

"Making All Feel Welcome into the Church"

INTRO: When my wife Nadine and I were expecting our first child, we couldn't wait... the potential, we are both quite academic and musical, with her brains and my looks...!

When our child was born with physical and learning disabilities, our life fell apart; before we found out about the rare syndrome that our child had, we were told he might never walk or talk - NOW when he runs away from us in a shopping centre, swearing loudly over his shoulder (usually when I've got a dog-collar on), we have to remember that this is a clear sign of God's blessing to us!

Hello, I'm ANDREW WHITE - not the famous Rev Andrew White from Belvedere, the "Bishop of Baghdad" - I'm the other one. I am Associate minister at Belvedere Baptist Church engaged in Schools and Youth Ministry. Imagine, being ordained and then finding you weren't even the first Rev Andrew White of Belvedere - well, I'm the other one!

Why am I speaking today? Probably :

1. not because I have a ministry that takes me into primary, secondary and special schools;
 2. not because I work 2 days a week for Bexley supporting pupils who have very particular pastoral needs in order to 'stay within the system';
 3. not because I'm Chaplain to South-East London Army Cadet Force;
 4. nor because I carried the Baton for the Commonwealth Games or nearly cooked for Delia Smith...
- I'm speaking today probably because I'm a dad to 3 wonderful children one of whom is disabled.*

HOW CAN WE BE A MORE ACCESSIBLE CHURCH? We can have ramps, all-access toilets, a loop system, clear-read worship books or data projectors, clear signage,

BUT if ***WE*** don't have accessible hearts, no changes are going to make others feel accepted. We have to be 'accessible for WE are the Church not the buildings. 1 Corinthians 12:27-28 "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues."

STORY: This is an Apocryphal story, but only because it has been retold - it is true. I am pleased it isn't a Church near here, but the story does challenge us all. A teenage lad with Autism and his mum wanted to go to church. He was obsessive and made some strange noises, but liked fairly formal services as the structure and predictability helped him to worship - they chose to visit a fairly high parish church. When they arrived it was okay - a sensitive sides-man asked the lad if he would feel comfortable on one side near the back - the sides-man had noticed that with very young families, if a child got fractious the parents usually felt more at ease to deal with it or slip out if they were not right up the front.

During the service the boy asked his mum lots of questions and did make the odd noise or two, but it went okay. Afterwards, however, a lady asked the mum to consider another church, as she didn't think that their church was best for the boy. It was a long time before they went anywhere; the hurts of the mum and the confusion of the lad had taken root in one conversation. We can all be shocked but its probably true that that idea is in most of our congregations and actually, we all deal with it in ourselves because when we feel we belong then anybody else that is out of the ordinary challenges what we are comfortable with.

In Genesis 1:26-27 we are told "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

Nowhere in the Bible do we see any evidence that those with disabilities are not made in the image of God. We are ALL made in the image of God. Yes, this is now a Fallen World, but those with disabilities are no more 'flawed' than the 'NORMAL' people. My senior minister, Frank Payne, always reminds us, "we all walk with a limp."

When I go into schools I often have visual aids to help - I have a pogo-stick and a set of bagpipes that I can't play - so I thought that you could be your own visual aid today

VISUAL AID ABOUT BEING NORMAL - EVERYONE HANDS-UP

Put your hands down if you are:

Registered Disabled, wear glasses, need a walking stick or a hearing aid

Under 18, retired, or a carer of someone who is elderly or disabled

Non-British National, Black, Asian

Struggled at school with Reading, Writing, Spelling or Numbers, have had difficulties with alcoholism or difficulties in life with money

You're a woman or you own a train-set at home!

The SMALL GROUP left are "NORMAL", but as you are a minority group that obviously doesn't 'fit' the NORM, you're obviously not normal either! All those descriptors are things by which the World says "you aren't fully the person you could be." Are we ever guilty in Church-life of echoing the Worldview? **ALL are made in the image of God.** So the World-view is NOT true! We can all be the person God made us to be, because we are all His precious children and he's our dad! (I'm not

into t-shirts with slogans, but if I had one it would say "You know the Creator God - He's my dad!" How empowering is that, when we are feeling less than the person we were made to be.)

People with individual needs or disabilities do sometimes need additional help and support to begin to feel part of, and then become fully members of, the Church. We need to rethink not just ramps into the building, but whether we need 'ramps' into our regular group that others might join; not just loop systems and good visuals in a Service, but a family love that helps all people engage in worship, prayer, study and fellowship.

Is this all easy? No. We might need a 'heart transplant' to begin to love all of humanity as Father God loves them. I went to a conference recently and heard about a Church in Birmingham; Anthony is a very large aggressive alcoholic, who wants to be part of worship. He is really difficult to deal with, and the regulars were frightened of him. But when the Church met to talk about the problems, they could see God in Anthony and began to talk about how best to help him belong.

This is *not* equality in human terms - all are equally loved by God but each of us have different needs, difficulties or disabilities. Nadine and I love our children equally but we do not treat them the same - Sophie is 8, she plods at things. We call her our 'Ronseal' girl - you get what it says on the tin - Sophie needs encouragement. Timothy is 10, he is academic and likes Mr Bean (don't know where he gets that, probably his mum). Timothy needs freedom. Benjamin is 15 and in some ways lives in Benjamin's own world. But he is really musical and he needs simplicity repetition and patience (luckily, he gets that from his mum too).

As we begin to open up our Church - ourselves - to the fragile, the broken, those who have been rejected by Society, and to the disabled, we might find that we readjust so that our 'special' members are fully part of our fellowships and that God has done a good thing in our lives too.

In Matthew 25:40 we are reminded that the Kingdom of God is where the king will say "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my children, you did it to me". We have a challenge for our fellowships but a Radical Gospel for the World: Counter to the World-view, whoever you are, whatever your life has been like, whatever 'shape' you are in today:

We are all loved, valued and accepted by Father God

Through Jesus Christ, we can all know forgiveness

And by the power of the Holy Spirit, all can know life in all its fullness.

Andrew White - Belvedere Baptist Church