As a young able-bodied layperson growing up in the Australian church of the seventies to mid-eighties I had only a smattering of experience of intentionally relating to people with disability. I had little cause to seriously reflect upon the relationship of disability to spirituality—and certainly not to my spirituality.

Even though my mother taught hearing-impaired children for many years, and even though I twice volunteered as a carer on camps for young people with physical impairments, I unconsciously viewed issues of disability as being far removed from matters concerning church practice, personal faith or spirituality. Perhaps at best—or worst—I had a vague feeling that ‘they’ were included under the Christian imperative to ‘love my neighbour’. In that regard I imagine I had a number of able-bodied ecclesial allies.

Articulate voices of experience and wisdom on the issue of disability and spirituality were few, although, thankfully, through the writings of the likes of Jean Vanier (founder of the now worldwide faith-based L’Arche communities for people with intellectual impairments) and Henri Nouwen (eg The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey), the idea of integrating disability narrative to my spiritual journey began to at least assume the somewhat patronising status of an idea worth considering. However, these learned voices usually came from far away, such as Europe or North America, distant voices far removed from an Australian cultural context.

Despite the articulate endeavours of a few (eg Dr Norm Habel, Is Christ Disabled?, 1980), a lucid and consistent Australian reflection on matters of disability and faith/spirituality has only really begun to emerge and speak with any clarity in more recent times.

The idea for an anthology of uniquely Australian writings on matters of disability and spirituality had its origins in the third National Conference on Spirituality and Disability in Australia, ‘Exclusion and Embrace’, held in Melbourne in October 2001. It developed through conversation between would-be editors Christopher Newell (Associate Professor of Medical Ethics, University of Tasmania, School of Medicine) and Andy Calder (then Disability Chaplain, UCA, Victorian Synod, and now Senior Chaplain, Epworth Hospital, Melbourne) and keynote international speaker Bill Gaventa (co-editor, Journal of Religion, Disability and Health). Thus emerged the concept for Voices in Disability and Spirituality from the Land Down Under: Outback to Outfront.

As Newell and Calder indicate in their introduction to the volume, ‘these papers reflect some deep strains of spirituality and an emerging dimension of Australian spirituality with regard to disability’ (p 2).

These deep strains are reflected in a richly diverse collection of writings that include various religious and Christian denominational perspectives, personal and community narratives, social and ethical critique, as well as historical description and analysis. The authors speak
with a variety of voices from professional to pastoral, from academic to personal. Often more than one voice can be detected within the one essay.

While some contributions emanate specifically from a religious or denominational construct, all writings challenge the reader to further consider, from a disability perspective, the meaning of that already hard-to-categorise concept called spirituality—and Australian spirituality at that.

Andy Calder analyses the well-worn clichés directed at parents of children with disabilities—eg ‘God has chosen this for you’; ‘We all have our crosses to bear’—clichés intended to comfort or provide religious resolve but which, at worst, can lead to spiritual trauma or abuse for the intended recipient. He challenges the reader to consider more nurturing and inclusive pastoral responses, such as that of the ontological sense of ‘being’ and ‘presence’ (B Williams, *Naked before God: The Return of a Broken Disciple*), as well as pastoral care as a mutually enriching relationship.

Jayne Clapton employs the imagery of the Australian coloniser to question the pioneering perceptions generated by scientists, medical specialists and philosophers that have traditionally regarded people with disability as deficit beings and have therefore seen the living of their lives as a personal tragedy. She proposes an ethical perspective that affirms ‘all people as relational subjects capable of sharing mutual and respectful relationships with others’ (p 28).

Lorna Hallahan evokes the immigrant image of the journey to the distant Australian shore to deconstruct various sentiments and myths concerning the concept of community. While attacking such lies, she strongly advocates for community solidarity with those who live with disabilities, a “‘we’ mentality” (p 39) that seeks just outcomes for those isolated by institutions, experimentations and personal fears. She proposes that the reachable ‘farther shore’ is not so much a destination as a loving, moral journeying made in ‘communio’.

As if to remind the Anglo-Saxons among us that issues of spirituality and disability are not the exclusive domain of the Christian tradition, the editors have included two contributions that remind us that our understanding of Australian spirituality is enriched through the recognition—indeed celebration—of the diversity of faiths and cultures among us.

Through the poignant description of his eleven-year friendship with Stephen, a young man with intellectual impairment, Peter Hawkins, now a Buddhist monk, affirms that faith’s teaching called *sunyata*, or ‘emptiness’, in which ‘everything holds everything in being’ (p 47). He describes a way of being in intimate relation to one another that upholds the dignity of all people.

Melinda Jones, an orthodox Jew, details that religion’s law as inclusive of all social relations, and describes Judaism as ‘unequivocal in its acceptance of people with disabilities’ (p 73). However, she also raises the spectre of the gap between religious teaching and rhetoric on the one hand and practice on the other, a gap that leaves room for exclusion and the consequent stifling of spiritual development.

Through Pam McGrath and Christopher Newell we are privileged to hear an interview conducted with ‘Georgina’ days before her death from Frederick’s ataxia. We gain insights into her impairment and her friendship with her devoted carer, who interprets to the outsider Georgina’s non-verbal detailing of her thoughts and feelings. We see a non-religious spirituality defined in terms of profound friendship, an intuitively caring, connected network of friends.
Lyn Dowling takes us to a small school in regional New South Wales that caters for approximately thirty-five students with severe physical impairments and/or chronic illness. We learn of the struggles of staff dealing with feelings of loss in an environment where death and dying is close at hand, and of the need to present a ‘happy face’ to the wider community in order to procure urgently required equipment.

Leonie Reid describes the work of the Personal Advocacy Service in Western Australia, where volunteers from parish communities assist people with intellectual disabilities (many of whom are long-term residents of institutions) to participate in the sacramental life of the church.

And while reflecting on church communities, Elizabeth Mosely, a self-described ‘Lizzie-come-lately’ (p 115) in terms of acquiring and living with disability in a wheelchair, uses her poetry and anecdotes to voice her struggle to find acceptance in her all-too-ignorant church. The lack of acceptance and access is voiced through stark poetic metaphors: ‘…flotsam, caught between pillar and pew’; ‘…crows seated on a barbed-wire fence’ (p 117). She thanks God that church is more than a building and the structures and practices contained within.

Michael Steer and Gillian McGrath describe the impact of religious and philanthropic values on educational programs for blind and vision-impaired children in colonial Australia through to post-World War II developments.

Ann Wansborough and Nicola Cooper, from the Uniting Church’s New South Wales Synod, speak of the development, since the early 1990s, of the concept of action plans in assisting congregations to be more accessible to people with disabilities. Such plans are promoted as a valid means by which the church’s inclusion-oriented principles can gain practical expression in the life of the congregation as it seeks to redress issues of inaccessibility and discrimination.

Despite the authors of this collection of papers writing in isolation from the specifics of each other’s endeavours, common voices on different disability themes can be discerned. These voices, though emerging from diverse contexts, invite the reader to ponder the collective Australian spirituality implied or specifically articulated. Against the ever-present exclusionary backdrop of deficit disability philosophies and practices, of ‘us and them’ attitudes and yawning gaps between dogma and practice, a practical spirituality based around disability-relevant concepts such as caring communities and networks, ‘journeying with’, mutuality of relationship and embrace, passionate advocacy, and, of course, resilience challenge the reader to advance their spiritual understandings within our Australian context.

The other striking feature implied across these essays is that spirituality grounded in a disability narrative is essentially incarnational, to be discerned not as some esoteric musing but rather to be discovered amid the joy, pain and frailty that is the fabric of human life. It is to be found not so much from the vaunted mountain-top vista but amid the cut and thrust of caring, community-building, advocacy and practical planning.

This Australian anthology, the first of its type, builds upon a growing sense of public discussion and literary output concerning disability and spirituality and brings this issue in its manifold expressions further towards the critical light of mainstream reflection and debate. In seeking such a goal, and for the quality and variety of topics covered, it deserves critical commendation. It serves as a coherent means by which important voices may be articulated, heard and given credit. However, it also leaves the ‘hooked reader’ and the disability advocate wanting to hear other voices still largely unheard, to which end Gaventa, in his foreword, points to the Australian Indigenous community. One can only hope that this volume encourages further Australian voices to emerge.