



An Inclusive Church

John Cullen, editor of *Intercom* and parish priest of Ahascragh, County Galway, looks at different ideas of an inclusive Church and takes one of Pope Francis's images to heart.



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I am part of a group of people who help the homeless by meeting and serving them food from a mobile soup-kitchen once a week. The group are made up of men and women of different ages, cultures, nationalities and religions. Some do not adhere to any religion! All are united in their dedication to the homeless and the hungry. Working with such a diverse group allows you to take a journey from imagining their distinct experience of the world to

acknowledging and overcoming your own unconscious biases.

To see what they see.

To hear what they hear.

To feel what they feel.

This only happens when we listen to other people's stories, and then locate and recognise the humanity of other people's experience within our own lives. It is unacceptable to use stereotypes that de-humanise another person. Listening to the stories of people who are from a different

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race, culture, religion and nationality opens new horizons. Spending time with people to listen and share their personal stories of discrimination, exclusion, racism and inequality is to assure them that they will be heard and not forgotten or ignored.

Pope Francis calls the Church to be a field-hospital presence on the periphery, where the wounded are to be treated and healed and where there is no place for condemnation and cruelty. The Gospels show us the new ground that Jesus broke and where he revelled and delighted in the strangest of company: the woman at the well, the woman who anointed him, meals with the Pharisees, the tax collectors, the lepers, the poor widow who gave everything, Zacchaeus and welcoming all children.

Listening and accompanying the outcast and the cast out is our response to 'loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself' (Mt 22:3). This is *Good News* for people, where fear and failure are met with a friendship and forgiveness. It leads to an invitation to follow and feed the many people who hunger for the food that is the 'daily bread' of God's love. The Gospels quote Jesus as saying, 'follow me, believe in me' and 'you are my witness'. 'Follow', 'believe' and

'witness' are engaging words. They are the dots that connect our life's journey through risks and relationships as we live out the puzzle and paradox of our lives.

The name Church (*ekklesia*) means a community that is called together. But it is not only a called community, it is also a community that represents the God of all creation, whose call and invitation is to all humanity. No one is excluded. Let us keep asking with gentle strength and with the strength of gentleness, 'who is missing from our gathering at the Lord's table?' Invite them to return.

Our Church is not restricted by nationality, race or tongue: this is the overflowing love of God for all creation in a community that is called to reflect back that love in every aspect of its life. Whatever we throw at God – rejection, indifference, apathy, denial or even a burial – the empty tomb shows that God will always find a way back to us. This is creation, annunciation, incarnation, resurrection, liberation and consummation – all wrapped into one! This is the day we feel the wind beneath our wings, when God carries us shoulder-high like a trophy and when the lost are found in translation of our mother-tongue – which is love. 