church, Warrington, Cheshire, with the Cantonese Worship Group, but sadly not the English speaking congregation (The portfolio entry 22/1/23 is of the English part of Holy Trinity Church). As Holy Trinity, Warrington has an English speaking congregation and a Cantonese church sharing the one building. I have also played with the Cantonese modern worship group at Holy Trinity, Warrington, where the worship group leader states that we should just go with the flow in leading worship and feel the beat and atmosphere of the whole church (congregation and musicians) but not do a performance.

Maybe this perspective of 'going with the flow' removes the pressure on the disadvantaged and able bodied musician and instead of worrying about how good we are at our musical craft, we just use our Holy Spirit given talents with total joy lifting music to God, in adoration of Him.

As I am an English only speaker, the Cantonese worship group of The Manchester Church Alliance have found a new dimension of 'disadvantaged' that has nothing to do with physical or mental disability, but in itself is disabling.

It was found that not having everyone engaging in the same language makes people as much 'disadvantaged' as the church tends to see any physically or mentally disabled person. The language barrier was dissolved by patience on both sides and the Cantonese speaking English when needed, and using facial gestures with lots of smiles with huge amounts of love and acceptance being felt all around.

It is glorious. I love the times such as at Christmas 2023, and Easter Day service (2024) when as a British, physically challenged and deaf person, I was enlisted by the Holy Trinity Church, Warrington, Traditional Cantonese Worship Group, to play the flute and descant recorder for soprano parts to some of the Christmas Carols and Easter hymns. In such a fitting time for being a virtuoso my flute, and descant recorder, soared up to heaven over the other instruments and singers in such places as the sixth verse 'O come all ye faithful', where it is proclaimed 'Sing Choirs of Angels, Sing in Exultation' (at Carols by Candlelight). Or in the descant to 'Jesus Christ is Risen Today', 3rd verse (for Easter Day). As we think about the pains that Jesus endured, that He procured our salvation, and is now King above all.

The patience found in the Cantonese Worship Group is a gift of the Holy Spirit and we are all given gifts to equip us for works of service (Ephesians 4:7, 11 - 13). As in verse 11 and 12 this passage says '11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'. And here is an example of Christians serving each other in the Cantonese Worship Group. By using the gift of patience to enable each person in the group to join in and worship God as one body, so building each other up.

Likewise, in mainstream church there is no reason why a physically or mentally disadvantaged person cannot build up others including the building up of the able bodied or 'normal' people in a worship group. In fact it might be considered that the mentally and physically disadvantaged people are made for this role in the church as they are not dashing around doing other things but have time and patience to sit and listen to others. I have known numero diverse people who, at the time, I have felt were talking rubbish to me. Then sitting quietly later in the day I realised that rubbish was not being talked about, but great insight was being spoken.

Going back to our Cantonese worship group, I was not told to go and sit at the back and not join in because of their language difference, just as no one should be pushed to the side in mainstream church just because they are physically or mentally challenged. Such unity is demonstrated when Christians start to bear with each other as in Ephesians 4:2 'Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love'.

In many churches inclusion might just be making reasonable adjustments by providing wheelchair ramps up to the altar section of the church, visual aids for the deaf musicians and audio aids for blind musicians to help our less mobile and sensory friends to participate.

I take on board that not all disabilities are visible, and it was with utter joy that at Saint Stephens in Birmingham, (portfolio entry 28/5/23) right at the end of my experience of gathering examples for the portfolio. I witnessed an unaided gentleman in an electric wheelchair come into this church with his children. The family was late, but no one in the congregation gave a stare and really did not seem to mind, just accepting that sometimes a disabled person is not as quick at getting ready for their day as an able bodied person. A fantastic example of what should be meant by a church being inclusive. The children went straight off to their Sunday School classes, and the gentleman definitely was not resigned to sitting at the back - he was a true part of the congregation and in no way stigmatised or segregated.

In such a case a ramp into church would have helped had it been needed, but it cannot be presumed that if a church supplies a ramp it is a disabled friendly church. As in the above example there was acceptance of the person and his family. Acceptance and love towards any physically or mentally disadvantaged person is as equally important as the provision of a ramp, or any other disability aid.

Maybe, it is because mainstream churches are not always so inclusive that there is a flourishing of specialist church services such as Torch Trust services for blind and visually impaired, and British Sign Language services (BSL) for the deaf.

Liverpool Cathedral in Merseyside, has a Signing Choir with all members taken from the monthly BSL service served by Canon Rev Mike Kirby.

I am a deaf wheelchair person, with a hearing dog and I attend the monthly BSL service at Liverpool Cathedral. I also play music for the Torch Trust type services in Blackpool, Lancashire and Chorley, Lancashire, plus the holiday, away weekend, and Christmas events that are linked to these Torch type services.

At these services I am loved, included and wanted. But in contrast I can attend my local mainstream church where I have been on the church register for 21 years, and they will prefer to use recorded music for their Sunday morning service instead of allowing me to play for them; and be visible at the front of the church. I must sit at the back, and can be made use of to be on the door at the back of the church (possibly so I am not visible).

At the AGM this year I tried to speak and was told to be quiet because they thought I was not on the church Electoral Roll. Those in church leadership were surprised when they checked and found that I had been on the Electoral Role for many years. There is a concrete ramp to the front door, but I do not feel included in church life.

Such people from these mainstream congregations do not seem to realise the spiritual and mental damage their attitudes inflict upon the disadvantaged. For example I know of a non sighted lady who plays the flute beautifully. But has been told so many times that she can't play the flute because of her sight loss, she is now too shy to play publicly, and has not even played flute at home for some considerable time.

It is as if people in general have made this lady feel guilty about her using the musical talent God has given her: An inflicted guilt upon a person just because she has a sensory impairment.

In special times at Easter, Christmas, and an away weekend, visually impaired folk will come from all over England, Scotland and Wales to a church in Chorley, Lancashire which holds monthly Torch type services, because this is where they feel accepted and

included. These folks stay at a nearby hotel that does special rates just for this group of regulars, and use the above church for worship, recreation and food between services.

At such times of recreation one or another visually impaired person will ask me if I have bought my usual car boot full of instruments and they will participate in playing drums, guitar, ukulele, the church piano etc. So fantastic is their Christian music that folks in the building will stop talking and listen.

It is very sad that, in general, the mainstream congregations miss out on these beautiful ad hoc moments.

All the above is said taking into account that although The Bible talks of equality of all people (Galations 3:28), in reality we have to be mindful that we all have different gifts, and are shaped differently by God to fit us into different jobs in His service.

Even with able bodied musicians, if a person cannot concentrate to the necessary level, or play music to the required standard of music mastery, or have the obligatory mental comprehension, they would not be able to play in the worship group. As the music team is dispensing the specialist service of providing music to lead Sunday and weekday church music for worship and meditation.

Therefore, whether the person is able bodied or disadvantaged it cannot be that just anybody can join a music group, as they have to fit their talents into the already established classification.

So what are the hurdles preventing the move forward and incorporating more disadvantaged musicians into church worship groups, so inclusively providing church music to the Glory of God?

Maybe it is because the disabled have become like the blind flute player (mentioned above) and have been degraded for so long that they are now too shy to play in front of a congregation.

The portfolio was produced to address the question as to where our physically and / or mentally disadvantaged are in the participation of our mainstream Church Worship Groups. And to give evidence to demonstrate that all too often a church is more admired for its history than its inclusiveness, and how non-inclusivity may also herald from grade 1 buildings.

It can be noticed that for the first few churches in the portfolio it seems to be nearly all history. Even in old newspaper cuttings (one goes right back to the 1950's) it is just about history, as if the church is not interested in music, choirs or inclusivity, not even knowing any information about the church organ.

Then there is the access issue. As in All Saints Church, Childwell, (portfolio entry 26/2/23) being an excellent example where, as with many churches, nothing can be altered about the structure as the church building is a Grade One building. Very sadly, not all wheelchairs can get through the narrow chancery door which is 25 inches wide, just two inches wider than the author's wheelchair, and is the only level access entry. A door which was used to remind able bodied historical serving clergy that they must 'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter' Matthew 7:13-14 (NIV).

To be very blunt, if a local disabled parishioner cannot physically enter the church they have little chance of enjoying being involved with the church music team or the church family. I don't know what the answer is but somehow physically and mentally disadvantaged people need to be able to enter the building.

So low in priority has the worship of God through music slipped in importance. Yet the Bible says in Psalm 44:8 'In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever'. Suggesting that boasting in God and worshipping Him is far superior to the knowledge of our churches human histories.

Maybe there is just a need to dismantle the past Christian ideas of the place of the physically and / or mentally disadvantaged in the Music of Christian Worship in our mainstream congregations and to start to see the beauty of God in our disabled.

Gods' gift to us of music is a gift bestowed upon humanity, transcending language and physical limitations, and it would be good to see more disadvantaged people playing music in their church worship group. This could start to happen by Christian churches of all denominations along with Faith Schools and Bible Colleges taking positive steps to create a more accessible music environment. Making reasonable adjustments by providing wheelchair ramps up to the altar section of the church, visual aids for the deaf musicians and audio aids for blind musicians.

Without turning our music worship into a freak show, or shouting how wonderful our church is because we are including disabled musicians, because if all are equal it would be a natural state of affairs for all to be using their God given talents in any church ministry - including music.

Although no one other than my local church, and my tutor, has yet seen the portfolio, it is as if The Church of England, Liverpool Diocese, are attempting to rectify the findings of the portfolio in their new realignment of their parish structures, through the

'Fit for Mission' project. This operation will change the way the parish works by making all parishes in the diocese into a parish group of churches instead of individual church entities. The outworking of which will be two church wardens to oversee all the churches in the parish instead of for each church, one PCC for each group of churches etc. The work towards this has begun by each congregation member of each church taking part in the six week 'Shape Course' to decide what our individual God given talents are, not minding whether a person is disabled or able bodied, but all being equal.

The next stage is the attending of the 'Cultivate Course' where each persons' talents will be integrated into the church setting.

My understanding is that churches in the parish will also, eventually, specialise in particular themes. The outworking of this being that one church in the parish might major on homelessness and another on childrens' worship. Although each church will need musicians, maybe some people will need to move their place of worship to use their talents, but each will be useful somewhere in the parish. There is also an encouragement for people to diverse into worshipping groups, such as Mums and Tots groups, or groups for elderly worshippers. And it may be in these groups that mentally and physically disadvantaged people will be welcome to play music in worship groups leading the smaller congregations.

Bibliography

Rev. Canon Dobb, Arthur J. (2020 - revised edition), The Guild of Church Musicians.

Word count 4285

