

Community – Inclusion and Exclusion

One would be hard-pressed to find a Methodist Church which didn't identify itself as 'welcoming'! Sometime ago I visited a church where I'd previously been the minister. A long-time member enthusiastically filled me in on the new persons who had joined the music group: "There are more who were born outside the UK than inside!" That church's welcome of difference has served it well over several decades. Its welcome is more than just feeling proud that strangers have wandered in for whatever reason; its welcome involves finding roles for new people to fill so that they become part of that worshipping and serving community.

In these days when church going is not the norm, one wonders what encourages persons to make the first step inside the strange door or gate... Are they searching for meaning in life? For community? For a hand-out?

On the interfaith scene, I've been very warmly welcomed into Sikh Gurdwaras for meals – the first I recall was some 40 years ago in India. As a young person, I was surprised to find that other religions also cared for people and offered free meals. Since then, I've been welcomed to Muslim mosques for meals and to Hindu weddings where the tables groaned under an abundance of food. Jewish bar- and bat-mitzvahs are great occasions to feast as well. Parsi birthday parties can consist of a spread of tasty Zoroastrian delights. Nearly every faith tradition has an imperative to welcome and feed the stranger.

The path from being welcomed as a stranger to being included as part of the community is much more complex. We've noted before that 'hospitality' and 'hostility' are interrelated: welcoming the stranger can also mean making oneself vulnerable to danger. Each of our religions has set up boundaries for who can be included and who is kept apart. We Methodists like to pride ourselves with saying 'all are welcome,' even having a communion table open to all who want to 'follow Jesus,' but to become a 'member', one must go through training and be approved by the Church Council. Community becomes more complicated.

There are places of worship where I am not welcome, usually because I am either a woman or because I am not a member of that faith tradition. Some of this exclusion touches on the 'holiness' debate I mentioned in an earlier column. Some of it is in response to previous episodes of persecution by outsiders. Inevitably there is pain involved, either remembered pain of those whose previous welcome has been abused or the pain of the excluded newcomer.

My research into interfaith marriage revealed much pain experienced by those whose choice of marriage partner from another faith tradition excluded them from one or both religions. Often a faith traditions' response to someone from another faith wanting to marry one of their own is: 'we will welcome you, if you convert.' While a voluntary conversion is often a life-changing and life-giving occasion, a forced conversion is often the sign of a dangerous relationship, one built on power rather than compassion.

Some of our faith traditions are known as 'evangelical' or 'missionary' religions, those that actively seek out new members, a.k.a. converts. Christianity and Islam head the list of these, sharing a compulsion to convince others of what is best or highest or most divine. Others have strict rules about who can be a member of the community, and often the restrictions have to do with one's birth circumstances, that is, one must be 'born' into the faith. These

include Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Hinduism. These faith traditions can often look upon the 'evangelical' religions with great suspicion!

If we're honest with ourselves, all of us would probably regard someone from our own faith tradition who 'converted' to another as a traitor of some sort. It feels like we've been rejected. At the same time, we celebrate when someone converts to our faith tradition. Does that mean 'we' won and 'they' lost?

Some years ago, I worked at an institution which called itself a 'Christian International School'. The heritage and ethos of the school was built on the Christian faith, which was seen as inclusive of all persons as children of the God who came to give life and love to all. There were often debates, though, about whether a school could be 'international' and 'Christian' because many from faiths outside Christianity felt their international identity was not well-served by being included within Christianity. For many, Christianity primarily signified a religion that was part and parcel of Western colonialism. It's a debate which was never fully resolved but one which required those of us involved to think long and hard about what it meant to be Christian in a multi-faith world.

Perhaps it is a conversation that we need to continue more intentionally. When we welcome someone into our church, our congregation, our community, are we doing it on the condition that they become one of us to the exclusion of what they were before?

The most effective 'conversions' I've witnessed are from persons who have caught a glimpse of a loving, accepting, forgiving community that serves a kind and compassionate God. In Hindu terms, one has a responsibility to carefully choose one's guru (teacher) and then commit to learning deeply about the divine from that person. Is that what those whom we welcome are looking for when they come onto our premises?