

## **Don't You See? Visual Impairment and the Church**

by Lynne Ling

Mary, from North Yorkshire, is a regular attender at worship in her local church. She worked for many years as a nursery nurse and enjoyed many kinds of handiwork in her spare time, tapestry, cross stitch, making her own clothes, painting and calligraphy. She led a banner making group, ran a toddler group and led and spoke at church meetings.

In 1985 she became aware that the sight in her left eye was very gradually deteriorating, and in 1998 was diagnosed with age-related macular degeneration (AMD) – a condition in which the central vision becomes progressively blurred, meaning that reading becomes more difficult, colours are less vibrant and it is harder to recognise faces. Peripheral vision is usually unaffected, so sufferers might see the outline of something but not the fine detail.

Mary says: "I coped with this quite well, apart from bright sun; colours changed, especially blue and green. Gardening was awkward, but on the whole things were not too bad." However, Mary suffered a haemorrhage to the other eye resulting in her being registered blind in 2000, at the age of 82. This time she tells me she was: "DEVASTATED! I sat with my hands in my lap. I could still cook and bake and had talking baking scales, and various magnifiers. My husband read to me and we did crosswords together. Since my husband died in 2008 I do find life difficult."

Mary is a founder member of her local Macular Society support group, campaigning and fundraising for research into treatment.

Let's pause here for a moment, and ask how many people do you know who have this condition? And how many members of your church do? It's estimated that 1 in every 10 people over 65 have some degree of AMD – so perhaps there are more people in your neighbourhood and church circle than you realise.

Methodist Women in Britain, Shoreline Conversations and Mike Holroyd of Gaining Vision jointly hosted a 24-hour gathering earlier this year (mid 2016) to explore issues around visual impairment and how the Christian community in its widest sense can show more sensitivity and give practical help to those with visual issues.

We asked Mary what would make most difference – her reply: "Just ask if I'm ok, if I am I'll say so, and if I need help I'll be grateful."

Sue was another attendee, along with her Methodist minister husband David. Sue's sight was damaged as a totally unexpected side effect of routine hip replacement surgery. She suffered blinding headaches, an extreme sensitivity to light or glare and was barely able to see or read printed text on either page or screen. The pressure in her eye was 'sky high' and despite treatment and numerous hospital visits over several months the pressure did not reduce or stabilise. On the day before her 58<sup>th</sup> birthday she found herself as an emergency patient undergoing surgery to insert a minute drainage tube which (happily) successfully stabilised the pressure. This condition is Primary Angle Closure Glaucoma. Sue was also diagnosed with Fuchs' Dystrophy, which means that at some point in the future she will need a cornea transplant.

She says:

This life-changing experience has its problems which I face on a daily basis. My main issues are with bright lights and glare, extreme difficulty reading what the rest of the world considers 'normal' text eg newspapers/magazines/labels, uneven ground and steps. And I would also include heavy geometric/jungle type patterns on fabric and floor/wall coverings and constantly flashing lights.

At the time of her diagnosis, Sue was in training as a local preacher, and despite missing some sessions, she was able to complete her portfolio and become accredited. She says:

As a local preacher, I use a lectern or table at the same level as the congregation - steps to a pulpit or a block to stand on would be too dangerous. My call to preach is bound up

with families and alternative styles - Messy Church, café worship and All Age Worship is my comfort zone and I have managed to continue with these. I'm a perfectionist and my preparation is meticulous. Once done, I need very little in the way of printed notes; just key points and headings in large print on a clipboard plus a clip-on microphone and I'm flying.

Steps and kerbs are a major hazard. I'm amazed at how many different levels there are in some of our chapels, especially around the communion table. One step may not even be noticed by most people, but if it protrudes awkwardly or there are two of different tread together, to me it's like Everest. I have banged shins, stubbed toes, tripped and almost gone flying with these sorts of circumstances. Access steps without handrails (yes, they are still around) are a challenge.

Mary again:

I am a very determined lady, and if I find something difficult at church, they are very willing to help. We have large print hymn books and service books. Not the hard-back heavy service books, but the soft-backed A4 Holy Communion Service. If the hymns are not in the books we have them printed in large print along with any prayers which need a response, that are usually put up on a screen. The steward on duty phones me during the week with the hymn numbers for Sunday as I have my own hymn book. I find and mark the hymns, marking any with a refrain with a red spot.

Each disabled person knows their own needs, and should not be shy to ask for help. Stewards, and other able-bodied members with good eyesight, should be able to see the special needs of any disabled person in their congregation. After all, I find shop assistants excellent at helping people, without being asked.

Local preachers and ministers should be trained to be aware that not everyone in the congregation can see, hear or respond to their visual aids, and should certainly be well trained in how to present pictures on a screen. NOT TO PUT THE PICTURE UP AND SAY NOTHING!

So, what are the guidelines emerging from our event for stewards, preachers, and all of us?

### **Church stewards**

- Give thought to accessibility – lighting which is adequate but without glare, window blinds, access routes not blocked or hazardous, marking of step edges, handrails, raised lettering or braille signs on or beside room doors.
- Speak with every person in your church that you know or think might have difficulties in this area, including those who have stopped coming. Ask what would help most - then address those issues on an individual basis.
- Before and during services, look out for those who might need your help, and offer your assistance sensitively.
- Beware of touching unexpectedly, maybe say: "I'd like to shake hands, is that OK?"
- Have torches or clip-on book lights available.
- Make available large print copies on white or yellow paper (16 point font size or as requested) of orders of service, notice sheets, Bible readings and hymns routinely and without fuss, including sufficient for unexpected visitors.
- If appropriate, email or deliver these ahead of time so that people can prepare for worship.
- Consider making well-presented copies of special services available for all the congregation to take away for further reflection, and as a gift to the housebound who are not otherwise able to take part, including large print versions as required.
- Give thought to how fellowship over coffee after the service can be made as accessible as possible to all.

- Consider accessing training in how to guide a visually impaired person around the building.
- Share these guidelines widely with colleagues in other churches and contexts.

### **Preachers**

- Make your order of service available in plenty of time before the service so that large print copies can be made and email versions distributed.
- Ask stewards whether there are any special needs you should be mindful of.
- Have variety – multi-sensory worship.
- Describe visual elements, eg “imagine a blue vase of daffodils”.
- Use visual aids in the broadest sense, not simply something pulled out of a bag for a children’s address, but something to assist understanding for all.
- Announce clearly when people should stand or sit.
- Be very clear in giving instructions around communion.
- When setting up prayer stations, include large print versions, tactile things, use all five senses.
- Share these guidelines with other preachers, worship leaders and those in training.

### **PowerPoint and Projection<sup>i</sup>**

- Have up to six lines of text with only about five or six words per line.
- Use left justification.
- Text must be large enough to be read by most low vision people in the front of the audience and by people at the back, ideally 48 but no less than 32 point.
- Use mixed upper and lower case letters rather than all capitals.
- Use sans serif font types such as Helvetica, Arial and Verdana.
- Avoid the use of italic font style and try not to use more than one font type per slide.
- Use dark colours for the background and bright colours for the text to avoid glare. A white font on a deep blue background is a good combination.
- Keep animation to a minimum.

### **For theological consideration and further reading:**

Professor John Hull raises and answers questions relating to blindness and the Bible in a number of his many publications. When interviewed by the Church Times in 2013<sup>ii</sup>, he said:

On the whole, the Church doesn’t cope very well with disability. Many Christians still persist with a literal concept of miracles, and the imitation of Christ is sometimes thought to involve healing miracles for disabled people. The true miracle, however, is when disabled people are fully integrated into Church life and accepted exactly as they are. In the English language – and, I believe, in most languages – the word ‘blindness’ is used as a negative metaphor, suggesting insensitivity, ignorance, clumsiness, and lack of discrimination. This negative language is also found in the Bible, and has come into our hymn books and our daily speech.

Hull, John M, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person’s Conversations with the Bible*, SCM Press, 2001

Hull, John M, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*, SPCK, new edition 2016 (this book inspired the film *Notes on Blindness*, 2016, available as DVD)

<http://www.notesonblindness.co.uk>

<http://www.johnmhull.biz>

### **Consult a disability advisor**

Disability advisors employed by your local authority or church district or diocese may be an invaluable source of advice. Maureen Anderson, the Methodist Church disability advisor for Scotland who is herself visually impaired, attended the event. She described her role in advising churches on the practical and physical aspects of good practice in the area of inclusion in worship and in church life in general, donning her hard hat to meet with church property stewards and architects at various stages in the building processes of planning and construction.

'An inclusive environment considers people's diversity and breaks down unnecessary barriers and exclusions in a manner that benefits us all. This is significant because although society and individuals have invested heavily in enabling people to manage their personal circumstances effectively (eg by caring for older people or providing aids and adaptations for disabled people), many people remain unnecessarily 'disabled' by ill-conceived environments. As a result many people cannot take full responsibility for themselves and are prevented from contributing to society.'<sup>iii</sup>

**RNIB** <http://www.rnib.org.uk/>

**Macular Society** <https://www.macularsociety.org/>

**Methodist Women in Britain** <http://mwib.org.uk/>

**Shoreline Conversations** <http://www.shorelineconversations.com/>



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<sup>i</sup> Edited extract from a summary of the main points from WBU PowerPoint Guidelines: Guidelines on how to make the use of PowerPoint and other visual presentations accessible to audience members who have a vision or print impairment, published by the World Blind Union. © Copyright World Blind Union 2007 [http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s31/pub/wbu-visual-presentations-guidelines\\_summary.pdf](http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s31/pub/wbu-visual-presentations-guidelines_summary.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.hymnsampublications.co.uk/emags/CT/7835IJNHT/index.html> p40

<sup>iii</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, *Planning and access for disabled people: a good practice guide*, 2003, © Crown Copyright (available to view online at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/7776/156681.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/7776/156681.pdf))