



Black Santa expects to top last year's total as charity vigil ends

The 60-year-old dean of Belfast's Anglican cathedral said he has been grateful for both the public's donations and the unusually mild weather, as he prepares to end his outdoor fundraising stint on Christmas Eve.

News Letter - Dean John Mann said that single donations have ranged from under a pound to £5,000, and that his “gut feeling is we will do a little better than last year” when they come to totting up the final amount.

It is the fifth year he has been in charge of the long-running fundraising tradition, which sees him stand outside St Anne’s Cathedral – clad in black – for roughly nine hours each day while the public hand in donations.

The money is then split amongst around 200 different charities.

The tradition dates back to 1976 when then-dean Sammy Crooks began the first fundraising drive.

The target is to raise about £200,000, and last year £182,000 was raised.

By Wednesday afternoon, Dean Mann said about £122,000 had been raised – but that the total always rises after Christmas, as more donations collected during the festive period arrive with the Cathedral.

He expects that by the time all the money has been totted up after Christmas, the 2015 event

will have raised between £180,000 and £190,000.

Read more: <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/black-santa-expects-to-top-last-year-s-total-as-charity-vigil-ends-1-7132309#ixzz3vEYaZQjv>

Presbyterian respite home lighting up lives at Christmas

Lawnfield House in Newcastle, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's respite care home, continued this year's Christmas celebrations with a special lighting event, when the home's Christmas lights were officially switched on.

Permanent residents and respite care service users of the 20-roomed residence, family members and friends from the local community were invited to the festive evening for the official switching on of the lights by Terry Andrews, Councillor of Newry Mourne and Down District Council.

"Christmas is a special time, even if you are away from your own home, and we wanted to

invite as many people as possible to enjoy the official switching on. It was wonderful to welcome



so many people, especially Councillor Andrews, and join in the carol singing with singers from the Newcastle Glees Musical Society,” said Isobel Leslie, Lawnfield’s manager.

As part of the festivities representatives of The Salvation Army and Society of St. Vincent de Paul were invited to take part in the event and collect the Lawnfield House contribution to their joint Family Appeal, one of Northern Ireland’s

biggest Christmas appeals. “It is just one more way in which Lawnfield can make a difference



Attending the Christmas celebrations (from left to right): David Gibson, Angela Cummings, Jennifer Napier, and George Wilson (all permanent residents at Lawnfield), with Isobel Leslie, Home Manager.

and I want to thank all the staff who worked so hard to make it happen,” Isobel Leslie said.

Lawnfield House is open 12-months a year, with referrals coming from all of Northern Ireland’s health and social care trusts, as well as self-funding guests. All rooms are wheelchair accessible and some are en suite.

The Church took over the running of the care home from the Disabled Christian Fellowship in September 2014 and caters for a diverse range of people who require respite care, from those with various physical disabilities, visual and sensory impairment to mild learning difficulties as well as older people.

“Like the other homes run by the Church, the Christian ethos is a central part of Lawnfield House, and those who come to stay are from a range of denominations and none. With different activities to enjoy at the home, our wheelchair accessible minibus is used for day trips to the local tourist attractions and to the shopping centres in Newry,” Isobel said.

Since the formation of the Presbyterian Orphan and Children’s society in 1866, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has played a key role in ministering to the physical needs of people, working in partnership with many different organisations. The Church’s Council for Social Witness has overall management responsibility for Lawnfield House and the Church’s 17 other projects across Ireland.

Recognising the importance of the three strands of residential, respite and day care in the overall support of individuals and their families, the Church seeks to deliver an effective social witness service through Lawnfield House and its other projects.

Britain's Christian values key says David Cameron

Britain's Christian values have been key to making the country a successful home to people of all faiths and none, David Cameron has said in his annual Christmas message.

The Prime Minister emphasised the importance of peace and security at a time when millions had been forced to flee the fighting in Syria while Christians in some parts of the world lived in fear of persecution.

“That is what we mark as we celebrate the birth of God's only son, Jesus Christ – the Prince of Peace,” he said.

“As a Christian country, we must remember what his birth represents: peace, mercy, goodwill and, above all, hope.

“I believe that we should also reflect on the fact that it is because of these important religious roots and Christian values that Britain has been



such a successful home to people of all faiths and none.”

It is the second year in succession that Mr Cameron has referred to Britain as a “Christian country” in his Christmas message, despite

having previously been accused of stoking “alienation and division” by doing so.

The Prime Minister said that it was a time to remember people who would not be spending the festive season in a home that was safe with their family around them.

“Millions of families are spending this winter in refugee camps or makeshift shelters across Syria and the Middle East, driven from their homes by Daesh (also known as Islamic State) and Assad.

Read more: <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/northern-ireland-news/cameron-britain-s-christian-values-make-us-a-home-for-all-faiths-1-7132067#ixzz3vEWM2Emm>

‘World must support persecuted Christians’ says Archbishop Carey

News Letter columnist Billy Kennedy writes - Former Archbishop of Canterbury the Rev Dr George Carey has expressed his concerns over the plight of the Christian community in the Middle East and he has called on Prime Minister David Cameron to help them. Dr Carey said after a year in which Christian communities of the

Middle East have been subjected to persecution and crucifixion by Islamic terrorists, the Christmas story is a precious reminder of Middle-Eastern origins of the Christian faith.

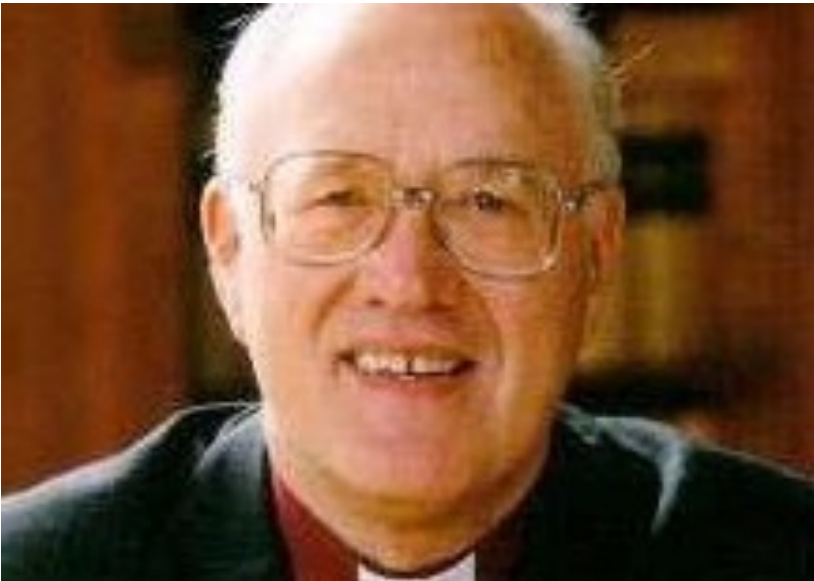
“The Gospels are full of the place names which you hear on television news programmes describing modern-day violence – Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Egypt, and Damascus.

“In Christian tradition at least two of the three Wise Men came from the Middle East – from Iran and Iraq. Later, the Apostles spread the message of Jesus and the first Christian communities were established in the Middle East,” said Dr Carey in a pre-Christmas message.

“The Christians of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel, though small in number, have taken pride in their historic precedence in worldwide Christianity. They were the original churches before missionaries reached northern Europe. But they were conquered in the early Middle Ages by Muhammad and his Muslim

armies, and Christians and Jewish people suffered discrimination and insecurity.

“There are signs that this is the decade in which Christianity will be finally wiped out by emigration driven by persecution. The region will be poorer for their loss,” said Dr Carey stating that in 1900 Christians were 20 per cent of the Middle East population.



“Now the figure is less than five per cent. In 1915 hundreds of thousands of Christians were murdered in the Armenian genocide by the Ottomans.

“This year the IS terror group has set about completing this genocide with murders of

Christians by beheading and crucifixion. So serious is the problem that you might expect the nations of the West would come to the rescue of these historic Christian communities, or that the Church would be demanding the world act now. Far from it. There has not been nearly enough pressure from hierarchies of any of the Western churches.”

“Thankfully, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and the Pope have spoken up for Christian minorities. But Western churches are depressingly timid in their support for Christians in the Middle East.”

“Around 600,000 Christians have fled their homes so far. They are a particularly vulnerable minority in the Middle East and have no safe havens. Prime Minister David Cameron has met his pledge to bring 1,000 Syrians from the United Nations camps before Christmas, but in spite of repeated inquiries there is no information on whether any of these refugees include Christians or other oppressed minorities.”

“Surely, the most vulnerable refugees, the target group the Government is seeking to help, must include some of those targeted for torture,

beheadings and enslavement by jihadists,” said the evangelical Dr Carey.

<http://www.newsletter.co.uk/carey-world-must-support-persecuted-christians-1-7132429>

Remembering both the Christian story, and the civilisations it launched

News Letter leading article on the Cameron and Carey comments above —

Two important Christmas messages have emphasised the centrality of Christianity to Britain, Europe and the Middle East.

David Cameron has [again referred to the United Kingdom as a Christian country](#).

The former Archbishop of Canterbury [Dr George Carey has said that the Christmas story is a reminder of Christianity's origins](#) in the Middle East, and its possible extinction there.

Such talk is overdue after years in which political and church leaders have been at pains to

demonstrate neutrality between cultures and faiths. That approach has not worked.

As any fair minded person will agree, London is one of the most vibrant cities on earth partly because it is so diverse and yet it mostly manages to remain harmonious. But a doctrinaire multi-culturalism is quite another matter – the sort of philosophy that insists that there is no dominant culture in the UK, that every position and creed has equal validity, that violent, fanatical Islamism is no better or worse than Quakerism, that you can live in Britain but have no loyalty to it.

After the Paris attacks and the fact that thousands of Jihadists from nations such as Britain and France have fought overseas, attitudes are rightly hardening. Even millions of Britons who have no religious belief can see the historic role of Christianity in every aspect of the building of Britain, from its laws and freedoms and achievements to its culture and values.

As Dr Carey says, we of all nations need to be much more alert to the possible annihilation of the now small remaining Christian communities in countries such as Iraq and Syria.

It is also fair to wonder, as he does, why the UK, as the Christian country that Mr Cameron says it is, has been unable to specify that this particularly vulnerable Middle Eastern minority group cannot get a specific refugee status from us.

On this Christmas Eve, at the end of a year in which barbarism has been evident, it is time to remember both the story at the heart of the festive season and the great European civilisations it ushered in, of which we are fortunate to be a part.

The Church of Scotland and the Church of England reach an historic agreement

The Church of Scotland and the Church of England have reached an historic agreement that recognises their longstanding ecumenical partnership and lays the groundwork for future joint projects.

The agreement called The Columba Declaration is set out in a 15-page report by the Joint Study

Group "Growth in Communion, Partnership in Mission".

Rev Dr John McPake, co-chair of the study group and one of the authors of the report, said

"The Columba Declaration recognises the strong partnership that already exists and will help encourage and support new initiatives.

"We believe that approval of the Columba Declaration by our two churches will represent a significant step in the long history of their relationship, one that affirms the place we have come to and opens up new possibilities for the future."

Arranged into four chapters, the report sets out the history of partnership between the two churches and the shared beliefs that allow for close cooperation between the churches, before exploring how the partnership could grow.

This year the churches established the Churches' Mutual Credit Union as a response to concerns that low-income families needed access to low - cost banking and loans. And that's just one of the

areas where the two churches already are collaborating.

The Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council and the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs talk regularly about everything from poverty to refugees. As well as recognising one another's ministers, the churches exchange views on ministry and come together for example on initiatives such as Fresh Expressions. The Church of Scotland also sends a representative to the General Synod while the Church of England sends a representative to the General Assembly.

In a joint statement prefacing the report, joint study group co-chairs Rev Dr John McPake and Rt Rev Peter Forster, Bishop of Chester write:

"Our hope is that joint affirmation by our two churches of the Columba Declaration would:

Affirm and strengthen our relationship at a time when it is likely to be particularly critical in the life of the United Kingdom;
Provide an effective framework for coordinating present partnership activities and for fostering new initiatives;

Enable us to speak and act together more effectively in the face of the missionary challenges of our generation."

The report emphasises that joint ecumenical work should also include other churches and especially the Episcopal Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church. At the same time it acknowledges the "distinctive partnership in the gospel to which our two Churches are called within the United Kingdom, rooted in our shared history and in our parallel and overlapping roles as the churches of our respective nations."

The report will now go to the Church of England's Synod in February and by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May for approval. A debate is scheduled at the Synod on Feb 16, 2016.

Modern Irish poetry in Archbishop of Canterbury's ecumenical Christmas greeting

The Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:20)

The shepherds see God and return to normality. Summoned by a vision that was life-transforming and life-giving, they leave their sheep and make their way into the crowded, narrow streets of Bethlehem, where in the most unlikely of places, they find the cause of the universe shifting in its course.



The Archbishop of Canterbury has sent a Christmas message to ecumenical partners and heads of churches around the world.

And then they return, and presumably go back to the life they had led as shepherds.

Of all the mysteries of the incarnation, its simplicity is the one that is born in/on me afresh each year. In its simplicity is its power and its challenge to us in these times of war and suffering, of multitudes on desolate roads seeking refuge. Caught between the Devil and the Sea, the desperate and hungry, make their way through unimaginable peril. Palestine was very much like that. It was not a place of safety, but of danger, and like those millions today, Jesus himself was carried by anxious parents to the safety of another land.

In memorable words at the Inauguration of the General Synod of the Church of England, the Preacher to the Papal Household, Father Raniero Cantalamessa said: “In many parts of the world, people are killed and churches burned not because they are Catholic, or Anglican, or Pentecostal, but because they are Christians. In their eyes, we are already one! Let us be one also in our eyes and in the eyes of God.”

Amidst the terrors of Paris, of Bujumbura, of Iraq and Syria, and amidst the fear which we so often allow to dominate, we are called back to the simplicity of the Incarnation. Jesus identified himself completely with the poorest and the most

broken of the Earth. Those who are lost in our world today seek the simplicity and beauty of that gift, which as we identify together unites us in adoration of the God who gave his only son.

The Irish poet Michael O'Siadhail, in a poem called 'A Toast on the Eve', writes:
"Where is the star that beckons to the east,
That God come down to bless the flesh
Of living? O give us the daily yeast
To burble through the veins and charm
Our sour grapes into wine. Find me the crèche
Where a god is cradled by a woman's arm."

I pray that in our common endeavour to establish peace, to encourage the fearful, to comfort the traumatised, to love the poor and in them to find afresh the Christ-child born in poverty, that we may all be gripped again by the simplicity of the action of God which has brought us a church, suffering, yes, but full of hope and strength in the gift of the Spirit.

At this Christmas I pray for you and your churches, and seek your prayers for me and the Anglican Communion.

News links to reports on faith, politics and education

Irish Church leaders Christmas messages

Belfast Telegraph column by Alf McCreary brings together quotations from most of the mainstream church leaders based in Northern Ireland.

<http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/church-leaders-deliver-christmas-messages-of-peace-love-and-hope-34312071.html>

Times

Faith leaders from across Britain have condemned a growing crackdown on Christmas in Muslim countries. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, said that “the answer to an upsurge of religious extremism” was not to ban the celebration “but rather to encourage the true spirit of Christmas in hospitality, generosity and respect for each other” (see above). The Bishop of Leeds, Nick Baines, writing in the paper urged the “religiously illiterate western intelligentsia” to lose their scruples about condemning the persecution (See Comment below).

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article4649290.ece>

ITV

The Archbishop of Canterbury has called on the government to tackle the growing homeless issue in England. Justin Welby said it should be something "that touches all of us, in which we all participate". He said, "We have to act and the government has to act."

<http://www.itv.com/news/2015-12-23/justin-welby-the-government-must-act-to-tackle-shameful-homelessness/>

ITV

In the same interview, Justin Welby said that in the three years that he has been the spiritual head of the Church of England – 2015 has been his toughest year yet. He, like most of us, has struggled to come to terms with some of the events that have happened around the world.

<http://www.itv.com/news/meridian/update/2015-12-23/archbishop-of-canterbury-describes-his-toughest-year/>

Yorkshire Post

The Archbishop of York's Christmas Message: A Christmas message of hope and why Jesus is a light that shines in the darkness which no darkness can put out.

<http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/opinion/john-sentamu-a-christmas-message-of-hope-and-why-jesus-is-a-light-that-shines-in-the-darkness-which-no-darkness-can-put-out-1-7639350>

BBC/Tel/Herald Scotland

An "historic" agreement has been reached between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland - marking their first formal working arrangement (see above). A document - the Columba Declaration - will be debated by the ruling bodies of both Churches next year. It commits them to "grow together in communion and to strengthen their partnership in mission". The declaration has been authored by Kirk minister the Revd John McPake, and the Bishop of Chester, Peter Forster.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35173452>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12066726/Church-of-England-and-Church-of-Scotland-forge-pact.html>

[http://www.heraldsotland.com/opinion/14164939.More good news for churches this Christmas/?ref=rss](http://www.heraldsotland.com/opinion/14164939.More%20good%20news%20for%20churches%20this%20Christmas/?ref=rss)

Times

News that the CofE will use Social Media app Periscope to stream a Christmas sermon live online on Friday. When the Revd Graham Hunter delivers his sermon at St John's church in Hoxton at 10.30 on Christmas morning, his audience will not be confined to the congregation in the pews. The CofE has promoted the project on Twitter:

“Can’t make it to church this Christmas? Tune in to one of our @ChurchLive services.”

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article4648547.ece>

BBC/Mail/Tel/Ind/Exp

The Prime Minister has urged people to reflect on Britain's Christian values in his Christmas message. Mr Cameron said the country's "important religious roots" made it "a successful home to people of all faiths and none".

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35170590>

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3372686/PM-invokes-Jesus-Prince-Peace-Xmas-message-Cameron-says-Christian-values-key-making-Britain-successful-home-all.html?](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3372686/PM-invokes-Jesus-Prince-Peace-Xmas-message-Cameron-says-Christian-values-key-making-Britain-successful-home-all.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

[ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/12066988/Britains-Christian-heritage-is-why-it-welcomes-immigrants-of-all-faiths-says-David-Cameron.html)

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/12066988/Britains-Christian-heritage-is-why-it-welcomes-immigrants-of-all-faiths-says-David-Cameron.html>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-christmas-message-pm-to-hail-britains-christian-values-a6785021.html>

<http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/629210/David-Cameron-families-reflect-Britains-Christian-heritage>

Eve Stan

Britons would rather go Christmas shopping than celebrate the birth of Jesus, an opinion poll reveals. A third of the population say shopping for presents is one of the things they most enjoy about Christmas, according to research by BMG

churchnewsireland@gmail.com

Research. But just 18 per cent say marking the birth of Christ is a favourite activity, and going to church on Christmas Day is a favourite for just 10 per cent.

<http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/brits-would-rather-go-christmas-shopping-than-celebrate-birth-of-jesus-poll-finds-a3143956.html>

Ind

Bethlehem residents are facing a “real challenge” in celebrating Christmas at the birthplace of Christianity. The article reflects the situation on the ground in Bethlehem and elsewhere on the West Bank.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/bethlehem-residents-face-real-challenge-of-celebrating-christmas-at-the-birth-place-of-christianity-a6784776.html>

Mail online

The number of children growing up in workless households has dropped by almost half a million since Iain Duncan Smith began his reforms to the welfare system. The Work and Pensions Secretary, who the paper claims, has come under repeated attack from the CofE and the "Left-wing establishment", said the figures proved the "doom mongers" had been wrong (see Mail Comment below).

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3372761/500-000-fewer-children-homes-no-one-works-IDS-reforms-Work-Pensions-Secretary-says-figures-prove-doommongers-wrong.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490

Tel

And finally ...Church bell-ringers will be silent at Christmas for the first time in centuries after their ropes were eaten through - by squirrels. St Erth Parish church, Cornwall has held a festive service since the 15th century but this year no bells will welcome the Birth of Christ, because of rodents in the belfry.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/12067371/Christmas-church-bells-silent-for-first-time-in-centuries-after-ropes-chewed-by-squirrels.html>

Comment

Times: Christians are the most persecuted of all the World's faiths – Nick Baines, Bishop of Leeds
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/thunderer/article4649135.ece>

BBC: Caroline Wyatt explores the current issues around collective worship and takes a look at its history. Includes comment from Nigel Genders, CofE's chief education officer.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-35161361>

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