St. Columba's, Oxford United Reformed Church

"Our mission is to celebrate God's love: in *worship* that is within the Reformed traditions; in *fellowship* that is inclusive, supportive, challenging and affirming; in *service* that extends the love we share within our community to the wider community. In all things we hope, through the help of the Spirit, to be true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Oxford Usual Resident Population = 153,900 (2008)

Ethnic Minority Population = 17.2 % (2007)
- The ethnic diversity among young people is especially high, at 22% of under-16s.

Oxford has the 2nd highest proportion of people born outside the UK in the South East.
- Diversity has increased by migration from new European union countries, with around 2100 migrants applying to work in the Oxford area in the three years following April 2004 (mainly from Poland)

Our Story ...A Journey of Diversity

The church now known as St. Columba's was originally founded in 1908 as a Chaplaincy to Presbyterian students by three denominations – the Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church of England and the Free Church of Scotland. It was intended to serve students and members of Oxford University who "were or should be" Presbyterian.

As time went on, people from outside the university began to attend services, and in 1929 the church became part of the Presbyterian Church of England. As with many congregations of this denomination, St. Columba's particularly attracted Scottish and Irish Presbyterians. Taken with the continuing university influence – at one point, the eldership is said to have been broadly the same as the Committee of the University's Caledonian Club – this gave a distinctive flavour to the church.

Over the twentieth century, however, the nature of the congregation broadened, and increasingly the Eldership reflected this wider community. In 1972 St. Columba's became part of the United Reformed Church, and in 1978 the church called Caryl Micklem to be its Minister. Caryl was the first Minister of St. Columba's not to have come from a Presbyterian background.
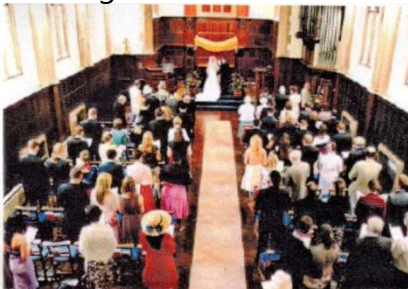
Widening the Circle – Open and Welcoming

Following Caryl's ministry, and the ministry of Wesley Workman, 1995 brought a further change, when the church called Susan Durber to be its Minister. Susan was not only the first female Minister of the church, but the first Minister only ever to have served within the

United Reformed Church. During Susan's ministry at St. Columba's the congregation continued to develop, calling its first elders from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and seeing women and younger members increasingly taking leadership roles within the church. We also noted that people had less denominational allegiance, and we were welcoming newcomers who had not necessarily previously worshipped in the Reformed tradition.

Gay and lesbian people have been faithful members of St. Columba's for many years. In the mid-1990s the Metropolitan Community Church planted a congregation in Oxford, which met initially at the Friends' Meeting House, and then later in the hall at St. Columba's. This allowed fellowship to develop between the congregation of St. Columba's and the members of the Metropolitan Community Church. When the national Metropolitan Community Church decided that it needed to refocus its resources and withdrew from Oxford, St. Columba's was delighted to welcome members of its Oxford congregation to worship with us.

However, the church meeting was concerned that the closure of the former metropolitan Community Church had meant that a group of people in Oxford were distant from church – and that St. Columba's was well-placed to minister to them. A small group of people were therefore encouraged to work towards a Christian ministry to lesbian and gay people.

This ministry has taken the form of a group known as 'First Sunday', which meets once a month for an evening of discussion, fellowship and worship. A wide range of people have attended 'First Sunday' - ranging from students to senior citizens, from people who are secure in the faith but confused by sexuality to people who understand their sexuality but have been hurt by institutional church in the past. It has welcomed protestants and catholics, evangelicals and liberals - and people who are searching for faith without recognising such labels. Some people worship in other churches while others have joined St. Columba's; some come to a few meetings and move on, while others continue to attend and to gain from the meetings.

We believe St. Columba's is also the only church in the area which has celebrated services of blessing for civil partnerships.

St. Columba's has continued to evolve in other ways during this time. Asylum Welcome, an off-shoot of the Oxford Black and White Christian Partnership, began its work in our buildings, and several members of our community (and of our sister church in Cumnor) have been central to its work. We have been delighted to see a growing number of young families worshipping with us - and as more of us have become disabled, we have been learning about meeting the needs of disabled people effectively. And, in partnership with the Archway charity, we have offered a ministry of welcome to people affected by loneliness.

Finally, in addition to the number of nationalities who are represented in the congregation, we continue to remember God's people across the world – for

example, focusing on our Commitment for Life partner in Bangladesh. One of our Elders participated in the Wessex Synod exchange with Zambia, and we have supported HODEP (Helping Orphans Develop - a Zambian charity working with AIDS orphans) financially since her visit. The daughter of one of our Zambian visitors is now studying in London, and we were delighted to welcome her to worship recently.

Following Susan's appointment as Principal of Westminster College, St. Columba's and our sister congregation in Cumnor called Carla Grosch-Miller to be our Minister. Carla brings new experiences to our churches as a Minister who was previously in pastoral charge in a United Church of Christ congregation in the United States.

We are looking forward to working with Carla to meet the challenges that we continue to face:

- we want to be serious about serving the growing number of young children in the church - for example, by taking the actions involved in pursuing the Child Friendly Church award - we are already adapting our buildings to make them better suited to children;
- we want to recognise, and understand how to meet, the diverse needs of disabled people and their families in our congregation;
- we want to play our part in reaching people who have little experience (or perhaps interest) in formal church structures, but who are seeking faith.

We believe that our experience so far highlights a number of lessons for the future:

- the importance of genuine contact and engagement with the people we encounter;
- the prophetic role of church meeting and the whole church in being part of a vision of an inclusive church;
- the challenge of listening for the spirit, and being prepared to answer a call, even if it means a departure from previous practice; and
- the powerful effect of visible role models in the church who differ from stereotypes.

In conclusion, the Elders recall a discussion we had with a minister who was working for a dissertation on inclusion. We spoke about the meaning of inclusion for us, and the challenges we found with the idea - and then concluded by returning to the Bible:

> "...in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28 - New Revised Standard Version).

For us, this remains the cornerstone of our prayer to be an inclusive church, and the starting point of our journey towards being a multicultural church.

The Elders of St. Columba's United Reformed Church,
Oxford April 2009