

## The Real Christmas

The Chief Executive of the Liverpool Business Improvement District (BID) approached the city centre 'hub' of ministers for ideas and help in bringing the 'real' meaning of Christmas to shoppers and visitors.

A discussion re how we might best meet this challenge took place with staff of the BID, city centre chaplains and other ministers operating in and around the city centre.

### Planning meetings

Initial ideas were wide-ranging:

A stall giving away 'blessings' – booklets/shells/stones/plants symbolising the free gift of God's love, counter-cultural to the usual consumerist Christmas.

A celebration of the Winter solstice with a 'real' St Nicholas, as the last day of the project would be 21<sup>st</sup> December.

There was a bookable bandstand/performance space in the centre of the retail area. We discussed the possibility of encouraging carol singers/choirs to perform there and near our stall too.

'*In Another Place*' a Christian theatre company known to have giant nativity puppets was approached and were keen to be involved.

More practical details were covered – costs/sponsors/programme/printing etc. and the need to investigate what other plans were already in place for the Christmas festivities. The BID's remit was community engagement and the message they wanted to relay was that Liverpool is the safest, friendliest city for families to visit in the UK. Addressing Health and Safety issues such as aggressive begging, security around the huge Christmas tree, the martialling of crowds during performances/parades were of paramount importance.

Agreement was reached to call the project 'The Real Christmas'. There would be a nativity trail using shop windows. The trail would lead around the city centre and ultimately back to a nativity crib. The stall would be the distribution point for leaflets giving a map of the trail/clues/reference to the real story of Christmas/information about Local Christmas services etc. 'Real Christmas' stickers would be given to children to encourage participation. The necessity for craft workshops to produce free gifts/symbols of Christmas was discussed. A list was drawn up of likely partners for the project and possible choirs or performers. *In Another Place* would construct the installations for shop windows and produce a nativity parade and performance of the nativity story, using their giant puppets and their gospel choir, on the last day of the Christmas Market. Their graphic designer would produce the necessary flyer. The BID agreed to fund the design and printing of these.

At a later meeting the BID offered to fund the project up to the cost of £2000.

We decided, knowing the warm generosity of people in Liverpool, to utilize the stall as a drop off point for the nearest food bank collection point. Recent publicity had raised awareness of the growing need for donations and there was great sympathy with the predicament of those who could not afford to feed themselves at this supposedly festive time of year.

### Nativity Crib

The national company which operates and manages the local, and Christmas, street markets offered a set of nativity figures for our use. They were of German origin, wooden, hand-carved and almost life-size. As one passer-by commented, they were 'medieval' in



appearance. To the mortification of several children, there was neither donkey nor any angels.

The figures attracted attention as soon as they appeared on the scene. They were initially stored overnight on the veranda of a nearby chalet bar, 'Rudolph's Rest', suppliers of the popular Gluwein to punters at the Christmas market. Several families took advantage of the photo opportunity even before the figures were in their intended crib position. A pagoda style, wooden shelter –open on four sides for easy viewing –was constructed by the Market Management Company. They also provided lighting, greenery and bales of hay for decoration. The latter served as convenient seating for the many people of all ages who felt compelled to have their photo taken with the Holy Family.

Several members of the public rejoiced that their voices had been heard after protesting last year at the lack of a visible crib scene in the city centre. The traditional city council crib had, in fact, been on display but near the local BBC radio station, Radio Merseyside, which is behind one of the main shopping areas. A woman was adamant that her protests to the local authority and public outcry on Radio Merseyside was instrumental in its reappearance in the city centre - 'the men in grey suits might not want it but the people do, put the Christ back in Christmas!'. A bystander wrote a prayer of thanks with her name on it in recognition of her achievement. Several admirers of the scene promised they would phone Radio Merseyside to register their approval publicly.

Several others were so enamoured that they decided to pitch up next to us. A local 'regular' street activist, an evangelist of the fire, brimstone and homophobic variety, leaned his placard against our chalet and prepared to take advantage of a target audience. Not wanting to offend him or anybody he targeted, we politely asked him to retreat to his own space which he did muttering under his breath, 'it's a free city and we are all preaching Jesus Christ'. Several other evangelists seeing the crowds at the crib also saw an opportunity for a recruitment campaign for their own churches. We gently explained that the space had been carefully negotiated.

We had agreed in advance to give out booklets detailing Christmas Services etc. at the Anglican Cathedral. In exchange, their bookstall in the nearby Urban Winter Village Market gave out flyers advertising our Giant Puppet Parade and nativity performance.

We were supplied with a small chalet which provided shelter for volunteers, storage for prayer cards, leaflets etc. and a dropping off point for food for the nearest Food Bank collection point.

A prayer tree was constructed from small tree branches, cardboard tubing, - supplied by a market trader - and a metal stand. We offered a constant supply of glittery, stringed gift tags which served as prayer cards, twinkled in the light of the fairy lights and fluttered in the wind. The crib situated at the 'entrance' to the Christmas market, in effect, acted as a windbreak for the stalls on the downward slope behind it. When winds were particularly high and in driving rain, the prayer tree was taken into the chalet for protection leaving little room inside for the hardy volunteers.

Nearby was a refreshment stall which supplied scouse banter, sympathy in detrimental weather and good coffee at a generous discount. Between this stall and the crib was an extremely busy pedestrian crossing where many people regularly risked life and limb to traverse its five yards in record time escaping collision by a whisper with big green buses, black taxi cabs and blue flashing vehicles of various varieties.



They were all overlooked by a traffic camera with a permanent inhabitant, a little bird who accompanied the whole scene with its own well-tuned repertoire of Christmas carols.

### Volunteers

The viability of a 'nativity trail' came under question because it proved difficult to persuade established retail businesses to allow window space for an unproven project during a prime trading period. Also, the landlords of empty premises were reluctant to allow access or the installation of any construction as this would incur a business rate charge. Consequently the planned early volunteer recruitment drive was delayed.

Those who did volunteer - existing Chaplains, ministers, parishioners, friends and associates were asked to commit at least two hours to staffing the nativity project. An appeal was also made through the Anglican diocesan ebulletin. We agreed that volunteers would not proselytise but if they were asked spiritual/theological questions they would be equipped to answer and also be reliable.

A commitment was made to the Market Management to provide volunteers on site 24/7 from 10am until 6pm. The other trade chalets in the Christmas market were obliged to stay open until 8pm but it proved impossible to supply enough people power to our project for the same hours, particularly at a busy time of year for Christians! As the project developed the same dilemma applied to Sundays. A rota was drawn up for the month, organising volunteers in pairs to allow for comfort breaks, security etc.

Security of the nativity figures was also an issue. They were fenced on all four sides with wire grating but, when volunteers were in situ, the front fence was removed to allow an uninterrupted view and access by the public. It didn't always work. Gifts - not gold, frankincense or myrrh - but an expensive stiletto shoe with a gold heel (perhaps Cinderella's?), a party hat, a wicker penguin and a wicker reindeer head, money



and a lipstick were found deposited in the crib overnight! People fuelled by Christmas spirit of the alcoholic variety were apparently able to traverse the fences to leave their offerings. On the other hand there was a formal objection made to the city council which berated the sign: **DANGER, KEEP OUT**, which was placed on the fencing by the market security at night.

Several volunteers enjoyed the experience of staffing the crib so much that they volunteered again and again! They felt that the intriguing conversation with people from all over the world became addictive, whatever the weather. There was some trepidation from those who thought they would have to take every opportunity to preach. One young mum who was volunteering for the first time literally grabbed the first passer-by and thrust a prayer card into his hand, much to his polite consternation. She had wanted to overcome her apprehension by diving in as quickly as possible and was so relieved to realise that simply being an 'intentional presence' in the name of God was enough!

In fact many people enjoyed chance conversations at the crib with others of different nationalities and travellers to the city from different parts of the country paying their Christmas visit to family in Liverpool and the surrounding area. It gave lots of opportunities to wish complete strangers, 'Happy Christmas!' and really mean it. Several visitors from the U.S. commented how, regrettably, a scene like this just wouldn't be considered politically correct during their 'holiday' season.

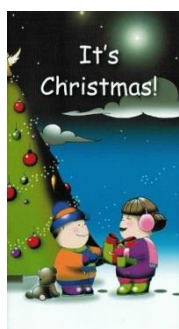
As well as regular volunteers we had regular 'customers' too:

One was a man with special needs and his dog, Oscar, who wore a little red fur-lined coat and often looked warmer than his owner. He spent hours at the crib telling us about his one man campaign to get his dog recognised as a 'helping dog' with the same rights of access as guide dogs for the blind. He was repeatedly asked to leave shopping malls and restaurants because of his loyal companion but insisted that '*me and Oscar are a match made in heaven*'. He gave us a Christmas card 'to the family'.

A lady who attended the local Blessed Sacrament Shrine handmade prayer cards for us in various shapes and colours with phrases such as: '*Father may your will be done here on earth*'. '*Give glory to God, ring out the joy*'. '*Open your hearts to Jesus*'. '*Christmas begins with Christ*'.

## The Prayers

Prayer cards and pens were freely available and help was offered to those who had difficulty writing, or found it too distressing. Prayer cards were removed from the tree every evening to make room for the next day's intake. Booklets, 'It's Christmas!', telling the real story of Christmas were offered to children who visited the crib. 500 of these were given away. However many children opted to write prayers too, often urged on by parents encouraging them to remember their grandparents.



In all 1081 prayers were left at the prayer tree. Many people spent time just reading them, moved to tears by the words. There were prayers in several different languages.



Many prayers were written in memory of loved ones who had died and for families in mourning. Others prayed for the return of loved ones far away or, more often, separated from their families after a disagreement or falling out – parents longing for estranged children, mostly mothers. 'Rachael weeping for her children'. People prayed for peace for the world, food for hungry, for the homeless, for those tormented by addiction, for comfort for the victims of recent accidents in the news headlines, for animals, for health, for healing, for miracles. '*Jesus please take the cancer out of my body please. Jesus I thank you for every new day you grant me. I love you Lord*'. Others prayed for practical outcomes: '*Please God help me win the lottery*'. '*That we can make a fresh start in Liverpool*'. '*Please give us boyfriends*'. Several were confessional in nature: '*That my daughters will forgive me and welcome me back*'; '*Forgive me for illicit affairs and for going to the wrong places*'.

So many prayers were heartfelt and heart rending. (Appendix 1) Only one bore the atheistic message: 'God isn't real you \*\*\*\*\*'. Alternatively there were prayers of praise and thanksgiving: '*Thank you for all*'



*your help when needed xxx'; 'Thank you God for all your help. It's been really appreciated xx'; 'Dear God thank you for all of my family and friends for making me alive, lots of love from Ava Amen'; and simple but profound expressions of faith: 'Please make my dream come true. You know what it is'.*

Some prayed for the crib itself: *'I want to keep Jesus safe'.*

We quickly gained a reputation for prayer. Two ladies were waiting for us to open up one day and asked: 'Is this the place where they are taking prayers?' They wanted prayers for a family member who was ill. People helped each other write prayers. Many could be heard explaining the story of the nativity to their companions. One comment was: 'If you went to church, you would understand'.

We promised to honour all the requests for prayer. A sign was affixed to the fencing: **LEAVE A PRAYER. CITY CENTRE MINISTERS WILL PRAY FOR YOU.** We kept that promise, but more of that later. The glitter of the prayers left us all glittering long after Christmas, in more ways than one.

### The Stories

The overwhelming response from the public was how wonderful it was to see a crib in such a prominent position in the city centre. *'Don't believe in all this holiness stuff but this melts your heart, doesn't it?'* One lady was in tears because *'it brings back memories'*. On the other hand a lady pondering near the hay while smoking a cigarette said, *'I hope no one sets it on fire on you, love'* a thought that until then had never crossed our minds.

We were asked lots of questions including directions from the many visitors to the city, *'Does the 76 bus stop here?'* There were lots of questions about the figures: *'Why does one of the figures look Chinese?'; 'If the Bible says Jesus came before everyone why are all the other figures older than him?'* *'Why does Joseph look so much older than Mary?';* and one small child pointing out who was who to her mummy: *'That's Mary, that's Baby Jesus'* and pointing to the Wise Men, *'and they're the Grandads!'*. Another child decided, *'it smells like real hay'*, which, of course it was!

Lots of people felt driven to touch the figures, to kiss them, to cross themselves reverently as they lingered in front of them. However, one person asked how much they were to buy, and another asked our volunteer for a little of the hay for her own crib at home! Numerous children were told to *'sit next to Jesus'*.

One morning after opening up we were asked why the nativity scene looked different today only to find on closer inspection that a creative reveller had affixed the baby Jesus so that he was clinging to Joseph's neck!

Jesus' manger was made of crossed tree branches and he was placed precariously on top. Not surprisingly on several mornings we found he had fallen from his perch or was 'off his rocker' as one volunteer put it. Also, one young man decided to take 'we will rock you' literally and removed the Christ child to hold him on his lap. 'I'm only getting my photo done mate' was his defence when we remonstrated.

We were told several favourite stories about nativities. A retired school caretaker had witnessed hundreds of versions of it but particularly remembered the one where they were using a real baby. A little boy in the audience piped up: 'That's not Jesus, that's our Michael!'



## Entertainment

Actually the crib became a focal point for several activities. The Salvation Army band playing in the middle of the shopping street agreed to come and play carols for us next to the crib. Their brass band, playing traditional Christmas carols, proved very evocative for many passers-by.

One bitterly cold Saturday morning the local Sisters of Mercy, parishioners from the city centre Blessed Sacrament Shrine, plus their whole entourage of adults and children of several different nationalities, gathered at the crib for the Rosary. They were accompanied by men on guitars and the children gave out trays of little reminders of the real meaning of

Christmas which they had made themselves. These were

heart-shaped pieces of coloured paper with shredded paper 'hay', and a tiny baby Jesus glued on. The motto 'We wish you a Happy Holy Christmas' was written on each.

They all faithfully endured the cold for over an hour. The children wrapped in colourful scarves and

Father Christmas hats were full of smiles and enjoyed every moment. Crowds surrounded the group and joined in with the familiar words. A passing nun commented on how the new Pope, Francis, would have been very pleased at such an eclectic gathering of people worshipping together. The worship ended with a blessing from a local priest who congratulated us on the ministry of the crib. One of our volunteers recognised him from a former parish and they were delighted to renew their acquaintance.



Many charities took advantage of the large volumes of Christmas shoppers in town. There were collectors from the Armed Forces, RNIB, the Salvation Army, activists encouraging the public to sign a petition to free Edward Snowden who had recently been convicted



for disclosing classified U.S. government documents; and a demonstration march against cuts to NHS funding. Fancy dress seems to have been compulsory for all collectors. There were pirates, super heroes, Sponge Bobs, robots and even a devil on a bike! He turned out to be a Christian who helped out at a food bank. He admitted to a real dilemma of identity every day when he donned his costume to advertise electronic cigarettes and the musical 'Wicked!'.

Father Christmas was replicated in many guises. A whole brigade of him in varying shapes and sizes played in a drum band collecting for charity. Father Christmas was even seen on a passing bus guiding visitors on a tour of our beautiful city.

Another energetic band of drummers performed in support of victims of the flood in the Philippines. They amazed with their sheer energy, throwing drums high into the air and delighting the crowds.

By far the greatest entertainment was provided by ordinary people - lots of street theatre, and not only from performers.

There was the large party of young men on a stag night, dressed as batman, Spiderman et el, who thought it was a good idea to actually climb en masse into the crib amongst the figures.

Girls on a hen night were just as challenging. A group wearing Santa hats with helium-filled balloons floating up from each of their bobbles decided it would be appropriate to change the identity of the figures by donning each face with one of those popular famous faces masks! Joseph unwittingly became David Beckham in a long dress – not as unusual a change of style as one at first supposes!

A football fan fresh from the pub darted into our chalet to help himself to a fold up chair. Chasing after him his excuse was, 'Me mate's got a bad leg, love.' The demure lady from the Wirral peninsula volunteering at the time shot after him like an Exocet missile, shouting at him, 'You'll have two bad legs if I get hold of you!' It was only when she had regained her usual composure that she was surprised at herself having 'threatened to break the legs of a scouser'.

## Surrounding area



Amongst other interesting sights, we saw a shop lifter being arrested; a shopper walking by with a large wooden giraffe so diligently wrapped by the stall-holder that it would be no surprise to its recipient what he or she was getting for Christmas; two unlicensed traders looking for a likely spot to sell their unique method of recycling, windmills made from used drinks cans; clowns, pirates, elves, fairies and numerous people in Christmas jumpers. The BID was encouraging the public to wear these in an effort to secure the record for the most people (it had to be 6000) going to work in a Christmas jumper.

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## Food bank

We obtained a collecting box and tin for our chalet but decided to forego fancy dress. We had initially decided to collect food from generous shoppers for the nearest food bank. However we found that this was too big an ask for many already laden with Christmas parcels. Although some kind people made a deliberate journey to deposit food stuff, the overwhelming majority wanted to donate money. We continually assured the public that prayer is free. However to refuse offerings would have damaged the dignity of the giver and we accepted them in aid of the food bank to the tune of £1055.51. Some bemoaned the fact that they had little money to give. A middle-aged lady with tears in her eyes put some coins in the collecting tin and told our volunteer that she had been made redundant three months earlier and wished she was able to help more. He told her that she had indeed helped and received a grateful hug and tears of thanks for his reassurance. A young Spanish student studying at John Moores University was surprised to see we were collecting for a food bank and commented that he hadn't thought there was such a need for it in the UK as there was in Spain.

We did not foresee the strength of the innate need to give that so many people expressed. The often asked question was, 'How much is a prayer, love?' We were delighted to reply, 'Prayer is free'. Even so scores of people felt that they had to make a donation anyway. Somebody pointed out that we could be selling indulgences but for me it meant that prayer there had added value. Unusually, in a society where everything and everyone can be viewed as a commodity it felt more like gratitude for acceptance. Isn't that redemption?

Many shared their personal tragedies: A nephew who was found dead by his two young children who both have learning difficulties; a father of, not one, but two autistic children; young woman studying dance who had lost her friend aged 22 from pneumonia; a 10 month old granddaughter with cysts on her brain; a wife fighting her corner against an unfair pay deal; a daughter who had lost her mum just a few weeks before – firstly from Alzheimer's disease and then again at the end of her life; a toddler with a brain tumour; a mother and son awaiting the results of her scan, both feared the worst.

A mother who had prayed that she might see her son at Christmas and then found him on the doorstep came back to tell us how her prayer had been answered.

A Jesuit priest from the Philippines who is studying the arts at Liverpool Hope University happened to pass the crib on what, he later told us, had been a difficult day for him. He was moved by the sight of all the prayers and by the promise to pray them. He asked if it would be possible for him to make an art installation from them. The idea proved to be an inspiring culmination to the whole project. More of that later too.

## Stories from the volunteers

1. *Apart from two incidents, those obscene men in super hero costumes and the man who tried to steal our chair there were no other unpleasant or challenging incidents. The people I spoke to were all very receptive except a very few who said they were not religious. People of other faiths (judging by their dress) who stopped were quite forthcoming letting their children watch. The children seemed to know the baby's name and got it right. I spoke to a few people who had lapsed from church and were quite receptive to guidance about how to make contact again. Some people seemingly Catholic Church members were enthusiastic about a tangible Christian presence in the city and about Jesus being present in the Christmas celebrations. Many people wrote prayer cards, some*



*needed prompting as they did not realise what the cards were for at first, including many children who mostly wrote prayers for their grandparents. Many people gave spontaneously, I had the box just hanging over my arm, not at all visible really and yet people went out of their way to give. I was really impressed by the children who seemed to like lingering about and watching the figures. Some people were looking but not really seeing but when I pointed out the carpenters work and skill in producing the figures they got quite enthusiastic. I hope the figures were remembered and talked about when the people met their friends or family.*

**2.** *One bloke caught his anorak on the wire mesh surrounding the crib...he asked what I was going to do about it.*

*"You could make a claim to the Council" I said. "Is that your pat answer?" he said. "That's my answer" I said.*

*(Should have said "Hang a prayer on the tree for a new anorak" but he probably would have caught his anorak on the tree then...)*

**3.**

- *A group of students from a Special School all gathered around the Crib. I photographed them. They were walking around the city counting how many places in town there was a visible sign of the real meaning of Christmas.*
- *Many times where parents were talking to their children and sharing the Christmas story with them.*
- *The many people who thanked us for the work of the Food Bank*
- *The generosity of people who donated notes*
- *Speaking to 'the Devil'!! A man advertising e-cigarettes who stopped near to the Crib by the railings – he was a Christian who worked in his local Food Bank*
- *Lady who wanted help to word her prayers*
- *People asking for directions – not spiritual direction – but there ought to be a link there somewhere!!*
- *The lady who told me she prayed each night that God would protect the Crib*
- *A man who enjoyed taking photos of buildings. He said he often wondered what the buildings had originally been built for*
- *All the help received from N, K, M, J and others from Clayton Square Shopping Centre who helped me open up, brought me coffee and hot chocolate, and allowed me to take a toilet break!!*
- *All the people taking photos – wanting to 'be in' the nativity story!*

**4.** *I had a wonderful time standing with the crib. Many people stopped to say how wonderful it was to see a Crib in the City Centre that was visible! Others just stopped to look, and take photos without talking. I was moved by the number of people who stopped to write prayers for the tree, it shows that people still have a strong connection to their faith! Furthermore, the number of people who donated to the Food Bank was overwhelming!*

*I was only heckled once so overall I believe it was welcomed by all! All they shouted was "you're wasting your time God ain't real"*

*My only suggestion is that I think the Crib would have been better facing the other way. I think more people come from Queen Square and Lime Street who would see the Crib instead of having to walk around to see it!!*

*5. A lady who only had 10p left in her purse but put that in the collecting tin and then spoke to the figures and asked them if they were real.*

## **The Media**

A young reporter from the local newspaper interviewed us. A Muslim, she was pleased to see the reference the crib made to the real meaning of Christmas. She told how she felt that in Islam the size and number of gifts given at Eid sometimes took precedence over the love, respect and generosity it was meant to signify.

We were interviewed by Radio Merseyside for their Sunday morning religious programme, 'Daybreak'. They were interested in how the crib had been welcomed and respected without the vandalism which many had anticipated. There were many favourable comments on their Facebook page.

A group of students studying media and film at John Moores University were filming the unique phenomena of Christmas in Liverpool and decided to include the crib.

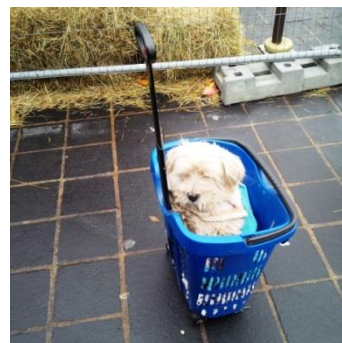
We were also interviewed by BBC North West Tonight and by Bay TV the local television station.

We encouraged all the amateur photographers to send their pictures to #realchristmas- an idea we will build on in the future.

A young graduate of media and film, who was recently acquainted with Mission in the Economy, was commissioned to film the whole project for us. She paid regular visits to all sites and events. See the film here: <http://youtu.be/wAxD5qcmnt8>

## **Animals**

Although a sheep and a lamb were the only animals apparent in the crib, several dogs claimed a place in the whole scenario including the becoated Oscar. One a very large black dog posed very docilely in front of the crib to the delight of passing animal lovers. Another whose appearance lived up to his name, 'Teddy Bear', was pushed up to survey the figures in a wheeled supermarket basket. He had arthritis and was no longer able to walk.



## **St John's Market**

St John's Market also played a part in the 'Real Christmas' project. Another smaller, more traditional version of the nativity crib was set up in one of the empty stalls. Market Management provided lighting and a similar prayer tree was put in position in a stall there. Again many prayers were collected and when prayer tags ran out prayers were written on leaflets and any other scraps of paper left to hand. These were included in the total and the same promise to pray was honoured. Traders and management were



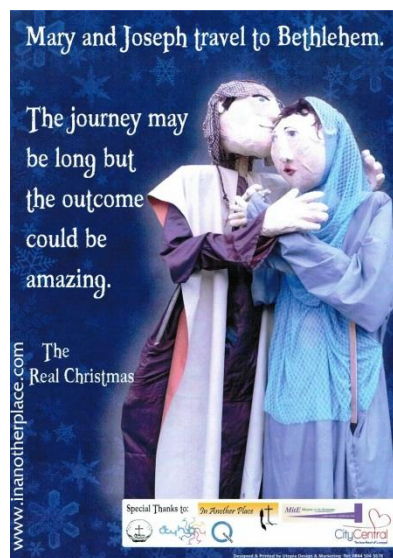
surprised by the response. The Liverpool Philharmonic Gospel Choir came to sing their unique arrangements of Christmas carols and gospel music on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> December. They performed in four different areas of the market to enable the traders, who are often one person businesses, to be part of the performance. The choir had them and the public dancing in the aisles and brought a smile to many people's faces. In a pause between the end of the last performance and the crowd's applause, one enthusiastic stall-holder shouted, 'You wouldn't get that in Marks and Spencers!' A young girl in the crowd signed up for the choir there and then!

A minority of traders felt the choir interrupted trade but the majority thought the sacrifice was well worth it, increasing footfall and creating an atmosphere of community.

The Tenants Association sponsored the choir by £250.

The choir collected £85 on the day which they donated to the work of Mission in the Economy. This was used for small gifts and Christmas prayer booklets for the traders and for the purchase of prayer tags.

### Giant Puppet Parade

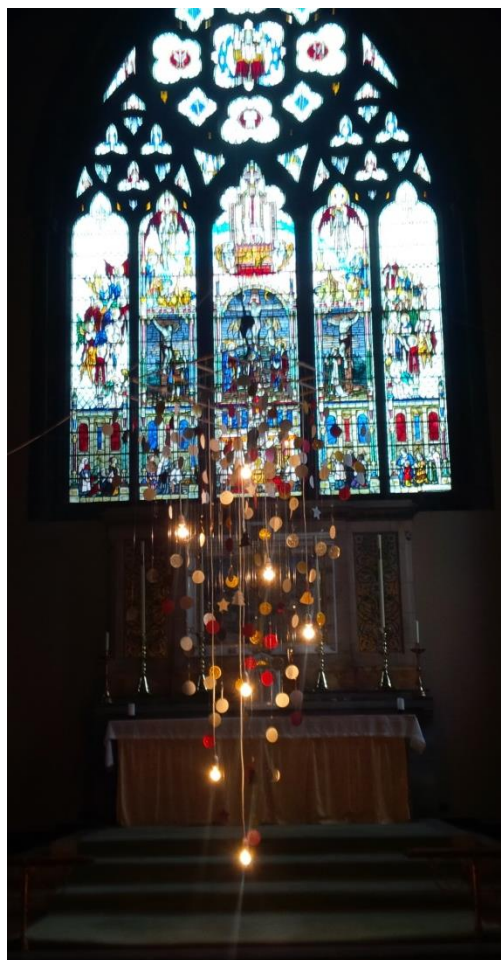


The Puppet Parade and nativity performances were originally scheduled for 4pm on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> December. It would be a joyful culmination of all the activities in the city centre. Further discussion disclosed worries about overcrowding and space on the parade route and in the performance areas on what was the last Saturday before Christmas. ( **Appendix 2** ). The event was rescheduled for 10am starting with the gathering of the puppeteers and gospel choir (in torrential rain!) then a parade to the first performance area in a central square using the bandstand where the story of the nativity would be narrated and sung. The square was temporarily inhabited by an 'Urban Winter Village' which comprised several container shops selling local crafts and art work, one of which was the Anglican Cathedral shop. The rain ceased and the parade immediately attracted attention. The crowds were fascinated by the giant puppets and

obviously enjoyed the whole experience. I looked in the direction of the gospel choir singing in the bandstand and spotted a parishioner who had come to watch, only to have been roped into the choir, dressed in a robe and was singing her heart out! It was an opportunity she had longed dreamed of! We had another short parade to the Christmas tree where, due to technical difficulties with sound equipment and the particularly windy vicinity, it did not attract as many people but, nevertheless, was enjoyed by all those who stood and braved the wind. Throughout the event children distributed little models of baby Jesus made of paper, cotton wool and hay to children watching. The giant nativity figures made a visit to the crib at the end of the event where they posed for photographs and gave everybody giant hugs.







## City of a Thousand Prayers

Discussions took place about how we might best honour the promise to pray. An Anglican parish church on the edge of the city centre which had been sadly neglected for many years had been recently reclaimed. It is a special space which seemed to lend itself to art work as worship, being beautifully decorated and with wonderful stained glass. Fortunately the newly appointed Chair of MitE had taken on responsibility for St Margaret Antioch and arrangements for a service of prayer and celebration with an art installation using the prayers was relatively easy to organise. It was decided that Epiphany would be an appropriate time for this – near enough to Christmas to honour our promise and, considering the public response, also appropriate theologically which will be discussed later on in this account.

The Jesuit priest and artist Father Jason Dy was invited to judge if he felt the space was fitting for his installation idea. He explained his initial vision of an upside down Christmas tree made from the prayer tags with the point in a clay pot containing incense. This was to symbolise the raising of the people's prayers to God and God's love incarnate coming down to humanity at Christmas time. He called it 'up is down, down is up'. (Appendix 3)

The artist needed help from a carpenter and an electrician to construct the installation. Two skilled tradesmen who worked at the Anglican cathedral were able to offer help. Others gave time stringing the tags at different lengths ready to be hung when the wooden framework was complete. It took 2 days for the work to be completed. The remaining prayers were scattered on the altar steps and around the figure of the baby Jesus which was borrowed from the market. A service sheet was prepared. (Appendix 4) Personal invitations were sent to each of the volunteers and a notice was posted on both crib sites, on the diocesan website, social media and announced on Radio Merseyside. Members of the BID, Market Management and other associates and friends were also invited. It was an opportunity to raise awareness of a unique space, often over-looked by busy passers-by on a main route into the city, to thank volunteers for their sterling work, to reflect on the art work and hear about it from its creator and, most importantly, to offer the prayers to God. A reflection was prepared which brought together the themes of epiphany, the prayers and stories from the crib, the New Year and the upside down nature of God. (Appendix 5) One of our city centre Chaplains read from scripture and another, Chaplain to Local Solutions, a large social enterprise in Liverpool, read a poem for us.

The service was attended by approximately 50 people who were moved by the space, by the atmosphere, and by the prayers shimmering in the light and floating ephemerally against the brilliant colours of stained glass. People were invited to move around, read the prayers, view the installation and the architecture of the church, and make it a personal experience.

A cheque was presented to the project leader of the Hope Food Bank who shared stories of people in desperate need of help.

(<http://www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk/UserFiles/file/Food%20Bank%20A5%20flyer.pdf>)



## Further developments

The installation 'Up is down, down is up' was due to be removed from St Margaret Antioch on January 31<sup>st</sup>. An open afternoon was arranged for Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> January from 12md until 2pm. This would be a last chance to see the installation there and an opportunity for local people to see their parish church in a new guise. Friends and associates of the newly licenced minister in charge were also invited to come in support of his new ministry of reawakening this place of worship. The event was well-attended by people with diverse motives for coming as out-lined above. Some interesting conversations took place. The artist preferred to have the installation exhibited next in a 'secular' place such as a shopping mall because his ultimate aim was to help bring the sacred into secular space and to involve the community in the process. We discussed possible places – The Bluecoat Arts Centre, FACT (Foundation for Arts and Creative Technology), DVD film of the project could be of interest to them also, the round Chapter House at the Anglican Cathedral, and other places of worship. He told us of his plans for another installation to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First World War. This would involve people growing their own poppies for an event in June. In June and July 2014 there will be an International Festival of Business with delegates from across the globe coming into the city. The First World War having had a universal impact we discussed the possibility of joining up the two events. Discussions are on-going. Suggestions were made that funding for such a project might be available from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

**The Chair of Walton Youth and Community Project**, who also teaches Religious Studies at a Liverpool Secondary school, prepared a school assembly based on the nativity crib. This was distributed across the city via the Liverpool School Improvement Team.

*'The Good News of Christmas is if we look at the baby in the manger we shall see that indeed **GOD IS HERE** in Liverpool with us, in the muddle, the despair and the uncertainty within some families and communities. As we gaze on the Christ child help us to remember that in life, no matter what uncertainties we face we will **"Never Walk Alone"**. That is the **JOY** of the Christmas story.'* (Appendix 6)

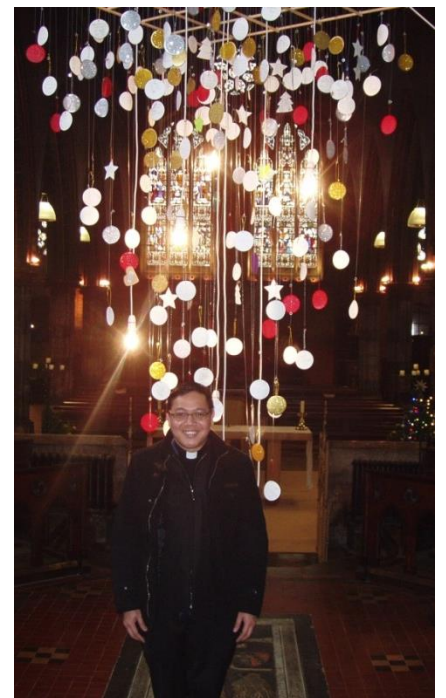
We have since discussed lending the art installation and accompanying DVD to schools who might appreciate the lessons to be learned about human vulnerability, prayer and our utter dependence on God.

## More thoughts...

We did not take God to the city centre. Conversely, we met him there full on, living and breathing with dynamic human vitality - but also lonely, lost and looking for the love that feeds, redeems, liberates and gives life in all its fullness. 'The Kingdom of God is no other-worldly escape, but takes shape at work in the midst of the world – its violence and poverty, its power and insecurity'.<sup>1</sup> Chaplaincy is a ministry 'in the public square' and is 'embedded characteristically in social rather than church situations'.<sup>2</sup>

The whole 'Real Christmas' project was one of those joyous occasions when an event takes on a momentum all of its own which, of course, we can only attribute to God. It was a huge learning curve for all who were involved. We have since agreed with the BID that it is certainly worthy of building on again next year.

The prayers, in particular, were very precious. Hanging from a makeshift tree in a city centre in the throes of a commercial xmas or hanging from



<sup>1</sup> Phil Wood, 'Decision-making in the New Testament', *Guidelines*, January to April 2003, BRF, p93

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Todd, Notes from *Research Report for the Mission and Public Affairs Council Executive Summary February 2014*, The Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies (CCCS) and the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology & Practical Theology (OxCEPT) Cuddesdon

‘Christ’s chandelier’ in the sanctuary of an authorised holy space at Epiphany, they comprised the kind of art that has the ability ‘to leapfrog generations and convey its central message or beauty to people undreamed of by its original creator’.<sup>3</sup> The artist and priest Jason Dy perceived that the Co-ordinator of Mission in the Economy was ‘given the grace to read the intentions and to offer prayers for them to God. Further, he believed that ‘my humble contribution is to offer further reflection on the prayer appeal.’ In personal response to God’s grace I undertook to prayerfully read every single prayer and found it difficult to relinquish them into the artist’s hands when the time came. As Chaplains we are compelled to be creative liturgists organising worship in the strangest and least expected places, from airports to shopping malls, from markets to conference centres. It is a privilege, a stimulating challenge and very fulfilling. However we are vessels to be used and the relinquishment of all we prepare into God’s hands is part of our calling.

As Chaplains, God’s representatives in the work place, it is also part of our calling to be invisible. ‘Chaplaincy ministry is semi-invisible or hidden within the central ministerial and missional discourses of the Church’.<sup>4</sup> We are often studiously avoided by those who would rather not engage with us, whatever their reasons. We may be momentarily acknowledged as harmless, naïve or irrelevant. Alternatively, we can be welcomed as someone representative of comfort and reassurance or with special, even supernatural, resources to draw upon. At times we are identified as having power and influence. We experience all of these reactions to us every day in the course of our work. In our identity, our ‘being’ with God we give the same choice that God gives.

How faithless of us to be surprised by meeting God so full on in a contemporary urban concrete jungle! We have the example of Jacob in scripture who met God in his own contemporary environment of wilderness and stone. ‘Surely the Lord is in this place and I didn’t know it!’ (Genesis 28:16).

Actually, our volunteers and visitors were fascinated that our ministry on the margins, or Church without a threshold, so readily evidenced God ‘in our going out, not gathering in’.<sup>5</sup> It gave several Chaplaincy ‘explorers’ and an ordinand the opportunity to experience church at the cutting edge. Although many rushed by us oblivious to the nativity figures and their meaning, the majority were compelled to pause and contemplate even if only for a moment. People made their choice to stop and pray without subliminal technology, without glitzy, slick packaging but instead with the earthiness of the real Christmas story amidst the relentless force-feeding of the consumeristic xmas. Prayer cards, which on the surface could seem so insignificant, but when offered to God in faith have the potential to touch people at their place of need.

Just as the Celts created sacred spaces from pagan expressions of spirituality, just as the Romans built Christian churches on the memorials of inanimate gods, we have to build Church on secularity. We have no idea what it might look like in the future but as Pope Francis advises it has to be attractive, ‘It is not by proselytising that the church grows but by attraction’.<sup>6</sup> The work of Chaplaincy is ‘reintroducing religion as part of everyday life’, making people of faith rather than religious people.

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon Mansell, *Praying with the Psalms, Guidelines*, January to April 2003, BRF, p93

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Todd, Notes from *Research Report for the Mission and Public Affairs Council Executive Summary February 2014*, The Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies (CCCS) and the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology & Practical Theology (OxCEPT) Cuddesdon

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Todd, Notes from *Research Report for the Mission and Public Affairs Council Executive Summary February 2014*, The Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies (CCCS) and the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology & Practical Theology (OxCEPT) Cuddesdon

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium*

Now the Christmas market is packed away for another year, there is a space where the Church should be. There is a vacuum where, for a short while, heaven touched earth to the delight of those who recognised the touch, to the wonder of those who experienced it for the first time and to the comfort of those who thought they had lost touch forever. Being Church on the street showed us the God-given potential of ordinary people and the wonder of his creativity in the changes of light and atmosphere which so often go unnoticed by the church or office bound, in the sights and sounds, the joys and despair of God walking to and fro on the earth.

As Chaplains we endeavour to replicate His ministry. We are to add piquancy to the proceedings of life – like salt on chips, like LED Christmas lights in the dark, like familiar Christmas carols to the ears, like persistent puppeteers in pouring rain, like Gluwein on a cold winter's night, warming the heart and soul. We endeavour to show that God's love is real and to embody his heaven sent, down to earth mission to his world. Our work is one to one, transactional relationship building, often unnoticed and unpublicised. Perhaps it is a ministry for the age of Individualism. Perhaps it opens the eyes of those we engage with to the fact that 'the other' is an individual with failings, needs and hopes just like me. We hope that we 'draw back the veil a little' on the love of God.<sup>7</sup> Chaplaincy is a theology of the moment for an instantaneous society but with long term plans for eternity.

*'Love shows in the need and in the exact fulfilment of the need. All we have to do is just do what is there to be done, whatever there is. Every action is God's plan, every gesture is important. Every single person is important in God's plan.*

*Can you see love? Of course you can!*

*Can you hear love? Yes, it is all the sounds.*

*Can you taste love? Yes!*

*Can you think love? Of course! Thought is naturally love. You have to work hard to make it other.*

*That is our job, to tell people about love, to persuade people to love.*

*Everything is love. Everything changes. Everything is new all the time. What you see, God made yesterday. But love is always there. This is what everything is made of. That is God Himself.<sup>8</sup>*


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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Todd, Notes from *Research Report for the Mission and Public Affairs Council Executive Summary February 2014*, The Cardiff Centre for Chaplaincy Studies (CCCS) and the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology & Practical Theology (OxCEPT) Cuddesdon


<sup>8</sup> John Stewart, 'Unity', in *A Promise Kept: The Life and Work of Tom Chapman*, Shephard-Walweyn Publishers, London 2003, p82

## Appendix 1

### Prayers from the City

Please teach me how to laugh and smile again. I forget how to be happy. Please help me and I need to let my family know I love them
God bless Liverpool – Jesus the Reason for the Season!
Please pray for those who have no faith in Jesus
Dear God, please end my Mum's pain and misery. Thank you
Pray for D to be a better person and change his ways. H and A W for their sickness. My family keeps them safe and well. And friends. Thanks x
To Mum and Dad. Still miss you loads. You have a new grandson called A. All our love, M and G xxx
Jesus please take the cancer out of my body please. Jesus I thank you for every new day you grant me. I love you Lord. P
I love my family Z K V 
Can you please pray for my auntie N to have an eternal rest? Thank you xx
Dear Lord, please pray for M B and Nelson Mandela and all those who have passed away. R C
That my daughters will forgive me and come back. B
For the sad and lonely people in the world Let us pray
Peace in Syria & Afghanistan & enough food for everyone C + T M
Merry Christmas to all rich, poor
Please pray and help G & T to get by without drugs Thank you



Prayer for the Salvation Army all work done in Bootle Liverpool. We try to help people. God bless you all
Please pray for family and friends of the F family. God bless xxx ps thank you
Please pray for R. May he take God into his life and find the solution to his addictions xxx
Thank you God for my flat, take care of my family and friends and for keeping me sober x
That one day me and my family will walk in this street
Pray for I and his family for a visa... Merry Christmas!
How lovely to see crib of the Holy Family. Pray for all our family please
For a child for a desperate childless couple Please God
We pray for Spanish people in Liverpool. Good luck Bona sort
Please God I am begging. Help A to recover 
G & boys. Take it easy. Life will be good again. Mum
Pray for all the B & W family Dublin Ireland xx
Please help H.
Dear God thank you for all of my family and friends for making me alive lots of love from A. Amen.
Please pray for J - gets out of depression
Pray for work for me and everybody in Liverpool. Thank you
God please help us to see our S soon. Love you God
For the victims and families of the Glasgow helicopter crash
For all the F, D, D & P family

<p>Please pray for all families affected by alcohol &amp; drugs</p> <p>Please pray for our brother F and keep him strong that he can get a liver transplant soon. All the family</p>
<p>Please pray and help the people of South Africa to come together and live in peace</p>
<p>Pray for my families, all the sick and lonely. Pray for my great grandson who is having a bad time in school. Help him</p>
<p>For our sweet little old grandma xxx</p>
<p>Happy x-mass to everyone. Please pray for my family and all the Iranian people xxxx</p>
<p>Please pray for my sister to get strong again after chemo. May her hair grow back thick. All the family</p>
<p>For P + O 'The perfect match'</p>
<p>Please pray for D family friends and relatives for all their intentions this Christmas &amp; for a healthy happy New Year. Special prayers for grandchildren &amp; those unborn &amp; many thanksgivings xx</p>
<p>Thank you for all your help when needed xxx</p>
<p>Whoever's up there please take care of my baby boy A and tell him me &amp; his sisters miss &amp; love him xxx</p>
<p>Please pray for all those affected by Hillsborough. Thank you x</p>
<p>S, please do not be angry with me F</p>
<p>Thank you J H for getting crib back</p>
<p>I pray for you C RIP</p>
<p>Please pray for my son &amp; daughter who are ill with stress because of the schools they teach in xxx</p>
<p>For our family. We are starting a new life in England. We want a nice Christmas!!! With a lot of love! J-D-B-M. P-M family</p>

Thanks King Jesus for having the courage to do what u did Love u xxxx
I pray for all those people less fortunate than myself x
Please say a prayer for my 2 sisters, my Mum & Dad and my 5-day old baby. May they all rest in peace and may we meet again some day
Thank you Lord Jesus that J, 8 years, was found after missing 6 hours
Father may your will be done here on earth
I need help with my family to see them + especially my grandkids
Prayer of protection for my sister as she prepares for her wedding in 2015. Lord may we not lose any close family members as it happened b4. Amen
Please pray for the innocent who suffer, especially children, this Christmas
Praying for the homeless and all the kids to get work and all the sick especially B. World peace. Thank God for concerns received. Xx
Pray P will come back to me and please help my K to get better + M to be happy x
Dear God & Nana Happy Christmas from T Amen. I hope you are ok in heaven, Nana
Open your heart to Jesus Love. Trust 😊
I'm very blessed - prayers for the hungry, homeless. Pray for peace!!!
O Lord give me the power to walk with you. Amen
To get over this bad patch Lord. E xx
RIP for the animals exploited, neglected, abused, imprisoned, tortured – in food/entertainment/industry. God's greatest gift

Peace for Rev C K
Please pray for our beautiful daughter E R who became an Angel five years ago, aged 8. Happy Christmas Sweet Pea
Prayers for a mortal world in immortal danger of never seeing the Light again xxxx
Thank you God for all your help. It's been really appreciated xx
Keep my son safe
To all my family at Christmas love K + P xx
Please give us boyfriends!
Please pray for baby D to get better soon and all the babies in Liverpool Women's – F, E, F xxx
Dear Lord hear my prayers and thank you for all your help in making me strong to look after all my family + friends who need me, x. Love, peace, joy to everybody xx
To God from C peace to all nations x
I want to pray to get my girls back home with me. T and A
Pray my children stay safe and the world regains its balance + tolerance
For J. J sadly passed Sep '09 Merry Christmas
Pray for those who won't be with their families this Christmas season. God bless every single one of them
My Dad passed away 2 days ago. Please pray for me C. G
I do pray one day this will be a better world for everyone no more war or misery. Would like all the world to enjoy peace + calm. xxx Oh Lord thank you xxx




Please pray for children who have learning disabilities
Thank you Lord Jesus for your mercy. Heal our world & those in most need. Amen.
Dear Lord xxx Thank you for giving me the strength + help for taking care of my family + friends who need me. Please help me to carry on and please forgive all my sins. I believe in You God. Love you now + forever xxx Elaine xxx
This is for all the sick children in the world. God bless you all L, A, R, T, F
Help my sister who lost her son in Afghanistan age 21
Pray for my Mum. Hope she finds her soul-mate xxxxx
A life free of stress & immorality. To be good mother so my son grows to love & walk with God. God give us a real family/home
For baby C 'Charlie Bear'. May you find better health in this coming year little one! Love you to the moon & back. Nan-nan + Pop-pop xx
Please pray for J, I, J, M, L, L, K, D addiction with drink
Lovely to see proper crib + beautiful sculptures – long may they be here.
That the true meaning of Christmas happens, people being good to each other
Dear Lord please welcome my son into your arms + help us to carry on
S's healing of memories of traumatic past
Please pray for the removal of fear from people's minds x
I want to keep Jesus safe. T

Jesus help me in home & office and send me my husband soon. I'm alone and full of sorrows
Please help my son Sean thru his stress & anxiety. Thank you
Give glory to God. Ring out the joys
Peace. Christmas begins with Christ. Become skilled in living
W's uni work → strength & endurance. J → he can be honest about his feelings, not too stressed. Philippines
Please pray for my son A + me Y for a healthy long life honourable to God – Thank you x
Please pray for M & family that this is not to be the last Christmas they share + that it be a happy one for him and all of us
Please pray for good health for us all, and reconciliation between my sons. Thank you N x

My name is R. Happy Christmas
Please pray that my daughter can pass her 6 <sup>th</sup> driving test x
C my child who died 8/1/08 x
To all my family in Chile. Love & Merry Christmas xxx
To all who have nowhere to go at Christmas
30.10.12/16.11.12 My beautiful daughter A. M. GBNF miss you baby girl xxx Mummy & Daddy xxx
Please pray for a cure for cystic fibrosis + cancer which has took my only son, Mum & Dad away xxx Thank you
Dear Lord have love for all religions to unite and stop war. Amen. L

Dear Jesus have a wonderful Christmas. Lots of love S xx

P and S   
Bulgaria

Thank you Lord for all your blessings and happiness. Thank you for a special little gift you gave us. S and E

To Grandad, Dad and L, Merry Christmas Tickle it you wriggler xxx

To everyone who needs strength at xmas & anytime. May God bless us all with strength.



## Churches Together in the Merseyside Region

In Another Place

Liverpool Quakers

Methodist Church

Mission in the Economy

St Brides C of E Church

United Reformed Church

Dear Bill

The hub of city centre ministers is proposing to stage a Nativity Procession and performance – 'The Real Christmas' - on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2013 at the close of the Christmas Market.

### Procession:

**4.00pm** Start: Lord Street/Debenhams

**4.30pm** Performance 1: Performance space near Christmas tree - duration 15 minutes

**4.45pm** Procession to Williamson Square

**5.00pm** Performance 2: Williamson Square near bandstand – duration 15 minutes

Christmas carols with 'In Another Place' Gospel Choir

**6.00pm** Finish

The procession will comprise of 8 puppets. Each puppet is 11ft high, person width and weatherproof. (Apart from very high winds). Each puppeteer is accompanied by a guide. There will be approximately 100 people in the parade. Children may be invited to dress as angels, kings or shepherds. Members of the public will be invited to follow.

We also propose to run an interactive crib/nativity situated at the entrance to the Christmas market for the duration. We hope to work with the B.I.D. to stage carol singing from local choirs in the near vicinity.

We trust this proposal is acceptable and look forward to working with you to bring 'The Real Christmas' to Liverpool city centre.

Yours sincerely,

*Jean Flood*

On behalf of the City Centre Hub

**MitE** *Mission in the Economy*  
www.missionintheeconomy.com

*...at the interface of faith and work*

### MEDIA RELEASE

5 January 2014

#### Paradox of Epiphany

The Mission in the Economy (MitE), chaplaincy providers in North West, UK, together with the Parish Church of St. Margaret of Antioch, an Anglican church built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, collaborates with Filipino Jesuit Priest and Contemporary Christian Artist in the site specific installation work entitled “Up is Down, Down is Up.” This work is set up in the former chancel (choir) area of the newly refurbished church of St. Margaret’s acting as an alternative chandelier with its seven 40-42 watts LED clear bulbs.

This installation is part of “The Real Christmas,” an annual participative Christmas appeal for prayer intentions during the Advent as well as Christmas season that culminates in an ecumenical prayer service and thanksgiving dubbed as “Prayers of the City,” organized by the Liverpool City Centre Chaplaincy.

Witnessing the participants of this bidding prayer appeal writing their personal desires on Christmas tree décor paper tags and hanging them on the barren branches of some winter tree, Dy was inspired to create a three-layered work exploring the paradox of divine revelation, incorporating an innocence of child’s play, and offering a communion in secular urban space.

The upside-down Christmas tree formation of suspended coloured, glittering, and hand-made prayer tags proposes a different view of beholding its mystery, perhaps as G.K. Chesterton suggests of viewing it by “standing on one’s head.” According to Horacio de la Costa, SJ in his homily:

“Chesterton said it for us all: the only way to view Christmas properly is to stand on one’s head. Was there ever a home more topsy-turvy than Christmas, the cave where Christ was born? For here, suddenly, in the very heart of earth, is heaven; down is up, and up is down; the angels look down on the God who made them, and God looks up to the things he made.”

The over-all installation is reminiscent of the popular children’s game *pabitin* (literally, suspended, for grabs) as known in Dy’s local Filipino culture. Toys, candies and other goodies are strung suspended on bamboo lattice for children to freely grab. Could this allude to human desires suspended on faith (as represented by nylon threads bearing its light weight) or divine providence buoying them up (as suggested by the aroma of incense rising from the earthen clay pot)? Or just really a child’s innocent try to either enjoy the play or continue the plea?

However ephemeral and industrial the materials employed by Dy, it is worth discovering the “linking element, principle of agglutination” in his installation as suggested by Nicolas Bourriaud beyond the artist’s usage of this kind of material form.

**ENDS**





*Special Thanks to:*

Revd. Jean Flood, Revd. Bob Lewis, Revd. Bernard Thomas, The Parish Church of St. Margaret of Antioch, Mission in the Economy, British Jesuits, [RED Wire], Art in Liverpool, Liverpool City Centre Chaplaincy, The Methodist Church, St. Bride's, In Another Place, The United Reformed Church, Churches Together, City Central, Hope Food Bank, Geraud Markets Liverpool, Liverpool Cathedral, Peter Ford, Gary Grene, Rafael and Jenny Cammayo, and Jaydon Pananbo.

*Information of the Installation:*

AM+DG

"Up is Down, Down is Up"

Site Specific Installation

160 Prayer Intentions on Christmas Paper Tags, Nylon Threads, Wood, Metal Rings, Wire, 7 40-watts LED Clear Bulbs, Wire, Synthetic Pearl, Clay Pot and Incense

5-31 January 2014

Princes Rd, Liverpool, Merseyside  
L8 1TG, United Kingdom

*Further information contact:*

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# **Prayers of the City**

**A Service of Prayer and Thanksgiving**



**Sunday 5th January**

**3pm**

**St Margaret's Church**

**Princes Avenue Toxteth,**

**L8 1TG**

## Welcome

### Introduction

Life is a journey on many different roads

**All: but God is always with us**

Sometimes we lift our faces to the sun  
**and God is with us**

But then there is the hard journey  
through pathways of pain  
and fears in dark places

**All: But God is with us.  
Nothing can separate us  
from the love of God in Christ Jesus**

### Hymn

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,  
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;  
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,  
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor the  
earth sustain;  
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes  
to reign.

In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed  
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Lord, we know that in you all shall find rest.  
You heal the wounds of the suffering  
and touch the hearts of those who are afraid  
In you no one is worthless or unloved  
When the darkness threatens to overwhelm us,  
enable us to see your light.

*We pray together:*

**All: Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name;  
thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen**

**Reading: Mysterious New Year**

**Jason Dy**

Angels and archangels may have gathered  
there,  
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;  
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,  
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;  
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;  
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

### Reading

### Reflection

### Prayers

**All: God of love, we place into your hands  
all burdens and sorrows,  
all concerns and anxieties,  
all joys and pleasures,  
all pain and weakness  
we give you thanks**

### Hymn

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.

The world shall soon dissolve like snow,  
The sun refuse to shine;  
But God, who called me here below,  
Shall be forever mine.

When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we'd first begun.

When the song of the angels is stilled  
When the star in the sky is gone  
When the kings and princes are home  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks  
The real work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner  
To rebuild the nations  
To bring peace among the people

### **Presentation and Thanks**

### **Blessing**

Gracious God,  
for your love for us,  
gentle as a shower,  
healing our pain  
binding our wounds,

For your love for us  
sure as the dawn,  
transforming our darkness,  
revealing your truth,  
**we give you thanks**

For your love for us  
mercifully steadfast,  
calling us to you,  
raising us up,  
**we give you thanks**

As we go from here  
**All: go with us.**  
As we talk to others  
**All: speak to us.**  
As we work and relax  
**All: give us peace**  
As we continue our journey,  
**All: give us your blessing.**  
**In the name of the Lord. Amen**

Today is the day the Church celebrates Epiphany. This is the day we recognise and celebrate the gift of God's love to the world – a gift that changes everything. We hear of gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for the one who was to die, gifts befitting the true king, the perfect high priest, the saviour of the world. Over the last few weeks before Christmas I, and several others here, have been standing by the Nativity Crib in the middle of town. It's been a gift in so many ways. And it's been an eye-opener to say the least! All sorts of people from little tots entranced by the figures to an inebriated superman, from nuns to the devil on a bike advertising the musical 'Wicked'. He by the way, turns out to be a Christian who helps out at a food bank who admitted to a crisis of identity when wearing his costume. Every morning when we opened up the crib we found gifts – money, a party hat, a shoe, a penguin but the most important gifts were the prayers.

Looking from behind the crib, I couldn't help wondering what all these different people from all over the world made of it. I looked for God in the faces of the people standing there studying the scene. Was God there in their curiosity, in their wondering, in their longing, in their unbelief, in their doubts or in their needs? All of these things.

Someone standing at a nativity crib in the middle of Liverpool asking for a prayer is a gift- not just a gift to enthusiastic volunteers, not just a gift to the Church - but it is a gift to God, because God wants nothing more than to be needed by us. All these prayers express that need in oh so many ways. Take a moment at the end of the service to read some of them. If they move our hearts, how much more do they move the very heart of God – the God who loves us enough to show us that being as needy as a tiny baby born to refugees in an oppressed society, being that needy is what he is all about.

One of the security men in town advised that we should have had a wishing well rather than a prayer tree. I explained to him that we are into prayers not into wishes. There is a subtle but essential difference. We've all heard that saying – be careful what you wish for. We could also say be careful what you pray for. The difference is that we don't have to trust to luck, we can trust God completely with our prayers, our

hopes, our longings and our dreams. In fact he is the only one we can trust completely with the deep longings of our heart because he knows and understands that longing better than we understand ourselves.

Many of us can think back and remember some of the things we wished for, some of our dreams that never came true. Many of us can think well thank God they didn't because that wouldn't have been right for me at all.

One of the prayers on our tree said: 'Please make my dream come true. You know what it is'. The simple faith expressed in those words says it all. God needs no explanation, God needs our trust.

We were asked in town: 'Are these prayers just for dead people?' God is the God of the living. His prayer for us, his love for us, never dies. We are forever caught up in the love of the God we cannot see, but who knows our needs and hears our prayers.

This might all seem like *airy fairy* wishful thinking but what keeps wild hopes alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes, what keeps hope alive is love, love for those around us, love for those no longer with us, the haunting need for love in our longings, in our hopes and dreams, in the love and hope we express in our prayers. Our hearts are restless until we find our rest and peace in God.

It is hard to express such love, so poems and works of art are created to try and capture the emotion of love. Christianity is filled with art and music and prayer, because it is a religion based on God's love for us here on earth.

At this unsettling time, the beginning of a new year, we are surrounded by the poetry of prayer, the poetry of life that doesn't always rhyme and it reminds us that prayer is for life not just for Christmas. Amen



# Christmas in Liverpool 2013

Sometimes we need to **look again** at the Christmas story and ask ourselves is the message **relevant** today?

In Liverpool new lights have been erected in Church Alley to show the Three Kings on their **journey** to Bethlehem.

So when **you next journey** into Liverpool may I suggest you make a **short journey** to see these Kings and then venture up Church Street.

Here you will see a traditional Crib Scene has been set up by Liverpool Churches Together and Liverpool BID Company, City Central, to remind shoppers and visitors of what a **REAL Christmas** is all about.

Go, stop and look at the manger scene in the Nativity Chalet.

Beautiful life-sized wooden nativity figures stand alongside the lights, tinsel and materialism of our shop windows.

The nativity is a window from the past which is **truly linked to the present**.

The crib shows us the infant Jesus, his mother Mary, and Joseph.

Shepherds and sheep, as well as the Kings, and gifts belonging to the Magi will also be placed in the crib.

Here they accept donations for **Liverpool Food Bank** and they encourage people to see the **real gift of Christmas**.

People are also being invited to write a prayer and place it on a prayer tree.

They also plan to stage a performance of a '**Giant Puppet Nativity**' at the Christmas tree and in **Williamson Square on Saturday 22nd December from 10.30am**. This will include a Nativity Procession and Gospel Choir.

Jean Flood, Mission in the Economy Chaplain said:

"We have been overwhelmed by the response to the Nativity Crib. The prayer tree is bedecked by prayers and people are moved to tears reading them.

We have prayers written in many languages including Spanish and Chinese. Many people comment that it is wonderful to see a crib which points to the real meaning of Christmas.

It is a wonderful experience just to listen to people's conversations about Christmas, and of course all of the human stories from across the world."

## PAUSE

This morning I want you to **imagine** you are Mary or Joseph in that stable.

Think about the **excitement** of the first Christmas morning.

Messages and cards start arriving. One was sent by the innkeeper's wife.

*"It's got a cute nose and big round eyes;  
It's created excitement you can't disguise;  
It's a wonderful baby from a perfect pair,  
And that's reason enough for a great fanfare.  
Congratulations on your new baby boy!"*

Joseph reads this card and hands it to Mary.

Later another card from the girlfriends of one of the shepherds says:

*"A baby boy's one thing  
The whole world adores,  
And the best part of all  
This one is yours!"*

The bible doesn't seem to tell us about the cards Mary and Joseph received. Perhaps there were quite a lot of cards because everybody loves a baby.

As Mary carried Jesus around Bethlehem total strangers stopped.

Everybody loves babies - they remind us of how very **precious** human life is.

Babies bring out the best in people.

You have only to look at how gently and tenderly people treat a new born.

Babies are very special - they are **precious**.

The sad thing is that as babies grow up they become **less adorable** and as young adults they may find themselves **forgotten** or neglected.

- The adorable baby may develop into a young person hanging around on a street corner. They may unnerve others and people do not always find it easy to see a gang of youths as the valuable, loved and adorable people that they once were.

- The adorable baby ends up as a child in a detention centre - separated from her mother in a dawn raid because her mother is seeking sanctuary in our country. We seem to have forgotten how priceless and loved those children once were.
- The adorable baby ends up living in poverty. In Liverpool there are neighbourhoods where over 50% of children live in poverty. Parents struggle to feed themselves and their children

## How have we allowed this to happen?

Perhaps if we had continued to see these children as valuable, adorable and precious then things might be different.

Christmas is a story of a baby - a baby who most certainly is:

- Special
- Precious
- Adorable
- Priceless to Mary and Joseph
- Valued by Christians all over the world because he is God who came to share our human life

We too are **ALL** precious

- Loved
- Valued
- and Adorable

If we believe that Jesus who is God becomes a member of the human family then we all have God as a member of our **OWN** families.

That means that the **WHOLE** human family is **SPECIAL** and **PRECIOUS**.

**Every human being is equally precious** - not just the people here in school.

It is also true of homeless people finding shelter in Liverpool's Whitechapel Centre.

It is also true of the family where a parent has lost their job and they look to the Food Bank to feed their family.

It is true of those who shock us deeply by the terrible hurt that they cause to other people.

This means as people we cannot sit back and ignore times when that utter preciousness is denied to:

- the young person hanging around on the street corner

- the young adult who finds themselves without a bed for the night
- the family who asks for help from the Food Bank
- the list can go on and on

We can't simply sit back and ignore the fact that basic services are being cut to some of the most vulnerable people in our country.

The baby lying in the manger calls us to look at the world in a new way.

Christmas is about the **giving** of presents and the very best presents perhaps say something to those who receive them about how deeply precious and special they are to us.

## Story

*There is a wonderful story from the Seventh Century about King Oswin of Northumbria giving St Aidan the gift of a horse to help him on his travels. The saint met a beggar. He felt embarrassed and uncomfortable about owning a horse. Without hesitation he gave it to the beggar.*

*Aidan later returned to King Oswin without the horse. King Oswin was cross. "If you want to give away horses to beggars I have dozens of old nags you can give away. Don't give good horses to old beggars."*

*Saint Aidan looked the king in the eye and said "Is this horse more valuable to you than this child of God?"*

## Reflection

That is what the baby Jesus brings to our world - a vision of the utter preciousness - the **value** of each one of us as a human being.

That is the vision that has the ability with God's help to **change and transform our communities**. That is the vision of Christmas.

*A baby boy's one thing*

*The whole world adores,*

*And the best part of all*

*This one is ours!*

The Good News of Christmas is if we look at the baby in the manger we shall see that indeed **GOD IS HERE** in Liverpool with us, in the muddle, the despair and the uncertainty within some families and communities.

As we gaze on the Christ child help us to remember that in life, no matter what uncertainties we face we will **"Never Walk Alone"**.

That is the **JOY** of the Christmas story.

## Prayer

In a moment of **silence** we think about the meaning of the Christmas story.

*Lord,*

*Thank you for the gift of Jesus*

*Help us to explore and understand the message of Christmas*

*We pray especially for people who find Christmas difficult:*

- *the lonely*
- *the homeless*
- *people in hospital*
- *our soldiers serving overseas*
- *people who are separated from loved ones*
- *families where members and friends have recently died*

*Help us **ALL** be mindful of other people's needs*

***Amen.***

