

*Dear
Friends and partners
in Disability Ministry,*

*M*ay we first of all wish you a very Happy Christmas and every blessing in the coming new year. We hope you are keeping well, and pray that you will be encouraged and strengthened by this letter and by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

EDN has had a busy year. The conference in Riga brought together 50 people from 12 countries to explore and develop the theme Bridges to Inclusion. We were thrilled to meet new people and strengthen so many friendships. Only a few weeks later we were in Tallin for the Hope for Europe Conference running the Disability Track alongside 15 other interest groups. That was a good chance to influence people in the other tracks to think more widely and clearly about being inclusive.

Thinking of the future, what will happen after Brexit? Will Europe be somehow incomplete?! The powerful message from the EDN track at HFE in Tallin was that the Church in Europe is incomplete if people with disabilities are absent. Why? Because their gifts, skills and expertise are essential if the church is to be whole and share the gospel effectively with others.

But of course you know that, and are working hard to persuade others where you are to be more inclusive, more accessible and more welcoming towards disabled people. Thank you for your commitment to the physical and spiritual welfare of disabled people in your region and nation.

We in EDN want to go a step further than inclusion and involvement. We want to see more disabled people in positions of leadership and responsibility in churches. Why can't the pastor be a wheelchair user? Why shouldn't a blind man be an elder? What's to stop a woman with cerebralpalsy preaching regularly?

We hear some good stories, but if we're honest, they are the exception, not the norm. Can you encourage us and tell us more stories of where the gifts of disabled people have been honoured and used to bless congregations and communities near you. We'd love to hear about the good examples you've seen.

We are very pleased to update you on the changes taking place in the EDN Steering Group at present. Therese Swinters has given 14 years of inspiring leadership as Facilitator, and is in the process of handing over the reins to Baiba Baikovska from Latvia. The two have been working together in the coordination of EDN for some months now, and the transition will happen gradually over the next year or two.

Baiba recounts how, when she was a year and a half old and became ill, the doctors told her parents to "leave me in the hospital, that it was not worth it to take me to school, but my parents were brave". She studied at the University of Riga, where someone spoke her about God and his ability to love unconditionally. "I understood that God loves me as a person".

Baiba longs for more disabled people to discover the "love that will never die, and will never let me go."

May the Lord bless you and keep you as you continue to serve him in 2019.
In Christian love,

Therese and Baiba

*On behalf of EDN
Steering Group*

