

Barry Naylor

Barry came to Leicester to take the newly created position of Urban Canon at the cathedral, created so that the church would have some impact alongside the physical regeneration of the city. Barry loves the countryside, but having been in a rural parish where the local landowner's wishes in most aspects of life held sway. Not like this side of things, he was drawn to Leicester because of its diversity, but its multiculturalism was not evident in the city centre because of the separate development of the Hindu and Muslim communities. The congregation at the cathedral were all white and he was asked 'Are you on the square?' i.e. 'Are you a Freemason?' At a regeneration meeting the few Asians there were assumed to be the staff of the venue. Although people wanted to be involved in regeneration, many people did not want to come into the city centre because of its perceived Asian population. The development [in the city centre] was piecemeal as money dried up and only the architectural drawings remained.

What about the social impact? Nothing reflects the multiculturalism and nothing has been done. What about the retail sector? At the High Cross shopping centre Barry made contact with the retail staff and was able to give some support to them following a number of suicides and this enabled him to build relationships.

Cathedral AM is a breakfast meeting open to all, with speakers and opportunities to network. At Cathedral AM, members of the police force met the leader of the Dawn Centre. The police were worried about beggars and homeless people and The Dawn Centre (to quote its web site) is a project for homeless people providing temporary accommodation, support, advice and assistance on health, housing, life skills and education all in one place.

Thirty to forty thousand people come into Leicester each weekend ... prayed about what Christians should do ... in Suffolk there had been a 'Safe Haven' bus which provided a safe place for people to spend time ... but the church had been excluded. Street Pastors were contacted and an ecumenical team set up to be out on the streets at the weekend. People asked: What are you doing? - Bringing the love of God; Which church? - We're working together! There is a whole range of situations to deal with providing opportunities to help, care for and meet people. Time has to be spent on fund-raising, but working in partnership leads to things happening.

'Christ in the Centre' began as a passion play staged in the streets of Leicester. On the first occasion it attracted perhaps a hundred people. Now, ten years later, eight thousand or more come together on Good Friday. Barry recalled that when a list of the faith festivals was compiled Easter and Christmas were left out and when the council were asked for financial support the response was that they could not support all and we do spend a lot on the Christmas decorations. When it was planned to have the words of 'When I survey the wondrous cross ...' on the big screen on Good Friday it was forbidden as it might offend ... no longer the case.

Many Leicester people do not know it has a cathedral and if they do they are not sure where it is and assume it is doing 'cathedral things'. Through the choir the cathedral has an outreach to schools. The cathedral is involved in civic functions, but what it does was not related to the city centre. Next to the Cathedral was Leicester Grammar School and when it became vacant the diocesan offices were brought together and housed in the building and it became St Martin's House. A wing of the building is rented out to provide income. The building is open to the public and food is available, and it has become an important meeting place ... open hospitality ... generosity ... people on the street surprised that they were invited in. Through St Martin's House the cathedral has become embedded in the city centre and has built up relationships with City Council.

Leicester is a City of Sanctuary and the Welcome Project (based in St Martin's House) is open for all asylum seekers every Thursday from 10.00-1.00pm with a women-only session on Tuesdays (12.30-3.30pm).

The cathedral has spent a lot of money on major projects [like St Martin's house] and the question of whether such money should be spent directly on the poor is asked. We struggle with this.

The city centre is becoming more reflective of multiculturalism and diversity. This has drawn the attention of the English Defence League (EDL) who have visited the city. The cathedral has been the focus of the response of the faith communities to these visits. EDL were perceived as a threat

the Hindu and Muslim communities and United Against Fascism wanted a higher profile, but other wanted to avoid confrontation. Hope not Hate was a joint statement by the faith leaders and open prayer meetings were organised and the people who came included humanists. Bridges were built, the gospel was shared ... spreading the good news requires good relationships.

The actual visit of the EDL was a nasty occasion with nasty and abusive confrontations. Street Pastors were out on the streets as were the Salvation Army. Other church people were there to comfort ordinary people who did not know what was happening. The day after the first EDL visit the faiths came together in celebration and the council praised the faith communities for their involvement.

At the beginning of her Jubilee Year the Queen visited Leicester because of the kind of city it is – diverse and multicultural. She attended a service of at the Cathedral in which people of other faiths took part, which concerned some. The faith leaders see the cathedral as their cathedral, because of the range of services that are held there ... generous hospitality and challenging what people are about. Barry told us that after the service ‘thousands’ of people came into the cathedral just to sit on the same seats that the Queen and Prince Philip had occupied! – There were lots of conversations of the gospel and things that touched people’s lives.

The discovery of remains under the site of a Leicester car park that might be those of Richard III has raised the question of a possible interment in the cathedral ... what liturgy should be used ? ... how might the event be exploited? This in turn has created relationships with the archaeologists at the university. The possibility of a Richard II Plantagenet Centre with green space in front of the Cathedral has been mooted.

Comment

We are not as open to other Christian denominations as we are to other faiths.