

FOCOLARE

Bringing people together in Birmingham

Birmingham has often been called the ‘city of a thousand trades’ because of its rapid industrial development in the last century. With a population of just over 1.1 million where one third are of minority ethnic origin, it

is the second largest city in the UK. It is also a relatively transient city where 44% of the population have been resident there for less than ten years.

Pat Whitney reports on the experience of the temporary Focolare in Birmingham.

For the Focolare community who, since autumn 2015, have spent a few days each month in Birmingham, it is the ‘city of a thousand

unexpected opportunities to bring people together’. We all feel that it is a place where you see the power of the charisma of unity at work in everyday life in a measure disproportionate to our human efforts.

The gift of a house

This experience began when the Catholic Archbishop, Bernard Longley, made available a house for the Focolare to use as a base. It was formerly a presbytery which was going to lie empty when the parish priest retired. This house has become home for the focolarine who visit regularly and all the other people who collaborate in our activities. In the past, the Archbishop worked with members of the movement and was so impressed by the attitudes they brought to their work place that he wanted this spirit to be present in his diocese. Our house is in Darlaston, in the Black Country, north of Birmingham, in an economi-



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This dialogue, especially among the faithful of different religions, is more than ever necessary and indispensable today if we want to avert the great evils threatening our societies.

Chiara Lubich, London, 2004

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cally deprived area with a range of social problems. The Archbishop's hope was that we could simply share our love of God with the people of the area. We didn't need to plan how to do this – opportunities just seemed to open up before us.

Dialogue with Sikhs and Muslims

Our arrival coincided with the Gen Verde 'Start Now' performing arts project in Birmingham (See New City February 2016). This involved working with students from seven different schools and of different faith backgrounds. These initial contacts gradually developed into a deep relationship of trust and esteem with the Nishkam Sikh community, particularly with the Nishkam School Trust. Over the last year, we have collaborated regularly with primary school staff in delivering a series of workshops for all students based on values drawn from Sikh scripture. In the high school we have also held a 'Run4Unity' and some workshop events where young people from Christian, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds take part in a range of activities but also explore the importance of the golden rule in their own faith. These are small gatherings but it is impressive to see the impact of building respectful close relationships with people whose religious and cultural identities are so different from our own. One teacher said, 'I feel renewed and invigorated all at once when we work together', and the young people always want to know how soon we can do the next one! For us, these are authentic moments of dialogue when we are all free to explain who we are and, simultaneously, appreciate the values and goals that we share.

We also know members of the Shi'a Muslim community in Balsall Heath and have spoken in their mosque and worked together in a range of activities. Recently, a lady from this Muslim group took on the task of organising a large open air iftar in the area. Iftar is the evening celebration when Muslims break their fast during Ramadan. The programme brought together not only a number of people from other faiths but also a range of Shi'a and Sunni Muslim groups who had never previously collaborated. The task was especially difficult because of the attacks on the public in Britain in May and June this year which, in some contexts, have increased a sense of fear and mistrust. The organiser shared that it was the Focolare spirituality that had helped her during the challenging time of preparation: she said that she realised that the process – living in the present and 'entering into' each person's concerns – was as important as the outcome.

Ecumenical dialogue

Perhaps one of the most striking stories about bringing people together relates to the Anglican and Catholic parishes in Darlaston. The two churches are less than a hundred metres apart. However, over recent years, neither the clergy nor the parishioners ever met because changing patterns in ministry and shortage of time meant that connections never happened. During a morning of Lenten reflection in the Catholic parish, we suggested that we include a visit to the Anglican church for a moment of prayer. This simple idea was met with great enthusiasm and during the following weeks, several people asked if this contact could continue in some way. Since then, we have had two open afternoons in our house, attended by clergy and parishioners from both parishes. At the moment, these joyful, open and unstructured meetings are an opportunity to ask all you ever wanted to know about the other denomination. People have commented that they are a celebration of being brothers and sisters in Christ; they also feel that it is 'so supportive' to recognise one another when we meet along the street.

So what next in the West Midlands? There are plans in place for further developments of interfaith youth projects in the autumn but one thing we are sure about, God has more imagination than us! There are so many small opportunities each day when dialogue with someone totally different from ourselves is not just an attitude but a moment of real encounter and enrichment. ■

