

AN ALTAR FOR ST FRANCIS BOURNVILLE

Designed & Made by Joe Warbrick

In consultation with the congregation of St Francis, facilitated by their Vicar, Revd Canon Richard Wharton, strong themes of community, environment and thanksgiving quickly emerged. The community of the church is clearly woven into the wider community of Bournville. Care for the environment is reflected in the attractive and carefully designed and landscaped Bournville estate, and is a high priority for the Congregation. Grateful interaction of humanity with creation is at the heart of the tradition of St Francis.

Francis' ability to cherish what is good without attempting to possess or control it led me to create a space which felt protective and cherishing, but not constricting or confining. In that space, which upholds the table for the Eucharistic – thanksgiving – prayer, the church community can place anything they wish to cherish, honour, give thanks or pray for, yet without controlling or confining it. The initial idea was the nativity tableau, conceived by St Francis, but then any seasonal emblem, flowers, fruits, object representing the best of human collaboration with creation, or anyone in particular need of cherishing or protection.

The concave space facing the nave feels protective, but not enclosing, so cherishing without possessing whatever is held there. It can continually express the theme of community and involvement, and the priorities of St Francis, such as love for animals and all creation. Imaginative use of this simple space will bring the cares of the neighbourhood visually to the altar, holding them in the Church's gaze as they gather for prayer.

The base is constructed by a method of coopering, comprising 208 pieces of 5 different woods, its varied tones representing a diverse community, as well as the best of historic skilled human craft working with cherished natural resources.

Understanding the importance of Francis' non-controlling approach to relationships expressed in the three-fold promise of poverty chastity and obedience, the lintel of the altar is a panel of Oak marked by three knots, like those of the Franciscan girdle.

The open, light space of St Francis church is ideal to appreciate the richness of the woods that grow in many Bournville streets and gardens, and after which many are named. They are, Maple, Ash, Oak, Sycamore and Douglas Fir. I sought a lightness, richness, yet sense of being grounded in the natural world, reflecting the spirit of the welcoming community of St Francis and their commitment to be an enduring, enriching presence in this neighbourhood.

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