

# “How can I help?”

Scott Cheeseman

## Vocations through the lens of disability and neurodivergence

### Scott

So I was born with congenital heart defect, so really early on had lots of issues with that. One of my great ‘two truths, one lie’ is I was in an air ambulance at two hours old, being taken out to Hertford Hospital, and for many years I had an unsigned death certificate on my file. They filled in the paperwork and they never signed it.

From that I have had physiotherapy, I have had a stent. I had an internal defib installed in 2019.

And then just to add to my physical, but yet invisible disability, I also got diagnosed with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and dyscalculia throughout education and university as well. A

And that led me into youth work and what I do now. So I'm a full-time youth worker here in Kidlington at the Baptist Church, and I've also been exploring Anglican discernment process for the last three years and a bit.

### Jane

Brilliant. OK, tell me a little bit about what has drawn you into a sense of vocation?

### Scott

I think for me it's fundamentally, if you were to whittle me down to a tagline or one of the things, it would be ‘how can I help people?’ And for me, when I've been exploring that with young people or when I've been exploring that with adults, it's, ‘how can I help?’

And I'm quite happy to get my hands dirty in that regard. I'm quite happy to, you know, get on with stuff. I'm not as proficient, shall we say, at the touchy-feely conversations, but more the get on with it and how can I help them, sit with someone that's vulnerable and go right, how can I sit there?

So when we went into the pandemic, I would go around to people's houses and set up iPads and tablets for them so they could get on to Zoom, so they could get on to tech services ‘cause they didn't have a clue, and I can sit there and, right, let me explain it to you in a way that helps them, put it into a way that you can understand, ‘cause that's what helped me.

At school I had a couple of really good teachers that looked out for me and would very much be like, right, we understand that Scott's not going to get this easily. How can we make it so that he can?

And so for me, when I'm looking at vocation and I'm looking at who God's calling me to be, it's very much, ‘how can I help you be the best you that God is calling you to be?’

It's not about me. I don't particularly get any- I get joy when I see people thrive, sure, but fundamentally, how can I help you be the best you, and if that's as a priest kind of helping the parish, how can I help the parish thrive?

How can I help, you know, if it was looking wider than the churches to the national Church or wherever else, or the serving team - how can I help you thrive?

And I don't care if you're male, female, what gender, any of that, that's irrelevant. God made you. We are each wonderfully made in his image. How can we help that?

**Jane**

Right. What have been the challenges in following your sense of calling?

**Scott**

I think the big challenge - and there's two.

So, if we go to the physical disability for a moment, is the invisible disability. Saying it next to the person that I was meant to do the work for, part of the process, we had to do a mystery shopper, mystery worshipper event. And I'll admit I didn't do it!

Some later day a while ago, I went for a meeting with a friend of mine, and I parked in the disabled bay opposite the church. I put my blue badge in the windshield, I went and had a coffee. I spoke to the gentleman at the front door, 'Oh, where's this coffee shop in the town?' I didn't know where it was, and he pointed me in the direction.

Come back to my car and the gentleman waved me down. He goes, 'You're really fortunate you are.'

And I went, 'Oh, yeah? Why's that?' Half thinking it's, oh, because you know Ollie or whoever.

He goes because the traffic warden just walked past and didn't put a ticket on your car parking in the disabled bay. And I looked at this gentleman and I went, 'Did you not see the blue badge in the car?'

And his face was just a picture, and he went, 'I'm so sorry.' And I'm like, 'It's fine. I know I look young and fit and healthy, but actually I've got a really serious heart condition. That's why I've got the blue bag.'

And I'm happy to help explain that, and turned out that that was the church warden for the parish that I parked in. But I use that as my example of actually, how can we welcome people if we're going to kind of prejudice and prerequisite on what they look like?

The second one, in terms of vocation, some of the challenges have been the academia.

I did go and do a degree in youth work and practical theology and by the grace of God, I got through it. But the idea of reading books, you know, 'Oh, for the next lecture, can you read three chapters of these books?'

No. Can you give me an audiobook? I'll listen to it. Give me a way to listen to it. Super. I'll read all the chapters of that that you want me to. Go read this commentary so that I can... No.

But you want to have a conversation with me? I'll tell you what that book is going to tell you because I've lived here. I've got that experience.

And so for me, part of that has been, you know, I was just sharing with Andrew a moment ago and, two of the guys that went off to train this year, they shared their reading list with me for their respective universities, and I gulped and went not a chance.

And they were like, we're struggling to read it and we've not got dyslexia. I'm sitting there going yeah, I need about a year running on that, let alone anything else I'd be doing, because realistically, that's a challenge.

So there have been the real challenges. It's tackling that adversity and that invisible disability, you know, and in church we had the stereotype and I have no issue with it, you know, 'well, you're young and fit, and can you go help with those tables?'

Yeah, I can, because I'm happy to help. But I'm not the only one that can do it. And actually, if you're going to ask me to go and, you know, put these tables out, yeah, give me the time to do it. Don't expect it in five minutes, then I'm not going to be able to do it.

And the the looks you get when, for me, I'm on seven different pills a day, five different meds, and one of them is a lovely water tablet.

So when you get up in the church and go out and use the facility, and people look at you and go, 'You're the youth worker. You shouldn't be leaving.'

It's either that, or this ain't gonna end well! I'm being blunt. I don't want to leave halfway through, but that's good medication for you people. And that's just where we go.

So they're proving the real challenges, in terms of adapting to that and understanding that I am who I am. God created me as me. And so yes, I'm Scott, and, yes, I have dyslexia and dyspraxia, and yes, I have a heart condition. I'm still Scott. How can I help?

**Jane**

What have been the blessings?

**Scott**

I think the real blessing is being able to relate to people.

One of that joys I've been able to do in Kidlington is going to school. So 4 1/2 years ago, I arrived and in September we went into the local secondary school and went look, I'm here, how can we help?

And still I'm a bit taken aback by that they expected that we were gonna come in with this, we want to do this and that and this. And it was like, no. No. How can I help? How can I help you? How can I help your students?

And from that I started mentoring kids. And that's my background and I've done a bit before and so I now mentor eight students every week. They're different. Some weeks there's more.

And we do a mental health well-being group. And we set that up. We are the first school in Oxford that we are aware of that runs it, because we wanted to support those kids, and I can sit there opposite that kid that's got, I'm really struggling in English because my handwriting and my memory, and I think I've been in your shoes. Or that kid that's being bullied, I'm with you. I had the joy of the last name of Cheeseman and I grew up in a town called Towcester. Secondary school was not fun. But I can relate to that kid.

And so for me, being able to sit there and go to the SENCO and go hang on, this kid's struggling. Have you picked this up? Because and Jane will testify, I'm not afraid to tell anyone my opinion on things.

Can I help this kid? Well, if I've got to go to the SENCO and say they should probably be on your radar and then the SENCO goes, oh, we didn't know about that, yeah, we'll keep an eye and then might not do anything with it and that's fine, but at least I've helped that kid get over that step because at the moment, if you want to get an ADHD test in in the UK, it's something like two years, two- or three-year waiting list minimum. Dyslexia is the same.

Because of everything that's been going on so the sooner we can get that going the better that's going to be for the kid in the longer term. And that's kind of where we're us and the blessing in that regard, being able to help people and relate and being able to go look, I might not understand all the technical jargon and I challenged directors on that - I still have never got my head around why do we stand for singing and we sit for this bit and we stand for that, and we don't reflect for that bit and we do that and why when actually we can just be ourselves, but that's me and I'll probably always have that question.

But again, the the blessing for me is being able to sit there with young people, with adults, with seniors, those in the third age, whatever titles you want to call it, and sit there and go, how can I help and how can I bless you in your week and in your day, with God and in your journey? And if I can relate to that then that I will be happy to.

### **Jane**

Final question. How can the Church bring in, involve, support and enable people with hidden disabilities to be part of the leadership of our Church and to serve the Church and the world?

### **Scott**

I mean, be out and proud about it. We have got people in senior leaderships of churches who probably have hidden disabilities, whether that be neurodivergent, whether that be physical, whether that be whatever, why are we hiding that fact? Why are we?

We were just talking about statistics. We have so many bishops in this country, and I'm going to pick on the bishops for a minute and I respect them. There is a percentage that will have a neurodivergence of some description. I don't know of any that have actually ever gone, 'Do you know what, I struggle with that?'

As Tim was saying a minute ago, when he was talking, seeing someone like Tim helped. And that's for me.

But they're at a local level, because I'll go to that for a minute, if being accepting of that difference and going, you know, you've got unique skills that you can bring to the PCC, the standing committee, to whatever team it is. Then then we want to enhance that.

If we've got to change some things to adapt? That actually our meetings are at 7:30 because late nights we struggle, but we can meet at 6. If we can make those adaptations that's what we should be doing as a Church, because I'm fairly certain we would do it for anything else.

If we had a situation where someone in our church couldn't see, was blind, for example, or was in a wheelchair, where it was a visible, you can see the disability, we'd be very quick to go, how can we change our services or whatever we're doing to adapt to that situation?

But when it's an invisible disability and we don't know about that, then that's one thing, and it's on us with invisible disabilities to kind of own that and go, look, these are skills I can bring to the table. I may not be great with numbers and so don't make me the church treasurer, whatever you do, but I will see things that you probably won't because of the way that I think. And I will see things from about 15 different angles before you even thought about it because of the way I think.

So how can we, when we're dealing with big issues or we're tackling things, go right what are the options in the room Scott? And I've got, well, actually, if we go that way, it's going to probably look

like that, if we go that route, it might look like that, you could go that way. Now we've got all the information to make an informed decision.

That's the skills that I can bring to the table, and when we're talking about that in our own right, we're all individual, we all have our own skills, As churches, we need to be enhancing that and putting them up the front - if that's what they want to do.

If they don't want to do it, but they want to serve tea and coffee, then we encourage it. If they want to do the behind the scenes stuff then we encourage it.

Because at the end of the day it's, how can we help you grow? And if that's what we're doing then that's us being Church. I don't particularly mind the rest. That's us being Church if we can stand there and do that.