



Canon Ian Ellis calls for church-loyal order forum

A leading Anglican figure has warned of an increasing “divergence” between the loyal orders and the Christian churches.

Canon Ian Ellis, writing in Thursday’s News Letter, decried what he called a “disconnect” between institutional Christianity and such

groups, and called for a remedy to be found as quickly as possible.

He said more dialogue between churches and orders could aid in the resolution of parading tensions, and suggested a Churches and Loyal Order Forum be established to help make this happen.

Canon Ellis wrote: “The Loyal orders are self-proclaimed Christian organisations, yet there is an unfortunate and growing ‘disconnect’ between them and the institutional churches that needs to be remedied...

“While the churches in recent times have had occasional meetings with the loyal orders, a more sustained and in-depth dialogue is now required.”

The forum he envisages would be independent, voluntary, and “could play a significant role in assisting towards the resolution of contentious parades and flags issues at local level”.

His call comes in the wake of the Stormont House Agreement – a wide-ranging deal between the Province’s five main parties which includes a blueprint to help resolve cultural

differences, including unionist anger over parading decisions.

Among other things, the Stormont House Agreement declares that responsibility for marches and associated protests should “in principle” lie with the Assembly; that some kind of “independent adjudication” process will still be necessary; and that local-level talks will be vital to regulate parades.

Detailed proposals are to be drawn up by June.

Canon Ellis is rector of Newcastle, Co Down – a post he has held since 1993. He has also been editor of the Church of Ireland Gazette since 2001; a newsletter containing news bulletins and commentary. It is distributed island-wide, often by subscription, and is independent of the Church of Ireland itself. In addition, Canon Ellis is also a past president of the Irish Council of Churches.

Cathedral ablaze with light as Bishop Miller leads diocese into a Year of Mission

The steps of St Anne’s Cathedral were ablaze with light on New Year’s Eve as Bishop Harold Miller led the Diocese of Down and Dromore into a Year of Mission.

Following an evening of celebration, the bishop led the 500-strong congregation into the street as spotlights shone into the night sky and St Anne's became a canvas for the Year of Mission logo, 'For you'.



The lights and environmental projection were just one element in an event which celebrated the end of a full year of continuous prayer and looked forward to 2015.

There was something for all ages with good food, crafts for kids, live music and worship before the symbolic act of leaving the building as 'Lights to the World'.



The diocese has been preparing for mission for 18 months and, as Bishop Miller said in his address, the 'For you' logo has a clear message.

“‘For you’ is a declaration that the church is here not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of the outsider,” he said. “The church does not primarily exist for itself or, like a club, for its members - it exists to transform the world, and especially the community in which it is set, for Jesus Christ. Archbishop William Temple famously put it like this: ‘The church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of its non-members’”.

‘For you’ will appear on banners around the diocese from New Year’s Day and the diocese

has also launched a microsite, www.churchforyou.org to allow people to easily connect with local churches and to be impacted by stories of faith.

Missionary in African rainforest when she learned of OBE



Maud Kells pictured in her Cookstown home during a visit from her missionary work in Africa. Awarded an OBE for services to people in the Democratic Republic of Congo

A veteran missionary discovered she is to be honoured with an OBE whilst checking her e-mails deep in a remote patch of central Africa.

News Letter - The award recognises 75-year-old Maud Kells' lifetime of work at a medical centre in the impoverished and war-ravaged Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The Cookstown woman is still currently in Mulita in the east of the country, due to return in March, and cannot be reached directly.

However, sister Margaret Keane, 77, spoke of breaking the news to her after finding the letter at Maud's bungalow.

"She is absolutely delighted," Margaret told the News Letter.

"She said: 'I'm not getting that! They couldn't honour me like that!' She could not believe it."

Miss Kells only turns on her solar-powered laptop once a week to check emails.

Margaret said the machine did not have enough power to let her download the Cabinet Office forms which are needed to accept the award, so she had to fill them in on her behalf.

"She lives in the rainforest and it's very primitive," said Margaret. "Not many of us could live out where she lives."

She has worked in the DRC since 1968.

Maud works for charity WEC International, and its Ireland director Norman Cuthbert said: “She works on her own and has done for many, many years. She studied nursing here and then one day as a Christian she felt God was calling her to go overseas.

Rev Ronnie McCracken, a 71-year-old “itinerant evangelist” from Crumlin, is to receive an MBE.

Since shortly before the break-up of the Soviet Union, he has been sending aid to Leningrad (now St Petersburg) after making contact with churches there. This has continued since, both there and elsewhere in the globe.

“These things we were doing were practical expressions of our Christian faith in the Saviour,” he said.

“After 70 years of people in eastern Europe being told there is no God, it was not enough to go and hand out pamphlets.”

Rev McCracken (who according to family legend is distantly related to Henry Joy MacCracken) declared the award a “great honour”, but added:

"I couldn't have done these things without the help of others."

Anna Margaret Glass was awarded a BEM for voluntary service to Ardstraw Parish Church and the community.

Church 'would have a stronger case if it had embraced civil partnership' - Association of Catholic Priests

THE referendum on gay marriage looks set to be another battle the Irish church is "destined to lose", according to the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) in Ireland.

Irish Independent - Fr Brendan Hoban of the ACP said some of the arguments offered by official and non-official church bodies against the Government's proposed change "seem unconvincing".

"If the church had been generous in welcoming civil partnerships in 2010 we'd be in a stronger position to argue about the definition of marriage," he told the Irish Independent.

The Co Mayo-based parish priest also questioned how much time, money and effort the church was putting into fighting the proposal for gay marriage and how much time, money and effort was being devoted to the pastoral care of gay people.

The ACP is considering polling its membership to see what support for or resistance to the government proposal on same-sex marriage there is among its membership.

Fr Hoban said the priests' group estimated it represented about 30pc of Irish priests, or just under 1,100 clerics.

"We're aware that there are different views among members, from full agreement to outright opposition," he explained.

"The hope would be that the debate, in the lead-up to the May referendum, will be respectful and civilised."

According to Fr Hoban, Pope Francis wants honest debate around the realities of life.

"It's clear that he's not just encouraging debate, he's moving the church in a very definite direction," he said.

Fr Hoban said the Pope's recent message about the forthcoming second synod next October shows that he's not for turning in his view that pastoral care must be based not on church doctrine but mercy.

"This approach has all kinds of repercussions, not least in terms of the same-sex referendum," Fr Hoban stated. He said the ACP was founded "almost as a last fling of the Vatican II generation of priests", but with Pope Francis arriving unexpectedly it had suddenly created great expectations of a movement towards reform.

"We sometimes say that Francis has stolen the ACP's best lines.

"There is no discernible difference between what Francis is saying and what the ACP is proposing," Fr Hoban said.

Irish Methodist team in Haiti

Thirteen Irish Methodist are currently in Haiti to help local Methodists set up and maintain education and health organisations. Plans for the trip were made with the President of L'Eglise Methodiste D'Haiti, Rev Gesner Paul in early 2014. The team will return on 14 January.



The team comes from all over Ireland and will be involved in 5 main areas of work:

- Raise funds for and help with refurbishment of an accommodation block at a teacher training college which trains teachers from rural areas so that they can make education available in regions where it is in short supply. It will also be used for church activities such as youth camps, preachers seminars and conferences. It would also be an asset that would generate some income for the church as they could host outside groups for conferences and seminars.

- A series children's holiday Bible clubs in various places with 500 children expected in total.
- Pay for and help with some short term local GP clinics in rural areas near Port-au-Prince where basic health care is in very short supply.
- Provide two seminars for Preachers/Ministers. During the seminars the team hopes to learn from the growing church in Haiti

The visit with its sharing of skills and mutual learning is part of the Methodist Church in Ireland's desire to forge deeper friendships with a few of its world church partners, one being the Methodist Church in Haiti.

You can follow the team on their blog on <http://headingtohaiti2015.tumblr.com>

Dramatic rise in civil marriages in Ireland

Civil marriages have doubled in Northern Ireland over a 22 year period according to figures published by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

Derry Journal - In 1991, there were 9,221 marriages of which 15.4 per cent were civil marriages, whereas in 2013 the figures increased to 30.8 per cent out of a total of 8,126 marriages.

The statistics for civil marriages in the South of Ireland are very similar to that in the North. Civil ceremonies accounted for 29.5 per cent of the 20,680 last year, compared to only five per cent 20 years ago, as stated in the Irish Times.

There has been an increase of 66 per cent in civil marriages in England and Wales from 2002 to 2012. Figures produced by The Office for National Statistics show that 70 per cent of all marriages were civil marriages.

A civil ceremony is a non-religious, legal marriage, conducted by a government official or functionary, normally known as a registrar. Local authorities designate where a ceremony can take place such as hotels, stately homes, Council Registry offices, etc.

Almost one third of weddings here are no longer conducted at a church, and like most European countries, Northern Ireland is experiencing a decline in religious worship and a rise in secularism, humanism, paganism and atheism. Many couples want to celebrate their marriages

with their friends in a ceremonial fashion, as opposed to the no frills, no trimmings registry office event

More at -

<http://www.derryjournal.com/news/features/dramatic-rise-in-civil-marriages-1-6492825>

In Historic First, Belgian Bishop Calls Church to Bless Lesbian & Gay Couples

For the first time in known history, a Roman Catholic bishop has explicitly called for the Church to recognize and bless committed same-gender relationships.

New Ways Ministry - Bishop Johan Bonny of Antwerp, Belgium, made his comments in an interview with *De Morgen*, a Belgian newspaper that was published on December 27, 2014. He called for the Church to recognize the faithfulness and commitment of same-gender couples in the same way that the Church recognizes the relationships of heterosexual couples. A news story about the interview

in [*The National Catholic Reporter*](#) contained excerpts translated into English, including:



Bishop Johan Bonny

“There should be recognition of a diversity of forms. We have to look inside the church for a formal recognition of the kind of interpersonal relationship that is also present in many gay couples. Just as there are a variety of legal frameworks for partners in civil society, one must arrive at a diversity of forms in the church. ... The intrinsic values are more important to me than the institutional question. The Christian ethic is based on lasting relationships where exclusivity, loyalty, and care are central to each other.”

Bonny acknowledged that the pontificate of Pope Francis, which has offered greater openness to LGBT issues, has motivated to speak his mind.

On whether the Church will eventually bless lesbian and gay couples' relationships, he said:

“Personally, I find that in the church more space must be given to acknowledge the actual quality of gay and lesbian couples; and such a form of shared-life should meet the same criteria as found in an ecclesiastical marriage.... And we have to acknowledge that such criteria can be found in a diversity of relationships and one needs to search for various models to give form to those relationships.”

Bonny also stated that he still considers that heterosexual marriage should maintain its unique place in the Church.

Christian Aid steps up support for ebola survivors orphans and quarantined families

The plight of thousands of people affected by the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone must not be forgotten says Christian Aid, as the first case of the deadly virus is diagnosed on British soil.



In recent weeks Christian Aid has intensified its emergency response to the crisis in Sierra Leone, where nearly 2,500 people have died and over 9,000 have been infected by the disease. The country represents nearly half of all reported cases in the current outbreak.

Christian Aid is addressing pressing needs in seven of Sierra Leone's worst-affected districts using funds donated by the British public through its own appeal and the Disasters and Emergency Committee (DEC).

Its partners have scaled up distributions of food, household materials and hygiene items to 420 Ebola survivor households and 150 quarantined homes.

This week Christian Aid became the first organisation to provide such kits to survivors in the Western Area, working alongside Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs. The distributions were organised by Christian Aid partner NETHIPS, which supports people living with HIV.

Jeanne Kamara, Christian Aid Country Manager in Sierra Leone, who took part in the distributions, described it as "truly humbling". "Survivors need food and other support, such as the provision of basic household items, since those who are infected have all their belongings burnt leaving people in a desperate situation," she says.



In eight districts up to 500 religious leaders will be trained in psycho-social counselling and stigma reduction, to prevent Ebola survivors and their families from being ostracised by their communities.

The growing number of orphans will become a legacy of this deadly disease and in the coming months Christian Aid partners will also be providing food, water, medical assistance and trauma counselling for approximately 100 orphans, and will aim to reintegrate as many children as possible with extended family members.

Partners will also carry out further public education initiatives, predominantly through radio broadcasts and community visits, aiming to reach at least 1.5 million people with vital information on prevention and treatment.

As a new year looms and the outbreak enters its 10th month, Christian Aid hopes the crisis will not be forgotten by the international community. “We are very sorry to hear of the British nurse who has fallen victim to this indiscriminate virus,” says Jeanne Kamara. “At a time when the Ebola crisis appears to have fallen from the international

news agenda, this sad incident reminds us that this disease does not recognise country boundaries and is continuing to infect more people every day.”

She continued: “This was a very unusual Christmas period in Sierra Leone. At a time of year when people are used to being with their families the mood was sombre and celebrations were curtailed in a bid to halt the increase in the chain of transmissions. However, the numbers of infected persons remains worryingly high.

“Cases continue to fluctuate amid the drive to identify Ebola sufferers, who are still not presenting themselves for early treatment and/or isolation. People are still caring for the sick and dying themselves, as well as carrying out unsafe burial practices, resulting in many deaths that could have been avoided. The issue of cultural practices continues to pose a big challenge.

“Christian Aid partners are working flat out in various districts, including ‘hot zones’, to trace those who have been in contact with Ebola sufferers, carry out patient referrals and train psycho-social counsellors. In addition they are providing urgently needed food and non-food

items to an ever-increasing number of quarantined people in poor communities, in order to prevent starvation.

“The long-term impact of the Ebola outbreak on Christian Aid’s programmes mean that we have to sharpen our work on livelihoods for Ebola survivors, particularly focusing on women and young people. Also, resources meant for alleviating the suffering of people living with HIV have been greatly reduced, since much of the focus has been on our national Ebola response. In 2015 we will need to accelerate our HIV work to ensure that our gains are not lost and are, at best, stabilised.

“My sincere hope is that Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea will see the back of this deadly and uncompromising virus within the first half of 2015. Sierra Leoneans are a resilient and sturdy people and I hope the country will begin to pick up the pieces and start to rebuild the gains that it has so woefully lost.

“I hope this outbreak will encourage the Government of Sierra Leone and its partners to build a resilient health service for all, so that if, or

when, another infectious disease rears its head again the country and its people are prepared.

“Finally, I hope next year we can begin to address the critical issues of maternal and child health, ensure that children and young people can get back into full-time education, and start to deal with the enormous socio-economic issues emanating from this dreadful disease.” To donate to Christian Aid’s Ebola response visit www.christianaid.org.uk/ebolacrisis