

# Study 1: Growth in Numbers

In this session we are looking at the church's efforts to recruit new members – and the complications that can follow. We will see that when the church grows, newcomers bring new ideas and unexpected challenges.

## Getting started

Sit for a few minutes in silence and try to recall experiences of going to a new church for the first time. Share what happened and how it felt with the group.

## View from the world church

As congregations grow in India and Ethiopia, difficulties have arisen as people from different cultural backgrounds begin to mix.

**SOUTH INDIA:** The Church of South India is reaching out to marginalised communities through evangelism and practical support. An initiative in East Kerala Diocese (supported by USPG) is providing schooling for the children of tribal communities who live in remote forest areas. Families are relocated by the diocese and provided with accommodation while their children are given places in school. The tribal children find themselves sitting alongside children from different communities, while their parents attend church for the first time. In both cases, confusions have arisen. Senthil kept breaking the school rules. First he brought a crab in a jar into class, then he disrupted the lesson by running around. At first, the teacher didn't know what to do – and it didn't help that Senthil spoke a different language. But eventually the teacher realised there was a clash of cultures. In his forest home, unfettered by school and other responsibilities, Senthil had spent his days exploring with his friends, encountering herds of elephants and other wild creatures. It was no surprise that his teacher didn't know how to handle him. Eventually, Senthil started to get used to his new surroundings. And, after two months, he had settled in. He picked up the local language and was starting to entertain his classmates with skills learned in the forest, such as firing a catapult and playing the drums and pipes. Over time, the church and school were slowly getting to know the tribal people. According to the Revd Jessie Anand, of USPG: 'The initiative brought cultures together and surprising friendships emerged. The learning was on both sides.'

**ETHIOPIA:** In the western region of Gambella, in Ethiopia, USPG Mission Companion Bishop Andrew Proud had a similar experience. The Anglican Church has been growing, but different tribal groups started to disagree over who should be in leadership roles. Bishop Andrew observed: 'What was disappointing for us is that we were going to great lengths to try to be inclusive and, instead, we discovered that tribal identity is stronger than Christian identity. So we are now talking about Christian identity as much as possible.'

## For discussion

1. What can we learn from these experiences of the growing churches in South India and Ethiopia?
2. All Christians tend to agree that evangelism is important – but they often disagree on what it means. What does evangelism mean for you?

## Looking at the Bible: Acts 2:1-41

Acts 2 begins with the first Pentecost – the creative Spirit of God is at the heart of this biblical story. Just as God's Spirit gave birth to Creation in Genesis, so too the Spirit plays a vital role in the new life of the church. Note how both unity and diversity are important: the one fire of the Spirit links the disciples together even as it divides into 'tongues' of flame; and the barrier that language imposes is overcome, but not by all speaking the same 'tongue' – rather by being able to understand each other in spite of difference.

1. In the group, take it in turns to share an insight or idea that particularly struck you as you read through this dramatic passage.
2. In the passage, God's Spirit speaks and acts through a range of cultures and languages. What does this tell us about God's own nature? What are the implications for how the church embraces difference, both locally and globally?
3. What lessons does this passage offer for outreach and for dealing with difference, in terms of faith, culture and otherwise? How can a church prepare for growth?

**Prayer**

Expansive and creative Spirit,  
You startle and exhilarate us,  
Challenging God's people to become  
more than we dreamed or desired.  
Enflame us with your passion, and  
dare us to envision your kingdom,  
Empowering us as instruments of  
mission and new creation.

**Action: Bring and share meal**

Think about the different cultures represented in your local community. Organise a meal offering food from around the world as a means of celebrating our diversity. You could make this an outreach event. Don't forget to take up an offering for USPG.