



A Journey of Faith

by Geoffrey Smith

Geoffrey Smith, now National Director of Toc H, was until recently a Residentiary Canon of Bradford Cathedral and Project Champion of The National Millennium Faith Experience.

In June 2000 the National Millennium Faith Experience will open at Bradford Cathedral. Housed in a former post office with a bridge over to the cathedral, this multi-million pound project represents a real journey of faith, writes Geoffrey Smith.

Like all journeys, as we have arrived at an ending with the turn of the century and the opening of the National Millennium Faith Experience (NMFE), we find that we have arrived at a new beginning. So what of that journey and where has it taken us?

NMFE at Bradford Cathedral is a project that is principally funded by the Millennium Commission with support from other key funders. Built in a former post office, it will comprise a local authority training facility, a restaurant, shops and a visitor attraction with three galleries (of which more later).

A 1995 report into the life and governance of the cathedrals of the Church of England aimed to effect considerable change. In its critical appraisal of Anglican cathedral life it has helped

cathedrals to see themselves more clearly and identify what belongs to their mission.

Hidden away in the statistics in the appendices of the report was the revealing fact that Bradford was at the bottom of the league table as far as visitor numbers were concerned.

The Cathedral's Education and Development Officer, Caroline Moore has over the years nurtured a dream that it might one day prove possible to develop a centre where the city could interpret itself and its history in relation to some of the themes which are emerging in the new realities of contemporary life. This vision she had tentatively entitled "The Observatory of Bradford Life", a reference to Abraham Sharp, the eighteenth-century astronomer who lived in Horton Hall, Bradford.

We reasoned that if we could attract more visitors to the Cathedral, we would be advancing our mission as a place of pilgrimage, and helping people discover their own spiritual realities as they eavesdropped on the ongoing life of an urban cathedral. More practically, we could also address the need for a third income stream alongside congregational giving and our Church Commissioners Section 31 grant.

More visitors would allow us to develop the educational and interpretive role of the cathedral. We define this as presenting Jesus in and to a city where cultures collide, diverse faiths are practised and poverty in all its manifestations is to be seen etched deeply into people's faces.

The sale of the former post office sited at the foot of the cathedral hill offered an ideal opportunity. A magnificent Grade II listed building, it is rumoured that it was built expressly to obscure the view of the cathedral from the city centre!

In 1996, with the support of colleagues, I began to make enquiries about whether the cathedral could acquire the building for our own purposes. So the journey began.

From start to finish this has been a journey of faith, and whilst the money has been raised and the concrete poured, a number of theological questions have arisen.

Money

The first concerns money. At an early stage a member of the congregation took a very strong stand about the fact that the money we were spending was lottery money. In fact, he felt that he could no longer worship at the cathedral because he saw the use of proceeds from the lottery as inappropriate for a religious organisation.

My view is that money is ethically neutral and only finds moral value when it is spent. Applying lottery money to the purposes for which we had in mind meant that there would be a moral "good".

The benefits are considerable. We have contributed to the regeneration of the city centre in a very positive way. We have created jobs and training opportunities. We have supported local businesses, and, in the end product, we have made a bold and inspiring statement that both arises out of and speaks to our postmodern environment. We have left our "statement" much as the Victorians left theirs.

Secondly, multi-faith Bradford reminds us that religion plays a central role in social, political and economic events, as well as in the lives of individuals and communities. People need opportunities to reflect upon and understand religious traditions, issues, questions and values (sometimes characterised as the search for ultimate meaning or the answer to spiritual questions). NMFE will offer such an opportunity.

Thirdly, the "spiritual" is almost always engaged through the concrete and practical. In this way, ordinary, everyday materials, events and experiences become the basis for spiritual enrichment. As an example, holy communion, which lies at the heart of the Christian Church's spirituality, is an activity, involving the taking, blessing, breaking and sharing of bread and wine. Through this activity the presence of Jesus Christ is realised in the life of the Christian community. Within the visitor attraction, examples of other faith communities actualising their beliefs will be presented.

Mission

When I first arrived in Bradford, each time I left the cathedral I was greeted by a large billboard poster that exhorted me to read the Koran, "The Final Revelation".

Bradford is a large, ethnically and culturally diverse city. Under the leadership of Bishop David, the Anglican Church has built excellent relationships with the community leaders. With the help of our Interfaith Adviser, a meeting was arranged for the various communities to hear

about our plans and to visit the proposed site.

The original design concept proposed by Past Forward, designers of York's Jorvik Viking Centre, began with the historic journey from the planting of the preaching cross by the broad-ford (Bradford) to late twentieth century multi-faith Bradford.

Debate about this proposal resulted in two quite clear principles being established with the agreement of the faith leaders represented at this first meeting.

Firstly, that each faith would be robustly presented in a form which acknowledged and respected the integrity of all faiths. Secondly, that we would seek to avoid a presentation that caused Christian visitors to ask "Is this how my story ends?" and for other faith visitors to wonder "What happened to the rest of my story?"

At the heart of the attraction in a central gallery, building on Caroline Moore's Observatory idea, visitors will meet significant figures from Bradford's past who have made their contributions to literature, art, music, science, commerce and social reform on a national or international stage.

On either side of this gallery will be two further galleries; one concerned with faith and the other, Digital City, with allowing contemporary visitors to record their contributions to a developing archive. This living history book will record the social archaeology of the twenty-first century. The three galleries of NMFE will provide insights into three key areas where the life of faith communities has enriched the life of the wider community.

At the end of the first millennium Wulfstan, Archbishop of York suggested that the significant spiritual question for his contemporaries was one of identity: "Who am I?"

Fundamental fundamentalism

The design of the exhibition has been fraught with the implicit question about what represents the fundamental spiritual question for a society on the cusp of a new millennium.

Who am I? Where am I from? What will become of me? These are real questions for people as postmodernism casts doubt on the value of the meta-narrative. It is in response to this agenda that the three galleries which make up the National Millennium Faith Experience will explore:

- aspects of faith, in the context of Bradford as an international city, leading to the question of identity: who am I?
- the triumph of social imagination through the achievements of individuals as they are related to significant social developments, leading to the question: what is my history?
- the contemporary fascination with religions as myths of origin and personal significance. Visitors will be invited to make their millennium mark, and, as their stories are collated and archived they will be seen as part of the ongoing “story of faith”, leading to the question of ultimate value: what will become of me?

As part of the superb design solution for the project, a bridge was built to span the chasm between the cathedral and the developing NMFE centre. Crossing that bridge for the first time, I felt that the journey was truly well under way. We are near the end; the beginning of the journey is in sight... 