



Statement of Principles: Disability

Department for Social Justice

Twenty years ago, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales published a pastoral document, *Valuing Difference*, that invited all Catholics to reflect on the part that people living with disabilities play within our Churches. It also set out a vision to both practically and pastorally include these individuals more fully into our faith spaces. Canon 209 states that among all the Christian faithful, there should be 'true equality regarding dignity and action by which they all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ according to each one's own condition and function.' Therefore, it is our duty, as Catholics, to encourage and nurture the gifts and talents of all those around us. The body of Christ is as diverse as those that play a part in the making of it. This ought to be celebrated.

On the anniversary of this document, the Conference, through the department of Christian Responsibility and Citizenship, have re-evaluated their relationship with people living with disabilities. The dignity of every human life is paramount to the work of the department; working with and for all people. It is with a refreshed interest in this provision that the department have drawn up a statement of principles to encourage effective work alongside people with disabilities. This document serves as a set of principles by which we, as a department, can ensure inclusion in the work that we produce and the research that we do. The ultimate aim is for all people with disabilities to take their rightful place in Catholic life in England and Wales.

1. Valuing every human life

The dignity of every human life is intrinsic to our work and lives as Catholics. It is through God's gift of life in his likeness that we all have an inherent human dignity; value as a child of God. People living with disability are equal contributors to our communities and therefore must be valued as such. In his address to the 2017 Vatican conference, *Catechesis and Persons with Disabilities: A Necessary Engagement in the Daily Pastoral Life of the Church*, Pope Francis said that "there can be no lack in communities of the words and, above all, the gestures to encounter and welcome people with disabilities." The department aims to take this instruction to heart and work.

2. "Working with", not "doing for"

The document *Valuing Difference* praises the shift in national thought away from doing things *for* those living with disability, and instead working with, so that each person can flourish. In this vein, the department aims to draw on the expertise, advice and experience of those living with disabilities themselves, those who are experts in healthcare ethics, and those working pastorally and as advocates for people with disabilities. This group will inform the work of the department, speak into issues and direct the department in the best provision for those living with disabilities.

3. Increasing the scope of work

There is evidence of good pastoral work that is being done at parish and diocesan level. Those living with disabilities are taking part more fully in the catechetical work of the Church. The department takes inspiration from this work and aims to make provision for the disabled more visible at a national level. We take inspiration from the US Catholic Bishops' Conference in their mandate to "each office and secretariat" to address concerns from persons with disabilities. We also aim to serve, as they suggest, as a "resource to both parochial and diocesan bodies" in matters related to disability.¹ The department pledges to ensure that during each aspect of work, the question of provision is raised. If not, the gap in provision will be addressed. This should not only be a matter of good practice, but something that everyone should be concerned with, and aim to carry out.

4. Encouraging a positive public opinion

Christ aligned with those who are different, and as agents of the Catholic Church, we are called to do the same. As a department we engage in a range of advocacy work, in particular, advocating for the dignity of every human life. In this regard, the department will encourage the conference to align itself, where appropriate, with campaigns that advocate the dignity of all humans. An example of this is the work that the conference did to oppose the assisted dying bill in 2014. The conference worked with a range of disability groups to advocate living fully and living well, an argument that was crucial in the winning the case.²

5. Key Questions

As we embark on the task of increased inclusion, we can ask ourselves some key questions as a catalyst. These questions are set out as a guide to engaging as fully as possible.

1. In our endeavors to be a voice for Catholics in our society, do we also ensure that this includes those living with disabilities in all walks of life?
2. Can those living with a disability relate to this provision/advocacy/aspect of work?
3. What practical message are we, in our streams of work, giving to those who have a vocation to be pro-active in Church life?

As a department, we recognize that people with disabilities bring unique gifts to Christian responsibility and citizenship. By celebrating these gifts, we acknowledge that each person, regardless of capacity or ability, is a 'worker in God's vineyard' and a full part of our Catholic community in England and Wales.¹

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues".

¹ <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/upload/Pastoral-Statement-of-U-S-Catholic-Bishops-on-Persons-with-Disabilities.pdf>

² [http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/Featured/Features-2014/April-June-2014/Assisted-Dying-Bill-2014/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.catholicnews.org.uk/Home/Featured/Features-2014/April-June-2014/Assisted-Dying-Bill-2014/(language)/eng-GB)