

# Welcoming, Open and Inclusive: a study

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## Introduction

A church that is welcoming, open and inclusive has the following characteristics:

- welcome for newcomers and visitors that demonstrates genuine love,
- welcome and inclusion of those from different backgrounds and with special needs,
- a joyful desire to develop new relationships with people and groups,
- a willingness to welcome diversity and see it as a strength,
- help for people to develop real and accountable friendships in the church, and
- inviting people into the full life of the church.

*MAP for Derby Diocese*

The following study is structured into three sections, each of which draws on the New Testament to examine one aspect of a church being welcoming, open and inclusive:

- *Being Welcomed into the Household,*
- *Diversity in Unity,* and
- *Embracing Conflict.*

Each section includes questions to encourage reflection on aspects of the characteristics of a welcoming, open and inclusive church.

## 1. Being Welcomed into the Household

When you read or hear the word 'church' what images come to mind? Perhaps you think of a particular building, perhaps the building in which you gather regularly with others to worship God. Or perhaps you think of the people with whom you gather regularly to worship God, what might be called a 'worshipping community'. In the New Testament the word 'church' (Greek *ekklesia*) is often used to refer to a worshipping community which

gathers in a particular place, for example:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. ... Greet also the church that meets at [Priscilla and Aquila's] house. ... Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. ... Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.

*Romans 16.1, 5a, 10b, 11 (NIV)*

To the church of God in Corinth

*1 Corinthians 1.2a (NIV)*

You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia ... Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.

*1 Corinthians 16.15a, 19b (NIV)*

To the churches in Galatia:

*Galatians 1.2b (NIV)*

Give my greetings ... to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

*Colossians 4.15, 16 (NIV)*

The churches to which Paul wrote his letters were typically households. Households formed the basis of 1<sup>st</sup> century Graeco-Roman society. They were considerably broader than the 'nuclear' family with which we are familiar in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. In Graeco-Roman society a household included not only immediate relatives but also the household slaves, freedmen and freedwomen, hired workers, and sometimes tenants and partners in trade and craft. The head of the household – *paterfamilias* – would be expected to exercise authority over his (typically) household and

would have some legal responsibility for it. It is within this context that Paul wrote letters to churches across the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. When we read or hear the word 'church' in Paul's letters, we might want to imagine the letters being addressed to – and received by – a household gathered together as a worshipping community, possibly joined by some individuals with little or no pre-existing connection with the household, for example traders and new converts.

## Questions

1. Think of a time when you have visited a friend's home. What has made you feel welcome? What has made you feel unwelcome?
2. How might individuals within a worshipping community seek to make visitors to their worshipping community feel welcome?
3. How might a worshipping community corporately seek to make visitors feel welcome?
4. Thinking of people you call 'friends', how are 'friendships' started, nurtured and sustained?

## 2. Diversity in Unity

Within each household there would be a hierarchy based on differences between individuals and groups of individuals, for example *paterfamilias* and household slaves, men and women, adults and children, patron and clients. In addition, there would be diversity within each household based on other characteristics, for example wealth, ability, ethnicity. In his letter to the church in the city of Corinth and in his letter to the churches in the province of Galatia Paul makes clear that this diversity is held together in the unity of Christ; it is not to be used to distinguish between Christians, for example by privileging some at the expense of others.

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 baptized 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.

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.

*1 Corinthians 12.12-15 (NIV)*

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

*Galatians 3.26-28 (NIV)*

## Questions

1. As you read the two short extracts above from Paul’s letters, what word or phrase stands out? Why does it stand out?
2. What diversity might be present within a worshipping community in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain?
3. How might diversity within a worshipping community enhance:
  - a. the worshipping community’s understanding of themselves and the wider community of which they are part,
  - b. their understanding of God, and
  - c. their worship of God?

## 3. Embracing Conflict

Conflict is inevitable because we have different expectations, different perspectives, different understandings, different experiences, different

traditions. Conflict is not something to be avoided. It is not a sign of failure. Handled well, conflict can be a source of mutual learning, an opportunity for mutual growth. Handled badly, conflict can lead to the breakdown of relationships and, in the worst case, to the creation of factions. The extent to which we – as individuals and as a worshipping community – are welcoming, open and inclusive reflects our willingness – as individuals and as a worshipping community – to accept conflict and to handle it well.

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is

through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

“After this I will return  
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.  
Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,  
that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things’ —  
things known from long ago.

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

*Acts 15.1-21 (NIV)*

Acts 15 provides a report about a conflict within the early Church between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians: should Gentile Christians be required to be circumcised. Jewish Christians who travelled from Judea – the location of the Jewish church – to Antioch – where Paul and Barnabas were active in growing the Gentile church – drew on their traditions – the law of Moses – to insist that Gentile Christians should be circumcised. The

ensuing conflict – ‘sharp dispute and debate’ – between these Jewish Christians and the leadership of the Gentile Church in Antioch was handled by sending Paul, Barnabas and other Gentile Christians to Jerusalem to seek the guidance of the first Apostles (e.g., Peter and James).

The report of the discussion in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 provides a glimpse into how the early Church handled this conflict. Paul and Barnabas drew on their experience of God working in the lives of Gentile Christians, Peter drew on his experience of being called by God to visit the Gentile Roman Centurion Cornelius (Acts 10, repeated at Acts 11.1-18), and James interpreted Peter’s experience through the lens of Scripture (primarily Amos 9.11-12, and other related texts from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Zechariah). The outcome of this discussion was that Gentile Christians were not required to be circumcised, although they were required to adhere to certain Jewish purity laws.

## Questions

1. As you read the extract above from the Acts of the Apostles, what word or phrase stands out? Why does it stand out?
2. What challenges might diversity within a worshipping community present to the worshipping community? How might these challenges provide opportunities for the worshipping community to grow?
3. What challenges might diversity within the wider community of which a worshipping community is part present to the worshipping community? How might these challenges provide opportunities for the worshipping community to grow?

