



# Learning Disability



A guide for ministers and leaders

People with learning disability can bring much blessing and joy to the Church family if they are recognised as individuals with something to contribute to the life and witness of the Church and loved in Jesus' name.

With a little thought and consideration, the local church can make a meaningful difference in the lives of people with learning disabilities and their families.

## Learning Disability – did you know?

- It is estimated that about 2% of the population (33000 people) in Northern Ireland have a learning disability
- Around 26000 people are registered on the Republic of Ireland's National Intellectual Disability Database (0.65% of the population)
- Most people with learning disabilities will always require supervision by other adults - at home, in school or the workplace - the amount of supervision depends upon the severity of their disability
- Learning disability affects people's lives in a whole variety of ways - difficulty in communicating or socialising, understanding their emotions or controlling their behaviour, handling money, using public transport, shopping, cooking, personal hygiene, or using recreation & leisure activities
- People with learning disabilities quite often, although not always, also have conditions such as epilepsy, Down's syndrome, and autism – to name but a few

## Children

The vast majority of children with learning disabilities live at home as part of a family. Most attend schools specifically designed to cater for their educational needs; 'special' schools - 47 in NI and 77 in RoI - while others are placed in special 'units' (NI) or 'classes' (RoI) within mainstream schools.

'Special' schools provide education for students up to the age of 18 (RoI); 16 (Moderate Learning Difficulty (MLD) schools, NI); and 19 (Severe Learning Difficulty (SLD) schools, NI).

## Adults

A significant number of adults with learning disabilities also live at home with their families. A small number of these adults have regular jobs, although many are employed on a part-time basis or on a work experience or sheltered employment programme.

For those unable to work, however, the choices are very limited - either spending their time at home each day or availing of various day care services provided by Health & Social Services Trusts (NI) or Health Boards (RoI), although attendance may be less than daily depending on available resources.

And what of those who do not live at home with their families? Some still live in long-term institutions, although the trend is now towards residential care homes or supported housing schemes wherever possible.

## Presbyterian Church in Ireland - did you know?

PCI's Board of Social Witness is committed to encouraging inclusiveness within the whole church and helping ministers and leaders to understand and provide support for people with learning disabilities and their families.

It seeks to fulfill these aims through the work of its Committee on Learning Disability. Many of the Committee's members have personal experience of living with learning disability in their own family situations.

In April 2002, a new supported housing project for adults with learning disabilities was opened at Willow Brook in Coleraine. Accommodation and personal support is provided within a Christian environment for nine men and women living in two shared houses and three single-person homes.

The Board also has an increasing interest in Aaron House, Dundonald, which has provided residential care for adults with profound learning disabilities over many years through the Currie Community.

As part of a series of booklets on challenging issues facing Christians today, the Board has published a Bible study guide entitled "Disability". It is available from the Board's office and is suitable for use in midweeks, home groups, etc. A video/DVD on disability entitled "May I Come In" is also available.

## A recent survey of Presbyterian congregations revealed that:

- On average, for every congregation in PCI there are at least two people with learning disabilities.
- 64% attend worship regularly
- Almost 50% participate in a variety of organisations

This is really encouraging. But what about the 36% who are unable to attend worship - or the 50% who cannot participate in organisations?

- What kind of interest is taken in such people?
- What kind of support is offered to their families?

## Here are a few things to ponder:

- Christians have a particular responsibility towards those who are most vulnerable in society.
- All the members of the family are affected by the disabilities, not just the individual person.
- Many people with disabilities and their families go through life excluded from so many experiences and opportunities that others take for granted.

## How may the Board of Social Witness assist you?

- Are you struggling to respond to or support parents and families who have come to you seeking help?
- Have you a parent who would love to speak with someone who has walked this road before them?
- Would your Kirk Session like help with these issues?

As a small step to providing help and support to families or ministers and leaders supporting someone with a learning disability, the BSW staff would be glad to make arrangements with appropriate people to chat informally and confidentially with anyone who would find it helpful to do so.

Details of suitable resource materials from Christian organisations are also available from the BSW office, Church House, Belfast BT1 6DW.  
Tel: (028) 9041 7234. Email: [bsw@presbyterianireland.org](mailto:bsw@presbyterianireland.org)