



Students and nuns at St Joseph's with their shoeboxes of presents. Sister Mary is far left.

Sister Mary Sweeney organised the distribution of gifts collected in the UK to children in Sierra Leone traumatised by the sickness and grief around them.

Guardian Global - Christmas gatherings [have been cancelled in Sierra Leone](#), but 900 children in one town have been brought some cheer by celebrating it early, thanks to the foresight of a local school teacher.

Sister Mary Sweeney, an Irish special needs teacher, has been distributing presents to children whose families have been hit by [Ebola](#) in Makeni, a busy commercial hub three hours north of Freetown, after private donations of 1,000 shoeboxes stuffed with presents arrived from schools in the UK.

“We started to distribute the presents because we wanted them to have something. We couldn’t bring them altogether because of the ban on gatherings this [Christmas](#),” she says.

“They were all so beautifully wrapped and it was a joy to see the little ones’ eyes light up. They were so excited. There were the most gorgeous things inside: socks, shoes, sunglasses, notebooks, markers, football jerseys. In one of them a child had even put in a few pound coins,” said Sister Mary, who has lived in [Sierra Leone](#) for 42 years.

“The first thing they did after taking a peek was put the box on their heads and take them home. Some of these children have been traumatised. It is so fantastic to give them something to show them somebody is looking out for them.

“The gifts are bringing a lot of joy to the children, despite the grief and trauma that they have to deal with.”

The boxes arrived at [St Joseph’s school for the hearing impaired](#) in early December after [supporters in the UK](#) decided to take action in the absence of an international response to Ebola in Makeni.

The Christmas delivery was one of 12 pallets of freight to be sent out since September by UK supporters. Although humanitarian aid is flooding into Sierra Leone, little was reaching Makeni in the first few months. The pallets cost about £14,000 to get through customs, more than half the charity’s annual funds.

Supplies from chlorine tablets and body bags to gloves and medical equipment filled the first few pallets, packed by volunteers Scott Wilkinson, a freight expert, and Louise Baines, from St Anselm’s college in the Wirral.

“Having been so closely connected with Sister Mary over the last five years and seeing her desperation at trying to do something for the school and the community, and knowing the international response was so slow, we felt we

needed to do something,” said Linda Freestone, one of the trustees of St Joseph’s.

The Bombali district, of which Makeni is the capital, is one of three hardest hit by Ebola in Sierra Leone, but got its first [treatment centre](#) only this month.

Like in many other places, families have been ripped apart by the virus, leaving young people as heads of their households.

Sister Mary says people in Makeni were getting “fed up” because of the lack of support. There may be medical care now, but food and psychological support is still thin on the ground. “Where are the NGOs? Where are the NGOs?” she says.

She says she knew one 24-year-old woman who is now caring for 12 children after the death of her sister and brother. “They are one, two, three years old. My legs were shaking thinking how are they going to survive? The breadwinners are gone so where are they going to get food?”

More at -

www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/dec/24/irish-nun-joy-children-ebola



Archbishops' Christmas Day Message on RTE 1 TV

The annual Christmas Day Message by the Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic Archbishops of Armagh, The Most Revd Dr Richard Clarke and The Most Revd Eamon Martin, will be broadcast on **RTE One Television at 12.15pm on Thursday 25th December.**

This year, the Archbishops' theme will be on life as a gift and building a culture of life and the message will feature interviews with those who have given and received blood and organ donations.

Following the broadcast from 12.15 to 12.30 on Christmas Day, the Archbishops' Message will also be available to view on the RTE Player.



The Archbishop of Dublin Most Rev Dr Michael Jackson with Canon David Gillespie at St Anne's Parish Dublin, Black Santa Sitout for charities

Christmas Message from Archbishop Michael Jackson

Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson writes - At Christmas we pray for peace as we herald the coming of Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace. Peace, of course, makes us yearn for the end of war but it also makes us think of dignity. And I mean the dignity withheld and the dignity destroyed by those who have taken to themselves the entitlement to deprive others of their personal dignity and peace. And so the word peace enables us to tunnel right down to the dignity that defines the human person. In this way, the Prince of Peace both gives dignity to

those who follow him and restores dignity to those who are touched by him today through the power of the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection; life, death and new life.

A few weeks ago, I was in the company of a Christian from the Middle East. As well as listening to his story and the stories of others that he told us, the group of which I was part was able to hear from him what he understood as a theology of martyrdom. He began by telling us that those who write in the Western theological tradition do not now have the building blocks of a theology to address the problem of suffering. When pressed on the point, he gave us three words that for him epitomize a theology of martyrdom: obedience to the Lord in that he suffered and asked us to carry our crosses; hope in such a way that the world should see the hope that is in us and wonder at its source; blessing in being persecuted for righteousness and, in such a way as this, being a blessing to others in society.

As never before the Christians in the Middle East are looking open-eyed at their own invisibility. Their numbers on the ground have shrunk to no more than a trace. Jesus Christ came for their

peace and dignity as well as for the peace and dignity of you and me and for the peace and dignity of their oppressors. There is no peace that is not shared. This is the double-edged message of Christmas in 2014.

‘We need a Church built for today’ – Bishop of Limerick



Bishop insists there is still life in the Church in Limerick
Irish Catholic - Bishop Brendan Leahy has urged the people of Limerick diocese to work together to “repair and rebuild” the Church there.

Acknowledging that the diocese has been through “difficult and confusing times” in recent

years, he insisted there is still life in the Church in Limerick.

Bishop Leahy said that the upcoming synod, a three day-meeting of 400 delegates in the spring of 2016 to chart a fresh blueprint for renewal in the diocese, will send out a “bold statement” to those who have felt side-lined by the Church in recent years.

“I think the Synod will be something very positive in the life of the Church in Limerick. It will send out a message that, not only is the Church still alive, it is looking to grow,” he told *The Irish Catholic*.

“We in the Church want to share a sense of what we have with those who are not part of the Church. We need to work together to repair and rebuild damaged relationships.

“It’s not enough to just have Mass or a presence in a building. People on the margins need to experience Jesus Christ through a loving community,” he said.

Recognising the need to “regenerate” the Church in Limerick, Bishop Leahy appealed to clergy and laity to work together “to discover a new way of being Church”.



Clogher appointment for church educationalist

Portadown Times - Portadown man the Rev Dr Ian Ellis had been appointed as rector of Rossorry Parish, Rossorry, the second largest in the diocese of Clogher, on the outskirts of Enniskillen.

The vacancy arose during the early summer when the previous incumbent, the Very Rev Arthur Barrett, took up the position of Dean of Raphoe. Dr Ellis, who lives in Portadown with his wife Heather, is currently secretary to the Church

of Ireland Board of Education NI. He worships at Seagoe Parish Church in the town.

He graduated from Queen's University Belfast in 1979 with a BSc in Physics, completed a PGCE and taught in Antrim Grammar school until 1986 when he began training for the ordained ministry in the Church of Ireland.

He graduated from Trinity College Dublin and the Church of Ireland Theological College in 1989 with a BTh and was ordained to serve as curate assistant in St Mark's, Armagh from 1989-1991.

He was then appointed rector of the grouped parishes of Loughgall and Grange, also in Armagh diocese, where he remained until taking up his current position in 2002. He completed a Doctorate in Education at the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast in 2013 and his topic was a study of the relationship between pupils' spiritual development and school ethos.

Heather is a human resource professional and has retired from the Southern Health and Social Services Trust. She is currently co-ordinator of fundraising and communications for Down and Dromore Diocesan Mothers' Union.

Her other interests include Rotary International, volunteering with the Trussell Trust foodbank, and Roots of Empathy - a classroom programme for primary school children.

Ian said, "I am really pleased and honoured to be appointed to Rossorry parish and look forward to getting to know the parishioners. It will be a great privilege to live and serve God in the beautiful surroundings of Enniskillen."



RTÉ Player shows High Hopes Choir final concert

From Tuesday December 23, exclusive to RTÉ Player, fans of the series have been able to watch the full length gala concert performance

from the High Hopes Choir in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.

The High Hopes Choir is an ambitious project which is led by David Brophy and features some of the most recognised charities in Ireland with members of the Dublin Simon Community, Saint Vincent de Paul and Focus Ireland coming together to form Ireland's first homeless choir.

This thought provoking and uplifting series shined a light on a major Irish issue, which has seen over 800 children and their families losing their homes this year alone. For those who haven't yet experienced this evocative series, all four episodes will be available from December 23 on the RTÉ Player.

This performance-based project involved two regional choirs in Dublin and Waterford made up of people affected by homelessness and the staff and volunteers who work with them.

The choir recorded Kodaline's *High Hopes* and released it as a single which they performed live on The Late Late Show. The charity single was recorded after receiving some encouragement and vocal advice from chart-topper Ed Sheeran,

former Westlife star Shane Filan and *The Voice of Ireland's* judge Bressie.

90 cent from each download of the single will be split equally between Dublin Simon Community, Saint Vincent De Paul and Focus Ireland.

Links at -

<http://www.rte.ie/ten/news/2014/1222/668476-rte-player-to-show-high-hopes-choir-final-concert/>



George Square crash: churches' reaction and prayers

Bishop Gregor Duncan: 'I saw with my own eyes the awful aftermath'

The Rt Revd Dr Gregor Duncan, Bishop of Glasgow and Galloway in the Scottish Episcopal Church, said: “The whole Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway offers our prayers for and condolences to all so suddenly and terribly caught up in this latest tragedy to befall the City of Glasgow. We bless God for the response of our emergency services. The disaster occurred very near our Diocesan Centre and I saw with my own eyes the awful aftermath. I shall not forget what I saw.”

Kirk Moderator’s sadness

In response to the tragic events in Glasgow’s George Square, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Rt Rev John Chalmers, said: “The news from the city centre of Glasgow just a few days before Christmas is simply devastating. For the second year in a row Glaswegians will have to dig deep into their reserves of compassion and sympathy as they support the families of those who have been killed and injured today

“I am sure that in these circumstances the churches and faith communities of Glasgow would do all that they could to bring support and comfort to those caught up in this tragedy and

that all round Scotland and beyond; Glasgow would be remembered in the prayers of the people.”

Archbishop Tartaglia: ‘My heart breaks’

Archbishop Philip Tartaglia said: “I was shocked and horrified to hear the news of this incident. My heart breaks for all those who have been directly caught up in it as they go about their business just a few days before Christmas in the centre of Glasgow. The circumstances could hardly be more tragic. I would ask any person of faith to pray for those who have died and their relatives and those who have been injured.”

Nativity scene and Christmas tree invite us to make room for God, says Pope

God did not come to the world with arrogance to impose his might, but offered his powerful love through a fragile child, Pope Francis has said.

The Christmas tree and Nativity scene are reminders of this mystery of the Incarnation and they both carry “a message of light, hope and

love”, he said as he met the people who donated the centrepieces of the Vatican Christmas decorations.

The Italian city of Verona donated the Nativity scene, and the southern Italian city of Catanzaro donated the 82-foot white spruce tree, which both adorn St Peter’s Square. The tree was lit and the scene officially unveiled during an early evening ceremony in the square on December 19.

Earlier in the day, the Pope thanked the delegates for their generosity and highlighted the importance of the Christmas creche and tree for Christians, as they are a sign of how “God made man to save us and the light that Jesus brought to the world with his birth”.

But the Nativity scene and Christmas tree touch the hearts of everyone, “even those who do not believe because they speak of fraternity, intimacy and friendship, calling all people of our time to rediscover the beauty of simplicity, sharing and solidarity”, he said.

“They are an invitation to unity, harmony and peace; an invitation to make room – in our

personal and social life – for God, who did not come with arrogance to impose his might, but offers us his omnipotent love through the fragile person of a child,” he said.

“Let us follow him, the true light, in order to not lose our way and to reflect, in turn, light and warmth upon those who are going through difficult and dark times,” he said.

A choir from Serrastretta near Catanzaro and the band of the Vatican gendarme corps were to provide traditional Christmas music, both sacred and popular, during the lighting ceremony.

Media digest

Sun

Bishop of Leicester Tim Stevens shares a Christmas message, reflecting on news stories including the attack on a school in Peshawar, Pakistan.

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/suncolumnists/6201912/Festive-message-from-Bishop-of-Leicester-lends-hope-in-face-of-extremism.html>

Guard

Report on investigation by the paper into how evangelical Christians treat mental illness. It states that research in the US shows that nearly half of evangelical Christians believe that mental illness can be overcome by "Bible study and prayer alone", but the thinking behind this belief is evolving. Article includes case studies sent in by readers and the reaction of their individual church. The report concludes "while these stories do illustrate a range of experiences, from negative to positive, the responses indicate that churches of all denominations are making steps, slowly, to constructively address mental health."

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/dec/22/evangelical-christian-church-mental-illness>

Times

Report that the moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, John Chalmers, who once criticised those who go to church only once a year, has repented and pledged to welcome Christmas churchgoers with open arms, according to his Christmas message published on the national church's website.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/scotland/article4305352.ece>

BBC/Tel/Mail

Report that Pope Francis has criticised the Vatican bureaucracy in a pre-Christmas address to cardinals, complaining of "spiritual Alzheimer's" and "the terrorism of gossip".

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-30577368>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/11308290/Pope-says-Vatican-is-sick-with-power-in-Curia-address.html>

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2883753/Pope-criticises-Curia-lusting-power-s-sake-Christmas-message-Cardinals-Bishops.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490

Tel

Report that Bishop of Buckingham, Alan Wilson has said in an interview with *Pink News* that the Church of England suffers from "serious institutional homophobia" and that homosexual

marriage among the clergy will become commonplace in a few years' time. Article notes Lambeth Palace said it would not comment while the Church of England is currently engaged in a two-year process of "conversations about sexuality". Article also refers to comments by Archbishop Justin at the weekend on the issue of same sex marriage during his *Desert Island Discs* interview.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11310900/Church-of-England-guilty-of-serious-institutional-homophobia-says-Bishop-of-Buckingham.html>

Times

Leader article and news report that Christians are facing ferocious repression in the Middle East, which formed the cradle of all three Abrahamic faiths.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/leaders/article4305898.ece>

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/article4305894.ece>

Ind

Christmas editorial on Christianity's relevance today praising the work of both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of Westminster saying they are "two men whose instinct for social justice is as strong as their faith, and who

are not shy of speaking out and risking controversy."

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/editorials/spiritual--and-political-for-those-who-question-the-churchs-relevance-to-society-a-resounding-answer-is-provided-this-christmas-9943448.html>

Ind/Mail

Reports that David Cameron has stressed his commitment to "Christian values" in his Christmas message saying "among the joyous celebrations we will reflect on those very Christian values of giving, sharing and taking care of others."

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-stresses-his-commitment-to-christian-values-in-christmas-message-9943495.html>

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-2885719/Leaders-deliver-Christmas-messages.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490

Mail

Feature on an atheist who finds solace in the pews each week despite 'agonising doubts'. The article is set against the backdrop that millions will pay their annual visit to church over Christmas.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2885809/Secret-scared-tell-mother-Millions-pay-annual-visit-church-tomorrow-daughter-zealous-atheist-reveals-finds-solace->

pews-week-despite-agonising-doubts.html#ixzz3MngKJZiN

Mail

Report that the Islamic State has released a list of rules dictating how Christians living in the Syrian city of Raqqa should behave, including the instruction to never pray in public or within earshot of a Muslim

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2885506/How-live-Christian-Raqqa-ISIS-release-seven-rules-followers-rival-faith-including-praying-earshot-Muslims-never-mocking-Islam.html#ixzz3MnjpOurT>

Ind

Christmas feature on the boys cathedral choir at St Alban's Abbey

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/christmas/choristers-at-christmas-midnight-mass-and-the-end-of-an-era-9943048.html>

Tel

Report that some archaeologists believe Jesus was born in the small village of Bethlehem in the Galilee, located in northern Israel, which later became known for its Nazi-sympathiser German Templar community

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/11310856/Israels-other-Bethlehem-have->

[Christians-celebrated-Jesus-birth-in-the-wrong-place-all-these-years.html](#)

Mail

News report headlined "after the war a bittersweet Christmas in Gaza"

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2885499/After-war-bittersweet-Christmas-Gaza.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490

Mail

Report that Hindu groups have demanded that the Uttar Pradesh government in India should ban 'changai sabhas', meetings organised by churches where ailing people are allegedly lured to convert to Christianity.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2885690/Hindu-groups-demand-ban-church-meetings-luring-sick-Christians.html#ixzz3MndPLa6B>

BBC

Feature on the business of cathedrals headlined "mixing finance with worship" focusing on Lincoln.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-30513600>

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