



Annual Christmas Day Broadcast by the Archbishops of Armagh

The annual Christmas message from the Archbishops of Armagh, the Most Revd John McDowell and the Most Revd Eamon Martin, will be broadcast on Christmas Day (Friday, 25th

December) at 12.10pm on RTÉ One television and 1.05pm on RTÉ Radio 1.

The message, which was this year filmed in St Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Armagh, will feature interviews with local people on the difference which their Christian faith has made in their lives during the coronavirus pandemic.

Choral music was provided by choristers from St Paul's High School, Bessbrook, and the Royal School Armagh. The broadcast will be available afterwards on the RTÉ Player.

Virtual Carol Service from Armagh

The men's and boys' choir of St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh has a long and distinguished history, dating back in its present form to at least 1634. Due to the pandemic, however, choral services in the Cathedral had to stop from 15 March 2020 and were not able to resume until September 2020. The requirements of social distancing and current regulations have meant that the boys and men have been unable to sing together since March.

Some weeks ago, in case of a prolonged lockdown over the Christmas period, the gentlemen of the choir recorded a service of Lessons and Carols, which can be used in an online format for worship by members of the Cathedral congregation and many more. The choir was directed by Dr Stephen Timpany, Organist and Master of the Choristers and the organ was played by Canon Dr Peter Thompson, Assistant Organist.

Speaking about this year's Carol Service, Dr Timpany said, "Cathedrals are usually the largest churches in their diocese and are the central church where everyone can meet. This year, the Cathedral offers a shortened version of the traditional Nine Lessons and Carols to the diocese, and to all members of the local community. The service will be

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available online on YouTube 'ARMAGH Cathedral Choir' and other formats from the afternoon of Sunday 20 December." Stephen continued, "The service features readings and prayers by Canon William Adair, Rector of St Columba's Portadown and Canon Dr Peter Thompson, Rector of Donaghmore, and well-known carols and solos by the gentleman of the choir."



More than 15,000 people view Larne quilts online

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In previous years, visitors to the exhibition in St Cedma's kindly and generously made donations to parish funds.

As this was not possible this year due to Covid-19 restrictions, the creative group produced a virtual exhibition of Quilts for Advent and shared this on the parish Facebook page, revealing the splendour and wonder of the Christmas Story.

[[<https://www.facebook.com/larneglynraloo/videos/859321124879408/>]]

Magheragall Mothers' Union supporting those in need

Members of Magheragall Mothers' Union have been unable to meet in person since March, but the pandemic did not stop them from supporting the annual Barnardo's Christmas Hamper Appeal.

Throughout the year, members were able to continue some projects remotely, and as they approached Christmas, the branch committee decided it really wanted to complete the Christmas hampers.

The charity Barnardo's distribute them in Lisburn to homes where there is real need, and given the impact of the pandemic this was an initiative the MU members were determined would happen in 2020.



Rector of Magheragall, the Rev Nicholas Dark, with Susan and Brown and hampers put together in the church hall.

The hampers needed to be ready for early December and with churches once again closed, it looked like the project might have to be shelved. Thankfully, the regulations permitted church halls to be used for the provision of food relief. With the green light, the MU got down to business and appealed to the parish for food donations which were delivered to the hall.

To keep the people involved in the packing process to a minimum, there were two separate shifts – shift one was Shirley and Georgie and shift two was Bronwen and Susan. Alongside the donations to the hall, some members made up hampers at home. The MU also collected toiletries for emergency washbags for local hospitals and for the

women's refuge, and these bags have been put together by Ray in her own home.

When the work in the church hall came to a close on December 2, there were 23 hampers ready for households in Lisburn.

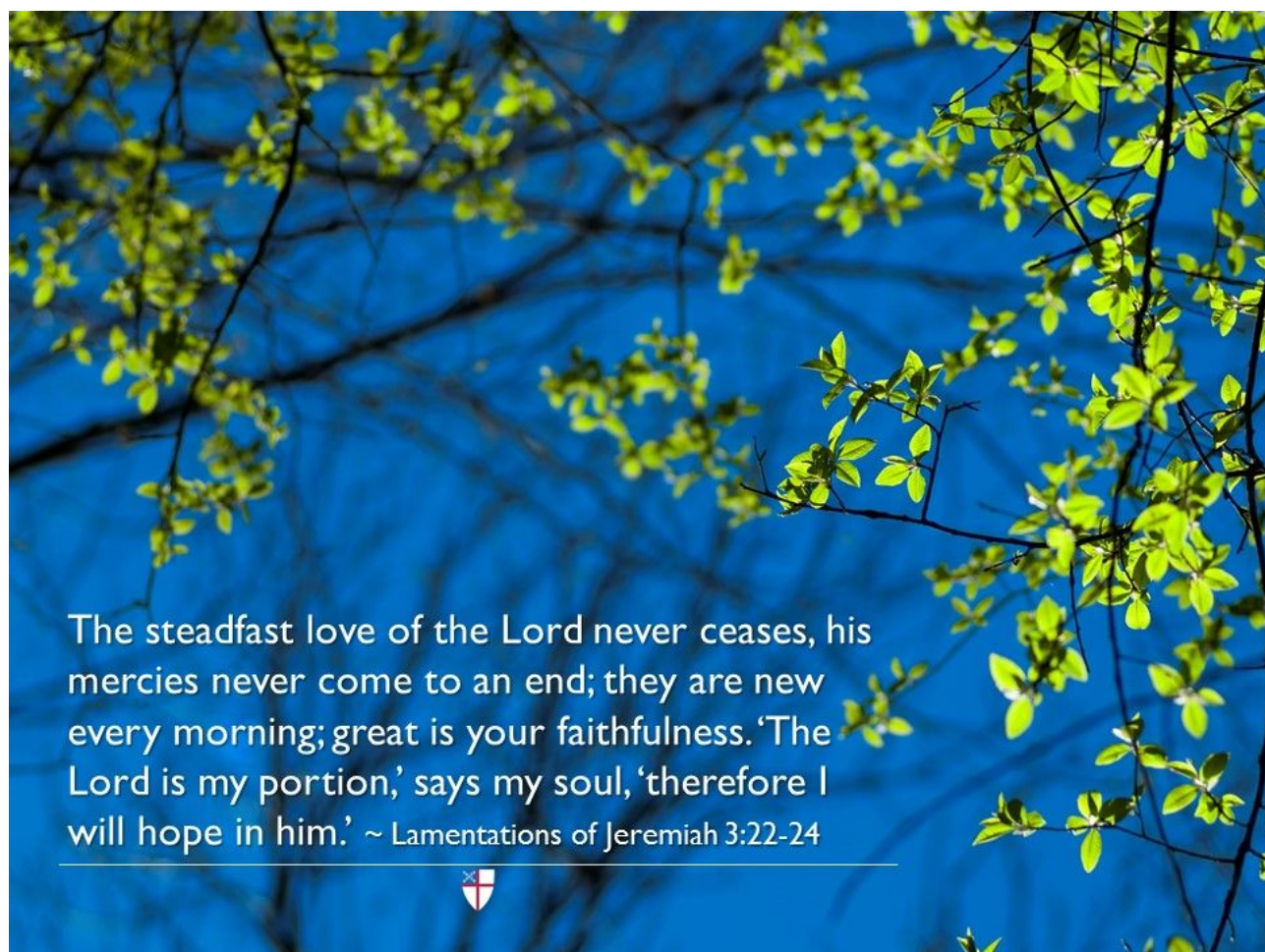
Susan Donaghy, branch secretary, said: "Thank you so much to every member who donated food or money to buy food items along with toiletries which will go to Women's Aid and the Lagan Valley Hospital. Also a big thank you to our church family who also donated food, toys and beautiful knitted hedgehogs. It will go towards helping so many families in the Lisburn area that are struggling due to illness or job loss."

Carrickmacross inter-church Community Carol Service is online

The annual Carrickmacross Community Carols Service which normally alternates between St Joseph's and St Finbarr's cannot go ahead this year so Monsignor Shane McCaughey and Revd Colin McConaghie have been working on an online alternative as a way of thanks to all local businesses and a celebration of the community spirit that has seen them through this most difficult of years.

Revd McConaghie says Christmas readings have been pre-recorded in a variety of shops and businesses in Carrickmacross and some wonderfully talented local musicians have provided Christmas Carols.

"The message of the service will be one of hope with Monsignor McCaughey sharing a message reminding us of the true reason for the season."



Rev McConaghie says he is excited to see the final product.

'The service promises to be a wonderful celebration of our local community. I don't want to give too much away but you will see plenty of familiar faces and hear some beautiful singing. As churches we wanted to thank all who have worked so hard throughout the pandemic as well as giving a message of hope to all who have struggled.'

Revd Colin McConaghie, Rector of Carrickmacross Parish in Co. Monaghan, explained that 2020 has resulted in everyone having to alter the way they are used to doing things with businesses up and down the country having to adapt to Covid regulations. "Our churches have been no different with church buildings closed for almost half of the year and clergy having to think of initiative ways to worship.

“With Christmas approaching we would normally be listening to Christmas carols with nativities and Christmas pageants. Unfortunately, with restricted numbers churches are having to adapt the celebrations this year.”

The Community Carol Service is now available on the Facebook Pages of the two churches (St Joseph's Church, Carrickmacross and Carrickmacross Group Church of Ireland).

Following the Star in Dundrum

For the past few months the team at St Donard's Community Church in Dundrum have been busy planning Christmas events and services not knowing if their plans would be able to happen. However the past weekend proved to be a big hit with families in the village.

Earlier this month, a Christmas Star appeared above the door at St Donard's, brightening up the dark winter night. It was a sign of the fun to come when, on Saturday 12 December, 149 stargazers took part in the 'Follow the Star' Christmas trail.

Participants picked up their star maps and then headed off through the village in search of the star clues in order to break the Christmas code. Once they had completed the trail everyone was then able to share the decoded Christmas message with Santa himself who gave everyone a Christmas gift for their efforts. Santa was very happy to hear the message “God is with us” in the middle of a crazy year like 2020, while the children were happy to speak with him before getting a photo with the big man in the red suit! Santa was kept busy chatting to the children and also by



waving at the many cars beeping their horns on the way past.

Those taking part were able to keep energy levels up with a hot chocolate and cookie from the local Blue Bay Café. It was great to be able to support a local business by sending some hungry stargazers their way and we are very thankful to the staff there who gave everyone a discounted offer as well as making some special star shaped cookies!

Carol service

That wasn't the end of it as on Sunday families were all invited along to the Family Christmas Jumper Carol service at St Donard's. It was great to see so many colourful jumpers under the lights of the Christmas tree and candles with the best jumpers picking up a prize. Everyone there was treated to the premier of our special 'Virtual Nativity' starring some of the children in the village. This involved parents recording different scenes from the Christmas story in their homes before it was edited and produced by the wonderful 'Play It By Ear' drama company.

Over the course of the weekend Christmas Gift packs were given out to families. This included Christmas activities for

children, some helpful hope-filled reading for the adults, a copy of 'Finding Hope' (the Gospel of John), lots of editable treats and an exclusive St Donard's Christmas tree decoration.

Colin Morris, Community Pastor at St Donard's Community Church said "We were blown away by the response of people in the village. There were so many happy faces from both parents and children. Different folk expressed how great it was to see a community event like this, especially in the year we have had. It was wonderful to be able to share with people how, despite whatever circumstances we face we can find hope in the good news about Jesus, a hope that shines brighter than any star."

Ireland in Christmas Praise with New Irish Arts

A firm favourite in the festive calendar, Ireland in Christmas Praise with New Irish Arts, is being hosted at Live from the Ulster Hall on 19 December 2020.

Directed by Jonathan Rea, Ireland is Christmas Praise is now well established as one of Belfast's major Christmas events. This year the New Irish Choir, Orchestra and Youth Choir are broadcasting to you in your living room from the Ulster Hall, with a wonderful mix of live choral music and solos on the night plus pre-recorded videos featuring some of our favourite moments from previous years in the Waterfront.


Get the tree up, turn the heat on, warm the mince pies and let's celebrate the beautiful story of Christmas once again

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With a great line up of guest soloists, this will be a fantastic broadcast. Buy your tickets now and watch with your family as many times as you want until Boxing Day.

This event will be streamed live on 19 December 2020 at 8pm and will be available to view until 26 December 2020.

Once you have bought your ticket, the event will appear in the Digital Content section of 'Your Account' (click to access). A detailed 'how to' guide will be emailed to you prior to the event date. See - www.Ulster hall.co.uk



**Since it is so likely that
children will meet cruel enemies,
let them at least have heard of
brave knights and heroic courage.**

C. S. Lewis

family.is heroic



Soap means hope for some of world's poorest people

A potential new festive tradition has begun in Londonderry where a humble bar of soap has been added to the decorations adorning the Christmas tree in St Columb's Cathedral.

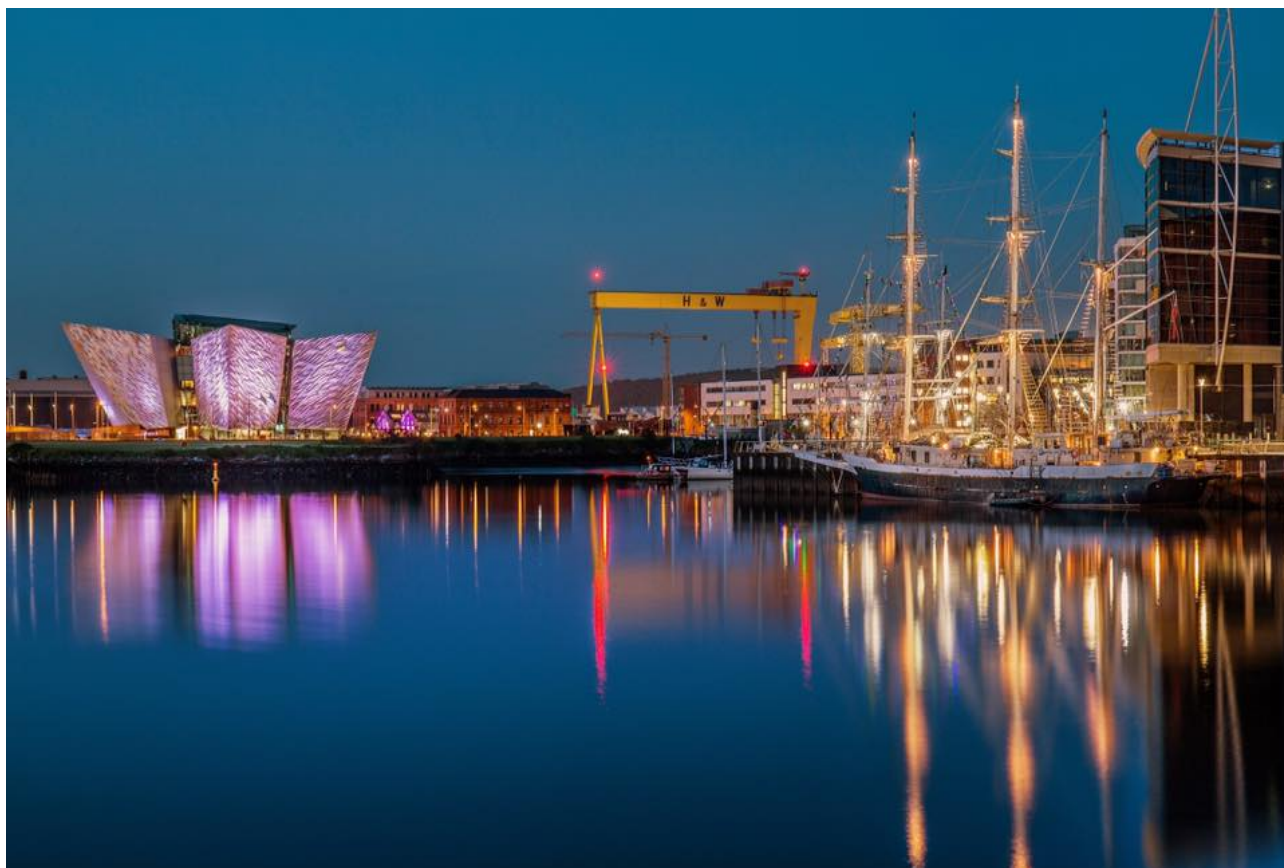
The Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, the Rt Rev Andrew Forster, hung a bar of soap on the tree as part of Christian Aid Ireland's campaign to celebrate the life-saving power of soap and to raise awareness of the millions who still lack easy access to soap and water at home.

Bishop Forster explained why he was backing the campaign: "For us, soap is commonplace. Most of us take it for granted. Nowadays, though, soap can literally be the difference between life and death. Regular handwashing

with soap is one of the best ways of preventing coronavirus from spreading. Almost half the world's population don't have that option, though. Christian Aid estimates that 3 billion people worldwide – 40% of the world's population – don't have soap and water in their homes. For them, soap is a luxury. I'm delighted to support Christian Aid Ireland's 'Soap Builds Hope' campaign. If we can raise awareness and raise money, we can save lives and bring hope to many of our poorest brothers and sisters."

As part of its global coronavirus response, Christian Aid has so far managed to distribute soap to around 250,000 people in 18 countries as part of their effort to prevent the virus spreading in some of the most vulnerable communities in the world.

Soap plays an important role in helping fight poverty too. In Ethiopia, as well as the impact of coronavirus, the climate



crisis is increasing the risk of drought and famine, which is pushing farming communities further into poverty. Christian Aid is providing women with the tools they need to run a successful soap-making business. Mother-of-three Kumana Kurasho (26) has been trained in soap-making by Christian Aid using the drought-resistant aloe vera plant native to the area which thrives where other crops fail.

Christian Aid Ireland is asking people to take a photo of their soap Christmas tree decoration and share it on social media with the hashtag #SoapBuildsHope to encourage others to take part.

This year, Christian Aid has expanded its virtual gift selection to include a Charity Gift priced at £15/€15 enabling supporters to help train more women to make soap. To support Christian Aid and help other mothers like Kumana, visit <http://caid.ie/SoapMaker>

Shane Forster ‘deeply humbled’ to be appointed new Dean of Armagh

Canon Shane Forster succeeds Dean Gregory Dunstan in the role and also automatically becomes the Keeper of the Armagh Robinson Library.

It is anticipated that Canon Forster’s Installation will be on Sunday, February 14.

Canon Forster said: “I am deeply humbled and honoured to have been invited by the Archbishop to be the next Dean of Armagh.



“It is a great responsibility, and I am acutely aware of the historical significance of Armagh as the ecclesiastical capital of Ireland, the place where St Patrick built his first ‘Great Stone Church’.

“I am grateful to the parishioners of Ballymore for the support and encouragement they have offered to me and my family over the last 15 years and look forward now to new opportunities and challenges as the cathedral community and indeed the whole church begins the recovery process following the coronavirus pandemic.

“Strong links already exist between the cathedral, the parishes of the diocese, other churches, and the wider community within the city and hopefully and prayerfully in the years to come I will be able to help develop these important relationships and in faith enable them to grow and flourish”.

His was one of three appointments confirmed on Sunday by Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Rev John McDowell.

The Rev Elizabeth Cairns has been appointed the Archdeacon of Ardboe, with immediate effect and will also be installed as a member of St Patrick’s Cathedral body on February 14.

On his appointment as Dean, Canon Forster will relinquish the Armagh Diocesan Prebendal stall in the St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin.

He will be succeeded by the Rev Malcolm Kingston, rector of St Mark’s Parish Church, Armagh, as Prebendary of Yagoe in the National Cathedral.

Commenting on the appointments Archbishop McDowell said: “I am delighted that Canon Forster has accepted my invitation to take up this senior position within the Cathedral and Diocese. Canon Forster has served his entire ministry in the Diocese of Armagh and has acted in the senior role of Chaplain/Executive Chaplain to four Archbishops.

“His faith formation took place in St Anne’s Cathedral, Belfast and he is familiar with the Irish Cathedral tradition. As Keeper of the Armagh Robinson Library the new Dean will have an important part to play in the development of the Library as it adjusts to post-Covid life. I look forward to

having Shane, Kathleen, Timothy and Emma as neighbours here on the Hill of Armagh.

“Archdeacon Elizabeth Cairns, who was brought up in the parish of Milltown, in the Diocese has over thirty years of ministerial experience, first as a Church Armagh Evangelist and following ordination, as a priest in the Diocese.

“She has assisted in and had the care of parishes in the Diocese of Connor, the Diocese of Down and Dromore as well as here in Armagh. The Archdeacon is well known for her pastoral sensitivity and her cheerful common sense.

“I look forward to working with her as she takes up this important role as an executive officer of the Archbishop and a senior priest in the Diocese.

“The Rev Malcolm Kingston has also served his entire ministry in the Diocese of Armagh and occupies a number of



important offices within the Diocese and the city. It is a mark of the respect in which he is held by his clergy colleagues that he has been elected recently as one of the Clerical Honorary Secretaries of the General Synod.

“It is entirely fitting that he should succeed Canon Forster as the Armagh Diocesan member on the Chapter of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin.”

Faith leaders back LGBT rights in ‘landmark’ pledge

Gay conversion therapy should be banned, according to a “landmark” pledge from almost 400 religious leaders from around the world.

The UK Government has brought together senior faith leaders to sign “a historic declaration” calling for an end to violence and criminalisation of LGBT+ people, as well as a global ban on conversion therapy.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has funded a conference that was held yesterday online to mark the launch of the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives, bringing together hundreds of religious leaders from around the world.

The declaration has been signed by leaders from 35 countries and all main religions, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu with eight other archbishops, Rabbi David Rosen and the former president of Ireland, Dr Mary McAleese.

The conference comes after it was announced in the summer that plans to ban controversial gay conversion therapy will be brought forward following the Government's completion of a study on the issue.

Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, said the practice was “absolutely abhorrent” and “has no place in this country”.

The term “conversion therapy” refers to any form of treatment or psychotherapy that aims to change a person's sexual orientation or to suppress a person's gender identity.

The Rt Rev Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool, who co-chairs the commission, will say at the event: “Today is a landmark day in global faith and LGBT+ relations.

“For too long, religious teachings have been misused – and are still being misused – to cause deep pain and offence to those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex. This must change, which is why we have joined forces to launch the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives.”

See also -

[[] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55326461>]

Pointers for prayer

Lord Jesus, when our Advent journey becomes hard please give us the strength we need to overcome obstacles and difficulties along the path; whether these are problems of time, relationships or other complications.

Pray for The Right Reverend Guli Francis Dehqani; Bishop of Loughborough, who has joined Church Army's Board; that she will bring her wisdom and expertise to the position.

Loving Lord, however many years we have made the journey through Advent, may we continue to find the way exciting and refreshing. Help us to be open to new challenges and inspiration, alongside finding comfort in the familiar delights.

Lord our Messiah, as we journey once more through Advent, thank you that we are not alone – we walk together with our fellow pilgrims, enjoying your loving presence as we travel towards the wonder of the nativity.

Pray for the new government of Burundi and for President Ndayishimiye. Ask God to bless Burundi. 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:24).

Please pray for the meeting of the Church Leaders scheduled for this week as the leaders try to co-ordinate a response to the continually changing legislation as it affects churches.

Speaking to the soul

Out of the Way by Chuck Alley

A Reading from the Gospel of John 3:22-30

22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. 23 John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim

because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized 24— John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison. 25Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. 26They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him." 27John answered, "No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. 28You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' 29He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. 30He must increase, but I must decrease."

Meditation

Old habits are hard to break. We do not have to be imprisoned by addictions to experience the bondage to habitual ways of thinking and doing. In their milder form, we explain them as our natural reactions to certain circumstances and stimuli. For example, we tend to be competitive. Generally this is a good trait, in that it provides the energy behind what we promote, including the Church, various missions and ministries, and our faith in Jesus. It is also the fuel for our loyal support for our leaders and friends. On the negative side, it can blind us to the truth and promote division through a "party spirit" (1 Cor. 3:1ff). Also, it is far too easy to dismiss the message of one who is not one of us or like us.

The problem with such competitive thinking is that it places the focus on us rather than the other. At its root, competition is self-promotional. Our inherent self-centeredness inhibits

our ability to hear the word of transformation. We tend to live looking down into the well of water baptism and never lifting our eyes to the baptism of the Spirit. John was the transitional figure in moving baptism from ritual purification, through symbolic spiritual cleansing and rebirth, and into transformation by the Holy Spirit. That is a transition required of all Christians (the transformation with or without manifestation of the charismatic gifts, but always manifesting the fruit; Gal. 5:22-23). But in order to make the change we must take on John's attitude: "He must become greater, I must become less."



Chuck Alley is a retired Episcopal priest and an adjunct associate professor of anatomy on the medical faculty of Virginia Commonwealth University.

