

Small Pilgrim Place Journal 55:

St Michael's Church Hall Green, Birmingham

Although most Small Pilgrim Places are in small towns, villages or rural settings, a few are in cities: St Pancras in the midst of a shopping centre in Exeter, for example, and Greyfriars in Canterbury. But St Michael's is unique among the sixty-odd I have visited, in that it's in a suburb of a large city, Birmingham and, as churches go, is pretty young, having been built in 1971. So I wasn't expecting to find anything of great historic or architectural interest, as I had in Exeter and Canterbury. What I did find, however, was a church whose very small congregation is making an enormous contribution to the wellbeing of its neighbourhood.

The church building is of red brick, set on a small patch of grass amidst shops, houses and busy roads. St Michael's is a Bronze Award Eco-church, and a sign on the wall explains that the grass is left unmown for parts the year for the benefit of wildlife.



I was met at the door by parishioner Ann, who gave me a guided tour of the worship space and adjoining rooms, which are used for a bewildering variety of purposes. One of them was neatly packed with everything a baby might need, from clothes to pushchairs and toys. This,

Ann told me, is the Growbaby room, a walk-in facility where those with infants can come to find what they need. It is run by members of a local branch of the Vineyard church who hold services here in the shared worship space. Hall Green is not an affluent area and, following the closure of several industrial works, unemployment figures are high here.



Another room was used by an arts and crafts group, whilst Muslim children come here for a Koran class. There is an after-school club too, and an older adjoining hall is home to a large Scout group. Other rooms are used for ballet, karate, yoga, a mums-and-toddlers group and Moo Music, a pre-school children's music group.

In the central worship space a dais holds a plain altar and preaching desk. Chairs are of the stackable sort that can adapt to the needs of various groups who meet here. A corridor leads to a hexagonal room, light and airy, furnished with a fitted carpet, wall hangings and comfortable chairs. This is set aside as a place for quiet prayer and reflection.



After Ann's tour we joined Priest-in-charge Martin and non-stipendiary minister Ian for a lunch of home-made soup and bread, served from the kitchen. They explained that St Michael's is a Local Ecumenical Project, shared between Anglicans and Methodists. Although the congregation is very small -



perhaps twenty parishioners attend the Sunday service - the footfall through the church each week is very large, thanks to all the groups who meet here. Many of these began through the work of Ian, who arrived in 2014. With the help of "Thrive Together Birmingham", a joint venture charity of the Church of England and Church Urban Fund to tackle poverty, he identified local groups needing spaces to meet for

various activities. The results of that ministry are now evidenced in the array of groups who regularly gather here, making this an exceptionally welcoming place with a buzz of activity and a willingness to adapt to the needs of its diverse local community.