

Get Involved: Pray



EMBRACE Prayer Group September 2014

I spent several years working for the Presbyterian Church in Nepal. When I arrived I was given a language and orientation course to help me learn about Nepal and the local culture. This really helped me through the process of 'culture shock' and to settle in to a very different culture. Most people who come to live and work in Northern Ireland do not have anyone to help them in the difficult process of adapting to Northern Irish culture.

In May and June Embrace and the Irish Churches Peace Project (ICPP) ran a series called 'A Cultural Journey' in Newry. A group of local people and 'new residents' from a variety of countries shared in interactive workshops looking at the values underlying culture and how to deal with cultural difference. One particularly interesting and practical exercise that we did together was to share the various protocols that should be followed if you are invited for a meal in someone's house. We discovered that each culture has very different expectations. For example, if you are invited for 7pm, what time should you arrive? In some cultures you should arrive a few minutes early. In other cultures you should arrive half an hour later. We discovered that in some cultures you should expect to arrive, have a time of conversation and leave immediately after the meal. In other cultures you eat the meal, have a time of conversation and then leave. There are many other questions, like how should you greet your host or hostess? With a handshake, hug or kiss? This little exercise was very practical for those new to N Ireland. Many of them had never had anyone explain these simple things to them. They were in danger of making some cross-cultural blunders.

At another seminar I attended some years ago a group of Africans who had been part of various churches in Ireland were asked how many had actually been in an Irish person's home. It was very disappointing to see that only one or two had been welcomed into a local person's home, even though they had been 'welcomed' into the church.

Our series of events in Newry ended with an overnight trip to Derry, during which we toured the city walls and learned about Irish history. The feedback from this was very interesting. New residents found it very helpful to have an understanding of the background to the tensions and divisions they have observed in Northern Ireland. One person said that learning the history with local people helped him understand the personal nature of the suffering that had taken place, and why people couldn't just 'get over it'. However, a comment by a local person, is perhaps most interesting. They stated, that after talking about Irish history in a group made up of local Protestants and Catholics and new residents, they felt that new residents have a real role to play in building peace in Northern Ireland.

New residents need help to learn the new culture they encounter in Northern Ireland, and churches are well placed to do this. But new residents have much to offer us, including a new perspective on our history.

Contributed by Peter McDowell, ICPP Good Relations Officer

This month we give thanks for:

- 'A Cultural Journey' programmes – opportunities where local people can meet new residents
- People who open their homes and dedicate friendship
- New residents who have much to offer us