



Mainstream and margin

Tension in the church

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Acts 6:1–7 (ESV)

Introduction: the mainstream/margin concept

Draw a river on a piece of flipchart paper (you can prepare this in advance) or invite people to think about a river. Talk about how parts of the river flow faster than others: in some places, the water even flows backwards. The main part of the river – the mainstream – is where the power is. Societies tend to be like this river, with part of society seeming to be the most active or powerful while others can feel left out, excluded and left behind.

We refer to this as the 'mainstream and the margin'. The mainstream are the ones who decide the rules of society, what is and what is not acceptable, and how people should and should not behave. The mainstream sets the culture while the margin are those who have to abide by the rules that have been set for them. The mainstream does not have to be the majority; indeed it often isn't. Think of

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apartheid South Africa or of colonial times (if relevant): the colonial powers were never the majority in the country but were the ones who set the rules.

Highlight that a person can be mainstream one way and margin in another at the same time, depending on what characteristics you are looking at. (For example, a college-educated woman in a church group may be mainstream because of her education, and margin because of her gender.) And if you are mainstream in this group, there are other groups in which you are the margin. We all have experiences of being in the mainstream and of being on the margin.

Background to the Bible passage

The early chapters in Acts describe the life of the young church after Jesus had ascended into heaven. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The followers of Jesus experienced a sudden growth in numbers. The core group was made up of Jewish people who spoke Aramaic, a derivative of Hebrew. They were sometimes referred to as 'Hebrews'. The newcomers to the community included many travellers from distant regions who had come to Jerusalem for religious pilgrimage or business. They heard the gospel at Pentecost or shortly thereafter and became followers of Jesus. These people were also Jews, but they were part of the Jewish diaspora – those who had been scattered over the centuries following the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. They had settled in many cities throughout northern Africa, southern Europe, the Middle East and western Asia. They spoke Greek as their common language, which was the cosmopolitan language of the day. So in Jerusalem, these diaspora Jews who became followers of Jesus were called 'Hellenists', because they spoke Greek. Following Pentecost, the new community began sharing their belongings and taking care of any in need (Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32–37). Many people sold their lands and other possessions. The money was given to the apostles who then saw that it was distributed to anyone who had need. But, as this passage shows, some were being left out in the distributions and this was starting to cause tensions.

Bible study

The Bible passage provides some examples of people trying to work positively from both mainstream and margin positions. Invite people to read and, if you are meeting as a household or as a small group, discuss the passage using the questions below.

Reflection questions

1. Identify the parties to the tension: who is involved in the situation? What is the immediate issue? What are the underlying concerns for both sides?
2. Which group could be considered 'mainstream' or at the 'centre' of the community? Why?
3. Which group could be considered on the 'margin' or on the edges of the community? How did they experience being on the edge or the margin?
4. How aware was the 'mainstream' group of the experience of those on the 'margins'? How did that awareness change?
5. In what way did the decisions made affect the mainstream and the margins? The names of the seven people chosen are all Greek names. Does that signify anything about the nature of the resolution achieved? Were there other people on the margin who were missing in the solution? What implications do you see for those missing people?
6. In what other ways, if any, did the decisions made not address issues of both those in the mainstream and those on the margins?
7. What did those on the margins do that was most helpful?
8. What did those in the mainstream do that was most helpful?

Key points

- One way to understand the dynamics of the tensions in this story is in terms of 'mainstream' and 'margins'. Every one of us has the experience of being mainstream in some settings and margin in some other settings.

Lesson insight: We can learn from our experience of being on the margins how to listen better and act more justly when we are in the mainstream.

- The mainstream is unconscious of its privileges and rank within the group. The mainstream is also unaware of the experience of those on the margins. Those on the margin, however, are distinctly aware of both their own and the mainstream's values and beliefs because they have to consciously function in relation to the mainstream. The mainstream sets the ways

the group will operate. The Hebrew Christians, including the apostles, had no awareness of the suffering of the Hellenistic widows. We don't know how the matter of the neglect of the widows actually came to the apostles' attention. Perhaps the widows complained directly. Perhaps a Hellenistic community leader brought the complaint. Perhaps there was a sensitive Hebrew who picked up the concern and brought it to the apostles. However it happened, the apostles did not get defensive or criticise the one bringing the complaint. Instead, they listened and then acted appropriately to address the concern. Listening is the best first step in countering the unconsciousness and unawareness of the mainstream.

Lesson insight: The first and best step the mainstream group can take when tensions arise is to listen!

- When a conflict involves structural injustice, as in this case, some sort of structural change must be included in the solution. In the Acts 6 story the Hellenistic widows were being neglected, so the structural change involved both establishing new roles in the church responsible for supporting the needy, and giving power to the neglected community in the new structure. All those chosen to administer the new programme were Hellenists who had been neglected.

Lesson insight: Resolving conflicts rooted in injustice means involving those on the margins.

- After the conflict is resolved, verse 7 tells about the dramatic expansion of evangelism. A conflict takes a lot of a community's energy, focusing energy inward on the conflict. When the conflict is resolved, the energy can then be turned outward in creative endeavours.

Lesson insight: Good conflict resolution releases the energy used in conflict for other activities.

Message from the margins to the mainstream

Ask people to close their eyes and think of a time when they were on the margin. What did it feel like to be on the margin? What emotions came to the fore? Reflect on these emotions. From their position on the margin, what did the people in the mainstream look like? How would they describe them? What words would they use? Reflect on these descriptions. From their position on the margin, what advice would they give to those in the mainstream? How could the mainstream behave in a way that would be helpful?

The mainstream and the margin in people's context

At this stage, you may wish to get people to reflect on their own environment. Invite them to think of who, in their context, is in the mainstream and who is on the margin. Encourage them to draw up lists of both. Encourage them to think of gender and age if it doesn't come up, as well as education level and language; faith group, tribe or ethnicity should also be explored. Once you have the list, ask how many of them are in the mainstream and how many are, or have ever been, on the margin. You will usually find that the majority have been in both groups (or will be – both youth and the elderly are often on the margin as are women, while men will usually be in the mainstream). The good news is that the next time they are in the mainstream they will know how they can behave in a way that helps those on the margin. They just need to listen to the advice that they have just come up with!

Prayer

Lord give me eyes to see and a heart to feel for those that are on the margin of our society. Help me to see those who are invisible, left out, ignored and unheard. Cast out any fear that I might have about them and show me when and how I might engage with them, to help give them a voice, to help them become full members of society and to be treated with dignity. Amen.