

NEWSLETTER FOR JUNE 2013

A matter of orientation

In my work for the Church Buildings Council, we're sometimes called to visit churches that wish to re-orient themselves - that is, to turn their worshipping space around so that they face west, or north or south, or perhaps arrange it in a circle. (Strictly speaking, 'orientation' means facing east - the normal axis for a church - but the term is used flexibly in architecture, as well as a descriptor of sexuality!) They seek to do this for various reasons. Sometimes our advice is that it will work, but often it will not, because it is fighting against the 'logic' of the building, and would have a disorienting effect.

In Cyprus last week - patron saint Barnabas, who evangelised the island with Paul, and whom we commemorate this month - I visited the Selimiye Mosque. This lies just beyond the 'green line' marking the 1974 Turkish invasion that leaves Nicosia as the only divided capital city in Europe; the implications for fully implementing Cypriot EU membership are complex and yet to be resolved - if they ever are. It was built as *Agia Sophia* cathedral in the 13th and 14th century, on the site of an older church - not on the Orthodox pattern, but in Gothic style, for this was during the period of Frankish rule; so it has a strong east-west axis. In 1570, under Ottoman rule, it was one of a number of churches on the island to become a mosque, with all the decoration stripped away and minarets added. And because Muslims face Mecca for prayer (denoted by the *qiblah*), the orientation of worship was shifted by about 30°, producing a disconcerting effect of patterned carpet running diagonally across the floor.

I returned home to find some local people disconcerted in a different way, by an article in the *Daily Mail* comparing Muslim attendance at Friday prayers in the East End with Sunday attendance at two local churches - ours, and St Mary Cable Street. It was planned some weeks ago (when the photograph was taken), so it's unfortunate that it appeared now, at a time of heightened Islamophobic activity in the wake of the Woolwich attack. It said nothing about local Christians' positive engagement with the Muslim community, for instance through Tower Hamlets Inter Faith Forum, which works strenuously to keep the far right at bay and foster good relationships with 'no place for hate'. (Perhaps we should now try what Archbishop Sentamu has called the 'Yorkshire strategy' of tea and football....)

We were originally told that the article was about religious life in Spitalfields - which we are not! In the event, it reported that we had a congregation of only twelve: a good biblical number, certainly, but for the record on the Sunday in question it was nearer thirty by the time everyone had arrived (not all of us are punctual!) Still not a vast number, of course, compared with those at Friday prayers, or indeed at some other parish churches in the area, but it would be wrong to say our morale is low.

The diocese has recently provided figures from the **2011 Census** for every parish - they will soon be on the diocesan website - and we shall be studying the valuable information they provide. They confirm that we are statistically a 'young' parish, with rather more in the 19-24 and 25-35 age groups, and rather less in all the older age groups, than in the diocese as a whole - though Sybil rightly continues to remind us of the needs of the elderly. They show that 20% of the adult population of 9,397 identify as 'Christian', with 48% 'other religion' (almost all Muslim) and 32% 'none/unstated' (percentages in this category across London as a whole were the highest nationally). Further detail on ethnicity, country of birth, main language, family situation, employment and deprivation are also provided.

So it is indeed the case that there are many more residents of Muslim than Christian background. Because of the demographics, the percentage in our school is even higher - though we take great pride in faithfully fulfilling our original vocation as a church school for local children (which we'll be celebrating on **Founder's Day**, 28 June) - see below on **Ofsted**. Such

a mix is nothing new: some older people remember when it was a Jewish-majority school, with many synagogues in the parish. We have been here before - and we are still here.

None of these figures mean that we are doomed to fail as a Christian community in the patch we are called to serve, and will soon need to shut our doors. It is simply that we need to be present, and engaged, in other ways, as well as gathering to pray for our neighbours (as we believe they do for us). And it is certainly not true that our church - used throughout the week for a variety of events as well as being an open house of prayer - could become a mosque. True, other denominations have done this in times past - remember the iconic Brick Lane building that has successively been a Huguenot church, a Methodist chapel, a synagogue and is now a mosque - but Anglican rules now, as then, do not permit such disposal of parish churches. When St Mark Whitechapel (now part of our parish) closed in 1925, for instance, there was no question of it ever becoming a synagogue.

We shall continue to re-orient ourselves, as imaginatively as we may, to match our situation - not by shuffling the furniture around, as if on the decks of the Titanic, but by facing the challenges of the risen Christ whom we serve, in whatever direction they may lead us. The 'logic' of what we're about in and around our building may seem odd to those who come from outside to inspect us and find us wanting, but East Enders are used to this, and we remember the risen Lord's words to his disciples - *stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high* (Luke 24.49). Michael

Parish events, past and future

- Our **Ascension Day** service, and the shared curry that followed, was enjoyed by all who came. 'Enjoyment' is a proper word to use: the introduction to the liturgy for Pentecost says *Jesus Christ, whom we worship, is our crucified, risen and ascended Lord ... [in the fifty days of Easter] we have enjoyed his risen presence with us and his revelation of himself through the breaking of bread.*
- The first **Hot Potato Sunday** also went well, with a diverse group reflecting on the readings, and some topical issues, before sharing food. This will continue on the second Sunday of each month (so the next is on 9 June).
- We are still receiving a few **Christian Aid** envelopes, and will send them off shortly and announce the figure. Thanks to all who have contributed.
- **Musicians:** it has been good to welcome back Martin McPherson-Pottle, a former organist and flat resident, to play for us for three weeks, gladly making the journey from Oxford, where he is organist of the Dominican Priory, to renew old friendships. Elspeth will be with us during June, and then Robert Langston for a while, coming even further (on leave from the far east). Other global visitors continue to call, including Aubyn Marath from Oregon who always spends some time here on his travels.
- We are working on 'refreshing' our monthly **all-age eucharist**, with some special contributions due on 2 June - comments and reflections welcome.
- The **Tuesday Eucharist** continues, with occasional breaks when the Rector is away (such as on 24-26 June, at the Tower Hamlets clergy chapter residential conference at Ely).
- Since the date of **Orthodox Easter** was 5 May, the Coptic congregation that worships here some Saturdays is still in the great fifty days, so we send them Paschal greetings. (Cyprus has giant wayside Easter eggs bearing the legend *Kalo Pascha*).
- Network Wapping's application to establish a **Neighbourhood Planning Forum** has been much-discussed recently, and further consultations are taking place - ask the Rector for more details.

• Full details of our **parish trip to Bradwell** on 6 July - a mix of mini-pilgrimage and seaside trip! - will follow shortly; meanwhile, we are collecting names.

'This is an outstanding school...'

was the verdict of the recent OFSTED inspection of St Paul's, with this grade awarded in each of the four categories - achievement of pupils, quality of learning, behaviour and safety of pupils and leadership and management. Our congratulations to all the staff, pupils and governors on this long-awaited outcome - the result of much dedicated work. Please have a look here at the [full report](#).