

## A NEW NATIVITY A new contemporary commission for Birmingham Cathedral



<http://www.birminghamcathedral.com/>

### The commission

This is a new opportunity for artists/makers/craftspeople/blacksmiths/jewellers to create a new Nativity set that will be shown within Birmingham Cathedral during the Christmas season – to launch in December 2025. We want to focus specifically on makers/craftspeople/blacksmiths/jewellers to bring to the fore the specific trades and specialisms of Birmingham and the wider West Midlands.

It is an exciting opportunity to make a substantial work that reflects on themes of **centring marginalised voices** from across the world and **bearing witness to global events**. Birmingham Cathedral is entirely open to ideas and concepts and looking forward to working with artists on this important project.

### Background to the commission

Birmingham Cathedral respects the creative vision that artists working in all disciplines bring to sites and contexts and is establishing a programme of creative projects that explore its important heritage, theological role and its vital city centre location.

The cathedral wants to continue this contemporary programme by commissioning a new Nativity for cathedral, following on from 2022's hugely impactful **Common Wealth Table**. It is hoped this new work will form a key focus of our Christmas celebrations, with the ability to be used yearly, possibly focussing on a new story or theme on an annual basis.

**The Nativity** will become the focus for the cathedral's Christmas celebrations and will hopefully be interpreted widely by artists/makers/craftspeople/blacksmiths/jewellers. It will need to provide an area of focus for during the period – positioned at the front of the Cathedral altar between

Christmas and Epiphany, and then moved to the East End from Epiphany until Candlemas (see above pictures for size and scale and position during Christmas). Figures would need to be easily moveable and storable for the rest of the year – but for this special period in the church’s calendar, be able to be restaged annually with the ability to possibly explore different global stories that may have been in the spotlight throughout the year. We are however open to artists’ interpretation and encourage you to think creatively and ambitiously. The Birmingham Cathedral steering group are eager to receive ideas that are inventive and not restricted by narrow interpretation.

We hope also to run workshops with cathedral user groups with the artist to talk through possible themes and ideas around global concerns and the importance of bearing witness as part of the process, so please also keep this in mind when thinking about your proposal.

### **Short history of Birmingham Cathedral**

The Cathedral Church of Saint Philip is the Church of England cathedral and the seat of the Bishop of Birmingham. Built as a parish church and consecrated in 1715, St Philip’s became the cathedral of the newly formed Diocese of Birmingham in 1905. St Philip’s was built in the early 18th century in the Baroque style by Thomas Archer and is located on Colmore Row, Birmingham, England. The cathedral is a Grade I listed building.

It is located on one of the highest points in the city and is said to be at the same level as the cross on St Paul’s Cathedral in London which was completed in 1711. Following an Act of Parliament, construction commenced in 1711, to the design of Thomas Archer and was ready for consecration in 1715. Construction was estimated to cost £20,000, but the final figure was only £5,012. (Equivalent to £790,000 in 2019). This was because many of the materials were donated and transported to the site at no cost.

At the front stands a statue of Charles Gore, who became the first Bishop of Birmingham in 1905, when Saint Philip’s became Birmingham’s Anglican Cathedral. While adhering to his views on the divine institution of episcopacy as essential to the Christian Church, Gore from the first cultivated friendly relations with the ministers of other Christian denominations and advocated co-operation with them in all matters when agreement was possible.

In social questions Gore became a leader of the group of high Anglicans known loosely as Christian socialists. In 1889 at Pusey House. Gore had helped found the Christian Social Union. He worked actively against the sweating system, pleaded for European intervention in Macedonia, and in 1908 was a keen supporter of the Licensing Bill.

On 28 September 1917 Gore licensed 21 women as lay readers called the “Diocesan Band of Women Messengers”. These were possibly the first female lay readers in the Church of England. The last one, Bessie Bangay, died in 1987 aged 98.

During the Second World War, the cathedral was bombed and gutted on the 7 November 1940. Its most significant treasures, several windows by Edward Burne-Jones, had been removed in the early stages of the war by Birmingham Civic Society, and were replaced, unharmed, when the building was restored in 1948. Edward Burne-Jones, who was born two streets away in nearby Bennett's Hill and baptised in the church, added to the enhancement of St Philips by the donation of several windows, of which three are at the eastern end. The West window, also by Burne-Jones, was dedicated in memory of Henry Bowlby in 1897.

## Surrounding area and current situation

Six of the monuments in the grounds surrounding the cathedral have heritage listings, including one commemorating two men who died during the construction of [Birmingham Town Hall](#) and a memorial to the victims of 1974's [Birmingham pub bombings](#). [Thomas Stirling Lee's](#) statue of Charles Gore, vested in convocation robes with his right hand raised in blessing, is located at the West entrance.

The modern-day cathedral has an excellent professional Cathedral Choir of boys, girls and adults. They sing five services each week in various formations, usually including the boys at three services and the girls at two. They have no choir school, so choristers come from many different schools and their diversity reflects the diversity of the city. It has a close working relationship with Birmingham Conservatoire and the cathedral also plays host to concerts from other choirs and musicians on a regular basis.

The cathedral has a developing reputation for commissioning significant works of contemporary art, including the 2022 Common Wealth Games commissioned [Commonwealth Table](#) by Intervention Architecture. It has developed a Creative programming strategy which [can be found here](#). It is worth noting that it also has a strong working relationship with St Chad's Cathedral – Birmingham's Catholic cathedral – situated a 7-minute walk away.

There is a keenness to support **emerging talent** of artists and makers – evidenced by the choir and the cathedral's support of the annual craft fair, but it also is developing good links with the art school, has ties to the Conservatoire and would like to retain a role in developing creative talent within the city.

The cathedral also has a close relationship with and delivers support services for homeless people and charities in Birmingham.

## The Nativity – specifics of the Commission

The cathedral has developed this commission in response to meetings with its Arts Steering Committee, with support from Chapter.

We see **The Nativity** as an ambitious work that speaks intelligently to this context and will provide an annual contemplative spectacle for the next couple of decades. It will be a place where stories can be told, when global plights can be commemorated, where communities can focus their thoughts around Christmas activities. We are keen to see a wider, global majority focussed story represented in proposals.

As mentioned above, we would also like to create moments for communities to shape ideas through preceding workshops whilst you are thinking about the creation of the work: please consider this when thinking of how you may approach the brief, but it can also be developed as ancillary work by the cathedral.

- **Material**

**The Nativity** can be interpreted widely by artists: we do want to demonstrate our commitment to sustainability but also recognise that for longevity and mobility different approaches may need to be used. Metals of any description may be an approach, given the focus on regional key crafts. Mother of pearl/ nacre is also a substance that is shared by traditional trades in both Birmingham and Bethlehem, so this may also influence your thinking.

- **Size/length**

We see this as substantial with each character being approximately life-size and visible from the back to the front of the cathedral (hence image of Canon Missioner in accompanying images for scale). It would initially be composed of a minimum of 8 figures: Jesus, Mary, Joseph, three kings and two shepherds – plus scope for incorporating animals/ stars etc if desired.

- **The Budget**

The budget is still tbc but as a guide we are assuming the budget will be approx £20,000. This will need to cover all the costs of the commission, including artist design fees, travel and expenses (and any accommodation), and the making: materials, installation and any storage needs.

**Please note the budget is still subject to funding applications. The budget estimates must include VAT.**

- **Selection Criteria**

The shortlisting will be undertaken by the steering group based on the following criteria:

- The originality, creativity, and skill of the proposed work
- The engagement with and response to the themes of **centring marginalized voices and bearing witness to global events**
- The viability of the proposed work to be completed within the budget and timeframe
- The practical suitability of the proposed work for use in the cathedral

### **What to do next**

Birmingham Cathedral is working in partnership with Arts&Heritage on this contemporary commission. Birmingham Cathedral and Arts&Heritage are inviting through open call responses to this brief via a short expression of interest. We particularly encourage applications from artists/ makers/ designers and jewellers from the West Midlands. Expressions of interest should state why you are interested, 300 words outlining your initial thoughts, a paragraph on your previous experience and links to/ images of examples of previous work which respond to similar briefs/ themes. Expressions of interest should be submitted by 30 August 2024.

### **Site visit**

A shortlist of 4 selected w/c 4 September will then be invited to submit fully costed proposals by 15 January 2025. A contribution of £500 will be made toward your costs for this. A final decision on which proposal to take forward will be made by the steering group in January 2025.

### **Timescale**

Brief circulated	June 2024
Deadline EOI	30 August 2024
Shortlisting of EOI and 4 x successful applicants informed	w/c 9 September 2024
Proposal Development	October 2024 to Jan 2025
Deadline Proposal submission	15 Jan 2025
Decision commission	End of January 2025
Funding confirmation	January 2025
Making of work and workshops	Feb – Nov 2025
Work installed	Dec 2025

### **Enquiries**

Please contact [enquiries@birminghamcathedral.com](mailto:enquiries@birminghamcathedral.com) about this commission. We look forward to receiving your response.