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Where diversity flourishes

In Europe, international congregations offer a 'large welcome'

James and Jana Shepperd and their daughters look forward to Sunday mornings. That's when the biracial, binational, bicultural family of four attends Bratislava [Slovakia] International Church.

Instead of drawing attention — an everyday experience in this largely homogenous country — in church they're just part of the wallpaper. An intricate, colorful wallpaper of folks from Europe, North America and Mexico, Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

"Everybody who comes to Bratislava International Congregation has some element of outsidersness" to Slovak society, said Miriam Schmidt, the ELCA pastor and missionary who serves the church.

James Shepperd calls them misfits. "Finding a place where any given Sunday you can be in a high concentration of misfits — it's kind of calming," he said.

Building community

For the Bratislava International Congregation and other members of the Association of International Churches in Europe and the Middle East, welcoming outsiders and misfits is a primary emphasis.

"Our congregation offers a place for people to see others who look like them, who come from the same mixed background," said Stephan Kienberger, an ELCA pastor who serves American Church in Berlin. Most members come from North America, Europe and Africa, and many are or have been married to Germans.

The story is the same at American Lutheran Church in Oslo, where the nearly 30 nationalities include many

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CLAUDIA MANN

Close friends Anna Kienberger (left), Kendra Killmer, Keziah Killmer, Elsa Kienberger and Alina Müller pose for a photo after Elsa's confirmation in Berlin. The Killmers are members of American Lutheran Church in Oslo, Norway, and Müller is a member of the Lutherkirche in Wiesbaden, Germany.

worshippers from the Indian subcontinent. "Everybody
except for the Norwegians is on somebody else's turf," said Timothy J. Stewart, an ELCA pastor who served the congregation until fall 2014. "In a way, we are all a little off balance."

That feeling extends to worship — while the liturgy is Lutheran, many worshippers are not. Stewart said the congregation is united because they "are in Oslo" and "believe in the Triune God and want to worship in English" — often a second, third or fourth language.

To live out what Schmidt calls "a very large welcome" for people who can be isolated by language, culture, race, immigration status or transiency, the congregations are intentional about building community. They also pay careful attention to cross-cultural dynamics.

In Berlin all visitors are greeted and their presence acknowledged during the service. Staff and lay leadership are intentionally diverse, and worship life includes "the full face of the community," Kienberger said. The traditional choir is led by an American, the contemporary choir by a German, the gospel choir by a Ghanaian, and the organist is Indonesian.

Coffee hour is an extended affair at all three churches, offering expatriates a safe space to swap stories about the challenges of international living, make friendships and feel the support of the church community.

Ministries are as fluid as the members who come and go. Kienberger said American Church in Berlin has "an open door policy — if we can try to fit you we will!" Its on-premises food pantry attracts people of all ages who volunteer even though they aren't fluent in German. And in Oslo, new moms organized a prayer circle.

Ministry to other migrants is natural. In Norway, Stewart attended immigration hearings with members seeking religious asylum to help confirm the authenticity of their faith. In Berlin the congregation offers English or German classes for neighbors, primarily Muslim migrants. All three congregations offer prayer and social support for members struggling with visa difficulties.

High turnover means fewer "sacred cows in terms of programming," Stewart said.

Schmidt agrees, adding that in the Bratislavan church, too, barriers to innovation by newcomers are lower than in less mobile congregations.

Intentional inclusion

Why do these diverse congregations in Europe flourish while multicultural congregations are few and far between in a diverse U.S.?

Outsider status is one reason. When everyone is an outsider in some way, a sense of unity prevails. When conflicts arise, people are more tolerant, in part because there's no place else to go.

The ability to apologize — which Stewart calls Oslo's "greatest strength" — complements a careful attention to the dynamics of language, culture and power. Cultural transgressions happen all the time.

"It isn't easy," he said. "We all work."

In Bratislava, Schmidt watches as new people are welcomed and settle in. Will someone from Japan or Indonesia find their place in the congregation as easily as a native English speaker or an American? If not, what response is needed?

Money, status and class can separate, as former refugees and high-level diplomats work side by side in ministry. Roots in a variety of church traditions mean that worshipers have different understandings of stewardship, service, even relating to the pastor.

Challenges do arise. "Working together in a small group has been a work in cross-cultural pollination and understanding," Kienberger said. "We talk about false perceptions we have of one another and find some heartening things as we unpack."

For Kienberger, the bottom line for these worshiping communities is to "try to stay Christ-centered and reflect the diversity of the world church and the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelations 21."

And, yes, it's the future of the church. "We are multicultural and multiethnic and on a daily basis dealing with the reality of people who are not Lutheran and did not grow up that way," said Stewart, who now serves the International Church of Copenhagen. "It's messy, it's chaotic, and it's intensely beautiful."

Comments
