

## CASE STUDY 1

# Cemetery Road Baptist Church, Sheffield

### Introduction

We are on a journey to be a healthy city serving, multi-ethnic church, to truly be a house of prayer for all nations. About two dozen nationalities are represented, with large numbers especially from Jamaica, Congo and Iran. We have been exploring, in study groups and away days, the importance of cross-cultural engagement and competence, empowering diversity in leadership, and a common identity in Christ. There are tensions, particularly over ethical cultural understandings, but we seek to be intentional in accommodating a love for all people.

### History

Just on the edge of Sheffield City centre, for many years Cemetery Road Baptist Church (CRB) was the premier Baptist congregation in the area, planting most other Baptists churches locally. It had a largely gathered congregation. Since early in the last century CRB has had Jamaican links and, post-war, saw the growth of the West Indies Fellowship, in the main from Jamaica. The warm welcome given to immigrants was in stark contrast to the experience of other churches. Subsequently there have been small pockets of members from other nations and backgrounds attending. Ten years ago, the church was invited to host Baptist refugees from the Karen community in Burma; they now have their own church (although a strong link remains). The church has always celebrated its multi-racial identity. We have a good proportion of mixed-race marriages.

### Change

During a period of ministerial interregnum, the church conducted a SWOT analysis which enthused many and has led to an increase in size and task. There are many outcomes still to follow up, but as the building and congregation is renewed, so the missional purpose has been strengthened. A Congolese prayer meeting started that has grown into a fellowship of good size, including many refugees from Burundi. Just following that, we began to receive people from Iran who were, in the main, asylum seekers. That fellowship now includes many from other middle eastern nations. Universally, people have felt welcomed and encouraged by the church. The church now has increasingly more people involved within walking distance, although some do travel from a distance of 30 miles to attend. As a church, we have been looking at what it really means to be a healthy multi-ethnic congregation, and not only be a place of welcome, but a place where those joining can find significant purpose. The journey is not easy - there are occasional tensions and prejudices that surface. We are working at bringing people into membership and leadership from the fringe so as to represent more fully our racial diversity, and provide a broader perspective on being Baptist.



### Leadership Team

The Lead Minister is a stereotypical white British male, but has tried to widen the experience of leadership for the congregation by, within the past two years, having a woman minister in training, a Ghanaian minister in training, a Farsi project worker, and an increased diversity at the front in the services. The diaconate has for many years included those from Jamaica or children of Jamaicans, and that too is widening. Challenges of broadening the leadership demographic emerge, but there is a keenness for that to happen. Deacons' away days and breakfasts are important to explore issues of being a multi-ethnic church.

### Worshipping together

The style of Sunday worship is recognisably British Baptist. The children are included in the first half before going to classes. Farsi speakers will attend their *Alpha* course at this point too. We have elements of worship from other cultures, but for multi-ethnic church to work, there is a need to be fairly mono-cultural in our worship. We are conscious of tokenism, but occasional music and material from the world church is appreciated, especially our Congolese choir. The Congolese and Farsi speakers have a separate time in the week for worship and teaching - although many will struggle through an English spoken service happily. Up to two dozen different languages are spoken within the church, so interpreting cannot easily be personalised. We have a large number of baptisms now, and interpreters are used for that, and testimonies.

### Church meetings

Church meetings rarely reflect the make-up of the church. Language accessibility is an issue. Power dynamics are most at play in this forum. We have tried to do things a bit differently, such as meeting over Sunday lunch, but it has not really worked so far. The meeting is conscious of its responsibility to represent a diverse church in decisions that are reached. More members are being added from other cultures, as people want to be included more into the life of the church.

## Children and Youth

The Junior Church is quite diverse and welcoming and good work happens. However, because of the geographical spread of the congregation, mid-week activity is difficult. We are in the process of looking for a pastor to work with young people and families, who can encourage integration. The fifth Sunday of a month is an all-age service. Projects and holiday activities, such as *The Quilt of many colours*, seek to enhance an appreciation of diversity and connectedness.

## Outreach

The church serves the local community and God, by caring for the least, by having a coffee morning in the flats opposite, a Luncheon Club, Soup Run, supporting Street Pastors, and other such activities. We are aware of issues of justice, highlighted through hosting the Sam Sharpe lecture, and an event to mark the Gutumba massacre of many Congolese refugees in Burundi in 2004. That event directly impacted many of our members, and war crimes justice is being sought. Many of our asylum seekers and refugees (we have had about 200 in the last couple of years), have trauma and evidence of torture, which add to the pastoral workload. The lead minister finds himself attending asylum hearings on average once every three weeks. The increase in asylum seekers has challenged the church, but also blessed. Over 100 baptisms have taken place in the last 18 months. Most weeks we will have converts - especially former Muslims drawn by the love of Christ and his church. This has normalised baptism, so many longstanding church attendees are now enquiring about baptism. Recently, four of us travelled to Poland to baptise a couple of Polish converts who had returned and are involved in a Baptist church back home.

## Language

Basic level English classes are offered at different levels, a couple of times a week. These do enable bridges to be built and relationships to form. Recently a training day was offered on Sign Language for the Deaf.

## Food

Good fellowship centres around food. At gatherings, a bring and share culture is encouraged and appreciated by most. We have various groups and organisations using the main kitchen in the week, and issues do arise at times. We had a Jamaican evening recently, and a Congolese one is next - to share food and stories.

## Highlights

This year's Church Weekend away highlighted the positive intention to celebrate multi-ethnic church. It is certainly not an easy option, but we have theological concerns with the homogenous unit principle that has dominated church growth studies in recent times. We seek to serve God and do church better by looking to bless the city, bring the least to Christ, and encourage and fulfil the Great Commission.

[www.crbchurch.org.uk](http://www.crbchurch.org.uk)