

# Tolerance, intolerance and mission

**Dan Strange and Peter Sanlon talk about how local churches can break down the culture of hostility against the Christian faith by being places of welcome, generosity and creative mission**



**Dan Strange thinks through the difference between Christian and secular tolerance, with the aid of a new book by Don Carson**

Reading Don Carson's new book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, has caused me a fair amount of distress. Not with Carson himself, of course, but with the sad, mad and bad beast caught in his cross-hairs, a beast which desperately needs to be put out of its misery. And the identity of this monster? Tolerance, or rather the contemporary

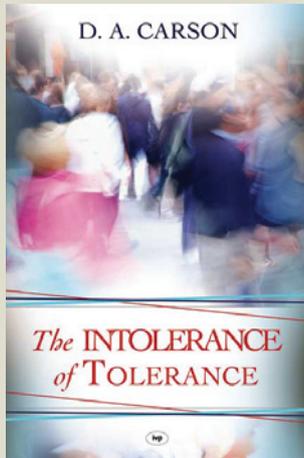
articulation of tolerance: a rabid, de-Christianized and secularized mutation of the older and distinctively Christian value of tolerance. As Carson explains:

"The old tolerance is the willingness to put up with, allow, or endure people and ideas with whom we disagree; in its purest form, the new tolerance

is the social commitment to treat all ideas and people as equally right save for those people who disagree with this view of tolerance. Advocates of the new tolerance sacrifice wisdom and principle in support of just one supreme good: upholding their view of tolerance. So those who uphold and practice the older tolerance, enmeshed as they inevitably are in some value system, are written off as intolerant. Thus banished, they no longer deserve a place at the table.'

In a sentence, this new tolerance is neither neutral nor benign but rather ideological and repressive. Worse than inconsistent, it is intolerant.

What is distressing about Carson's description is not so much the intellectual and moral incoherence



## **The Intolerance of Tolerance**

DA Carson  
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of this new tolerance, which with a customary crack-shot Carson expertly nails in the forehead. Rather it is the example after example he gives of where the new tolerance beast has been allowed to run amok in all sectors of society in the West, a number of these being drawn from the UK.

Put together, these examples justify his opening claim that the new tolerance has become part of the warp and woof of the Western 'plausibility structure', that is, a deeply embedded structure of thought which Carson says is 'widely and almost unquestioningly accepted throughout a particular culture.'

The result? Men, women and children, without even thinking much about it, if at all, are, in the name of 'tolerance', already predisposed to believe that any Christian claim of truth, absolutes, and exclusivity is inherently intolerant, arrogant, proud, judgmental and imperialistic. And here's the killer: they may never have even met a Christian, let alone gone into a church.

Now before anyone else points out the irony to me, I have already realised that what I probably need right now (after a lie down), is a God-given dose of the old tolerant tolerance to help me deal with the new intolerant tolerance! And on a more constructive note, it is within the bounds of the older tolerance that Carson himself ends his book by giving us a number of ways for us to move ahead including: the need to expose the arrogance and

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bankruptcy of the new tolerance; the importance of evangelism; a preparedness for Christians to face suffering; and an exhortation to delight and trust in God.

All these are profoundly right, good and helpful. Please read the book. And yet if you are anything like me, faced with the size of the tolerance beast together with the power and influence of its handlers (the media, the political world), paralysis sets in. We often feel so insignificant to be able to do anything practically, let alone affect change.

And so some of the questions buzzing around in my head concern the appropriate contexts within which we activate this 'to do list.' For the vast majority of us, where are we able to start to loosen the stranglehold that the new tolerance has on our culture?



**Peter Sanlon shares from his experience how local churches can build trust and respect by practising true love and tolerance.**

We believe that a central place which God has designed as the place to help humans make sense of life is the local church. There are many things that a local church can realistically begin doing, which display both a commitment to truth and a commitment to love, which is true tolerance.

A local church can be mistaken by the watching world for a group of homogenous people who hang out together, because they have the same hobbies or cultural background. Steps taken to change this perception have a powerful impact on all who witness it.

For example, my church in London has a comfortable seating area near the entrance. During many services, homeless people or patients from the mental health hospital will wander in and sit on the sofas. They may not want to stay for the whole service; they may make noise and disrupt it. That is fine. They know they are welcome to have some tea, relax and join in as they wish. Willingness to embrace this kind of mixing up of cultures and backgrounds gives the whole church,

and any visitor, a deep sense that this church is tolerant of a range of people, in a way the world struggles with.

It is a problem in the UK that many in the government feel that churches are in some way a problem to be contained. In our church we try and help with that by offering to use our resources to help local government. So our vicar met with the local police chief to discuss what we could do to help an often under-appreciated and stretched police force. Out of that grew a police chaplaincy ministry, where local officers regularly visit the church for counsel, and an annual police carol service where officers visit a church which welcomes them, and hear the gospel which explains why we do what we do.

Our part of London has many young men out of work. With our good relationship with the government and police, we have been able to venture on a mentoring and apprenticeship scheme. We pair unemployed youths with two Christian employers – one at our church, and the other from another local church. They mentor

the young person through a job which we arrange for them. All kinds of opportunities to connect with and explain the gospel grow up around the relationships which result.

Local government leaders can look at our church and know that we seek to serve, love and help people who are different to us. That builds trust and respect. It means that now, after years of doing this, the government can actually approach us for advice and help, and is willing to help us solve practical problems we are faced with in growing an urban ministry.

This sort of process is not smooth or without challenges, but we remain convinced that the local church is the best place to show the world what true tolerance is. Those who believe that will be led to make local, practical implementations which are generous. And slowly but surely those plausibility structures which are so often reinforced within the broader culture, begin to be challenged and overturned by real Christians and real Christian communities.

In lots of little ways, a local church is able to nurture true love and tolerance by seeking to serve and care for its members and those outside. When this is done, the gospel message not only makes sense, it critiques the world's misunderstandings about tolerance, and creates for itself new opportunities.