

Christ Church from Brick Lane, looking towards the City

Hope in the heart of Banglatown

Matt Vaughan on one church's response to the world on their doorstep

Walking from Liverpool Street station towards Brick Lane is an odd experience.

The wealth and prosperity that characterise the area around the station bear witness to the fact that London is the newly crowned financial capital of the world. Elegant, modern office buildings, surrounded by the jostling swarms of busily rushing commuters that populate their numerous floors, speak of the massive amounts of material wealth that change hands every day. Sharply-suited businessmen and women dash to and fro in the shadows of the vast office blocks, chatting into their mobiles or fiddling with their Blackberries as if the world were about to end.

Yet a few streets away from this orgy of capitalism and pinstriped oneupmanship is Brick Lane, one of the biggest Bangladeshi communities in London. Veiled Muslim women walk past the curry houses that have made the street famous; men in flowing kurta robes chat on street corners; even the street names are translated into Bengali. A few hundred metres are all that separate Brick Lane from the City, yet it may as well be a few hundred miles, since the two communities carry on as if totally oblivious of each other's existence. Booming business and stark ethnic segregation: these are two of the faces of modern Britain.

Standing directly between these two communities rises the tall white tower of Christ Church Spitalfields, one of Urban Vision's partner churches. This beautiful old church backs directly onto Brick Lane. It therefore finds itself in the challenging, but increasingly





common, position of being the main Christian building in an area the majority of whose inhabitants are Muslims. Christ Church's mission statement is to 'grow the church and bless the community'. They see their location at the gateway where the city and the East End meet as both "an honour and a responsibility" in the words of vicar Andy Rider, who goes on to state that "for most of us here at Christ Church we would want to be nowhere else on earth, doing nothing other than 'growing the church and blessing the community' in this very special and God-loved corner of London".

The challenges presented by the existence of several million Muslims in Britain seems to have thrown some British Christians into paroxysms of confusion: how do we demonstrate God's love and grace to all his children, irrespective of their religious allegiance, whilst at the same time remaining aware of the important – well, crucial – differences between Christianity and Islam? This complex balancing act has, regrettably, driven some Christians towards fear and insularity rather than towards love and grace. Fuelled by crude, tabloid-style generalisations about suicide bombers and Muslim veils, some supposedly reputable Christian leaders have produced literature on Islam that is more reminiscent of BNP election manifestos or Daily Mail opinion columns than it is of the kind of love exemplified by the God they profess to follow. Thankfully, not all Christians have followed this route, and many seek to respond to Muslims with practical acts of love instead of strident rhetoric and crude stereotyping. The worshippers at Christ Church Spitalfields, assisted by training from Urban Vision's Steve Bell, are a good example.

The holiday clubs they have run for the past eight years are typical of the kind of outreach they organise. This year, for example, the club was based around the theme of pirates and children who attended were invited to make name badges, paint a banner for their particular team, and take part in games. One of these games consisted of each team member rushing forward and popping a balloon containing a word, and when all the balloons had been popped they had to rearrange all the words to form Philippians 1:3 ("I thank my God every time I remember you"). The sight of forty mostly Muslim children squealing with delight as they rushed back and forth popping balloons and puzzling over a Bible verse was exciting: so many barriers – of culture, of language, of fear – separate Muslims from Christians that the sight of even a small bridge being built across the divide was reassuring. After the games were finished and the points had been counted up, the children sat and listening to a Bible story told by Andy Rider. Watching Muslim children listen attentively to the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus was even more encouraging, especially as several of their parents stood at the back and listened as well. That evening, in order to include the children who were too old for the holiday club, a football match was held in a nextdoor park. Two separate matches were held in order to accommodate all the children who turned up and the resulting contests were keenly fought, with members of Christ Church taking part on both sides.

Even though the whole week was a great success, there were plenty of reminders of the difficulties that tend to accompany such work. The

marquee in which the holiday club took place had scorch marks from where someone had tried to burn it down the night before, and while the team were praying before the club began a lit cigarette lighter was thrown onto the roof, followed soon after by a beer bottle. I would argue that the opposition encountered in the course of this type of outreach demonstrates its importance: at least spiritual oppression indicates that the work is worth oppressing, and therefore worth doing.

The reality remains, of course, that outreach like this is able to reach only a tiny proportion of the Muslims in Tower Hamlets. The gap between Liverpool Street and Brick Lane is physically small and yet, thanks to decades of misunderstanding, racism, and British insularity, culturally vast: the secularised culture of modern Britain is as repugnant to Muslims as it ought to be to Christians. The task before us seems insurmountable. It is also true, however, that every long journey has to start somewhere. Perhaps some of the spiritual seeds scattered during the week will lodge in fertile ground and start to sprout, and the gap between the two cultures of Spitalfields will be that much less stark. ■

For more information on how to get involved in the work of Christ Church Spitalfields – perhaps as part of a summer team, or as an On Tracker – go to **www.ccspsitalfields.org**

For more information on the work of Urban Vision, go to **www.interserveonline.org.uk/urbanvision**