



AN EXAMPLE OF A

LITURGY FOR

PEOPLE WITH LEARNING

DIFFICULTIES

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The undernoted liturgy was used for the first time at a Harvest Service in Woodlands Hospital on Sunday, 22 October, 1995. The Chaplaincy at Woodlands has had considerable experience in leading worship with people who have learning difficulties, not least in the adjustments it has had to make in relation to the changing needs and abilities of those worshipping. As more and more of the abler people were transferred to accommodation outside the Hospital so the level of responsiveness and availability for active participation



has diminished and worship has had to be modified to take this into account.

Accordingly the congregation on this occasion comprised about thirty people with severe learning difficulties ranging in ability from those who were able to articulate only certain words and whose range of concepts was very limited, to those whose perception was limited to the immediate experience of their five senses and who engaged in a series of spasmodic gestures and verbal ejaculations. Also present were a small number of nursing staff and parents.

The aim, therefore, is to appeal to a wide spectrum of handicap where the parameters of communication are fairly basic.

Let us look at the construction of the service in greater detail.

INTRODUCTION

A little time is spent at the beginning of the service welcoming people who have come. If it can be



personalised, so much the better. Also, people get a mind's eye fix on the person who is conducting the service. Some ties can be made to the occasion for meeting - Christmas, Easter, Harvest, which happens to be the pattern for Woodland's Services.

PRAYER

Words of opening and closing prayers are basic and familiar from years of usage. Participation is encouraged in saying the words or in at least saying AMEN. Later in the service there is an opportunity for a simple prayer of thanksgiving and intercession, which could include the Lord's Prayer said together or maybe sung to a Negro Spiritual tune.

PRAISE

Music has to be strongly rhythmical with a good pulse to it - familiar songs which can be used over and over again. At Woodlands we have a core of songs and verses.¹ New ones can be introduced but need to be repeated fairly frequently and need to have an easy

¹ A list for those interested can be obtained from The Chaplain, Woodlands Hospital, Cults Road, Aberdeen.



catchy tune. Most of CH3 and a good proportion of *Songs of God's People* is not suitable. There is a dearth of good, simply constructed items. On occasion, simple sets of words can be made up to fit a well-known tune.

Instrumental music can be used in the service to create atmosphere but again it has to be used with discretion and sensitivity. Passages must not be too long either.

Here, familiar songs and hymns are played in an upbeat way as people are assembling, as they are during the service. An appropriate song or hymn is sung after the ceremonial entry of the symbols of water, light and bread.

THE ADDRESS

This is best kept short and split into different parts if possible - dealing with one point or different aspects of a point. Here the theme was Harvest and our thankfulness to God: for water symbolised by a glass jug containing water, for the light of the sun symbolised by a candelabrum and lit candles, and for



bread symbolised by an ordinary loaf - all necessary for us to have food to eat.

The main ideas were also reinforced by overhead transparencies, eg a picture of a basket of fruit and vegetables displayed as the people gathered, a picture of the sun decorated with a smiling face, a picture of a loaf of bread sliced and ready to eat; and by the objects brought forward.

MOVEMENTS

The movements and gestures are important and should be slow, calm and deliberate and repeated if possible, so that as many people as possible know what is happening or going to happen. The object is to take people with the flow of things and to adapt to their attention spans which may be very short. Some words and ideas can be communicated by gesture, facial expression or the use of specialised sign language such as *Makaton*.

PARTICIPATION



The involvement of those present is encouraged wherever possible. Handicap does not mean that someone can not take part. In this case a girl in a wheelchair who has very limited response brought up the bread, one boy brought up the candles to be lighted and another the jug of water. Despite limited response, the liturgy is there to assist the congregation to worship and, where possible, everyone should be helped to take part. Inviting someone to come forward to blow out the candles at the end or encouraging everybody to blow together as a body is another way of involving the congregation. Parents, members of staff and others can model for those with learning difficulties - putting hands together in prayer, patting someone's hand in time to the music, helping the person to clasp or sway in time, translating what is happening into appropriate gestures of *Makaton* speech.

Familiarity with the situation and freedom of approach also makes it possible to incorporate spontaneous "happenings" in the service as they arise, thus increasing the feeling of being part of a big family where we share together, no matter who we are - surely



one of the aims of worship which it is increasingly difficult to capture in our congregations today.

CONCLUSION

It would not be expected that there would be large numbers of people with learning difficulties at the regular Parish Church morning service, but it is our duty to incorporate all who worship, whatever their mental ability, so that none are left out.

With a little modification, some of the above observations could be of value in enhancing the quality of those parts of the service involving children and perhaps have a “knock on” effect elsewhere !

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