

New Road Baptist Church's Story

New Road's journey towards being more inclusive was initiated in late 2010 by our then minister, Kat Bracewell. There was nothing at the time requiring a 'decision': indeed, Kat stressed it was important to have the conversation without it being linked to - or hurried by - a specific situation.

Discussions extended over 8 months or so. A study day was followed by a questionnaire to those who had attended 'to start to gauge where we are as a church.'

Two months later, two elders from our neighbouring URC church joined our church meeting to share their stories of how their same sex orientation had affected their lives, and how different churches had treated them. In a very moving exchange, members of the New Road church and congregation then shared stories of their own.

A church meeting three months later featured small group discussion of church responses to same sex relationships ranging from rejecting-punitive to full acceptance and what each of these would mean in practice if adopted by New Road. New Road's congregation includes many accredited ministers, and potential tensions between the church's position and Baptist Union expectations of accredited ministers emerged as a challenge at this point.

No decision was taken until the next church meeting when the meeting approved a declaration that 'people of same sex orientation and practice shall have full rights, responsibilities and privileges of membership, participation and fellowship in the life of this church.'

Looking back, several factors helped us on this journey: taking our time; hearing - and sharing - personal testimony; using restorative techniques to support respectful listening and an equal voice for those whose standpoint differed; and rooting the final declaration in New Road's covenant tradition of openness and acceptance.

Many of these points are underlined by the church's more recent (2018/19) conversations about partnering with Oxford Pride in a service affirming positive relationships of all kinds. That the church would be supportive in principle was highly probable, but the need for a decision meant the conversation was rushed. The discussion was less well managed so not everyone had an equal hearing and some church members' questions went unanswered.

Our journey is far from complete. Conversations are still needed on solemnising same sex marriages and on the welcome afforded to transgender seekers after God and others whose sexuality is non- binary. Our hope is to start these conversations early in 2020, all the while seeking to listen carefully and prayerfully up God, to others and to each other.