



Drawing by Massa Zahdeh, Dar Al-Kalima School, Bethlehem

World Council of Churches' 2016 Christmas message

Christmas is a celebration of Jesus, the Christ. In this celebration we can see the mystery of the good being present in the midst of the ordinary, even in the midst of evil. It is a moment to ignite a light in darkness. Christmas is an opportunity to celebrate the presence of the God of life in a

world where death is all too present, writes Olav Fykse Tveit

As Christians are celebrating Christmas, we renew our faith that the glory of God is shining in our midst. We celebrate that this happened through Jesus Christ, born by a woman as a human being, with all the potential of love and all the vulnerability that belongs to being a newborn child.

There is no other way of being a human than by first being a child. As children we are given life through others; we need to be fed and we need to be clothed, we need the care of those around us, we need to learn from others, we need to be protected from dangers, violence, and illness. We need to belong to somebody, somewhere.

Today many children are presented with enormous possibilities for their present and future lives. They are significant persons in their families, communities, homeland and in the globalized world. In all countries of the world they also face challenges, risks, even threats. Some are exposed to this much more than others, and much more than children should ever experience. This happens through conflicts, violence and

other attacks on their vulnerable bodies and souls. Many children today, in greater numbers than we have seen since World War II, are refugees fleeing from their homes and protected living.

This is also the story of the Son of God. The biblical narratives of the birth of Jesus convey all these dimensions of human life: care and love, as well as the enormous risks and threats to life. King Herod committed the gravest sin by killing all children in the area where Jesus was born to eradicate the threats to his power. Jesus and his family became refugees in Egypt.

As the World Council of Churches, we affirm the role of churches in addressing the needs of children. We encourage one another to be at the forefront of offering care and protection for those who are most vulnerable among us, particularly those who are wounded and are refugees. We want to make more contributions in this respect, embodying the qualities of child-friendly, caring and protecting churches.

This year our Christmas greeting is made by children in Bethlehem. Their drawings are marvelous expressions of the beauty of life in the birthplace of Jesus, as well as the limitations and

even threats to their lives through the ongoing occupation with its walls and wires. From the context of Bethlehem today their drawings give hope to all humanity. This corresponds to the hope we are given through the birth of Jesus long ago in Bethlehem. Seen through the eyes of children, this hope is even more costly and shining ever more clearly, to all children in danger, to all human beings of all ages and in all places, longing together for the kingdom of the Prince of Peace.

May the children of Bethlehem experience signs of the kingdom of the Prince of Peace, the child who was born in their beautiful city! Let us celebrate Christmas, wherever we are, and may the love and care of God for all God's children fill our hearts and guide our steps forward on our common pilgrimage of justice and peace!

*Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit is General Secretary of
The World Council of Churches*

**Christians encouraged to pray for
Syria this Sunday**

Tomorrow Sunday December 18, Christians in Syria are holding a special time of prayer for their country, which has been devastated by almost six years of war.

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland's Convener of its Council for Global Mission, Rev. Dr. Liz Hughes, is encouraging congregations and Christians throughout Ireland to join with their Syrian brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for this worn-torn nation on Sunday.

The campaign has been organised by a group of church leaders in Syria from different denominations, who have issued a special invitation for Christians around world to join them in praying for Syria.

"It is especially significant that this call to prayer has been initiated by the Church in Syria, where 400,000 people have been killed, 4.8 million people have fled the country and 6.3 million are internally displaced," Dr. Hughes said.

"In the past week, the ancient city of Aleppo has been hitting our news headlines daily and we have been reminded yet again of the destruction and ongoing violence in the country. We cannot

imagine what life is like for ordinary people trying desperately to survive there.

“Yet despite the tragedies, we receive reports from our partner in Syria, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, of Christians continuing to meet together to worship the Lord, and provide assistance without distinction or discrimination.

“Can I urge people to pray for Syria, to cry to the Lord for an immediate ceasefire throughout the land, and to pray that all involved in the conflict will strive for a just and peaceful way forward.

“Please pray for the people of Syria, remember those traumatised and in mourning; those who are injured, or caring for loved ones who are injured and all who continue to live in fear. Pray that medical and humanitarian assistance will reach all those in need and that those who have fled their homes, will find warm shelter and security.”

Dr. Hughes concluded by saying, “Please pray also that as Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus – Immanuel - 'God is with us,' - that our Syrian brothers and sisters in

Christ will know that Light of Christ breaking into the engulfing darkness.”

40th Black Santa Sit-out underway on Belfast Cathedral steps



Dean John Mann chats to Lord Mayor Brian Kingston. The Rev Canon Ruth Patterson looks on.

The 40th annual Black Santa Sit-out for charities is underway on the steps of St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast.

Dean John Mann was joined for the first 'shift' by Methodist Minister the Rev Canon Ruth

Patterson, and Dean's Vicar, the Rev Canon Mark Niblock.

One of the early callers was the city's first citizen, Lord Mayor of Belfast Alderman Brian Kingston, who after making a donation spent some time chatting.

It was a grey and murky start – not so cold perhaps, but the rain and the wind blowing up Donegall Street definitely made it chilly for those standing on the spot.

You can show your support for this great Belfast tradition by stopping by the Cathedral anytime during the day (except Sunday) between now and Christmas Eve and saying hello to the Dean, or if you can't make it you can [donate online](#).

On the eve of the 40th Belfast Cathedral Sit-out for charities, Dean John Mann has made two £5,000 grants from Black Santa funds in response to the humanitarian crises in Syria and Yemen. The money came from donations to Black Santa made before start of this year's sit-out, and the grants will be directed through Christian Aid and its partners in Syria and Yemen. The Dean said a representative of Christian Aid had assured him that the resources

will reach those most in need despite the receiving countries being in such turmoil.

Christmas Tree Festival opens at St Columb's Cathedral, Derry

A couple of curious visitors turned up outside St Columb's Cathedral on the opening day of its five-day Christmas Tree Festival on Thursday. The theme of this year's festival is "The Road to Bethlehem" and two curious donkeys were brought to the main door of the Cathedral to see what all the fuss was about. Members of the Model Primary School choir – who were performing inside – surrounded the donkeys to get their photographs taken with them.

There are more than a hundred trees on display throughout the church, all designed or created by local businesses, community organisations, charities or groups associated with the Cathedral. There's also a tree from the Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District, Alderman Hilary McClintock.

The Rev Canon John Merrick says the festival's theme reminds us that we are all on a journey. 'Some have just started out and this will be a



very happy time for young children. Others are further along the ‘road of life’ but we are grateful for the knowledge that the Saviour of the world walked the road before us and supports us on our journey.

Canon Merrick hopes that visitors will enjoy seeing the 111 different trees as they walk the “road to Bethlehem” and be blessed by the experience.

Victorian teas are a feature of the 2016 Festival, which lasts until Monday 19th December. The Cathedral is open for the Festival from 9am to 9pm on Friday, Saturday and Monday, and from

2-6pm on Sunday. Proceeds are in aid of Cathedral funds, the Foyle Hospice and Foyle Search & Rescue.

Muslim businessman gives Baghdad's Christians a giant Christmas tree

A Muslim businessman has erected the tallest Christmas tree in Baghdad as a show of solidarity with Christians during the holiday season.

Yassir Saad told The Associated Press on Thursday that the initiative aims at “joining our Christian brothers in their holiday celebrations and helping Iraqis forget their anguish”. Saad mentioned the the war in Mosul, where Iraqi forces are battling ISIS.

The 85-foot-tall (26-metre) artificial tree, with a diameter of 33 feet (10 meters), has been erected in the centre of the al-Zawra amusement park in the Iraqi capital. Saad says the initiative cost around \$24,000.

“This tree represents love and peace,” said teacher Saba Ismael, as her visiting students

took pictures in front of the tree. “I wish all Iraqi Christians could return to Iraq and live normal and peaceful lives.”

Iraq’s Christian community has steadily dwindled since the 2003 US-led invasion. Christians have been targeted by Islamic extremists on several occasions, and have also fled the country for better economic opportunities.

Thousands of Christians fled Mosul and surrounding areas when IS swept across northern Iraq in the summer of 2014. The extremist group forces Christians to convert to Islam or pay a special tax, and often confiscates their property.

Some Christians have managed to return to villages outside of Mosul that have been retaken by Iraqi forces, only to find that their homes and churches have been ransacked.

Bishop Clifford “Tireless and selfless peacemaker” is laid to rest

The former Primate of all Ireland, Cardinal Séan Brady, has paid tribute to his fellow bishop and

close friend Bishop Gerard Clifford, who died on Monday of this week.

Bishop Clifford died after a four-year illness during which he endured great pain and suffering “with amazing strength and dignity – without complaint or self-pity, uniting his suffering to the sufferings of Jesus Christ.”

Cardinal Brady was giving the homily at the funeral Mass at the Church of Saint Patrick, Dundalk, Co Louth at noon on Wednesday. During the Mass, the chief celebrant, the current Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, read a message which Pope Francis had sent for the funeral. *(See CNI yesterday)*

In his homily Cardinal Brady told the packed church that Bishop Clifford had chosen as his motto ‘That they may be one’ from the Farewell Prayer of Jesus for the disciples at the Last Supper. “His choice reflected his interest in promoting the unity of Christians and his desire to devote his energy to that task,” said Cardinal Brady. “But I think we can also see that it represented his desire to work for greater communion in our own Church for a Church where more and more people would have the



Bishop Gerard Clifford.

attitude and mind of Jesus Christ, where people are of one heart and mind – looking out for one another's interest."

Cardinal Brady said that "Certainly that is how he lived his own life – as a tireless and selfless peacemaker, an earnest and dependable bridge-builder." He was "A man of remarkable good sense and sound judgement [with] the ability to listen respectfully and respond graciously."

Bishop Clifford, born in 1941, was ordained in 1967. He was Director of Religious Education in the Archdiocese of Armagh from 1969 to 1979.

“He was acutely aware of the importance of religious education,” said Cardinal Brady. “He teamed up with many others – priests and laity – to provide a top class advisory service in religious education at a time when it was badly needed.”

Fr Clifford’s interest in ecumenism, which was so decisive for his life, stretched back to his student days, when his theological degree was awarded for a study of ministry in the Anglican Church. After Pope Saint John Paul II’s visit to Ireland in 1979, he was a natural choice to be part of the Catholic Church’s response to the pope’s invitation for the churches to work more closely together.

Working in close co-operation with fellow clergy from other churches, in particular Canon William Arlow, he organised ecumenical talks twice a year between the diocese and Saint Anne’s Cathedral, Belfast, and inter-church services in Armagh Cathedral during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In 1984 Fr Clifford was appointed first full-time executive secretary of the Irish Bishops’ Conference and ordained bishop in 1991. As a bishop, he served as a member of its Council for Ecumenism. He was a member of the

Episcopal Commission for Pastoral Care,
and President of CURA from 2010 until 2013.

In his spare time Bishop Clifford, described by Cardinal Brady as “a dear friend, a good and faithful priest and an outstanding brother bishop”, had a great love of gardening, painting, and walking in the foothills of the Cooleys.

“Now that the curtain has come down on his personal life on earth, we ask the Lord to draw back the other curtain to let him see the light of eternal day. There every tear will be wiped away and that other garden – the Garden of Paradise – will be revealed. The vision will be infinitely more glorious, where even the splendour of the Cooleys and Dundalk Bay will have to take second place!” he concluded.

News briefs

+++ New Zealand cathedral re-opens for

Christmas - The congregation of St Paul's Cathedral in Wellington, New Zealand, will return to their building for Christmas services after a safety cordon around it was lifted. Much of the cathedral building was within the cordon imposed after last month's earthquake amid fears that a neighbouring nine-storey

building might collapse on top of it. Demolition experts have reduced the height of that building to a safe level, and on Thursday night the city's engineers reduced the size of the cordon, opening up the cathedral for use once again.

+++ Silent night at York Minster? - York

Minster's bells could remain silent this Christmas for the first time since 1361 as sympathetic bell ringers boycott the venue after it axed its team of 30 campanologists. The [Minster's bell ringers were left in tears in October](#) when they arrived for practice to find the locks to the belfry had been changed and they had all been sacked. With a 17,000-strong petition calling for the bells to ring at Christmas, the Minister had approached campanologists from neighbouring churches to ring in the festive season. But, one by one, they are rejecting the Minster's offer in an "act of solidarity" with the York ringers. Leeds Minster's deputy ringing master Robert Childs said members discussed the invitation from York's Dean and Chapter during a practice session where 13 members voted no, with two abstaining. The issue centres on the Chapter's desire for accountability and possible past issues in the area of safeguarding.

+++ Emerald Ball at Titanic, Belfast - On the eve of St. Patrick's Day, 16th March. The evening will commence with drinks at 7pm, to be followed by a sumptuous four course dinner at 8pm. There will be a high-end luxury ballot and dancing to a live band. Dress is formal and monies raised will support the Down and Connor Lourdes Pilgrimage for the sick and the young people who support them. Tickets are £60 each and available from the pilgrimage secretary, Sinead on 02890610477 or the Drumbo Parish office on 02890812238 . The Emerald Ball promises to be a highlight of the social calendar so be sure to reserve your tickets early.

+++ When is enough, enough? - What makes for a society where 'enough is plenty'? This question was at the heart of an event recently held at the Agape Centre in South Belfast. It addressed contemporary moral, economic and theological issues in our affluent and waste-prone society and brought both Methodists and Quakers together to consider the issues and share their concerns. The event was an excellent example of how Friends can work with other faith groups on a common cause. The title of the event was taken from the book *Enough is Plenty* by Anne Ryan. Anne is a writer, educator and

community activist from County Kildare, and a former member of the academic staff in Maynooth University. A detailed account of the meeting will be given in the January issue of the *Methodist Newsletter*.

News links to reports on faith, politics and education

Old fashioned confession would have served DUP better in RHI runaround

Sluggie O'Toole

<http://sluggerotoole.com/2016/12/16/old-fashioned-confession-might-have-served-dup-better-than-this-rhi-runaround/>

St Patrick's College in Maynooth seeks new president

Irish Times

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/st-patrick-s-college-in-maynooth-seeks-new-president-1.2907832>

New schools law 'will not change Catholic first policies'

Irish Times

... schools to discriminate against children on the basis of their **religion**. ... The Education and Training Boards **Ireland**, the patron body for almost 300 ...

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/new-schools-law-will-not-change-catholic-first-policies-1.2907511>

churchnewsireland@gmail.com

Guard

Interview with Rector Sarah Lunn, from Carlisle Diocese, on her participation in the Listening Ear project involving 12 clergy and covering five GP practices in the Eden Valley in Cumbria. The free service is for any local resident who needs to talk but does not need to see a doctor, The Bishop of Carlisle, James Newcome, the CofE's lead bishop on health and health care, is quoted as saying that initiatives such as Listening Ear make a significant difference to people's health and well being.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/14/gp-patients-surgery-with-vicar-cumbria>

Tel

Article by Nick Gibb the Minister of State for School Standards outlining the Government's Education priorities in advance of the publication of the annual primary school performance tables. In the article Mr Gibb states: "We are looking to expand the number of good faith school places across the country."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2016/12/15/primary-schools-rising-challenge-proposed-reforms/>

Guard

Further coverage of the UK's first multi faith homeless shelter started in Leicester on Monday with more 200 volunteers from six different faith groups taking part. *One Roof Leicester* will move around different faith venues over the next 11 weeks as it provides food and emergency accommodation for ten rough sleepers each night. The shelter brings together Anglican, Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh groups across the area. The project is funded by the charities *Human Appeal* and *Housing Justice* and *Near Neighbours*, administered by Church Urban Fund.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/15/multifaith-homeless-shelter-leicester-churches-synagogue-muslim>

Times/Tel/Mail

Further coverage that Leeds Minster has turned down an invitation to ring York Minster's bells at its Christmas services, in an 'act of solidarity' with York's ringers. In October the Archbishop of York issued a statement saying it had been necessary for York Minster Chapter to take action regarding a member of the bell ringing community on safeguarding grounds and that the whole team had been disbanded following 'repeated disregard of the Chapter's attempts to fully

implement the Church's national policies for safeguarding, health and safety and security'. A York Minster spokeswoman is quoted.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/it-s-silent-night-at-york-minster-as-rivals-support-sacked-bell-ringers-2286918j3>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/12/15/york-minster-ding-dong-bell-ringers-could-see-fall-silent-christmas/>

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4037648/Bellringers-snob-invite-perform-Christmas-service-world-famous-York-Minster-solidarity-volunteer-ringers-sacked-without-explanation.html?](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4037648/Bellringers-snob-invite-perform-Christmas-service-world-famous-York-Minster-solidarity-volunteer-ringers-sacked-without-explanation.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

[ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4037648/Bellringers-snob-invite-perform-Christmas-service-world-famous-York-Minster-solidarity-volunteer-ringers-sacked-without-explanation.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)