

UNLOCK WALK 2012

Unlock, an ecumenical organisation which works in deprived urban areas, has a sponsored walk each year as its main source of funding. Part of the fun is visiting a number of churches of different denominations, each of which issues a factsheet about its work. Most also sell refreshments. This year the distance was seven and a half miles and was in the borough of Brent, the most ethnically diverse local authority in Europe, where we visited nine churches. The Walk always makes a good day out and it was marred only slightly by almost incessant rain.

I started at Queen's Park tube station and went to the nearby St Luke's Anglican church. This is a modern building replacing the Victorian Gothic church which was destroyed by bombs in WWII, with "a thriving and diverse congregation, reflecting the rich mixture of cultures in the area." There is a Fairtrade Café and the church participates in a Homeless Nightshelter from December to April, providing an evening meal, overnight accommodation and breakfast to about fifteen homeless people, one night a week. There are close links with the adjacent primary school and many of the congregation are aged under eighteen. There was an interactive exhibition including a short film of the story of Hagar and Ishmael in which all the characters had been made out of Lego, including the Almighty and two angels! It worked well.

The route led through Queen's Park, which was renamed in honour of Queen Victoria in her Golden Jubilee year and is maintained by the City of London. During the 19th century Christian campaigners fought for open spaces, believing that free access to parks was essential for people living in overcrowded districts and working in bad conditions. The next church was St Martin's, Kensal Rise, an Anglican church founded in 1899 as a memorial to Dean Vaughan, who was headmaster of Harrow School and Master of the Temple. The foundation stone was laid by Princess Henry of Battenberg (Queen Victoria's youngest daughter, Beatrice, whose own daughter Ena became Queen of Spain). There is much excellent Arts and Crafts work in the church, including the carved choir stalls, a stunning memorial to those killed in WW1, and some impressive stained glass. I was particularly drawn to nine lancet windows depicting St Andrew, Caedmon, St Oswald, St Crispin, King Alfred, St Francis, George Herbert, Florence Nightingale and General Gordon. Each window commemorates a member of the church – the Caedmon window is in memory of a curate who died in 1916 as a Chaplain to the Forces. There is also a fine Hill organ dating from the early 20th century. St Martin's has collaborated with churches in the West Indies for almost a century and the present congregation is racially diverse. There is a multi-faceted Mission Action Plan which seems practical and admirable.

The next church was the Pentecostal City Mission in Harlesden, said to be London's Reggae capital. The population here includes Afro-Caribbean, Irish, Portuguese and Colombian communities, plus a strong Brazilian presence. I had already passed the premises of the Divine Redeemer Ministries Intl and the Maranatha Church. The Pentecostal City Mission has weekly services and other projects including a nursery, young people's club and a foodbank. The fact sheet asked walkers to praise God for the new church building and to pray for various kinds of help, including a new church bus.

Not far away, beyond Willesden Junction and the tiny, pretty Pocket Park, was the Roman Catholic church, Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden. In pre-Reformation times it was a place of pilgrimage with a holy well and two statues of Our Lady. St Thomas More was a pilgrim there; his last visit was in 1534, just days before he was arrested. The more famous statue was removed in 1538, taken to

Thomas Cromwell's house in Chelsea and burnt. But in 1886 a Catholic Mission was established in Harlesden and a new statue was carved from an oak in the graveyard of St Mary's, the shrine's original site. The present church was opened in 1931 and during the Marian year of 1954 some 60,000 pilgrims visited the shrine. Today there are over sixty first languages spoken in the congregation, including many Brazilians who "have brought their own colourful devotion to the Mother of God: Nossa Senhora Apparacida." I much enjoyed visiting this beautiful Romanesque church. Prayer points in the factsheet were to give thanks for the diversity of the community, to pray for families in overcrowded accommodation and for those affected by drugs, prostitution and gun crime.

The route then led past Harlesden Jubilee clock, marking Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, and through Roundwood Park to the New Testament Church of God whose strapline is "The church where love is growing". Like many churches in this area, the chancel was equipped with a drum kit. I visited the church first and then had to walk another hundred yards, past some shops and across a road, to find the checkpoint and refreshments, not that I needed the latter as I had refuelled at the Roman Catholic church. Not far away was the Elim Pentecostal Church which states "we are passionate about God and His plans for the local community." There are initiatives regarding children, youth, women, men, pastoral, hospitality, literature and finance. On Sunday there is pre-service prayer from 10.30 with the service itself lasting from 11 am to 1 pm, while on Tuesday there is coffee morning, prayer and socialising between 10 and 12 noon. It was certainly a friendly and lively place, as were all the churches I visited.

Next it was up to Gladstone Park. I could have saved myself some trouble by taking the much shorter wheelchair route round the base of the hill (the Walk always caters for people with disabilities, or people bringing small children in pushchairs) but I climbed up the hill to Dollis Hill House, where William Gladstone and other senior Liberal politicians came to work away from Westminster. In 1900 the local council bought the house and gardens and named the park after him; sadly the house has been damaged by fires. The park is spacious and has a pond with plenty of ducks on it. Leaving the park, I made my way to the Polish church of St Francis of Assisi, which is on loan to the parish from the Anglican church. The Polish community is growing constantly – there are about 150 baptisms and 100 first communions each year – and asks for prayers for a church of its own. Meanwhile there are many groups including prayer groups, more social groups such as Mother & Toddler, Scouts, and an AA group for alcoholics and a marriage counselling service.

Not far south was Willesden Green Baptist Church, which has a membership of over 500 drawn from forty nationalities. There are activities every day including an Open House on Fridays where homeless people are helped with "food, clothes and spiritual bread."

The route then encouraged one to travel by bus to the Interfaith Centre on Salusbury Road. This building looks a bit like the Planetarium but it is older than I thought – the foundation stone was laid in 1904, again by Princess Henry of Battenberg. It houses the congregations of St Anne's Anglican Church and St Andrew's URC and is also "a Christian hosted place of meeting, study and interaction between those of all faiths and none.....The Centre is also home to established inter faith initiatives such as World Congress of Faiths and World Conference of Religions for Peace." The main worship space is upstairs, and from behind the altar there is a fine view over Willesden Lane Cemetery – that

doesn't sound great but it is in fact very attractive! Downstairs, beside the welcoming entrance hall and easy chairs there is the Trinity Chapel which has some beautiful Orthodox icons.

It was encouraging to see so many new churches, built because more people have moved into the area and wanted their own churches. It was also good to see that Kilburn Library is open seven days a week, while Willesden Library near the Baptist Church was opened in 1894 following a poll of ratepayers.

As usual the walk was fascinating and enjoyable with lots of friendly people, and as ever I am very grateful to my generous sponsors. One of the delights of the walk is that since the route is circular and can be walked in either direction one is constantly meeting other walkers. They can be identified at fifty paces – all holding their route maps and with ready smiles and greetings! Next year's Walk is on 20 April.

Juliet Chaplin, April 2012