

# **Making Church Accessible to All**

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# Making Church Accessible to All

Including disabled people  
in church life

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# Foreword

When Maggie came up to receive Holy Communion for the first time, she refused to take the translucent round wafer of bread that was offered. Her parents were understandably distressed. We had been preparing for this day for some months. Maggie was living with severe learning disabilities, but she loved church and it seemed as if she had been looking forward to her first communion. She had certainly enjoyed being part of the preparation group I had run. But something went wrong on the day. Something was preventing Maggie from feeling included.

I think it was her big sister who quietly pointed out that Maggie probably didn't recognise that little round wafer as food. Why would you take such a thing and put it in your mouth? The following week we consecrated a small piece of 'real bread' for Maggie. She never looked back.

This little story illustrates two truths about this important book. First, our churches need to change and adapt and learn how to include people, especially those with learning disabilities or autism or hearing loss or mental health conditions, who are so often excluded elsewhere. Secondly, though, we have so much to learn from others, especially the excluded, the ignored and those on the margins. The Bible is full of examples of God speaking through unlikely people—or, should we say, the people we least expect. And God is always toppling the mighty from their thrones.

Maggie was saying something important to the whole church about the nature of eucharistic hospitality. She was teaching us. Therefore, when we become a church which is accessible to everyone, we will be open to hearing everyone's voice and

we will be closer to becoming the church that God intends us to be. This book will help your church understand these issues of inclusion and accessibility. It also offers practical wisdom. Read it and the doors of your church will be opened.

*Stephen Cottrell*  
*Bishop of Chelmsford*

# Introduction

Visiting a windmill while on holiday in France, I learned the French word for chatterbox: *moulin à paroles*, literally, a ‘word mill’. I embark on writing this book acutely aware of the risk of being simply a *moulin à paroles*, churning out words to be received only with polite interest or irritated boredom.

The words and language we use are crucial for communication, but both words and language evolve and change. Words we were happy to use ten years ago are now deemed out of place. Not only that, but our language is full of jargon in almost every sphere of life, not least the church.

A book that tackles disability and the church, looking for a happy and seamless blending of the two, is almost guaranteed to hit the jargon button and cause confusion. So please bear with me as I explain some of the words and phrases that will appear in its pages, in the hope that you will read on with understanding instead of stopping the *moulin à paroles* and putting the book back on the shelf.

## Making church ‘accessible’

Many words are understood differently depending on who’s speaking, who’s listening and where they are being spoken. The words ‘saving’ and ‘redeeming’, spoken by a clerk in a bank, would mean very different things if they were spoken by a minister in a church. Words such as ‘service’ and ‘praise’ are commonly used in everyday speech but have a particular meaning in church circles.

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘accessible’ as ‘able to be reached, entered, influenced or understood’,

and ‘church’ as ‘a building for public worship or a body of Christians’. So an accessible church could be a building for public worship in which barriers to entry are removed so that anyone at all can get in, move around and make use of all the facilities.

Where ‘church’ refers to a group of people, the definition is harder. ‘Accessible’ in this case might mean that it is easy to make and build relationships and friendships there, or that visitors are easily accepted—much harder things to measure.

### **So what does ‘inclusive’ mean?**

We could say that the word ‘accessible’ is to do with the building and ‘inclusive’ is to do with the people. Being accessible makes it possible for people to gain entry and join in. Being inclusive goes way beyond that, describing how we are as people—our attitude and approach to others, the warmth of welcome for new arrivals, the encouragement and support given so that people can get the most out of what church has to offer and can feel at home there.

So that gets us beyond the book and chapter titles! What about the word ‘disability’? The most commonly recognised symbol representing disability is the wheelchair; it’s visual and easy to understand. Many people’s response to that idea is, ‘Solve the wheelchair user’s problems and you’re there, or at least well on the way.’ Statistics show, however, that only seven per cent of disabled people are wheelchair users. That still represents a large number of people, so meeting their needs is a good start, but it leaves much more to be done.

Another common misunderstanding is about the prevalence of disability in society. Many consider it to be a marginal issue affecting a small minority of people, but the fact is that there are ten million disabled people in the UK—one person in six. Among people over the age of 50, the proportion rises.

In addition, it is estimated that 95 per cent of people will experience a disabling condition at some point in their lives. This is no marginal issue that we may or may not come across. It is very much an ‘us’ rather than a ‘them’ matter, and should be seen as a mainstream issue. It needs to be brought into clear focus for attention and action so that the church of Christ becomes fully accessible and inclusive.

Think of it like this. One family in four is affected by disability. If a church is able to welcome, support, encourage and include the disabled family member, the impact on the whole family will be positive and lasting. The converse is likely to be equally true. Where a church is unprepared or copes badly with the arrival of a disabled person, not only the individual but the whole family could be alienated.

This book is in two parts. The first part looks at issues to weigh up and think about. The second is an essentially practical approach, tackling seven areas of disability, taking the theory of Part 1 and examining how to put it into practice.

Much of what is contained in this book could be described as common sense. But it’s only common sense when you know what the issues are, and that’s what you can expect to discover as you read on. You will also gain wisdom and insight from the people who have contributed to the book. Each one brings his or her knowledge and experience to bear in ways that will inform and inspire you.

My prayer is that you will enjoy the journey through these pages and respond to the challenges they contain, for there are many. By God’s grace, may we see increasing numbers of churches where disabled people are welcomed, included, encouraged and strengthened, and where their presence and gifts in the congregation bless others and make for a church that is rich in love—in short, a church that is better for everyone.



# Part 1

*WELCOME!*

# Chapter 1

## Inclusive people

*The steward pushed the church door shut and hit the panic button. The Duty Deacon came running. ‘What’s wrong? What’s wrong?’ he shouted.*

*The steward explained that there was a man outside who wanted to come into the service.*

*‘A man? That’s wonderful!’ said the DD.*

*‘Well, not really,’ said the steward. ‘You see, he’s in a wheelchair!’*

*‘Oh dear,’ replied the DD. ‘How will we get him up the steps? And what about the fixed pews? I’ll go and ask the pastor.’*

The Bible gives a very clear and positive picture of what church should be like. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul likens the church to a body with many parts, all different but all essential and valued. As we think about welcoming people into the building we call church, we start by recognising that only Christ, through grace, can bring people into the body of Christ, the people we call church. ‘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’ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Paul expands on this theme of grace in Ephesians 2. Motivated by love, God has demonstrated what is humanly impossible—salvation by grace: ‘But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved’ (Ephesians 2:4–5). People who believe and

trust in Christ have, by the grace of God, been taken from death to life. Once saved by grace and therefore made part of the body of Christ, people should not fall into the trap of looking around and comparing themselves with others, concluding perhaps that they don't fit or don't belong. It is not a matter of whether or not we are good enough or worthy of God's favour; we are not! But through God's grace we are transformed and welcome in his presence.

Paul comments on this in his comparison of the church with a human body:

*Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.*

(1 CORINTHIANS 12:15–16)

How we are made and how we fit in is part of God's amazing plan for his people and his church. Each one of us is unique, yet we each have a place to take alongside others.

Paul continues to press the argument by saying that no one may judge another to be unnecessary. As every part of the body is essential, so is every person in the membership of a church: 'The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable' (vv. 21–22).

Verse 22 is a very powerful and intriguing statement. It refers to people who 'seem to be weaker'. Disability does not equate to weakness. Sure, there may be some things a disabled person can't do, but equally there may be things they excel in. There is a danger that we may see only the person's disability and fail to see their abilities, strengths and gifts. The weakness referred

to in verse 22 is an *apparent* weakness—our perception of their weakness—based perhaps on comparisons with ourselves or others. We are not to judge like that. Such judgment can lead to discrimination and is out of place in the Christian church.

Indeed, there is much for those who are considered strong to learn from the weak, and for the rich to learn from the poor.

*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.*

(1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–29)

‘Those parts that seem to be weaker’ describes, of course, a host of people in different life circumstances, but certainly would include some people with disabilities. The surprising conclusion from this analysis of scripture is that where a church recognises and addresses the needs of people with disabilities, investing time, effort and resources into making church a better place for them, the church will become a stronger, more united, loving church—a better place for everyone.

And it works! I asked church leaders to share their stories.

## **Kerith Centre, Bracknell**

Simon Benham, senior pastor at Kerith Community Church, Bracknell, writes:

Over the last 25 years, Kerith has been on a journey of becoming more and more accessible to people with disabilities. It started with us providing signing for the deaf community on a Sunday, but now includes running a group for adults with

learning disabilities, providing respite care, support groups, advocacy and Sunday buddies for families with children with special needs, and modifying our building to include better facilities for people with physical disabilities.

This journey has transformed us as a church. Being more aware of people with disabilities has helped us to recognise that we all have areas where we struggle and where we need to make allowances for one another. We have become more real about our own struggles, more open about our own weaknesses and more compassionate about reaching out to people who are different to us.

### **Riverside Church, Exeter**

Aran Richardson is senior pastor at Riverside Church, Exeter, and has a son with learning disabilities. He writes:

Over the last few years we have seen a change in the programmes that the church offers. A sensory room has been installed adjacent to the youth and children's facilities. This space is now accessed by local school groups as part of their SENCO requirements as well as a weekly Parent and Toddler support group for parents of children with special needs.

Other programmes are delivered specifically with inclusion in mind. We aim to give all people the opportunity to engage with all our service programmes.

For example, a girl with partial sight wanted to take part in a day out cycling along the river path. Individually, this was beyond her abilities, but aboard a tandem she was able to be part of everything that happened on the day. And the arrival of a boy with autism at our Friday night youth project has led to his peer group picking up a few simple Makaton signs in order to engage with him. They are learning to accommodate him, but also to accept him as part of the group in a practical (rather than idealistic) way. This attitude holds true across the church.

A short while back, one of the young people who has autism displayed a desire to be part of the worship band. Although they didn't have the necessary ability to play an instrument, the worship leader open-tuned a guitar to the appropriate key and allowed the young person to be part of the worship set that evening. The young person strummed away merrily, and it really was a memorable evening and a great example of how inclusive we can be if we put our hearts and minds into it.

We're far from perfect, and there are many areas in which we could improve. Ultimately, Riverside exists to connect people with God and to build a community of believers, and we will continue to work towards an environment that allows that to happen for everyone.

## **Go and do likewise**

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Luke 10:25). The question opened a dialogue between the legal expert and Jesus. The man knew the law and summarised the commandments exactly as Jesus himself does in Matthew 22:37–39: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' But it was not enough for him that Jesus commended his answer. He wanted to know what was meant by 'neighbour'.

As Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, his listeners would have been shocked—not by the violent action of the robbers (that was to be expected) but by the callous behaviour of the priest and the Levite, and the intervention of the Samaritan. The hated foreigner was the one who stopped and got his hands dirty, shaming those whose calling should have prompted them to help. It's a simple enough message: keep your eyes open for people in need of help, and get stuck in.

Some church members may need extra help and support in order to be included and effective, and that's fine. It's part of the mutual respect and honour with which we should treat each other. It has positive outcomes: it promotes the concern Christians should have for one another and it minimises the risk of divisions. As we invest our time and effort in promoting equality and harmony, we will have less time and inclination to enter into squabbles and arguments over matters of little consequence.

Disabled people and their families often need help and support, some more than others. Having spotted a need, it's a matter of sensitively asking the question, 'Is there anything I can do to help?' Provided that the offer is genuine and not patronising, people will not mind being asked, and it may start off a fruitful conversation and relationship.

Obedience to Jesus' command to 'go and do likewise' may lead us to give practical, emotional or spiritual support to a disabled person. That's a great start, and to be commended. But what many people discover is that, while the initial motivation and action put them in the role of giver, it's not long before they find themselves on the receiving end. As the relationship develops, the helper is blessed by the person they are helping.

### **Judy's story**

Having been involved with *La Ciudad Feliz* ('the Happy City') project in Ecuador since the 1980s, I have been privileged to meet many of the children helped by safe housing and education.

One of these children was Paulo, an underweight, diminutive child of seven, found sleeping in the bus station of Ambato, a major city. Paulo had no hope of bettering himself, whether physically, because he begged and 'borrowed' to survive, educationally, because he had a mental age of three, or spiritually,

because no one was there to tell him that God even existed, let alone loved and cared for him. Paulo wasn't an attractive boy. He had uncorrected crossed eyes and was able to relate only to dogs, ignoring any attempt by adults to engage verbally or in sign language. Dogs somehow knew what Paulo needed, so a wagging tail or lick of the cheek brought a beatific smile to his weathered face, showing broken and rotten teeth but a twinkle in his eyes and dimples in his cheeks.

The couple who lead the family at the Happy City, Ramiro and Jenny Vega, could see the possibilities in Paulo, and I met Paulo when I went to help build bedrooms there. We incorporated prayer times, Bible study, singing and playing with the 17 or more children who lived there and those who ran through the fields to arrive for play time. Paulo always stood apart, unable to relate well with a group. I tried, by moving near him and getting him used to my presence, to involve him gradually in the fun. Slowly, slowly...

During that visit, I received news that a beloved uncle had died. Several times, I took myself away to think of him and pray for the family I couldn't join in their grief. At one of those times, I suddenly became aware of a little shadow accompanying me. It was Paulo. Somehow he was in tune with my sadness and *he* came alongside *me*, intuitively offering me the loving support I needed. Without words or touch, he was just *there*.

JUDY DIVALL, HAMPSHIRE

## The last word

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Lesley Biffen speaks about her faith in Christ and her passion for people with additional needs to be made welcome in church. She has learning disabilities and is supported by Prospects:

**Jesus is the light and the life of everything.**

# Chapter 2

## Inclusive God

*The pastor was a resourceful man and quickly directed two of his elders to go across the road to the railway station, where he had noticed a folding ramp leaning against a wall, while a third elder moved the church flowers so that the wheelchair could be put at the front of the congregation.*

*Just as the elders were about to leave the building, the steward caught them, a shocked expression on his face. 'But he also has Down's Syndrome!' That stopped them in their tracks—but they knew what to do in times of panic. 'I'll go and get the pastor,' said the senior elder.*

### In God's image

At the start of the footpath leading up from the west towards Pen y Fan, the highest peak in the Brecon Beacons, there's a National Park noticeboard explaining what you can expect as you explore the mountains. It names 'spiritual refreshment' as one of the three expectations. How interesting that the National Park authority recognises that being surrounded by the beauty and majesty of creation will result in spiritual refreshment.

At the beginning of Genesis, God says, 'Let there be light,' and the amazing work of creation begins. Water, land, plants, trees, sun, moon, stars, fish, birds, animals and people—a breathtaking array of diversity reflects the beauty and glory of God himself.

As Christians, we know why people would be refreshed by creation: it's the result of humans being made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26–27 says:

*Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the air, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

The way we are made gives us the capacity to appreciate created beauty and to be creative ourselves. Being made in God's image means that we can love, build deep and long-lasting relationships, and experience powerful emotions. We can show compassion and we can use logic and reason. When God finished creating, he took a look at everything he'd made and concluded that 'it was very good' (v. 31).

Any encounter with creation has the capacity to leave people amazed, inspired, thankful, awestruck or full of praise. Creation speaks constantly about the Creator. Psalm 19:1–4 says:

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.*

Day after day, night after night, the glory of God is being communicated, but do people notice? Scripture says that people have no excuse for not knowing about God, because his divine nature and eternal power have been openly displayed for

all to see: 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse' (Romans 1:20). Standing by the sea and watching waves break over the rocks, seeing the rapids or waterfalls on a river, or walking through a wood with the wind roaring through the trees all leave a deep impression. The stillness of a mountain lake reflecting perfectly the peaks beyond, a red kite riding the thermals above in lazy circles, or the perfectly formed petals of a rose in bloom can all touch a person deeply, triggering a desire to know the Creator as well as to enjoy his handiwork.

A young man arrived at church, entering into worship with a wholeheartedness and lack of inhibition that caught the leader's attention. The man had never been to church before. Why was he there? Well, on holiday in South Africa, he'd climbed a tree and, as he sat there watching the sunset, God spoke to him. He was converted and transformed in that moment and, ten years on, is worshipping and serving God wholeheartedly.

The spectacular variety of creation never ceases to amaze me. There are so many species of plants, animals and birds, with more being discovered every year. There are more colours than can be described by human language. The fullness and generosity in creation reflect the generosity of God and his desire that the created order should be richly varied, and, as part of that richness, that people should enjoy life to the full. In John 10:10 (ERV), Jesus says, 'I came to give life—life that is full and good.' God's love for all that he has created is clearly expressed in Psalm 145:8–10: 'The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All your works praise you, Lord; your faithful people extol you.'

Humans occupy a unique role in creation, having been given dominion over it and responsibility to care for it: ‘God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground”’ (Genesis 1:28).

God’s love for all people is expressed nowhere more clearly than in John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ ‘Whoever believes...’ No exceptions!

An awareness of God’s love changes people, as Mary’s story shows.

## **Just the way you are**

Mary came by train. She’d travelled alone and it had been a very difficult journey. By the time she arrived, she was so upset that all she really wanted was to be back home. But the welcome encouraged her to stay, and that evening I taught a song beginning with the words, ‘God loves you just the way you are, and he knows everything about you.’ Mary could not accept that; it simply could not be true. She knew what her past contained, and she was certain that, if God really did know, he would not love her.

During the following day, team members chatted with her and, by the evening, she was persuaded. Not only did she lead us in singing verse 2 of the song, ‘God loves me just the way I am’, but her whole outlook on life had changed. Her face was now relaxed and smiling, her faith in a God of love renewed.

What Mary discovered was that God’s love for people doesn’t depend on how they behave, on how they have led

their lives. Having made human beings in his image, God values and loves everyone so much that Jesus died on the cross for them. God's love is an amazing, compassionate love. It is a love that excludes nobody and discriminates against nobody—an inclusive love. This love, when expressed and understood, changes people's view of both God and themselves.

God has always been, and always will be. He has no beginning and no end; he is eternal and infinite. From our limited human perspective, this is difficult to comprehend. And God has never existed in isolation. Even when there was nothing else, there was the triune God, the Three-in-One: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The completeness of God in the Trinity is key when we are considering the nature of people in comparison with the nature of God. Genesis 1:1–2 and John 1:1 clearly link together Father, Son and Spirit at the point of creation: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters'; 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Luke 3:21–22 records the baptism of Jesus, when all three members of the Trinity made a public appearance:

*When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'*

Jesus emphasised to the disciples that they need look no further to discover the Father: 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30) and 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (14:9). The writer to the Hebrews picks up this theme: 'The

Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word' (Hebrews 1:3). The inclusive nature of God is demonstrated in the Trinity. They were together even from before the word 'Go'.

Genesis 1 concludes with verse 31: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.' Everything that God had made was good, but something was missing. In Genesis 2:18 we read that God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.' In making people in his image, God made them to live in relationship with each other. God knew that human life would be incomplete without the contribution that others could bring.

That's why church and other forms of community engagement are so important as ingredients of normal life—and this is the link into the subject of disability. It is not just that disabled people need others, although you might argue that they do, but that all of us need the company and contribution of others if we are to enjoy the 'life to the full' that Jesus offers (John 10:10).

Some people with disabilities find themselves quite isolated. They may live alone, remote from family members or even rejected by them; they may be unable to get out easily, perhaps having lots of spare time and not much to fill it with. Please don't misunderstand me here: this is not a generalisation about disabled people. Many lead a full life, have dynamic relationships and are regularly in the company of family and friends. Many are involved in work or community activities in a leadership capacity.

For those who crave company and long for an extra dimension to life, though, God has provided other people—people like you and me. And God has provided the church, a gathering of people who share his values and long to see his kingdom

made real on earth. For Christians, that may mean getting alongside people who live with difficult circumstances or have taken some serious knocks, and giving them encouragement, support, time and love so that they too can share 'life to the full'.

*High king of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,  
O grant me its joys after victory is won;  
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be thou my vision, O ruler of all.*

Once we belong to the Father's family, we become sons and daughters of God. This last verse of the hymn 'Be thou my vision' lifts our eyes to the king of heaven, the ruler of all. If he is the king, then we, as his sons and daughters, are princes and princesses. Using this kind of graphic language to explain our status in God's kingdom can help people who may have been bombarded with negative messages about themselves. We can encourage them to agree with the psalmist that they are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14) and help them to see that God's love for them was so great that Jesus died to win their forgiveness and salvation.

## **Chosen and loved**

As people come to terms with this new and perhaps radical understanding of how God sees them, they may wonder about the purpose of it all. Amazed to be loved by God, astonished to be forgiven and set free from sin, thrilled to assume the status of royalty in God's kingdom, they may ask, 'But to what end?'

The answer lies in Ephesians 2:10: 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which

God prepared in advance for us to do.’ In short, God has work for each one of us to do. It’s something that God has been thinking about for some time, and it will bear fruit. It will not be the kind of task that leaves us scratching our heads. Because we are God’s own handiwork, he will equip us fully for whatever task he calls us to. As we then, in faith, get on with it and achieve good results, God gets the glory. We are simply being obedient.

Some of the work to which God calls us may require us to make a stand against prejudice, discrimination or misunderstanding. Jesus was no stranger to such things, as the story of the man born blind illustrates (John 9). A commonly held belief in Jesus’ time, and still in the present day in some countries and cultures, was that disability or disease was the result of sin. Therefore, the disciples ask, ‘Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ (v. 2). Jesus makes it quite clear that they are on the wrong track, asking the wrong question.

As the story unfolds, the man’s sight is restored, he and his parents are questioned, and he gradually gains confidence in his references to Jesus. By the end of the story he has become a worshipper (v. 38).

Jesus’ whole lifestyle was an inclusive one. He often connected with people in a way that others in his position would not. On the way down from the mountain where he had been teaching the people about the kingdom of God, Jesus’ path was crossed by a man with leprosy. It was unheard of for a rabbi to touch a person with leprosy, but Jesus broke the taboo and set him free: ‘[The man said], “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy’ (Matthew 8:2–3).

On another occasion, passing through Samaria, he met a woman at a well near Sychar. Jesus struck up a conversation with her, despite the cultural barriers that separated them and should have inhibited any contact.

*The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.'* (JOHN 4:9-10)

Their conversation led to Jesus spending two days in Sychar, with many townspeople becoming believers as a result.

Hearing that Jesus was passing, blind Bartimaeus started shouting out and caught Jesus' attention. Jesus called him over and questioned him. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road' (Mark 10:51-52).

Jesus' meeting with the unpopular Zacchaeus was greeted by discontented mutterings from the crowd. However, there were popular results as cheated people had their money restored: 'Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount"' (Luke 19:8).

Through these unexpected encounters, Jesus brought blessing to the individual involved and often to others as well. Jesus made himself accessible to people, including them in his time, his ministry and his life. It's a pattern that we, as individuals and churches, will do well to emulate.

## The last word

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My favourite song is 'Jesus, be the centre'. For me, that says everything about Jesus.

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