

Avenue St Andrew's United Reformed Church,
Southampton, Hants – Wessex Synod

“Believing worship to be central to our lives we see our mission as continuing to grow, both as individuals and as a fellowship, so as to further our Christian service and witness within the community and the world.”



Southampton

The population of Southampton is predominantly White British.

- Minority Ethnic People account for 7.6% of Southampton's population, and primarily live in the wards of Bargate, Bevois, Portswood and Swaythling.
- The largest single ethnic group, other than White British, is the Indian population (2.7% of the total).

This is a story not written to claim an award, but simply as a narrative to indicate that in deepest Wessex a strong belief in upholding a multicultural society has led to exciting developments. We apologise for simply sending a text without poetry or music and we are constrained in our use of photographs by the knowledge that many who come to our Church premises, for a variety of reasons, are uncomfortable to be photographed.

Our Diversity



Happily, Southampton is a city with a rich vein of diversity, with two thriving universities attractive to international students, a continuing maritime outlook because it is a major container port and a base for ocean liners. At different periods it has been a centre of immigration. With migrants from Asia and the West Indies, then from East Africa (one of whom was recently the Mayor of Southampton) and more recently from Eastern Europe and via the policy that Southampton is a dispersal centre with asylum seekers from all over the world, Southampton is a city with a continuing strong international tradition.

We Strive to be Welcoming

Avenue St Andrew's, in hosting weekly a Muslim worshipping group and an evangelical West African Christian Church and having a community café, a multicultural drop-in centre and an evening activity for young refugees has visitors from upwards of 25

countries each week. Most of these visitors come to the Avenue Multicultural Centre but in addition we have on Tuesdays a Sure Start group and on Mondays and Fridays the Avenue Centre, a day centre for families encountering serious difficulties. Both Sure Start and the Avenue Centre attract mothers and children from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Worship in our own congregation reflects this multicultural dimension to a certain degree. The catalogue of activities is not a boast. We could and should do more. It simply represents a marker point in the journey of one Church which in the early 1980s was founded by the coming together of St Andrew's Church, a Church representing, in part, the historical Presbyterian traditions in the City, and known locally as the Scotch (sic) Church and the Avenue Church which in representing some Congregational traditions was sometimes known as the Welsh Church. So we have moved on. From the rich seams of Southampton life we now have on a Sunday morning a Congregation encompassing a leader of Junior Church from the American Continent, Asian and African students, refugees and asylum seekers and occasional visitors from all the Continents. However the multicultural dimension of Avenue St Andrew's is more evident through two newly developed activities, a community café and a multicultural centre.

Embodying Faith - A Community Oriented Church

We have been fortunate to have a Church Related Community Worker and in the five years that she has been in post first a community café and then a multicultural centre have been opened. In the beginning the café, opening once a week, was a place of welcome for members of our Congregation and friends, casual passers by, retired folk living close to the Church and a small number of the asylum seeker community who did not pay for meals. By testing the demand we realised that there was an absence of any drop-in centre in Southampton for asylum seekers and refugees and we decided to look to open such a centre. In July 2008 with substantial help, both financial and organisational, from the Red Cross and City Life Education and Action for Refugees (CLEAR), an agency which had been working in the City since 2001, we opened jointly a weekly one-stop centre on a different day of the week from that of the café. We started with attendances of about 30 but by April 2009 nearly 100 visitors have been coming to the Avenue Multicultural Centre each week. They come for many reasons. Refugee Migrant Justice (formerly known as the Portsmouth Refugee Legal centre) have two caseworkers present weekly to help alleviate the scandal of the almost total absence of legal help in Southampton for those asylum seekers who are trying to present asylum applications or appeals. If for no other reason the Centre can bring hope to many by ensuring that they have an opportunity of legal representation. Refugee Action has an advice desk and their current presence one day a week is inadequate to deal with the volume of enquiries from both asylum seekers and refugees. We are presently arranging that Refugee Action will attend a second day of the week, at the time of the community café. Clearsprings, an agency concerned with distribution of benefits to asylum seekers able to receive such help are also present weekly. The Southampton and Winchester Visitors Group is a local charity helping to provide accommodation and food to destitute asylum seekers. Members come to the Centre in a befriending role to have weekly meetings with clients. They use the Centre for meetings but also as a distribution point for fresh vegetables. The Red Cross and CLEAR have worked alongside the Church in bringing the Multicultural Centre into existence and are represented together with

clients in the management of the Centre. Both the Red Cross and CLEAR have advice desks, so whatever the problem there is a good chance that it can be addressed through this accumulation of expertise.

Building Relationships

However a centre is more than a series of advice desks. It is a centre in which those who pass through create an atmosphere and happily since last July a friendly atmosphere has grown up: those who are destitute receive a free meal; many come just for a cup of tea or coffee; some come only to seek advice; more come to meet friends and the Centre recognises that we see both those who still have the confidence to create strong relationships and those who have been shattered by traumas who have difficulty in emerging from their isolation. For some, simply involvement in an activity is helpful. We have established a sewing group with the help of Tools for Self Reliance, who have loaned sewing machines. We have been able to set up a guitar class. We have planned a cooking and healthy-eating group and an art group. We have informal English conversation classes. None of these activities can remove the uncertainties and worries of life as an asylum seeker. Such worries are best alleviated through the granting of Leave to Remain. All the work of the Centre recognises that for many, everything is secondary to this key to a less trouble free life in the UK. However the sheer resilience of those placed in terrible situations is a shining light to those working at the Centre who have more peaceful lives.

Our Multicultural Centre

The opening of our Multicultural Centre has only been possible due to the coming together of a number of organisations. More recently the city authorities asked that we extend our work. Now every Tuesday we offer a meeting point for Afghani under-age refugees (under 18s). Typically these young people arrive in the UK alone, knowing nobody and separated by a cultural abyss from their previous life. The Red Cross provides a programme, 'Living in Britain' to bridge the abyss. Southampton Children's Services assists these young people by placing them into foster care. It is the role of Avenue St Andrew's to welcome these and other migrants.



Simply, the world of the 1980s when the merger of two Churches of proximate Christian background was noteworthy, has moved on. Each week we see visitors from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Just as that merger in the 1980s led to vibrancy and renewal, the present opening of the doors of the Church to the rainbow of nations leads to a reappraisal of our commitment to racial justice and the cherishing of diversity.

John Mellor and Avenue St Andrews URC
April 2009