

Report for Church Council on Inclusive Church Group, June 2016

Background

After discussions at Church Council meetings and the General Church Meeting, it was agreed at the April 2015 Church Council that Hinde Street should sign up for the Inclusive Church Movement. The meeting also set up a Task Group to examine ways of ensuring that Hinde Street is as inclusive as possible. It was suggested that the Group should review progress after one year, but report more frequently than that.

The Inclusive Church Group meetings were attended by Ann Cotterrell (chair), Elliot Fountain, Amy McNicholas, Rev Val Reid, Cathy Slater, Christine Robson and Roger Cotterrell (secretary), with specialist input from Urs Mattmann and Matt Johnson. This report is based on Roger's detailed minutes and papers from members of the Group and from Steve Lowe, Richard Shepley and Miriam Kennedy. We met six times and considered sexuality, gender, ethnicity, disabilities, economic power, age, and identity. We were not able (through lack of time) to consider mental health, technological literacy, or children under the age of 18.

Interim reports were presented to the Church Council meetings in September 2015 and February 2016. These mainly focused on the two separate issues of same-sex marriage and disabilities.

For further information on Inclusive Church, the following are recommended:

- i. Inclusive Church leaflets 'Working for an Inclusive and Welcoming Church' available at Hinde Street; the Inclusive Church website, <http://inclusive-church.org.uk>, newsletter and 6 booklets (available at Hinde Street).
- ii. *Cross Currents* issue on 'Inclusion / Exclusion', March 2016.
- iii. Abridged minutes of the Inclusive Church Group meetings which can be made available.

The Inclusive Church Statement of Belief is: *We believe in inclusive Church - church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.*

Conclusions of the Group

1. Particular categories of difference are limited in usefulness: each individual is different and may wish to define their identity, if at all, in their own way.
2. We need to incarnate in the church the sense that *all* are equally in the centre, rather than a sense of insiders and outsiders, with insiders fixing even unconsciously the terms on which outsiders are included.

3. Although the Group considered various causes of exclusion in turn, a common thread running through the discussions was the need not just for tolerance but for acceptance. This led to various principles of behaviour that are here stated in a rough draft and may require further revision:
 - i. avoid the perception of insiders and outsiders;
 - ii. avoid categorising or stereotyping people;
 - iii. avoid making assumptions about people;
 - iv. allow people to define themselves if they wish to be defined;
 - v. make it possible for everyone to participate, regardless of economic situation or disabilities;
 - vi. be aware that everyone has gifts and can contribute in various different ways;
 - vii. encourage a sense of belonging;
 - viii. use inclusive language;
 - ix. include everyone socially – make sure no-one is left out;
 - x. welcome newcomers;
 - xi. welcome diversity.

Action Proposals for Church Council

1. To send a letter to the Inclusive Church Movement suggesting a revision of the Statement of Belief to include mental ability and physical health.
2. To consider whether we should do more to celebrate special dates, eg Disability Awareness, Gay Pride, Racial Justice Sunday, and to hold inclusive services (see suggestions on next page).
3. To invite the following to think about how they can add to inclusiveness and take action:
committees for worship, property, music, communications, church life, communities, junior church, young people and pastoral work (including inviting classes to think about inclusion);
and individuals responsible for the Bible-reading rota, door-stewarding rota, night shelter, Thursday Tea-Time, Wednesday Club, and others.
 A further suggestion is a standing item for all committees to consider inclusiveness twice-yearly in relation to their field of activity.
4. To publicise Hinde Street as an inclusive church: the Communications Committee should be asked to look at this.
5. To replace the Inclusive Church Group with a small group specifically to prepare an annual report to Church Council on 'what is the Inclusive Church movement doing?' and 'how well is Hinde Street doing?'
6. To set priorities because there may be resource implications for some of the proposals listed below.

Examples of Specific Proposals:

I: Sexuality

The Church has responded to the consultation on 'Marriage and Relationships' and we are waiting for the outcome of discussions at Conference.

Urs Mattmann introduced the subject of Sexuality more broadly with reference to his book, *Coming In* and the following suggestions were endorsed by the Group:

- i. A service, perhaps once a month, might include the opportunity for someone to tell something of their life story. In this way people who might have felt previously not fully included could have a chance to say something.
- ii. Group discussion sessions monthly could explore a particular theme (e.g. sexual diversity and Christianity).
- iii. Themes related to inclusiveness could sometimes be addressed directly in sermons.
- iv. A special inclusive liturgy might be used, perhaps annually.
- v. Themes of inclusiveness should be represented in intercession and in songs used in the services.
- vi. Gay pride services could occasionally be held (such a service has previously taken place at Hinde Street)

A further suggestion was that dialogues could occasionally replace sermons and class meetings could carry forward discussion and reflection on inclusive church.

II: Disability (Cathy Slater)

It would take several pages to list all the actions the church could take to include people with disabilities, so first here are some possible resources:

The websites: <http://www.throughtheroof.org/> and <http://churchesforall.org.uk/> and three books: *Complete in Christ* on people with physical disabilities; *Treat with Special Honour* on people with learning disabilities in the life of the Church, edited by Faith Bowers; *The Inclusive God* by Steven Shakespeare and Hugh Rayment-Pickard.¹

You can read an excellent report on the *throughtheroof* website 'all of us complete in Christ' based on a questionnaire addressed to people with disabilities. It states:

There was also a deep longing for genuine friendships, which many disabled people are not finding in churches, even churches who are quite kind and welcoming. One might expect that it would be the lack of physical access or facilities such as large-print hymn books or induction loops that caused people difficulties. But interestingly, these were not . . . what the majority of answers focused on. Most people were far more concerned with the attitudes they encountered and the wish for people to understand what their lives are like or what their most pressing needs are.

So here are a few of the many things we could do:

¹ In June 2016 there will be a major conference in Rome exploring Disability, theology, practice and culture.

- i. smile, talk to, and be aware of people. More social interaction.
- ii. discover and encourage the talents, skills and gifts of disabled people.
- iii. make services more inclusive using music, pictures, silence.
- iv. disability awareness raising , both formal and informal.
- v. accessible steps, hand rails, doorways, printed material.
- vi. good lighting, induction loop, identifying sign language and lip reading skills.
- vii. encourage people to express personal choice.
- viii. include people in all activities.
- ix. seat a larger number of people per table at church lunch.
- x. ensure that disability and wider inclusion is a regular topic for classes.
- xi. encourage congregation members to be aware of people with disabilities in the community and campaign on disability rights.
- xii. help with transport.

Other specific suggestions regarding assistance with sight and hearing were included in an interim report and have led to action although there may be a need to remind everyone to speak loudly at meetings and for the chair to summarise when some people have not heard fully.

III: Economic Disadvantage

We need to recognise that there are different kinds of need: material and spiritual poverty do not necessarily go together.

It was noted that people coming to church may be deterred by its middle class aura. It is easy to categorise people as givers or receivers and not to see everyone as having gifts to contribute in one way or another. Everyone could contribute somehow: the problem is how to help them realise this.

Practical suggestions include:

- i. claim forms for people to claim expenses for attending meetings, or for the cost of stamps used for church business;
- ii. assistance with childcare costs where appropriate;
- iii. looking again at the pricing system for church lunches;
- iv. recycling of things that are not wanted;
- v. since the door stewards have a major role in welcoming people, the team should reflect the variety of the church;
- vi. since dress can powerfully signal the economic make-up of the congregation, everyone should be conscious of this.

IV: Age

- i. Young people should be more visible as readers in the morning service and a wider variety of them as readers in the evening services.
- ii. Readers are accepted on the rota only after training and there could be a case for more flexibility on this. (This proposal may have been considered already by the Worship Planning Group.)
- iii. We should avoid identifying and stereotyping people because of age but instead look at individual identities.

V: Gender

Assumptions still remain about gender roles but in some activities these are weakening. Tasks and responsibilities should be assigned and taken on according to gifts and, although there need not be an equal balance of men and women filling all roles, it is important that no one should feel debarred from taking any role they are willing and able to assume.

Practical suggestions include:

- i. The church should ask for volunteers for some roles, such as flower arranging and the tea / coffee rota, making it clear that men are equally welcome.
- ii. It might be possible to emphasise gender role in a sermon, or to discuss other aspects of gender relations in the Bible.
- iii. Consider how far we are succeeding in avoiding gendered language.
- iv. Consider having discussions and exercises in class meetings (examples available).
- v. Consider whether the church should be involved in Methodist Women in Britain.

VI: Gender, Sexuality and Language

The world is not divided neatly into two genders but there are multiple gender identities and some people do not want to self-identify as a particular gender. There might be members of the congregation of varying genders in the church but they may not feel comfortable in coming out. It is important not to impose our assumptions on them. At the same time, it is important to avoid a situation in which members of the congregation feel unable to speak at all for fear of offending.

- i. Practical suggestions include:
- ii. Using non-gendered language where possible, eg 'they' rather than 'he' or 'she'.
- iii. Matt to write an article for *Cross Currents* on non-gendered language and other proposals.

VII: Ethnicity

The principles seemed much the same as for other issues of inclusion. The Group questioned whether the church should have more explicit recognition of cultural and musical difference. This is difficult as people from minority cultures did not

necessarily want services that directly reflected their culture. As in the case of other issues for inclusion, cultural difference cannot be assumed and choice of language is important.

Practical suggestions include:

- i. The food available at church gatherings may be culturally symbolic. Cultural variety in food could help inclusion and there should be more occasions when people bring their own choice of food.
- ii. People have different culturally varied stories to tell. A way is needed to bring the stories out because they are sometimes not being heard. Dialogues might occasionally replace a sermon, encouraging people to speak from their experience.
- iii. To increase their sense of participation, people in the congregation could be invited to choose a hymn for a service, say once a month.

Finally, reaching out

Perhaps it is not strictly 'inclusive church' but the spirit of openness and concern for welcome arising through our meetings led to the expression of a wish to be more involved with other denominations and other faiths. Details of events to follow.

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Ann Cotterrell

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