



# Not like us

## Two very different experiences

Have you ever arrived at an event and felt like an outsider? You didn't know anyone and everybody else seemed to be greeting each other like long-lost friends. Have you ever felt like the odd one out? Looking around in a crowded room, you experienced an overwhelmingly unpleasant experience of being different. You were the only man, woman, young person, older person, white person, black person, individual dressed in a certain way. You didn't feel like you fitted. Uncomfortable isn't it? Then there are other times when we feel very much like an insider. We are in a place and with people with whom we can easily feel at home. Everyone looks, thinks, acts like we do. We are comfortable. The overwhelming feeling is, 'I belong'.

### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

**Q.** When have you experienced feeling like an outsider? What words would you choose to describe how that made you feel?

**Q.** When have you experienced others go out of their way to make you a part of something? What words would you choose to describe how that made you feel?

The difference in finding ourselves in the two situations described above is something we feel deep within. But outwardly, others around us maybe don't even notice how their presence and behaviour as a group either sparks discomfort or creates welcome – excludes or includes. How open or closed a community is can be a very subtle, but also a very powerful thing. It either draws others or reinforces distance. This is also true of our congregation's life.

# Becoming all things to all people

The Apostle Paul is a great example of someone who understood what it was to be drawn into a community of which he was not a natural part. After all, he had been a persecutor of the first Christians before he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, became one of his followers and a key leader in the church. But none of that happened without him embarking on a journey from the outside in. The early Christians were understandably wary, suspicious, and even fearful of him. He knew what it was like to experience the awkwardness of that and the welcome of two people in particular who went out of their way to include and integrate him – Ananias (Acts 9:10-19) and Barnabas (Acts 9:26-28).

So, when he wanted to set an example to the congregation in Corinth of how to reach out to people who were not like them, he wrote about how he continually set himself to do all that he could to go out of his way to include them, so as to win them for Christ. Paul didn't expect those who were different to him to become like him so that he could then share the good news he had found in Jesus. He tried to become as much like them as he could so that nothing about him would get in the way of them coming to appreciate Jesus. Here's how he described what that looked like.

## READ 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23




### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

**Q.** Paul was a Jew by background, belief and lifestyle. But to reach out to those who were Gentiles – non-Jews who didn't live by God's law – he had to work hard to enter their world. What do you imagine that involved for him?

## Seeing ourselves: loving difference

One of the great challenges of following Paul's example and instruction in this passage is that we are not good at seeing ourselves. We are so used to being with all the people with whom we are familiar and comfortable in our congregation, that we can't begin to imagine how everybody wouldn't feel at home among us. We also fail to recognise how alike most of us are in terms of background and lifestyle.

The other great challenge is loving difference. Like most groups, congregations naturally form around likeness, rather than difference. 'Birds of a feather flock together' even in the church. When outsiders come they often 'stick out like a sore thumb'. They feel the pain of that. The awkwardness of their presence also throbs uncomfortably in our consciousness.

 Watch this short clip that challenges us to see ourselves and love difference. Then discuss the questions that help us to reflect on our challenge as a congregation to see ourselves and to love difference.



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### POINTERS FOR PRAYER



- Pray that we would better recognise in ourselves some of the things that both draw others into the life of our church and creates distance between us and them.
- Pray that we would come to love, rather than fear or despise, difference.
- Pray that, like Paul, we would find some practical ways to show we love people who are not like us.
- Pray for those around the edges of the community of our church's life that God may help us to draw them towards him and win them for Christ.

### FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

#### SEEING OURSELVES

**Q.** What gets in the way of our seeing ourselves as we really are as a congregation?

**Q.** What do most of our congregation share in common?

**Q.** What makes it easy for new people to quickly feel at home and become part of our congregation? What makes it difficult?

#### LOVING DIFFERENCE

**Q.** Honestly describe how you feel when you see new people come into your congregation?

**Q.** What kinds of differences are we most uncomfortable with in our congregation?

**Q.** In the world of Paul's day, the big divide in society was between Jew and Gentile (non-Jew). What are some of the big divides we need to have the courage to name and begin to cross if we are to reach people who are not like us in our congregation's situation today?

**Q.** What are some simple ways we might begin to do that?