

St Mary's Church, Boston Spa



Report from the October 2024 survey
of people's lived experience of accessibility and barriers to
participation at St Mary's, Boston Spa

The purpose of this survey was

- to identify barriers to participation in the worship, fellowship and ministry of our church community
- to listen and learn how people's accessibility needs have not been met by us
- to inform an accessibility action plan

27 responses were received: 23 paper returns, 4 online returns

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Question 1: How are you connected to St Mary's Church, Boston Spa?

- I attend regularly on a Sunday 19
- I attend occasionally on a Sunday 2
- I attend Café Church on Saturday 12
- I attend worship during the week 6
- I attend a community group that meets in the building 5
- I watch live streams from home 4

Other (please tell us about any other ways you attend or engage with the church)

- Grew up in St Mary's, then Adult membership and volunteer
- "You've Got This" (midweek support group)
- Help in the churchyard
- Member of the choir (Thursday rehearsals, Sunday services)
- Member of the VCC
- Harmony (monthly deaf and hearing worshipping community)
- Sacristan
- Coffee rota
- Read the lesson / lead intercessions
- sidesperson
- St Mary's Friends of Music
- Baptism team
- Magazine distributor
- Mothers' Union
- Eucharistic Minister
- Attend various events
- Do small jobs around church as required within my age limitations

Question 2: Are you disabled or a carer or supporter of a disabled person?

- I am disabled myself 6
- I don't think of myself as disabled but find some things difficult 13
- I am a carer/supporter of a disabled person 5
- None of the above 5

Question 3: Can you attend in person?

If you come, can you attend alone or do you need support for this? If you are a carer, can the person you care for attend with your support?

- I can attend alone 27
- I need a carer / supporter / helper to attend 0
- I cannot attend the building 0
- The person I care for / support comes to church with me 3
- The person I care for / support cannot come to church with me 1

1st Narrative (Q1-3) – the Reverend Nick Morgan

Around two thirds of respondents are drawn from Sunday congregations, but many groups within the church community (including our new worshipping communities) and users of the St Mary's Room are represented. The majority are church "activists" and volunteers. This is evidenced by the extensive list of ways in which respondents say they engage with the life of the church.

All respondents can currently attend the building independently themselves. This is unsurprising since the majority responded on the paper forms given out at church (and available in the building) but even the four online respondents also reported independent access of the building.

Around half of respondents find some things difficult and around a fifth of respondents identify as disabled themselves.

Carers attend with some people but in one case, a carer reported not being able to attend because the environment is inappropriate for the person they care for.

Question 4 - Which of the following best describes your experience:

- Mobility issues – including wheelchair user 4
- Blind or vision impaired 2
- Deaf or hearing impaired 10
- Mental illness – depression , anxiety etc. 6
- Neurodivergence – Autism, Dyslexia, ADHD, Dyspraxia etc 4
- Learning / intellectual disability 0
- Medical – diabetes, epilepsy, heart conditions, breathing difficulties etc 6
- Dementia 2
- Pain – arthritis, muscle, joint and back conditions 11
- Fatigue and energy limitations – Chronic fatigue Syndrome etc 4
- I am not disabled and am a carer / supporter of a disabled person 1

Other please briefly describe things that do not fit into the categories above.

- Often have urgent toilet need.
- driving concerns
- Balance is harder when older
- Balance difficulties
- I tend to be clumsy and there are a lot of things to trip over in church
- I am beginning to find big groups daunting, so 8am Communion and Wednesday's service are more comfortable for me. I feel that I am dropping out of our church community.



Question 5: Do you think people at church are aware of what you are experiencing?

- Yes – my disability is visible and everyone knows about it **1**
- Yes – I am open about my disability **9**
- Yes – a few people know but not everyone **7**
- No – I've not thought to tell anyone but wouldn't mind if people knew **2**
- No – I don't want anyone to know **1**
- No – I think my problems are small compared to what others live with **8**
- I am a carer / supporter but don't really talk about it **1**
- I am a carer / supporter and most people know about it **1**

Please tell us more if you would like to.

- I accept I am growing old and problems will occur – but I can cope!
- I have severe depression & autism and my son has autism & ADHD
- Sometimes I feel people do not appreciate how hard it is when you have mobility problems
- My involvement and volunteering has substantially reduced since my diagnosis of dementia

Question 6: Do you think St Mary's Church understands and attempts to meet the needs of disabled people?

- Yes – most of the time **11**
- Yes – some of the time **7**
- No – there is provision but it is inadequate **3**
- No – there is no understanding or provision **1**

2nd Narrative (Q3-6) - The Reverend Nick Morgan

Pain (11) and deafness / hearing impairment (10) were the commonest response. Issues which have a bearing on a person's physical ability to access worship, activities, ministry, and move around the building etc. are very common among respondents (wheelchair use, mobility, medical conditions, fatigue, balance).

A significant percentage of respondents reported neurodivergence, mental health conditions and dementia. This indicates some training may be beneficial to make our church community more neurodivergent-friendly, dementia-friendly, and perhaps to undergo some mental health first aid training alongside general disability awareness training for welcomers.

Only 10 respondents indicated that their disability is either clearly visible or widely known about. This is only around a third of respondents. This reminds us that not all disabilities are visible. 8 respondents said they thought their problems are small compared to what others live with. While this may be true, it is possible that the needs of those who prefer to downplay their impairments are being overlooked because they don't want a fuss. We should strive to meet needs in a discreet way, anticipating needs where possible and creating a culture where people feel able to make their needs known without fear of being made a spectacle of in how we respond.

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about how St Mary's seeks to meet their needs at present, with only one respondent who felt nothing at all is currently being done. Despite this generally positive impression of most of the respondents, from the responses to other questions (see next section) I believe that the third option ("there is provision but it is inadequate") is probably nearest the truth when it comes to how we are actually meeting accessibility needs at present.

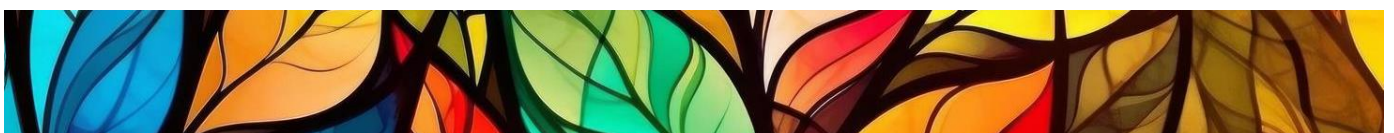


Question 7: What difficulties do you encounter?

This could be getting in, accessing facilities (such as toilets), the comfort of pews or chairs, lighting, seeing and hearing, using hymn and service books, using a screen on which material is projected or displayed, access to and presentation of live streams, or anything else that is difficult for you when you attend or participate in services or events.

- Finding the light switches. An automatic light at the entrance would be useful when the main church lights are not switched on.
- Emergency exists difficult as up or down stairs, stone floors uneven and trip hazard (MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS)
- toilet doors narrow for wheelchair access.
- Accessing the disabled toilet MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS
- invasive questions from some of the other parishioners about my disability.
- Toilets are small and not suited to older and disabled people. MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS.
- People asking the person I care for personal and rude questions about their disability. Very entitled! Not appropriate. They won't come now. Probably think they are showing sympathy when they make these comments and questions but it's just none of their business.
- Loo is not accessible. Too small. Too hard to get to. MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS. Limited options of where to put a wheelchair in the audience. Narrow gaps to fit a mobility scooter or wheelchair past.
- Stepping up and down steps. Door / step into choir vestry is difficult for able people and dangerous.
- Ramp not wide enough for wheelchair users.
- I can no longer use the internet efficiently.
- Getting hold of information can be difficult
- You have been helpful in terms of meeting needs and feeling welcoming. *cont...*

- External exit from choir vestry urgently needs better handrails and lighting.
- I experienced problems with inadequate lighting, recognizing different floor levels, and the use of projected material which uses words.
- If lighting is poor, I have to be careful with steps.
- In relation to hearing, the audio system is good but people speak too fast so the echo in the building distorts the sounds. **MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS.**
- I appreciate attempts to meet my needs (and those of other elderly people) and help is offered and appreciated when I need it.
- Unable to see the screen when used or hear the service properly if users don't adjust the microphone when they use it to read the Bible, notices or prayers. **SEVERAL RESPONDENTS MENTION.** One mentioned it is especially the case with soft spoken people and a lot of female voices.
- The uneven floors are a nightmare! Only a matter of time before someone (me?) falls on them.
- Pipes in the Nave are a hazard.
- Steps and edges in Chancel can be awkward as you get older.
- Vestry toilet needs to be higher
- The plastic chairs can be uncomfortable. I need a cushion for longer than half an hour – pews are OK for an hour.
- I find reading small print difficult, but our hymn books and orders of service booklets are fine.



Question 8: What could help you overcome some of these difficulties?

Tell us about things we could do that would make your experience at services and events easier.

- Remove pews and level the floor with ramps to front sanctuary area; remove old pipes and trip hazards.
- Accessible toilets, wider education about disabilities and communication.
- More level access to more of the building. More options for where to park a wheelchair in the church itself. Loos you can get into with a wheelchair. Think about how much space you need between tables to wheel past in the café bit.
- I often would like to attend services within the benefice but can no longer get to any of the churches other than St Mary's.
- Clearly mark the floor levels, particularly the step outside the vestry near the toilet. **MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS.**
- Some large print service sheets, large print books
- Soft furnishings in St Mary's Room to deaden the echo as it becomes difficult to listen to what people are saying when it is crowded
- People are already kind and offer to help when the need arises.
- When the projector and screen are in use, there are times when the text on the screen is difficult to read such as the colour yellow on a white screen. Sometimes the print is too small or cannot be read when we are standing in pews towards the back and so cannot see the bottom part of the screen.
- Nothing can really be done about the screen. A gentle reminder to users of the lectern to adjust the microphone when they use it.
- Sound: at the lectern people sometimes do not have the mic sufficiently close to their mouth. Similarly with the hand held mics. **MENTIONED BY SEVERAL RESPONDENTS.**

cont...

- Access to the front door: the automatic door opening system can be erratic and the push button must be difficult for non-assisted wheelchair users.
- Could do with Live Transcribe or a BSL interpreter (for Harmony and other church services)
- Wheelchair access within the church is challenging! E.g. accessing the North Aisle overall, and the South Aisle (with heating pipes and pillars narrowing the passage). Wheelchair access to the Chancel via the current ramp from the North Aisle is a bit tricky.
- A quiet, dark space that allows a comfy space to chill out
- Choir is too exposed
- Raise the toilet seats (higher to sit down upon)
- Only someone who has had to manoeuvre a wheelchair in toilets can realize how much space is needed for a wheelchair user / carer as it is difficult and embarrassing to manipulate a chair around narrow spaces and uneven floors. Much more space is needed and provision of more grab handles.
- I think a lack of heating in church can be a problem for the elderly with poor circulation but I appreciate not easy to get it right and very expensive

Additional information regarding an example of a good reordering was offered.

St John the Baptist, Knutsford was reordered in 2014 (Graham Holland Associates were the architects). This involved removing the late-Victorian pews, and the installation of an oak floor. The pews were replaced by simple but comfortable chairs. Underfloor heating was installed. I understand the total project cost £1m which they raised within the community – a wealthy area, admittedly, but the result was impressive and welcoming.



3rd Narrative (Q7&8) including initial thoughts on the survey results from the vicar

The most pressing issues which emerged from these responses appear to be:

1. Hearing impairments are common among respondents, as are audio problems in the church. Perhaps a different lectern mic might be considered (one less directional) but initially the livestreaming team could be trained to be able to turn mics up higher when needed. It may be possible to address this through training and changing how we operate the sound system (at no cost).

We can also send instructions to those reading or leading intercessions on the importance of slightly slower, clearer delivery of speech, and use of the microphone. Training and coaching could be offered.

2. The inadequacy of our toilet facilities is a crucial issue and must be a priority.
3. Access around the building is generally poor and often hazardous. There are many steps, tight corners, uneven flooring areas and other hazards which affect people with visual impairments, mobility issues, balance issues, dementia, CVI¹ and wheelchair users in particular.

Related to this, a common issue is trip hazards. These relate to heating pipes, steps in the chancel, uneven stone flooring, steps into the vestry. The temporary steps put in to aid accessibility to the vestry can be a trip hazard to other users and should be replaced with a more permanent solution promptly. The edges of steps, whether stone or carpeted, are unclear. White paint rather than tape might well be a better solution for the stone steps, alongside remodelling some areas with ramped access. We should consider looking at the edges of carpeted steps as a hazard. Do we need the chancel carpet at all? Of if we do, might we get a carpet fitter in to cut the carpet short of the step in order to make the step clearer and safer?

¹ See <https://cvisociety.org.uk/about.php> for information about one group not represented in this survey, but whose interests have led to research into carpets, steps and paved surfaces which is apposite for our respondents.

I believe these three items (notably items 2 & 3 since 1 can be addressed operationally) should form the starting point of the accessibility action plan and be discussed with our Inspecting Architect as soon as possible.

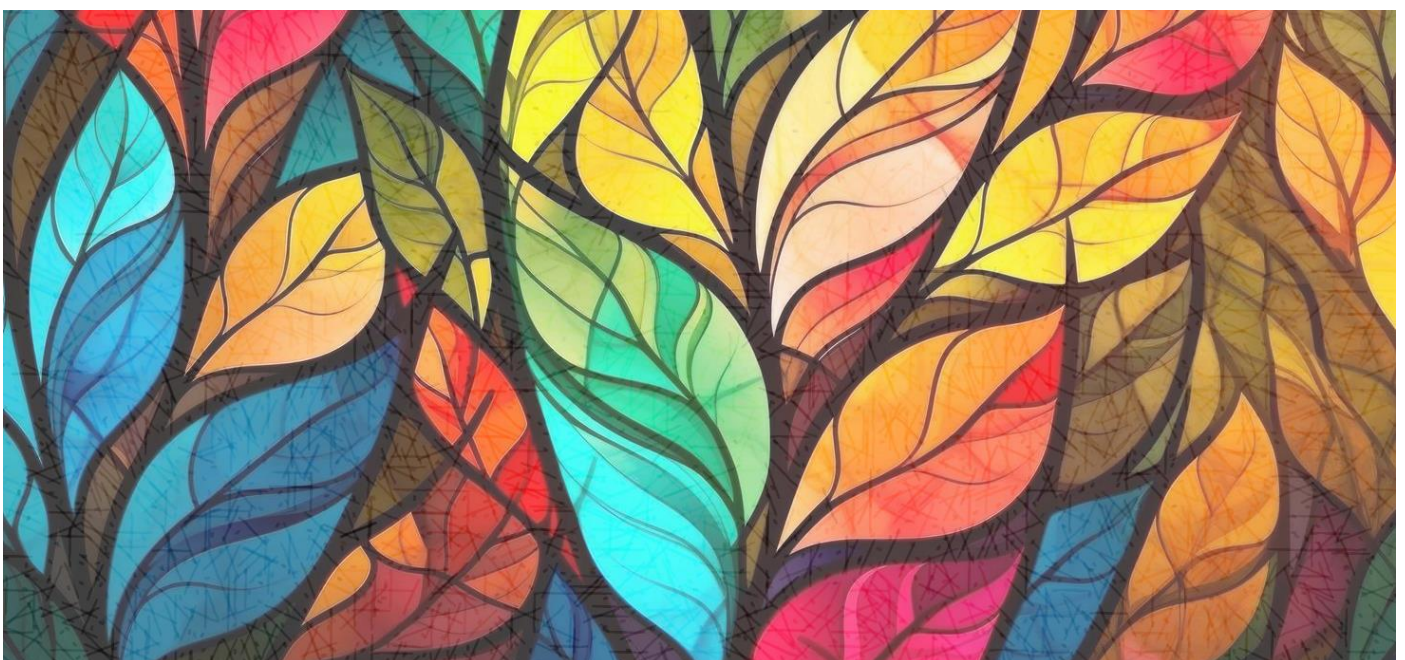
Other practical suggestions which emerged in response to the survey should also be discussed with a view to coming up with an action plan. Mostly these can be addressed through simple purchases and minor works, or by changing operating procedures. A few items on the list were already in hand at the time of the survey.

I suggest a small working group be set up, including members of the VCC, but with the invitation being extended to those respondents who indicated an interest. They would be tasked with looking at these matters and drawing up this side of the action plan. Their remit will be to decide which suggestions merit action, prioritizing these, then coming up with a list of solutions, including costings, to report back to the VCC.

Question 9: Would you be interested in joining a follow up group?

Two people were willing to be part of a follow up group, but a further 10 would be interested in finding out more about a group with a view to being involved.

Three more respondents might be interested at some point in the future.



Final reflection

The Gospel is radically inclusive. Time and time again, Jesus sees beyond impairments and acts to meet the deepest needs of people. He seeks out the excluded and those who have been marginalised, and therefore so should we. If we are a church serious about the flourishing of all our members, and being agents of flourishing in our community, we must address barriers to inclusion when we are made aware of them. We should seek to remove these barriers so that participation in the life of our church is seen to be for everyone, and everyone can flourish. Our goal must be that those who wish to can independently participate in the worship, fellowship and ministry of our church.

I am grateful to everyone who filled in this survey, and especially to those who shared experiences and opinions which they might have thought I and the VCC did not want to hear. Your honesty is exactly what we need to move things forward, so thank you.

Aside from a physical “to do” list to improve the church building, there also emerged one troubling theme for us as a church family. More than one respondent reported that people with visible disabilities are faced with intrusive questions about their impairments, no doubt kindly meant, but which have the effect of demanding explanations of things which are deeply personal and intimate. As I write this in the week leading up to Remembrance Sunday, I am struck that one would never ask a soldier to retell and relive a traumatic experience on a battlefield, or give a graphic account of the treatment they received for a battlefield injury – it would be crass and insensitive to do so. And yet people can demand that people with disabilities explain their impairment, give details of their treatment, speculate on how their disability might progress, or make them sit through unsolicited (and often ill-informed) suggestions for alternative treatments and therapies. It was sad to read that one person encountering this approach will no longer come to our church. Disability awareness training will be sought, especially for those who greet people at the door and who engage in “front of house” duties, and this should include neurodivergence training. I commend the further reading links and resources included at the back of this report as a good starting point for our collective reflections.

The Reverend Nick Morgan, November 6th 2024

Some initial reflections on Scripture

James 2:8-9

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favouritism, you sin.”

Sense UK explains ableism like this:

Ableism is a word for unfairly favouring non-disabled people.

Ableism means prioritising the needs of non-disabled people.

In an ableist society, it’s assumed that the “normal” way to live is as a non-disabled person.

It is ableist to believe that non-disabled people are more valuable to society than disabled people.

Ableism can therefore be framed as the sinful kind of favouritism James is writing about. When we think of accessibility as an optional extra, rather than having inclusion of people with all kinds of impairments as our default – a part of our culture as a church – we are behaving sinfully because this is favouritism.

Humans tend to normalize our own experience. We define ourselves in all kinds of ways, and these definitions can lead us to think of our own experience as being “the norm”. We are defined by gender, race, social status, language, our upbringing, our culture, and much else. Ableism comes about when the able-bodied think of their lived experience as the norm and people with a disability as being “not the norm”. Whether we are registered disabled or not, most people experience impairment in some way or other. Injuries can mean we temporarily lose the full use of a limb. Perhaps we are not tall enough to reach something on a high shelf, or cannot read small print in poor light, or have a fever which means we are too dizzy to stand. These are all perfectly normal experiences for human beings. When St Paul writes to the Christians of Galatia, he urges them to look beyond their own bubble of what is “normal” and have a more inclusive vision:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,

there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28)

In the wonderful diversity of God’s vision for the Church, there is no place for human divisions, and God longs for everyone to flourish. There is no longer “able” and “disabled” in the Kingdom of Heaven, but just as the church has struggled to find its way into overcoming the Jewish-Gentile divide, the equality of slaves and free-born people, the equal ministry of women, and currently struggles to affirm the full participation of LGBT+ people, we have to work harder to address the division caused by our lack of vision when it comes to disability.

John 20:26-28

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’

As Thomas can witness, the risen Christ still bears the wounds of the cross. He is still physically impaired, but that impairment has not disabled him from defeating sin and death. When it comes to the Ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:6-11), Christ bears the wounds of the cross on his body. His physical human impairments go with him as he takes his place in glory: they do not estrange him from the perfection of heaven. When we are raised to glory with him, our impairments are no barrier to our participation in the joy of heaven. If we are living as people of the resurrection, equal opportunities of worship, fellowship, participation in ministry, and nurturing in discipleship must be available to all, regardless of our human impairments.

Nov. 7th 2024 njm

Some definitions and sources of information

Impairment versus disability:

A disabled person is a person with an impairment who experiences disability.

Disability is the result of negative interactions that take place between a person with an impairment and her or his social environment.

Impairment is thus part of a negative interaction, but it is not the cause of, nor does it justify, disability.

Impairment: an injury, illness, or congenital condition that causes or is likely to cause a loss or difference of physiological or psychological function.

Disability: the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others due to social and environmental barriers.

(source: <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Northern-Officers-Group-defining-impairment-and-disability.pdf>)

You are disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.

(source: <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>)

Definitions of Disablism and Ableism from Scope UK <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism>

Lived experience of disabled people in the UK

The Government’s 2021 report “Exploring the everyday lives of disabled people” gives some deeper insights into the lived experience of disabled people: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exploring-the-everyday-lives-of-disabled-people/exploring-the-everyday-lives-of-disabled-people>

The rights of disabled people in the UK are summarized here: <https://www.gov.uk/rights-disabled-person>

Disability History Month Resources 2024

Disability History Month runs from 14th November to 20th December 2024. Please find below an inexhaustive list of resources if you would like to learn more.

Web Resources:

UK Disability History Month website 2024

<https://ukdhm.org/>

National Disability Arts Collection and Archive

<https://the-ndaca.org/>

Historic England, *A History of Disability: from 1050 to the Present Day*

<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/disability-history/>

The National Archives, *Disability History*

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/disability-history/>

The Disability Visibility Project

<https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/about/>

Diocese of London resources for disability history month

<https://www.london.anglican.org/church-and-parish-support/diversity-and-inclusion/disability-ministry/disability-history-month/>

Books:

Starter books and essay anthologies

Alice Wong, *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories From the Twenty-First Century*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, New York: 2020)

Emily Ladau, *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally*, (Ten Speed Press, Berkeley: 2021)

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, (Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver: 2018)

Shayda Kafai, *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice and Art Activism of Sins Invalid*, (Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver: 2021)

Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, (Duke University Press, 2015)

Sami Schalk, *Black Disability Politics*, (Duke University Press, 2022)

Christian perspectives and Theology

Nancy Eiland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1994)

Lisa D. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation*, (T&T Clark, London: 2023)

Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church*, (Brazos Press, Ada: 2022)

Julia Watts Belser, *Loving Our Own Bones: Disability Wisdom and the Spiritual Subversiveness of Knowing Ourselves Whole*, (Beacon Press, Boston: 2023)

Memoirs

Judith Heumann, *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist*, (Penguin, London: 2021)

Alice Wong, *Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life*, (Vintage Books, London: 2022)

Robert Murphy, *The Body Silent*, (Henry Holt & Co., New York: 1987)

Diocese of London webinars:

Disability Theology Webinar. Moses: Provocations From a Disabled Prophet. 14th November 2024, 7pm, zoom

<https://www.london.anglican.org/event/disability-theology-webinar/>

Disability Theology Webinar. Radical Rest: Shabbat as Resistance to Ableism. 21st November 2024, 7pm, zoom

<https://www.london.anglican.org/event/disability-theology-webinars-with-rabbi-julia-watts-belser/>



Bramham Benefice 2024

