

Kingshill Baptist Church

What I learned from an in-depth look at inclusion in its widest sense.

In 2019 as minister of Kingshill Baptist Church, we sought the help of Luke Dowding (Executive Director, OneBodyOneFaith) and as a church embarked on a series of sermons, home group studies and training on inclusion within the church; a major area of our discussions was inclusion for LGBTQ+ people.

What did I learn during this time?

- That sexuality remains a difficult and contentious subject for people of faith.
- That a church can express a position of progressive inclusion through some of their actions, but still feel unable to publicly declare themselves as affirming; thus throwing into question the extent to which they are really inclusive in the first place?
- That the most effective tool for helping people understand systemic prejudice and privilege was to hear the stories in person of those adversely affected by those systems.
- An evening panel discussion of LGBTQ+ people of faith sharing their stories was the session that had the most impact. It was evident the personal stories of real people helped listeners to have a better understanding of how church spaces can be unwelcoming and unaffirming; even when they say they could be. A number of church members talked about how this evening had helped them appreciate the personal difficulties faced by many in the LGBTQ+ community – I think some of these church members moved to a more affirming position because of this evening. I wish we had arranged for this to be longer, or for there to have been more of these evenings. An hour and a quarter was not long enough for four people to share their stories and graciously respond to audience questions. We could have easily filled two hours, probably longer, if public transport had been more accommodating (and assuming participants were willing to be part of a longer conversation).
- That even as someone who sees themselves as a progressive minister of the Christian faith; fully inclusive at heart; that I still had much to learn, and that I was in danger of making some serious and obvious pastoral errors. Small group training led by Luke was really helpful in making me see this. Being given some case studies to discuss was especially helpful and made me realise that in one such case study I would have, in my role as minister forced someone into a disclosure of their sexuality (mistakenly believing this would have been guaranteed to help their relationships with their family). I also saw a little of the impact on a person's life of having to repeatedly retell their story – I learned that coming out is not a one-time event but a costly, ongoing part of one's life.
- That the work of inclusion is exhausting; especially for those who are (often repeatedly) sharing their personal stories of coming out, being rejected, and facing prejudice for their sexuality.
- We learned that inclusion is, by its very nature exclusive (e.g. it excludes those who feel unable to embrace and endorse same-sex marriage).
- Our church still has a way to go and we have made some changes to the way we do things; but I know this is a process that we have to keep reviewing and asking ourselves and our LGB friends, "how inclusive are we, really?"