



The Disability Justice Group

An article written by David Buckingham and Jerry Newson for the Baptist Ministers' Journal – October 2014. David and Jerry are Baptist ministers who have both been significant members of BUild (*the Baptist Union Initiative for people with Learning Disabilities*) and the Disability Justice Group.

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At the Baptist Union Council in November 2010, it was agreed that BUGB would establish three Justice Groups: gender, race and disability (at the time under Faith and Unity). The first two already existed, the latter would be added. Discussions were held over the following year to ensure that a Disability Justice Group could be established in November 2011. Since then members of this group have worked to implement the purposes for which it had been formed. But why was there a need in the first place?

To answer this question, we need to go back nearly 30 years. During that time, work with and on behalf of people with learning disabilities had been undertaken by BUild (Baptist Union Initiative with people with Learning Disabilities), which had been originally established as part of the BU Education Department under the leadership of Bryan George. When this department was closed in 1991, BUild became a network largely independent of the BUGB structure, with its work funded by subscription.

BUild was set up in response to questions from churches, Christian parents and carers, to address the spiritual needs of children with severe learning disabilities—notably ‘How can they learn that Jesus loves them?’. It has continued to promote this purpose by providing pastoral support, preparing appropriate resources, providing training and developing awareness. This has been done in different ways, notably through regional conferences, *BUild News*, relevant publications, by being available for advice and support, and through theological research.

However, BUild’s independence of the BU structure has meant that it has had great difficulty in getting its voice heard. Richard Kidd, already a member of the Faith and Unity Group and the convenor of BUild, together with the rest of the BUild Working Group, felt very strongly that BUild should be there, as a recognised part of the BU structure within a Disability Justice Group. Such a group would also represent those with physical and other disabilities, as well as learning ones. Such a group would affect the attitudes to Baptist Assemblies and publications among other things. Richard prepared a discussion document to this effect in November 2008. This document was discussed fully by both the BUild Working Group and the Faith and Unity Department, under the leadership of Graham Sparkes.

The main arguments for the setting up of DJG were as follows.

1. As BUGB considers itself an inclusive community, by increasing our ability to respond to issues of disability and by deepening our relationships with people for whom disability is a significant feature of their lives, we should ensure that we are enriched by the contributions which people with disability can and already do make to our life as a gospel people. They are companions with whom we share the work of the gospel.
2. BUGB and its churches should fulfil particular responsibilities to ensure they comply fully with the law. The Baptist Union Corporation has helped churches do this through its paper on the Disability Discrimination Act (1996). However, they should also enable active participation in those campaigning and advocacy programmes seeking to reverse the radical imbalance which has long remained the status quo in our society and in many of our church communities.

Longer term goals

With regards to Disability Justice what should BUGB have in place in the longer term?

* A structure to allow BUGB to be proactive in the advocacy of justice for all people with disabilities. This would affect the publicity and publications structures of the Union and provide a framework through which, from the earliest stages of planning, the voices of people with disabilities can be heard in the shaping and the organisation of events such as Association and National Assemblies. This is the only way in which the profile of people with disabilities, not as a problem but as a resource for the life of the Union and its churches, will achieve the status (normal standing orders) that it deserves.

* A structure to monitor changes in the legal responsibilities of churches and ministers. This would ensure that all such matters are picked up appropriately within the BU.

* A structure to identify and encourage creative work on different aspects of disability. Aspects needing regular attention would include:

Learning disabilities: this would continue to include many of the concerns already undertaken by BUild. Areas not yet covered but increasingly significant include the many varieties of dyslexia and the difficulties experienced by those with less understood and less affirmed preferred learning styles. Increasingly in recent years, questions are being asked about how those with Autism and Asperger's can be enabled to be fully included within the life of our churches.

Physical and sensory disabilities: this would include issues relating to wheelchair users, people with hearing impairments, people with visual impairments, and people with other specific physical impairments.

Mental health issues: quite a number of our churches are doing useful work, while others may be struggling and needing support.

* A structure to identify the need for and the production of appropriate resources to enable each of the above groups to function. This has been a major part of BUild's work and needs to continue. Explanatory literature with links to web-based information also needs gathering for people with various physical impairments, as well as resources to help churches respond to people with particular needs in their own communities. Much of this is a matter of sharing good practice.

Despite the enthusiasm, progress on Disability Justice moved fairly slowly! Eventually, following conversations between Faith and Unity and representatives of BUild, who offered experience of working with people with learning disabilities, many of whom also have physical disabilities, Graham Sparkes produced a document on Equality and Diversity in September 2010. This set down the then current arrangements and the proposal for a new way forward, with the formation of three Justice Groups which would stand Baptists in good stead for future times. An appendix to the document included the proposed terms of reference for each group.

Following affirmation from the BU Council, each group was launched, with Gender and Racial Justice Groups using the existing resources and representatives. The Disability Justice Group started from scratch by drawing some representation from BUild with others approached to join because of their known experience, passion and interest in this area. From the outset it was recognised that the DJG would be worse off if it did not have the benefit of representation, contact and dialogue with people with disabilities in the wider Baptist family. Following discussion it was agreed that this area was vital to us all and that in due course we would seek to form, from across the wider Baptist family, a consultative network of people with personal and professional experience of working with people with disabilities.

The purpose of the DJG is as follows.

* To explore and reflect theologically on issues within and beyond BUGB from the perspective of disability justice.

* To develop an ongoing programme of work that enables a deeper engagement by BUGB with disability justice.

* To monitor and challenge as necessary the life and structures of BUGB to ensure that at all levels disability

justice is fully addressed, that instances of injustice receive appropriate attention, and that inclusive ways of living and being become the norm.

* To encourage and support churches, associations and colleges in developing, promoting and monitoring policies and practices that reflect equality for those with disabilities.

* To work with others (*eg* the Ministry Department and the Colleges) to ensure that all people are helped to discern and respond to a call to ministry, and to access appropriate training.

* To work with others in developing competencies for all ministers relating to disability justice.

* To work with BUild in developing appropriate responses to the needs of those with learning disabilities.

* To promote with others the aims and objectives in respect of disability justice.

* To maintain links and involvement with wider Baptist and ecumenical bodies for the purpose of shared understanding and collaborative work on disability justice.

From that initial meeting, we have endeavoured to produce a work programme for the coming years, based on this statement of purpose. Potential areas of work had previously emerged during initial discussions around the creation of the DJG:

Bibliography: DJG Bibliography: to include appropriate books, resources, organisations *etc* (suggestions would be welcome).

Data: How do we know how many of our Baptist family are disabled? Where are they? Who are they? How well are they served with resources, access *etc*? A discussion took place with regards to data from the BU Annual Returns and what if any questions are asked with regards to disability. (A questionnaire on disability was sent out to all churches with the 2013 BU census; the results are being examined.)

Colleges: exploration with colleges to ascertain the level and amount of input on disability issues in ministerial formation.

Baptist Union: BU publications should have accessible versions such as was seen in Five Core Values and Covenant 2000. Consultation needs to be automatic between the DJG and the BU especially with regards to future publications and BU assemblies.

Regional Associations: to be encouraged to appoint a Disability Champion from among their executive, to promote DJG guidance, monitor regional activities and ensure Associations are aware of the needs of those with disabilities and what help is available to them through the DJG.

Website: it was felt important that we create our own DJG section on the BU website.

What can you do to help us in our work? We are hoping to put together a list of people who would be willing to act as consultants, Baptists who have experience of disability issues, whether personally or professionally—but not to attend meetings you will be pleased to hear! If you know of anyone who might welcome this opportunity for service in this way, do let us know, but do ask them first!

... and do pray for the members of the Disability Justice Group, that we may know God's wisdom as we seek to explore ways of pursuing our purpose.

And so the story continues...

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