

Wavemaker Spotlight: The Wave Church story

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Most churches seek to be places of welcome and acceptance for all. However, there is often anxiety around if and how to include individuals with learning disabilities and their families in regular services and activities.

This story is about how a group of us, some of whom have a family member with a learning disability, decided to create a place where people of all abilities could worship God together. We didn't have any special experience when we started. We just wanted to do something!

How it all started

In 2008 at St James Church in Muswell Hill (North London) there were several families with a young person with learning disabilities. Many of these young people were in, or had gone through, mainstream education and they enjoyed the church's youth programmes. However, as they neared adulthood they, and their families, felt increasingly isolated.

A group of mothers – Bernice, Kirsten, Celia and Andrea - met to talk about these struggles. They believed firmly that in God's eyes everyone is valued equally but how could this be practically demonstrated?

The families were at different stages in their journeys. Bernice and Kirsten were looking for ways in which their teens/20s daughters could develop their faith. Celia and Andrea had younger children and were looking to the future.

What were the barriers

The youth work at church was great and inclusive for many of the young people, although not geared up for those with more severe disabilities. However, after the age of 18, when many contemporaries went off to university, the opportunities diminished. Some parents felt there was an assumption that their young people were not capable of developing a spirituality of their own, sometimes being treated as children.

Bernice could see that her daughter struggled with the format of the long services. Kirsten, who had accepted the limited experiences her daughter could have in church, says her eyes were opened by Bernice's commitment that church could, and should, be more accessible for their daughters.

Kirsten, Bernice and Mary were regulars at Spring Harvest where Prospects (now Livability) held worship meetings that the young people enjoyed. Surely there must be a Prospects group somewhere in North London – but sadly there wasn't.

The trigger to do something

The group of mothers knew they needed to do something and the idea crystallised around their chosen name, WAVE – We're All Valued Equally.

Prospects* seemed a good place to start and Bernice, Kirsten and Mary went to a Prospects conference. There they met Susanne, also from North London, who had come along because she had a passion for inclusion. The seed was sown and together they organised a training day in Muswell Hill, with people from several churches joining in. Pete and Christine Winmill (now known as Count Everyone In) demonstrated how clear language, Makaton signing, drama and visual imagery could help people of all abilities to worship together in a meaningful way.

The group was now expanded by others from the training day. Most had some personal or professional connection with learning disability (as parents, friends, teachers or therapists), and their awareness of the gap that needed to be filled probably helped to fuel their commitment. While nervous about what they were taking on, the training day had given them the confidence to make a start.

*This organisation is no longer running

The key steps to starting Wave Church



Bernice did a talk at St James and a handful of people came forward saying they wanted to be involved. Ruth was the first to sign up. When she first moved to London in the 1960's, she had stayed with a family who had a child with a learning disability. She never forgot the spirituality and faith demonstrated by this young woman in prayer – she instinctively knew that this was an area of ministry that she wanted to be involved with.

Some people invited to get involved (because of their connection to learning disability) were initially uncomfortable or uncertain about the idea. A number of them however, on seeing Wave Church in action, joined in and have remained faithful members.

Over the years others have joined us, not because they have lived experience of learning disability, but because they believe that God values us all and they want everyone to be able to worship Him in their own way.

Our fledgling group came together to plan and pray.

- We found a venue - the local Methodist church – where Gill the administrator was keen to attract new community groups and excited about the idea of Wave Church. It had a comfortable, suitable-sized, accessible room and good parking
- Although we expected to start using a CD player for the music, a couple of weeks before the first meeting we found a musician (the son of a friend) who played the guitar and, aided by the Prospects songbook, found songs that were clear and easy to sign using Makaton
- One of our team, Judith, was a SEN teacher with experience of Messy Church and she provided invaluable advice on creative activities that would involve everyone without being childish

Taking a leap of faith, the first Wave Church service took place in June 2010, on Disability Sunday. A small number of people from several local churches heard about it and came along (this ecumenical approach remains very important). For the first couple of months we prayed for new people to join us. It was a slow burn and several months before the first new person arrived.

We kept the services short and straightforward. As Mary says, “we learnt on the hoof, observing how people responded, talking to them about the activities they enjoyed and paying close attention to attention spans”.

Music was, and remains, a very important element of each service.

Gradually we found a format that worked for us:

- We sang the same songs at the beginning and end of every service and kept the overall format broadly consistent from month to month
- We projected the words of songs and readings onto a screen and illustrated them with symbols and pictures.
- We used a visual timetable so people could easily see where we were in the service. This was a simple pole with pictures of each element of the service (song, prayer etc) attached in order. (Note: the timeline is now on our PowerPoint slides!)
- Members with learning disabilities took an active part in the service – co-leading, joining in the drama, doing the bible reading, keeping the visual timetable updated
- Bernice's daughter was a very proficient Makaton user but we needed help with specifically Christian signs. Our first attempt to find a Makaton specialist failed but a year later we found Becky, a Christian who was considering how she might use her signing skills (subsequently she has made recordings signing Christian songs – see Becky Makaton Tutor on YouTube)
- We discovered some of the team were wonderful bakers. Tea and cake after the service became a really important time for one-to-one and small group chatting – about the good things and the troubling times. Always remembering that we weren't creating child-like Sunday School, we became sufficiently confident to tackle more challenging topics, covering Fruits of the spirit, Armour of God and the Trinity. The talks have always been a key element of each meeting and, using experience and God-given insights, we worked hard to get to the core of an issue and present it simply. It takes practice! We talked about the meaning of Holy Communion and a local vicar started to attend once or twice a year so we could share communion together.

Transformation seen

Over a decade later Wave Church still meets monthly (during the 2020/21 lockdown we even managed a monthly online service).

Various Christian media have covered our story over the years. We've featured on BBC's Songs of Praise. Wave's co-founders Bernice and Celia have been honoured with the Archbishop of Canterbury's Langton award for community service. And yet it is the small transformations that we've seen amongst our Wave Church community that mean the most.

- The non-verbal member who arrives confidently with a huge smile, seemingly because he recognises Wave Church as a place that's warm and caring – and the excellent cake helps too!
- The woman who reminds us of core biblical truths in her simple but expressive way, and who humbles many of us with her prayers showing great care for others in the group and the wider world

The sense of community that has developed with people showing real joy when they get together – and a sense that we can just be ourselves

We originally set out to start a church service for people with learning disabilities. Our approach is no longer 'for' but rather 'with' – we do Wave Church with each other. And, as we've discovered with other Wave activities, it's often amongst the people without disabilities (who come as parents, carers or simply as interested supporters) that the greatest transformations are seen.

- One attendee says it's the most uplifting service she attends, where Jesus' love is so clearly manifested
- Another says it has helped her with her own faith as things are explained in a clear and straightforward way whereas in mainstream church those basics can be lost
- Through a couple of invitation services (when we invite people to come and experience a Wave Church service) and joint services with St James Church, we've seen wider attitudes change. St James now includes people with learning disabilities in regular services, doing the reading and leading prayers.

Our numbers have grown gradually as more people hear about us and we now meet in a larger space at the Methodist Church. Our desire is to keep smallish (40-50 people at absolute maximum) to retain the close-knit feel. Three other Wave Churches have been established as a result of connections made with us but our prayer is for many more. The fact that one of our members travels right across London to join us each month, because there is no inclusive church service in his area, shows just how great is the need.