

## 'The Tyranny of the Normal' – a presentation by Sally Barnes and Eliza Zikmane



**Jesus in his life came to be with the poor and dispossessed, those outside of what was/is perceived as the “normal”. He modelled being alongside and with those who lacked power and were not heard.**

This is Sunday morning and we all are going to St. Mary’s cathedral for a church service as good Lutherans or Anglicans to celebrate Gods presence in Word and Sacrament, to experience communion with our Lord and with one another. The events of Reformation challenged the notion of the Church as one communion - the Body of Christ in different ways.

*In this morning session we will explore together our contemporary Anglican and Lutheran experience of the Church as body of Christ from the perspective of inclusivity. What does this mean to us. How do we show it in our communities and as individuals? How do people recognise they are welcome and included or not.*

Because it is Sunday, this session will follow the rhythm (in a broad sense) of Mass. Everyone will be invited to take part in different stages of this session. In our powerpoint slides we will use text fragments from the Holy Communion service of Church of Sweden (in English translation).

**“Our God is gracious and comes to us in mercy. When we wander far from him he comes to meet us and restores our broken lives” . “God of love, we thank you that through Jesus Christ the way to you is always open”**

**We would like you to talk with your neighbours for just 5 minutes and consider these questions:**

**If we are the body of Christ what does inclusion mean to you in your church?**



**In your church context who do you think has been excluded and how?**

**Have you ever felt excluded? How?**

**Have you ever “closed the church door” to someone?**

**Have you ever excluded someone from the church?**



**What can we do? What if we don’t like what we hear?**

**Now, before you feed back any questions or comments, let’s move on.**

**“Christ who was poor, reaches out to all to transform the world, to turn it upside down and give life so we might live it fully” not to some but to all”.**

**Matthew 5:v46-48.**

For if you love those who love you what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters what more are you doing than others? Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Romans 13:8

Owe no-one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law



Listen to Eliza as she shares something of her experience as a woman in the Latvian Church

### Women in Ministry in the Latvian Lutheran Church – Eliza Zikmane

Yesterday, on the way to Herrvik, we passed a sign commemorating refugees who crossed the cold and perilous Baltic Sea at the end of the Second World War. It reminded me of the Swedish people who welcomed those Latvian and Estonian refugees and gave them a new lease of life.

On Friday, and yesterday, we heard about Crusaders who stopped here in Gotland on their journey to the lands on the other side of the Baltic which they were about to invade and bring the Christian faith there, as we say in Latvia, by fire and sword.

Connections across the Baltic Sea which have an impact on church life have existed throughout the centuries. Most recently, just two weeks ago, a new bishop was consecrated in the Latvia Lutheran Church. He is a Swedish priest who came to Latvia a few years ago as he would not be ordained in the Church of Sweden because he was opposed to the ordination of women. One of his first pronouncements after his election was that he will not co-operate in any way with churches which ordain women.

In order to understand these developments we must have a short overview of the role of women in the Lutheran Church of Latvia over the past one hundred years. The First World War and revolutions in Russia brought major changes in the lives of Latvians because the frontline came to Latvia and stayed there for three years. About a third of the population fled as refugees to other parts of Russia. In exile the first buds of an independent Latvian state took shape. Also, in 1917, a decision was made in St Petersburg to form one Latvian Lutheran Church which would unite parishes from several Russian provinces into which the Latvian territory had been previously divided. The Republic of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918 and the new Church structure was created.

From the very beginning, women had equal voting rights both in secular and some church contexts. In 1919 the government of Latvia issued regulations for the councils of Lutheran parishes which ordered that voting rights were also conferred on women. Trying to break away from the German system, the church chose to forge new links with Nordic churches and the office of bishop was introduced. The first Latvian Bishop, Karlis Irbe, was consecrated by the Swedish Archbishop, Natan Sederblom, in 1922.

The University of Latvia was established in 1919. In the theology department women studied alongside the men. The first female student graduated in 1923. Until 1940 more than 12% of graduates were women. Women, basically, were prepared to become Christian education teachers in the schools because they could not be ordained, and the men were prepared for work as a teacher or pastor. This was the first period in Latvian history when home grown Latvian pastors could take charge in the church which for centuries had been ruled by German land owners and nobility.

The first call to recognize women's rights to all positions in the Church came at the First General Women's Conference in 1925. In 1932 the Synod passed a resolution indicating that, 'women are allowed to speak in Church from the lectern'. Women could preach, but only from the lectern. They could not preach from the pulpit because the pulpit was seen as a sacred space. Women were also allowed to engage in mission work overseas and in Latvia, for example in student organisations. The Society of Latvian Women Theologians challenged the resolution, arguing that the church interior was not designed for speaking from the lectern and therefore is technically inconvenient.

In the popular press at the time there was an article by a female Member of Parliament calling for dialogue. She wrote that the negative attitude of pastors to women's ordination was linked to the fear of strong competition. As a pragmatic argument for the need of women pastors, she mentioned the fact that, at the time, a number of parishes were without pastors. There were views expressed that women had good pastoral skills.

The socio-political activism of women theologians contrasted with the prevailing emphasis by many parish women's committees on the cultivation of personal spirituality. In her lecture 'Obstacles to women in spiritual work', in the conference of Women's Committees, the lecturer mentioned as external obstacles family duties, non-believing family members and work conditions. This active period of debating came to an abrupt end with the breaking out of the Second World War.

In 1939 the Baltic German population left for Germany. The Soviet army invaded in 1940. The Nazis invaded in 1941. The Soviets returned in 1944. During these years Latvia lost one third of the population again, either killed, sent to Siberia and concentration camps, or those who fled as refugees. Church was a target of the Soviet atheistic regime and had lost more than half of its clergy.

In the early 1950s, addressing the situation, the Lutheran Church introduced an office of deaconess, women who could look after parishes under a pastor's supervision. Some of them were women who had studied theology before the war. In the late 1940s the Archbishop offered ordination to Johanna Ose who was a very gifted preacher. But she refused on the grounds that, if she became the first female pastor she could give in to pride. Deaconesses and theologians did exercise their ministry under very harsh conditions of Soviet terror and oppression.

In the 1960s, subsequent Archbishops initiated discussions about women's ordination, on the basis of the lack of pastors as well as the practice of German and Nordic churches. The, after a long struggle with the Soviet authorities, the Church was able to open a theological seminary where there were also a few women students.

In 1975, at the Church Council meeting, Archbishop Janis Matulis raised the issue of women's ordination again, saying that the Latvian Church needs to follow the practice of other Lutheran churches. After sharing their views the council members decided to support the Archbishop's proposal, saying that it was a 'necessity to involve women in pastoral ministry.' The first three women were ordained a month later. The issue did not go to Synod because calling a Synod would have meant a lot of trouble with Soviet authorities both in Riga and in Moscow.

Discussions about women's ordination were rekindled by a group of young male pastors in 1983. In the following year a commission was formed which would look into the arguments for and against the ordination of women. The committee included pastors, men and women, but they did come to a persuasive conclusion. Meanwhile, Archbishop Karlis Gailitis, who supported women's ordination, continued the practice started by his predecessor. During his time in office, Latvia regained its independence and possibilities opened up for co-operation with the Churches on the other side of the iron curtain, among them the Latvian Lutheran Church in Exile which had been established by the Latvian refugees after the Second World War and in which women had been ordained since 1974. After the Archbishop's sudden death in 1992, an Extraordinary Synod was called in Latvia. A new Archbishop, Janis Vanags, was elected, but he did not support the ordination of women. This brought to a halt discussions on a merger or reunification of the two Latvian Lutheran Churches.

In 1990 the Theology Department in Latvia University reopened, having a number of women studying there. After graduation, some of them moved to other countries and were ordained in the Latvian Lutheran Church Abroad or in other churches. Some of those who stayed formed the Latvian Women Theologians' Association. In a situation of a shortage of pastors, a ministry of readers (evangelists) was introduced and the first group was commissioned in 1995. In 1997 a Lutheran seminary was established and close links between the Latvian Lutheran Church and LCMS

forged. In the programme for the education of pastors, women were not admitted. At the same time the Church distanced itself from the University by branding it liberal and not fit for education faithful servants of the church. As more pastors graduated from the seminary and took positions in the Church, the more the stance against the ordination of women got ingrained in church life. Financial crisis in 2007, mismanagement of resources, allegations of corruption did not improve the emotional climate in the Church. Pastors and parishes are afraid to lose their livelihoods if they oppose openly the Archbishop and the leadership. Women who are still doing ministry as readers or chaplains feel quite isolated.

Sadly, the culture of dialogue had not developed during the post-totalitarian years and the onslaught of Russian propaganda, which makes references to 'the true Christian and family values' and the denunciation of the West, did not help either. In 2016 the situation was ripe and Synod voted with a majority to write in the Church constitution that candidates for ordination can be male only. Irrational rhetoric of scaremongering about gay marriage which would inevitably follow the ordination of women, as well as messianic claims of the Latvian Lutheran Church being the last beacon of truth, dominated.

To sum up: to a large extent the Lutheran Church in Latvia is still perceived and used as a political instrument. While facing external challenges of an ever changing world, the Church has not been able to form a clear and stable identity from within. And this hinders inclusion of women in ministry. One cannot fully welcome others to a place where he or she does not feel secure in him or herself. A long exclusion of the Church from public life led to an exclusion of women from public ministry in the Church, repeating the pattern.

\* \* \*

Now let Sally share some of her experiences trying to encourage people to be more inclusive as Christians congregations.

### **Inclusive Church – Sally Barnes**

I would like to begin telling you a little about Inclusive Church (IC), how it was formed and grown over the 20 years since it began. IC was started by a few dozen people coming together in reaction to an issue that caused a great deal of anger across the dioceses at the injustice caused to a very popular, respected, theologian and priest.

After several informal meetings it was decided to form an organisation to work towards overcoming the injustice of exclusion for those who do not properly seem to "fit" the picture of "Church"; those who have been nudged out, ignored and damaged because of what and who they are and the situations of their lives but, who never-the-less, have a deep faith, have much to give and long to belong fully and be heard but always felt, if they stayed, they were not really acceptable.

Because IC grew out of a grass- roots sense of injustice it became clear to those of us who were there at the beginning **inclusion/being inclusive**, was about far more than just one issue.

We became aware the consequences of exclusion for the individual or group concerned is essentially the same whatever the reason for it; whether the prejudice, either consciously or unconsciously held, is on grounds of race, gender, sexuality, illness, disability, poverty and increasingly age. It prevents those affected from recognising and developing their gifts, abilities, their vocations, sense of self-worth, feeling alienated and from becoming what God has intended them/us to be in their lives. *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"*

It was and is clear so many do not have that abundant life. We were made aware from individuals suffering from mental ill health, for example of the numbers who commit suicide; of those who are bullied and rejected because they are gay, especially young men, the history of women's full participation in and acceptance in the church is long, damaging and hard. Archbishop Justin Welby said in an interview on BBC Radio Kent, "the church needs to be an incredibly inclusive church in which people are welcomed for who they are not for what they are."

Not only do people, outside “the norm” become deprived of that abundant life but the Church itself is deprived of the gifts and contribution they could bring - because so often they walk away or remain “on the edge”.

Those of us who have experienced many years of campaigning for justice in one form or another wanted to confront the generic problem of discrimination by promoting an inclusive view of the Scriptures, and by appealing to the values of social justice. *Micah 6v8; “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”* and most importantly Christ’s commandment to “Love one another” - a gospel imperative. **A statement by the Anglican Communion suggests that being inclusive is what it means to be Anglican.**

We tried to encapsulate what we believed in our statement: ***“We believe in Inclusive Church – a church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in a church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ.***

Many individual churches had been pondering on this and wanted to tackle aspects of inclusion with which they were concerned among their community. It may have been how best to be inclusive of those with a disability, suffering from mental ill health or held back by poverty.

Whatever it was, being invited, our aim was to explore their concerns with them to support creative ways of opening up discussions, so that they could discuss these issues without threat and develop strategies for themselves to help overcome them.

Through all these opportunities IC’s interest and increasing expertise became more and more in recognising what the experience of being ‘outside’ because of the process of discrimination meant and the effect it had on so many of those who experienced it.. As Jean Vanier called it, they all suffered from **“The Tyranny of the Normal”**.

A fundamental idea that underpins our approach is the vital importance of working with and learning from those who have the personal experiences of the issues concerned. We have representatives on the committee from groups and individuals. We have a network of people we can call on to help organise and take part in conferences and workshops including notable and respected theologians.

It has become abundantly clear to each of us, from whatever vantage point we come from, that we are all, one way and another, on a very steep learning curve, that it is never, ever a case of “being done to” or “talked to, about or over” but rather “learning from” those who have lived experiences of exclusion, ensuring that they have time to tell their stories and, most importantly, listening to what is being said so that we could all learn and reflect.

So, if we have a conference or work shop on, for example, Disability, those with a range of disabilities take the main part, tell their stories, give the listeners time to take in what we/they are hearing, discuss the implications for our church groups and assimilate the way we see things in our own lives too. As one of my colleague friends has said, who has severe disabilities, ***“we need to move beyond inclusion towards developing a transforming vision that changes the way we all see ourselves and each other. We must be able to change our vision to the realisation that we are all created by God to be as we are”***.

There is so much to learn that challenges us and turns our world upside down all the time making us realise how much more there is to learn. It is never the case of getting everything right but trying hard to understand the others point of view and keep it within the commandment to “love another”.

Over the years we have developed increasingly effective ways of communicating with our members and those interested through social networking, a very up to date, colourful and informative website, monthly newsletters, regular emails, area ambassadors, meetings with each other, Key note addresses, conferences on specific issues run by those with the knowledge supported by us.

To enable this to happen, we built up sufficient funds to appoint, a part time coordinator to help us put all this into effect. What an inspired appointment that was. In 2.5 days a week he does what most people couldn't do in a FT job, going up and down the country responding to churches requests for training, arranging conferences, preaching, meeting groups, taking work shop sessions with congregations on their chosen aspect they are most concerned about. He is breathtakingly wonderful.

Finally, out of all the work done, what to me, has been the most effective project that has really taken off; that is the publication of our resource books relating to the 6 key areas that have been identified as the most important ones of concern and focus. They are selling like hotcakes.

Each has, an introduction followed by three chapters written by people experienced in the particular area. Each book has a theological underpinning written by a distinguished and respected theologian. At the end are resources and suggestions for groups to consider.

To date we have about 300 churches who have registered with us as fully inclusive and many others who show an interest. The partnership work of IC is thriving not just in the UK. We are getting queries from abroad where people facing similar issues want to discuss ways of tackling them. People help each other.

We know we have a long way to go and it isn't easy but we live in hope that by challenging the Church to do things differently; that the "living on the edge" for so many becomes the past, that they become included and can make their contribution from which we all benefit.

\* \* \*

Now we would like you to get into your small groups again to consider what we mean when we say, **I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints.**

**Is there a difference between what we proclaim and what we do?**

We often say, *"We pray for those who through baptism have become members of Christ's Church. Keep them in your love."*

**How can we intercede and advocate for those excluded and make our church more inclusive?**

**What can you do in your local church/context?**

At Communion we say, *"Though we are many, we are one body, for we all share in one bread"*.



**The communion table cannot be a place where only some can gather. We say we are all the one body of Christ. Can all can feel they can gather round and not be excluded. But does everyone feel like that or are treated like that?**

**What does that mean to you and in your church and community?**

**What gifts does the Church miss out on from the (consciously or unconsciously) excluded?**

**[At this point questions and comments from the small groups will be taken]**

**Let us end with a prayer:**

**"Lord, we thank you for your inexpressible gift. You became the answer to our prayer, the bread for our hunger. Help us know to hear the cry you have heard, to understand as you have understood, to serve as you have served. Reveal to us the secret of your table: one bread and one humanity."**