

BIBLE STUDY 1: Once we were strangers

Way in/ setting the scene

Before looking at the Bible passage together, ask the group to identify some of the reasons why people might leave their homeland (e.g. to escape war, poverty or famine, to seek better economic opportunities, to seek medical treatment, to enjoy a better climate or lifestyle, to start a business, to retire, to find work, to marry or be with a partner or children, to serve their country e.g. diplomats or the military, to study, to travel for an extended period). Write these up for all to see. Don't evaluate any of the reasons at this stage.

The movement of people from place to place has always been part and parcel of human history.

You may invite the group to also consider the following questions: (optional)

How many family members have lived or worked in other countries? Do you aspire to travel to other countries/ to work or live in another country? Under what circumstances would you leave your home and go and live somewhere else?

Next, look at the list of reasons and see whether we perceive these to be good or valid reasons. Do we judge people coming here differently to how we might justify our own reasons for going somewhere else? (E.g. compare the person seeking asylum with someone retiring to a farmhouse in Provence.) Do we judge in favour of those in the greatest need or those who have the most to offer? Should it matter?

The wealth of biblical material on

the treatment of strangers is still highly pertinent to the present day. Throughout the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), Israel's identity as the Children of God and their obligation towards the stranger is tied to their own history as a sojourning people. This is traced back to Abraham who leaves his land and family in response to God's call. It is recalled over and over again in Genesis that Abraham resides as an alien.

Israel's own experience of exile and oppression in Egypt (where they went to escape famine) is the context for God's dramatic intervention on his people's behalf. Even when they do finally reach their own land, they are told to regard it as belonging to God, and their status as that of resident aliens.

Therefore, they are to have compassion on the disadvantaged, including the stranger, because they have experienced the same plight. There is a kind of special bond between Israel and the aliens residing with them because they have a point of identification.

Read: Deuteronomy 26

Questions

1. How was Israel instructed to treat 'the stranger'?
2. How was this linked to Israel's own identity?
3. How is it linked to God's character?
4. What is the significance of 'aliens' being grouped together with the

Levites, 'widows' and 'the fatherless'?

Taking it forward

During the week, take a bit of time to look out for newspaper reports or news stories about refugees, people seeking asylum, migrant workers or minority ethnic people. Consider your own reactions to these news items.