

'I just didn't fit into the way that they did church': Barriers to Access and Participation for Disabled People in UK Churches (Summary)

By Naomi Lawson Jacobs (2025)

Overview

Disabled people have the right to take part in their religious communities, just like everyone else. In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 says that churches must make **reasonable adjustments** for disabled people and must **not discriminate** against them. But how well do churches live up to these standards? How easy is it for disabled people to take part in their churches?

This study asked 30 disabled Christians about their experiences in UK churches. Some shared positive stories. But many talked about barriers that kept them from playing a full part in church life. It could be difficult for them to get into church buildings, take part in worship, and join in with church social life. Many did not find it easy to belong in church communities.

Some of their churches may have been breaking the law when buildings were not accessible, or when they did not make changes to include disabled people.

Some disabled people's legal rights to access churches were met. When there weren't so many barriers, they felt like they were truly welcomed and could belong.

The Equality Act can help church communities to understand their legal responsibilities and make access easier for disabled people who want to play a full part in churches.

About the Study

The study aimed to be accessible, so that disabled Christians could take part.

Naomi spoke to:

- 30 disabled people
- From Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, evangelical and charismatic churches in the UK.

Participants were disabled people with:

- sensory impairments
- mobility difficulties
- chronic illnesses
- mental and emotional distress
- and neurodivergent people.

People chose to take part in:

- one-to-one interviews
- small group discussions
- text interviews
- or slower discussions by email.

An advisory group of disabled Christians helped guide the research. At the end, the researcher wrote a book with one of the participants, to share the findings with disabled

Christians and their churches.

What The Study Found: Barriers in Churches

Physical barriers in church buildings

Church buildings were often not designed for disabled people. Some wheelchair users were placed in separate seating areas where they couldn't see properly. Some people had to leave the main worship area because it was too loud, bright or crowded for them.

Maria regularly sat in the church kitchen because the service was overwhelming for her.

Many people had to keep asking for help to get into or around church, because their churches were not accessible. When they asked for improvements to access, some people were treated badly or ignored. Churches did not always make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people could take part more easily.

Under the Equality Act 2010, this could be called **discrimination** and **harassment**.

Other disabled people felt more welcome because churches made **reasonable adjustments** to physical access, like installing ramps or accessible seating.

Zoe said it was powerful when she could take part in church equally while using her wheelchair, without having to sit at the back.

She called it "the gospel."

Worship

There were **cultural barriers** in some churches.

Some disabled people felt they were expected to stand and kneel in worship like other people. They felt shame or anxiety when they could not do this.

Church worship was often based around seeing or hearing. This excluded blind and deaf people. Victor and Hazel, who are blind, could not see the song words shown on the screens. Andrew, who is Deaf, said, "I just didn't fit into the way that they did church."

Under the Equality Act 2010, these situations could be called **failures to make reasonable adjustments**.

Church social life

In some churches, people were expected to socialise or take part in ways that were not accessible to them.

Coffee time after church caused anxiety for some neurodivergent people. People with chronic illnesses found it hard to stay involved in church when they couldn't attend small groups or activities.

Stephen has chronic fatigue syndrome. He felt he could easily “fall through cracks” when he was not well enough to go to church regularly.

Anthony is autistic. He felt that some churches only value people who join in with social activities. He wanted to belong to church differently from the typical ways.

In some churches, disabled people were expected to attend regularly. This could be seen as **discrimination** against those who were too unwell to attend every week.

What this means for disabled Christians

In this study, church buildings, worship and social life were all designed for an **ideal worshipper** – a non-disabled person. Disabled worshippers didn’t fit. They were seen as the problem. But the barriers were the real problem.

Many churches didn’t see access as a matter of justice. They thought disabled people needed help and care, not rights.

Some of these disabled people found that struggling to take part in church, week after week, was too difficult. They left their churches. Others stayed to fight for change for all disabled people, even when this was stressful or harmful for them.

Their experiences show how churches can fail disabled people. They also show how churches can change to become more genuinely inclusive.

Access and theology

Access is spiritual, not just practical. Access shows us who is valued in churches.

A diverse church is a church that reflects God’s creation. When churches exclude disabled people, they are not seeing us as part of the Body of Christ.

When barriers keep us out, the message is clear: we’re not *really* welcome.

But when disabled people can access our churches and take part equally, we feel like we belong in church communities.

The law and churches

Under the Equality Act 2010, churches must not discriminate against disabled people. They must make reasonable adjustments. However, many disabled people in this study experienced discrimination or failures to make reasonable adjustments. Their churches may have been failing in their legal duties to disabled people.

The Equality Act can help churches understand the barriers that keep disabled people from belonging in churches. The law is not perfect, but following disability law is a step towards justice for disabled people in churches.

Bringing disability studies and theology together

Disability studies hasn't always understood faith communities very well. There hasn't been much research about religions in disability studies. At the same time, some theologians have ignored ideas from disability studies, like ableism and disability rights.

This research uses ideas from both disability studies and theology. Theories from disability studies can help us understand the barriers and ableism that disabled Christians are dealing with, in some churches. Theology can help us see why access is a spiritual issue, not just a practical one. We need both to create real change.

Final thought: What needs to happen

The Equality Act can help churches understand their responsibilities to disabled people. Churches may need to make changes to their buildings, worship, and social life. This should involve **listening to** disabled people and **working with them** to remove barriers.

This study shows the barriers disabled people face in churches, but it also shows what is possible. Churches can become truly inclusive communities where disabled people are not just accommodated, but celebrated.

The researcher, Naomi, is a disabled person of faith. The original article sometimes talks about disabled people as 'we' and sometimes as 'they', to show that disabled people don't all have the same experiences. But many of the people in this study had ableism in common.

Thank you to the participants for sharing their stories and for their advocacy for disabled people in churches. Thank you to the St Luke's College Foundation and Funds for Women Graduates for funding this research.

Glossary

Body of Christ: This is an idea that theologians use to talk about the church. It comes from the Bible. All Christians are members of the Body of Christ.

Equality Act 2010: A law that gives some rights to disabled people in the UK. It says that institutions (like shops, restaurants and churches) should not discriminate against disabled people.

Reasonable adjustments: The Equality Act says that adjustments should be made to buildings, policies or practices that are not accessible to disabled people, to make them easier to access.