

Balsall Heath Church Centre - United Reformed Church, Birmingham

The United Reformed Church and St Paul's Church of England working together as Balsall Heath Church Centre: CARE – HELP – FRIENDSHIP – WELCOME – UNDERSTANDING

Balsall Heath Congregation is located in an inner city area of Birmingham with a population comprising 60% Asian people, 20% African Caribbean and Black British people and 20% of White British people

Balsall Heath is located in the Sparkbrook Ward in Birmingham (UK)

- Approximately 30,000 people resident in the Ward.
- average age of 35 compared to 36 for the city as a whole
- Approximately 65% of the population are of Asian origin
 - roughly 45% from Pakistan, 9% from Bangladesh and 6.5% from India.
- 8% of the population is black, including 6% of Afro-Caribbean descent.

Ecumenical Calling

Balsall Heath United Reformed Church is part of Balsall Heath Church Centre. In the church centre we work with St. Paul's Anglican Church, in a shared building. We usually worship separately, but do have joint services several times a year, and worship together on other occasions such as through Holy Week. We also run joint bible studies from time to time and we have a Joint Church Council which helps us to share our news to one another and plan to do things together. Our main undertaking is the Day Centre with a joint Church Management Committee which is responsible for its running. Our green vision committee is also formed from across the two congregations.



We are also members of Balsall Heath Churches together through which we are involved in Churches Together Lenten Studies and share in each other worship services during the year. We are also involved with the women's World Day of Prayer Service.

Enacted Justice

Members of our congregation are very active in promoting trade craft and fair trading. We run a fair trade stall after the service at least once every month, but sometimes more often. Our members are loyal supporters of the stall and through the very proactive work of those who are responsible for the stall; members are kept well informed about issues and concerns that Trade Craft are working on. Members are often encouraged in various forums to sign petitions/cards to be sent to MP's or the Prime Minister, as well as to engage with concerns in their prayer lives. The Jubilee debt

campaign is also supported by the congregation, with some members attending events and rallies, and being involved with the local jubilee debt group. Members are kept up to date on the campaign through articles in the newsletter, through the Sunday notices and through worship.

Greening Church & Living

Our Green Vision Committee works across the two congregations to help make our building more environmentally friendly and our members to be more responsible for the gift of our environment. Some of the changes we have already made are: changing to energy saving light bulbs; changing our urinal systems and placing blocks in the toilet cisterns; having cavity wall insulation; providing draft exclusion for all our doors and windows, choosing a new green material (Marmoleum) to renew our corridor floor and continuing to expand our recycling facilities. We recently had an exhibition at one of our Synod meetings to show other churches how they can work on greening their church.



Cultural, Historical & Ethnic Milestones

Through worship we celebrate and talk about cultural, historical and ethnic milestones, with recent examples being *Windrush* at 60 and the centenary of the act to abolish the transatlantic Slave Trade. In partnership with St. Paul's we are also able to share in many social event where the foods and music is largely Caribbean and Caribbean influenced. WE also participate in world food and music evenings where we would have a short world quiz and share food and cultural activities from around the world.

A Heart for the Community

Our main form of community outreach is with our day centre for the elderly. They are collected from their homes or care homes and are brought to the centre in our minibus. At the centre they have the opportunity to take part in activities such as keep fit, quiz, bingo, singing, crafts, baking, trips out and socialising. They also get their lunch and snacks during the day. There is a communion service for them on a Wednesday every week. Members of our congregation are very active in running activities for the day centre. Our members run the keep fit, quiz, singing and crafts, as well as spending time talking to them, and taking our part in running the communion services. The church centre also has a coffee shop open to the public every day where people can come for a drink, a snack and conversation. This is very much valued by some members of the community. We also are linked to the community through the way the community use our facilities – the church centre is used by many different groups as a meeting place, including the police, the community forum, the local councillor's surgery, other charities and organisations.



The Balsall Heath Forum is a local community group which works hard to regenerate the area. We have a congregation

member who attends these meetings and is able to keep us informed of any assistance that we can give in the community. For example, recently the forum reported a rise in people accepting or requesting food parcels as the credit crunch has hit. Our congregation supported the forum's street wardens financially, to enable them to hand out more food parcels to those most in need in the community.

We Strive to be a Welcoming Church

In our congregation there are black British, white British, Jamaican, and white European members, the numbers of each group can vary Sunday to Sunday, but on big festival days such as Christmas and Easter the largest number will be Jamaican and black British. We do not have many regular young people who attend, but we do have some, who are in the process of considering confirmation. On festival days there can be up to 25 children attending the service. As with most congregations there is a general bias towards women, but we do have some very active men in our congregation, three of whom form part of our team of retired non-stipendiary ministers. The eldership also has a mix of male and female, and includes people of different racial groups. The committees that we are involved in, Joint Church Council, green vision and management also have a mix of people with different backgrounds.

Balsall Heath URC - Multicultural congregation story award Project

Our worship area has a large strip of dark coloured boards around 2 sides, with one wall of the area being particularly dominated by them. There had been some brightly coloured posters and sentences from scripture on the boards for quite some time, but they were beginning to look tired. So when we received the information about the multicultural congregation story award we decided to use it as an opportunity to refresh the look of our worship area and make a display of the story and journey of our congregation.

The tree of *our* life

This was partly inspired by the vision4life bible year material called "who do you think you are?- Israel's story"

The first panel, 'the tree of *our* life', we made during a Sunday service. The main part of the service followed a pattern of a reading from the bible which had something to do with the particular element of the tree we were focusing on (so roots, branches, leaves and fruit), then a short reflection from the preacher, then an action with the same theme as the reading.



On the roots we all wrote the places that we considered to be a part of our heritage. They were very varied. Some people wrote different cities or towns in the UK, and others wrote down countries such as Jamaica, the

Netherlands, Norway, Ireland and other places.

Next we moved on to the branches. Everyone received some circular 'tree rings', since tree rings can be used to look at the stages of a tree's life, we wrote down what the particularly important stages of our lives were. Some people wrote down important dates in their lives, others wrote about events such as meeting or marrying a partner, having children or being baptised.

Then we moved on to the leaves. On the leaves we wrote about what makes us who we are. Some people wrote factual statements, like 'I am a wife and a mother to two children', others wrote about the qualities that they felt that they possessed such as 'I am friendly and outgoing'.

Finally we focused on the fruit. We read about Jesus saying "you cannot bear fruit by yourself, you must remain in the vine." (John 15:4) And we reflected about our life together as a congregation. On the fruit we wrote down words that describe our congregation, the special things that draw us to be a part of the congregation and things that we do together as a congregation, like bible study and fellowship meetings.

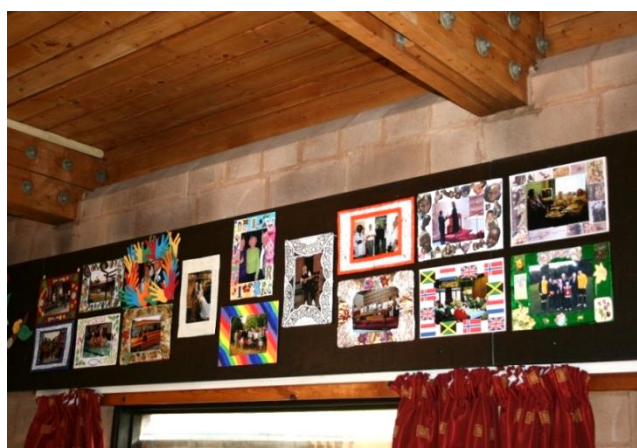
We are pleased about how our tree, which represents us as individuals and together as a congregation looks in our worship area. All of the different colours of the fruit and leaves are vibrant and full of life, and we hope that our tree, with all of the variety that it represents, will keep on growing.

Our photo journey

For the second panel, we worked individually at home. We brought in lots of photos of different events that had taken place in the life of our congregation, beginning with leaving our old building and starting our life in the new building, baptising our young people, fellowship meetings, congregation members getting married, away days, our work with the day centre for the elderly...and much more. We were all given a cardboard frame and some instructions about what we should do with it as follows:

Your task is to either decorate the cardboard frame or use it as a template to make one out of another material (if, for example you wanted to knit or crochet one etc). **The theme for decorating the frame is DIVERSITY.** You can interpret that as a diversity of materials (for example, sticking buttons, different fabric, recycled items etc to the frame) or you could interpret it as a diversity of colours (especially if you have a special talent for painting, drawing etc) or you could interpret it in any other way that describes diversity for you. **Please bring your finished frame back to church next Sunday!**

Everyone that decorated a frame had their own ideas about representing diversity. Some frames were covered with pictures of all kinds of people, or all kinds of animals, or all kinds of



flowers. Others decorated their frames with rainbow colours or different materials. One frame had some paper doilies on it to represent the diversity present in snowflakes: no one is alike! The frames were diverse in themselves, but when we all put our frames together, the diversity was astonishing and beautiful – the diversity of interpretation really represents well the diversity of human life, the way we think differently, see things differently, value things differently.

The second panel is made up of our frames with the photos of our congregation's journey inside them. It got us thinking about diversity and creativity, and the photos remind us of all the different things that we have done together and all the different people and families involved in our congregation.

The water that keeps on flowing



The third panel was made during the service on Mothering Sunday. We heard three readings, one was the story of the woman at the well, the second was the story of the road to Emmaus and the third was a passage from

Jeremiah. The preacher drew out the ideas of the water of life that Jesus promises, from the Jeremiah passage God's promise that he will give us "hope and a future", and from the story of the road to Emmaus the idea that if we remain negative about the future, like the disciples on the road with their "downcast faces" we cannot see the future hope – or in the disciples case, they cannot see Jesus.

We were then lead to think positively about our future and were told to "dream dreams" without constraint. We were given some blue fabric to represent the water of life and we used pens, fabric, paper, ribbon, thread, netting and other materials to express our hopes and dreams for the future.

Some people interpreted this task in a global way, and wrote hopes for peace, or heaven on earth on their fabric, others interpreted it personally, detailing hopes for their future life, still others wrote their hopes and dreams for the congregation, such



as growth or that many people will come and be challenged to think about God.

The fabric pieces were then glued on to a river-shaped piece of card, and decorated to appear more like a river- the river of life flowing into the future.