

Exclusion, inclusion and participation

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The story is told in Wales of a man who was shipwrecked on a desert island. Realizing that a quick rescue was unlikely, he set about building himself an environment in which he could feel at home. Years later, when a passing ship saw his frantic signals, his rescuers were astonished to find that he had built himself a small but practical house and two chapels close to each other. "Why two?" they asked. "Ah", he replied, "this one is the chapel I attend – the other one is the chapel I don't attend."

Human beings have an extraordinary ability and, seemingly, even a desire to break down the world into "them" and "us". We do not know who "we" are, it seems, until we know who "they" are. And once we have identified "them", it is open to us to disclaim responsibility for their welfare, their rights or, in extreme cases, their very existence.

Each of us inhabits a personal commonwealth, often more than one. Membership in each commonwealth defines for us those with whom we share a common dignity, common rights and common obligations. At the root of exclusion in all its forms lies the drawing of boundaries around that commonwealth for reasons of personal comfort, economic advantage or political power.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we find that God's people were to be different, setting no boundaries to their care because they themselves knew what it was like to be excluded: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, a great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut 10.17-19).

The gospel and exclusion

At their truest, our churches recognize that the gospel stands in contradiction to all forms of exclusion, just as the ministry of Jesus reached out across the boundaries imposed by religion and convention to include those whom conventional wisdom excluded.

Scripture undergirds that understanding in countless ways:

- All human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1.26). A person's dignity or worth does not rest upon accomplishment, appearance, talents, wealth, power or recognition. To draw boundaries which exclude those whose very being reflects the image and likeness of God is to risk losing sight of God entirely.

- Jesus – in answer to the question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” – redefines the concept of neighbour to be universal in its scope (Lk 10.25-37). The neighbour is the one who lives within our boundaries – and the parable of the good Samaritan provides no comfort for those who seek to draw those boundaries comfortably close. Neighbours are all those who need and can receive God’s love at our hands, a fact which stretches our boundaries to the breaking point.
- Jesus taught that a touchstone for true discipleship is care shown to the least – to those who are most easily excluded (Mt 25.34-46). In serving the least, we serve Christ. When we exclude the least, we exclude Christ. From these examples we can see that the gospel turns the problem of exclusion on its head.

While in the world’s eyes exclusion may appear to be a problem only for the excluded, in God’s eyes it is as much a problem – and perhaps ultimately a more dangerous one – for those within the boundaries as for those they keep outside them.

At their best our churches recognize that it is we who need to change as much as others – part of our growth in faith is to be made fit to wait on the Christ who is outside the comfortable boundaries we use to define who we are.¹

Social exclusion

In recent years, the concept of “social exclusion” has received a great deal of attention. In the European Union it has come to be preferred to terms such as “poverty” because its scope is wider.

The importance of the concept is that it recognizes that there are many and different ways in which people find themselves with no real opportunity to exercise basic economic, political, social or cultural rights.

An elderly person living in a high-rise flat can be excluded by lack of mobility, the poor can be excluded by their inability to purchase services others take for granted, whole communities (races, sexes!) can be excluded on the basis of conscious or unconscious discrimination.

Theoretical rights mean little if, in fact, they cannot be exercised.

Social exclusion is a better measure than poverty because it does not define disadvantage in static terms, eg a level of income, but includes the *processes* by which people in our societies are disadvantaged.

Exclusion does not end with the recognition that it is undesirable. Exclusion ends when the root causes are removed. Drawing the boundaries more widely involves more than a decision, it involves the practical action necessary to make inclusion a reality.

“If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, then what is the good of that?” (James 2.15-16).

An inclusive church?

Churches, no less than other groups, draw boundaries – often without noticing – that allow those inside to feel comfortable. They make assumptions about the kind of people who fit in: about dress, about race, about gender, about sexuality or any combination of a range of other characteristics. They draw boundaries which affirm the life-choices or lifestyles of those inside or perhaps help them to maintain a position of privilege.

In doing so churches often make it quite impossible, or at least unbearable, for those who do not fit the pattern to play a full part in the life of the church – or sometimes any part at all.

In our own Reformed traditions, with their tendency to fragment, we find too many instances of churches which have failed to recognize and welcome immigrants in their midst. Equally, we find churches formed from privileged immigrant communities, ignoring the needs of the indigenous people among whom they have come. And who can deny that splits which have damaged the credibility of the gospel have often been dressed up as differences of principle while they were, in reality, the drawing of boundaries to protect personal power, economic privilege or social status?

As in society, overcoming exclusion means more than uttering words.

To say that those with disabilities are welcome in a church means nothing if the architecture of the building means they cannot gain access in a wheelchair. To be open to all generations means nothing if activities are planned only by members of one generation. To be culturally open means nothing if the form of service cannot be understood by those with a poor grasp of the language or style used. To be open to people from other cultures means nothing if we welcome them only on condition that they identify with our own culture.

Before a church begins to challenge exclusion in society, it must first recognize the ways in which it is often, itself, a community which excludes others – and deal with that exclusion.

To attempt to speak and act on behalf of people whom we ourselves exclude is both fruitless and patronizing. It is fruitless because we cannot truly appreciate the gifts and needs of people with whom we do not share our world. It is patronizing because to speak on *behalf* of people who are excluded rather than *alongside* them is simply another form of exclusion.

To break out of this impasse is often very difficult. Those whom we exclude are often invisible to us. We make no provision for those with disabilities because we have no members with disabilities because we make no provision for them! We break out of such vicious circles when someone from within an excluded group refuses to accept the way things have always been done and forces us to hear a new voice. We break out when a church decides to look and listen honestly to the community in which it is placed – often a painful process as we realize how irrelevant we are to others in their need.

Gifts and graces

In the end, we must learn to base our self-definition as churches on the gifts and needs of those who, by the grace of God, *could* be a part and not merely those who *are* a part of our community. The extent of the church is not ours to decide but God's, and the extent of God's choice can only be tested if the church is ready and willing to welcome everyone God sends.

Perhaps we would be less afraid if we reflected on the fact that God's gifts to us often come in the form of other people. We exclude others because we are afraid of their need or their difference. But our failure to draw our boundaries wider in welcome carries a cost.²

Many years ago in Jerusalem, a group of Jesus' disciples met to consider their boundaries. Before them was a proposal to set aside precious boundaries – boundaries which for centuries had defined what it meant to be part of God's chosen people. No doubt many of them were uncomfortable with the idea. Perhaps they would have turned it down entirely, if it had not been for one thing. As Peter told the story of his encounter with Cornelius, they realized that whatever *they* felt, *God* had chosen to break down the barriers: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life." (Acts 11.17f).

Questions

1. Can you identify those in your local community who would feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in your congregation? What could you change to make them feel welcome?
2. What gifts might there be in your community which are not expressed in your congregation? Why not?
3. Who are the groups least likely to be able to participate fully in your society?
4. How does your church make common cause with those groups, either as partners or fellow members, in fighting their exclusion? How does your congregation respond?

Notes

1. The Scots hymn-writer Graham Maule writes: "Jesus Christ is waiting, waiting in the streets; no one is his neighbour, all alone he eats. Listen, Lord Jesus, I am lonely too. Make me, friend or stranger, fit to wait on you."
2. In northern countries, for example, many local congregations face extinction even though there may be vibrant multicultural churches near by. The dying churches are paying the price of excluding immigrants decades ago, sometimes blatantly and sometimes in subtle ways of which they may not even have been aware. Offered a gift in the form of new neighbours who could have infused them with

new and vibrant Christian insights, many churches simply drew their boundaries tighter, not realizing that they were choosing death. Others opened their doors to new gifts and new life.

Global Institute of Theology

Living and learning in Africa
in the context of a unique worldwide Reformed gathering

The Alliance will hold its first global institute of theology in Accra, Ghana, from July 22 to August 15 2004. The institute is intended for theological students and pastors beginning their ministry. It will be organized in conjunction with the 24th general council and in close cooperation with Trinity Theological Seminary, Ghana.

The institute will

1. reflect theologically on the general council theme, "That All may have Life in Fullness" (John 10.10);
2. study contemporary theologies and missiologies in their interconfessional, intercultural and interreligious dimensions;
3. examine contextual perspectives on the Christian witness of the global Reformed family; and
4. strengthen global networks of sharing and reflection among theological students and faculty, church workers, theological institutions and churches.

The institute is intended for up to 80 women and men from all continents who are either *a*) students preparing for the Christian ministry at a theological school related to a WARC member church or *b*) pastors in their first years of ministry recommended by WARC member churches. In addition, there will be 15–20 auditing theological students from Ghana.

We will be meeting in Africa, a continent which has been marginalized in the process of globalization, and we will be learning what the churches of Africa have to say to the world situation and churches on other continents. We will organize ourselves as an international community of scholars, and our experiences and sharing will become the immediate context for what we do together.

The global institute of theology reflects four major concerns of the Alliance: *a*) to encourage theological reflection on the contextual significance of our common Reformation heritage; *b*) to promote the renewal of mission practices and missiology; *c*) to train new generations of ecumenically-minded Reformed leaders and *d*) to strengthen the participation of youth at all levels of the life and witness of our churches.

Exploring new frontiers in mission

Several aspects of today's world situation are immediately relevant to our study. These include the revival of religious fundamentalism; the crisis in the ecumenical movement and ecumenical missiology in particular; the challenge of interfaith dialogue and interreligious conflicts; the challenge of peacemaking in the context of the current "war on terrorism"; the urgent need for continuing to address issues of gender, race and class. Of particular concern to the Alliance is the covenanting process of addressing worldwide economic injustice and environmental destruction.

The global institute of theology will explore the results of a two-year study on the practice, understanding and renewal of mission among Alliance member churches and engage in a dialogue with "post-colonial" issues emerging in the missiologies currently practised in Asia and the Pacific islands, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Curriculum

All students will be required to take a core course on "Life in fullness: challenge to theology and mission" (for 2.0 credits) and one of four possible elective courses (for 2.0 credits) on "Confessing the faith today", "New directions in mission for the 21st century", "Theology and mission of the church in Africa", or "Explorations in intercultural theology".

Academic credit according to international standards will be granted by Trinity Theological Seminary, but other possibilities may also be negotiated. The language of instruction will be English.

Faculty and students

Dr Philip L Wickeri, professor of world Christianity, San Francisco Theological Seminary (USA) will serve as dean of the institute of theology, and Dr Volker Kuester, professor of intercultural theology, Kampen Theological University (The Netherlands) as associate dean for academic affairs. Dr Jane Dempsey Douglass, professor emeritus, Princeton Theological Seminary (USA), and Dr Milan Opocensky, professor emeritus, Charles University, Prague (Czech Republic) will serve as co-presidents of the institute.

Further information

For further information on the institute and for application forms, visit our website at www.warc.ch/24gc/, email us at institute@warc.ch, or write to the department of theology at our international office.

The closing date for applications is January 15 2004.