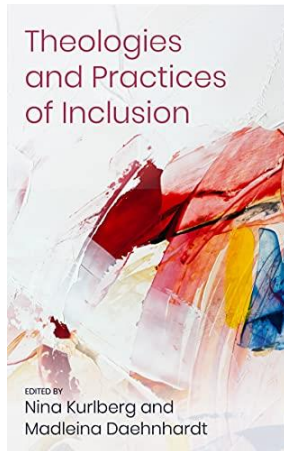


BOOK REVIEW

Theologies and Practices of Inclusion

Edited by Nina Kurlberg & Madleina Daehnhardt

Reviewed by Rebecca Redfield



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In a society where diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging are buzz words, *Theologies and Practices of Inclusion* serves as a reminder and call to action grounded in the reality that followers of Jesus have a biblical mandate to follow the example of our king and actively participate in his just and beautifully diverse kingdom coming, where all are welcomed and the last will be first. *Theologies and Practices of Inclusion*, masterfully edited by Nina Kurlberg and Madleina Daehnhardt, practices what it preaches as the twenty contributing authors span many countries and first languages, and more than half are women. This book offers a refreshing balance of theological grounding - looking to Scripture and the example of Christ as our guide - and case studies to demonstrate how these practices are lived out. I commend Tearfund's staff for its humility in openly sharing the joys, challenges, and lessons learned for the benefits of the larger faith-based community.

This book is relevant and important today. We need to be reminded of Scripture's clarion call to engage in the work of inclusion and justice -- that it is not optional for followers of Jesus. We need to be reminded of why inclusion is essential to development work. We need to be reminded that inclusion is achieved in the presence of justice. We need to learn

from examples of inclusion in practice, especially in the world of development work. Here we explore these four key gifts to the community from the book.

First, **why inclusion matters to Christians**. Scripture undergirds the entirety of this volume, grounding the "why" and fueling the "how." We see that ethnocentricity has no place in the kingdom and that there is no superiority or supremacy in the kingdom of God apart from that of Jesus Christ himself (Philippians 2: 9-11). His body is made up of beautifully diverse image-bearers from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" worshipping him eternally (Genesis 1:26-27. Revelation 7:9). We see and experience God through the beauty of diverse experiences and cultures of his image-bearers and, consequently, as Jocabed Solano and Juana Condori remark, "when a people group with their own specific culture dies, something of God dies" (314). We follow a king who welcomes all, confronting and disrupting cultural norms of exclusion (John 4: 1-42, Luke 10: 25-37, Luke 19:1-10). We follow a king who breaks down (has broken down and continues to break down) the walls that divide us - not by exalting one group over another, but by centering the king himself (Ephesians 2:14-22). *Theologies and Practices of Inclusion* contends that our theology must not be divorced from our practice, advocating for faith-based organizations "to develop theological thinking and programming in parallel, and not in isolation" (13). Beginning this work with a biblical understanding of why it matters for followers of Jesus and organizations centered on him builds a solid foundation to withstand pushback (both internal and external) that the work of inclusion and engaging in justice is mission drift. Selina Palm's chapter highlighting theological vantage points and cultural perceptions on inclusion from a variety of regions is especially insightful in pointing out that, with the Bible as our guide and Jesus as our model for the work of inclusion and justice, incorporating culturally-informed views and associations can serve as guideposts and lenses through which to engage across cultures.

Second, **why inclusion matters in the development space**. With a clearly outlined scriptural precedent and expectation to be people and organizations of inclusion, it is perhaps redundant to address why inclusion and

justice matter in the realm of development. Yet, I have observed in this space an assumption that discussing and engaging in the work of inclusion is “nice to have,” rather than a “must have” that is integral to the work. As we will see, addressing inclusion and systemic injustice is integral to achieving holistic development outcomes. Exclusion, injustice, and poverty are often mutually reinforcing—strengthening and deepening the pull into isolation. As Bryan Stevenson says, “My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice” (Stevenson 2014, 18). Further, drawing from Bryant Myers’ seminal work on the four core relationships reflected in *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (2011), we see the insidious work of exclusion and injustice rallying together to inhibit flourishing relationships with God, self, others, and creation. And as Liz Muir reminds us, “Poverty and racial injustice are inextricably linked” (76). Inclusion matters if we are seeking to support the holistic flourishing of all people. I was struck by the case study on including the ageing in the Rwandan church, and the observation of how often development practice prioritizes investing in the younger generation to build the future, to the exclusion of the older population. This also serves as a reminder that at its core, inclusion is about people. Chapter 9, by Oenone Chadburn, highlights the role of localization in the work of inclusion, through an emphasis on partnerships, expounding on the roles of time and trust, funding and finance, dignity and delivery. There is a strong call for local organizations to be at the decision-making table! Let us remember that welcoming people into community often cannot be done without addressing systemic injustices.

Third, **why inclusion does not end with building relationships.** Inclusion addresses injustice. The theological framework for inclusion outlined in the book builds on Miroslav Volf’s work in explaining a theology of embrace (Volf 1996), which highlights the role of relationships and acknowledging interpersonal power dynamics, through explicitly calling out that relationships are impacted by systems and inclusion requires justice (62). In her own contribution to the book, editor Nina Kurlberg adds to the theology of embrace the concept of “inclusion as shalom justice through the power of the Spirit of God” (66). Relationships are critical and yet insufficient to inclusion. They must be paired with systemic justice and breaking down barriers that exclude. In a chapter on gender issues, for example, Prabu Deepan joins Kurlberg to argue that “Inclusion requires the active interrogation of systems, processes, norms and attitudes in order to challenge unequal values, power and status” (194). We must acknowledge oppressive systems and

structures that inhibit the fulfillment of the kingdom call to inclusion and justice. Exclusion roots in injustice and perpetuates injustice. The work of addressing systemic injustice requires collaboration and partnership. Case studies throughout the book highlight how critical it is to partner with diverse stakeholders – including local churches, Christian and other faith-based organizations, local governments, and communities.

Fourth, **what inclusion can look like in practice across contexts.** The book is rich with case studies from diverse contexts and provides a unique contribution to the literature by showcasing diverse ways of fostering inclusion and addressing oppressive cultural norms and systems. This includes a look at peacebuilding and religious diversity, emphasizing the roles of imagination, hospitality, and embrace, and continuing with exploring the pilgrim identity, reflecting on the prevalence of migration throughout Scripture, and solidarity with migrants through recognizing how all Christ-followers are spiritual pilgrims on this Earth. There are also case studies on the Latin American Campaign “As Born Among Us,” fostering hospitality to migrants within churches and communities, and Tearfund’s Transforming Masculinities approach, casting a new vision for masculinity grounded in the example of Jesus, that “is not about maintaining the status quo or teaching people how to use their power well: it is about dismantling unequal systems” (193). In chapter 11, Jessie Fubara-Manuel explores building welcoming, honoring, and inclusive churches and communities for the elderly in Rwanda. She tells how she learned from women living with disability and HIV in Nigeria, and how a holistic view of healing included both a transformed identity and physical healing.

Theologies and Practices of Inclusion provides a thorough and thoughtful exploration for those seeking to learn about inclusion grounded in theology and embodied in development practice through partnership with local communities. I closed the book with a refreshed vision for the work of inclusion, inspired by the example of our friends and colleagues at Tearfund, reminded that this work is not optional for people who follow Jesus and is critical in the development sector (in addition to our own selves, families, neighborhoods, and churches!). May we be people who follow the example of our king, creating welcome for those excluded and on the margins through dismantling unjust systems, following the examples of trailblazing brothers and sisters around the globe who are ushering in a more inclusive kingdom.

References

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Volf, Miroslav. 1996. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

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