

SHRINKING THE MARGINS: THE CHURCH AND DIVERSITY

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This article continues to explore full inclusion (FI) and how and why the Body of Christ ought to be exemplary in building communities that are inclusive and inviting. In a society that is increasingly diverse, have we, the church, done all we can to welcome those who may be marginalized by cognitive, sensory, physical or emotional behavioural differences? This article continues an ongoing exploration of inclusion and widens the biblical worldview lens to consider marginalization based on diversity in ethnicity, race, culture, and values. It is imperative that Christians be critical consumers before accepting or rejecting any publicly proffered ideologically driven slogans. Suggestions toward becoming more intentionally inviting are offered.

Introduction

We are familiar with the saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” The three thousand words in Figure 1 speak as “signs” of the times. The command to love God by loving those He created, including ourselves, has not been rescinded. Fulfilling the command by being inclusively compassionate and inviting in our increasingly diverse ecology may, however, be challenging. This paper explores these signs and implications for the ministry of the church today, and for the vocation of church leaders as apprentices of Jesus.



Figure 1 Common Slogans and Symbols

Most people in North America have seen various iterations of the slogan proclaiming, *Celebrate Diversity*. It is less likely that many in North America have seen the second phrase, which, translated, says: *It is normal (common) to be different*. The third image has more recently become prevalent. It engenders various, often visceral, responses.

Signs of the Times

According to Scripture, Christian leaders are not “of” this world but living “in” this world and therefore must seek to understand it to minister authentically. To that

end we must critically examine current cultural signs concerning diversity through biblical worldview lenses.

Celebrate Diversity

Posters with this phrase surfaced decades ago, and now, as then, the message is cause for reflection. As an educational psychologist and special educator, I am passionately supportive of marginalized persons, especially students with special learning needs. In Spring 2020, Heather Stace-Smith and I shared the church experiences of her children who have diverse special needs, an encouraging narrative of being included within the church community (Stace-Smith & Pudlas, 2020). Why, if I am supportive of inclusion, do I take issue with celebrating diversity?

To be clear, the issue is not with diversity or with inclusion. My concern is with prioritizing a focus on what makes us diverse – that is, unlike one another. Rather than focusing on what may divide us, we should focus on what we have in common first, and then revel in, rejoice over, and celebrate the richness of the variety God created in nature and in humans. What we have in common is that we are all sinful and in need of salvation, and yet God loves us all the same.

Es ist normal, verschieden zu sein.

The second image came to my attention when my wife brought it back after visiting her mother in Germany. It is translated: *It is normal (common) to be different.* This slogan encourages a subtly different perspective, one that suggests it is our uniqueness that we have in common. All are created in the image of God – *Imago Dei* – and God is not limited, nor is the richness and variety in the natural world, including the diversity of his created beings.

Black Lives Matter

The genesis for the focus of this paper was table discussion around the third image at a recent multigenerational family birthday celebration. Like their contemporaries, our grandchildren are engaged with social media. They were not aware of fundamental values and underlying goals of some of the signs they see there. They need to be critical consumers of what they see, hear, and read, to be able to seek truth and then to speak truth in love.

Stepping back from my focus as a special educator and advocate for inclusive praxis and using a wider lens to try to understand *difference* in our increasingly complex world, I have begun to wonder if our society and churches have become so focused on differences that they have become less *intentionally inviting* and *inclusive*? We who desire to be followers of Jesus must beware of conforming to the world's values if those values are not in alignment with biblical teaching. At the same time, we must do all we can to demonstrate inclusive *praxis*.

Definitions

First, some of the italicized terms will be defined so that we have a shared understanding.

Inclusive and Invitational *Praxis*

The term “inclusion,” when used in education, refers to the philosophy and pedagogic paradigm wherein all students are taught together in a shared community. No longer are students with ‘special needs’ segregated in separate schools or classes. The onus is on ‘regular’ teachers to provide education for all students. The desired outcomes include both a good academic experience and the building of community. These are laudable goals. For more discussion, please see Pudlas (2017).

In church ministry, the educational principle of inclusion can be seen as the application of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and related passages. There we are taught the Body of Christ on earth has many parts and that each one of those parts has an important role to play if the Body is to thrive. The community invites and meaningfully includes all existing and potential members of the Body.

Inclusion includes respecting persons with different ideas. The principle of respect applies to the inherent worth of the person. We should exercise discernment and we naturally show preferences. Some preferences are benign - tea versus coffee, chocolate versus vanilla, and so on - and some are more substantive. There is great danger in the current trend of dismissing a contrary view or value with an epithet, often with the suffix “-phobia”. Differences in values requires us to discern and hold our own values in love. Rather than silencing debate with epithets, as long as we practice love and respect, our values may have an influence.

Invitational Education

The term “invitational education” was coined by Purkey and Novak (1996) to describe education wherein all participants are invited to play a role and wherein the people, places, and programs are designed to be safe and welcoming. Recently an emerging scholar, Sean Schat (2020), took these underlying principles and applied them to an ethic of care. His research question, which has profound implications for those in church ministry, was: “What do teachers who are known for demonstrating “educational care” do that is perceived as caring behaviour by their adolescent students?” As they relate to ministry in the church, the principles of invitational education are the psychosocial outworking of many scriptural teachings, including that Jesus invites everyone to follow him.

Praxis

For the purpose of this discussion the term “*praxis*” refers to the habitual performance of an action. Perhaps more aptly, it is doing something that is so

ingrained in our values, so at the very heart of what we do, that we cannot imagine not doing it. Note that heart here relates to the very essence of who we are. As those who seek to imitate Christ, we should, by nature, be inclusive and inviting.

Current Realities and Challenges

In a previous article, I related how my young sister was not assigned a Sunday School class because she wouldn't be able to hear anyway. Such experiences remain in a person's memory at a visceral level. I became a professor specializing in special education and diversity as a result. As an adult, I witnessed another kind of exclusion.

I was a member of an evangelical church where the gospel was proclaimed, and the Bible was clearly taught. I served as a deacon, my wife played piano and organ, and our two children were lovingly nurtured in the Sunday-School. Sadly, our marriage ended, and I experienced a society and church that didn't know what to do with a suddenly single-dad family. In the neighbourhood in which my children and I lived, social exchanges became limited and I no longer fit into a safe category. In a church where I had grown up and served, I no longer fit the established norm and no longer experienced the same level of hospitality. My brothers and sisters did not appear to be intentionally disinviting, however, they also did not appear to be intentionally inviting. I now fit into the category of other.

As an educational psychologist, I understand at a cognitive level. We are born into a complex world and developmentally we make sense of it by grouping, first into simple, and then increasingly complex categories, known as schemata. At their earliest stages of development infants categorize objects in their environment based on whether they are satisfyingly edible. For evidence, simply observe infants who take anything that can be grasped and immediately thrust it in their mouths. Fortunately, over time we become more sophisticated in our categorization. No longer are all animals "bow-wows" nor all males "da-das." Sadly, though, when it comes to people who are different, we suffer a tendency to regress to a simple dichotomy: good versus bad or at best, comfortable versus uncomfortable. We need to see the *Imago Dei* of the individual person first, not a schemata.

For some years I taught at the University of Wisconsin and lived relatively near to Moody Bible Institute in a kind of mid-west Bible belt. I still communicate with long-time Christian friends from that season. Recently I was struck by a less-than-charitable comment using the definite article "the" and a party name as a dismissive epithet. This struck me because for decades in my special education courses, I taught teacher candidates to avoid the definite article and to use person first language. My doctoral research was in the field of education for deaf students, and when asked, "What is the best way to teach 'the' Deaf?" I would respond, "I will answer if you first tell me the best way to teach 'the' hearing." How often are we

guilty of devaluing someone by categorizing them, relegating them to one of our schemata as of lesser worth or importance? This speaks to a form of “othering.”

The work of Wolf Wolfensberger and his seminal discussion of “normalization” and more recently of “social role valorization” is foundational to exploring the notion of othering. Social role valorization suggests that our sense of self is derived to some degree from how others in society treat us. For example, Wolfensberger (1998) states that,

... in order for people to be treated well by others, it is very important that they be seen as occupying valued roles, because otherwise, things are apt to go ill with them. Further, the greater the number of valued roles a person, group or class occupies, or the more valued the roles that such a party occupies, the more likely it is that the party will be accorded those good things of life that others are in a position to accord, or to withhold (p.58).

A more recent and very practical treatise on the church and othering is offered by Baumgartner (2020).

Particularly in the contemporary social and political season, we need to take another serious look at inclusion and othering in society in the light of scriptural teachings. Galatians 3:28 suggests that ethnic/cultural/gender differences are not important in determining to whom the Gospel applies. In John 10:10, Jesus says He came that we may have life and have it to the full. The Scriptures do not dwell on difference and they speak to a promised high *quality of life* (QoL).

Neither Jew nor Gentile

In the letter to the Galatian church we read, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female...". In each case, the reason is, "... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 NIV).

Christ holds the most honored position in the family of God and all Christians are, as we read above, one in Christ and therefore united and equal in the eyes of God. Our identity, our sense of self, is to be found in Christ and not in liberal versus conservative politics, the color of our skin, or our heritage and present culture. Nor is our identity and worth dependent upon any particular spiritual or other gifting or particular role. In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, all members of the Body are valuable. These verses do not, however, suggest we are identical; it is normal to be different.

Scripture teaches us that God is not a “respector of persons.” Recent translations of Romans 2:11 (NIV) more clearly state that God does not have favorites; he does not show favoritism. In this passage Paul writes that there is no partiality with God. What conclusion does the apostle draw for inviting and inclusive

ministry? Paul sees people storing up wrath because they were focusing on differences. He suggests this hatred toward others will grow and become hatred towards God if it is not dealt with. What truth does Paul want the Galatians to see? It does not matter if you are “a Jew or a Gentile” because God loves all humans the same.

The admonition against favoritism is consistent with the Old Testament teaching of Leviticus 19:15 (NIV), which says, “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great but judge your neighbor fairly.” This teaching is repeated in the New Testament in Acts 10:34: “Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (NIV).

We may imply by our behaviour that God loves some people more than others; for example, “the” supporters of one political party more than another, or “the” never divorced, or perhaps “the” highly intelligent or ...? If God does not show favoritism, and if we are to be imitators of Jesus, we must learn to look beyond labels to appreciate all persons.

The argument thus far has been that we should focus not on diversity but rather on our common sinfulness, need of salvation, and that God loves us all the same. We are, however, unique in our backgrounds, cultures, areas of interest and gifting, and opinions. It is normal to be different. Our differences have worth. Our lives matter so much that Christ came to live among us that we not only have eternal life but also abundant life (John 10:10). The gift of eternal and abundant life encompasses our commonalities and differences.

Quality of Life

According to the story of the Good Shepherd told by Jesus and recorded in John 10 the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and that his sheep (should) know his voice. Jesus, using stories for his “hard of learning” listeners, said in verse 10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (NIV).

What does it mean to have life to the full and is it fully available to those who are marginalized? Can we discuss quality of life authentically without including a spiritual component? Further, who or what is the thief that robs us and prevents all of God’s people – since Jesus said he had other sheep that he would bring into one great flock - from enjoying that high quality of life here on this earth?

In addition to encompassing basic conditions of life such as shelter, adequate food and safety, the construct of individual quality of life (QoL) includes social, leisure and community activities that are based on the values, beliefs, needs and interests of the individuals (Schalock & Parmenter, 2000). A brief overview of the literature on quality of life drawn from Zhang (2013) suggests QoL is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by a person’s physical health, psychological state,

level of independence, social relationships, and their relationships to salient features of their environment. The World Health Organization (1997) describes QoL as including individuals' perception of their position in life in the context of their culture and value system and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. In this regard, see previous reference to Social Role Valorization (Wolfensberger, 1998) and the Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 discussion of all members being essential to the Body. There is a consensus in recent literature that spirituality is a significant dimension of human well-being (Liégeois, 2014). More specifically, the spiritual aspect of life has the potential to affect quality of life in terms of emotional and physical well-being, relationships, self-determination, and social inclusion.

We are created for relationship, for community, for belonging, for inclusion. Being marginalized is the antithesis of what Jesus spoke of as having life to the full. How then do we regard others who do not fit our often all-too-narrow schemata defining who is good and therefore acceptable in our community?

Role of the Church

We behave in accordance with our worldviews, be they explicit or implicit. In place of worldview we might use the term “heart,” the very essence of who we are. Collectively our behaviours form a grand narrative or discourse. The history of attitudes toward persons marginalized due to some form of learning difference reveals three examples of dominant educational discourses: Lay, Medical, and Charity. Each view was in its time sincerely held but was not proven helpful for persons with disabilities. We can learn lessons for the church in today's increasingly complex social and cultural ecology as we reflect on these discourses.

The lay discourse essentially sought to protect so-called normal students from the perceived threats to educational or other forms of well-being posed by others. Thus, the students were kept separate. During the dominance of this view, institutions were built, ostensibly to provide shelter, but also coincidentally to hide these others from the general population.

The medical discourse saw differences as pathological conditions. Education from this perspective focused on treatment or remediation. Educators assumed that the special needs were problematic or aberrant and needed to be cured. Their goal was to normalize as much as possible by focusing on the deficits and attempting to remediate them so that the student/patient could become normal. This was not, in all instances, a bad goal. A more current narrative that uses the term “neurodiversity” has shifted focus from the pathology to difference and from weaknesses to strengths, using the strengths as a positive niche from which to move forward. This new discourse suggests it is normal to be different.

The charity discourse positioned some people as weak and powerless and in

need of care and attention. An underlying assumption was that students with disabilities are not competent, do not have opinions worth considering, and should be grateful for attention and assistance from 'normal' people. Actions arising from this perspective reinforced feelings of inadequacy and helplessness and fostered unhealthy co-dependencies. Yet Scripture, for example, 1 Corinthians 12, tells us that spiritual gifts are given to all believers, they come in a wide variety, and all the gifts are necessary for the effective functioning of the Body. Amid the diversity of gifts is the unity of purpose for the gifts and the singular Giver of those gifts. In other words, spiritual gifts speak of equal value because they are grounded in God and his purposes.

Church leaders need to reflect on the dominant discourse in their faith tradition regarding diversity, and how their worldview influences their ministry to those who are not part of the majority. How will they minister to those who are different in some way, be it ability, ethnicity, culture, or sexual orientation?

Church leaders need to focus on what makes us the same. We all need redemption and reconciliation with the One who created us. We all, according to Scripture, have been given gifts. We all are created for community and belonging. In Colossians 2:11 we read: "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." The writer then gives important instructions that result from this truth:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful (Col 22:12, NIV).

We, as individuals and as those who collectively make up the Body of Christ on earth, will not individually or corporately get everything right all the time. I am reminded of that same church mentioned earlier. After a season during which I attended a different and much larger church where I had no history, I was blessed to be married and acquire three additional children. Eventually we returned to my childhood church where some years later I was elected to a servant-leadership role, which made me an *ex-officio* member of all church committees. I was bemused to learn that one committee had lagged on offering English as a Second Language classes because they might not get it right. In ministry we are not the arbiters of success or failure. We are simply responsible to offer what we have. After all, it is amazing what God did with a few fish and a few small loaves of bread.

When life and ministry are ended, will God say we have nurtured the flock well, including those who were on the margins by way of not fitting into comfortable sameness? Will we be able to say that we have brought God glory on earth by finishing the work he gave me to do (John 17:4)? In all of this I suggest that while knowledge and skills are important, it is the heart that is the essential driving force. What are our hearts toward those who differ in some way from the norm with which we are comfortable?

Summary and Thoughts for Reflection

Dr. Martin Luther King (1958) argued that religion is concerned with salvation and with quality of life.

But a religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man's social conditions. Religion deals with both earth and heaven and, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself. This means, at bottom, that the Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of men, and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed. Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion...(p.68).

What is the religious *praxis* that God values? Micah 6:8 simply yet comprehensively answers, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." The motivation of our heart is critical. To give a cup of cold water to a thirsty person is biblical and is inviting; to pour cold water on a person tied to a board is torture. As members of Christ's Body here on earth, we are to be like streams of living water to those who may be, in fact or perhaps merely by perception, marginalized.

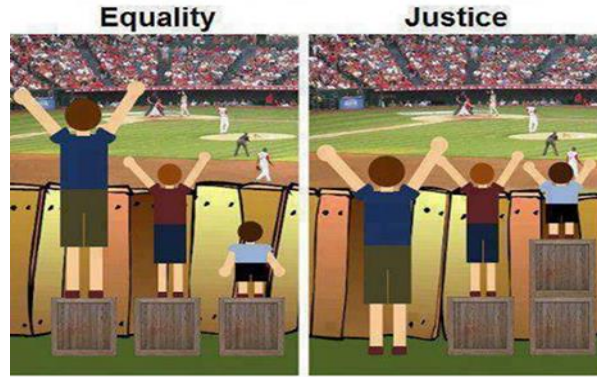


Figure 2. Equality doesn't mean justice.

Equity, and justice are not necessarily synonyms. May we be authentic in seeking to provide equity and justice for all, practically living out the teaching that “[r]eligion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:27 NIV).”

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