

Bigot busters - tackling sectarianism

Kiran Singh, education and access curator at St Mungo Museum in Glasgow, discusses a groundbreaking new approach to the seemingly insurmountable problem of sectarianism in the city.

In 1993 St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art opened with the aim of challenging bigotry and promoting mutual understanding and respect between people of different faiths and of no faith.

However, staff knew that the museum's goals were going to be challenging. Only two months after the museum had opened, a visitor attacked and permanently damaged the museum's image of the Hindu god Shiva as Nataraja – the man said that he was acting in the name of Christ.

Over the past few years, St Mungo Museum has recruited a team of education and access staff who, along with museum curators, research, plan and deliver programmes to raise awareness of religious divisions, promote understanding of world religions, and tackle social issues such as racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.

In 2002 the team at St Mungo initiated Scotland's first museum citizenship programme for schools. They later realized there was a need to create programmes to explore the subject of sectarianism in more detail, and to work with a wider range of audiences, including adults from faith communities, young people, teachers and, more recently, gang members and politicians. The result was a programme called Bigot Busters! Tackling Sectarianism, which – with support from local awareness groups such as Nil By Mouth, Sense Over Sectarianism, and Learning and Teaching Scotland – has now become one of the UK's largest and most popular anti-sectarian programmes, with over 1200 people taking part in it each month.

Group visitors are first welcomed to the museum and then taken to see the damaged image of Shiva as Nataraja. We explain how the statue was attacked by someone who saw the placing of a Hindu image along side Christian objects as offensive. This aspect of the workshop leads to a thought-provoking discussion about why someone would want to attack a religious image that others view as important or sacred, and about how some people use religion as a tool to divide.

To explore the language associated with sectarianism, we start with the rivalry between the football clubs commonly known in Glasgow as the Old Firm. At a football match between Glasgow Rangers and Glasgow Celtic, people will see examples of social and global divisions, as well as political connections, unfolding before them – by the flying of Irish, British, Palestinian and Basque flags, and by the singing of sectarian songs.

Objects on display in the museum and handling objects – such as sectarian merchandise sold at Old Firm games – are used to facilitate discussion of how people's views and beliefs can be shaped by upbringing, and what can often lead to prejudice in the form of racism and sectarianism.

The team at the museum relies on the community to support its programmes. In order to engage support from the wider community, staff at the museum often work in partnership with anti-sectarian groups, young offender organisations and social work departments, as well as teaching groups, faith representatives and other museums.

Although we know that we cannot always change the views of someone with sectarian beliefs, we have discovered that a thought-provoking visit can lead visitors to question themselves and their views, if not now, then perhaps in the future. We hope that these workshops will help people to rethink about what type of city they want to be part of, and what we all can do to change it. We see the museum as a place where people should feel safe to discuss issues relating to sectarianism and methods to eradicate the problem across all levels of society.

A key objective of Glasgow City Council is to promote social inclusion, tackle poverty, and improve health and well-being. The Council's corporate Equality Policy recognises the need to promote equality and challenge discrimination. It has identified faith communities as a priority group, and outlines the Council's commitment to promoting good relations between people from different communities.

The work of St Mungo Museum ties in with Glasgow's Cultural Strategy, a strategic priority of which is to develop socially inclusive cultural services which promote equality, challenge discrimination, and increase participation amongst under-represented / hard-to-reach groups. The Action Plan which underpins the strategy commits the Council to developing St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art as a national centre for challenging religious discrimination, promoting inter-faith dialogue, and exploring sensitive issues of faith in the 21st century.

St Mungo Museum will continue to expand its work on social issue topics. As part of this year's commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade within the British Empire, schools and groups across Scotland are being offered the chance to take part in a free workshop called Towards Understanding Slavery, which looks at crimes against humanity – both in the past and human rights violations and forms of slavery today.

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'One generation plants the trees, another gets the shade. '
Chinese Proverb