ADDRESS TO THE DAC CONFERENCE – 17th September 2027

Forgotten Stones, Living Flesh

From reactive advice to prophetic accompaniment: the DAC's particular vocation

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Thank you so much for inviting me to speak this morning. It is a real joy to welcome you to one of the jewels of the Churches Conservation Trust, of which I am privileged to be a trustee. This morning I want to reflect with you on the vocation of a DAC: what our buildings say before anyone speaks, and how the advice you offer can help them speak more truthfully of God's extravagant welcome and belonging.

This building shares its own story, as well as its inherited fabric. And that heritage, that layer upon layer of memory, is not the enemy of access. It is that beauty and exclusion can inhabit the same place; that a threshold may hold centuries of memory and still refuse a particular body; and that welcome is never proved by the door being open. It is proved by whether people can enter, move, see, hear, rest, participate, lead and belong.

So, before I continue, let me first explain one word: ableism. Ableism is not simply prejudice against disabled people. Ableism is a hierarchy of bodies and minds, privileging certain bodies and minds as normal, desirable and authoritative, while treating other bodies and minds as lesser or as an afterthought. That hierarchy can appear in attitudes, but it is also built into thresholds, steps, sightlines, acoustics, seating, sanctuaries, information and decision-making. A church can say, 'All are welcome', while its fabric quietly adds, 'provided your body and mind function in the way this building expects'.

So for me this is both personal and professional. I am a Canon at York Minster and serve on its Fabric Advisory Committee; before that I served for nine years on the Southwark DAC. My disabled body has walked, stumbled, preached and prayed

through sacred spaces that rarely welcome it easily and sometimes reject it altogether. But this is not principally a request for kindness to people like me. It is a question about the truthfulness of the Church's witness. What does our fabric say about all those who have gone unheard and unacknowledged, whose bodies too bear the image of God?

So my question for every DAC is not simply: should a proposed access intervention be recommended? My question is more fundamental: what kind of Church is our advice helping to build?

The DAC's distinctive vocation

I fully recognise that a DAC cannot, by itself, make every church accessible. PCCs and other custodians carry responsibility for their buildings; the chancellor determines faculty petitions; budgets are constrained; and every historic church presents real, particular difficulties. Your role is advisory. Yet that word 'advisory' should not be mistaken for marginal. Advice given early can enlarge the imagination of a project. Advice given late will only negotiate the edges of a design whose assumptions have already hardened.

The Church of England's own guidance tells parishes to speak to the DAC as early as possible, both about permissions and about accessibility. That places you at a decisive point in the life of a scheme. You may be the first people to ask whether the statement of need is wide enough; whether disabled people have helped to frame it; whether the whole journey has been considered; and whether a supposedly neutral existing arrangement is itself causing harm.

A statement of significance and a statement of need are sometimes treated as opposing briefs: first explains what must not be harmed, then makes an apologetic case for change. But the living use of a church is part of its significance, and exclusion is part of the evidence of need. Heritage and mission are not rival claimants at the door. They are held together so that both may become more truthful.

And the great gift you bring is interdisciplinary conversation. Around a DAC table, different kinds of knowledge can meet and expose a false choice before it controls the scheme. Josie's contribution this morning made the point plain: lived experience is not an anecdote heard after the experts have spoken; it is evidence of how a church actually works.

The DAC is not only a guardian of inherited significance. Through its advice, the DAC helps decide what our churches will signify next.

Three shifts in the DAC's practice

I want to invite three shifts in how a DAC's vocation is understood.

First, a shift from access as mitigation to access as mission. Too often the historic arrangement is treated as neutral, while the inclusive intervention must prove its necessity. But an inaccessible step is never neutral. A fixed pew, unreadable notice, unheard liturgy or unreachable sanctuary reveals an assumption about whose body was imagined as belonging. Therefore, the decision to leave it untouched is also a decision, with consequences for worship, sacrament, mission and public witness.

This does not mean that every barrier can be removed in the same way, or that historic significance does not matter. It means that 'do nothing' must carry an impact assessment too. The question is not only, 'What harm might change cause to historic fabric?' It is also, 'What harm does the present arrangement continue to cause to the living Body of Christ?'

Second, a shift from reactive assessment to proactive accompaniment. Accessibility cannot live in a silo marked 'access works'. Lighting, sound, heating, seating, toilets, reordering, paths, interpretation, livestreaming, new art and emergency planning all have an access dimension. The most powerful DAC intervention may not be a condition attached near the end. It may be a generous, searching question at the beginning, before the architect's brief or the parish's preferred solution has become fixed.

Third, a shift from provision for disabled people to authority with disabled people. Look at the membership of your DAC. Are disabled people present at all DAC decisions? Disabled people should never arrive during or at the end of a process to test a solution devised without us. The essential question is: who has helped to frame the problem? Wheelchair users, Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, blind and partially sighted people, neurodivergent people, people with learning disabilities, people living with pain or fatigue, and those with fluctuating conditions will notice different barriers and imagine different possibilities.

Co-design is not an optional courtesy. Co-design is how a DAC and a parish gain the evidence needed for good judgement.

From today's case study to DAC practice

Gemma has introduced this site and why access came into view; Will has located Community Connect within MySight York's wider work; Josie has shown what consultation becomes when a participant with sight loss brings her own knowledge. I do not want to turn their account into a faculty case. I want to draw out its method: begin with relationship, invite lived experience early, and allow what is heard to change the question as well as the answer.

Josie's account rightly centres sight loss. The method matters beyond sight loss too: a wheelchair user may have no choice of route; a Deaf person may lose the speaker behind a high pew; a person with fatigue may need rest before everyone else begins. This is not a checklist. It is a reminder that access is relational: between bodies, activities, information, people and place.

What we have heard about Community Connect is more than a project report. It shows that access grows through connection: between church and specialist organisation, professional knowledge and lived experience, the site and wider community. The consultation visit was not a final test of a predetermined solution, but part of how the place learned to notice. For a DAC, the lesson is clear: do not wait for disabled people to validate an answer; invite us to help define the question.

Access needs do not always point in the same direction. Brighter lighting may help one person and overwhelm another; an open plan may improve manoeuvring and remove a place of shelter. Co-design does not erase such tensions. It makes them visible early enough for careful design and genuine choice to answer more than one body.

The purpose of good conservation is not to freeze a building at the point when exclusion was normal. It is to conserve and renew its capacity to gather people now.

Five practical commitments

So what might these three shifts mean in practice? Let me offer five commitments.

One: ask for an access and participation account in every relevant scheme. Not only in a project labelled 'disabled access'. Ask applicants to identify barriers, say who has been involved, explain what changed because disabled people were listened to, and consider the whole journey: finding information, arriving, entering, circulating, sitting, seeing, hearing, using a toilet, reaching the altar, receiving the sacrament, leading worship and leaving safely. Ask explicitly about the impact of doing nothing.

Two: use pre-application conversations to widen the brief. Before a preferred design hardens, ask: 'Whose participation is this scheme assuming, and who is absent from the room?' Encourage parishes to meet local disabled people, to pay for specialist lived-experience advice where appropriate, and to test more than one option. An access audit is valuable, but a checklist cannot replace relationship.

Three: make inclusive participation a cross-cutting test of DAC expertise. The access adviser should not be summoned only when a ramp appears on a drawing. Architects, archaeologists, heating advisers, organ advisers, liturgical specialists, landscape advisers and others should all ask how their counsel affects different bodies and minds. Build that question into agendas, site visits and delegated advice, so access is ordinary rather than exceptional.

Four: hold evidence about people with the same seriousness as evidence about fabric. A worn threshold can be measured; so can the number of people who cannot cross it. A pew's date and craftsmanship matter; so do the testimony of someone who cannot see, transfer, sit or receive communion from it. Seek solutions that are beautiful, proportionate and well detailed, certainly. But do not allow disabled people's participation to be described as a regrettable visual cost before it has been understood as a core good.

Five: learn after the advice and after the faculty. Return to completed projects. Ask not only whether the work matches the drawings, but whether participation has changed. Which early questions unlocked an excellent solution? Which conditions helped, and which merely postponed the problem? Where did a temporary arrangement become permanent exclusion? Share those lessons across the diocese and beyond, so one parish's hard-won wisdom becomes part of the whole Church's practice.

A prophetic form of guardianship

I am not asking DACs to abandon conservation. Quite the opposite. I am asking you to practise a fuller conservation: one that conserves a church's capacity to be a place of worship and mission for all, and to gather the whole Body of Christ.

There will be difficult cases. There will be competing forms of harm, limited resources and imperfect solutions. Not every barrier can be removed immediately, and not every need can be answered by one intervention. Your calling is not to pretend those tensions away. It is to ensure that the cost of resolving them is not routinely borne by the person who cannot enter, see, hear, understand, reach the altar, receive the sacrament or exercise leadership.

Disabled people are not guests in God's house. We are its builders, theologians, prophets and priests. A DAC can make that conviction visible in stone, timber, glass, sound, movement and space - and in the conversations from which change begins.

You advise on the stones, glass and wood so that they may better serve the living body of Christ.

One test for every conversation, site visit and notification of advice. will this decision preserve a building, or will it further the mission of the Church and help the Church become more fully the Body it proclaims?

For the Word became flesh - not idealised marble; not stones and mortar; but human flesh, wounded flesh, disabled flesh, risen flesh - and dwelt among us.

My ongoing prayer is that DACs will use their expertise, imagination and influence so that **all** are gathered, **all** are remembered, and **all** can belong.

Thank you for listening.