



A Gospel for

Reflections of a special needs worker



Opportunities

I sat looking at the computer screen as the job advert for special needs worker with Scripture Union stared back at me. It was the beginning of 2002 and I was not looking for a job! I had taught in schools for children with severe learning difficulties since 1992 and not long returned from teaching overseas and doing some short-term mission work. Even if I had been looking this was not the sort of job I saw myself doing. I loved the hustle and bustle of the classroom and the adrenalin of adventure. Yet I could not put the job

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advert out of my mind and one question kept circling my head. Are children and young people with learning difficulties being given opportunities to learn about the Gospel?

The experiences I'd had whilst teaching children with severe learning difficulties kept filtering through in answer to this question. I had felt so ill-equipped to teach these children about Christianity. For much of my teaching experience I knew nothing of what it meant to be a Christian. It was through an Alpha course that I finally learnt that Jesus had died for me. Yet I was expected to teach something I didn't understand and, more than that, I was expected to pick out the essence of Christianity and put it across in a way that was both simple and relevant to the children I was teaching. I really did not look forward to that slot in the week that read RE on my timetable!



Difficulties

Even as a Christian I struggled to find ways of explaining the Christian faith to pupils with severe learning difficulties. I could see this mirrored in others as I saw their sessions or chatted in the staff room. As far as school teaching was concerned I knew I was finding it difficult to teach the ideas central to Christianity, and was not alone in this.



So if they were not learning about Jesus at school, were they getting that teaching elsewhere? Well, in the town where I live it is estimated that 4% of the population attend church regularly. I held on to the fact that they might be in that 4%. Then reality struck. I had previously looked after a little boy with Down's Syndrome so that his parents could go to church and worship together. The church felt unable to accept him into their childrens' work unless a parent was with him. I knew their story was not an isolated one. There are so many children whose special needs and individual characters have elicited reactions from church congregations that have made them and their families feel it would be better if they did not go to that, or indeed any, church.

had not been looking for! That was in April 2002 and it's been an exciting journey since then.

One of the first things I had wanted to do was to produce some simple information about Jesus for young people with learning difficulties and low-level literacy skills; something that presented the message whether they could read or not; a publication that incorporated picture symbols that many would be familiar with and illustrations that seemed age-appropriate and interesting; a book that would answer some questions that they might have about Jesus through the use of a narrator. I also wanted it to point to the Bible

Are children and young people with learning difficulties being given opportunities to learn about the Gospel?

Questions

I had to answer this nagging question of whether these children with special needs were learning about the gospel with a deflated heart based upon my own experiences. Many of the children I'd come across in special schools knew far more about other religions and little or nothing about Christianity. I longed to see this change and to find ways of enabling this group of children to find our loving God. Not surprisingly I took the job that I



as the holy book of the Christian faith through giving biblical references. It needed to fit within the guidelines for RE teaching in schools and be acceptable to people from different faith groups. It needed to be a book that pupils could own and take home to look at with their family.

Answers

What Jesus Did is now published by Scripture Union with a vision that many young people with learning difficulties will own it and that it will be a tool to help them understand what Christians believe about Jesus. A pack of five *What Jesus Did* books costs just £5 and comes with a sample assembly plan which gives ideas for an assembly designed to introduce the book to the students.

Each page in the book focuses on a different aspect of Jesus' life. To help those struggling to teach Christianity to this group of students there are ideas for teachers to expand the use of this book on the Scripture Union web pages: www.scriptureunion.org.uk/enable

The book offers a fantastic opportunity for churches to support their local school for students with learning difficulties. Why not take the opportunity to go into the school and give students a book about Jesus? Get to know the local school and ask whether individuals from the faith-based community can come and talk about the Christian faith with students. Churches could buy a copy for every student aged 11 or over.

There is so much more that can be done to help with teaching in this area to pupils with learning difficulties. I hope this will be just one of many similar resources in the years to come. I know there is a mass of experience and creativity out

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Fact file

Denise Abrahall is an experienced Special Needs teacher who is currently Scripture Union's Special Needs Worker. She is author of *What Jesus Did*, a book written especially for young people aged 11 to 14 with moderate learning difficulties. The book is also

suitable for older teenagers and adults with learning difficulties within the church context.

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Book review

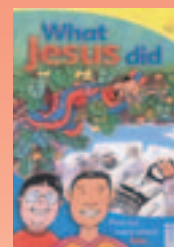
What Jesus Did

Although *What Jesus Did* has been written specifically for 11 to 14 year olds with moderate learning difficulties, its crystal clear retelling of the story of Jesus makes it eminently suitable for children and adults of all ages and abilities. (I have successfully used Denise Abrahall's text and Colin Smithson's illustrations during all-age worship and received very positive feedback afterwards.)

The book is written using delightfully simple language. The chosen print size and font make reading easy, and the written word is complemented by a range of visual cues including signs, symbols and illustrations. For maximum accessibility, speech bubbles have been used instead of speech marks. For maximum authenticity, Bible references are included in each section of the book.

The book begins with two youngsters (one white girl who wears glasses and one black boy who doesn't) stating that they are Christians. They explain how the book works and then challenge the reader to 'find the word that goes with the symbol' in each section.

What Jesus Did follows a well-worked Q&A format which asks and answers questions such as: Have you heard about Jesus? What did Jesus do when he grew up? How did Jesus help people? Where is Jesus now?



What Jesus Did

by Denise Abrahall
Illustrated by Colin Smithson
Scripture Union, 2003
24pp paperback
ISBN: 1 84427 006 8

Use: Secondary Special
Needs/Church/General

£5 for 5 copies

Towards the end of the book (p22) we find the answer to the question: Can anyone be a friend of Jesus now? (I defy any Christian not to smile and go a little misty eyed when they read the answer and see the superb accompanying illustration.) On the final page readers are encouraged to find out more about Jesus.

The pack contains five copies of the book and is supported by an equally concise set of notes which gives helpful tips on how teachers and visitors can make the best use of the book in an assembly. In fact the assembly outline is excellent in its own right.

In short, *What Jesus Did* is an outstanding resource which can be used in church and home settings as well as in RE lessons in school where young people are learning about Christianity.

Highly recommended.

■ Rupert Kaye, Chief Executive, ACT

there that could help to inform this work. If you feel that you would like to chat about the work, or whether I could be of help to you or vice versa, please do not hesitate to contact me.

■ Denise Abrahall

