My abiding memory of Newtownhamilton is of huge farm kitchens with stone floors, an old-fashioned stove, a plain kitchen table – and very little else. As a town-dweller whose experience of country dwellings was limited to picturesque bed and breakfasts, I had expected tasteful interiors with curtains and tablecloths in attractive cotton prints, dried flowers in hanging baskets and beautifully preserved antiques. A few farmhouses lived up to my naïve expectations, but many looked as if they had not been decorated for years and had no more furniture than was absolutely essential for the functioning of domestic life on a farm.

When I told friends who had been brought up in the country, they smiled with amusement and recognition. Yes, they confirmed, interior design was not a big preoccupation among practical farm folk – and why should it be? Why indeed? My urban bourgeois values were very different from those of the farmers of Newtownhamilton who, during the summer months in which I interviewed them, were often out on the land for twelve hours a day. Many of the farmhouses had been handed down through the generations and had changed little in decades. Their parents and grandparents had been preoccupied with making a living rather than creating a lifestyle, and they were no different.

The culture shock which I experienced was an education for me in the difference between rural and urban ways of living, particularly between the lives of country-dwellers on relatively low incomes and middle-class urbanites such as myself. It was a difference which was reflected time and again in the results of my research; the rural–urban divide was one of the most profound – and possibly the most profound – intra-ethnic boundary in both Northern Transvaal and Northern Ireland. Moreover, there were striking similarities between the rural areas, on the one hand, and the urban areas, on the other, in both territories.

We tend to take for granted that we are members of certain communities. Yet, given that we will never meet all the members of most
of the groupings we identify with, these are but imagined communities. For these communities to have an aura of reality, it is necessary to construct perimeters around them. We have seen already how both the Churches in this study contributed to that process of creating and reinforcing boundaries in a number of ways, particularly through the act of worship. We have also seen how passions over the act of worship revolved around religious distinctiveness in Northern Ireland and perceived cultural difference in the DRC. These distinctions mirrored the fault-lines of identity around which the ethnic conflicts in each territory were structured.

This process of boundary-making went on in other ways besides the act of worship in each of the fieldwork congregations. It was conducted in the most intense manner in both the rural fieldwork congregations, especially in Newtownhamilton. Newtownhamilton was the only one of the six congregations where there was a fairly large measure of residential integration across the ethnic divide. My suspicion was, therefore, that this contributed to a need to work that much harder at keeping the symbolic, imaginary boundaries in place.

BOUNDARY-MAKING IN THE RURAL CONGREGATIONS

Land has always been very important in Ireland, north and south. It represents the staking-out of territory, identity and power. In the country, the individual and collective soul is woven into the land. In Northern Ireland, it has also become an emblem of the wider ethnic conflict. Battles may no longer be fought over it but an economic stand-off continues to simmer between Protestant and Catholic. All over Northern Ireland, one hears tales of the reluctance of Protestants to sell land to Catholics and vice versa. To the best of my knowledge, no research has ever been carried out on this subject and the extent of this invisible barrier remains the source of much speculation.

This economic barrier certainly existed in Newtownhamilton. Just over two-thirds of those interviewed said they would not sell land to a Catholic. Some said they were simply worried about what their Protestant neighbours would think and feared retribution or being cold-shouldered. As one farmer and leading member of the church’s congregational committee put it:

Land has a different meaning from property in the Ulster Protestant’s mind. My family would turn their backs on me if I did