

The 2015

Inclusive Church Annual Lecture

beyond inclusion: un-dressing

'belonging together'

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The 2015 Inclusive Church Annual Lecture was given by The Rev'd Dr Michael Jagessar.

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(www.caribleaper.co.uk). Michael locates himself as member of the Caribbean diaspora who embodies multiple

identities and for whom "home" is always elsewhere!

Inclusive Church is grateful to Michael for his generosity in bringing the 2015 lecture.

It can be viewed at https://youtu.be/R1FKBosujRc

beyond inclusion: un-dressing 'belonging together'

introducing the conversation

The invitation from the trustees of *Inclusive Church* to give this lecture affords me an opportunity to share

some thoughts on inclusion-moving beyond good intentions to wrestling with the tough demands of living

out belonging together. While phrases such as - 'radical welcome', Christian hospitality, generosity -

abound in mission statements, many still continue to experience exclusion/marginalisation of all sorts in

churches

In Wikipedia and the Politics of Openness, Nathaniel Tkacz (2015) addresses one of the myths of

technology's participatory potential – openness - a term that generally implies unrestricted participation,

transparency in governance, and widespread collaboration. The author argues that openness is a political

project that obscures its own inner workings, by sweeping power differentials and inequality under an

apolitical rug. So a project that proclaims itself "open" is able to sidestep questions of power and agency—

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even when it's clear, that such issues remain. 'Openness' may contain the seeds of its own closure: especially given its reliance on a neoliberal market framework. What starts out as open and inclusive gets quickly hijacked by profit. Though specifically about technology, the point is that hierarchy, power and privilege do not disappear even in so called open and inclusive spaces. How do we move beyond talking the talk of exclusion and belonging together, to walking it and living it out? 'Beyond inclusion (or the talk of inclusion) – undressing belonging together' is an attempt to interrogate some of the restrictive habits we need to uncover to engender such a move.

A few minor notes on this working title: 'undressing' – is a metaphor to help me peel off the familiar 'wear' and invisible 'underwear' of our inclusion talk, especially the un-deconstructed inherited bits; 'belonging juxtapose with together' locates our discourse as ecclesial communities as we wrestle with identities around a common table; and 'beyond', is that which "signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future", mindful that "the very act of going beyond" takes us into the "unknowable, un-representable, without a return to the 'present'." (Bhabha 1994:4). Beyond, also underscores a hope for inclusion to "transcend its shortcomings". (Riveria 2007:10).

locating self and context...

I recently came across an underground advertisement which reads: "on first impression I may seem conservative". It would be possible to substitute 'conservative' with progressive', 'radical', ethnic or any other descriptor! In spite of Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink* (2005) first impressions can be deceptive in the world of complex identities. So let me to partially undress myself in your company – as it may help locate my thoughts. I am a complex Caribbean Diasporan traveller - accidentally landing on these shores and largely welcomed by some friendly natives. While I am a minority in a majority context of UK, I am also privileged (hetero-sexual male-married-academic) within my minority context. My faith/spirituality has been informed and shaped by impulses from multiple religious and cultural traditions living in the fullness of two or three simultaneously. My God-talk (theology) is done within the rich world of diversity, identities, hybridity, impurity, many-one-ness, contradictions, fluidity, and 'tidalectics' (ebb and flow),

Anansi-ism (Caribbean saint and trickster figure) - with all the exciting possibilities and challenges these offer.

I found a home in the dissenting, non-conforming and minority heritage of the United Reformed Church.) As a minority Church in three nations, the URC wrestles with identity issues, diversity and inclusion in all sorts of ways. While we may have lost our non-conforming vigour (genuflecting to the Status Quo), we have not given up on good intentions of creating spaces to give agency to all sorts of minorities. But, though elected as a moderator of our General Assembly (2012-2014), it did not mean that belonging was re-configured to include the difference and culturally shaped giftings I brought to the table. One had to largely fit into a white-male-extroverted-hetero-sexual-abled-bodied-English-cultural framework. To find a place in church as a minority is somehow to be generally complicit with the dominant ethos! The habit of all around the table being *mutually inconvenienced* for the sake of economy of the host (God in Christ) remains uncomfortable and too demanding!

crossing-over: locating challenges beyond

How do we move beyond representative minority voices and presence - break out of minority-ness to 'fuller participation' in our life together? The hundred foot Journey (Helen Mirren, Om Puri) is an apt film on the challenges of belonging. It is the story of a migrant Mumbai family – whose whole life has been delighting in food and running a restaurant. Forced to move to the UK where they found the raw ingredients for food 'lacked soul' the decided to try Europe. When their old van breaks down in a sleepy South of France village, the father sees this as a sign that the family should stick around there and open an Indian restaurant (Maison Mumbai). Never mind the one star celebrated restaurant sitting right across the street from their new premises or that they are in an insular part of the country. Papa Khaddam has faith in his food—and in his son, Hassan - a brilliant, young cook without a certificate. Hassan soon masters French cuisine and falls in love with the beautiful French chef Marguerite! The movie captures the tensions and interaction between cultures, generations, belonging and integration. Hassan doesn't just want to cook murgh masala with cashews and cardamom: he wants to belong to, and conquer, a new world. What comes through is the longing of the new voice around the table, the overwhelming push-pull between the need to

belong, the constant reminder that you do not belong, and the need to assert one's own identity. The film is set in France where a genteel pride in the refinement and supremacy of one's own culture can easily be nudged into overt exclusion. Food serves to transcend bigotry, snobbism, prejudices, cultural and religious differences and restrictive habits of every kind. Hassan learns to master bechamel and velouté sauce. Madame Mallory is eventually drawn across the road by the enchanting aroma of spices, even adding a dash of cardamom to her classic boeuf bourguignon. The two restaurants were 100 feet apart, but making the trip – to cross over took a lot of effort at examining inherited traditions and rediscovering the joys of intercultural engagement in belonging together.

We have just celebrated a meal – a miniature of the 'whole gospel story' [Williams 2014]. It is an ideal space to locate my thoughts on 'beyond inclusion' and 'belonging together': a meal at the heart of our vocation to embrace the way of abundant life for all. Amy Jill-Levine writing in *The Misunderstood Jew* notes: "The kingdom of God is not a press conference, or a resolution, or a short course in how to be eloquently indignant. It is a table laden with grace, at which the social maps are all redrawn. Jesus' guest list comes straight out of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* [2007: 48].

table space: power and privilege

The 'ashes' (cricket) is in full swing and we are winning! We may recall though that in the winter of 2013 our cricket team were convincingly thrashed 5-0 and a soul-searching about the state of England's performance in sports began. The early exit from World Cup football (2014) plunged the nation into even more despair. While our women footballers have done better this year, pundits are querying whether as a nation we have upset the football gods. Commentators have explored how English sport has always been suspicious of "outlandish talent" as sport was "set up for honest yeomen" (sic). This suspicion can be traced back to the Victorian era and the age of the sporting amateur when what mattered most were loyalty, comradeship and mutual responsibility. There was no place for anyone or anything *unorthodox*. Scholars suggest that such conservatism still characterises English attitude to sport, the operational ethos of our long established institutions (Church included) and more (read *How Corrupt is Britain?* 2015). Pushing

the boundaries of orthodoxy and tradition(s) is still viewed with much suspicion – a stumbling block to full inclusion and belonging together.

Our eucharistic table space signifies **on** power and privilege. Power is not necessarily evil nor is it neutral. It is misused though when minority groups are disempowered and when dominant groups are empowered and privileged. We cannot help being privileged in contexts that are structured to give unfair advantages to few. Who has power and who has privilege are two different questions. Power is held collectively within systems and structures: privileges are afforded individuals who are part of the power structure. We must ask: for which group of people are the decision-making processes, along with the hierarchical structures, cultural values, educational materials, worship, hymns, liturgies, and accountability arrangements in our church are historically created to favour? Most likely a dominant group: dominant groups operate in default ways – unconsciously inhabiting the privileges, internalising it all. Marginalised groups – can also internalise such a habit and then re-inscribe it. And, the identity of the dominant/normative group as superior is internalised as much as the inferiority of the marginalised group!

My experience – as a theological educator in Britain and as both responsible for intercultural ministries and moderating Councils of the United Reformed Church (2012-2014) - is that power and privilege is often a no-go area and convenient ways are found to allow these to remain intact through entitlement to rights and resources, knowledge production, comfort and attention, access to space, and deference. Even minorities are sucked into this pattern – while showing that the system is inclusive, that is *almost*.

In enabling diversity awareness processes I have often found that participants are keener to name inequalities rather than spend time on interrogating the privilege machinery that produces the inequalities or the steps to be taken to counter them – especially if their own complicity and privilege are exposed. There is also an assumption that we operate on a level playing field where anyone can access the resources, means and space. **This is a myth**. In the teaching domain colleagues representing the dominant group assume the right to dominate the space of theology and discussion. They assume the right to have attention and they assume this is nonreciprocal: others should be reading their work even while they neglect to read

what we have written. I know you are gracious enough to excuse my generalising and focus on the patterns

I am trying to find words to describe and that which we need to be aware of and challenge.

To understand what any form of marginalisation do to minorities we need to explore and expose what it does to help dominant group(s). Beyond exclusion invites us to focus on what we can do together to displace privilege and power. So let me ask you: how have liberal values contributed (knowingly or unknowingly) to enshrining a white-male-straight-abled-bodied-privileged class power base? How do these affect minorities and dis-empower them? To break through systemic exclusion through solidarity and alliances, the privileged must grow in awareness of what is at stake in the struggle for justice both for marginal groups and for themselves. We have to become accountable for all our privileges in an unequal landscape. If we subscribe to the view that God desires full life for all and invites us to work towards that end, then the capacity to realise the common good must exist as God will not require of us the impossible. An urgent challenge before us – perhaps another series for inclusive church – ought to be work on the intersections of class, race, sex, gender, poverty systems and its implications for belonging together. This is critical as these systems and the institutional interactions they reproduce heavily shape our moral-lives-in-relation. We can stop being an unwitting tool of inequality and become what some call a privilege traitor - deploying the power of our privilege as a tool for abundant life for all.

table space: remembering and tradition

A significant act around our table-space is that of remembering-recalling: how does remembering give agency to the multiplicity of experiences we embody? Where the agenda of empire causes: a 'lack of bread' for many, power imbalances, and penury - will our 'remembering' reinforce boundaries that advance cultural, economic and spiritual superiority of one group or tradition? In the act of remembering should we forget the power inequalities around the table (the explicit and implicit boundaries we work with), we may end up turning an intended inclusive space into one where some will be unable to find their voice or be reluctant to share the same space with those implicated as representing the dominant group (often keepers of the tradition).

In *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy, through Chacko speaking to the twins, offers a helpful insight: [Chacko] explained to them that history (think tradition) was like an old house at night. With all the lamps lit and ancestors whispering inside: "To understand history (or tradition)," Chacko said, "we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying." [1997:52] Belonging together entails a journey inside the tradition to listen, interrogate, unearth voices – especially the silenced ones in the process of arriving at what we have inherited as deposits of faith. Tradition is a dynamic process – always in formation, yet "[t]here will always be a sharp difference between those who understand faithfulness to tradition as the *preservation* of past doctrines and those who understand it as recognising that past ideas may be worthy of *development*." [Brian Gerrish 2003:5] My Reformed family understanding of the church as *reformata et semper reformanda* is helpful here: tradition is traditioning as reformed is reforming!

'Beyond inclusion' invites us to a challenging journey into critical scrutiny of the past (traditions). When texts of the past (our tradition) still continue to hegemonically form and inform contemporary ecclesial life without an awareness of its own cultural-shaping world and structures from where these have come from, to form the basis for our theology and practices, it is time for intentional action. Awareness of how an 'oral and received tradition' evolved into a written one and how exported and imported texts with its literary constructions and representations are already culturally and ideologically compromised is necessary if tradition is not to become a tool for continuing exclusion.

table space: an expansive way

Around every corner in the gospel narratives we meet Jesus at a table, teaching and telling parables, making dramatic self-disclosures, gathering with his disciples, struggling to overcome barriers of hostility and division – living out generous –expansive love. Often it is at table with a host of dodgy characters we find Jesus living out God's offer of abundant life for all: working a different set of table-rules around a different economy. How does our life together reflect such generosity and expansive embrace? Can our belonging together be inclusive and graceful to embrace the range of diversity that we embody? Is there a limit? How can we avoid what starts out as and intends to be inclusive from becoming another means of exclusion?

Located in a complex liberal framework, I often wrestle with the ways liberal views can marginalise and exclude. Often our arguments around 'inclusion' (valid and good intended as they are) can lead us into a corner – a sort of 'sum total game' – with one's vision of inclusion resulting in the exclusion of others. The politics of the liberal way which gives agency to equality for all, will stand or fall on us believing and affirming that dehumanisation anywhere and everywhere is wrong. The sad reality though, is that even in the name of freedom, democratic values and equality we can end up displaying a hierarchy in mariginality and oppression much to the glee of the status quo! Perhaps we need to rediscover an original meaning of 'liberal' as 'free in bestowing, bountiful, overflowing, generous, open-hearted......

Here, I am with the few liturgical scholars/practitioners who deploy 'expansive' as a helpful way to allow for multiplicity in conversation to surprise us in our belonging together around a common table. Expansive suggests no privileging of one perspective over another, but rather a critical engagement and conversation to be able to catch a glimpse of the Divine. Expansive is also helpful in enabling a dynamic engagement with a diverse "cloud of witnesses" through our inherited texts and various traditions. Beyond inclusion means re-discovering the expansive, generous, open-hearted and recklessly extravagant grace of God in Christ. Re-negotiating belonging, interrogating power and privilege, managing our complex identities and prejudices, and experiencing mutual inconveniencing, imply that we have to rediscover this heart of God in our ministry of inclusion. We cannot act inclusively out of the assumption that God's grace is limited and scarce!

table space - in need and mutual inconveniencing

Rowan Williams suggest that to participate in Holy Communion "means to live as people who know that they are always *guest*" and that "indiscriminate generosity and the willingness to mix with unsuitable people" were very much part of the life of the early Church. [2014: 41-42] Around the table-space we are all in need: and if belonging together is going to be truly expansive it means that space has to be renegotiated for all to be included. Because we are always guest and all in need – together we must be *mutually inconvenienced* for the sake of the economy of the host. Our God-talk and practices cannot be

about reducing each other perspective and practices – all must move out of their fear and comfort spaces into grace-generosity space even if it is costly and inconvenient.

This is the vision of an inter-cultural journey: moving beyond a mere recognition of the presence of a multiplicity of cultures or diversity with little or no interaction beyond one's own group. The latter diminishes our common vocation together around the table of Christ. The invitation/ journey is for *all of us* to journey beyond our cultural/theological comfort/fear zones and boundaries to discover new insights of the Divine and what it means to be followers of the Jesus Way *together*, while allowing for multiplicity in the vision of *togetherness*. Together we enable each other to participate and experience inclusion by living out expansive habits characterised by "mutual inconveniencing" (embracing each other's differences); courageously imagining new ways of being Church so that the variety of 'giftings' are shared and received in ways that delight, enrich, renew and transform lives. Every time another joins us around the table, the way we are community has to be re-negotiated to give agency to their presence.

A recent meeting of European Reformed theologians exploring how to respond theologically to migration drawing from our family treasures left me much to think about. My colleagues in reading scriptures theologically were adamant that we had to do so through the Reformed confessions as the most important interpretative lens. It is a difficult starting point for me. While recognising the importance of creeds and confessions, my premise is that such may or may not contain appropriate things to say at a given moment in time – but always in light of what scripture says. My colleagues held their view with integrity as I held mine. My social location pushes me to work with the understanding that integrity means to also interrogate power, cultural, privilege and empire dynamics in all our received texts in a theological conversation with my ecclesial tradition. My European colleagues on the other hand deployed integrity as meaning faithfulness to the 'inherited Tradition of the Church' as the means to shape what we see in and say. So when I say, "The gospels show Jesus a Galilean Jewish Rabbi, undoing some of the restrictive borders of his religious tradition and pushing the boundaries on hospitality and inclusion" – that was found wanting because it was not connected to the creeds and confessions. Any articulation in my God-talk which appears veering away from our shared statement of faith was dodgy. Essentially we offered different answers to the question: how do we relate the Bible to the theology of the church? Living with integrity is

important – but if it is about stated positions to be affirmed and not critically engaged with – with no sense of inconveniencing - then we are all impoverished and we may be each hijacking the Jesus story!

table space - one in Christ and identities

One of the Pauline notion associated with table-space is the body of Christ as a basis for the ecclesial dimension of eucharist. Notions of 'body of Christ' and 'one in Christ' are not without an agenda. How do our theologies of the body of Christ shape our understanding of 'one in Christ'? Does our theological perspective allow room for the distinctiveness of identities and differences within the body? What does the collapsing (one in Christ) do to distinctive embodiment and how is this reflected in inclusion practices and belonging together? In contexts where identity plays a central role in the theological constructions of marginalized communities, how do we make sense of ethnic particularity within the church's theological formulations? How do we re-read the interpretive tendencies of Paul's oneness theory that seems to subsume differences?

I wonder how much of God-talk and liturgical practices honestly reflect the complexities of interaction and hybridity from the first Christian community to our current time. How much of our 'one in Christ' mantra unknowingly legitimises a hegemonic unity that leaves little space for 'differences and diversity' by placing more emphasis on 'sameness of identity or unity'? In the debates and process meanderings in the United Reformed Church on same gender/sex marriage underlying much of the debate is unity or 'one in Christ' mantra. The 'one in Christ' call may look like equality in the body. Closer scrutiny, however, will reveal that it carries an in-built threat to differences in the Christian economies of history – diminishing and restricting the existence of others!

Because identity is a complex matter, the politics warrants analysis. At the same time an exclusive focus on identity politics with a pull towards inward looking may mean missing intersections or can lead to inaction. Because systemic transformation needs alliances, it will become necessary to include those outside of one's experience (of the minority group I may represent) – but who also embody similar (same) experiences – to interact and speak with and on my behalf. Identity does matter and paying attention to identity allows us to interrogate the process through which any dominant group have their opinions taken

at face value, while minorities and non-normative groups of people struggle to have their voices heard. But we can also tire ourselves, totalise the complexities of identity, polarise our discourses, and can even internalise/re-inscribe some of the very habits we wish to counter when identity becomes our sole focus. To move to a politics of transformation and change, we need to grow in adjusting our discourse. This would require effort and much grace

table space: mystery, silence and imagining a different world

The table-space of Christ also signifies on a different world/economy (of the impossible). In the reenacting – words are insufficient to embrace the mystery present. Whatever our theological colour: protestant faith tends towards too much activism, premised on an unbalanced understanding of God as creator and *actus purus* (God as rester no!). Is this why we invest little in developing and nurturing an interior life necessary to feed our activism? We do not know how to be silent/ to pause - as a countercultural act in noisy world of orchestrated distractions.

In favouring rationality, we can be suspicious of mystery – deducing and reasoning out every act of mystery, miracle, magic and grace. Mystery terrifies many of us. The mantra of "growing in the faith" – meaning leaving behind childish things – can lead us to perceive Christians who subject their scriptures, liturgies and creeds to critical analysis to have a grown up and mature faith. The others can then be located in the domain of an emotional, immature and childish faith. It is not impossible to see how this can lead to polarised perspectives - stifling inclusion and belonging together

Beyond inclusion invites us to resist and counter any tendency to "pin down all meaning without anything that signifies mystery or risk". [Brueggemann 2000, 2-5]. In inclusion ministry can a rediscovery of sacramental 'mystery' open up ways for us re-imagine community in terms of in-between-space(s) and 'homelessness' around a common table? Not fixed spaces/places/language that fossilise and polarise identity and belonging; that "removes any possibility of a genuine, open-ended engagement with others"; or "of seeing community in multiple contexts and through the lens of diversity".[Kim 2008:37] But mystery as that which displaces/unsettles because there is more meaning than each of us around the table may be able to comprehend. Currently impoverished by an 'illiteracy of the imagination', we desperately

need to find ways, beyond inclusion, to break through unhelpful polarisations, categories and restrictive habits to imagine a different world. We need fewer words to help us receive "the gift of a new vision – the gift of seeing things". [Williams 2014: 52].

I find the Protestant obsession with words – parcelling out positions and truths in neat and precise words and language contrary to the Jesus way of ambiguity and fluidity. I find myself in a too talkative ecclesial tradition: we talk about finances rather than releasing our grasp on the purse-strings for the sake of the Jesus project of full life of all; we get aroused quarrelling about sex rather than enjoying it; we talk for days and months, reeling out reams of paper to justify our theological positions, assaulting God, when we could have broken out in poetry, music or just shut up to hear and catch a glimpse of the Divine. If as Catherine Keller suggests "the Church began in a mysterious transcultural event of amazement: 'All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'what does this mean?'" what has become of us?[Keller 2008:xi] What has the dominance of words, obsession with speech and proclamation and emphasis on a thinking/intellectual faith done to mystery? Beyond inclusion is not just a human endeavour!

becoming what we receive - unending thoughts

At the heart of Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice. The intersecting of perspectives [culture, economy, politics, social patterns etc] brings into play the ecology of our life together (including our institutions). Every dehumanising and degrading act harms the whole. At the heart of our moving beyond inclusion is a plea for an integral ecology for we are faced with one complex crisis with multiple manifestations.

Inclusion and belonging together is not happening: when we malign or look down upon the capacity and ability of the 'other'; when two groups of people have the same idea but it only becomes legitimate when the 'dominant voice' in the room offers it; when we refuse to interrogate our sacred deposits of faith for the seeds of exclusionary practices; when our leadership and key committees do not represent the variety of our membership; when different opinions would be helpful, but perspectives are not asked for, or are discounted; when questions about who are absent from around the table are not asked; when conversations on the intersections of marginalisation, privilege and power are missing; when the

narratives, images and language we use to describe our life together reinforce the dominant group and harmful stereotypes; when we favour a talkative/reasoned faith at the expense of mystery/silence. There is still much to be done towards realising communities of boundless compassion where none is excluded.

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