

Study 3: Growth in the Community

A growing church cannot contain itself. It breaks out into the local community, bursting with good news. In this session we look at what happens when a congregation ventures beyond the safety of the church building.

Getting started

Spend a few moments thinking about the different ways you are connected to your local community: think about schools, organisations, places you visit, even local shops. In the group, compare the different ways you are involved with your community.

View from the world church

In Japan and Bangladesh evidence of a deepening faith can be seen in the church's commitment to community outreach.

JAPAN: Children born to Filipino migrant workers in Japan are caught between two cultures: they do not know the land of their parents, nor do they have full legal status in the land of their birth. They can attend school, but often struggle when they do so due to language and cultural differences, and sometimes because of bullying.

Thousands of Filipinos arrive in Japan each year looking for work so they can send money back to the Philippines to help their families out of poverty. But many are exploited in low-paid jobs, while their children are left with nothing to do, home alone in dilapidated housing.

Fortunately there is hope for these children. The Anglican Church in Japan is providing schooling and lessons in Filipino culture to help prepare the children should they one day choose to leave for the Philippines. Classes are run by the Diocese of Chubu, where USPG Mission Companion Claire Gelder has been teaching English to raise funds to support this mission.

Claire said: 'The children have stability in their lives and are learning skills, and their parents are pleased their children have a safe place to go.'

She added: 'Jesus helped the outcasts – people like these children – and I think that is the motivation behind the school.'

BANGLADESH: The Church of Bangladesh is tackling human trafficking, through both an awareness-raising prevention programme and a support programme for women and children rescued from slavery and bonded labour. Sabina was aged 12 when a distant relative offered her a well-paid job in India. Her impoverished parents agreed on the understanding that their daughter would be well looked after. But Sabina was kept like a prisoner and forced to work as a prostitute.

USPG Mission Companion James Pender reported: 'For seven years, Sabina was helpless and contemplated suicide. But she eventually convinced a client to help her escape.'

Back home, Sabina struggled to fit in due to the stigma attached to former sex workers. But the Church of Bangladesh, provided support giving her training in tailoring and embroidery. Now aged 22, Sabina has started her own tailoring business. The church even won a legal battle to claim compensation for Sabina from her traffickers – something almost unheard of in Bangladesh.

For discussion

1. Share your reactions to these stories from Japan and Bangladesh. What parallels can you identify between these stories and your local community?
2. Churches can sometimes become a 'holy huddle'. What are the needs of your community – and how are you and your church getting involved?

Looking at the Bible: Acts 3:1-10; 4:1-22

The church can sometimes be tempted to become inward looking. Acts 3 makes it clear that God is not seeking this model. The healing of the lame man at the Temple Gate offers important lessons for the church as it grows out into the community. Peter and John do not offer 'charity' to continue the man's long-term dependency – but rather they empower him to take his future into his own hands. Furthermore their actions challenge the status quo, and that places the apostles themselves in danger.

1. What do these passages show us about the church's initial steps to communicate with the wider community? Note the differences in interactions with the lame man and the Sanhedrin.
2. In contrast to life in Palestine in the first century, modern Britain has free healthcare, schooling, access to legal protection and other benefits. Therefore what comparisons, if any, can be made between community outreach today and in New Testament times?
3. What obstacles prevent the church from reaching out today – locally, nationally and internationally – and how can these obstacles be overcome?

Prayer

Encouraging Spirit,
You yearn for all people to know
freedom and fullness of life.
As you have ripped apart the veil
dividing humanity from the holy,
So make us bold in every place to
speak and act in your name.

Action: USPG Cocktail Party

Have fun hosting a cocktail party for USPG! Contact us for ideas and recipes for non-alcoholic cocktails. Make this a community outreach event by inviting neighbours, family and friends. Visit www.uspg.org.uk/cocktails