

Hospitality, Inclusion and Justice:
A theological reflection in response to old and new forms of discrimination and exclusion
A continuing conversation among the members of the Core Group of and others related to the
WCC programme on Just and Inclusive Communities
Nagpur, India
December 10-14, 2009

The work of the Core Group on Just and Inclusive Communities is rooted in the engagement of theologians and activists with a particular contextual and experiential reality of oppression and exclusion. The group chose the context of the Dalit communities in Nagpur, India for its reflection on the theme. This is the third in a series of theological reflections on the theme: Just and Inclusive Communities. The La Paz gathering focused on the theme – *Inclusivity as a theological challenge*; and the Rio gathering addressed the theme of *Justice from the margins of the 21st century* and in so doing called on the churches to name the practices of exclusion as sin. This third gathering in Nagpur is an attempt to integrate the themes of *hospitality, inclusion and justice*, particularly in view of the inclusion of the concerns of migrant communities and people in the WCC's Just and Inclusive Communities programme from 2010. In exploring the theme of ***Hospitality, Inclusion and Justice: A Theological reflection in response to old and new forms of discrimination and exclusion***, the group was unanimous in affirming the importance of hospitality as a significant mark (identity) of Christian Communities. It called on the member churches of the World Council of Churches to take seriously the biblical call to practice hospitality (as in *Deut 10:19; Lev. 19:33-34; Ex.23:9*) as they seek to live out their commitment in contexts featured by the challenges of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion of several sections of people. The following is a summary of the common understanding that has emerged¹:

¹ The process of this Conversation involved plenary presentations on the theme, followed by small group reflection and feedback from the five areas of concerns. As in previous meetings the practice of theological reflection was based on the lived experience of the participants.

Prof. Felix Wilfred gave the keynote address on the topic of *“Across Barriers: overcoming exclusion in the global community.”* He offered ten responses: 1. Ideological challenge – the need to “bring down the walls of the mind. Caste needs to be made a public conversation; 2. The acknowledgement of plurality contributing to the common good; 3. The need to promote indigenous (local) knowledge; 4. The importance of changing language – from “untouchables” to “Dalits”; 5. The need to strengthen democracy and promote justice; 6. The idea of justice; 7. The use of Constitution and Legal provision; 8. Affirmation of the universal notion of the common good; 9. Challenge the strategic exclusion of people from Natural resources; and 10. Inclusive historiography

Perspectival reflections on the theme were offered by:

Prof. Lázaro González from Mexico, representing the Indigenous Peoples
Ms Seta Hadesian from Lebanon, represent GEM
Prof. Ezamo Murry from India, representing EDAN
Rev. Michael Blair, Canada, representing the Racism network
Mr. Philip Vinod Peacock from India, representing the Dalit Solidarity Movement

1. Hospitality without justice is oppressive and dehumanizing. Similarly, inclusion without hospitality is nothing more than charity. The intricate weaving of hospitality, inclusion and justice will lead to the emergence of communities, which are a tapestry of interdependence and human togetherness where human dignity is respected, celebrated and honored; where liberation and freedom are a reality; and where oppressive power relationships are dismantled.
2. In reflecting on the theme from the vantage point of the Dalits in India, some of whom live on garbage dumps and as manual scavengers that we saw in Nagpur, we were of the opinion that hospitality is not a patronizing gesture but one that demands the courage to defy, expose and resist the status quo and social privileges.
3. In other words, it is being guided by the value of justice. Justice in its essence is about right relationships. Isaiah writes of the need to “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1.17). Micah also reminds us of the need to do justice (6.8). Justice is not an intellectual ideology but a reality achieved through radical action. The articulation of justice has often been expressed among the excluded communities contributing to this report both as the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources as well as respect and acceptance in a spirit of mutual love between persons and communities. As the La Paz Consultation said, “The clamour of the excluded people for justice is often a clamour for acceptance and freedom to be. Justice is when every human person is aware that they have a right to sit down at the table without needing to be asked or to seek permission.”
4. “It is this understanding of human community and person that we would like to call the Church to become aware and to own. The story of Good Samaritan can be read as a critique of the Church, represented by the Priest and Levite, walking around a victim of violence... Does the road to Jericho become safer because of the Good Samaritan? It will continue to be treacherous until the challenge to injustice becomes the norm. Some do not respond out of fear, some do not respond because they have other things to do and it is not a priority, some are the beneficiaries of injustice and violence, some do not notice, and some do not want to get their hands dirty”, as we recall saying in Rio de Janeiro in 2008.
5. In seeking to weave this tapestry, it will be essential to deconstruct the terms *hospitality* and *inclusion*. The current use of the terms in contemporary culture have implicit in them the notion of power. Hospitality involves guest and host. Both the biblical and cultural imagination has been shaped by this notion, especially because the concept is rooted in the experience of the aliens/strangers, the poor, the widows and orphans and the ones who are travelling and are away from home, those dispossessed and those deprived of a place in the community. So to show hospitality is to welcome the stranger, provide the basic necessities of food, water, lodging, etc. In this experience, the host has the power and prerogative to offer hospitality. Even if is motivated by religious and cultural commitments and standards; the manner and extent of it are often based on

the social identity and location of the guest. The Dalit experience of upper caste paternalism is the case in point. Therefore, although the experience of being hospitable might be good, it is not always transformative, in that it does not necessarily change the circumstances of the guest or host; nor does it challenge the ideologies or politics that have contributed to the lived experiences of the guest or the social status of the guest and host.

6. In the light of the above hesitations and limitations, we are inclined to affirm incarnation as the basis for re-imagining our understanding of hospitality. Church's practice of hospitality is to be rooted in the truth of the mode and manner of God's hospitality with human kind (Phil.2: 5-11). It is a hospitality that defies the world- its norms and values in order to be obedient to God. It is a hospitality that seeks out the lost and least (Mt.9:13); that provides opportunities for whom these are denied (Mt.20:1-16); that celebrates in the restoration of the dignity and humanity of the dispossessed (Lk. 15:11-32); that also calls for costly preconditions from the aspiring guests (Mk.10:17-22), and one that find itself as those struggling for life and all that make it as God intended it (Mt.25: 31-46).
7. Churches need to constantly affirm the sanctity and dignity of every human being in the light of this understanding of God present with us as a host and a guest. Hospitality practised from this perspective will begin to tamper with the social, cultural and political status quo. It is not a mere attitude but a goal that seeks to challenge the political system and assumptions about social status and identities. It implies that it is no longer simply providing training at the garbage dumps to Dalit women and children as we saw in Nagpur, but one that challenges the very system that allows them to be scavenging in the dumps in the first place.
8. The notion of *inclusion* also needs to be deconstructed. Implicit in the notion of inclusion is the notion of "*normative/norm*" and the binary notion of 'insider/outsider' with the "insider inviting the outsider" into the normative space. Someone is choosing to include someone else! The fundamental question then is, who includes whom? Like the cultural assumptions around hospitality, inclusivity too has implicit power dynamics and runs the risk of not being transformative. Inclusion can become another term for tolerance.
9. The ultimate goal of social relationships where exclusion and marginalization are in play then is participatory partnership. Participatory Partnership will challenge the notions of the exercise of power in relationships related to insider/outsider immigrants/residents, stranger and host, etc. It will be attentive to the relationship between 'host' and 'guest' and the politics of food. We were told how in the Indian context, hospitality as far as food is concerned would move downward and service would follow a pattern of upward movement. In moving to a practice of participatory partnership the church must be attentive to its theological affirmation of grace and justice, in which all persons are accepted by God and included into God's family no matter what they were (cf. Mt. 1).

10. The radical hospitality which is characteristic of Christian identity is rooted in the reality of both God's *justice* ("I have seen, heard, and intervene" - Ex. 3), and God's *hospitality* (The word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood – Jn.1:14), is a call to transformation. It requires a commitment to struggle with the complexity and ambiguity of suffering in the world and the way in which laws and politics and negotiated cultural relationships can be and is dehumanizing to other human persons, and consequently will challenge and engage political systems. It will engage the theological question of "where is God?", and the duality of a hospitable God and an inhospitable church or a hospitable church and an inhospitable God. It will deal with not just the symptoms of oppression and exclusion, but address the causes of oppression and exclusion – like economic policies, issues of land, environment and social class. It will participate in and actively support acts of resistance. Wherever people are marginalized, excluded, oppressed the church will be there walking side by side constantly making choices between the law of God and the law of the land.
11. During our time together in Nagpur, we also visited the following places: 1. Deekshabhoomi, where Dr. Ambedkar (considered the father of modern Dalit movement) received Neo- Buddhism; 2. Bhandewadi, where the Church of North India (CNI) runs a project for Dalits working on the garbage dump; and 3. Butibori, to visit both farmers and migrant labours working in the industrial areas. In reflecting on the exposure trip, the group expressed its sense of hope in the fact that the Church was present in all these places of where we came face to face with intense Dalit suffering. We agreed that we should take care not to call what we saw the women doing in the garbage dumps 'work' or 'livelihood', so as not to give any legitimacy. The visit also highlighted the reality of migrant workers and the challenges of human trafficking. Another important observation was the fact of the resilience of the human spirit. In the midst of incredible dehumanizing circumstances, members of the Dalit community still find ways to survive.
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