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With, Not For: A write-up of the WAVE for Change Gathering

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The WAVE for change gathering on the 21st September was an event seeking to change the conversation around learning disabilities and inclusion. People from a variety of walks of life and with and without learning disability attended, including people local to Muswell Hill in London. The ethos of WAVE is building communities where it is easy for people with and without learning disability to mix together easily, and where all are valued, irrelevant of ability or life experience. These communities include those of all faiths and none, and are centred on the idea of 'with, not for'.

Bernice Hardie from WAVE shared some of the key findings from recent research undertaken by WAVE. This research sought to explore if 'inclusive communities' really are possible, and learning what helps and hinders inclusion. Findings from the research indicate that inclusive communities indeed are possible, and that 'mixed communities' (communities including people with and without learning disability) work with activities that everyone can take part in to the same degree. This 'levels' the playing field and allows for mutual encouragement and joy. Another key point was that the more we 'mix', the easier it gets, thus the better we feel and the more likely others are to join in. Bernice named this the 'virtuous circle of connection' in her presentation. These findings point towards the vision for WAVE - that of communities where it is easy for people with and without learning disability to mix and gain mutual encouragement, joy and respect - is viable.

Next were the small group sessions. I was in a small group on inclusion in churches. Heather Payne led a small storytelling session. Her point was around the Bible having had many translations, yet we are in such

desperate need for new vocabulary around disability in the Bible. This was agreed by all group members in regards to both learning disability, and disability and neurodivergence more broadly.

We discussed the areas of barriers to inclusive communities, triggers (things that bring people into the community), enablers (things that keep people participating and coming back) and action points. Some great in-depth discussion was had around these areas. Some pertinent discussion points involved: the culture of individual churches and how we define inclusion being barriers to inclusion; invitation, word of mouth and 'having people like me' in church as gateways to joining such groups; and how the culture of the church is part of ensuring people continue to stay involved (i.e. enablers). The importance of team members, church members and volunteers modelling the desired behaviour was also touched upon. With regards to learning disability specifically, we considered aspects like communication and the language we use and the sensory environment.

The space at the gathering was mixed with people with a learning disability as valued and central to the day. For me, I always feel so uncomfortable when talking about people without their presence and own agency. The feeling in the air in the church was one of mixing and blended togetherness. This is key to the heart of an inclusive church; one that is diverse, with mutual learning and sharing. As in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14: "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body?whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free?and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many."

This quote from Jean Vanier seems fitting to end on: "When we begin to believe that there is greater joy in working with and for others, rather than just for ourselves, then our society will truly become a place of celebration."

Written by Krysia Waldock, self-described 'autistic PhDer', speaker at [Thinking Differently about God 2019](#) [1], and Inclusive Church supporter.

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Links

[1] <https://www.inclusive-church.org/disability-conference-2019>