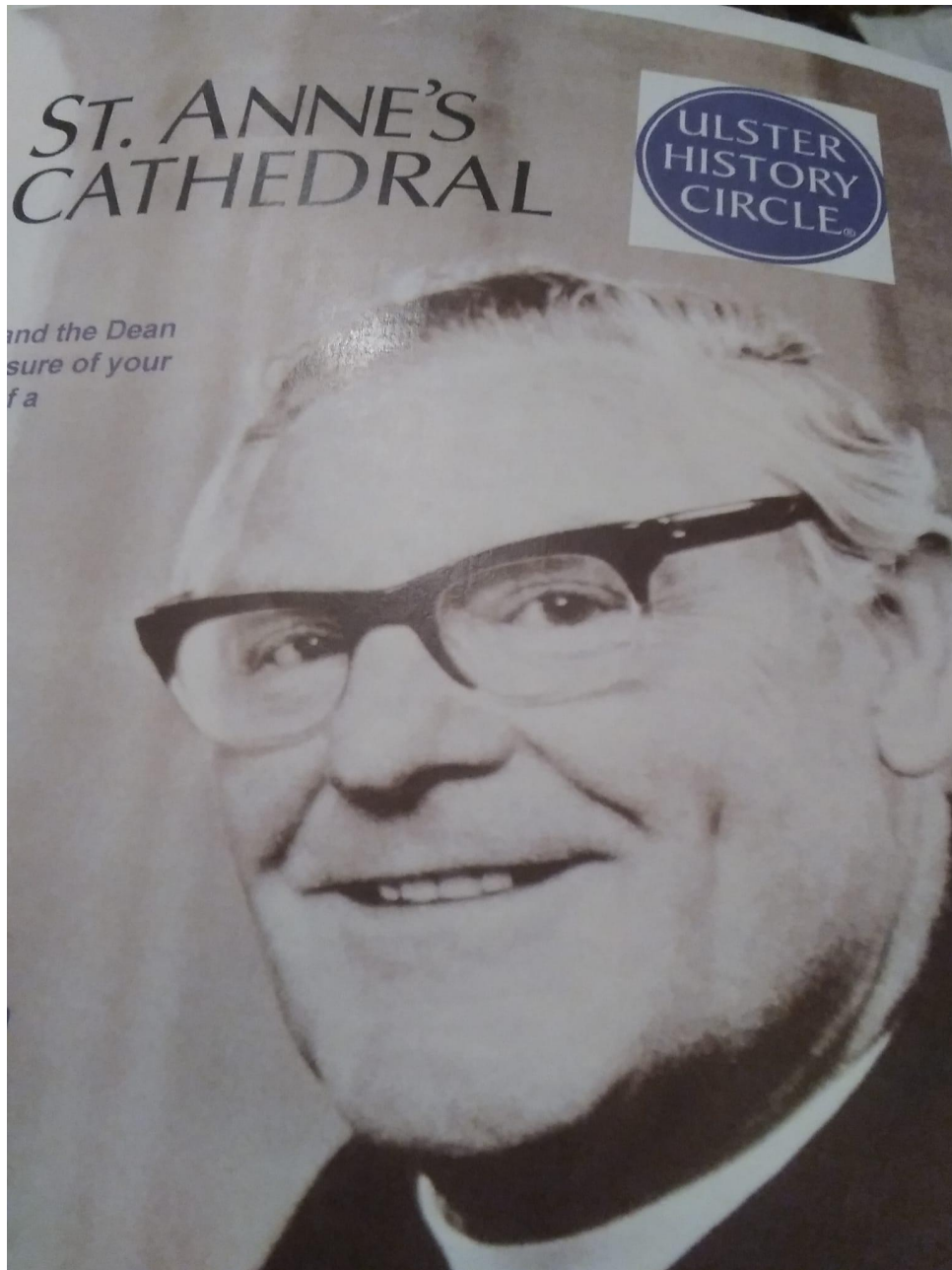


Church News Ireland



**Image of the day – Belfast Black Santas
past and present**

Image of the day

Belfast Black Santas past and present

The Dean of Belfast, the Very Reverend Stephen Forde says, 'It's important for us to keep hope alive even when all looks hopeless'

The Dean talks here about his motivation to. The annual Sit Out for Charities

This year, the Belfast Black Santa Sit-Out is running for 10 days, from December 14 to 24. Dean Forde says -

As I arrived at St Anne's Cathedral on Friday for what would be a 12-hour stint on the steps of the cathedral, it seemed like this would be a long day. Fortunately, the weather was mild. Yet, on Friday morning, at the beginning of the sit-out, those 10 days can seem like a long haul to Christmas.

But two things ensure that I do not view the sit-out in any such negative terms.

First, even though the Translink workers took two days of industrial action in pursuit of their wage claim to meet the cost-of-living crisis, there was a steady stream of people passing the cathedral.

People will do what it takes to make their donations. It is that desire by people from every walk of life to make their Christmas gift, so that others who are struggling may

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receive something more, which ensures that I am happy to stand on the steps for the long haul.

This is a light in dark times.

The other motivation is for those who will be helped by every penny raised for the Black Santa Appeal.

A parent whose daughter or son is held in the grip of drug addiction, is a parent who is 'in it for the long haul'.

And those charities supporting families and individuals in the area of addiction know that they too are 'in it for the long haul'.

And families watching the gas or electricity meter run down to the last pennies, know that heating and feeding a family means sticking to it for the long haul. They will be turning to charities who know that there is no quick fix.



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It is this determination to keep going through the most challenging of times, and to be supported by those who understand and care, which keeps hope alive even when all looks hopeless.

Light in dark places. Hope in place of despair. These are the most important gifts of Christmas.

These are the gifts which the Black Santa Appeal makes possible of the generosity of each person who gives.

The First Black Santa - The Very Reverend Samuel Bennett Crooks

The 'Black Santa' tradition at Belfast Cathedral was started more than 41 years ago by Dean Sammy Crooks. The local press described Dean Crooks as Belfast's Black Santa.

The Very Reverend Samuel Bennett Crooks OBE TD was Dean of Belfast in the last third of the 20th century.

He was born on 20 January 1920 into an ecclesiastical family (his father was the Rev. S. B. Crooks, Rector of Killough, Co. Down and then St Stephen's, Belfast) and educated at Down High School and Trinity College, Dublin.

He was ordained in 1944 and became Dean's Vicar and then Vicar Choral at St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, until 1949, when he was appointed Rector of St John's, Orangefield.



Later he became Rector of Christ Church Lurgan, then the largest parish in the Church of Ireland, Rural Dean of Hillsborough and Archdeacon of Dromore.

In 1970 he became Dean of Belfast, a post he held for 15 years. While at the Cathedral he launched the annual Christmas "sit out" to raise funds for local charities for which he became known as the Black Santa.

He was made a Chaplain of the Venerable Order of St John of Jerusalem in the Queen's Birthday Honours in February 1976., and admitted OBE in 1981.

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He died in 1986 aged 66 in a car crash on the Saintfield Road near Carryduff on his way to a meeting at Belfast Cathedral.

Donations to the Black Santa Appeal

All the money gathered is donated to local charities with a proportion given to Christian Aid. The range of charities includes medical research; those caring for children, youth and the elderly; the improvement of employment opportunities for young people and a host of small charities which cannot afford paid fund-raisers.

The funds are distributed to charities at the Good Samaritans' Service, held in the Cathedral early in the year following each Sit-out. Registered Charity NIC108368.

You can donate online via this link.

<https://belfastcathedral.enthuse.com/cf/black-santa-appeal-2023>

People and places

East Antrim carols in garden centre and airport

Last Saturday morning the Christmas shoppers at Coleman's Garden Centre in Templepatrick enjoyed some wonderful Carol singing as they walked around the shop looking for Christmas presents or while they enjoyed a coffee.



A choir made up from singers from local Ballyclare churches, as well as some from Portrush, sang everyone's favourite Carols and raised money for Christian Aid. Kilbride Parish Church was well represented and thanks must go to Pamela Gray from Ballyclare Presbyterian Church for organising this wonderful event, and to Coleman's for once again hosting the choir.

There's another opportunity this Friday evening at Belfast International Airport when the choir will be singing in the Arrivals Hall from 7:00 - 9:00pm, welcoming weary travellers home for Christmas. If you would like to join the Carol singers please let Pamela know through Ballyclare Presbyterian Church Facebook page.

Ballyclare parish serves up 285 hot chocolates

A team in St John's never fails to surprise. In one day they served 285 hot chocolates, handed over approx 100 rolls of sellotape and wrapping paper.



Their rector commented that all was done “with the love we have for our community. We are conscious that so many in our town need to know hope and love this Christmas. If you know anyone that we could encourage and support this Christmas, then send an email to jonny@theunitedparish.org.uk. And if you can join us in the coming week, we would love to see you...”

Letterkenny prepares for their Christmas Carol Trail

There will be a truly festive atmosphere in the heart of Letterkenny before Christmas as the town hosts its tenth carol trail.

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This year's event will take place on Friday, 22 December starting at Trinity Presbyterian Church Letterkenny at 7.30pm.

This unique festive event is organised by Letterkenny Chamber of Commerce, Letterkenny Cathedral Quarter and Letterkenny CDP and the carol service is facilitated by Trinity Presbyterian Church, St. Eunan's Cathedral, Letterkenny and Conwal Parish Church.

“All are welcome to come along and participate in what should be a very memorable evening. The Bishop of Raphoe Most Rev Alan McGuickan, has been a regular attendee of the carol trails and this year we have invited his Church of Ireland counterpart the Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, the Right Reverend Andrew Forster to our tenth carol trail”.

The carol trail will begin with Christmas Carols and readings at Trinity Presbyterian Church on Letterkenny's main street at 7.30pm.

The group will then make its way up Church Lane in a candlelit procession which is being put together by Letterkenny CDP and the Cathedral Quarter.

The carol service will end at Letterkenny's oldest building, Conwal Parish Church at the top of the Church Lane for more carols and a short reading and there will be a special rendition of 'O Holy Night' from singer Jean Curran.

The evening will finish with tea and mince pies in Conwal Parish Church Centre.

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This year's event is bittersweet as it is first carol trail without the late Derek Fleming. Derek, who was the organist in Trinity Presbyterian Church was highly instrumental in establishing this joyful festive tradition as he arranged what carols would be sung. He also played the organs at each of the respective churches.

This unique event promises will be a very special evening and hopes to give people the chance to take time and reflect on the real message of Christmas 'goodwill to all',. "So, come along on Friday, 22nd December and enjoy a very special night in Letterkenny's Cathedral Quarter."



Belfast East does it with style

The Circuit Superintendent, the Rev Paul Maxwell, showing great courage to wear such an outfit for the Circuit staff Christmas dinner during the week.

Thanks were expressed to the staff at Re:refresh for a delicious meal.

Clerical Appointments

Rector of Blessington

The Revd Niall Stratford has been appointed as the new Rector of Blessington Union of Parishes in the Dioceses of Glendalough.

Niall grew up in a rectory in Ballisodare, Co Sligo being the youngest son of Archdeacon Ralph Stratford (deceased) and Phyllis Stratford. He has worked in the commercial world of Insurance – latterly as a Liability Adjuster / Investigator for some four decades.

His ministerial service has been as a Non Stipendiary Minister within the Dioceses of Dublin and Glendalough which he provided in conjunction with his Insurance career.

Following ordination in 2009, Niall served as curate in St Matthias' Ballybrack. Subsequently in 2015, he was appointed as Rural Deanery Priest to Taney Deanery, serving in the parishes of St John's in Clondalkin and Rathcoole and then in the parish of Zion. As of 2017 Niall was appointed as Youth Pastor in Powerscourt with Kilbride.

In 2019 and 2020, Niall provided relief duty in Blessington Union and Narraghmore Union. During 2021 and 2022 Niall served in the parish of Newcastle and Newtownmountkennedy with Calary and also in the parish of Donnybrook with Irishtown. Currently he is attached to the parish of Christ Church, Bray.

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Commenting on his appointment, Niall stated: “I am humbled and excited at being appointed as Rector to the Blessington Union of Parishes – rekindling previous acquaintances and making new ones as I embark upon a new chapter in my ministry”.



Niall is widowed. He says of his beloved wife: “ Vivian was a such a wonderful encourager throughout my ministry and had been looking forward to journeying with me on the latest chapter “. His family are Nicholas, Robin and Amy, Nicholas’s partner Fódhla and grandson Naoise. Niall’s interests include travel and reading and being an avid follower of ‘Inspector Morse’ and ‘Inspector Lewis’.

The date for Niall’s institution has yet to be set.

Evangelists commissioned in Castlewellan

The Bishop of Down & Dromofd has commissioned Trevor and Lorraine Brimage for their work as Family and Community Evangelists for St Paul’s Castlewellan and Kilcoo.

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Trevor and Lorraine, who have been in post for almost a month, are tasked with developing and supporting a family and community outreach strategy for the parish. They are working alongside Minister in charge, Revd Pat Kerr, to reach those in Castlewellan and Bryansford who have no church connection or who have become disconnected from church.

The couple are from Co Monaghan and have a background in youth work, worship and church planting. They are job-sharing one post which has been generously funded by a donor.

Pictured above at the commissioning service on Sunday 10 December: Bishop David, Lorraine and Trevor Brimage and Revd Pat Kerr, Minister in charge.

https://www.downanddromore.org/news/2023/12/evangelists-commissioned-in-castlewellan?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook

New role for curate in Shankill Parish Lurgan

“We're thrilled to announce that our curate, Rev Rodney Blair, has been appointed Vicar of Shankill, which means that Rodney, Judith, Harry, and new baby Blair (due in February), will be staying with us for around another 5 years.

“This new appointment will see Rodney have a more senior role in the parish and take on more responsibility for day-to-day ministry. Whilst we have been discussing and praying

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about this for some time, the need for this appointment has become more focused since Mark became Archdeacon of Dromore.

“Rodney will officially start his new role on Monday 15th January 2024, after he is instituted as Vicar by Bishop David McClay at a special service on Sunday 14th January at 7pm in The Jethro Centre.”

News reports

The intervention comes as the UK Government announces

In the media

Sniper kills Christian mother and daughter - Catholic Herald

A Christian mother and daughter were killed in “cold blood” by an Israeli sniper in the grounds of a Catholic church in Gaza City, the diocese of Jerusalem said.

Nahida and daughter Samar were inside the Holy Family Parish in Gaza, where the majority of Christian families have taken refuge, when they were shot with no warning.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, said in a statement: “One was killed as she tried to carry the other to safety. They were shot in cold blood.”

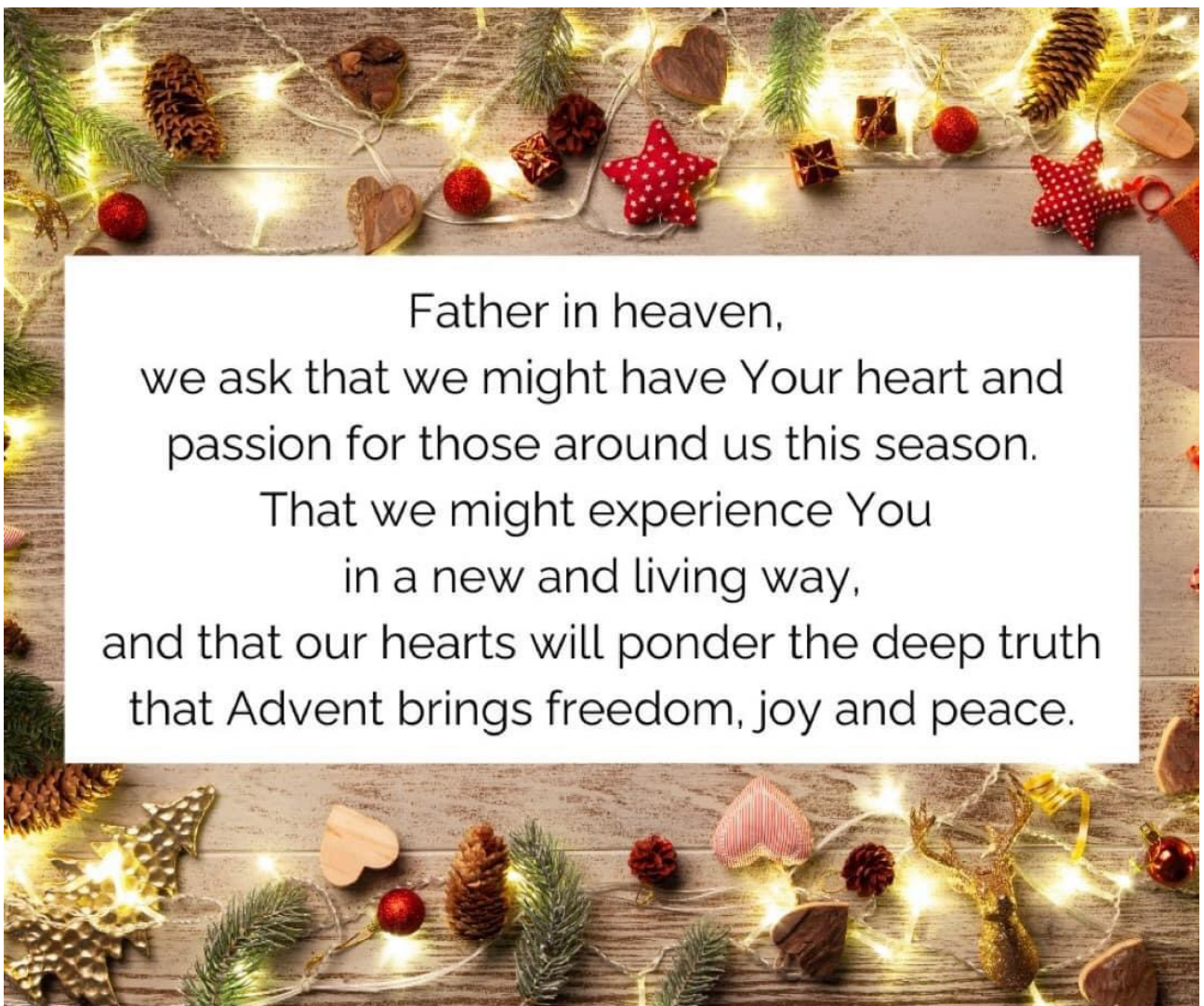
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Seven more people were shot and wounded as they tried to protect others inside the compound.

The victims were members of Gaza's shrinking Christian community, which dates back to the first century.

Earlier, the Convent of the Sisters of Mother Teresa was hit by a rocket fired by an IDF tank, destroying its generator and fuel, the Patriarch said. The convent is home to 54 disabled people, and part of the church compound. It had been signalled as a place of worship.

"The 54 disabled persons are displaced and without access to respirators some of them need to survive," he added.



Father in heaven,
we ask that we might have Your heart and
passion for those around us this season.
That we might experience You
in a new and living way,
and that our hearts will ponder the deep truth
that Advent brings freedom, joy and peace.

Layla Moran, a Liberal Democrat MP, said her relatives were among the hundreds trapped in the church. “I am desperately worried. There are snipers at every window pointing into the church,” she said.

Pope Francis condemned the killings during yesterday’s Angelus prayer, in St Peter’s Square, in the Vatican, describing it as terrorism.

“Unarmed civilians are the objects of bombings and shootings. And this happened even inside the Holy Family parish complex, where there are no terrorists, but families, children, people who are sick or disabled, nuns,” he said.

Church ‘is out of closet’ after first same-sex blessing - Daily Telegraph

‘I think applause may be appropriate.’ So began a chorus of clapping at St John the Baptist’s, in Felixstowe, Suffolk, yesterday morning, where the usual Eucharist service included a blessing, for the first time in the Church of England’s history, for same-sex partners, Charlotte Lytton writes

With the rainbow LGBTQIA+ flag flying outside, Jane Pearse and Catherine Bond became one of the first couples in England to receive a prayer that would publicly affirm and celebrate their union. A move made legal after midnight on Saturday – instead of the usual clink of teacups, the pop of champagne corks mixed with the post-service chatter, as

congregants and the women, both vicars, were well aware of the occasion's magnitude.

“I feel the weight of history on our shoulders, because it's such a historic moment for the Church of England,” Ms Bond, 63, said. Wearing a gold jacket and sparkly silver nail varnish, she added that she was “excited” – and indeed surprised – to have received a glut of messages of support both locally, and as far afield as Italy and France. “It hadn't dawned on me, this level of interest,” Ms Pearse laughs.

Although same-sex marriage remains forbidden in the Anglican church, last Tuesday it was announced that clergy would be able to use Prayers of Love and Faith. This came a decade after the publication of a report commissioned by bishops that recommended the introduction of “services to mark faithful same-sex relationships”.

It's a move that has come after seven years of “listening, learning and discernment” in the Church of England. During this time a bitter divide has brewed, running so deep as to lead to repeated calls for Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has publicly backed standalone same-sex blessing ceremonies, to step down. The fracas is “stretching us to breaking point”, Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York and Primate of England, said last month following a special gathering of the General Synod (the church's ruling body), with many senior figures left “feeling weary, fearful, confused and even angry about it all”. This week, Rev Canon John Dunnett, the national director of the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC), said in a statement that the organisation “deeply regrets” the new rule change; a decision that “confirms our belief that a line has been

crossed, which we hoped and prayed would not happen". It has left a "tectonic divide" within the community, the CEEC said, that "will continue to be destructively present until and unless it is addressed".

Bond admits to having had feelings of "nervousness" ahead of the service, concerned that protesters might derail the celebration. "But we're really prepared to stand up and be counted... we accept there are people who don't agree with this situation, and we have to respect their views. But I think, as Christians, we're clear that the Gospel is about love." Ms Bond and Ms Pearse got together six years ago, when working in the same benefice (an ecclesiastical office), and now live in Felixstowe and are both associate priests. They share a love of rowing, reading and tennis, with Ms Pearse happily claiming the better backhand. Both have adult children from marriages to men. Ms Bond's godson no longer speaks to her as a result of her relationship, she said.

'Today is wonderful for the Church. It is the day the Church of England comes out of the closet'

Local support has been bolstered by the Rev Andrew Dotchin who led Sunday's service. A member of the Synod, he sees it as an important step towards "build[ing] a church for a radical new Christian inclusion" – a journey that began, he says, with the church's apology to the LGBTQIA+ community for their treatment in January.

"We think that it's an 'us and them', without realising that gay and lesbian people are in the church already," he said. "Today is wonderful for Jane and Catherine; wonderful for the Church of England because it is the day the Church

comes out of the closet and says, ‘we are who we are, and we love everybody who’s here’.” He acknowledges that “not all of us are on the same page yet, but I hope and pray that the joy of today’s service will enable people to go on to say, ‘yeah, that wasn’t that difficult, was it?’”

Just as the notion of women becoming priests or bishops was once contested but is now largely accepted, he is hopeful that the matter of same-sex marriage will go the same way, too.

Still, for many campaigners, the Prayers of Love and Faith don’t go far enough, as they fail to give same-sex couples the rights afforded to heterosexual believers. Julia Johns, 50, who has recently moved to Felixstowe, says she and her partner “would absolutely love to get married in a church”, but current regulations are holding them back. Ms Johns says it is “really sad... if you truly believe that God is the one that created the entire universe, I don’t really think that they’re going to be bothered about two women being together”.

The Synod is to spend until 2025 debating whether to allow standalone blessings for same-sex couples. Whether gay priests will be allowed to have civil marriages is still being discussed. Is she hopeful that legislative change might soon come? “There’s hope, and there’s realism,” Ms Johns says, “and I think I’m a realist. So that’s why we have to keep campaigning.”

Ms Pearse is conscious that any forward movement “is still up in the air”, but both she and Ms Bond will marry legally in the church, if and when rules allow. Ms Bond hopes, too,

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that their blessing can be a beacon of hope. “It feels as if what we’re doing today is helping make the Church more relevant, and bringing it into the 21st century.”

Poem for today

When Out of Poverty is Born

Hymn by the Rev’d Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community

When out of poverty is born
a dream that will not die
a landless, weary folk find strength
to stand with heads held high,
it's then we learn from those who wait
to greet the promised day:
'The Lord is coming; don't lose heart
Be blest: prepare the way!'

When people wander far from God,
forget to share their bread,
they find their wealth an empty thing,
their spirits are not fed.
For only just and tender love
the hungry soul will stay.
And so God's prophets echo still:
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

When God took flesh and came to earth,
the world turned upside down,

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and in the strength of women's faith
the Word of Life was born.
She knew that God would raise the low,
it pleased her to obey.
Rejoice with Mary in the call:
'Be blest: prepare the way!'

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A-734713. Sung by the Christian Aid Scotland Scratch Choir*

Speaking to the soul

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

Church News Ireland

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