**“How should the Church of Ireland go forward with including people with special needs in worship? “**

by Elizabeth Fitzgerald

**Abstract**

I spent the majority of my previous career as Paediatric Physiotherapist, working with children and young adults who had physical and/or learning difficulties. I met many people with special needs who lived in my local community, but I met exceptionally few of them in church.

Ritual and worship are core elements of how, in the Church of Ireland, we express our Christian faith. At weekly worship there should be oneness with God and our fellow worshiper, so we pray with each other and for each other. I began to question whether someone with learning difficulties can take an active and meaningful part in worship, considering their possible limitations in skills of literacy, mobility and understanding.

This study begins by examining the perception of special need in the community at large and within the context of church. Chapter 2 draws on a biblical study of disability especially in Leviticus and Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, followed by discussion of some individual cases of disability including Jesus’ healings. In chapter 3, disability is balanced with our creation in the image of God, and how this reflects on difference of ability, physical and intellectual.

The final chapter explores the responses of some modern theologians to the question of special need and church, alongside the responses of a number of people with special needs who I interviewed regarding inclusion in church life. I wanted to reconcile the individual’s needs with the perception of congregation and theologian, and gain insight into how worship could be welcoming and meaningful for people with special needs.

Hence my question, in what ways can liturgy and communal worship be a truly all inclusive experience for those who have learning difficulties and those with whom they worship? It was poignant to listen to the difficulties which arose, and how the individual with special need and/or family reasoned a solution.

The concluding discourse discusses the findings of the interviews with six people and families with disability, and an exploration of observations and suggestions as to how worship could be more integrative for those with special needs.