

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

5 April

A Place of Worship



He was sweating when he brought it in. His homework was part of a project “where people worship”, and the task was to make a model church in a shoe box.

It’s a good way of learning - not only is it fun but it is learning by doing. Pupils manage to get the altar in the right place and do not put the font on top of the pews. We expect them to understand what the different parts are for and hopefully they get a better understanding of why places of worship exist.

So when he came in proudly carrying his homework, we couldn’t help but notice that it was hardly shoe box size. It was when he took the plastic bag off that we saw he had made a model of his local park complete with swings, a brook with a bridge, a football goalpost and a couple of benches. Poor lad – perhaps he hadn’t fully understood. He did have trouble with reading and writing – in fact his written explanation was quite short.

It said, “This is the park where I go to be quiet and think about God and my dad.”

Recalling that this pupil had come to Secondary school having lost his father in the final year of Junior school, his teacher also realised that this homework was exactly right – he’d got a pretty clear view of what a place of worship should be about.

The model has pride of place in my classroom today.

The Revd Sior Coleman is Chaplain and Head of RE at Baverstock school and presents the early Sunday Breakfast show on BBC Radio WM.



12 April

All Are Welcome



work in Wolverhampton, a city hardly renowned for its tourism. Some years ago, however, a book bearing the title *The Spiritual Tourist* appeared in which its author, Mick Brown, embarked on a world tour to discover our globe's varieties of religion.

Most of them are actually within striking distance of Birmingham and Wolverhampton and, as a lecturer in Religious Studies, this is one of the delights of living in the Midlands. Our students quickly learn not to rely on textbook information, but to visit religious communities and discover what they really do in practice.

Religious communities seldom read the contents of university libraries, and academics often confine themselves to philosophies, theologies and scriptures, with which rank-and-file believers are unfamiliar. Recently our students visited the Buddhist Pagoda at Edgbaston. Although meditation is taught there, it was refreshing to hear that most Buddhists do not meditate and that it is quite acceptable to make offerings for good health, a long life or even a compatible future spouse.

I think we tend to undervalue these 'lesser' goals. My own faith, Christianity, officially aims at the kingdom of God (whatever we mean by that), but vicars can be asked to anoint the sick, bless St Christopher medals or offer personal counselling. Religions have many dimensions. A notice on the door saying 'All are welcome' does not signal a desire for increasing numbers but a concern for the different needs and expectations of the seekers who come visiting.

Dr George Chryssides is Head of Religious Studies at the University of Wolverhampton. He attends St Michael the Archangel, Rushall, Walsall, where he is Director of Music.



19 April

An Acceptable Contribution



I am sure that many, if not all, of you regularly receive in the post, or via other media, appeals from various charities for financial support. Some do not contribute as they feel they do not have the money - but does a contribution always have to be a financial one? Is there not more than one way to help out?

The Jewish people are about to celebrate the festival of Pesach – Passover and we have a custom which dates back almost two thousand years that, prior to the festival, we make an appeal for funds to help purchase provisions for the festival which are distributed to the needy. It is the only one before which this happens.

This teaches us all a lesson in charitable giving and in sensitivity to others.

Pesach is a family occasion with each celebrating according to its individual custom; therefore prior to Pesach we make this type of appeal to enable families to celebrate in their own homes. Prior to other festivals we invite these same people to our homes as guests and provide for them in this way or give them a hand preparing for it.

When we hear or see an appeal we automatically think of money and if we feel we cannot afford it, we switch off. Sometimes time and physical assistance is worth just as much to others as money.

Rabbi Shlomo Odze leads the congregation at Birmingham Central Synagogue. Originally from London, he arrived in the city in 2005, having started young in the rabbinate at the age of nineteen. He is married with two daughters and describes himself as 'a sports fanatic'.



26 April

Crime Prevention



IN the struggle to have a more humanistic response to current penal issues, it is clear that imprisonment is not working well in the fight against re-offending, nor is it effective in preventing crime. Education, counselling, drug and alcohol treatment is already available yet each year there is still an increase in crime.

What else can we do? Build more prisons? Offer more treatment programmes? Educate the whole prison population? Magnus Ratter said, “Education does not necessarily make good men.” When you take a look at the prison population, or even those who attend court but never make it there, you see an increase in highly educated individuals committing serious offences. And what about those in high positions who make wrong (and debatably criminal) choices which affect many lives; should we hate them as we are taught to hate offenders?

Our current treatments are only implemented after a person commits a crime. What about preventing the crime? We need to affect our society from birth onwards with positive, loving role models. Our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, our teachers, our ministers, our actors, our media, and our pop artists all need to be a good influence. Rewarding negative behaviour with consistent publicity, where the wrongdoer gains more fame and thus money, does nothing to aid the reforms needed to stop the cycle of wrongdoing. If we are to achieve human unity, we need to love what is worthy of love, not reward the ones whose behaviour we hate.

Winnie Gordon works as a Lecturer in Numeracy and Literacy at Matthew Boulton College and is a member of the Unitarian New Meeting where she co-ordinates the Sunday School, Hall Lettings, and Building Maintenance. In the past she worked in the U.S. prison system.

