

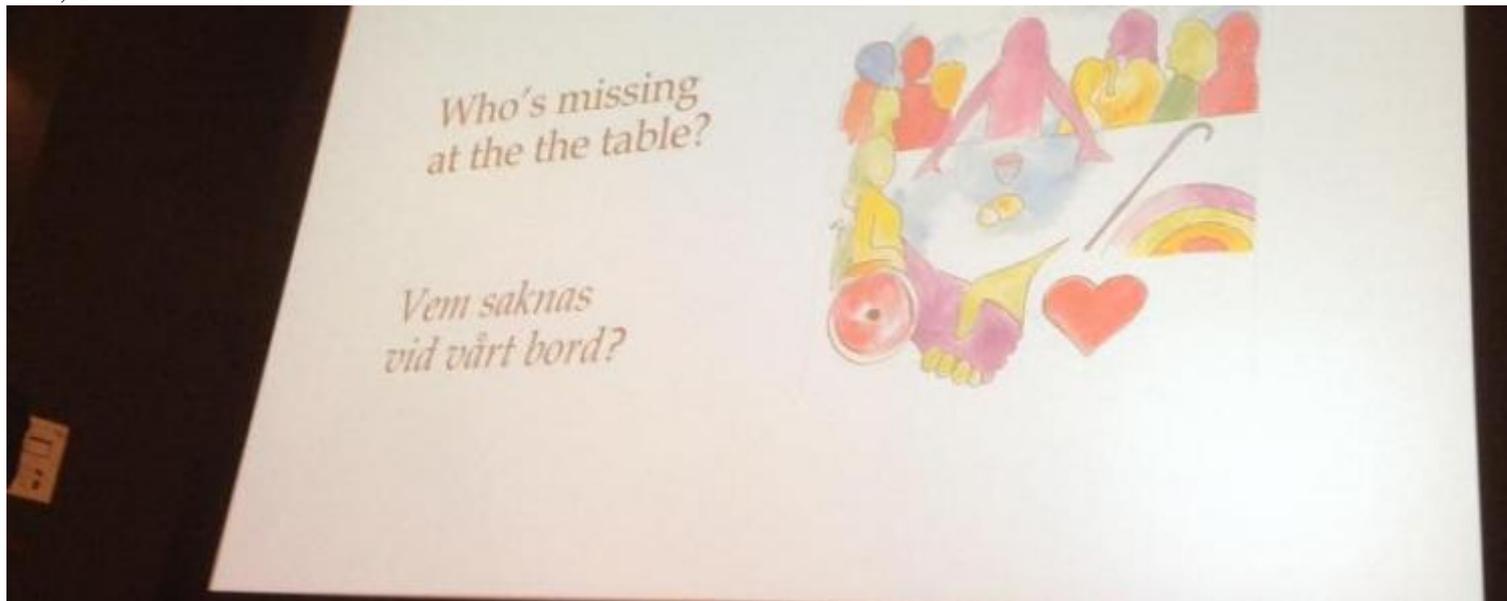


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IC's trip to Sweden: Being inclusive is about more than being 'nice'!

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A TEDxExeter talk got me thinking. A young deaf woman came on the stage and started signing her talk. This went on for long enough for us all to begin to feel uncomfortable. She then signed for her interpreter to come on stage. She apologised for forgetting that most of us didn't sign and she wanted us to feel included. It was a nice moment and a proper lesson.

A week later I went on a wonderful trip to Sweden and the Diocese of Stockholm with Inclusive Church to attend a conference on 'Inclusion and Accessibility?'. Here the hospitality was generous and the encounters were more personal. We experienced creative and imaginative work in a poor suburb of Stockholm where the Church and the Mosque are not only working together in the community, but a looking to build a Mosque next to the church with shared spaces: 'Gudshus? ' God's House. Nearer the centre of Stockholm, we visited a parish where fantastic work with young people with Down's Syndrome was being done, and where they were not only routinely included in activities, but in the Mass. 'A church for and with all?.

Inclusion in all these experiences meant more than being nice. For most of us, of course, inclusion *feels* the right thing to do. For me, it became clear that inclusion is also the Gospel thing to do. Not because it is nice, but because it speaks of the nature of God: God who demonstrates in Jesus Christ that God is 'for all and with all?.

The incarnation of our God is, perhaps, the most profound act of inclusion. For God not only takes on our humanity, but also brings our humanity into God's self. Without confusion, separation or division, the human and divine are included in one another, and each bears witness with the other to the love that stands at

the heart of God, the universe, ourselves and everything.

Inclusion is not an add on but is the heart of the Gospel; not an add on to mission, but the heart of mission. Inclusion is not (just) about loops and ramps, but is about being with and for everyone, learning from each and every person what God means and is. It's not about 'normal' and 'needy'; inclusion is not something the majority patronisingly confers on the minority. Ultimately, inclusion is what God is.

A common misconception about inclusion is that it is something I do for you or you do for me. Another is that inclusion is about views and ideas or practices. Inclusion is much more significant than that. It is about believing that at a deep and profound level each person, as they are, is the place and person where God is found and to be understood. And each person, as they are, is the place and person where humanity is found and to be understood.

Jean Vanier put it this way:

Each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to humanity. As we start to really get to know others, as we begin to listen to each other's stories, things begin to change. We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion, from fear to trust, from closedness to openness, from judgment and prejudice to forgiveness and understanding. It is a movement of the heart.

We might even go further and say that 'each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to God'.

There should be something redundant about saying 'inclusive church'. A church which is not inclusive, in that 'for all and with all' sense, isn't, probably, much of a church. By the same token, a church which is trying to be the Body Christ, a living witness to the love of God as expressed in the incarnation, will be inclusive. If we, as church, are not *being* what we proclaim, then we haven't much of a mission either.

I felt honoured to be included in the trip to Sweden. I felt honoured to be included in the conference and that they thought I had something to contribute. My inclusion was a learning experience; being included enlarged my sympathies and understanding: it was empowering. The simple act of inclusion taught me something of God. Inclusion, incarnation, church, and mission all define one another.

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