

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests, staff and fellow graduates.

Thesis title: *Adults with intellectual disability and their spirituality: voices to be heard by faith communities and the disability services sector in Victoria, Australia*

This study had its genesis some 50 plus years ago as a teenager whilst visiting the-then Kew Cottages Institution where my Church youth group sang Christmas carols to the residents. I was shocked by the appalling conditions these people were living in: the contrast with my own life circumstances could not have been more pronounced.

This seed of injustice planted a lifelong calling which has seen me live in a L'Arche community and work in a range of service and advocacy settings: community, government and the Uniting Church.

Lived experience in 1986 of serious injury from road trauma, deepened the curiosity about the meaning people ascribe to their experience. My 2006 Masters' thesis, with the Melbourne College of Divinity interviewed a number of road trauma survivors.

This was the precursor to my qualitative PhD research in which I partnered with the Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability (VALID), and interviewed 14 adults with intellectual disability. The semi-structured conversations explored the phenomenon of spirituality and its meaning for each person. Historically their perspectives and aspirations have been subject to the surmising and actions of others. Spirituality is rarely recognised within the disability services sector as being a part of people's lives. It was essential that their voices were front and centre.

Analysis of this participatory social action research revealed two superordinate themes related to friendship: connections with other people, including faith communities, and connections with God or a deity.

The research is being used for ongoing advocacy with both government and faith communities. VALID developed a new policy Statement affirming the importance of spirituality in people's lives. A similar Statement has also been developed by the Faith Communities Council of Victoria, seeking greater recognition and representation of people with disability.

This research, the first of its kind in Australia, is also having an ongoing reach: the National Disability Strategy 2021-2030 will, for the first time, include religious participation in its Outcomes Framework. The research will also contribute to an Australian Research Council project via the Centre for Disability Studies, University of Sydney, exploring the question: "NDIS: Reality or Rhetoric?"

In closing, I wish to offer appreciation to my two supervisors, Dr Alan Niven and Professor Trevor Parmenter, and to the University of Divinity for making the opportunity possible.

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