
E. Removing Barriers that Exclude



In our churches and societies, barriers of discrimination continue to exclude people with physical or mental disabilities. Those affected by HIV/AIDS face additional kinds of discrimination. How do barriers of discrimination challenge what it means to be the church? How does Christ's transforming power break down these barriers, as well as those based on race, ethnicity, caste, age, or gender? What should we be doing to remove them? Where should human rights efforts focus? The historical wounds of exclusion tend to be deep and festering. How can ruptured relationships with those who have been excluded be healed?

Iara's cry

Listen with your heart. I want to tell you my story. This is a story of millions of people, but at the same time, it is just my story. I am privileged because I can write and you can read. I want to tell this story—no more secrecy, no more silence. Keeping silent only makes things worse.

*I am a person who has been excluded many times in her life. Many barriers have prevented me from fully participating in church and society, or from entering the hearts of people. Once, a long time ago, I thought this was **my** problem. Then I came to a point in my life when I realized that I am but one among millions. I have a condition that makes people avoid me. This condition makes people think, when they first meet me, that I am neither beautiful nor intelligent. When they see me, their fears and prejudices rise within them.*

What condition do you think Lara has? Why do you think people exclude and avoid her? Why do you think she is so passionate about telling her story fully and openly? Can you relate a similar story of exclusion? Name other conditions people have that lead to their avoidance and rejection by others.

Barriers that exclude

Some people are excluded because of their religion. There are parts of the world where Christians or Muslims, Jews or Hindus exclude one another. Some people are excluded because of the color of their skin, others because of their ethnic background. On these bases, they are considered inferior. Some, like the Dalits of India, are considered “outcasts,” excluded even by the gods.

There are those who are isolated because they suffer from a chronic illness, such as HIV/AIDS. Others are excluded because they are obese, have facial scars, or are intellectually disadvantaged. Still others are shut out because they are gay or lesbian.

What kinds of conditions serve as a basis for excluding people in your culture? In your church?

Lara's story

I was born December 15, 1960 in southern Brazil. As a baby, I contracted polio (Poliomyelitis or Infantile Paralysis). My legs were twisted and weak because my muscles were affected. I was the victim of a worldwide polio epidemic which lasted from 1940 until 1960. In Brazil, at that time, we had a polio vaccine, but a baby had to be eight months old to receive it, and I was only six months old. Later, Dr. Sabin developed a vaccine that could also be given to newborn children.

My whole life has been affected by this. I learned to walk very late, after my first bone and muscle transplant. I cannot recall all the pain of being in a hospital for 20 days and for 45 days in a cast, but I can recall my mother's unconditional presence, love, hope and patience. One of the most painful images I carry in my soul is the moment when the nurses came to take me to the operating room. I was clinging to my mother's neck, screaming with horror.

After this surgery I began my rehabilitation. Three times a week I went to a physiotherapist to exercise my legs and learn how to walk. I was four years old when I had the first experience of standing on my own feet and walking.

While I was living with my family and friends with whom I grew up I felt completely loved and equal. Of course, I could not climb trees or ride a bike, but I had developed other skills. The trouble began when I went to school and felt different. My legs were not growing at the same rate as my body. My right leg and foot were very damaged. So, I walked differently. I limped! Reason enough for other children to give me nasty nicknames. I was

marginalized, discriminated against and alone. At this point in my life I decided that I would find friends and try to overcome being marginalized and alone. I also realized I would always have enemies. Tough realization for a seven-year-old girl!

Why did other children not accept Iara as she was? Why did they set up barriers that marginalized her and made her feel alone? What forces create these kinds of barriers?

Whence these barriers?

In telling our stories, we connect with the pain and the healing power of honest memory. Being open about a problem is the first step towards overcoming the barriers that people erect to exclude those who are different. Understanding the nature of the barriers is an essential step in the process of eventually breaking them down. We need to know how each one of us, because of our biases, may have helped build these barriers.

Unlike Iara, many children cannot point to a similar incident in their lives. They are excluded because of the way they look from the day of their birth. They are marginalized or even hated because of their ethnic background or appearance. For them, the barrier exists before they are born. The barriers that people erect to exclude others can last for centuries.

In some cultures, there are myths that explain why some children are born disabled, disfigured or diseased. Some Christians have suggested that people suffer disability or disease because of human sin. They trace the problem back to the sin and curse in Genesis 3. Bible passages such as Deuteronomy 28:6ff. are used to interpret sickness, insanity and disabilities as being God's punishments.

Jesus has quite a different answer. In John 9:2, the disciples follow a popular

interpretation of such disabilities and ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The disciples assumed that blindness was not part of the natural order, but a punishment of God. These popular beliefs of Jesus' day were perpetuated to exclude such people as "sinners." Even today, afflicted people sometimes say, "What did I do to deserve this?"

Jesus tells his disciples that sin is not the cause of a disability such as blindness. These conditions can be part of the natural order of things and used by Christ to reveal God's presence and compassion—whether they are removed or remain. All human beings are created in the image of God, an image that is expansive and inclusive enough to embrace male and female, varying degrees of ability, diverse shapes and appearances, different ages and colors.

Iara has this to say about the painful ways that healing texts in the Bible are often used:

When I think of these texts, I think of the other people with disabilities who were not cured. How did they feel? Did they think their faith was not enough? Or were they not worthy of being healed?... Such stories present problems for people with disabilities, because we are seeking full participation as we are. If we have to wait for our bodies to be restored, we might never be able to participate. ... Sometimes I believe it would have been better if Jesus had not healed all these people, but instead just blessed them and sent them home with the disability and with support. His example would change people's prejudices.

What causes these barriers to exist in peoples minds and lives? What reasons are given in your culture for keeping away from people who are different? What kind of popular beliefs or stories are told to justify excluding people?

One text I like is of the woman who was bent over for 18 years (Lk 13:10–17). Jesus calls this woman who is disabled “a descendent of Abraham.” He gave her the dignity and power to be among others. I call this text and the healing of the blind man (Jn 9:1.10) “almost perfect texts” because they really put people with disabilities at the center. They show our humanity, the image of God that we possess with our disability. But I wonder why Jesus healed them? The best answer I have heard is from a friend of mine, an old pastor who said to me: “Jesus healed them because he loved them so much.” This is what brings me consolation even though it does not give me a complete answer. Clearly, Jesus did not heal people so that they would be more acceptable, but because he could feel their suffering and because he loved them. He feels our pain and loves us just as much, whether or not our disability remains.

How have you heard biblical stories about people with disabilities interpreted in hurtful ways? How would you challenge this?

Barriers based on race, ethnicity, caste, or gender

Major barriers arise through the forces of racism and ethnocentrism. In the strict definition of the terms, these two negative forces are quite different in their origins, even if the effects are similar. Ethnocentrism is the belief that “my” nation or people is the best or special, is “chosen” in some way, and has a culture that is to be kept pure or undiluted by other cultures. This is often heightened when new immigrants arrive, and can lead to xenophobia (hatred of foreigners).

Racism is an even more insidious ideology. It is based on the false belief that

“races” actually exist and can be identified by biological differences between peoples—skin color, facial features and type of hair. Although originally claimed to be based on science, it is a belief that has been totally discredited by genetics, but one that still persists in popular thought. The most insidious part of this is the belief that some “races” are inferior to others, intellectually, morally and culturally. Racist structures and power relations have then been built up on the basis of this ideology.

In the technical sense of the term outlined above, there are no “races” in the Bible. In the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11), when God divides up the peoples of earth, God does so on the basis of “tongue” not “race.” “Tongue,” referring to a discrete language, is the basis of a given culture. In other words, humanity is divided according to cultures not “races.” And as Acts 17:26–28 makes clear, peoples of all cultures seek God.

A related barrier of exclusion are social structures in which caste plays a central role. As set forth in an LWF statement at the 2002 meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the following key features contribute toward discrimination and human rights violations:

- The concept of “purity-pollution,” with certain social groups being regarded as “dirty,” and contact with them as being ritually or actually polluting.
- An inherited occupational role, typically the most menial and hazardous roles within society.
- Socially enforced endogamy, though with varying degrees of strictness.

These basic features naturally result in a whole range of discriminatory consequences, such as segregation in settle-

ment and housing patterns as well as discrimination in employment, education and access to health, social services and public places. There sometimes are violent reprisals against those who challenge the social hierarchy. These are features not only of casteism, but also of more blatant forms of sexism.

Over recent decades certain barriers of sexism have been removed in many societies, and women now are entering spheres of work and service previously closed to them. In some member churches, for example, the majority of those studying to become pastors are women. Yet in other societies, major barriers to women's full participation in church and society remain, and are reinforced by cultural traditions and religious beliefs, which tend to perpetuate subtle forms of discrimination throughout the world.

The affirmation of human dignity is the primary reason why a church must not tolerate injustices such as racism, apartheid, occupation, colonialism, sexism and casteism being perpetrated against human beings. We believe that each one of us is made in the image of God, and is precious, unique, irreplaceable and valuable. Especially since the United Nations approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, human rights have been defined as a means of acknowledging and protecting human dignity. Human rights are an integral part of celebrating human worth by ensuring that human beings are treated as persons of value. The classical freedoms (of religion, opinion, expression, association, movement) that are part of an open democracy seek the same objective: to end policies and practices that treat any person as less than fully human.

Facing the challenges of diversity is inseparable from the challenges of building up a sense of nationhood, development and reconciliation. Nation building and reconciliation involve national integration,

which in turn entails bringing together various tribal, racial, ethnic, regional, or religious groups into a larger unit. Since racism was the mainstay of the colonial legacy, building a democratic society or nation involves minimizing the significance of the differences that prevail. Diversity, democracy and the acceptance of human rights mean rising above differences based on ethnocentrism or racism to a higher order where tribe, race, language or religious affiliation become less central in significance.

Which of these barriers has it been most important for your church to address? How is your church involved in removing these barriers in your society and church?

This was also an issue during Jesus' ministry. His contemporaries found the crossing and removing of boundaries of ethnicity, gender, or religion to be strange, even controversial. However, the rapid spread and eventual victory of Christianity over the many competing religions in the Roman Empire was in part due to its openness to the diversity of different groups and classes, to women and the downtrodden, and to those who for all kinds of reasons were outcast. The LWF and member churches must continue and intensify their pursuit of this commitment today.

Healing the pain of being excluded

Iara's story continues:

Then came adolescence and great suffering. Girls were talking about boys—and about their first kiss. Who would like to date a girl with a disability? So, again, I was sitting and observing and listening! I was that girl to whom all the other girls came to talk about dating. I

even learned how to kiss without ever being kissed. I was so alone. I wanted a boyfriend too. Nobody invited me to dance at a party, nobody invited me out, even though I was not really ugly!

You cannot imagine the pain of sitting in a restaurant with other friends when a guy sitting at another table started flirting with me. But, the moment I stood up and he saw my disability his face changed completely. He could not look at me. The pain of being different and disregarded led to doubts about being worthy. And that hurt deeply!

At the end of my teenage years, I went through another surgery, because the left leg grew longer than my right leg. I was almost unable to walk any more. I got a bone transplant from one leg to the other leg. My mother's presence was again my support.

Why is it difficult for people to accept those who are different? Why does difference threaten? How is the sexuality of persons with disabilities viewed in your community? How did Lara come to terms with her difference? Relate examples from your context of people facing similar situations because of where they come from, their cultures or lifestyles.

When I turned 20, I decided to become a pastor. That decision changed my life. I could drive to the seminary (after my car was modified) and join other students in our search for ways to liberate the world through such means as pastoral care, worship and social work. Even though the seminary, like many buildings in my country, was not physically accessible for people with disabilities, I felt welcomed. I experienced that I could be a lovable woman

In what ways does your church support people who experience this kind of alienation, exclusion and loneliness? How might it play a greater role in the healing process?

like others. This beautiful experience allowed me to feel whole, more capable, happier.

Here I also met my husband. We were good friends for many years, and after a long period of being apart, we realized that we would like to spend our life together. At this point in my life, I had the feeling of being able to face all of life's challenges and joys. I felt inside of me the power to fight for what I really believed in: to fight for people with disabilities and for the changes we need in order to live better.

More healing experiences were waiting for me. I became pregnant. In spite of the fact that some insensitive people were totally shocked, and asked me whether my baby would be born with the same disability, I really enjoyed seeing my belly grow and feeling a human being inside me. My family and friends were all celebrating with me. Our daughter Victoria, who was born in 1992, is the treasure of our lives.

Overcoming barriers

For the people of biblical times, barriers were a looming reality. One of the greatest dilemmas facing the early Christian church was the division between Jew and Gentile. This conflict came to a head at a showdown in Jerusalem. One faction said that a (male) person had to be circumcised to become a genuine Christian (Acts 15:5). St. Paul insisted that after Christ had come, people did not need to keep the old Jewish law, but to have faith in Christ as the revelation of God, whether the person was male or female, Jew or Gentile. Paul was countering a Jewish form of ethnocentrism.

This barrier between Jew and Gentile goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures and has been used, also by the church, to

justify excluding people quite ruthlessly. Christians have often viewed themselves as God's chosen people—as an extension of God having chosen Israel. As God's chosen people, the Israelites believed they should dispossess the indigenous Canaanites of their land, and exclude them from being an integral part of their community. These indigenous people were considered outcasts. No one should ever marry a Canaanite (according to Ezra 9:1–4) and mix “holy seed” with the peoples of the land. No Moabite is ever to be admitted to the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:3–6; see also the Bible study on Ruth 4).

This could be called “we are a superior Christian people” ideology. It was associated with many of the invasions of indigenous lands by European peoples—the Pilgrims and their descendants in North America, the Boer Trek in Africa, the invasion of Australia by the British. The invaders believed that, as Christians, they were superior to the so-called “natives.”

Was this ideology part of the experience of the church in your culture? Does this ideological barrier still exist, even in your church? Where especially is this a problem today?

When St. Paul and his followers faced this problem, the answer was unequivocal. In Ephesians 2, it is clearly stated that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, between one people and another, has been broken down by Christ. Christ has overcome the barriers created between peoples. Christ has created one new humanity, reconciling both sides to God (see the Bible study on Ephesians 2:13–23).

As far as God is concerned, all peoples are reconciled to God and part of one humanity. There should be no barriers that exclude people from God and the

blessings of the peace gained by Jesus Christ. Yet, our world is full of peoples who exclude each other. Most invading peoples still have not reached reconciliation with the indigenous peoples of the land. While the process has begun in countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, it is far from complete.

If Christ was the mediator who effected reconciliation with God, what should churches, especially through the LWF, be doing for the sake of reconciliation in society or between societies? How can the message of the cross of Christ be a means of effecting reconciliation and healing in contexts where the gospel is not accepted? (see also the chapter on the “The Mission of the Church in Multi-faith Contexts”)

Healing communities

How can communities contribute toward healing? These communities may be quite different, depending on the form of exclusion that has injured people. Such a community requires people who are willing to function as “healers,” working to be the healing hands of Christ in the community. Often these healers are people who themselves have been healed, who have experienced forgiveness, reconciliation and new life in Christ.

Iara formed one such community. As she says,

I began to invite people with disabilities to form a group. At first, it was very difficult to find them. We began meeting in March 1996. We each had a disability. Ronaldo, a worker, was 21 years old with cerebral palsy, and walked with difficulties with one cane. Maria Claudia, a physician with multiple sclerosis, was 38 years old and walked with great difficulty and dizziness. Ivanir, a 36-year-old housekeeper, also had multiple sclerosis and walked with one stick. Rosalie, a 52-year-old housekeeper, had only five percent of normal

sight and was considered legally blind. Rigoberto, a 23-year-old painter, had been living in a wheelchair for three years after being paralyzed from his neck down due to a bullet wound.

At first, we were a very strange parade for the other groups which met at the church at the same time. We could not find parking places for the cars that transported our group. We had many steps to overcome, because the building was not accessible. People asked me many weird questions. "This guy looks crazy. Is he all right?" or "What happened to that lady?" "Why are you meeting here?" As time passed, our group befriended members from other groups. They began to help us to get out of our cars and they saved spaces in the parking lot.

Our meetings were very sacred. We talked about our pain, our stories, our families, our experiences of being different and because of this, our experiences of discrimination. We read some Bible texts in a very different way with our unique eyes—through our pain, our experience and our hope. We interpreted them differently. We realized that Christ suffers when differently-abled bodies are rejected, are excluded, not loved. We performed many exercises that helped us to feel healed even though the disability remained.

Surprisingly, we reconnected with the image of God that people and the circumstances of exclusion had almost taken from us. We are God's images. God is so immense. God can embrace all diversity in bodies and minds. We

are created in the image of God. Our bodies were again whole—sacred, imperfect bodies, but whole. Our intimacy with God and with others was restored. We were not cured, but we were healed.

This is the story I would like to share with you. I hope you keep this story close to your hearts and remember all people who are excluded. Can you see any reason for segregation, separation or exclusion? The moment that we have our needs fulfilled we feel whole. The moment we are accepted the world is much richer. The moment our difficulties are heard and possible solutions found we can live like others. The miracle is not getting rid of the pain, the disease or the disability. The miracle is being accepted, having our needs met and to participate in the beauty and mystery of life.

In the face of HIV/AIDS¹

Within the global Lutheran communion, the suffering and anguish caused by HIV/AIDS impact all dimensions of our life together. When one part of the body of Christ suffers, all of the body suffers. In particular, HIV/AIDS challenges our theology and ecclesiology—requiring an honest and humble reassessment of how we actively reach out towards—or exclude—those whom Christ claims as his own.

A prophetic call to the church is coming from those suffering from HIV/AIDS, many of whom have been isolated or deliberately excluded from the community. As such persons share their stories and their lives, and as the church

It is now common knowledge that in HIV/AIDS it is not the condition itself that hurts most (because many other diseases and conditions lead to serious suffering and death), but the stigma and the possibility of rejection and discrimination, misunderstanding and loss of trust that HIV positive people have to deal with.

Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha, Anglican Church of Uganda

dares to listen, the church can be moved to repent of how it has sinned against those who are affected by HIV/AIDS, due to fear, lack of information, stigmatization, or a failure to act.

As a church we are often uncomfortable sitting at the side of a person or family with HIV/AIDS because this means facing so many related issues that make us uneasy, and around which many defensive theological and moralistic barriers have been built. These barriers distance the church from those who are most in need of care and acceptance in times of deep fear and grief. The church is hindered from speaking out prophetically on behalf of those who are suffering or whose dignity is violated. Responding with compassion to persons living with and affected by HIV/AIDS means challenging and moving beyond boundaries that have kept us from loving one another and seeking justice for all who are made in the image of God.

As churches, we need to become safe places where people can speak about these realities without fear. We must dare to proclaim the gospel with a full voice and live out God's gracious intention of abundant life for all. God's grace frees people of faith to break out of accustomed boundaries and taboos, to challenge irresponsible sexual practices, and to move into new perceptions of themselves and of God's healing activity in the world.

The healing process

If we analyze stories of healing, we can recognize a number of key stages in the healing or reconciliation process that we need to consider. Healing takes time as we work through the process of overcoming barriers. These steps are likely to include:

- **Listening to the story.** If we are to become a healing community we

need, like Christ, to listen empathetically to the stories of those who have been excluded in our community. We need to experience their pain, their wounds, their rejection. Often that is difficult, because we have developed negative attitudes toward such people. To begin the healing process, therefore, we need to take a risk and move beyond our own comfort zones. We need to be good listeners.

- **Probing behind the story.** We also need to probe behind the story to understand why certain groups have been excluded from our congregation, our local community, or our society. Are the fears and attitudes that caused their exclusion prevalent in our church as well as in society? Have we used our theology, our Lutheran traditions or even the Bible as a basis for excluding them? For this step, we need honest analysis.
- **Acknowledging the truth.** One of the hardest things to do is to confess that we as individuals, as a Christian community, or as a society, have been part of the reason why some people are alienated, excluded or marginalized. Public acknowledgement of the truth of past prejudices is vital if there is to be reconciliation. Some of us need to apologize publicly, for example, to indigenous peoples we or our ancestors have dispossessed and excluded over the years. Honest confession is crucial if there is to be healing.
- **Building a new community.** An authentic new community—or as St. Paul calls it, “a new human-

ity”— consists of both those who we once excluded and those who were guilty of excluding them. The task of restoration involves more than a public apology or formal acceptance. It also involves the process of building a new community in which all members are fully accepted and affirmed as participants in the life and vision of the community.

- **Healing rites.** One of the most powerful ways to help build community is to celebrate rites of healing, either separately or con-

nected with the Eucharist. Healing is needed for people on both sides of the barrier. Those who have been excluded, abused or marginalized have wounds that need healing, memories that burden them, fears that still threaten. Those who have excluded others, either recently or in the past, need to acknowledge the truth, confess the wrong and ask for forgiveness. Through the healing power of Christ, especially through the Eucharist, communities can be brought together in Christ.

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Where is such healing of barriers especially needed in your church? In the LWF? How can this occur?

Notes

¹ What follows is adapted from the preface to the LWF Action Plan on HIV/AIDS [http://lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/HIVAIDS-Action-plan.pdf].