

AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH?

by Terry Anderson

“Inclusive” has become a key self-designation for the United Church of Canada (UCC). Inclusive, and related concepts of pluralism and diversity, operate often as trump cards in discussions and decisions regarding faith, morals, and church policy. A designation makes an entity recognizable, in this case the UCC, by a mark, sign or name. It makes a statement about whom or what the designated one is, what characterizes it. So what does the designation of “inclusive” declare about our church, both to our own selves and to others? A dictionary of synonyms lists the following: “comprehensive; extensive; wide; full; all-embracing; encompassing,” etc.

How did we come so to designate ourselves? In its present form it seems to have arisen during the ‘80s and the ‘90s in response to the growing awareness of the plurality of peoples, cultures, and religions at home and abroad. It was generated, I think, by at least two factors. One was the powerful movements of the time for recognition, justice and equality for Afro-Americans, women, First Nations, other ethnic minorities, and persons of homosexual orientation. A second factor was various new communication technologies and the growing phenomenon labeled “globalization” with both its rich possibilities and dangers. The “inclusive” church designation gained credence in this milieu.

I believe, however, that we should drop this self-designation, for two basic reasons. The first is that as a description of whom and what we actually are, “inclusive” is both presumptuous and false. The United Church, like any other finite entity, in reality is not inclusive and can never be all-encompassing or comprehensive. Under the guise of the slogan “inclusive” we actually exclude plurality and diversity. There is hidden behind it the very thing that is supposed to be avoided: arrogance and intolerance.

We should be grateful that we do include persons, at least those in Canada, of various classes, cultures, those who are mentally and physically challenged, and those of the various groups named here seeking to be recognized and treated justly. And the term “inclusive”

actually functions partly as a code word indicating support for one or more groups of this kind. But, as an active participant in most of these movements, I find the code word misleading. For if anybody in any of these groups does not adhere to the ideology espoused by their particular movement — blacks opposed to integration or non-violence, women who do not subscribe to radical feminist ideology, gays and lesbians who are opposed to same-sex marriage or seek to change their orientation — they are in trouble. They find themselves excluded.

The self-designation of “inclusive” also functions as a sign of the ideal to which we aspire for this pluralistic, divided world. We are declaring that we are a church whose mission is to provide leadership in honouring diversity; we seek mutual tolerance, respect, harmony and unity among all. At first glance, this has a degree of resonance with the vision of the Kingdom, the promise of shalom.

A Slide into Relativism

However, a closer examination reveals that it pulls us in a way from the Gospel and its promise of shalom, for it leads to a relativising of all truth claims. This is the second main reason I think we should now drop the self-designation, “inclusive.”

The post modernist regards all “truth” as merely one perspective regarding how things appear to be. No objective reality or truth exists, or if it does, we can’t know anything about it. Therefore, all religions are equally valid or invalid. According to this plausibility structure any statement of ultimate belief, any universal truth claim, especially about the meaning and purpose of life, or the right and good, is dismissed as arrogant, and a major source of fanaticism. We are hesitant to make the claim that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, for that would be not only naïve, but also intolerant and divisive. Our message should be simply that *personally* we find the Gospel — or at least Jesus’ teachings — meaningful, spiritually satisfying, and useful. Such a posture, it is assumed, shows respect for the different personal choices of others.

I suggest that such relativism leaves the church without any meaningful center to define its being, and thus with a propensity to

blow with every wind. As a native (Papago) friend, a non-Christian, said to me, “I have been watching your church for some time, and I think that the word that best describes you is ‘whatever’.”

We may feel that we have great freedom of thought, openness to other views, and that “everybody plays, every body wins”. However, when the only basis left for determining the validity of beliefs, morality or practices is personal preference and self-empowerment, resolving differences can become simply a political power struggle over whose preferences shall prevail. I suggest this is evident in our church.

An Effective Mask

This relativism also serves to mask certain realities. First, the belief that there is no ultimate universal truth tends to obscure the fact that this is itself a universal truth claim. As such it does not escape many of its indictments leveled against Christianity and other religions. It too ultimately rests on underlying axioms that can only be taken on faith. It also sets boundaries that exclude. Clearly left “outside the camp” are those, probably the majority of the world, who sincerely believe that their religious faith is true, not just a personal preference.

Secondly, this “inclusive” approach provides a cover that aids us in avoiding having to acknowledge the boundaries that are operative in our church. It seems clear, for example, that we don’t in fact assume that everything can be left as a personal and private matter. We feel it is wrong to engage in, let alone justify, violence against women, sexual harassment and abuse, oppression of the poor, terror attacks, pollution of the environment, child pornography, anti-Semitism, etc. If someone were to say to us that the subordination of women is a private matter of personal choice, we would come down hard on him. I think, therefore, the claim that “inclusive” describes who we are shields us from facing the question, “What beliefs and moral standards are actually operative as legitimate boundaries in our church, and why?”

For we have boundaries. Those that exist, however, we don’t justify, since we feel they are based on what every right-thinking

modern person takes for granted. At a B.C. Conference annual meeting some time ago, representatives from other denominations and faiths were invited and welcomed to the meeting in the name of our being tolerant and inclusive. But during one session a lay woman delegate from Victoria rose to speak, obviously very nervous, reading from notes held in quivering hands, to express opposition to abortion. She was greeted with loud “boos!” No objection to the jeering came from the chair.

The falsity of our inclusive claim is apparent to most outsiders, and vividly so to those who have experienced the sting of rejection under its label. The United Church operates with an informal version of shunning — ignoring, refusing to engage the issue in question, scorn, isolation.

Thirdly, the relativism of this “inclusive” approach masks from its followers, though not from outsiders, its soft imperialism. The implicit, operative assumption is that we are the supreme hosts, arbiters of who can be included, as if these others are panting to be admitted to our world. Is this a carry-over from Western imperialism, only now with the hegemony of post-modern instead of modern truth claims?

The question facing our United Church in this pluralistic world, then, is not how we can avoid making a universal truth claim in the effort to be inclusive. It cannot be done by any finite entity. Rather the relevant question is, what do we believe and why? Does the truth we declare generate arrogance or humility, hope or despair, tolerance or fanaticism? Likewise, the issue is not whether the United Church has boundaries. They are unavoidable. Rather, the questions are first, what actually are these, what should they be in light of the truth we proclaim? And second, how should we relate to those who are outside these boundaries, especially those who belong to other faith groups?

But before proceeding further, it is important to acknowledge the sorry record of Christian malpractice. There is a blood-stained track left by Christianity, as well as by other religions, in bitter wars, persecutions, sanctioning imperial oppression, and the like. This record hardly commends the Gospel to a “global village,” where learning to live together is essential to survival. Undoubtedly, such

malpractice has drawn some embarrassed Christians into the “inclusive” relativism we have been discussing. But I think that such malpractice arose not because of believing Jesus is the Christ, and obediently following him, but rather in spite of this or in failing to do so.

Good News for the World

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for the whole world, human and other-than-human creation. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the climax of God’s relentless, ongoing work to transform this broken, divided and warring world into a new heaven and a new earth where justice and peace embrace - the Kingdom of shalom. This transformation entails the fulfilling and perfecting, not the annulment, of the rich diversity of God’s good creation.

God’s saving love is extended through Jesus Christ to all persons. And it is done so in respect for human freedom. Thus, this awesome, mysterious ruler of all that is does not exercise power of dominion either to coerce or to announce imperiously that all will now be insiders. Rather, God grants us humans the freedom to decide whether to turn and accept this free gift of grace, and the new life into which it calls, or to reject it. Excluded are only those who choose to be so. It is God’s invitation in and through Jesus Christ, then, that is truly inclusive, not a finite and imperfect entity like the church.

God’s gift of grace, as we know, entails both forgiveness (justification) and the leading into a new life following Jesus Christ (sanctification). Accepting the gift, therefore, entails commitments - dying to the old life, rising to the new, costly discipleship. We are to trust and obey. This quite likely will separate those who accept the invitation from others and will likely lead to being excluded and even persecuted. The commitments, then, establish certain boundaries grounded in God’s commandments and Christ’s Way.

Yet Jesus died even for those who put him to death. Evidently, God so loves the world that even those who reject that love are not abandoned, though we must not slide lightly over the reality of God’s wrath. Nevertheless, God’s invitation remains open. We are left to wonder which will finally prevail — human stubborn rejection, or

God's persistent love.

Standing Under The Truth

The truth revealed in Jesus Christ is not the possession of the church. It "is most surely ours when we do not claim it as our own, when we recognize the broken character of our apprehension of it, and know that it can be truth in us just insofar as we acknowledged it to be truth over us."¹ This is the paradox of grace. The Christian message to a pluralistic world is not that our church has all the truth about God and the meaning of the human story. But rather we believe the clue to the truth is to be found in Jesus Christ and trusting this is "to be placed on the path by following which we are led towards the truth."² Come and join us on that search. Or, as D.T. Niles, the Sri Lankan Christian put it so well, "we are but beggars telling other beggars where we have found food".

Relating to Those of Other Faiths

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is also active as Creator and Sustainer, as the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we should "expect, look for, and welcome all the signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know Jesus as Lord."³ This generates a posture toward other religions of respectful inquiry, discovery, and dialogue. This is very different from any a priori judgments of either rejection or inclusion. Jesus Christ remains the criterion for what is truly of God and what is not. But only God, not Christians, can decide or know who finally will be saved.

Contending For Justice With Love

Another attribute of the gospel of Christ pertinent to living in a pluralistic world is the familiar command to love our neighbor. Such love modeled on Christ's love necessitates both testifying to the invitation of God through Christ and contending for justice and other

¹ Ibid, p. 243

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 1989) p. 12.

³ Ibid., p. 180

moral goods that affect the well-being of us all. Yet this contending quickly generates opposition and division. The temptations are either to retreat to a sentimental loss of moral rigor in the name of tolerance on the one hand, or on the other fanatically to pursue justice in the name of faith. We need “both the ability to hold vital convictions which lead to action; and also the capacity to preserve the spirit of forgiveness towards those who offend by holding to convictions which seem untrue (or wrong) to us.”⁴

The “love so amazing, so divine” revealed on the cross brings into sharp relief not only God’s mercy but both our fragmentary understanding of love and justice and the poverty and sinful distortions of our actions in pursuing it. Such awareness moves us to hold to the rightness of our cause for justice while acknowledging that its rightness is not absolute. This will mitigate the temper of the struggle.⁵

And are Christians not called to love our enemies? Again, the love of God displayed on the cross so full of mercy and forgiveness even to us sinners and Jesus’ enemies engenders “the spirit of forgiveness which is at once the crowning fruit of biblical faith and the perennial need of all personal and social relations. The evil in the other is to be ‘borne without vindictiveness because the evil in the self is known’. ‘Mercy to the foe is possible only to those who know themselves to be sinners’.”⁶

Is the United Church of Canada an inclusive church? I have argued that we have a false perception of ourselves if we think that. The claim leads us astray. Our church can never be either the hope for a troubled world or its redeemer. We are a group of forgiven sinners. I pray that we will come alongside others testifying to God’s invitation to all in Jesus Christ. This invitation to turn, to receive forgiveness, be transformed, walk the way of life, is the hope for the world and its ultimate salvation. Perhaps our self-designation should be, in St. Paul’s words, “ambassadors for Christ”.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 2, p. 219.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1946) p. 16.

⁶ Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1960) p. 134 (citing Niebuhr).