

Ugandan ex pupils visit NI to thank those who helped provide their schooling



Alumni and supporters of the Fields of Life schools in Uganda laugh with Rev Willie Nixon, centre right, and Keith Mutabazi, in the red sweater, at Drumbeg church hall on their recent visit to Northern Ireland.

Former pupils of schools built in Africa by a charity that is based in Northern Ireland have visited the Province, Ben Lowry writes in the News Letter.

The group of successful young Ugandans were seeking to say thank you to donors to the Fields of Life charity, and to raise awareness of its schools.

Fields of Life (FOL) was founded by the Reverend Trevor Stevenson, a Church of Ireland minister who is now pastor of Crinken Church in Bray, Co Wicklow.

The charity, which has a head office in Portadown, began work in 1995 in an agricultural project in Kasangati, near Uganda's capital Kampala. Trevor and his wife Ruth saw that many children had no school to attend, so the first Fields of Life partner school was built on the farm in 1997.

Now there are 91 Fields of Life partner schools in Uganda, and more in other countries in east Africa.

The schools, which were built in some very poor communities, have a Christian ethos and seek to improve the opportunities of the often destitute children living there.

This is has been the experience of the NI visitors, which included singers and lawyers. They have founded a group called Fields of Life Alumni, and want to “give back” in thanks for their help by building a school in Karamoja, a deprived part of Uganda.

Among those who visited Northern Ireland was Trinity Nsabaanye, 25, who grew up in the slums of Kampala.

He never met his father, and his mother sold coal to make ends meet, but she was keen for him to get to school. On his first day at a school, all that he had was stolen (“down to the shoes on my feet”). His mum moved him to a Fields of Life school, where his “transformation” began. “We had good Christian education, the environment was good,” Trinity says. He is now a self-employed graphic designer.

Keith Mutabazi, 39, FOL partnership coordinator, also came to Northern Ireland with the group, who left on Sunday.

His parents had left Rwanda in 1959, and he grew up in a refugee camp. Keith was drawn to work with FOL “to help children who were in the position I was in when I was growing up”.

Trinity, who was sponsored by people in Northern Ireland, says: “I am so grateful for the generosity of this country towards Africa.”

One of the visit organisers was Rev Willie Nixon, whose Drumbeg Anglican church is helping build an FOL school. He said: “Through the gift of education, by FOL schools, these young people have managed to go on to university and into the professional worlds.” • More information www.fieldsoflife.org or 028 3839 0395

Moderator sends warmest congratulations to Queen and Duke of Edinburgh on their 70th wedding anniversary

The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Rt. Rev. Dr. Noble McNeely, has congratulated The Queen and The Duke of Edinburgh on their seventieth wedding anniversary, which takes place today, November 20

Writing to Her Majesty and His Royal Highness, the Moderator sent the greetings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland ‘and our warmest congratulations’.

Dr. McNeely wrote, “There are not many in the United Kingdom who can say that they have known each other for approaching eighty years, let alone enjoyed the blessing of a married life together spanning seven decades. As a Church, we see marriage as a deep, binding and enduring commitment through which husband and wife follow Jesus’s example of sacrificial and selfless love, supporting each other and their family, and building up the wider community – a rich vision of marriage and a key building block of a stable society.

“As you celebrate privately with your family, we give thanks for your public example, at the very centre of the life of the United Kingdom, of a Christian marriage characterised by the loving support and enduring commitment to one another that together you have shown down the years.

“May you both know God’s richest blessing at this time, as we also give thanks for your faithful service rendered in His Name, and assure you of the ongoing prayerful support of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.”

CNI

Cork celebrates 130 years of Mothers Union in Ireland



On Saturday, 11 November, the Mothers' Union in Cork, Cloyne and Ross held the meeting of their Diocesan Council in Northridge House. As part of the day they planted a tree in the grounds of St Luke's Home to commemorate and to celebrate thirteen decades of love and service: 130 years of Mothers' Union in Ireland!

Members were delighted that Phyllis Grothier, All Ireland President, was present to speak at the meeting and to plant the tree. Everyone was grateful for the assistance of the Rev Bruce Pierce and the presence of Joan Hanna, a director of St Luke's Home and a member of the Mothers' Union.



All-Ireland President of the Mothers' Union, Phyllis Grothier with the Reverend Bruce Pierce... and the tree

The Mothers' Union in each of the 12 dioceses in Ireland has planted a tree - with the 13th tree for the 13 decades being an All-Ireland tree. Many

have been planted in church or cathedral grounds, but Cork, Cloyne and Ross were very happy to plant its tree in St Luke's Home - a place and charity dear to the hearts of so many of throughout the whole Diocese and the wider community.

Crib Festival weekend returns to Thornhill, Derry

The Crib Festival weekend is on November 24-26 and this year's collection of cribs has even more diversity than last year.

There are crèches from Japan, the Vatican, France, Zambia, Mexico as well as nativity scenes specially made for the event.

With their imagination, friends of Thornhill have created cribs out of glass, wood, paper, wool, ceramics, stones, metal, cake, flowers and so on. An additional technological dimension is provided through Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality and this will appeal to the adult children as well as to those of school-going age.

A small number of creative decorative gifts, candles and religious Christmas cards will be available for sale. This is also a fundraising event

for the work of Thornhill Ministries and the Team here would be glad of your support.

Dates: 24,25,26 November Times: Friday 12:00 noon - 6:30 pm Saturday & Sunday 10:30 am - 6:00 pm

Lithuanian choir performs in Naas and Kill

Last weekend three Lithuanian organists from Kill, Ardclough and Kilcock churches united to bring their choirs together to sing alongside a visiting choir from Lithuania.

Ausra Dmukauskaite, organist with Ardclough church choir, said the idea came about one evening when one of the members of the Lithuanian choir visited Ireland and sang with Kill choir. An invitation was extended to Kill church choir and all the members of the choir visited Lithuania in 2007.” It was such a memorable event that we now want to return the favour,” added Rasa Kupriene, organist from Kill church choir.

“We are very excited about this new venture and were really delighted to be able to extend the invitation to St Jokubas Church of Ziezmariai town choir, Lithuania.”

Rasa explained how Lithuania has had a very turbulent history.



Members of the Ziezmariai parish choir who performed at a concert in Naas and at masses in Naas and Kill this weekend

“During the Soviet regime churches and monasteries were closed and often the buildings put to secular use. Their bells were silenced. The silencing of the bells represented for many the silencing of the voice of God himself.

Many priests were targeted and exiled to Siberia, as well as many Catholic families for their beliefs. Officially people were not allowed to

participate and were ridiculed and persecuted for doing so, but they did find ways and means.”

It is only since 1990 that Lithuanians have been able to celebrate their faith freely in public and coming to Ireland to sing alongside the Irish and Lithuanian communities means a lot to them.

Under management of talented musician-organist Algirdas Biveinis, Ziezmariai church choir sang at the Vigil Mass on Saturday, November 18 in Our Lady and St. David’s church, Naas, followed by a concert immediately after Mass where they will be joined by choirs from Kill, Ardclough and Kilcock. Admission to the concert was free. Ziezmariai parish choir also sang at Mass on Sunday, November 19, in St Brigid’s Church in Kill. Report courtesy The Leinster Leader.

The word Christmas ‘has lost all meaning for believers’, priest says

The word Christmas “has lost all meaning for believers,” Oblate priest and psychologist Fr Desmond O’Donnell, writes Patsy McGarry in the Irish Times.

“The word ‘Christmas’ no longer conveys the significance of the God who joined the human

caravan and walked in our shoes,” he said. “Christmas has a different connotation now,” he said.

Where many were concerned today, when it came to the religious significance of Christmas, “in general most people are not at that level of awareness,” he said. “Like the word Easter, it’s gone,” taken over by commercialisation.

“It’s not a tragedy. Let them go. Even the word ‘God’. Your father had a different understanding of ‘God’ to what you have,” he said.

He suggested that believers should now substitute the word ‘Nativity’ for Christmas. “In a few weeks as a priest I should invite people to celebrate the great feast of the Nativity,” he said. At Easter he might invite them celebrate instead the greatest Christian feast of all, the Resurrection, he said.

He has no problem with people celebrating Christmas or Easter, however. Celebration was “vital to human experience. Human experience gasped for celebration”, he said. It craved, as Psalm 104 said, for “ wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine.” he recalled. He “devoted a whole chapter in my new book ,*To Love and to be Loved*, to that.”

Fr O'Donell has nothing against "ordinary commerce and exchange but it is a pity about commercialisation. It's not good anywhere. Even people are for sale now," he said.

Currently based in Dublin's [Inchicore](#), he was ordained in 1953 and has had a lengthy missionary career which included service in Australia for 28 years.

Based in Rome for a period he had also visited [Flanders](#), [Malta](#), [Poland](#), and other Catholic countries as a general counsellor for his congregation. "It involved 600 plane journeys over 12 years," he said.

There was noticed a pattern. Many years ago "I saw it in Flanders which was 100 per cent Catholic. Family life began to break down, church going broke down, vocations began to drop. That was 50 years ago."

He noticed the exact same pattern begin in Canada's Quebec later, "followed by [Ireland](#) 30 years ago. Then Malta and now Poland." It's "very new in Poland but vocations there are down a third while that of nuns is down two-thirds."

Over time his experience of those countries was "like watching the same movie five times over,"

he said. His own Oblate congregation is down from 7,500 worldwide when he joined, to about 4,000 today while the Jesuits, once at a maximum of 36,000 worldwide, were now down to 17,000.

[Church of Ireland](#) Primate Archbishop [Richard Clarke](#) has described Fr O'Donnell's book *To Love and to be Loved* as "a work of rare brilliance" and "the fruit of a lifetime of wise reflection, wide reading, deep prayer and an energetic love for others and for God."

Press Watch: Compassion and compromise sorely lacking in same-sex marriage debate

Following the result of Australia's postal vote this week, showing 61% were in favour of same-sex marriage, the country's [Prime Minister](#), Malcolm Turnbull, vowed it would be legal by Christmas, Alf McCreary writes in the Belfast Telegraph

Australia is a long way away, as I realised during several [journeys](#) to Sydney and back, but the issue of same-sex marriage is right among us, and it continues to be one of the most crucial issues facing the mainstream churches.

The Church of Ireland, at its General Synod this year, and the Presbyterians, at their June General Assembly, once again clearly confirmed their stance that marriage is only between a man and a woman.

However, a Helen's Bay rector opened the debate again locally with a strongly opinionated letter published in the Times on Wednesday.

Canon Timothy Kinahan wrote: "Over the centuries, the Church has been complicit in causing untold harm to people whose sexuality

was outside what was then considered the mainstream.

"Harm to people harms the Body of Christ and also harms the whole body of society.

"It makes our faith harmful, which is inexcusable. Tradition isn't always right."

Canon Kinahan elaborated on these views when I talked to him for a follow-up interview for the Belfast Telegraph.

He said: "I feel strongly that the Church in general, including the Church of Ireland, has marginalised people and in many ways has uncritically reflected the social norms of the day.

"My reading of the Gospel is that in today's society, with the scientific reading of sexual orientation, we can no longer regard homosexuality as an aberration, or a sickness or a sin."

That is a courageous and strong statement for a rector at a time when the Church of Ireland across this island is deeply split. Equally brave and controversial is his assertion that tradition is not always right. Canon Kinahan is a realist and he says that other Christians will disagree with his views, but he asks people to realise that "part of the Christian journey is to learn to disagree, yet to walk together in faith".

Such views will indeed be strongly refuted by a large number of other Church of Ireland clergy and laity, but Canon Ian Ellis, the respected former editor of the Church of Ireland Gazette, managed to strike a balance that should be an example for other churches.

He said: "The Church, while holding to the traditional doctrine that sexual relations are between one man and one woman, should be able to recognize that there are genuinely held but different views.

"People in the Church should never seek to hurt or harm one another or anyone else."

This is an admirably balanced approach, and so too is the **excellent** booklet published recently by the Methodist Church on the subject of human sexuality.

Its tone is summarised by its title "Developing Good Conversation on Difficult Questions. It stresses: "It is important that this discussion is seen primarily as a conversation within the body of Christ - those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement are our Christian neighbours."

This approach is in contrast to that of the Presbyterian Church, which has an unseemly judgemental approach to this topic.

I listened closely to the debate on this at the General Assembly in June this year, and while there were sensitive contributions on both sides, there were harsh remarks from some people who should have known better.

To be fair, the conservatives have every right to their views, but they need to express these in a way that shows the utmost sympathy for church members and many others who are struggling silently, and often with great loneliness and pain, to deal with their sexuality.

Canon Kinahan put the point well when he said:
"Jesus treated people as equal in the eyes of the law.

"There is also an important principle involved, whereby we should ask ourselves, how we would like to be treated if we were gay?"

There is a need for people on both sides, in and out of the churches, to show more human concern for each other in this difficult debate.

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