A Theological Reflection on Exclusions

> 'How we treat the most damaged, the most vulnerable and the worst behaved in society reflects our humanity.' Paul Dix *When the Adults Change, Everything Changes*
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> 'Whatever you did for the least of these… you did for me.' Matthew 35:40

A theology of pupil exclusion must begin with the Christian understanding that each individual is made in the image of God and therefore of immense worth and value; each child matters. Jesus' words 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full' (John 10:10) are on offer for everyone, not the select few. In fact, the vulnerable and excluded are at the very heart of Jesus' invitation.

Wisdom in leadership holds in tension the varied needs of vulnerable pupils with the safety of the wider school environment. It knows that learning is essential for life ('Get wisdom, get understanding' – Proverbs 4:1) and all pupils should have the chance to learn (and teachers to teach) within safe environments ('They will live in safety, and no one will make them afraid' – Ezekiel 34:28). It balances this with an understanding that each child has one chance of a childhood education and makes every effort to secure this for even the most challenging pupils, as early as possible ('Doesn't he go after the lost sheep until he finds it?' Luke 15:4). Wise leaders understand the need for clarity, in judging each situation fairly and with equal measure, and take the time to fully comprehend each child's needs -'not wanting any of these little ones to be lost.' (Matthew 18:4).

Christian **hope** has every reason to look expectantly into the future, in the confidence of God's final redemption of all things – the new heaven and the new earth. At the same time, there has to be a recognition that things are not currently as they should be ('now we see only a reflection … then we shall see face to face' 1 Corinthians 13:12). This is the 'now and not yet' of the Christian life. There is an impetus therefore to keep going with challenging pupils, spurred on by the love of Christ, whilst handling the reality which presents itself: 'love… always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.' (1 Corinthians 13:7) Hopeful school leaders believe in the possibility of transformation and endeavour to attain a better future for even the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, despite the cost. They commit to looking beyond stereotypes, taking care to obtain achievement for all.

Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is warned to care for its weakest members just as God, the Father of the fatherless, does (Exodus 22:22; Psalm 82:3-4; Jeremiah 22:3). Jesus reiterates this imperative throughout his teaching, describing a **community** that is to 'deal mercifully with human weakness and failure', enabling 'forgiveness and reintegration of the wrongdoer into the community's life'[1]. Community without the most challenging becomes a community without vulnerability, a community without the need for dependence. However, the school's desire to be hospitable and welcoming to all needs to be held together with protecting the well-being of the whole from the impact of disruptive behaviour. Early identification and intervention of difficulties is therefore vital in preventing more serious issues for both the community and individual later on.

Finally, school leaders show their commitment to the **dignity** of each child by looking with curiosity beyond the presenting behaviour to see the underlying needs, understanding that 'targeting behaviour is like treating the symptoms and ignoring the cause of an illness'[2]. They consider the uniqueness of each individual, valuing them as 'wonderfully and fearfully made' (Psalm 139:14) while also giving the respect of calling out inappropriate behaviour, setting boundaries and offering the chance for repair. Whilst exclusion can be a necessary step for a young person and their family on the path to starting afresh, greater dignity is found in the life that is redeemed, in becoming fully alive and entering into the fullness of who God created them to be.

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[1] Hays, R. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper Collins, 2013)

[2] Hoffman, Cooper & Powell *Raising a Secure Child* (Guildford, 2017)