

## **Are you sure it's meant to look like this?**

What does an inclusive church look like? If that seems an obvious question to you and the answer is "one that includes everyone", then let me invite you to answer two other questions. What are we inviting people into and whatever space we are inviting people into, are we sure that it's meant to look like that? More than what it looks like, what does an inclusive church sound, smell, taste, feel like? If you've ever been in a position of being in church where you've not been able to answer any of these questions because you either can't get in, or when you get in, you can't join in, then we begin to see what inclusion means, and how it feels to be excluded

In a church context at least, to speak of inclusive church implies that in generosity, we, who are already in are seeking to invite people into a space which already exists. Then begins the complex work of working out the complex and highly technical business of "accommodating the needs" of so many different people – where do we even begin? And haven't we got enough to deal with already?

To achieve inclusion well, there are certainly technical and practical matters to be attended to, but to begin at that point, is I suggest, to look at the question from the wrong end. In opening the doors of our churches, we are inviting people to the threshold of heaven – and getting in there was never meant to be a feat of engineering, it is a matter of the heart. It is not about accommodating or tolerating difference but about starting from our common, God given, God-breathed inheritance, that we are all, children of God.

If we start from an assumption that everyone (and I do mean everyone, not just the people that we find socially acceptable) is welcome in church just as they are, not simply to sit, but to participate and to “grow into themselves” then the questions which inclusion asks, can you participate, can you engage, can you understand and be understood, can you see and be seen, can you hear and be heard, can you find your place (and work out where that is for yourself with the support of others) will spring naturally from the relationships which we form with

people. We must be prepared to question ourselves and others  
- and listen attentively to the answers - and to God?

Physical access is important, yes, but it is only the beginning. We cannot begin a relationship with people we never meet or begin a conversation with people to whom we do not listen. Disabled or not, we cannot expect people to stay where they cannot follow what is being said or they are made to feel unwelcome. There are already ample cliches around about what proprietorial places churches can be. "That seat belongs to so and so and "this is how we do things here" but we fail to appreciate too often, how deep those things can go and what a marginalising affect they can have. All the access changes in the world will only work as well as peoples willingness to engage with Deaf and Disabled people in their midst; not as people to be managed, or dealt with as friends and as part of the church family. Being interested in the stories of others and excited by what God might have in store for them, as well as for ourselves, is the sort of thing that can change the world. Inclusion at its best is a radical hospitality where we make sure

that there is room at the table for all whom God has invited – and if necessary – we change the table, not the guest list.

Because the basis of the template for inclusion is less “planning measures” and more “Pentecost”. Less Damascus and more Emmaus – though if any of you have a Damascene moment over why inclusion matters, then truly, that is fine with me. God is not asking us to be accommodating or accepting of disabled people, but reminding us that as children of God, we are all *already* part of the body of Christ and when we realise that, the question becomes less “how can we get people in” but how and why we ever spent so long leaving them out, or pushing them away and *longing* to change it. Look around you in church. Are you sure the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God is meant to look like that?

Opening our churches in a way that genuinely invites (and therefore can include everyone), is not a question of a weights and measures, terms and conditions analysis of everything that needs to be achieved to make people fit in, or to somehow

think we're trying to get broken people into a space that's fine as it is, but rather, ways in which we are inviting everyone into a space which is fundamentally broken in order to make it whole.

No one ever successfully completed a jigsaw puzzle by repeatedly trying to jam a puzzle piece into a place where it isn't designed to go – and when people see a mosaic, they don't focus on the cement or think of the tiles as broken – they see the beauty of the picture as a whole.

The pandemic has of course opened our eyes to some of these new possibilities. Interesting how, when churches were suddenly closed to *everyone*, there was a fresh imperative to find other ways to make church work. If that experience of being shut out from somewhere you wanted to be was new to you, then it will have been very familiar to many disabled people. Imagine how much more acute that feeling is when apparently, the door is wide open, but you still can't "get in".

It is certainly true that online church has been transformative for many people and is especially welcoming of many Deaf and disabled people, but I can already hear the little cautionary murmur in my ear that tells me we must guard against “virtual church” becoming *the* place for disabled people; for suddenly churches will find that they don’t need to worry about making their buildings invitational, inclusive places for disabled people “because there is somewhere else for them to go”. Removing choice, especially by permission, is not inclusive.

I do not believe for one minute that God’s vision for an inclusive church is essentially the church as it is at the moment, with a few disabled people “tacked on” so that we who have achieved that (whoever we are) can congratulate ourselves. It is not meant to look like this. On the contrary I see a church where each can find their place, The descent of the spirit that is making this possible will mean that we will, God willing, forget how to categorise people according to what they cannot do and see them first as our brothers and sisters in

Christ and embrace and celebrate only who they are and who God has called them to be. For this inclusion will mean that not only will we notice people when they are there, but notice them when they are not – and actively seek their presence with us.

For in church, we are all at the threshold of heaven and what are vocation, calling, growth in faith if they are not an exploration of what God's purposes for us "the new creation" might look like. How dare we believe that such an act of imagination and possibility is only the prerogative of those who are not disabled, or those who already "fit" in church. On the contrary, the answer to "what church is supposed to look like" is rooted first in the hearts and minds, carried on the voices and imaginations of those we have overlooked, dismissed, discussed and pathologised for too many lifetimes.

We are a long way from that vision and even those of us who have made some progress know that there is a distance to travel; but knowing there is a journey to be made and that we do not make it alone, but in the presence of God and one another. Start somewhere, even if that means saying you don't know where to start. The will to make the journey is half the battle won. I and many others will happily travel with you.