SITTING WITH THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED IN THE SEC DISCERNMENT PROCESS

SEI/ VAs/ADOs/LR Wardens
Some of the information in this document will be obvious to you, but it may not be obvious to everyone; we all have different life experiences.

The intention is not to speak down to anybody, but to create a level playing field.
FEAR NOT!

AVOIDING AWKWARDNESS

Near the beginning of Jostein Gaarder's the Christmas Mystery, the following interaction occurs:

"Elisabet had only just managed to get to know the world. She had learned what all the commonest animals were called, but she didn’t know the difference between a tomtit and a yellowhammer. Nor between a camel and a dromedary, come to think of it. All the same, there was no mistaking what she was looking at now. Elisabet realised at once that the shining figure must be an angel. She had seen angels in books and pictures, but it was the first time she had seen one in real life. 'Fear not!' said the angel in a gentle voice. Elisabet raised herself halfway up. ‘You needn't think I'm afraid of you,’ she replied, a little sulkily because she had fallen and hurt herself. The angel came closer. It looked as if he was hovering just above the ground. It reminded Elisabet of her cousin Anna who could dance on the tips of her toes. The angel knelt down and stroked her gently on the nape of her neck with the tip of one of his wings. ‘I said, “Fear not”, to be on the safe side,' he said. ‘We don’t appear to humans very often, so it’s best to be careful’"

When people first come into contact with a person who is differently abled there can be anxiety about how best to approach the person before them. Does one acknowledge the difference or not? Does one leap straight to offering assistance or is that disabling? Will the person before me understand me? Whilst we are working this through the moment of hesitation occurs that wounds the differently abled person as it will be read either as an unwillingness to engage or as simple fear.

FEAR NOT! is a reminder that both we and the person before us are wonderfully created and redeemed by God, whose presence guides our discernment meetings. God calls us each by name, we are both his children. So fear not: smile, introduce yourself, admit you're not an expert and dive on in to the conversation.
"Disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illness, fatal and progressive diseases, permanent and temporary injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions or obesity. Even though the prototypical disabled person posited in cultural representations never leaves a wheelchair, is totally blind or profoundly deaf, most of the approximately 40 million Americans with disabilities have a much more ambiguous relationship to the label... Disability, then, can be painful, comfortable, familiar, alienating, bonding, isolating, disturbing, endearing, challenging, infuriating, or ordinary. Embedded in the complexity of actual human relations, it is always more than the disabled figure can signify."

Some people you might recognise as disabled may not own that description for themselves. People with mental illnesses and learning difficulties have particularly difficult relationships to the term disability. There are a significant number of people on the Autistic spectrum who talk about Neurodiversity, objecting to the hegemony of neurotypicals who describe them as disabled. Paralympians are now being described as 'superhumans' and are not allowed to compete alongside able-bodied athletes because their prosthetics give them an advantage.
This is about discernment.
In discernment we ask all kinds of questions about all aspects of our candidates lives. Not asking how their particular difference or disability shapes their life experience is doing your candidate a disservice. If you know one person with autism, in a wheelchair, with hearing loss etc. you know ONE person. Your job is to get to know this person.

Discerning questions.
Do you think that there is anything in your experience of life that gives you a different perspective on church / relationship with God / view of society than a person who doesn’t share your condition?

Practical questions.
When it comes to working in a charge / undertaking training are there any adjustments that you can foresee needing in order to allow you to flourish? Can you help me to understand what they might be and why, so that I can convey these needs to others?
During discernment you need to be listening carefully. As with any candidate, you will need to be listening for key experiences that shape this person’s life experience and journey with God. It may be that the time at which a disability was acquired or diagnosed is particularly significant.

- Has this been processed fully?
- Is it raw?
- Is it not really a question for this person as their disability is ordinary to them?

Has this person experienced prejudice in the church or outside?
- How do they feel about people who do not share their disability?
- How do they deal with prejudice?
- Can they articulate what makes them really angry? [This is healthy!]

Has this person wondered with God about their disability?
- Do they feel marvellously made?
- Have they wrestled with God?
- What do they expect to be like in heaven?
SPECIAL INSIGHTS

Professor Brian Brock explores how early Christians reacted to children of *marvellous rare design*:

“For God is creator of all things: He Himself knows where and when anything should be, or should have been, created; and He knows how to weave the beauty of the whole out of the similarity and diversity of its parts... We know of men who have been born with more than five fingers or five toes. This is a trivial thing and not any great divergence from the norm. God forbid, however, that someone who does not know why the Creator has done what He has done should be foolish enough to suppose that God has in such cases erred in allotting the number of human fingers. So, then, even if a greater divergence should occur, He whose work no one may justly condemn knows what He has done.” ... Even more strikingly Augustine urges Christians to read this expected appearance of the unexpected not as freakish or repulsive but as a special communicative act of God. (Wondrously Wounded by Brian Brock)

Every person in the discernment process is asking whether they have a particular gift to offer to the church. Those with disabilities may worry that they will be seen as deficient in some way, written off for a perceived lack of ability.

It is particularly important, therefore, that your attitude conveys the expectation that they will have a unique set of God given gifts, wherever they may best be used.
A SHORT GUIDE TO SITTING WITH THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED IN THE SEC DISCERNMENT PROCESS

An aide memoir.

FEAR NOT, FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU! (ISAIAH 43:1)

EXPERIENCES COMMONLY LABELLED AS DISABILITY VARY.

Some people have life-long differences in the way part(s) of their bodies function. Others acquire a difference that may be temporary or life-long. For some people the ‘disability’ is so much a part of their identity that they choose to include it in their self description: eg an autistic person rather than a person with autism, as the autism does not feel separable from the person to most autistic people. Others prefer person first language: someone with hearing loss or spina bifida. Find out what the person you are speaking with prefers - don’t make assumptions!

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS

When meeting with someone differently abled in the discernment process your key questions will need to be:

What is your experience?

What do you need from me/the SEI/SEC to help you flourish?

IN THE BACK OF YOUR MIND

How does this person’s ‘disability’ shape their relationship with God and with others?

Is it simply part of who they are?

Has this been or is it still a tragedy for them?

Does it affect the way others respond to them?

How do they feel about that?

SPECIAL INSIGHTS?

Does this candidate have a particular experience of the world that may help others to see God differently. As with all candidates, in what ways might this candidate be a blessing to the church?

Ideal as a bookmark!
RESOURCES

BOOKS

Wondrously Wounded: theology, disability and the body of Christ.
Brian Brock

Becoming friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship.
John Swinton

WEBSITES

For disability friendly worship:
http://anordinaryoffice.org.uk

Adults with learning difficulties tell their own stories:
https://www.mencap.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-mencap/here-i-am

VIDEOS

(Autism) Amazing things happen:
https://youtu.be/RbwRrVw-CRo

There's no need to be awkward

16 things I with my hearing friends knew
https://youtu.be/G9KCgnJOy10

TED on Dyslexia
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zafiGBrFkRM

BBC3 has a whole host of "Things not to say to ..."videos where people with various differences talk about things that amuse and annoy them. Here is the blind one:
https://youtu.be/ykW4tYbRgo8

and this is the Cerebral Palsy one:
https://youtu.be/kohcRR3VXyY

BEWARE CAMPAIGNING SITES

Sometimes obvious sites to turn to for research are not appreciated by the person with that particular disability/difference. The National Autistic Society, for example still researches cures for Autism, this is seen as eugenics by many autistic people as is the campaign to eradicate Downs Syndrome via pre-natal screening by those within that community.