

Birmingham City Centre Retail Chaplaincy Report on 2013

It's been an exciting year! The city has been under construction for what feels like an eternity, but it's beginning to feel like the end is in sight. All this construction has been a nightmare for retailers as it has huge impact on retail outlets and footfall.

The German Markets seem like a distant memory and plans are on the way for Christmas 2014. We are hoping to set up chaplaincy to the German Markets for Christmas 2014.

The Chaplaincy seems to be undergoing its own construction and there seems to be new interest which is affirming and encouraging. The Bullring celebrated its 10th anniversary and seems to be growing from strength to strength but it has gone through its own difficulties: the economic climate has affected the entire retail sector. The Bullring has not been exempt from store closures and empty outlets and even though they are few, they are an indication of the current situation and are cause for concern.

The Pallasades is now a long narrow corridor connection to New Street Station and as I walk through I can't help remembering all the retailers, past conversations and past relationships: a time of joy and one of loss. I'm reminded of Graham Wigley (chaplain to Kings Heath High Street) expressing the sense of bereavement that chaplains experience when stores close or retailers move on. I feel a sense of loss as I walk through the Pallasades narrow long corridor.

But I'm looking forward to all the new relationships with the staff of John Lewis and the other new stores which will be opening soon—a challenge, but very exciting!

I am delighted to be able to welcome two new volunteer chaplains to the team, each with very different skills and giftings: Alan Hemus will support those who work and shop in the Indoor Markets and Joan Byrne will be offering Chaplaincy services to the Bullring Shopping Centre. Please pray for them in their new roles.

I would like to end by thanking the amazing team of volunteers for their continued commitment to the retail chaplaincy and without them; none of this wonderful ministry of Chaplaincy would be possible.

Elaine Hutchinson, Team Leader

Great Western Arcade

Over the past year my Monday morning visits have seen frequent changes; some staff I knew well have moved on, and outlets closed, some at short notice. I still wonder what has happened to the staff. These events underline the fragile situation of retailers, and the uncertainties staff face on a daily basis.

However, pleasingly some empty outlets re-opened, and there were new people to meet. Most were very welcoming, and surprised when I explained that (if they were not serving customers) I would come in as a be.friend volunteer, to see how they were and offer support, if and when they needed it.

Two years on I am still learning, occasionally dealing with unexpected questions and situations. I feel particularly privileged to be able to offer to pray at home for those with problems.

It has been encouraging to meet other chaplains, at CIGB meetings and events at Hall Green, Solihull and Longbridge. Retail chaplaincy relies on ongoing prayer support and encouragement, which I have been well blessed with, from our be.friend team, CIGB staff, my family and church fellowship.

Peggy Baker, Chaplain

Bullring Shopping Centre

I am delighted to be part of the City Centre Retail Team and have been offering retail chaplaincy to those who use the Bullring Shopping Centre since July 2013.

I am getting to know the people in the shops and they are getting to know me. I visit around 26 shops regularly. Sometimes they are busy so there's no time to talk; but of late there has been time to have a good chat with some of the staff. I know I am working for the Lord as He is always with me when I go into the shops. I know that He has gone in before me and has prepared the people. I feel really blessed to be serving the Lord in this way and I am enjoying it very much.

Joan Byrne, Chaplain

Open-Air Markets

I visit the City Centre Open Air Market most Tuesdays. The main part of the Market lies alongside the Rag Market Building: with two sections dealing with materials and household items, and alongside the fruit and vegetable stalls. Other stalls including baby clothes and toys continue past the Rag building and between the Rag and Meat/Fish buildings. I stroll through these areas wearing my yellow jacket with "Market Chaplain" on the back.

The stall holders know who I am, some ignore me although they may respond to a cheery greeting, but most acknowledge my presence and a surprising number ask when will I be back with these nice mince pies which we give them each Christmas! A good number are pleased to see me and a gratifying number are Christians, most being involved in an Evangelical church. Sometimes we discuss what was in the sermon on the previous Sunday. There are many Muslims and a few Hindus among the stall holders and most are happy to see and chat to me. Sometimes they discuss worries about the future.

Although the Market has existed for around 800 years and is a major bit of Birmingham's heritage, it is under threat, since the City Council finds that the cost of keeping everything in good condition is too high at a time when "cut, cut, cut," is demanded by Central Government. Many older traders will simply retire if the Market has to close but some younger traders are proudly the umpteenth generation of their family with a stall, and their future is uncertain.

I was surprised when I was first spoken to by some of the customers. A few mistake me for a Council official and complain about local services, while to others I am a source of help when they are seeking a particular road or building. Until recently a good city centre map existed at an adjacent bus stop but now there's a new shelter and no map – progress I suppose!

I am asked about topical matters such as "Do I believe that women can be Bishops?", "How can we attract teenagers to the church?", "Do I believe in the virgin birth?". Sometimes these result in a lively discussion! Occasionally I meet someone who is distressed about a personal matter and I can take them to adjacent St Martin's church where we can find a quiet spot.

There are some lively moments too ... Last year a gang dispute resulted in shots being fired right across the stalls but thankfully nobody was hit. In mid-February the Market was invaded by a large number of police and seven apparently illegal immigrants were arrested in a dramatic episode that left many people quite shocked – all a little piece of everyday life in the Market!

I think I can honestly conclude that "All human life is there!"

Iain Frew, Chaplain

Rag Market

I continue to visit on a regular basis and in many ways not much has changed on the surface but there are more concerns about the long term future. Issues relating to the probable move of the wholesale market; and where or when it might go continue to be a cloud over all proceedings, with little hard information from anywhere.

Sales levels have continued to be poor throughout the year and the hoped-for extra Christmas sales were almost non-existent, despite a milder snow-free December. To make matters more difficult, the markets' manager moved on in the early part of the year – the third change in as many years – and has not been replaced. Two council managers from other departments appear to have been told to oversee market operations on a part-time basis, even though they have no knowledge or expertise of such matters. I do sympathise with the City Council who are in great difficulties due to the financial cutbacks from central government.

Sadly, no liaison meetings between the council managers and traders' representatives have been held since late summer so it is very difficult for all concerned to know what is going on.

Having said that, I continue to develop relationships with many of the traders, so apart from the background hassle I enjoy my visits which are often interspersed with interesting conversations with people of various faiths about current issues and the occasional joke or humorous story from some traders.

There is always a strong community spirit amongst the older traders, which is good to feel part of! Unfortunately many of the new traders

who appear on empty stalls do not last very long – it may look from the outside that good money can be made, but when you take into account

the rent, cost of stock, transport etc., there are few that make a good living these days.

There continue to be a number of traders who share concerns about family and health issues and they are always thankful to have someone to talk to – and the offer of bringing them to prayers at Carrs Lane are never refused. The spiced apple punch and mince pies which were distributed at Christmas were very much appreciated again, but they would prefer to have them on a monthly basis!

Andrew Veitch, Chaplain