

IF THE HOOD FITS WEAR IT! Dave Wiles

I want to share a brief personal response to the ridiculous idea put forward on the BBC News on 16th May, on the basis that I have been getting increasingly concerned about the way that young people (especially those who have got into trouble) are being portrayed, labelled and treated in our society.

We routinely display disdain and dislike of teenagers in press stories, for example, 'Young People Now' conducted some research which found that in a given period across a wide range of media reporting 71% gave a negative view of young people. I am fearful that we are entering a period of irrational knee-jerk actions against young people based upon biased and misleading propaganda. Another recent example of this is the banning of hoodies and baseball caps in the Bluewater Shopping Centre which the Children's Society has called a 'blatant discrimination based on stereotypes and prejudices'.

So what about the notion of a uniform for young offenders to wear when they are involved in community service? I think this is demeaning, humiliating and offensive and possibly more importantly it will not work in terms of doing anything constructive about offending. It reduces human relations to the kind of humiliating tactics used by Victorian educationalists who inflicted dunce caps on some youngsters.

If a 'uniform for young offenders' ever becomes a reality I promise to wear the same uniform throughout my work as CEO of Frontier Youth Trust (obviously hoping very much that it becomes a fashion statement!!!). I will do this as an act of protest against a government that has lost touch with the notion that young people's behaviour is more complex than the actions of 'bad' individuals who are to be castigated for their 'bad choices' and which seems intent on responding to populist media fear factories by endorsing inhumane ideas and actions.

This government's responsibility under Article 37a of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that, 'No child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.'

HAVE YOUR SAY

See for yourself the story from BBC News:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4550755.stm

Published: 2005/05/16 13:31:27 GMT.

If you have something to say about this story

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NETWORK OF URBAN EVANGELICALS 2005

The annual gathering of agencies, representatives making up the Network is to be held at Bethnal Green Mission Church from 11am on October 12th. The major theme to be explored this year is

'Prophetic Evangelism in the context of Urban Mission.'

Contact:

Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission

Disability and Urban Mission by James Ashdown

It is curious that disability and urban mission have seldom been discussed together. I am unaware of any published writing on the subject and yet it is well known that disability is a significant cause of poverty, furthermore any serious acquaintance with census figures for urban areas will reveal that long-term and disabling illness is more prevalent in deprived urban areas than elsewhere. But perhaps it is not so surprising for in my experience if there is one thing that nearly always goes hand-in-hand with disability, it is invisibility.

Disability keeps people shut behind closed doors and unseen. Nonetheless urban churches, as opposed to the narratives of urban mission, have nearly always, in my experience, been well populated with disabled people — whether that be people with learning difficulties clattering joyfully to the front of the church every Sunday, friends struggling with the mental health system, mothers in wheelchairs or my own long-standing struggle with fibromyalgia.

Where disability has been present in urban mission it is, perhaps, in the form of the charitable model. Disabled people are there to be looked after and cared for, to be praised for their noble suffering but rarely brought into centre stage as leaders and initiators. Closely allied to this charitable model has been the medical model where people have been defined by doctors in terms of their medical condition and expected to do everything they can to get cured. A more disturbing bringing together of these charitable and medical models has been what can be described as the healing model where disabled people are there to be healed by 'spirit filled' healers. These models have been challenged since the early Eighties by what is known as the social model, where disability is not located in the individual but is seen as being created by a society which disables people with impairments by its lack of inclusiveness. This political movement has had a significant impact and has recently brought into being the Disability Discrimination Act which is forcing disability onto the church's agenda by raising the uncomfortable spectre of churches being sued by individuals who are not provided with access to church buildings and activities.

More encouraging are recent indications that Christians are beginning to seriously engage with the issue of disability. I would like to share some of these with you with the hope of stimulating a creative dialogue between urban mission and the theology of disability.

A useful and accessible contribution to the theology of disability is 'Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability' by Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris (SPCK 2002). This book is a helpful introduction to disability issues and provides practical ideas for how churches can become more inclusive but

the heart of it is a substantial reflection on the theological issues which disability raises — looking at issues such as what is it mean for disabled people to be made in the image of God, the Bible and disability and what does healing mean for disabled people. All in all a very welcome book — accessible but profound and rooted in personal experience of being disabled.

Another book also written by disabled people and equally welcome is 'Interpreting Disability a Church of All and for All' by Arne Fritzon and Samuel Kabue (WCC Publications 2004). This includes a useful hermeneutical reflection on Disability by Arne Fritzon rooted in his experience as a Swedish pastor with cerebral palsy and Samuel Kabue's different but parallel experience as a Kenyan person who is blind.

The book also includes the World Council of Churches recent statement on disability 'A Church of All and for All: an interim statement'. Together these two books make a very useful introduction to disability issues and their relationship to the church and theology.

There is also a growing number of useful resources available on the net, for example:

'A Spirituality of Disability: The Christian Heritage as both Problem and Potential' by John M Hull Studies in Christian Ethics, vol.16 no. 2, 2003, pp. 21-35 (<http://www.johnmhull.biz>)

A very penetrating theological reflection 'Inclusion in Church Communities' by Mel Dugosh, Parent, Pipe Creek, Texas (<http://www.tsbvi.edu/Outreach/seehear/fal197/church.htm>) A moving personal story of struggle by the parent of a disabled child.

Vatican document: committee for the jubilee day of the community with persons with disabilities — The person with disabilities: subject — receiver of evangelisation and catechesis (http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/jub_disabled_20001203_sc_heda5_en.htm)

Also well worth exploring is the 'Through the Roof' web site, an evangelical organisation who seem comparatively well resourced, they have lots of very practical resources on, for instance, the Disability Discrimination Act, including disabled children and creating an inclusive church (<http://www.throughtheroof.org/>)

More broadly based theologically and less well resourced is 'ChurchAction on Disability' (CHAD) (<http://www.chaduk.org/home.asp>)

I am in the process of producing some resources on disability and inclusion for Barnardos CANDL project and would be very interested to enter into dialogue with anyone interested in the issue of disability and urban mission — do get in touch!