

*Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21<sup>st</sup> century social issues*

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## INVESTING IN THE BENEFITS OF INCLUSION

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Over the summer the media has carried articles about crimes against disabled people. Late on 17 July in Worcester a disabled woman was tipped out of her wheelchair by two men who were drunk. They ran off, leaving their victim on the ground; one man was arrested.

On 30 July two men were jailed for the murder and manslaughter of Steven Hoskin, a man with profound learning disabilities. He was drugged with 70 paracetamol, burned with cigarettes, forced to walk around on a dog lead and then killed. This happened at a 100 ft viaduct in St Austell, Cornwall. It was reported that the evidence in this case suggested that had Mr Hoskin not been a disabled person, his murder would never have taken place.

The Charity SCOPE regarded the case as an extreme case of disablism – abuse or discrimination of disabled people stemming from the belief that they are inferior. The Charity had previously carried out a survey which indicated that 47% of disabled people surveyed had either experienced abuse or witnessed physical abuse of a disabled companion.

A columnist on the BBC *OUCH!* web page, though somewhat sceptical of the term ‘hate-crime’, nevertheless sees the increasing individualisation of society as the reason why people are less likely to intervene when they see a person being picked on or abused. The same author draws attention to the bullying of different groups of disabled people, of which he himself had first-hand experience. He believes it is getting worse.

### **What can churches do?**

The Disability Discrimination Acts of 1995 and 2005 drew our attention to issues of inclusion regarding our buildings and our ‘services.’ UK history is peppered with the pioneering work of Christians in many areas of disability. But it is time to take stock. Are churches places where disabled people can feel welcomed and included?

A number of Christian disability organisations provide a wealth of helpful material to stimulate our theology and our practice. Here are some examples:

*Churches For All* is a consortium of Christian disability organisations helping churches to create and sustain an environment where disabled people can participate fully in church life for the benefit of all. ([www.churchesforall.org.uk](http://www.churchesforall.org.uk))

*Through The Roof* produces helpful *Roofbreaker Guides* to advise churches on welcoming and including people with disabilities. ([www.throughtheroof.org](http://www.throughtheroof.org))

*Prospects*, a Christian charity which supports adults with learning disabilities, provides a range of helpful teaching resources through the *Causeway Prospects* page on their website. ([www.prospects.org.uk](http://www.prospects.org.uk))

*The Torch Trust for The Blind* produces Christian literature for blind and partially sighted people. ([www.torchtrust.org](http://www.torchtrust.org))

If you ask disabled people what they would like, they are sure to tell you that they want to be included – treated just like you and me. They want friends and they want to give.

While the role of an advocate is of great importance in the circumstances of many disabled people, it is vital not to forget the significance of those who relate to disabled people in the capacity of genuine personal friends, without a particular expertise or specific role.

A group of adults with learning difficulties, near to where I live in South Wales, is part of a voluntary group which visits older people and helps with shopping and gardening. Let's not forget that disabled people have gifts too. What avenues of service in our churches could be opened up to those who are disabled? A great example of this was in evidence at this summer's Cheltenham Bible Festival. Each afternoon in the Craft Tent, a team of disabled people (with supporters) taught silk painting to guests at the Festival.

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**Salt and Light Papers** is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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