

Creative Ideas for Worship with All Abilities

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and
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Preface

The purpose of this book



'All of us are welcome and all of us is welcome.' A Parish Council meeting of All Saints Church, West Dulwich, London, fastened on this thought-provoking phrase as a neat way of highlighting the impact of people with learning disabilities on their church. Several members of the local L'Arche community are active members of this parish, among others welcomed with a learning disability. *'All of us are welcome and all of us is welcome.'* Meaning?

The first part is pretty straightforward: contrary to any mistaken idea that the church is only for certain types of people, *'all of us are welcome'* flags up that the church welcomes anyone seeking to follow Jesus, irrespective of disability or any other possible bar.

But *'all of us is welcome'*? This needs unpacking. The experience of All Saints is that because people with a learning disability are made to feel welcome, this encourages other church members to bring their own vulnerability. In other words, going to church doesn't mean leaving the 'messy bits' at the door. Jesus welcomes the whole of our humanity: not just what we are most proud of, but our places of weakness, embarrassment. An example may help: some parents with young children at All Saints consistently report that the presence of people with learning disabilities encourages them when their own children and babies are noisy. This is not because the L'Arche folk make a lot of noise (!), but rather that their presence is a sign that this is a church that welcomes each person in their full humanity. In this light, the person with a disability is helping the congregation to fulfil its mission. So, inclusion works both ways: the individual person with a learning disability certainly benefits, but so does the whole congregation. This is very much the spirit in which we offer this book.

Introduction



This book is grounded in our conviction that when a church becomes more inclusive, it more faithfully represents the body of Christ. Seen this way, inclusion is not about doing something extra, but about enabling a church to realize its own identity more fully, and so carry out Christ's mission to share the gospel more effectively.

With that in mind, Parts 1 and 2 offer a range of know-how which we ourselves have used, or seen used, to support a person with a learning disability to participate fully in the life of their church community. In Part 3, the reader will find 12 inclusive church services. Readers might like to turn to this section first, trying to imagine how these examples might work in their own church. Be creative! The tools and ideas outlined in Parts 1 and 2 are intended to help you mix and match, adapting as needed to make a better fit to your own situation. In Part 4, given that small prayer groups play an important part in the life of many churches, we offer some guidelines for planning small group celebrations and then 12 sample celebrations for small groups to use and adapt. Finally, the Appendixes make available a range of other useful resources.

We have, where possible, included many diverse real life examples of good practice. This shows that thankfully, far from being an untried theory, inclusion is very much a lived practice, helping congregations week in and week out, in both their worship and witness. Indeed, more and more churches today up and down the UK are discovering the many-sided ministry of men, women and children with learning disabilities.

A word about L'Arche

Many of the examples in this book draw on the experience of L'Arche in the UK and beyond. L'Arche is an international federation now comprising over

150 communities, spread across 38 countries throughout the world: it offers life opportunities to all its members, who include men and women with learning disabilities, their friends and carers. L'Arche was founded in France in 1964 by Canadian philosopher, Jean Vanier and two men with learning disabilities, Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux.

In Vanier's vision (www.jean-vanier.org), what has guided the work of L'Arche from the start has been the conviction that each person is a potential source of life, with something unique and valuable to contribute to their circle, their neighbourhood and to wider society. L'Arche aims to unlock each person's potential, through a combination of excellent professional skills, and an attitude of warm acceptance. It is rooted in the belief that each human being is on a spiritual quest to find meaning in their life; while each person's path is uniquely their own, we can still share the journey together: the important thing is to encourage each other's personal development, and celebrate the gifts and talents that emerge.

There are 12 L'Arche communities in the UK (www.larche.org.uk for more details), and each has experience of supporting men and women with learning disabilities who wish to participate in the life of their local church.

A word about terminology

There is no universally agreed vocabulary to describe the condition which we in this book are calling learning disabilities. The World Health Organization uses the term 'intellectual disabilities'. Others prefer 'learning difficulty'. We have opted for 'learning disabilities' and 'learning disability' as these are probably the most widely used terms today in the UK, where this book is being published.