

THE BIRMINGHAM POST

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

In January various technical problems prevented the appearance of the faith reflection for two weeks running. For this reason reflections for two months are collected together here.

January 5

Remembrance and celebration

A week before Christmas, the Church of St Alban the Martyr in Highgate played host, as it does every year, to the Christmas Service of Calthorpe Special School. The school is for children who are seriously disabled mentally or physically - and, in many cases, both.

The church was packed to overflowing with pupils, wheelchairs, carers, teachers and parents and echoed to the sound of shouts, whistles, bangs and clangs over piano and guitars. Carols and Christmas songs were belted out, though not always the same ones at the same time. What the student choir lacked in delicate musicianship its members made up for in gusto and pride in achievement.

The service was cleverly crafted to allow even the very disabled students to play a part, so there were many moving moments. None more so than when the festive clamour ceased (well, almost) for a few minutes and candles were brought up to remember by name pupils who had died during the year. Remember that this is a school which must live with the sad fact of early death.

This simple ceremony, suspended amid all the noise and jollity, ensured that Calthorpe's Christmas embraced even those who could no longer participate. It reminded us that Christmas should be a remembrance as well as a celebration and so added depth and perspective to a festival that, even in much Christian practice, favours surface flash and dazzle. Our school days may be over, but here's a lesson we have still to learn.

Stephen Wycherley is one of the few remaining second hand book sellers in Birmingham. He worships at St Alban's church and lives in Halesowen.

January 12

Divided We Fall

*A*s 2008 dawns, one naturally looks back at the past year and ahead to the future. Doing so has left me worried about the government's attempt to tackle extremism, the basis of terrorism

The Muslim community has almost exclusively been targeted. I am not Muslim; nevertheless, I am worried that Islam will only be the first port of call as the government contemplates how it can 'control' all faiths in their operation. The difficulties in getting to grips with Madrasas abroad meant the government adopted a wider approach at home by targeting the use of charity legislation and considering the possibility of developing new laws. Trying to dictate how faiths are run is a recipe for disaster. They operate on values common to us all, so much so that they form the basis of this nation's legislation. Why erode them, then?

Britain boasts a tradition of religious freedom that has been enshrined in law for centuries. Religious restriction will be enacted at the government's peril. If the issue is terrorism - then deal with the terrorists, not the faith that they hide behind.

All major faiths have peace and tolerance as their core values. Anyone operating outside of these principles is by definition not of that faith - no matter what they claim to the contrary. Their actions speak louder than their words. If you attack Islam then you attack me, its Christian friend. In this regard we are all one. United we stand and divided we fall.

Gerald Nembhard is a member of the Council of Black-Led Churches and last year was made Chair of Perry Barr Multifaith Network.

February 2

Gratitude

Talking to a friend this week, I found myself moaning about my huge workload and how busy life had become only a few weeks after the Christmas break. Having just read an article about the power of gratitude as an antidote to discontent, I had to pull myself up and reflect on the impact of gratitude – a tenet that threads through all faiths as well as many secular personal development programmes.

I am indeed grateful that I have a full working life and for the sense of purpose and self esteem this brings. Perhaps you are unemployed and looking for a way back into work? Or perhaps life is not as full and meaningful as you hoped? Let me share here the huge benefits of becoming a volunteer. I am not only grateful for my employment, but also for the varied life I lead in my spare time as a voluntary worker with local charities!

The first thing to note is that everyone has something they can offer. From acting as a dab hand in the kitchen at the lunch club for the elderly to turning you hand to developing a business plan - charities would really value your skills. I serve as a Trustee and in this role help to make sure organisations are governed and developed effectively. There is a real shortage of new recruits for these positions and I would urge anyone to find out more from websites like do-it.org.uk – it is hugely rewarding.

Jane Gallagher works part time as Development Manager for the West Midlands Faiths Forum and is a voluntary sector consultant of long standing. She worships at the Renewal Christian Centre in Solihull. In her spare time she is Co-Chair of HALOW (Birmingham) and a Charity Trustee of The Good Neighbour Centre and Sports Pursuits.

February 9

What's the use of just killing humanely?

*M*ahatma Ghandi said, 'We must become the change we want to see in the world'.

Having grown up with values from tradition, how often do we deeply reflect upon them? I ask myself this as I sit watching *Hugh's Chicken Run*. This is one of the many regurgitations of the animal welfare awareness campaign around us, depicting the unsavoury lifestyles of intensively farmed chickens. One despairs imagining how often we must witness these educational scenes before the world changes.

Perhaps there are many of us who are quite satisfied with our ethics, believing we are fulfilling our holy obligations, but how many of us truly look at the inner meanings of the do's and don'ts of our traditions? Perhaps if we did it would truly make a difference.

One of the notions behind consuming animals slaughtered in a Halal manner is that of animal welfare, which tries to prevent unnecessary suffering to the animal. However you may view the methods involved, is it sufficient to be satisfied with the actions required at the point of slaughter? Do the actions we perform on the animals before the slaughter exonerate us from responsibility for the way in which they are reared?

The spirit of this concern impels us to care for the pain which animals must suffer in order to serve for our nourishment. It is the 'spirit of the law' that would perhaps best be at the forefront of our minds, if our actions are indeed true to tradition.

Zahra Lakha belongs to the Ismaeli Muslim Congregation in Birmingham and is a supply teacher in Birmingham College's transeducation department.

February 16

Healthcare Chaplaincy

*I*n recent years the NHS has encouraged all the major world faiths to play a more active part in the Chaplaincy Services in hospitals. Staff benefit from their support and guidance; patients and their relatives are relieved to meet a friendly face as volunteers from different faiths are on the wards and in the multi-faith chapels there. This contact can be extremely helpful and comforting. In times of illness or approaching death, to be able to talk to someone can help put things in perspective and address some of the questions, and indeed worries, that inevitably spring to mind in circumstances requiring short or long hospital stays.

One faith attempting to make a real go of this in Birmingham is Buddhism, with individuals serving as chaplains in the multi-faith teams at both Queen Elizabeth Hospital and Birmingham Women's Hospital. The opportunity to visit patients has helped Buddhists develop training programmes and a whole spectrum of competencies that it would want its volunteers to display. Many Buddhists in the UK actively pursue meditation; simple practices of working with difficulties and seeking peaceful outcomes can have a great impact when health and even life itself become a real struggle.

Looking ahead, the NHS is hopeful that within the next few years many more trained volunteers from all the faiths will be able to add to this richness as Hindus, Jains, Muslims and Sikhs too work to take up this challenge. If you're interested, try contacting the Chaplaincy Department at your local hospital now.

Keith Munnings is Chair of the West Midlands Buddhist Council and works as an educational consultant. Nationally he is Chair of the Buddhist Healthcare Chaplaincy Group.

February 23

Wearing the Hijab

I did not immediately wear the hijab on becoming a Muslim three years ago. For many weeks I tried it out in my bedroom but went no further. Then I began to wear it with friends, then at weekends. Eventually, I was confident enough to wear it travelling to work, but would take it off at the door, worried how colleagues would react to it. I was even more worried about what my family's reaction would be.

After several months, I had embraced wearing it completely, faced my fears and turned up at work and at my parents' house in it, happily surprised to find that I was still fully accepted as the person I had always been. There has been the odd encounter with difficult people who have not been fully welcoming of my hijab, but these are few and far between. In general, I am more relaxed now I wear it than I was before.

After the terrible tragedy of the 7/7 bombings, there was some public backlash and I did feel uncomfortable for a while, but this soon settled down. For several months last year, also, whilst struggling to find a new job and after several bad experiences at interview, I did consider taking it off for work purposes. It is a difficult dilemma at times whether to wear such a visible sign of one's faith, but I have been strengthened in my conviction by the general positive response and acceptance in the city.

Manchester-born Rachel Ginnelly came to live in Birmingham three years ago and is Senior Policy Officer at the rebranded Strategic Partnership, now Be Birmingham.

