



*The Archbishops of Armagh with choir members from local schools prior to recording their RTE Christmas message.*

## **Joint Christmas message from the Archbishops of Armagh highlights persecution**

The growth in the persecution of Christians and others worldwide is a focus of the joint Christmas message from both Primate of All-

[Ireland](#). Archbishop Eamon Martin and Archbishop Richard Clarke issued this message

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*“The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah,\*the Lord.’ Luke 2:10-11*

““Do not be afraid.” Fear is one of the most debilitating of all emotions. It can leave us almost frozen in our tracks. Our response as human beings is normally to try and escape fear or to confront it. This year in many parts of our world people have been living in the grip of fear. Think of those caught up in the cruel onslaught of militants in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia; or those whose families have been devastated by the spread of Ebola disease in Sierra Leone and Liberia; and others in troubled parts of the world like Eastern Europe who are fearful about their future because of continuing war and conflict. Many have fled the bloodshed, persecution or disease and now find themselves as refugees far from home, sometimes in foreign lands. They are cold, hungry and lacking shelter. It is a sad reflection on our world that many people have been forced violently to flee to

safety because of their religion, ethnicity or cultural identity. The plight of Christians in Iraq, Syria and the whole Middle East comes especially to mind at this Christmas time.

“As we pray for peace in the world let us remember those who are forced to spend Christmas far from home because of man’s inhumanity to man. We are forever grateful that many Christians and other people of good will do not stand idly by while their brothers and sisters live in fear. Many church and humanitarian organisations reach out to help refugees across the world. Their work is an inspiring reminder of the compassionate love of Jesus for those least fortunate in our world. Let us continue to support their essential and life-saving services. But at the same time we also need to speak up loudly and often for the voiceless thousands who are not allowed to remain in peace and safety in the place they call home.

Sadly, there is fear and need in our own land too. Many parents across Ireland are afraid for their children’s well-being because they lack the necessities for any level of security or comfort in daily life. The plight of the homeless on our streets has been much in our minds in recent weeks. We urge all people of good-will to work

together so that the needs of children and the most vulnerable are protected.

“As we once again reflect on the Nativity story, let us remember that the infant Jesus and his earthly parents also had to face need, hatred and persecution in Bethlehem and had to flee for the relative safety of Egypt. Yet the simple message of the angel to the shepherds was “Do not be afraid” for this child would be the Saviour of the world. He is called Emmanuel, which being translated means God with us. God with us in our darkest fears and in our brightest joys. God is our hope and our salvation. What a consoling message that is! And what a challenging message too – it calls us all to action and to do what we can to make a difference in relieving the pain and suffering of the world around us.

“May the light of the Christ child shine upon you and upon those whom you love this Christmas and always.”

In his message, Presbyterian Moderator Rev Dr [Michael Barry](#) has called on people to show hospitality and welcome strangers this Christmas. Many people who come here “come in the hope of finding peace and security, but



sadly some find that they are not welcomed but are rejected”, he said.

The Bishops of Derry said: “The harsh realities of life for many in today’s world raise big questions about the meaning and purpose of it all.”

Catholic bishop Donal McKeown and Church of Ireland bishop [Ken Good](#) described this as “a world in which too many have to contend with poverty, with homelessness and loneliness; where many live with dangerous political uncertainty and where, for large numbers, refugee status far from home is their lot”.

## **Choir gives passengers on Dublin-bound flight a Christmas surprise**

Passengers on an Aer Lingus flight from Brussels to Dublin this week were treated to a festive surprise when a choir that was travelling on the same flight serenaded them with Christmas hymns.

The Island of Ireland Peace choir - formerly known as the Waterford-Omagh Peace choir - is a cross-border choir set up in 2006.

They treated the passengers to a beautiful performance of 'Silent Night' and 'Oh Holy Night'.

And videos of the Christmas treat were uploaded to Instagram and posted to Aer Lingus' Facebook page. As Aer Lingus themselves commented, that is what you call in-flight entertainment.

The choir was visiting Belgium to sing at the a ceremony at the Island of Ireland Peace Park in Flanders to commemorate the centenary of the World War I outbreak.

Martin McGuinness was also in attendance at the park which was opened by Mary McAleese in 1998.

The choir also stopped by the Church of St Nicholas in Messines to attend a commemoration of the Christmas Truce. On Christmas Eve, 1914, soldiers from both the German and British sides called a temporary halt to fighting. Soldiers from both sides used the time to bury their dead and some also exchanged gifts, sang carols and played football

Video and music at - <http://www.breakingnews.ie/discover/choir-gives-passengers-on-dublin-bound-flight-a-christmas-surprise-655076.html>

## **Blue Christmas in Nenagh**

Nenagh Guardian - Blue Christmas, or 'Longest Night', is a service for people suffering from pain, loss, isolation or grief in the Christmas Season. St Mary's Church of Ireland in Nenagh will hold a Blue Christmas service this Saturday night at 8.00pm.

The service is usually held on or around December 21st - the longest night of the year. It is for those for whom Christmas is not a time of joy - for those who are lonely, mourning, alienated, cast out from family celebrations. A Blue Christmas service offers special recognition of the struggles many people face during this season.

## **Saintfield's Grumpy Shepherds**

Yesterday and today, Saturday 20 December, some grumpy shepherds will be sitting out for 24 hours outside Saintfield Parish Church to raise money for Tearfund's Syrian refugee appeal.

The shepherds have a lot to complain about! Why does the world not help others? How can people spend so much in themselves and only give a fraction to people who have nothing?

What would Christmas be like for Jesus if we don't serve our world in such ways?

The grumpy shepherds will also be complaining about the football, weather and the length of the sermons as well. If you are in Saintfield, please support this sit out and help them raise £2,500.



## **Irish speaking school move 'widely opposed'**

News Letter - The UUP claims the education minister has approved a new Irish language school in Dungiven which is neither affordable

nor viable and is against the advice of “a host of experts”.

UUP education spokesman Danny Kinahan MLA has called on John O’Dowd to justify his decision.



***Danny Kinahan MLA***

He said the minister had approved the new school “contrary to the professional guidance of his departmental officials and a host of educational experts”.

After reading the development proposal he was “utterly at a loss to understand how Minister O’Dowd has made his decision” to approve Colaiste Dhoire.

“A government minister has a duty and responsibility to make rational decisions for the benefit of society as a whole, taking due consideration of the need to be responsible in spending taxpayers’ money.

“If a minister decides to disregard advice from his departmental officials, he needs to have solid, defensible grounds for doing so. In this example, the minister for education needs to state clearly what the basis for his decision is.

“The Western Education and Library Board, the Education and Training Inspectorate and the Department of Education itself have all said that the proposal is neither affordable nor viable.

“St Patrick’s College in nearby Maghera provides an Irish language unit and they also have objected to the new school proposal.

“Damningly, even the Ministerial Advisory Group, which published a report last month reviewing Irish medium education, has said that approval of this proposal flouts its recommendations.”

The projected initial intake of 15 pupils is “ridiculously low” for a secondary school, he added.

“It has been estimated that approximately 11 double mobile classrooms will be required at a cost of approximately £600,000 (plus VAT) per year, with specialised accommodation increasing the cost.

“The school’s estimated first year deficit is around £100,000 and this will have to be carried forward to subsequent years.

“How on Earth can this be approved when the minister is pleading poverty? He is facing a funding gap of £162.5m in next year’s budget, with 2,500 teaching and support staff jobs under threat of being cut by April 2015.”

Education Minister Mr O’Dowd responded that he makes the final decisions.

“I take very seriously my statutory duty to encourage and facilitate education through the medium of Irish.

“While I note the advice of officials, I am the minister and it is my role to make the final decision on all development proposals. I stand over my decision on Colaiste Dhoire.”

<http://www.newsletter.co.uk/irish-school-move-widely-opposed-1-6479703>



*A final decision on gay ministers will be taken at next year's General Assembly*

## **Church of Scotland presbyteries vote to appoint gay ministers**

BBC - The Church of Scotland has moved another step closer to allowing congregations to appoint gay ministers.

A majority of the Kirk's presbyteries have now voted in favour of change.

The final decision will be taken at next year's General Assembly.

The issue has been a consistently controversial one for the church, prompting what Kirk leaders



insist is a relatively small number of ministers to quit.

Earlier this year, the General Assembly asked its 46 presbyteries to consider whether congregations should be allowed to opt out of the traditional stance and appoint a minister who is in a civil partnership.

The deadline for returns is Hogmanay but already a majority have voted in favour.

It means the question will return to the General Assembly next May where commissioners - around 800 of them - will decide whether to pass it as Church Law.

At the Kirk's gathering in 2011, commissioners voted to accept gay and lesbian clergy - on the condition they had declared their sexuality and were ordained before 2009.

The Kirk then prepared a report by its theological commission, which set out arguments on both sides.

Last year, the ruling General Assembly voted in favour of a proposal that allows liberal parishes to opt out of the church's policy on homosexuality

and this year's commissioners backed sending the draft church legislation to local presbyteries.

## **Go-ahead for major GB church credit union**

Fair returns to savers, fair interest rates on loans and the aspiration to be a flagship credit union are among the aims of the Churches' Mutual Credit Union Ltd (CMCU) which received formal authorisation from the regulatory authorities yesterday. This has been a rigorous process undertaken by the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority. CMCU plans to begin to offer its services to those eligible for membership from February 2015.

CMCU has been formed for and with the help of the Church of England, the Methodist Church of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Church in Wales. CMCU President, Canon Antony MacRow-Wood, said, "I am delighted at the news of authorisation. CMCU will help many, even in its first year of operation and, in due course, it should become a significant financial resource to the church and individuals throughout England,

Wales and Scotland. CMCU will enable a virtuous re-cycling of money within the church community, through a combined portfolio of savings and loan products."

At first, churches and individuals (notably ordained ministers, licensed lay ministers, elders, employees and trustees of churches and church charities and the charities themselves) will be able to become members and benefit from the financial products. It is estimated that at least 60,000 individuals plus churches and church charities will be eligible to join CMCU. This will enable savings and provide loans to individuals for essential items and to churches for mission projects and equipment. The Financial Services Compensation Scheme covers deposits up to £85,000.

CMCU plans to offer a range of loan products which will be a major funding stream for the dividend that will be paid on savings products such as ISAs, instant access and regular (monthly) savings accounts. These products will include a competitive car loan scheme.

Once the credit union has built up an established track record it is intended that CMCU will be

open to all church members and extend its denominational base. This would require permission from the regulators to alter CMCU's common bond (the definition of those eligible for membership). CMCU aspires to become an example of best practice in the sector and aid the Church's involvement in a critical area of national life for renewal and transformation.

## **World churches' body welcomes Cuba-US relations progress**

Following the positive developments in relations between Cuba and the United States, World Council of Churches (WCC) general secretary, the Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, has expressed his gratitude for the progress.

In a statement issued on 18 December 2014 from the WCC headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, Dr Tveit said, "The World Council of Churches has long accompanied member churches and partners in both countries in their search for reconciliation and justice, including for the release of political prisoners. Through many years of witness and advocacy, we have hoped and prayed that this day would come."

Dr Tveit added: “The fact that the long-held hope seems now to be reflected in political action – and long-detained prisoners are now released to their families – is a sign on our pilgrimage of justice and peace: a sign that despite long and bitter divisions, peace and reconciliation are always possible.”

The world churches' chief concluded: “Now it will be the responsibility and duty of both governments to ensure that the hopes so greatly encouraged by yesterday’s announcements are realized, and peace between these communities experienced as a reality. At this Christmas time, I pray for rapid progress on this path.”

## **South Sudan, a year on: the need for prayer and solidarity continues**

A year ago on 15 December, violence broke out in Juba. Since then, the conflict has left nearly 2 million people displaced in South Sudan or in neighbouring countries. Overall, nearly 4 million are in need of humanitarian assistance, with the food crisis growing. Although there is relative calm at the moment, security needs to be

sustained before people feel safe to return home and start rebuilding their lives and communities.



Starting in December 2013, severe fighting between government and opposition forces caused families to flee their homes. Tens of thousands have been killed in the fighting, which focussed particularly on Upper Nile, Unity and Jonglei states.

With over 1.4 million people displaced within South Sudan, people have been left hungry and sick, as the capacity to support them has been exceeded. The Church was often the first and sometimes the only source of assistance, particularly in more remote areas, where the

conflict was more prolonged. Relief organisations have worked to provide support, but have been hampered by lack of funds, as well as access problems, due both to the fighting and severe flooding during an unusually long rainy season. The UN estimates that by early 2015 2.5 million people are likely to be facing severe food insecurity, due to disrupted livelihoods and markets. An estimated 235,000 children are currently suffering from severe malnutrition.

Throughout this time, the Anglican Alliance has hosted conference calls between the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan (ECSS&S) Emergency Crisis Committee (ECC) and Anglican and Episcopal partners around the world. This has kept partners informed of the situation as it develops and has also helped them to post appeals to support the ECC as it responded to humanitarian needs. The Church response has been conducted in two phases. The first phase targeted relief to the areas most impacted by the initial displacement: Awerial, in Lakes state, Nimule, on the border with Uganda, and Lologo 2 camp outside Juba. In their final report, the ECC record provision of cooked food to 3000 displaced children in Awerial, and dry food packets to 40,032 people in

Aerial, 10,129 people in Melijo camp in Magwe county in Nimule, 6,473 people in Lologo 2 camp in Juba, and 1,800 vulnerable families (12,600 people) in Renk.

The needs far exceeded the funds received by the ECSS&S' relief and development arm, SUDRA, so they prepared a proposal to serve newly displaced populations with dry food in the Phase 2. This second phase also included activities on camp-based education, trauma healing & counselling, training in reconciliation processes and skills building for rehabilitation & resettlement. These activities are now ongoing, with trauma healing training conducted by the Education Commission and income generation training by the Mothers' Union.

The needs are huge, as most people in South Sudan have been affected by the current crisis, having lost loved ones, been injured in the conflict, having to flee their homes in fear of their lives, or hosting those who have been displaced.

Please pray and please stand in solidarity, as the people of South Sudan mark the first anniversary since the outbreak of conflict



Please support the vital work of the Emergency Crisis Committee of ECSS&S, alongside others working in South Sudan, as they use their grass roots network of churches to bring relief, comfort, healing and skills to those communities worst affected by the crisis - Mothers Union, CMS and Christian Aid are amongst the partners.



## Media

### Mail

Comment article on Christmas cards which carry obscene, offensive or even anti-Christian messages. It says the move is part of a tide of secularism sweeping the country and asks, might it not be time for some Archbishop or Bishop to declare that enough is enough?

<http://www.mailonsunday.co.uk/debate/article-2878454/STEPHEN-GLOVER-Imagine-outrage-vulgar-Christmas-cards-poked-fun-Islam-instead.html>

## **Mail**

Reports on how Christians in Sierra Leone attending church ceremonies on Christmas Day will be allowed to do so but are requested to return home immediately after the church services to celebrate Christmas with their families, according to the president, as the country attempts to tackle the spread of the Ebola virus.

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2877726/Sierra-Leone-launches-stiff-measures-fight-Ebola-surge.html?](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2877726/Sierra-Leone-launches-stiff-measures-fight-Ebola-surge.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)

[ITO=1490&ns\\_mchannel=rss&ns\\_campaign=1490](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2877726/Sierra-Leone-launches-stiff-measures-fight-Ebola-surge.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490)