



THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 affects all churches.

Does this mean my church?

It certainly does! The duties laid upon us by the Government in this Act are being introduced in three stages:

- since December 1996, it has been unlawful to treat disabled people less favourably for a reason related to their disability;
- from October 1999, we have been required to make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people, such as providing extra help or making changes to the way we offer our ministry; and
- from 2004, we will also have to make "reasonable adjustments" to the physical features of our premises to overcome physical barriers to access.

How do we make sure we don't discriminate?

Churches need to consider their approach towards disabled people. A parish church is more likely to comply with the Act if:

- Church members know it is unlawful to discriminate against disabled people;
- The PCC establishes a positive policy of including disabled people in all its activities and making sure that all church members know about it;
- The PCC monitors the policy and makes sure that it is working in practice;
- All clergy, church officers and leaders keep the issue regularly in mind;
- The PCC confers with disabled people and disability organisations.

In all cases, it is essential to make sure that the dignity of a disabled person is respected.

Disabled people are entitled to be asked about how they might be best served and given the opportunity to make the same choices as all of us.

What changes do we need to make?

All churches, large or small, should take the measures listed above. Churches also have a duty to make reasonable changes and provision for disabled people to enable them to access the church's activity. However, the extent to which it is 'reasonable' for a church to undertake actions requiring expenditure depends on its size, resources and its particular circumstances. Unfortunately, the Act is imprecise as to what is 'reasonable', but generally a cathedral or large well-attended church would be required to do more than a small rural church with a handful of worshippers.

Churches have an obligation to plan ahead - it is not sufficient to wait until a disabled person comes to church. Remember that good accessibility benefits everyone and there are many different types of disability - only 5% of disabled people are wheelchair users.

The route churches should take to make sure they comply with the Act is to:

- **do an accessibility audit to identify physical and non-physical barriers to access for disabled people** – you could ask a local disability organisation for assistance.
- **install appropriate equipment and make changes to accommodate different types of disability.** Remember that aids and equipment have to be useable - for instance, if an accessible toilet is used for storage so that a disabled person cannot use it, the church has not fulfilled its obligations. Similarly, the

provision of an induction loop for hearing aid users is not sufficient if it is not checked regularly and kept in working order.

- **provide training to sidesmen relevant to the adjustments made to include disabled people.** It is important that sidesmen and welcomers are generally aware of the needs of people with a variety of disabilities and know how to respond to requests for changes and adaptations.
- **draw the new provisions to the attention of disabled people** - for example, on signs at the church entrance, on external notice boards, in publicity materials and advertisements. Make sure that information and signs are clear, using the pictorial disability symbols.
- **make sure it's easy for disabled people to ask for help if they need it.**
- **regularly review the effectiveness of your disability provision** and make further changes if the review says they are necessary.

It will not be possible to anticipate every barrier which a disabled person may face, but if the church adopts the good practice above, it is likely to have met the legal requirements. Remember that many adjustments are simple and relatively low cost.

Once a church has become aware of the requirements of a particular disabled person who attends or wants to attend, there is then a legal obligation on the church to make a particular adjustment. If the 'reasonable' test of excessive cost makes it difficult to respond positively, the church may still be complying with the letter of the law. However, what sort of a message of rejection is it giving to the disabled person?

What about future requirements in 2004?

Churches should also anticipate the remaining duties in relation to physical features coming into force in 2004 (including making changes which involve physical alterations to the building). Whenever a church is undertaking building or refurbishment works, it is sensible to ensure that the work includes making the premises accessible, even though the law does not always require this.

The DDA is only a small part of the story!

It is people's attitudes which make a real difference - if a church genuinely wants to be inclusive of disabled people it will give thought to finding a way around the difficulties. Churches who see disabled people as important and precious to God will want to go further than the Act requires to enable them to be fully included in all aspects of church life.

How can churches get help?

For further help, including resources and training, contact:

Through the Roof, Global House, Ashley Avenue, Epsom, Surrey, KT18 5AD
Phone 01372 749955 Fax 01372 737040

Try Through the Roof's *Roofbreaker Guides* giving practical advice covering the following topics:

- Including wheelchair users and other people with mobility impairment
- Including people with visual impairment
- Including people with hearing impairment
- Including people with learning disabilities
- Including people with mental illness
- Including people unable to attend church meetings
- Including people with speech difficulty
- Including children with disabilities
- Including people with dyslexia
- Including people with epilepsy
- Guidelines for stewards
- Inclusive language in disability ministry
- Helpful organisations in Christian disability ministry

The Council for the Care of Churches has also produced a substantial and helpful guide entitled *Widening the Eye of the Needle* available from SPCK bookshops or direct from Church House Publishing, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ.

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