

Another culture

The wall in the head

In her book, *Estates: An intimate history*, author Lynsey Hanley describes her experience of growing up outside Birmingham on one of the largest council estates in Europe. It has lots to say about physical barriers that divide different neighbourhoods in a city, but its most moving chapter describes a different kind of barrier – the wall in the head. She describes an invisible awareness that many of the most marginalised members of society carry around, which is built up over time and awkward experiences. It is a feeling that there are places where they just don't belong and people to whom they could never relate.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Talk about a time when you felt out of place in a particular setting or in a group of people? What made you feel different? What did you think they knew that you didn't?

Could it be that many people bump up against a wall in their head about our church and feeling comfortable among us as its members? We think everyone should feel welcome and at home among us, because church life is all so familiar to us. But to them, we appear to come from a different world, speak a different language and express ourselves in ways that belong to a different age.

The air we breathe

In any group of people there are all sorts of unspoken understandings. The things that everybody just knows. The values we all share. The way we do things around here. The language we speak. The songs we sing. The symbols that are important to us. We call this culture. It's like the air that we breathe. We can't see it. It's just there. Every church develops its own thick, but invisible culture. Generally, insiders grow up with it and get it. But to those looking on, or coming in from outside, it can seem strange, alien and even excluding. The next set of questions challenge us to think our way from being insiders to outsiders.

Bringing down the walls

When it is at its most fruitful, the gospel has always crossed cultures, brought down dividing walls and drawn together the most unlikely collection of people in the local church. In New Testament times the biggest cultural division was between Jews and Gentiles. They had very different backgrounds, values, practices and ways of life. As the gospel spread and they came to trust in Jesus, Gentile Christians came from outside and found a welcome and a home in the church which, up to that point, had been predominantly Jewish in background. This was no easy process. The Jewish Christians had to work out what in their culture was just the way they had always done things and what was a non-negotiable part of following Jesus. The Gentiles had to learn new ways of living that were radically different to the lifestyle in which they had been immersed since birth. We read about this in Paul's letter to the congregation at Ephesus, in chapter 2, verses 11-22.

READ EPHESIANS 2:11-22

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. What are the things we take for granted about church life that others might find odd?


Q. What ways do we do things in church life that we are comfortable and familiar with, but others might find difficult to relate to or understand?

Q. In what settings in church life do we find ourselves lapsing into a language that we understand, but others might find completely foreign?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. What are some of the cultural differences that divide society in Ireland today?

Q. Which groups of people that you have named might feel most 'excluded' and 'far away' (v12-13) from your church? What might feel particularly 'foreign' or 'strange' to them (v19)?

 Watch one or both of the two short clips in which Rebecca and Seamus relate their stories of becoming followers of Jesus and coming to find a home in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland from their different backgrounds.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

REBECCA'S STORY

Q. What parts of Rebecca's story got you thinking about how difficult it might be for someone to fit into your congregation's way of doing things?

Q. What could your congregation do to be a more welcoming and accessible home for those who come from a different culture or have different life circumstances than most of your members?

Q. "We all really need to think about what it is like for the unchurched or not yet Christians coming in from outside and put ourselves in their shoes." What steps can we take to do that as a congregation?

SEAMUS' STORY

Q. What parts of Seamus' story got you thinking about how difficult it might be for someone to fit into your congregation's way of doing things?

Q. What could your congregation do to be a more welcoming and accessible home for those who come from a different culture or have different life circumstances than most of your members?

Q. "When someone from another culture enters our community they must feel welcome not just in our church, but they must feel welcome in our homes." How is this a challenge to our tendency to separate our church life from the rest of our lives?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER



- Pray for our deeply divided society, that the message of the gospel may bring the peace of Christ to community and individual lives.
- Pray for particular issues and situations in which there needs to be reconciliation between cultures which clash.
- Pray that God would challenge and help your congregation to see clearly the unintentional barriers that we might be presenting for others.
- Pray for a oneness in Jesus in your church life that unites and overcomes differences between members and builds togetherness as the dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.