

# FAITHFULLY INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES: HOW WELCOMING IS THE BODY?

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*“Full inclusion” is a term that elicits visceral responses in the public education system. Within the Body of Christ, His Church, is the term even known let alone discussed? It ought to be, for a number of reasons. Jesus’ instruction is that the greatest commandment is to love God, and that love is demonstrated by loving those God has created. This article begins to explore full inclusion and how and why the Body of Christ ought to be exemplary in building communities that are welcoming. This is an issue of immediate concern to all Christ followers; we are to be doers of the Word not merely hearers. In a society that is increasingly diverse in terms of culture and values, has the church done all it can to welcome those whose differences may result not only from culture but from cognitive, sensory, physical or emotional behavioural differences? This article begins what is intended to become an ongoing exploration of inclusion through a biblical worldview lens, the end goal being that we who are Christian ought to be able to echo the words of Jesus as recorded in John 17:4, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.”*

## ***What about me? Cathy’s Story***

Remember a time when churches had Sunday-School together, and picture the following scene in your mind.

It is a sunny September Sunday morning. The meeting hall is full of children and parents, all dressed in their finest. The children, barely able to contain their excitement sit in the front rows. Parents, silently hoping their sons and daughters will not somehow embarrass them in front of the entire congregation, sit toward the back.

It is “Promotion Sunday,” and in a scene played out in countless churches, students are anxious to meet their new teachers.

One by one they are called to the front and, as the class list is complete, they go off with their new-found mentor and spiritual guide. They may even discover some as-yet-unseen part of the church as they find their new classroom together. First the primary class goes, and then the older children. The excitement is electric, and the pride is evident on the faces of the parents.

One by one the rows empty. All the children are gone. All but one. She is a pretty girl, blonde and blue-eyed, wearing a new pink dress. She slowly turns her head, searches for the gaze of her parents, and with a plaintive expression on her face silently mouths the words: *But what about me?*

It is, without doubt, a pathetic scene.

What happened? Who was this girl, perhaps a visitor that was overlooked? No, her family were founding members of the congregation and she had been in the

church for some time. I know this to be true because I am part of her family and Cathy was my younger sister. Was this a deliberate slight? I am sure it was not.

Cathy was born with profound deafness. She was not one of the typical children in this Sunday-school; she had *exceptional learning needs* brought on by a *sensory disability*. Was Cathy included? Clearly not, and the ramifications of her pain and disappointment at being overlooked were felt by her parents and by her older brother. In fact, one of the reasons I am a special educator is because of that experience so many years ago.

How might such a scene, one that was dis-inviting and un-inclusive, be prevented from reoccurring, particularly in Body life, which is to be characterized by love? I suggest that one way is by bringing together our mind (intellect) our hands (skills) and our hearts (motivation and dispositions) toward *inclusive praxis*. How might the Church model inclusiveness and why ought we to be at the forefront of doing so? And, more pointedly, *How intentionally inclusive is your ministry?*

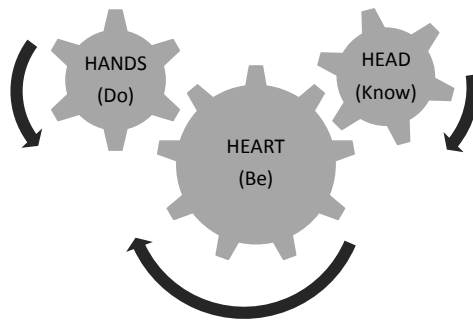


Figure 1. Confluence of head and heart and hands toward development of inclusive professionals.

The church, that is Christ’s apprentices who constitute His representatives on earth, while not “of” the world are certainly situated “in” the world and not insulated from the challenges faced by society at large. Some of the many challenges derive from a diverse and multicultural society which is increasingly pluralistic. There exist a multiplicity of worldviews where none is to be predominant. This then makes it difficult to establish shared values. One value that is commonly held is the focus of the discussion here: inclusiveness. What follows is the genesis of a discussion of how and why Christ-followers ought to be at the forefront of the inclusion movement, not bound by legal imperatives, as in the public education sphere, or by catch phrases common on Canadian sports teams’ shirts (*Diversity is Strength*) or uttered by politicians. Rather we ought to be modeling Jesus himself, who was and is the embodiment of inclusiveness. Scripture instructs, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22 NIV).

## Scriptural Imperatives for Inclusion

Historically, the church and scripture were foundational to the curriculum of compulsory public education in Canada and the United States. Over time, much has changed, with the church and scripture being removed from the sphere of public influence in an increasingly secular society. What has not changed is Jesus' response to the question regarding the greatest of the commandments. His response, is recorded in Mark chapter 12: 28-31 (NIV).

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

This teaching is elegantly simple: love God by loving people and by being true to yourself in the process.

Jesus' response comes shortly after the incident recorded by the Gospel writer in which Jesus models love by holding and blessing little children. In the Gospel of Mark, it is recorded that:

[p]eople were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10: 13-16, NIV).

These are only two of many passages demonstrating Jesus' heart of love and acceptance. That heart is foundational to inclusive praxis. My purpose in this first of what is intended to be a series of articles is to briefly discuss *full inclusion* and *inclusive praxis*. Praxis simply refers to something that is habitual or done at a level of automaticity; it is at the very heart of the person. In order to meet the challenge to be inclusive, that is, to bless those who are deemed weaker or vulnerable or may be at the margins, by including them in community, it is necessary that we have the knowledge and understanding of how, and also the will to do so. Further, *vocation*,

or literally calling, implies a Caller and suggests that those who engage wholeheartedly in their calling are more likely to find satisfaction in their work despite inevitable challenges, including those imposed by various forms of diversity.

The Church as the Body of Christ on earth, in its various forms and institutions, has an opportunity if not an obligation to take a leadership role toward being fully inclusive. This leadership responsibility has important implications for those in various roles of ministry and should give cause for careful reflection on what we do and why we do it. To illustrate the need to continually reflect on long-held traditions and practices, a church begins with a 9:45 a.m. Sunday-School because *it has always been that way*. There may be nothing wrong with the status quo in your church but do you know that to be true? As recorded in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was talking with the Pharisees and teachers of the law who asked Him about following long-held traditions and Jesus quoted Isaiah who said, “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Mark 7: 6-8, NIV).

It is important to examine rules and traditions as to their purpose and efficacy; this includes Full Inclusion. A holistic critical examination of long-held educational practice and the efficacy of the Full Inclusion paradigm has been attempted by Pudlas (2003, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2017). What follows here is situated within the context of that research, as well as personal experience as an educator and as someone who attempts to be a Christ-follower. Part of that lived experience was described in Cathy’s story, which may help set into real-world context the discussion that follows. Perhaps adding to the pain described in Cathy’s story was that this occurred within a church.

How might Cathy’s story be prevented from reoccurring, particularly in Body life, which is to be characterized by love? Bringing together head with hands all guided by the heart toward inclusive praxis would go far to preclude such dis-inviting and un-inclusive events. It is time to critically re-examine, in the light of current culture, the preparation of pastors, children’s ministers, and teachers in regards to the knowledge and skills needed and the dispositions that motivate them, to determine if enough is being done to prepare those in church ministry to be inclusive. As one example, in education the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) suggests that teachers should plan their lessons with every student in mind, accommodating for various needs, strengths and challenges. Ought this not also be true for our churches and those who minister in them? Again the question: how inclusive and welcoming is your church?

## **Inclusive Praxis – The Heart of the Matter**

The term *praxis*, the habitual act or performance, is something that is so ingrained in our nature that it does not require conscious thought; it is doing

something at a level of automaticity. In our reading of scripture we may see praxis in the phrase, “having the mind of Christ” or, “For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28, NIV).

Praxis relates to and derives from how we perceive our role. In this context it refers to the very *heart* of who we are. As an educator I find the words of Parker Palmer (2007) germane as he states, “Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together” (p. 2). Certainly we could substitute any form of ministry for the word “teach.” In the Old Testament, Ezekiel, prophetically describing the Christ who was to come, promised, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26, NIV). Further in regard to heart, Thomas Merton (1969), in his book, *Contemplative Prayer*, says,

The concept of “the heart” might well be analyzed here. It refers to the deepest psychological ground of one’s personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the un-known yet present-one who is “more intimate to us than we are to ourselves” (p. 3).

What we do, how we minister and relate to others, and how we fulfill our vocation is influenced by the heart. Vocation is an apt metaphor as it suggests faithfulness to a calling which in turn infers a Caller. That Caller is, as has been discussed previously, concerned with the heart of the one who ministers. Further, if we are to be faithful imitators of Christ then our worldview ought to value all persons and seek to include them in community. In 1 Corinthians 12 we read a discourse on the nature of the body (another metaphor) which, while made of many parts, must include all of the parts if it is to thrive.

In the present *zeitgeist*, that worldview is embodied in an educational paradigm prevalent in K-12 education which has come to be called *full inclusion*. It may be instructive to gain some background knowledge and explore the genesis and goals of inclusion. Subsequently, possible causes for concerns regarding Full Inclusion will be explored and suggestions as to how those concerns might be addressed and ameliorated will be presented.

Essential Knowledge  
Terminology: Inclusion

The praxis of Full inclusion is derived from principles of *normalization* proposed by Wolfensberger (1972) in which he espoused that all persons should live with dignity lives as close to normal as possible. This praxis gave impetus to the movement to close institutions that historically had “warehoused” people, and caused the critical examination of a worldview that historically deemed it acceptable to exterminate persons deemed unfit for society (see Mostert, 2002). The disparate treatment throughout history of persons considered exceptional demonstrates the importance of worldview; that is, of knowing what we believe and why we believe it. Further, worldviews must be critically examined and have a solid and immutable biblical foundation. To that end, I strongly suggest that programs for preparation for various forms of ministry should include in their curriculum a study of this history, and an examination of a theology of exceptionality - a biblically informed basis for inclusive praxis ought to be foundational.

Common to most definitions of *inclusion* is the aspect of *community*, from the same root that we derive Communion. Wolfensberger described the concept of *Social Role Valorization* (SRV) (Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2005), the application of empirical knowledge to the shaping of the current or potential social roles of a party (i.e., person, group, or class), primarily by means of enhancement of the party’s competencies and image - so that these are, as much as possible, positively valued in the eyes of the perceivers (Osborn, 2006, p.4). Note the goal of seeing *all persons as valued*. This fits well with a biblical worldview, especially in light of verse 22 of 1 Corinthians 12 which says that the *weaker* parts of the body are *indispensable*. One of the desired outcomes of this worldview is that all members of a school (or church) community are valued and accepted, and fully participating members of the community. We need to ask ourselves continually whether all those in our church congregation are fully participating and see themselves as valued and accepted. Who then are those exceptional learners that are to be included?

### Terminology: Exceptionality

In most educational settings there will be students who have different abilities and behaviours, some of which differ considerably from the norm; thus they are referred to as being *exceptional*. Cathy was such a person by virtue of her sensory disability. As used here the term “exceptional” refers to persons who *deviate from an established norm* and require extraordinary intervention if they are to meet their full potential. Often the term conjures persons with cognitive differences such as intellectual delay (what used to be known as mental retardation) or those with extraordinary gifts. The term also refers to those with sensory deficits or physical disabilities. More recently Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit

Disorder (ADD) have garnered a great deal of attention. The general category of Learning Disabilities has been extant since the early 1960s.

### Terminology: Special Education

Special education at its simplest, refers to those interventions and adaptations necessary to enable exceptional persons to meet their full potential; removing barriers. This may mean modifications in curriculum, in the physical environment, or perhaps simply allowing more time for persons to process information. Perhaps it may be something as simple as removing the stigma and fear of the disability. For our purposes a *disability* is something that is inherent in the individual, and may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, developmental or some combination of these whereas a *handicap* is an inability to accomplish something one might want to do, that most others are able to, and it may result from the disability. For example someone with a physical disability may function well enough until they come to church where they cannot access certain parts of the building; in which case their disability becomes a handicap, a subtle but important distinction. Recalling Jesus' words about not causing little ones to stumble, we must strive not to become a handicap, including by our lack of acceptance.

### Terminology: Biblical Vocation

Based on the work of Smith (1999), long-affiliated with Regent College in Vancouver, there are three levels of vocation or calling: general, specific and immediate. The *general call* is to hear God's voice and to follow Him by being an imitator of Christ. The *specific call* is the one that is primarily germane here and it involves a perceived purpose, a defining purpose or mission, a reason for being. That is it seeks to answer the questions "Why am I here?", and "What am I to be doing?" The *immediate call* is what happens in the here and now; given that I am a Christ follower and that He has called me to teach or to minister in some way, what it is that I must be about at this time. For those working with exceptional learners it is important to be mindful that meeting their needs with Christ-like love, grace and professional integrity is part of the immediate call. Concomitantly there are numerous challenges such as cultural shifts, devolving family structures, and educational paradigm shifts that may impact the vocational satisfaction of those who minister.

It is worth reiterating that in the public sphere there is a move to embrace diversity and to strive to be inviting and inclusive. In the K-12 education system this has presented many well-publicized challenges; is there a concomitant challenge in the church? If not, might it be because the church has lost its leadership role in providing safe, inviting, inclusive space in which persons with various forms of diverse challenges can find community?

What is the condition of the heart of the body with which you gather and worship? Is there a deep desire to put into action the admonition to love *all* of those that God has created? Are families who have children with learning challenges invited into your community and supported there?

As noted at the outset, the heart must provide the motivation and desire but church leaders also must have some knowledge and some skills. These will be addressed in subsequent articles. For now, some questions to ponder include: How inclusive is my church? How purposefully do I plan (my sermons, my lessons, my music, or my youth events) with the diverse needs of my church in mind? How intentional am I in bringing people in from the margins so that they can participate meaningfully? How do we provide practical support for families that have extra challenges by virtue of having children who need extra support?

## Summary and Conclusions

Full inclusion is not going away in the public school system; nor should it, in a just and progressive society. The church, individually and as collective congregations, ought to be no less inclusive. My purpose has been to begin to explore how inclusive praxis might be fostered to achieve in reality what are certainly laudable goals. The scripture references here have not been exhaustive on the topic. Suffice to say that those who seek to be imitators of Christ need to be doers of the word not just hearers, and that should result in inclusive praxis. May church leaders and educators be able to reflect on their roles and, repeating the words Jesus said to His Father, say as He did, “I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.” (John 17: 4, NIV). Finally, when all is said and done, will I have proven, in fulfilling my calling, to have been a faithful apprentice of Jesus in serving Cathys?

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