



# Current Affairs Assembly

KS3 Citizenship and politics – Difference and diversity

Assembly



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## Peace Wall or Separation Barrier?

### Aim:

- Growing trust and respect to overcome fear and hatred

### Introduction

#### Alexandra Park

*You may want to illustrate this assembly with photos of the various 'separation walls and fences' mentioned in the outline. Pictures of all of them are freely available on the internet.*

Imagine the scene in Alexandra Park in Belfast; a three metre high fence divides the grass, gardens and play areas in two. Catholic children playing in one part of the Park can see through the fence to where their Protestant neighbours play in a different part of the Park. On one side is the mainly Catholic area of Antrim Road, and on the other is the mainly Protestant area of Shore Road.

Starting this week, for a three month trial period, a gate in the fence will be opened between 9am and 3pm on weekdays. For the first time in many years, children and parents from the two segregated communities will be able to walk freely into the rest of the park, meet their neighbours from across the fence, and have the opportunity to play, to chat and to try to get to know each other. The decision to make this trial opening in the fence in Alexandra Park is the first brave step in a strategy to remove the 'Peace Walls' in Belfast. But what is a 'Peace Wall'? Might not a 'Peace Wall' be called by other names? A 'separation barrier' or a 'wall of shame'?

### Looking Deeper

#### Peace walls

At various times in very recent history, right up to the present day, 'Peace Fences' or 'Separation Barriers' or 'Apartheid Walls' have been erected in different parts of the world. Many are not very far from England!

**The Berlin Wall** was built in 1961 by the German Democratic Republic (also known in the UK as East Germany, belonging to the Soviet block after World War II). In West Germany, it was known as the 'Wall of Shame'. It was built ostensibly 'to protect the people' from the Western influences which were corrupting them and preventing the establishment of a socialist state. The Berlin Wall was a massive concrete barrier, nearly four metres high (*imagine that!*) stretching for nearly 100 miles, with armed guards in towers at intervals along it. This 'Iron Curtain' as it was also known, cut the city of Berlin into two parts. Before the Berlin Wall was built, thousands of East Germans migrated into West Germany for what they thought was a better life. After the Wall was built, very few East Germans managed to escape to the West. In the 28 years that the Wall existed, between 1961 and 1989, nearly 5,000 people managed to escape over or under the Wall; at least 200 were killed by guards as they did so. The Berlin Wall was broken on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1989 by civilians crossing it and climbing over it. Relationships between the East Germans and West Germans had become much more positive as a consequence of peaceful changes of government in other former Soviet states in Eastern Europe. Within just one year, the whole of Germany was reunited into one country again, and the Berlin Wall had disappeared into history.

Fear and mistrust between the two nations had been overcome. Peace, respect and trust



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had grown instead and enabled the two divided communities to begin again and become one reunited country.

**The Israeli West Bank Barrier** is a much more recent version of the Berlin Wall and it is nearly four times as long and at least twice as high — 470 miles long and eight meters high, (*imagine that!*). This Separation Barrier was built by Israel to protect Israeli citizens from terrorist attacks by Palestinians. It is in part wall and in part fence, on either side protected by wide zones patrolled by guards and every other form of human, mechanical and electronic defence system. It completely cuts Palestine off from Israel, and totally prevents Palestinians from moving freely for food, education, medical support or to see family and friends. Israel regards the West Bank Barrier as a great success since suicide bombings in Israel have fallen from 73 attacks in the three years before the Barrier was built to just 12 in the three years afterwards.

The Israeli West Bank Barrier stands high and long today, dividing Israel and Palestine, a symbol of increasingly bitter distrust, fear and hatred between two neighbouring communities.

**The Belfast Peace Walls** are much nearer to home! They divide communities within one area of the United Kingdom. There are nearly 50 of these walls in Belfast totalling 21 km. They are as high as the Israeli West Bank Barrier – nearly eight meters high (*Imagine that!*). Some are made of brick and concrete, many have fences on the top of the walls and most have spikes or razor wire along them. They run across parks, along the middle of roads, along the sides of roads, behind back garden walls, in front of neat front gardens and

white painted gates opening onto pavements facing the wall. Some have now been in place for as long as 42 years — that's 14 years longer than the Berlin Wall stood. These Belfast Peace Walls have even become a tourist attraction and coaches bring tourists to photograph them or have their pictures taken in front of them.

Yet they represent fear, hatred and distrust which has been embedded in these areas for many years through multiple generations. When, in 2008, a consultation was launched about removing these 'peace walls', large sections of the divided communities wanted them to remain, because the peace walls made them feel safer. This September, the ones in this trial which are being opened by gates are in areas where the residents on BOTH sides of the wall have had the courage to try to trust their neighbours. The openings are seen as first steps towards building a shared future for the divided communities of Belfast. Both communities, on each side of the wall, have had to show courage, trust and hope, and they have been prepared to take a huge risk by reaching out to their neighbours who are strangers. For these families and communities, these are the first steps in trying to follow the example of Jesus 'to love my neighbour as myself'.

## Reflection

After 28 years of dividing Germany, the Berlin Wall was broken on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1989 by civilians peacefully crossing it and climbing over it. Relationships between the East Germans and West Germans had become much more positive as a consequence of peaceful changes of government in other former Soviet states in Eastern Europe. Within just one year, the whole of Germany was reunited into one country again, and the Berlin Wall had disappeared into history. Fear and mistrust between the two nations had been overcome. Peace, respect and trust



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had grown instead and enabled the two divided communities to begin again and become one reunited country.



## Prayer



Lord God, we thank you for the trust that grew between nations to bring about the removal of the Berlin Wall. We pray for the communities and nations that are divided by fear and hatred today, especially the peoples of Israel and Palestine. We pray too for the divided communities of Northern Ireland, and ask that trust, courage and hope might grow through the trial openings of the Belfast Peace Walls. We ask you to protect the peace that already exists there, and enable it to grow until the two communities can look forward to a shared future together. Help us each to love our neighbour as ourself.  
Amen



## Keywords

Peace Walls  
Separation Barriers  
Apartheid Walls  
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Hatred  
Courage



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