

INCLUSIVITY REPORT

Introduction

What a privilege it has been for me to have had the opportunity to join you all at St Marks for part of my ordination training summer placement. Thank you to everyone who has made me feel welcomed throughout my time at St Marks. I have had the delight of spending time chatting to some of the congregation about 'inclusivity'. I asked five questions. I was not looking for right or wrong answers, but people's perspective of how they understand inclusivity in the context of St Marks and how they perceive themselves as being included or not included. I was interested in how St Marks congregation perceive themselves and whether differences within the congregation were seen as positive diversity or otherwise.

I am grateful for all the insightful and thoughtful responses that were given by all who were asked. Unfortunately, I have not been able to include every single comment in this brief report, but I have made every effort to incorporate what I jotted down at the time without compromising identity and confidence. It is hoped that this report reflects the encouraging and thoughtful responses that were made by all who participated.

Question 1. What Does Inclusivity Mean To You?

Essentially everyone agreed that inclusivity means; 'including everyone' and that St Marks works hard to welcome everyone into a "*safer space*". 'Safer' rather than 'safe' because as one person explained, "*no space is entirely safe for everyone, but we can work towards creating a space that is 'safer' for them*". I like the idea of 'safer' rather than 'safe' because it reminds us that there is always room for improvement; for further 'shuffling up and making room' for others who have yet to come through the doors of St Marks.

The policy and practice of St Marks is first and foremost is that everyone is welcome, and this was continuously reflected in the comments of those who agreed to chat with

me. In all of my conversations I discovered that there is a deep awareness among the people of St Marks, that as humans, we are diverse in our createdness, each of us with differing cultural and religious viewpoints. We are influenced by our physical and cognitive disabilities or abilities, racial and cultural backgrounds, sexuality and gender identification, all of which create and reflect unique lived experiences. St Marks creates an inclusive space for all the different factors that make a person unique in who they are, that they are respected and given room to express who they are. This is not to say that everyone I spoke to understood those who had different views from themselves. One or two expressed that although they did not necessarily agree with the lifestyle of some, they did respect that it was not for them to judge and they were glad to be in such a diverse church. Other views were more concerned with the practical aspect, for example, the slight irritation at the church “tinkering” with the language used in hymns. However, the overriding sense I received was that the people of St Marks respect and value each other beyond personal and individual preferences and every effort is made to give gracious and compassionate space for others to have a voice in the church community. This is reflected in this summarised comment from two people who have felt affirmed to be fully themselves:

“It’s important that liking or not liking someone has more to do with personality traits rather than skin colour, background, sexuality or age. I have found St Marks a safer place to be fully queer and a Christian and that has meant I have been able to be fully myself with integrity and honesty. I have been able to explore Christianity at my own pace and not at somebody else’s pace, I just wanted to have that connection with God and meet up with people who had similar journeys to what I have and to have that passion for it. Often we are expected to fit in a certain box and hit certain deadlines with expectations of what our faith should look like and it’s not like this at St Marks.”

A few people commented that they were concerned over how ‘inclusivity’ is such a buzz word now in the Church of England; everyone is talking about it. But that “we must be careful not to miss the mark of what it really means to be inclusive”. It is important that people who represent a particular sexual orientation or colour are not reduced to being just a ‘token’ of the people group that they represent to the point where they are overlooked for who they are on a personal level:

“Telling everyone that we have inclusive voices here doesn’t make it inclusive and sometimes it can mean those who are already oppressed and marginalised become even more marginalised by being exhibited as proof of inclusivity.” “We need to frame what we mean when say we are inclusive so that it is not related to a privileged stance of what is presumed to be normal or acceptable.”

The above comments show that although inclusivity at St Marks is positively affirming especially for LGBTQ+ people, we must also remember that *“no one LGBTQ+ size fits all, the people who are within the bracket of LGBTQ+ are on a journey as well as those who are learning to include them”*. On either side of difference comes the responsibility to not allow ourselves to limit our thinking and understanding to *“media endorsed labels or categories”* to remember that people slip up and make mistakes, whether we are on the ‘receiving end’ or ‘giving end’ of what is often a misunderstanding. The people of St Marks show grace by giving each other space to learn and grow. Such grace and willingness to understand each other is evident in all those who I had conversations with:

“I have found St Marks very supportive - allowing me to be me...I can be outspoken.”

“Good communication - people of different views - some are more vocal than others, but it’s important how we hear each other’s voices.”

“What makes St Marks attractive to me is that it is a liberal church in the sense that it welcomes everyone irrespective of background, points of view, sexual orientations and ethnic nationalities, “I would like to think that we have no discrimination at all in our church community”

I think it is impossible however well-intentioned, to have “no discrimination at all”, but this comment is the expressed heart felt desire of those of St Marks; to be a discrimination free community. There is an awareness that the demographic of the congregation of St Marks has less of those from ethnic backgrounds, less highly educated and those who are economically challenged. These people groups are not represented in the same quantity as the community at large which would reflect further diversity and inclusion. This I understand is not through the lack of effort and concern

of the leadership team or the congregation's desire to welcome and connect to others through relevant activities and programs as one pointed out:

"I understand that St Marks is aware that they are not ethnically diverse and I know it's not for the lack of trying per se, but it's the area St Marks is in and the people they attract tends to be white, educated and middleclass and it's not a world I would normally fit into."

However, for those who are from ethnic backgrounds they notice the gap more personally than others:

"We used to have international day – very good – bring friends along too, at the beginning there were more people of race".

"...I sometimes feel uncomfortable at how white it is..."

"I had a catholic up bringing, but my church still had a lot of people from different ethnic backgrounds and I miss seeing people like them in our congregation."

The 'Black Lives Matter' movement that has gained media attention in recent months has helped churches and other organisations across the nation to reassess ways in which to increase inclusivity of those from ethnic and cultural backgrounds. A reflection was written by a member of the congregation of St Marks who described their experience of being racially profiled, *"I think it brought it home to some people because it is affecting someone they know personally"*. The reflection has given St Marks a deeper understanding of the issues and seeks to practically and prayerfully find new ways to further embrace those from ethnic backgrounds and cultures.

Question 2. How Do You Feel Included In St Marks?

When I asked the above question the overall majority of those I asked, said that they felt either *"welcomed"*, *"valued"* and/or *"listened to"*. The sense of genuine friendliness of people when they first arrived struck many of those who I spoke to:

“We moved from a previous church wondering where we could fit – do we fit? Can I give anything to this church?.....the sense of LOVE in the building and among the people – within weeks, hospitality was shared with us.... we feel like St Marks is a church family and that we matter.”

“When I saw the display board - told me that I am wanted here and welcomed in this space”

“When we first arrived, there were a few individuals that made us feel really welcome... we have enjoyed the ‘night services’ and enjoyed being at the ‘service on the green’.”

These above comments show the welcome and acceptance felt on arrival, others spoke of growing sense of acceptance and support as they began to trust others to treat them well:

“...it has become my support system, my family – I feel at home here after moving around different churches before....as time has gone on, I feel it’s easier to be a part of it as myself.”

“I really appreciate ‘respect’ – which is different to being tolerant....feel respected...people look for strengths and qualities here – not labels.”

Some spoke of their involvement in the church as being an integral way of being included, for others, involvement has varied over the years from being fully involved to not so much or in a different way:

“We feel included by being involved in the church activities and serving wherever we could. We are practical people and being hands on has helped us to be fully integrated into the church community.”

“I used to be involved in the children’s work when the children were young, not involved as much now – but still come – it feels more familiar to me than churches that cater more for my cultural background.”

"I have had waves of involvement – depending on work and family commitments... actually feel more included since zoom – more accessible."

None of those who expressed that they had less involvement now than they had before, because of family or work commitments, stated that they felt any less connected to St Marks as their home church. This shows that people's connection to St Marks is not dependant on involvement as in 'what are your gifts and where can you serve?' but that St Marks welcomes you as you are with the space to grow in the gifts and expression of who you are in God.

One or two spoke of the everyday challenges for those with disabilities and how they felt that at St Marks they were not seen as just disabled, but rather they were fully seen:

"...really supported here – not just because of my disabilities, but because they see me, not just my disability.... received practical help rather than just prayer from church family has really helped me feel included even more..."

"I am glad that it [disability] doesn't get in the way..."

St Marks has an awareness of disability but works hard not to focus on the potential limitations in an effort to see the person for who they are and to help them flourish. One commented on how *"...hymns with healing in them..."* made them feel uncomfortable because:

"...I should be accepted as I am and not see my disability as something that needs to be healed..."

The above comment highlights how challenging it can be for those who do not have a disability to understand the perspective of the those less abled, but St Marks have and continue to address such everyday exclusions that those with disability encounter. Some particularly mentioned how grateful they were for the curate who has raised the profile of everyday challenges for those with disability:

“...the curate has helped to raise the profile of disability and how language in prayers and songs need to be inclusive of those who are affected by a disability – really grateful that this is something St Marks are aware of - hymns often portray being ‘broken and being fixed’ or ‘I was blind and now I see’ and these phrases can be difficult for those who live with a disability.”

The above comments shows how the raising of the issue of exclusion through disability makes a difference to how inclusivity is interpreted, and in this case, those with disability are aware that the church continues to be willing to respond with compassion through both the leadership team and the congregation.

Question 3. What Would You Say You Struggle With The Most At St Marks? Language, Liturgy, Music, Activities Etc?

The third question was asked to see if there were any issues around inclusivity that came across in the practical and liturgical workings of St Marks. I think it is fair to say that some of the Church of England’s worship resources can be an area of difficulty for some, especially for example, the ancient language of hymns. This was raised by several of the respondents, some of whom appreciated the efforts that are made to minimise this:

“St Marks is really good at updating the words of songs to gender neutral terminology which I really appreciate that some of the old hymns are definitely of their time and we are no longer in those times and our music should reflect that as well as staying respectful to tradition.”

“A lot of effort has been made to involve new people and change way things are done so that people feel more included, even trying to add more diverse music styles not just the typical western themed tunes.”

“...very inclusive – glad that we don’t have to say the creed, but affirmation is good....prayers that include God as a verb and not a noun is good...sometimes language of worship can be a bit abstract – we talk about God rather than to God..”

However, one or two mentioned that when the language of hymns are “*tinkered*’ with to be more inclusive, this can also be uncomfortable for those who have a long history with singing familiar hymns or saying prayers in the old English language:

“....words can be unfamiliar to what I am used to and can be off putting when I am singing a Hymn I know, but they have changed the words....”

“ I am used to saying God the Father, but I understand that sometimes we need to have other versions...”

It is understandable that those who have sung and prayed well known verses for a long time would find it “*slightly irritating*” to adapt to new inclusive words but nearly everyone understands the reasons for doing so, even if the implications of new words made it less familiar for them. Many, if not all, were happy with the content and styles of worship as one couple summarised:

“We like the fact that St Marks has inclusive style of worship – it adapts to the needs of the congregation. While we remain comfortable because it has remained broadly church of England, there have been occasions where a tinge of incense has been in the air at some festivals - other times it has had a very informal feel with no robes etc, but it always stays within the frame work of Church of England and we like how St Marks does that”

The above comment reflects the diversity and integrity of worship at St Marks, many spoke of their fondness of the choir which at the time of writing had been unable to sing due to the covid pandemic restrictions. Worship is very much a personal experience as well as a corporate experience and one person commented that although they are fond of the styles of worship at St Marks, they did “*...miss the lighter choruses being sung - devotional songs that gave you a chance to seek the presence of God – to worship God, to address God..”*. Another person said that there was good

use of *“progressive metaphors for God”*. But that the worship language tended to be more *“abstract – talk about God rather than to God...”*. Another person mentioned that the *“Taizé chants are a bit removed from actual Taizé style”*. Another stated that they would *“...like to see more charismatic move of the Spirit...”* What these comments show is that perhaps a reflective, intimate worship style is what is longed for by some and that this may be something to consider for St Marks. Of course, this would require more time in planning and implementation and with such a busy team it might not be possible now, but something to think about in the future.

One respondent commented that although St Marks is a *“good thinking church - theology and reflection”* they found that it could sometimes feel like *“overkill”* in its’ aims to not *“upset anyone”*. However, they concluded that this was more to do with *“wanting to do things properly with excellence and not to hurt people...”* which they appreciated, because the *“people here really do care!”*. Furthermore, they commented that it would be good *“if they allowed more new people to bring new ideas and gifts”* to help the *“possibly overworked”* leadership team.

Another area that was mentioned in the discussion of struggles was the geographical location of St Marks and how it affects their relationship with the community outside its’ walls. It was frustrating for some, not being able to connect to an immediate residential area, mainly that the *“building is not central to a community – it’s on a busy main road next to the hospital, not in a residential part of the parish”*. It was acknowledged and appreciated that the leadership team *“had made lots of effort to connect with the community of Broomhall but with limited success”*. That said, much was made of St Mark’s positive involvement in ‘Sheffield Pride’ which is thoroughly appreciated and enjoyed by those involved in it and it was highlighted by one or two, that the *“inclusive communion is a fantastic resource for those who can’t access communion as themselves”*.

One person mentioned the ‘soup run for the homeless’ that they were involved in, and how that it had made them feel more connected to the local mosque and wider community. For others they felt that St Marks was excellent for those who were *“seeking-searching, asking questions on different journeys and on various stages of*

that journey". Many of the congregation travel into St Marks rather than live in the adjacent area, a fact that was highlighted by a parish weekend away: *"The activity of 'human bingo' revealed that not many people of the congregation actually live in the parish."* This situation is unlikely to change significantly because the immediate area of Broomhill is primarily made up of small businesses and a Hospital rather than residential dwellings. However, many mentioned that they hoped that the residents of Broomhall would be in the congregational demographic of St Marks in the near future.

Question 4. What Would Your Perfect Church Look Like?

Sometimes our dream of the perfect church is very different to how we experience church. A wide range of different ideas were expressed in the answers to question 4. Some were adamant that there *"is no such thing as a perfect church"* and one went as far as to say *"if you have found a perfect church, don't join it!"*. Such comments show that a perfect church may not be attainable, however, one person did state that:

"Perfect church is St Marks! Because it has been my support system, my family - I feel at home here after moving around different churches before."

How wonderful to hear the above comment! Almost everyone who spoke of their perfect church kept St Marks close in mind when expressing their ideas. Some thought of their perfect church from a philosophical perspective: *"A hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints"* or *"It would be where the church tries to be all that it can be – holds everyone in compassion and allows differences to be expressed."* Others came from a more 'major building improvements' perspective, thinking that by adding a *"swimming pool"*, *"A Gym"* and/or *"a set of heavenly bells"* these would make St Marks perfect. However, there were those who mentioned more practical improvements that would make St Marks more of: *"A flexible church – where we could rearrange the furniture for different creative services – movable pews on wheels would help!"*

Some of those who were asked also spoke from more of a relational perspective, where the demographic of St Marks' congregation could be improved with:

“...one or two adjustments – would be nice to see more economically disadvantaged people in the congregation...” “...perhaps more input for lay people – lots of professors and ex vicars, but it would be nice to have average people having a go”.

“...would like to see more children – need other children for the children to make friends with..”

“I’m a big fan of the parish system and would love to see more of the less affluent families and young people...”

“I would like the church to be known to the local and wider area, that it’s here for them not just for the congregation...Broomhall has a Somalian population...we don’t hardly get anyone from there...”

The above comments show that there is a concern for the absence of those who are economically less well-off, children and those of a different cultural background in the congregation and that by having them included would create a more ‘perfect church’ demographically. The above comments also shows how the idea of a perfect church is connected to the desire to ‘include all’, it is not just about those within the existing congregation being included, but that there is also a longing to include those who are ‘missing’ from the congregation too.

Other factors that were also mentioned in making St Marks more perfect, with one or two adjustments, included the worship services: *“...like to see more variety in the worship services”* or that they would *“...like to hear more biblical exegesis in the sermons sometimes”*. It was also enthusiastically stated that the *“music is great!”* and *“...love the fact that we have an all women team!”* which also added to the concept and reality of what a ‘perfect church’ looks like at St Marks.

Question 5. How Has Covid19 Affected Your Experience At St Marks?

The discussions created around the above questions were held during the Covid 19 pandemic that had been causing havoc across the world since the beginning of 2020. Churches across the UK were closed during the strict lockdown from March until August, meaning that some of those who I talked to had not stepped into the church building for 6 months or more. The final question was to find out how everyone had coped with the Covid crises and how it had affected their relationship and connection to St Marks.

Generally, everyone was positive about how St Marks has kept in contact with them in one way or another. For some, Zoom Sunday services had made life easier: *“we were often a bit rushed on a Sunday morning, but now we are never late for a Zoom service!”*. Everyone appreciated the creative effort that has gone into making Zoom services accessible to everyone as possible. Although some expressed that they did not like to connect through Zoom, they preferred to *“sit in the memorial garden on a Sunday instead...”* Or another said they preferred *“...to listen to Radio 4 service....while we wait to see people once this is all over.”* Others stated that they struggled with the fact that:

“...my home has become my workspace and now I am being asked to have church in my workspace – it’s all a bit conflicting really.”

“I’m finding it hard to interact via Zoom in the 10am service, we did try at the beginning and enjoyed Holy Week but we have found the other Zoom services difficult on top of other commitments.”

“I have struggled with my laptop speakers which hurt my ears...makes it difficult to connect with the service properly.”

The above comments show that the struggles are related to the physical and technological adjustments to living, working and connecting to church, all in the same space. However, for some, the experience of Zoom has made church more accessible

for them, especially for those who could not physically make it to a normal Sunday service in the building, they are now enjoying the newfound connection:

“Zoom services has been great during Covid period – I have felt more connected to the Church.”

“Love the night service – haven’t been able to access it for years, but now that it is on-line its great!”

“Morning prayer works really well via Zoom – feel more connected.... communication is better - more focused and efficient...”

“I can attend all the services I want which is great...and tap into other things too like the CofE disability chaplain or daily office”

“Morning and evening prayer over Zoom has been a life line for me and I think when we get back.... I shall really miss that”

“I stay connected to church family through ‘coffee group’ over Zoom”

“It is good to Zoom – impressed with the technical quality...enjoy the small breakout groups after the service...”

“...bring and share service – easier for people to contribute over Zoom...”

The above comments show that Zoom has created a positive link between people and church that has not been used before. Like many churches across the UK, operating Zoom has been one of the solutions in keeping and creating new connections with people within the congregation and those who were on the fringe. Although some expressed that it is a life-line and that they would miss the aspect of Zoom once everything returns to normal, or a new normal as the case may be, others expressed that Zoom has not filled the gap of being in the church building and/or meeting together:

“...I’ve really missed being in the building more than I thought I would...”

“Miss being in the building and chatting to people.”

“We have missed the Eucharist...seeing people of all ages taking communion was a big draw for me....so important that we gather together to share communion.”

“Miss seeing the local people, but not the services.”

“The services can be too loud for me sometimes...I prefer the 8.00am service now, it’s quiet...I really like the homilies - straight from the heart...communion on screen – doesn’t work - it’s like watching Catholic Mass - don’t feel a part of it...”

“...prefer to see people face to face, will be glad when this is all over...it’s such a lovely lively church to belong to...I don’t know what I would do without it – feel nurtured.”

From the above comments we can see that being together as a church family in the church building, sharing communion is a strong connection that people are missing and that they look forward to coming back together again to celebrate the goodness of God with all his people in the Eucharist. At the time of these conversations, St Marks had only just started to open the building for appropriately socially distanced services that were also accessible via Zoom for those who could not attend in person. The thought of returning to the building and sharing in the services, although not in the same way as before, was palatable to all who had expressed how much they had missed being together as a church family.

Summary

The task I set myself was to find out what inclusivity means to the people of St Marks and whether they felt they were included and or not included. Furthermore, I wanted to explore how inclusivity is understood from the congregation of St Marks’ perspective. What I heard was that there is a strong link within the responses between diversity and inclusion. The more diverse the congregation the more inclusive they feel they are being and that this is a clear priority for both the leadership and the

congregation. Grace and willingness to understand and make room for each other is evident in all those who I had conversation with. What came across was the heart felt desire of those at St Marks, to be a discrimination free community. This was evident in four ways, the first two are the successful ways that St Marks has taken steps to affirm and include. Firstly, the comments of appreciation from all who are LGBTQ who stated that they felt welcomed and free to be themselves at St Marks. Secondly, the comments of gratefulness for the curate in raising the profile of disability in St Marks, comments were from those who are affected as well as those who are keen to accommodate. The other two evident areas had more to do with the awareness of the existing gap in the congregation which reflects the need for further inclusion. Firstly, there was appreciation for the BLM reflection that was written from a personal experience of racial profiling and discrimination, from which the concern was voiced that the current demographic does not reflect equal representation of those of ethnic minority backgrounds and the desire is for this to change. Finally, there were comments reflecting the concern and awareness for those who are less highly educated and on low income to also become more represented in the congregation of St Marks. It is understood that St Marks seeks to gain further understanding of the above issues and seeks to practically and prayerfully find new ways to further embrace those from ethnic and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. It is encouraging to find that the leadership and the sample group of the congregation are supporting the same goals and desires to be inclusive to all, both within the congregation and the wider community. There can often be more of a split between clergy and laity, so this is very positive. Clearly those who participated in the discussions with me have a heart for inclusivity and they see that this is reflected in the leadership and in each other. I can conclude that St Marks represents a church that is continually prayerfully and thoughtfully working towards creating a 'safer' space through the use of loving liturgical language and practice.