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BUILDING COMMUNITY IN THE CHURCH BETWEEN INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

ABSTRACT

In many churches, a group of people with a particular identity may often feel like “outsiders” and battle to fit into the community; yet “insiders” rarely recognise their difficulties. One such group in South Africa are refugees, particularly those coming from francophone Africa. This empirical study attempts to waken South African members of a local church to the heavy concerns carried by fellow Christians who have had to flee their homelands. The study intends to not only highlight refugees, but also any group within a church that may feel “excluded”. The aim is to show that a more supportive community can be fostered through an application of principles from many disciplines (studies relating to community-building, lament, empathy, and rituals). It is hoped that other churches can benefit from this example, thus promoting unity and incorporating the “excluded”, and enabling the establishment of healthier communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

This interdisciplinary study draws on the biblical concept of church members caring for one another, without showing preference for one group over another. It is based on principles such as “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek ... [but] all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28) and “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19).

The notion of drawing on various disciplines such as, for instance, theology, psychology, and ethics is a growing phenomenon in current research. For example, theology may engage with



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economics (Oslington 2006; Ballor 2014), literature (Walton 2011), psychology (Watts 2018), as well as with science and ethics (Peters 2017). For this article, Refugee Studies (within International Studies) provides insight, as do concepts of building community (Social Psychology), expressing pain through lament (Biblical Studies), promoting empathy (Psychology), and rituals (Pastoral Studies within Practical Theology). Relevant principles from these disciplines provide insight into trying to promote community-building in a local church between “insiders” (citizens of South Africa) and “outsiders” (refugees to South Africa).

The article begins by considering the citizen-refugee relationship in South Africa, from the perspective of both citizens and refugees. It then suggests four ways of seeking to respond to the biblical injunction of being “one in Christ Jesus”, namely the intention to build community; the exercise of communal lament (as noted in many psalms); the encouragement of empathy, and the introduction of rituals into the service of worship.

2. REFUGEE STUDIES

Census figures report that, in 2011, there were 2.2 million foreigners in South Africa, comprising 4.2% of the total population. Although a number of churches in Cape Town include refugees among their regular attendees, few citizens make a concerted effort to reach out to these marginalised people (or indeed any on the fringes), as they are often caught up in their own lives and blind to the needs and burdens of others. There are also reasons why some citizens have a particular bias against foreigners. The latter have been linked with the trafficking of heroin, South Africa being part of the “heroin route” from East Africa to Europe and the Americas (Pinnock 2019). Foreigners have also been associated with business robberies and illegal firearms (News 24 2019). Consequently, negative stereotypical views about refugees are fairly widespread,¹ especially among those who perceive them as threats in the job market (Amnesty International 2015). Despite their best attempts to fit in, many foreigners still find themselves ostracised, with the associated deep pain it causes (Cruz 2014:17-20).²

From their perspective, refugees have often been the target of attacks. Economic insecurity, among other factors, led to xenophobic violence against African foreign nationals and their businesses in March 2019 (Human Rights Watch 2020). Moreover, there has been a clear lack of accountability for

1 The “stranger” is linked with negative stereotypes and subordination (Alund & Alina 2011). See also Kahn 2013.

2 Ostracism activates the same brain regions as physical pain does (Eisenberger & Lieberman 2004).

xenophobic crimes (Human Rights Watch 2020), with the police, army, and Home Affairs officials³ tending to condone abuses (Human Rights Watch 1998). Refugees also find it extremely difficult to obtain the necessary paperwork in order to get jobs or seek basic services. In 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) reported that South Africa had the “largest number of unresolved (refugee status) applications” that year. Indeed, in 2012, Home Affairs closed its Cape Town office to new asylum applications (Washinyira 2020). By July 2019, the Cape Town office was still not functional, despite court orders to reopen. Refugees in Cape Town thus face significant difficulties and insecurity. Although the vast majority of refugees are well-qualified (for example, teachers) until very recently, their qualifications were not recognised, and thus most of them were forced to take on unskilled jobs, often as car guards (Nkosi 2018). Many South Africans often display their irritation towards car guards (Scharges *s.a.*). Frequently, refugees have to put up with unwelcoming behaviour from citizens.

In this hostile climate, Fozdar and Hartley (2013:2, 5) note that refugees seek above all a sense of belonging and emotional connection. Ager and Strang (2008) similarly observe that, although they value social bonds within their own communities, refugees also seek emotional connections with the wider population. Indeed, social exclusion by the “insider” group is viewed as a greater hurdle than structural barriers (Fozdar & Hartley 2013:10).

Giddens (1993) emphasises the need for refugees to know what to expect and how to “be” in society, much of which is culture specific. Ager and Strang (2008:166-191) also assert that, in order to facilitate refugee integration, knowledge of the host culture is essential. Gustafsson *et al.* (2012:75) agree, noting that a major problem to immigrants is a “feeling of being a stranger to one’s surroundings”. However, they add the problem of “being a stranger to oneself”, that is, being regarded and treated by others as “strangers”. For example, refugees are repeatedly asked: “Where are you from?” (Fozdar & Hartley 2013:13), implying that they are considered “outsiders” and, consequently, responded to in a limited, constrained way. Wernesjö (2014:43) observes: “The stranger⁴ is here, but is seen as someone who should not be, or at least not be at home here.” Strangers are “othered” and not accepted as belonging to the social community in which they live. This stigmatisation hinders their self-identities, which, in turn, aggravates their ability to integrate (Khan 2013:157).

3 The Home Affairs system and the legal system are complex (Van’t Riet).

4 Simmel (1950:402) introduced “the stranger” as “the potential wanderer who comes today and stays tomorrow”.

Beyond the notion of refugees seeking “belonging” within the majority culture, there is a need for both groups to recognise that they can learn from one another, and appreciate the unique experiences each has to offer (Main *et al.* 2017:363-364). This requires an effort from both sides to understand the other person’s cultural milieu (Hollan 2008), including how emotions and empathy are experienced and expressed. Khan (2013:166) found that such “two-way integration” can be facilitated by community newspapers, which provide a voice for marginalised groups. Similarly, one would hope that the local church would provide space for minority voices to be heard. That is one of the goals of this empirical study, to afford “outsiders” the opportunity to be heard by “insiders”, as a first step towards cultural exchange. The opportunity to hear the hearts of the refugees would, it is hoped, prompt some “insiders” to reach out to them and begin to ask questions and learn something of their lives.

3. COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Various understandings of “community” abound. Some researchers focus on the importance of “belonging” for community to be built (Furman 1998; Block 2008:xii). Pharr (2010:594) defines community as “people bonded together over time through common interest and concern, through responsibility and accountability to one another”. Bettez (2011:8-9) criticises these definitions as being “self-serving” and based on “unity through sameness”, thus excluding “the stranger” (as noted by Noddings 1996; Fendler 2006:303). She claims that an attitude of openness and inclusivity is needed, seeking to build bridges with those who are culturally different (Block 2008:145). Furman (1998:307) suggests that “the metaphor for community [be] an interconnected web or network of persons who may differ but who are interdependent”. In line with this, Hall (2007) conceives of community as ever-changing, with open and welcoming malleable boundaries that are continually recreated by those within the communities.

Such a definition, focusing on different interconnected elements, is at the heart of the biblical metaphor of the church as a “body” with many different parts. Katongole (2009) observes that community cannot be built in the church, unless Christians can view their faith as their primary identity, above that of ethnic affiliation, gender, or any other loyalty. He cites the example of Rwanda, where Christians killed other Christians, often in the same buildings where they had worshipped together, because they saw their primary identity as that of “Tutsi” or “Hutu” rather than as fellow members of the body of Christ. In this study, it will be critical for the “insiders” to recognise that their primary identity is their faith, as is that of the “outsiders”. Only then will there be commitment to work across cultural barriers.

To remind “insiders” that the Church is meant to consist of people who differ but are interdependent and that unity with, and care for, other Christians is a central tenet to the faith, the refugees’ prayer (in the empirical study) will be framed by the mention of some Scriptures that bring these truths to the fore, namely: “In Christ there is no black nor white, citizen nor refugee” (an adaptation of Gal. 3:28); “we are one body with many parts” (1 Cor. 12:12), and “bear one another’s pain” (Gal. 6:2). This is building on an insight from Empathy Theory (to be discussed in more detail later), in which it is asserted that people show more empathy towards those with whom they identify than with others (Cikara *et al.* 2014).

How can building community help “outsiders” such as refugees? Various scholars (Whitehead & Whitehead 1993:17; Renner 2009:59) claim that community and connectedness enable issues of social justice to be addressed in a context of mutual concern. Bettez (2011:10, 15-16) calls these “critical communities”. She insists that the goal of building community is not the individualistic concept of “belonging”, but that of learning to ask critical questions that might challenge dominant norms with regard to issues of power and oppression. This necessitates people learning to actively listen to one another, seeking what can be learned from the engagement (Bettez 2011:13-14). Indeed, if empathy is to grow, there needs to be feedback and continuing curiosity (Halpern 2001), for empathy is a “relational construct” (Main *et al.* 2017:358). Such sustained active listening enables community members to move beyond defensiveness (Rusch & Horsford 2008:358).⁵

Apart from building relationships across cultural gulfs in the church, a way in which more thorny issues such as, for instance, social justice can be addressed is within the context of prayers of lament. Such prayers are extremely appropriate to allow pain-bearers to bring their concerns to God. Several researchers (for example, Hooks 1994:243-250; O’Connor 2002:128) mention the importance of “a public space” for pain to be expressed and shared and for collective work for justice to be initiated (Brueggemann 1986:64). If the lament prayer is made within a public space, it allows others (for example, the “insiders”) to hear the hearts of the “outsiders” and to stand in solidarity with them. The next section highlights some aspects of biblical lament which are appropriate for this empirical study.

5 Burbules & Rice (1991:405) note: “Sometimes an [outsider] perspective is helpful precisely because it is different from that of the [insider] group.”

4. LAMENT AS A MEANS TO SEEK JUSTICE WITHIN THE CHURCH COMMUNITY

Biblical laments typically include four features, namely an address to God; complaints (with no restraints on the show of emotion); requests, including requests concerning justice against “enemies”, and affirmations of hope or trust from remembered experience with God. Within “complaints”, “requests”, and “requests for justice”, there is room for refugees to voice their pain and to seek relief. The “address to God” section is important in that biblical lament is a prayer, and the complaints are brought to God, not to a human authority or friend. Although the addressee is God, the biblical laments show an honesty and full articulation of the pain, with no holding back. The lamenters insist that God hears their pain, as they wait with hope for God to resolve the crisis (Brueggemann 2008:226, 231). This last notion (“hope”) is also an essential component of biblical lament.

Katongole (2017:xiii, xv, xvi) notes the critical role that lament has played in Africa over many years. He claims that “lament [holds] the key to a full explication of the nature and reality of hope in the midst of Africa’s turbulent history”. He found that arguing and wrestling with God was an ongoing way of [refugees] engaging God and articulating their suffering, mourning and hope.

Communal lament also serves to “act upon” hearers to the lament. “Pain-bearers”, through their lament, alert the community to the fact that the legitimated structures are not functioning properly (Brueggemann 1992:19, 29). The community is called to note and respond to the pain of the excluded and marginalised (Brueggemann 1992:22). This requires an understanding of empathy and how it functions. Insights from this field of study will be helpful as we seek to use the refugees’ communal lament to elicit a positive response from the “insiders”.

5. EMPATHY STUDIES

Ackermann (1998:88) asserts that, in a healthy community, people show “ethical imagination”, that is they are “prepared to stand alongside “others” (the suffering and the marginalised), to hear their cry of need, and then to respond”. An essential part of the healing of the “pain-bearers” is that they be heard (Caruth & Keenan 1995:257; Herman 1992:155), and their pain be acknowledged (O’Connor 2002:101, 107), in order to diminish their sense of isolation (Soelle 1975:178).

However, appropriate response requires that people learn to recognise and express their own pain, so that they can be attentive to the pain of others (Soelle 1975:125; O’Connor 2002:107, 88). If people have not learned to deal

with their own pain, they often respond to the suffering of others in ways that alleviate their own needs (O'Connor 2002:108) and bring relief to the distress they feel at witnessing those in pain (Watson & Greenberg 2011:126, 131). Being able to decentre from oneself and be concerned for those in pain does not call for one to "walk in another's shoes", but rather to *imagine* how it is for *that person* to walk in his/her shoes (Main *et al.* 2017:360, 362).

Apart from the need for imagination, Goubert *et al.* (2011:153-155, 161) note that there is also a cognitive component of empathy. Those who have a *moderate* sense of knowing the experience of the pain-bearer might be the most effective in helping the person. This suggests the value of presenting public laments, providing listeners with a moderate (but not overwhelming) sense of the sufferers' pain. Hearers are then confronted with the needs of others, and, it is hoped, this would move them out of apathy.

Cassidy *et al.* (2018:576, 578, 585) refer to the notion of "security priming" to reduce defensive reactions when exposed to the pain of others. "Priming" consists of thinking for a few minutes about "the person you can most depend on to be there to comfort you in times of trouble". It is hoped that the framing of the refugees' lament, within the context of a church service with constant reminders of God's caring and comfort, will help reduce defensive reactions from church members. In line with this, Schumann (2014) found that even simple reminders of one's values may be sufficient to affirm one's sense of self and thus reduce the tendency to respond defensively. Scriptures such as "we are one in Christ" should thus remind church "insiders" of their values. In addition, individuals are motivated to maintain their own perceived worth and integrity (O'Connor & Cuevas 1982; Steele 1988). Within a church service, it can be expected that they will be striving to reinforce their identity as Christians with certain moral values.

Another problem that mitigates against showing empathy is the tendency to individualise and to view the problem as belonging to others (Ackermann 2001:5; Cilliers 2007:403). To overcome this, the lament was also framed with reference to the Scripture "Weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). This injunction was a reminder to help "insiders" recognise their responsibility to share in the pain of others.

6. RITUALS TO BUILD COMMUNITY

The value of conducting the communal lament within a *sacred* space (including the use of Scriptures and biblical prayer) was mentioned earlier. Several researchers (for example, Hooks 1994:243-250; O'Connor 2002:128) also mention the importance of expressing and sharing pain within a *public* space (particularly if the goal is to initiate collective work for justice). These two notions

suggest the use of a regular church service as the place to present a communal lament which is addressed to God. This is simply an extension of the practice in many liturgical churches of providing an opportunity for other communal rituals such as praise, thanksgiving, and confession. Cilliers (2007:42) notes: "Liturgy conditions members of the community to certain habits, orientations and perceptions." One would expect that having a regular space in the weekly service for the church community to reflect together on the pain experienced by fellow-members would have many positive effects.

Several researchers (for example, Khawaja *et al.* 2008) found that prayer is a central coping mechanism for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. In his study, Tippens (2017:1095, 1099) notes that the primary resource mentioned by Congolese refugees was "faith in God's plan". This was closely linked to their ability to integrate into a religious community. The vast majority of the participants indicated that they use prayer to mitigate stress and negative emotions. Thus, the use of religious rituals, in particular prayer, to express refugees' pain (as in the empirical study) is well attested.

Any group rituals can be helpful in promoting loyalty and trust between participants (Hobson *et al.* 2018:270). However, rituals that are judged to be more sacred or meaningful are associated with more cooperation and feelings of unity than are other group rituals (Fischer *et al.* 2013). These findings support the use of communal biblical lament, as in this empirical study.

7. EMPIRICAL STUDY⁶

The year 2019 was one of "headlines about horrific violence against innocent and vulnerable people living in South Africa" (News 24 2019). Many of these people were refugees, taking shelter from war-torn African nations. With this study, it was hoped that, by exposing church members to some of the difficulties experienced by fellow Christians who happen to be refugees, their attitude would change, and they would become more empathic.

The group of refugees who took part in the study came from Burundi and the DRC, and participated in an English conversation class run by a local church. I invited them to participate in a lament workshop, at which we studied Psalms 3 and 13. Together we noted the salient features of biblical lament and observed the poetic and rhetorical features that make the poems persuasive. The refugees were also encouraged to reflect on what they know about God and how God has worked in their lives, to encourage them as they ask for God's intervention now.

6 Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Protocol Reference Number: HSS/1985/016PD).

Using the form of biblical lament, the refugees composed their own personal laments,⁷ from which a communal lament was jointly devised. A few weeks later at the local church, during a regular Sunday worship service, the refugees prayed their communal lament. As noted earlier, the prayer was framed by several Scriptures highlighting the unity of the Christian body. The congregation was invited to come to the front and surround the refugees, as a symbol of “insiders” protecting “outsiders” and extending blessing to them. The refugees took turns to utter different lines of the communal lament. They spoke in French (their choice), and the translation in English was displayed on a screen for the congregation to follow.⁸ The congregation was also given the opportunity to respond within the prayer, giving words of affirmation at appropriate points. Before and after the prayer, church members were asked to complete a questionnaire to ascertain their previous contact with refugees and to gauge if the communal lament had changed their attitude at all.

8. RESULTS

This local church consists mainly of “insiders” (South African citizens), although there are some members from neighbouring African nations such as Zimbabwe and Malawi. For many citizens, their only personal exposure to refugees is with “car guards” who work at the local shopping centres. Of the thirty-nine respondents (“insiders”), only eighteen knew a refugee well enough to talk to about his/her situation. Of those who mentioned that they did not know a refugee, most of them stated they had never thought about the problems facing refugees. When this group was asked what the experience of participating with the refugees in their communal lament meant to them, comments included: “Thought-provoking!”, “It broke my heart – I realise how little I know about how they must be feeling left out.”; “I have a stronger feeling of unity now with our refugees and a need to help them.”; “Such highly educated capable men who are looking for a place to call home, and for an opportunity to have a normal, love-filled life.”; “Very meaningful and touching.”; “This has opened my mind and eyes to a new way of looking at them.”

With regard to previously reaching out to refugees, twenty-two of the thirty-eight respondents had not previously helped a foreigner with the language or the way in which things work in South Africa. That is, the vast majority of the “insiders” had not previously reached out to help an “outsider”. The same

7 Personal lament may be needed first, to bring awareness from listening to the (uncomfortable) truth brought by the individual lamenter. Group lament is also needed, to bring healing to the individual and the community (Ackermann 1996:51-55).

8 See Appendix 1 for the English translation.

people indicated that they had never thought a great deal about the problems that refugees face.

In terms of the respondents' experience of "being a foreigner" (living out of one's country of birth for over a year), this did not seem to impact on people's sensitivity to the needs of others. An equal number (seven) of "insiders", who had been "foreigners" themselves, reached out to help "outsiders" as those who did not. Most of the "insiders", who had been "foreigners" but who did not reach out to help outsiders (six out of seven), mentioned they had never considered the problems refugees face. Presumably, their experience as "foreigners" had not been sufficiently traumatic as to give them empathy with refugee outsiders.

All but one of the thirty-nine respondents stated that praying with the refugees had made them more aware of the problems they face,⁹ and would make them more compassionate in the future towards refugees (such as the car guards they meet daily).

9. CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, francophone refugees experience many difficulties in trying to integrate into South Africa. There are several reasons for this, including the language barrier. It also appears that, often, church members are unaware of the difficulties experienced by those "on the outside". Results showed that many church members had not previously reached out to get to know a refugee, either at church or one of the car guards at the shopping centre. This was not intentional disregard, but a blind spot. When they were exposed to the trials of fellow Christians (through the communal lament), their attitudes changed. One would hope that their behaviour might also become more inclusive of those who are "different".

For community to be built, intentional commitment is needed by all, including those on the comfortable "inside". Leaders can facilitate a greater sense of unity by giving space for empathy to be stirred. One way for empathy to grow is for "insiders" to be exposed to the pain of "outsiders". Giving opportunity for "outsiders" to express themselves in a communal lament to God enables "insiders" to eavesdrop on their pain, and to have the opportunity to show solidarity with them. Doing so within a sacred space, using a liturgical ritual such as a special focused prayer as part of a service of worship can be particularly helpful. The refugees who participated in the lament expressed

9 The exception mentioned that he did not understand what the refugees were complaining about, as it was in French. He did not seem to realise that the English translation was displayed on the overhead screen.

gratitude to me a number of times, thankful that others were beginning to listen to their pain and show support. Clearly, the practice of communal lament within worship made a significant impact not only on the congregation, but also on the sufferers. The refugees experienced it as a symbolic “opening of arms” to them,¹⁰ and the “insiders” found their vision expanding beyond their comfortable confines.

There are many “pain-bearers” in our midst, whose plight needs to be raised to God in communal lament and prayer. One would hope that this might become a regular part of worship – praying not only *for* those in need, but also *with* those in need, allowing them to express their pain, and coming alongside them in responsive requests to God. Truth is uncomfortable for many of us whose lives are not touched by the suffering of such “pain-bearers”. However, if we are to become a community that cares and acts for the marginalised, we need to find a way of letting their voices interrupt our deafness.

Beyond being a blessing to those in pain, learning to recognise the pain of others is also vital for a healthy relationship between a church community and God. As Cilliers (2007:402-403) notes, the failure of a community to lament in solidarity with the afflicted leads to “the silence of God Himself”. Scripture frequently declares that God’s heart is committed to the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. Thus, if we would hear God speak to us and act in our communities, we need to line ourselves with God’s priorities. We need to reach out to those on the margins and draw them into our church life.

10 Cilliers 2007:402.

APPENDIX 1: COMMUNAL LAMENT OF THE REFUGEES

(English version)

(Italicised text indicates the response “insiders” were invited to pray.)

God, how long will we stay in South Africa as refugees?

How long will we be staying in someone’s house, renting?

Hear their pain, Lord, living far from their own country and people!

God, I know you are the provider. You settle the people of Israel in Canaan. Please provide permanent residence in South Africa so we can be able to have a better life.

Lord, you have a home for these your children. Please give them a place where they can be at home in South Africa.

God, punish the people who oppose us. Take revenge for us so that they can feel your revenge.

Revenge belongs to you, Lord. Please intervene for your children.

Despite that, we are living by hope. Your kindness overcomes us. You are our rescue.

Indeed, Lord, you are their rescuer.

We are faithful to you, but we are exposed to many things: Corruption and other things which are against your commandment.

Father God, God of Jacob and Abraham, did you forget about us?

Remember your people who suffer, Lord. Please intervene for them.

We remember about your goodness to us in the past. You showed favour to us at school back home. You took care of us in the past years.

You have been faithful to these your people. Show your favour to them again, please, Lord.

But we are sad by not having proper documentation in South Africa. We are asking you to intervene and sort out our problem.

Please, Lord, hear the cry of your children. Please provide them with the documents they need.

You are God of justice. You are faithful. Open a door for us so we can receive justice. Take revenge on our enemies. You can intervene and the situation can change. Thank you, because you can intervene.

We trust you, Lord, to intervene and help our brothers and sisters. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE WHICH CHURCH MEMBERS WERE ASKED TO COMPLETE

Please complete Part 1 NOW (before the service), and Part 2 after the service. Please drop in the box at the door as you exit the sanctuary. Many thanks!

NOTE: Responses are anonymous and there is no right/wrong answer.

Please put “X” next to the response you choose.

Part 1

1.	I know at least one refugee well enough to talk to about his/her situation.	Yes	No
2.	I usually greet the car guards near where I park.	Yes	No
3.	I usually speak to the car guards (with more than a greeting).	Yes	No
4.	I usually give some money to the car guard (more often than not).	Yes	No
5.	I have lived out of my country of birth for more than a year.	Yes	No
6.	I have lived in a place far from my family for more than a year.	Yes	No
7.	I have helped foreigners with the language, or the way in which things work in South Africa.	Yes	No
8.	I have never thought much before about the problems refugees face.	Yes	No

Part 2

We will be praying with some brothers in Christ who are refugees from the DRC and Burundi.

Please complete this section after the prayer together.

9.	Praying with the refugees makes me more aware of the problems they face	Yes	No
10.	Realising that car-guards are often people like these brothers in Christ may make me more compassionate towards them	Yes	No
11.	Please add any comments from the experience of praying with the refugees today.	-	-

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Church	Kerk
Community	Gemeenskap
Insiders	Binnestaanders
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