

Going beyond inclusion

Accessibility

Inclusion

Belonging



Mark Arnold, Additional Needs Ministry Director at Urban Saints, unpacks how we can move from Accessibility to Inclusion to Belonging as we welcome and support people with additional needs and disabilities in our churches.

For further information, see www.theadditionalneedsblogfather.com

When thinking about how to support children, young people and adults with additional needs and disabilities, churches typically find themselves at one of three waypoints on the journey; accessibility, inclusion, or belonging. But what do each of these waypoints look like, and how do churches move on from one waypoint to the next? Let's explore what is happening at each waypoint and how we can move forward.

Accessibility: The bare minimum that churches are legally required to provide under current legislation, e.g. the Equality Act 2010. This legislation protects people from discrimination, including disability discrimination, and requires churches to live up to their anticipatory duty to make such reasonable adjustments as are possible, so that church can be accessed by everyone. This access isn't restricted to just ramps and loos, it includes a church website being accessible for a blind person, for example; it covers all areas of church activity.

But when a church meets these requirements, meaning that a child, young person or adult with additional needs or disability can access what is going on, they can still feel like an outsider, a guest, being helped under sufferance. We must move on to the next waypoint on our journey to see any signs of improvement there.

Inclusion: A development from the baseline of accessibility; churches that are inclusive actively go above and beyond the bare minimum of the Equality Act and ensure that everyone who comes is fully equipped to take part in everything that is happening. Inclusion means that children and young people (and/or their families) or adults are asked what barriers exist that make church hard for them, and then action is taken to reduce or remove these barriers. Inclusion is about the church taking positive action, not expecting a child, young person or adult to 'fit in'.

However, children, young people and adults with additional needs or disabilities can still feel like they are 'outsiders', that they are being included but have very little influence, agency, or control over what happens in church. While provision is made for them when they are at church, they don't feel missed if they are not there. We must continue on our journey to find a better waypoint.

Belonging: A place where children, young people, and adults with additional needs and disabilities thrive, along with everyone else. A place where they have an equal say in how church happens, where they can serve and lead and follow their calling and gifting, where they are missed for all the right reasons if they aren't there. Belonging is being at 'home', a full and equal part of the 'family'. Surely we all want that, don't we?

When everyone is treated equally, as those made in God's image (Gen 1:27a), then we can all give glory to God together (Psalm 34:3). When Jesus said 'Let the little children come to me. Don't keep them away. The kingdom of heaven belongs to people like them.' (Matthew 19:14), he meant all of them. He didn't go on to say "...except that one who runs around and makes a lot of noise, or that one who can't hear..." Jesus spent a large part of his ministry engaging with people with additional needs and disabilities, ministering to them, treating them with dignity and respect, and ensuring that they all belonged to his kingdom. So should we.

Belonging includes actively having the opportunity to both receive and to serve; to follow a calling and to be as involved in ministering to the community as anyone else. Kieran, a young Autistic adult, was encouraged during his teens to follow his passion for technology by joining the tech team at church. It helped him use his gifting to serve his church community, as well as making the transition from youth group to adult congregation easier for him. In addition to serving at church, Kieran now uses his tech skills to serve Christian festivals nationally.

Roots has partnered with Mark Arnold to develop a visual timetable for churches, including over 50 cards depicting church-specific activities. Visual timetables can enable children and adults with additional needs to anticipate what is happening next and more fully participate in a service or session.

See www.rootsforchurches.com/vt

