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## **Inclusion, Mission, Disciples, Growth**

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Is inclusion work the role of social responsibility teams? A charitable project?

It's about mission. It's about discipleship. It's also about growth.

For a few years, I have been working with some Dioceses on inclusion, and how it affects the number of people in church. It's no big secret that the Church of England's overall membership is declining. Whilst there are some areas of growth, finding ways to encourage people to be part of church communities has become so important, for reasons spiritual, practical, social and indeed financial.

Following the growth patterns of some 500 Church of England churches in a region over the last ten years, some trends have become clear. These were examined from their self-declared information on access, and their stated alliance to particular organisations and beliefs.

Churches that were very sure that women could not be Priests saw a fall in their membership numbers, on average. Churches that welcomed autistic people generally grew fast, year after year. Churches that were the most accessible generally grew fastest, year after year.

What do we mean by accessible? Do minds immediately wander towards ideas of a wheelchair ramp? Inclusion starts way before that. It's about the message that says, in effect, 'We want you here. We value you. This is what's ahead in our church, hall and services. These things are what we've already done to make it easy for people to be here as leaders, as worshippers, or as members of the wider community. Here are the photos of people like you, leading, sharing, joining in. Here are the plans, the details of any access

work we've done. You are welcome, as you are, in love.? The message isn't just in words. When people turn up to the door of that church or its hall, they are greeted with love, with respect, with enabling people who are thinking, 'How can we best share life together, & what can we both learn from one another?'. Whether it is people of (e.g.) a different ethnicity, or level of income, or a different health or disability situation, a neurodiversity, age, gender or sexuality, there is a genuine fellowship and sharing.

Then, the building becomes a background part of that. Not as an act of charity towards a marginalised group, a token gesture, a tick on some audit form, but as an outpouring of love, a statement that people in all their diversity are welcomed and enabled members of that community. A large print hymn sheet, a seat with a cushion and arms, a mug with a handle big enough to make drinking from it a doable thing. A water bowl for a support dog. A reassuring arm for someone who is feeling a bit wobbly. A race to include the people in opportunities for leadership and collaboration, in ways that enable, rather than as token gestures with no thought for the person's particular needs and circumstances.

Such churches can, and often do, grow, and grow. Not because there is a ramp, but because there is love. And, of course, because there is enough knowledge, from good training and good ongoing planning.

We are all part of the One Body of Christ, all are needed, all belong. When we have turned away from someone, it's not just their faith we are potentially damaging. It is our own integrity as a church, and at the very heart of what it means to be Christian.

The statistical work continues, showing clearly that if we want to grow, we must do exactly what Jesus did. Enable all to join in, as one community, welcomed, included, enabled and cherished.

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*Ann Memmott is an Inclusive Church supporter, member of the planning team for the annual Conference on Disability and Church run in partnership with St Martin-in-the-Fields, and is a national advisor on autism.*

*There have been several studies into church growth which show a link between inclusion and growth. Here [1] is one done by the Methodist Church.*

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#### **Links**

[1] <https://gallery.mailchimp.com/755b3469edc7e4638776ccdf1/files/1c0d3e18-555b-44da-a4a3-486c9703956c/22672.pdf>