

CASE STUDY 3

Erdington Six Ways Baptist Church, Birmingham

Introduction and History

For most of the 20th century we were a church for 'well-to-do' white people. Erdington has changed and we have too. We are situated on the High Street in North Birmingham. Our city began as a village and became the mighty industrial place it is because of migration, from across Britain and from across the world. Erdington reflects this and our church, rooted in this community, has always followed on. In the past ten years our membership has grown, our age demographic has lowered and our cultural diversity has widened.

Change

For many years Six Ways has been an outward-looking and open-edged church. There has been and continues to be prejudice, and the power dynamics still need to change. But we have made headway and, having had seasons when things need to be shaken up, we are now in a time when we are church together in a natural way - but still needing to be intentional about what we do. It is nice to be multicultural at a certain level: sharing food, learning about each other, singing different songs, being pleased to be worshipping and fellowshiping together. It is a more challenging thing completely to move to a level that is both higher and deeper, where the decision-making and direction of the church is concerned, where those who are ultimately in charge truly reflect the diverse group who are the Body of Christ. The change is good and the change is continual. Sometimes it can be exhausting but it is also beautiful!

Leadership Team

I am a white British male, but in Baptist understanding we are a Black-led church insofar as our membership is predominantly 'non-white'. Our diaconate reflects this and has done for many years now. The majority of the members are not blind to the importance of diversity being reflected in those appointed to serve and to lead. Over the past two years we have also had a black British woman as Associate Minister. An important aspect of leadership has also been about modelling a way of being that is inclusive, and welcoming and that celebrates diversity. These values and the importance of challenging racial (and other) injustice run through all areas of church life and we have tried to give them prominence in all areas.

Worshipping Together

In our services we seek on every occasion to involve different people from different cultural, racial and generational backgrounds. As far as possible we look to achieve a mix of styles reflecting different backgrounds. There is still much much more that we can do, but we have at least achieved a point where the people of the church buy into the idea that we are all one, but different - where there are no favourites and no outsiders. Occasionally we have services and/or parts of services led by a group from a particular culture. Seeing previously oppressed and overlooked people leading, even just a prayer or in song, can be such a transformative moment! Each of these moments is playing a part in shifting the balance of power within our church. We have for many years now celebrated Black History Month, and this has helped us learn together and live side by side with better understanding. It has also played its part in changing some power dynamics.



Church Meetings

We try to make our church meetings as accessible as possible. We have few people where not speaking/understanding English is a barrier, but there are differing experiences and expectations of how meetings should be conducted. Therefore, we seek to combine formal and informal and create spaces within meetings where people can contribute in different ways. Also, we have found that many of our members who are most recently arrived in the UK and who are able to work are more likely to have to work long and sometimes inconvenient hours; therefore, in order to involve such people we have every other meeting on a Sunday after the service.

Children, Youth and Outreach

We do not have specific multi-cultural outreach but try to make sure that all that we do is open and accessible and remind people involved in activities and throughout the church to be culturally sensitive and thoroughly welcoming. We do, however, offer free ESOL lessons on Monday mornings, and these are accessed by a wide range of people from our community and there has been some crossover with our core church.

Language

Whilst our services are lead in English, from time to time we have readings and prayers in different languages from within our church community. A popular activity is to have a roving-mike opportunity for people to share a relevant phrase: for example, welcome/thank you Jesus.

Food

Over the past five years or so we have got in the habit of having bring and share lunches called 'Around the World in Eighty Dishes'. We have, on average, four per year. Individuals are encouraged to bring a favourite dish reflecting their culture. These occasions have been barrier-busters encouraging insights into others' cuisine and wider culture, recognition of previously under-valued individuals and cultures and simply meaning that we eat together over food!

Highlights

It is a matter of great joy for people in our church that we like being a multi-cultural church. We see that as being who we are. This in itself seems very important as we move forward together.