

Church News Ireland



Image of the day – Black Santa tapping into our generosity

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Black Santa: Tapping into our generosity as sit-out begins with target of £150k

“It never rains but it pours.”

On Monday, the first day of the 2022 Black Santa Sit-Out at St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, the outside temperature had jumped by 10C from the freezing conditions of the days before. But with the warmer weather, it started to rain.

Just as well, then, that Black Santa and his helpers have a brand new gazebo to keep them dry.

However, much more welcoming on the first day of the sit-out was the encouragement given by those who called by to offer their support.

At one point, three bishops, past and present, were helping Dean Stephen Forde. Also lending a hand was the Lord Mayor of Belfast, councillor Tina Black.

The mayor not only made a donation on behalf of the Lord Mayor's office, but took time to be fitted out with a Black Santa cloak and receive donations into the barrel from members of the public.

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The Lord Lieutenant and her staff also delivered the collection received at the Lieutenancy Carol Service, held last week at St Mary's on Chapel Lane in the heart of Belfast. Further colour was added by the staff of Christian Aid, whose bright red hoodies are a reflection of the parched red soil in the drought-stricken communities of the Horn of Africa, which Christian Aid is supporting.

With press photographers and TV interviews, the 2022 appeal is well and truly launched. What remains over the next six days, whatever the weather, is to tap into the generosity of the people of Belfast and far beyond, to meet that target of £150,000 raised.

Because the challenge facing the Dean of Belfast is nothing compared to the challenges faced every day by those people who will be helped by the charities that Black Santa supports.

Dean Stephen Forde is writing a daily diary of the Black Santa Sit-Out for the Belfast Telegraph

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.

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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 awarded an OBE in 1981.

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.

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.

You can donate online via this link.

<https://belfastcathedral.enthuse.com/cf/black-santa-appeal-2022>

News reports



Benefact Trust supports planned outreach by Down & Dromore to asylum seekers and refugees

The diocese of Down & Dromore is delighted to have been awarded a generous grant of £7,000 from the Benefact Trust to support outreach work for Ukrainian and Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the diocese. This grant scheme is being administered by the Church of Ireland's Representative Church Body.

Bishop David announced the diocese's plan to begin a new Diocesan Outreach to Asylum Seekers and Refugees at the Bible Week at the end of August. There are a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Northern Ireland from Ukraine, Afghanistan and Syria as well as from many other countries around the world. We want to

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welcome and support those who have arrived here with little or nothing and at the same time demonstrate the kindness and compassion of Christ in such a way that people will want to find out more about the Christian faith for themselves. To do this we plan to appoint a full-time leader of this outreach and seek active participation of volunteers from churches across the diocese.

Keith Gardiner, Fundraising Office for Church Growth said: “We need to raise £52,000 per year to cover the employment, property rental and programme costs of this new initiative. It is a real blessing to receive this £7,000 grant from the Benefact Trust meaning that we have now raised £11,500 towards the anticipated costs. We are really keen to welcome individuals and churches as partners in this pioneering outreach through their prayers, as volunteers and as supporters of the outreach financially.”

Donate

Donations to the Diocesan Outreach to Asylum Seekers and Refugees can be made through the diocesan CAF site - [<https://cafdonate.cafonline.org/21415#!/DonationDetails>]

Benefact Trust exists to make a positive difference to people’s lives by funding, guiding and celebrating the work of churches and Christian charities; empowering the most vulnerable and giving people, communities and places a renewed opportunity to flourish. (benefacttrust.co.uk)

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Joint Christmas Message from the Bishops of Clogher 2022

As Christmas approaches, we join together in prayer-filled reflection to look forward with hope to the coming days when we mark the coming of God as one of us; as one who walks with us in our joys and sorrows, no matter where we are or who we are.

During this past year we have witnessed the invasion of Ukraine and the outbreak of war on the continent of Europe

for the first time in almost eighty years. Many have been forced to flee their homes and become refugees – becoming exiles in a continent that prides itself as a beacon of dignity, freedom, justice and the democratic way of life. Those people— mostly women and children – forced to leave Ukraine are not alone; many others across our world have had to flee persecution, often on account of their religious belief. In more recent days we have seen on our TV screens the harrowing images of people fleeing across the English Channel, some of them sadly losing their lives. Indeed, recent UN figures show that 2 billion people across of the world – one in four of our global population – live in conflict.

Conflicts often bring other situations into focus, such as economic and financial pressures or social issues like homelessness and housing insecurity. All these place challenges and choices before us in terms of how we respond. Thankfully, people all across Europe have responded generously during this past year, including here in our Diocese of Clogher. Many thousands of people from Ukraine and other places of conflict and persecution have been welcomed to this island and the way in which families and communities have embraced them is exemplary. Those same communities are also helping and supporting many families and individuals to cope with the energy and financial crisis here through a variety of charitable organisations and bodies, nationally and locally. By doing all this, they proclaim through actions the love of God – walking with people in all kinds of situations; giving hope to us all in times of darkness and fear.

The Prophet Isaiah, writing at a time of invasion, war and desolation, tells us that:

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. (Is. 11: 1–2)

Some 700 years after this was written, Jesus Christ our Saviour was born in a stable in Bethlehem. Let us not forget that he too was a refugee and an immigrant, having to flee for safety to Egypt along with Mary and Joseph (See Matthew 2: 13–15). They knew the reality of violence and fear.

The God who comes to us each year at Christmas identifies with refugees and those facing economic hardship or the effects of war, wherever they are. His presence in our midst not only renews us and gives us hope, but challenges each of us again and again to witness to that presence in all people and to bring his live–giving hope to them, especially in times of conflict. God walks with us all year round. May we be open to walking with him in welcoming the stranger, helping those in need wherever they may be; and may we all pray and work for peace, reconciliation and justice in our broken world.

Let us pray,

Lord God our Father, at this time of celebration, let us bring to prayer all those who are suffering because of war, violence, persecution or any kind of economic or social hardship.

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We remember especially the millions across the world who are displaced, especially those from Ukraine and other places of conflict. Sharpen our awareness of how issues are inter-related. Keep our consciences alert. May our leaders develop policies and rules that are guided by humanity and vision and informed by your love for all. Thank you for the work of the many people and organisations that bring your compassion and love to those in need.

Thank You, Creator God,
Eternal Christ,
Reconciling Spirit
for the transformative power of Emmanuel,
God with Us.



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Bring peace to the people of Ukraine, Russia and other troubled places.

Eternal Father, as we welcome the birth of your Son, walk with your people, wherever they are, to remind them of your eternal presence, your comfort and your strength.

May the peace, joy and hope of Christ be with us now and forever, Amen.

Yours in Christ,

+Ian Ellis, Church of Ireland Bishop of Clogher

+Larry Duffy, Roman Catholic Bishop of Clogher

MU supports six foodbanks across Down & Dromore

As one of the aims of Mothers' Union is to help those whose family life has met with adversity, Diocesan Trustees were keen to explore how best to help families facing difficulties due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Trustees are already aware of the increasing need for donations to foodbanks and discovered that many foodbanks have had to increase their opening hours into the evenings so that those in work can access their help. Many of our members in Branches across the diocese regularly donate essential items to foodbanks and to other charities.

Mothers Union Trustees, keen to make a further contribution from Diocesan funds, decided to donate £600 worth of



groceries and other essentials to six different foodbanks in locations across the diocese.

The foodbanks advised us of their specific needs and were delighted to receive what they needed in groceries and other essential items.

We were also very grateful to have been awarded an additional grant of £600 from the All Ireland Mothers Union Fund, “Mums in May”, which will enable us to donate more groceries and other essentials to foodbanks in the New Year as we continue to remember families facing difficult economic circumstances.

With thanks to Clare Stewart, MU Action & Outreach Coordinator in Down & Dromore

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Bríd Smith's bill for more radical abortion is an 'appalling and retrograde' step, says PLC

The Pro Life Campaign has described the abortion bill introduced in the Dáil today by Bríd Smith TD on behalf of People Before Profit as “an appalling and retrograde move that would make horrific late term abortions legal on request”.

Responding today to the introduction of the bill, Eilís Mulroy of the Pro Life Campaign said:

"It's hard to fathom how Deputy Bríd Smith and others wish to introduce even more abortion when the reality is that abortion is already widely available in Ireland since 2019.

“With over 21,000 abortions since the law changed, representing an over 70% increase in previous rates in just three years, our public representatives should be focusing on positive supports for women in unplanned pregnancy rather than more abortion.

"It is truly barbaric to be proposing the decriminalisation of late term abortion knowing how developed the unborn baby is at this stage of development and the scientific evidence showing that unborn babies can even feel pain at that stage", she concluded.

‘More flights than Whicker’ fraudster took £5m in church funds

A Church Whicker” spent the proceeds of a £5.2 million fraud on Burberry, Ted Baker and online fruit machines, a court heard.

Martin Sargeant, 53, was head of operations for the Diocese of London, which controls churches and their coffers in the capital.

He requested cash for “dysfunctional churches” and the money went straight into his pocket. Sarjeant pocketed just over £5.2 million and the cash was “lavished on his lifestyle”, prosecutor Joey Kwong told Southwark Crown Court.

@

£1m

The money Martin Sargeant fraudulently spent on three properties in Scotland, ‘including a riverside log cabin’

He bought seven properties, three of them in Scotland worth £1 million, “including a riverside log cabin which can be rented out as a business”, said the prosecutor.

Mr Kwong said a statement from an American Express bank account showed Sarjeant spent £2,700 at fashion store Ted Baker in February 2012.

“In January 2013, £1,616 spent at Burberry and £4,000 spent on hotels in the same month ... and in the three months between May and July 2013, he spent £30,000 at the Soho Hotel in London,’ Mr Kwong said.

Sargeant was a BA frequent flyer who flew more than 180 times with the airline between 2010 and 2019, including to New York, the court heard.

At a previous hearing, Malachy Pakenham, prosecuting, referenced Alan Whicker, the travel presenter, when he said: “Alan Whicker would not have clocked up as many flights as this defendant did.” The Diocese of London have not been able to maintain their buildings and some have been closed to the public, according to an impact statement read to the court.

Mark Ruffell, defending, said Sargeant has a “long-standing gambling addiction”. He said: ‘This wasn’t a fraud from the start, it was a fraud that came about because he had influence with substantial amounts of money.

“He explained at the start of that interview that he had a gambling addiction and at some points was losing £20,000 a day from online fruit machines.”

Mr Ruffell said Sargeant’s gambling addiction began when he was 15 and would miss school to place bets.

He told the court that Sargeant “created a fantasy life to hide lies” and that he is “sorry for everything”.

Sargeant, of Dudley, West Midlands, admitted one count of fraud by abuse of position and was jailed for five years.

Judge Michael Grieve, KC, told him: “You admitted that as you did this you knew the church was close to bankruptcy.

“This was a sophisticated fraud carried out systematically for a period 11 years resulting to a massive loss to the churches of London which they could ill afford.”

Perspective

Christians, fewer in number, must not give up

Faith does not come from any cultural or political influence, but from our personal belief in Christ, Tim Stanley writes in the Daily Telegraph

I was in Edinburgh at the weekend and, with Christmas only days away, decided to pop into the Catholic cathedral for confession. Anticipating a big queue, I arrived 15 minutes early – an unnecessary precaution because by the time the priest sat down in his box, only two of us were waiting.

Habits are dying in a country where faith is wilting, where less than half of us identify as Christian and church attendance has never recovered from Covid. It feels as if, after decades of humming and hawing, Britons have finally given up God – tempting Christians to give up on Britain.

Well, they mustn't. Especially not during Advent. The answer to their problems is just around the corner ...

The first thing we need to establish is that the census data did not show that millions of Brits have ceased being

Christian but rather that they've stopped describing themselves as Christian, something they almost certainly weren't to begin with.

Christianity used to be part of the package of being British, like tea and Shakespeare. As Britain changed, becoming multicultural and secular, it was inevitable that people would rewrite their labels along with it. Yet Christianity is not, and never was, a collection of inherited customs, like carols or putting an angel on a tree. It's a religion – a set of beliefs that, with grace and hard work, are meant to transform the believer. And always central to its narrative is the idea of Christians as outsiders in a fallen world.

Jesus was rejected; even his own followers questioned and betrayed him. The Apostles were ruthlessly persecuted, becoming models for martyrs, visionaries and fools for Christ. Basil the Blessed, a 15th-century Russian, wandered the streets naked from head to toe, even in winter, and threw stones at the houses of respectable Muscovites. "We ought never to forget," wrote Cyprian, the 3rd-century bishop, "that we have renounced this world." Home is Heaven, he argued; this life is a foreign land: "We are living here now as aliens and only for a time."

A recipe for arrogance? Absolutely. But also for conscience, for the Christian challenges their society to be better – even when it is nominally Christian. The conversion of the Roman Empire did not end the dispute over the best way to serve God, and there followed schisms and reformations, the radicals always denouncing their age in terms we'd find familiar. Too greedy, too lazy, Christian in name only. When you realise that even in 17th-century society, a Puritan could

look around himself and say, “this place has gone to the dogs” gives one perspective.

These older jeremiads drew inspiration from ancient history. In the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, the prophet notes that the nation of Israel had fallen away from God. It was like a stump, though not entirely dead. From it would spring a shoot that would eventually bear fruit – the first Christmas tree, if you like, because Isaiah was predicting the birth of a messiah. The coming of Christ can be cited by Christians as proof that God doesn't stop caring about us even when we stop thinking about him, and even the darkest age can be conquered by light. Given Christianity's history and teachings, the most unchristian thing one could ever do is submit to despair.

So, what to do in 2023? The older I get, the more I'm convinced Christians need to shake off society's perceptions about their faith – that it is soft, gentle, like mild, green Fairy Liquid. It is challenging; if it isn't upsetting someone, it isn't being preached properly. It is not, however, political. Conservatives too often present it as a cultural reaction, the Left as socialism, yet Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was not of this world but of the next – and it's up to us, individually, to make things around us better.

Not that it's self-help, either. The banality of modern Britain, the obsession with utility must be avoided. “Come to church and get your kids into a good school” or “prayer can be fantastic for mental health” is insulting to a messianic faith that is, by its true nature, disruptive. The schmaltzy version of Christmas is comforting but inaccurate. Angels are not

floating babies; the Bible says they have six wings and are covered with eyes.

Christmas is the time for ghost stories because with Jesus's birth, the veil between this world and the next is lifted, and the fantastic seems possible. In short, Christians have the best possible advert for their beliefs, which is Christ himself, the very incarnation of God. All of these complex ideas must be made intelligible to a 21st-century audience, but it would be madness to jettison the mysterious aspects of Christmas, for that's what makes people stop and wonder, to consider more closely these peculiar Christians and their infant saviour.

What did the Edinburgh confessor say to me, other than "put back the money you stole from the orphanage"? There are some things too private even for a columnist to share, but he advised me to "return" to the Church, even though I'm one of the few who regularly attend it. Belief is not a membership, let alone a box on a form. It is a journey, often difficult – but, thanks to the companionship of a church, not one we have to take alone.

Follow Tim Stanley on Twitter [@timothy_stanley](https://twitter.com/timothy_stanley); read more at telegraph.co.uk/opinion

Poem for today

The House of Christmas by G.K. Chesterton

There fared a mother driven forth

Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings

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Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

Speaking to the soul – Christmas series

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

Church News Ireland

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