

Church News Ireland



Image of the day – Presbyterian Women confer

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Presbyterian Women confer

The Moderator, President of OW and speakers at the annual conference in the Assembly's Building. Report below

People and places

Irish Presbyterian Women President looks forward to new opportunities

Esther Parker, the new President of Presbyterian Women (PW), has told its weekend annual conference that the forthcoming year would be 'a period of opportunity' as the world transitions to 'something that feels more normal' following the pandemic.

With over 1000 women in attendance at the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's (PCI) Assembly Buildings, the organisation - which is a part of PCI's women's ministry - announced that during the past year members had raised just under £1/3 million for mission projects at home and overseas.

With the exception of PCI's General Assembly, PW's annual conference is largest annual meeting held by the Church. Founded over 130 years ago, women came together from its 465 PW Groups around Ireland to elect a new president,



worship and hear from God's Word. One of the invited guests, who gave an address of welcome, was Presbyterian Moderator, Right Reverend Dr David Bruce.

Speaking to Saturday's conference, PW's new president, Esther Parker, who worships in Belfast's historic Sinclair Seamen's Presbyterian Church, where her husband is minister, said, "As the world tries to transition from pandemic restrictions to something that feels more normal, we in Presbyterian Women find ourselves facing the same challenge. However, this challenge presents us with an opportunity, one we would do well to grasp. How will we move forward?"

"Before going forward we need to look back. Our history is important; we need to assess it and learn from it. We must also remember the recent history of the past two years,

which have proved that we can, and sometimes should, do things differently but that it does not mean losing what we stand for – to be women living for Jesus, living as His disciples.”

Mrs Parker continued, “A disciple is a learner so, as disciples of Jesus, we continually learn from Him; our own thoughts and opinions are not enough to lead us forward. We must prayerfully seek God’s way and not rely on our own ideas and preferences. During this period of opportunity, I am looking forward to visiting groups and encouraging them to take up this challenge: to both assess the past and plan ahead in an attitude of prayerful submission to the will of God; to take our theme for the year to heart and to go deeper together in knowledge of and obedience to God’s Word, and in our relationships with God and with each other.”

During the morning session and afternoon celebration, guest speaker Amy Summerfield, the Derbyshire-born evangelist who has served God in full-time ministry positions since she was 18, spoke on PW’s theme for the year, ‘Deeper Together.’ Inspired by Romans 12:10, it seeks to enable the organisation to take all that it has learned about what is important over the last two years, assess where PW has come from, where it is, and decide how best to move forward together.

The meeting also heard how PW and women’s ministry had contributed to the life, mission and ministry of the Church. Across Ireland, for example, PW Groups raised over £293,331 (€344,781) for mission at home and overseas. During the forthcoming year it was announced that the

Presbyterian Women's Special Home Project will support the work of PCI's International Meeting Point (IMP) in North Belfast. Set up in 2018 to meet the practical and spiritual needs of migrants and asylum seekers in north Belfast, it is hoped that £15,000 can be raised.

The Special Overseas Project will see PW seeking to raise the same amount to support PCI's partner, the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor, and their restoration of the Suara Kasih Radio Station, which was badly damaged by 2021's Cyclone Seroja.

This was the first time the annual meeting has taken place on a Saturday and the first in-person all-Ireland PW gathering since 2019. In her outgoing president's address, Heather Clements said she was "...thankful for the tremendous privilege of serving the Lord in Presbyterian Women for such a time as this. It was certainly very different; groups were unable to meet and the normal lines of communication were unavailable because staff members were furloughed..."

Mrs Clements, who worships at First Limavady Presbyterian Church, continued. "Although I missed the opportunities of visiting many of the groups I am thankful that I was able share in some services online and when staff resumed work again to be involved in communicating with groups. Most of all, I am thankful to God for His faithfulness to us as an organisation and for blessing us in so many ways as we seek to encourage women to live for Jesus."

News reports

Apology, 800 years on, for laws that expelled Jews from England

Church service to mark eight centuries since Synod of Oxford brings together chief rabbi, senior Anglicans and Roman Catholic bishop, Harriet Sherwood writes in The Guardian.

The Church of England is to apologise for its “shameful actions” in passing anti-Jewish laws 800 years ago that paved the way for the expulsion of Jews from England.

A special service at Christ Church cathedral in Oxford on Sunday, marking the 800th anniversary of the Synod of Oxford, will be attended by Ephraim Mirvis, the chief rabbi, with representatives of the archbishop of Canterbury and a Roman Catholic bishop.

The synod passed laws forbidding social interactions between Jews and Christians, forcing Jews to wear identifying badges, imposing church tithes on them and banning them from certain professions. They were also forbidden from building new synagogues.

By the late 13th century, further measures forbade Jews from owning land and passing on inheritance to their children. Hundreds were arrested, hanged or imprisoned.

Eventually, all the Jews in England – 3,000 or so – were expelled under an edict in 1290 by King Edward I. They were not permitted to return for more than 360 years.

The Church of England was not created until the 1530s, when Henry VIII split from the pope. Nevertheless, it was now right for Christians to repent of their “shameful actions” and to “reframe positively” relations with the Jewish community, said Jonathan Chaffey, archdeacon of Oxford. The Roman Catholic church was “fully in accord” with the apology, he added.

The move follows a 2019 document produced by the Church of England which said Christian attitudes towards Judaism over centuries had provided a “fertile seed-bed for murderous antisemitism”. Anglicans and other Christians must not only repent for the “sins of the past” but actively challenge anti-Jewish attitudes and stereotypes, said the document.

It acknowledged that cathedrals in Norwich and Lincoln were associated with the spread of the “blood libel” in the late Middle Ages, when Jewish communities were falsely accused of abducting and killing Christian children.

But the church’s effort to take responsibility for its part in Jewish persecution was blunted by stinging criticism by the chief rabbi of the continued “specific targeting” of Jews for conversion to Christianity. Some Christians saw Jews as “quarry to be pursued and converted”, he said.

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The document went no further than urging Christians to “think carefully” about evangelising their Jewish neighbours, and saying Christians should be “sensitive to Jewish fears”.

Tony Kushner, professor of Jewish/non-Jewish relations at Southampton University, said: “This is the hardest step for the church. Accepting that blood libels, massacres and expulsions were wrong is straightforward ... accepting that Jews have a validity of religion is more challenging.”

The apology over the Synod of Oxford reflected “concerns over contemporary antisemitism” and was part of a wider reassessment of ideas and heritage, including slavery, he said.

“The C of E didn’t exist [at the time of the Synod of Oxford] so it is apologising for things that it wasn’t responsible for. But if it regards itself as the leading voice of Christianity in Britain today, then the apology has some merit in recognising injustices that were done.”

Courtesy The Guardian. 08 May 2022

Church of Scotland General Assembly 2022 to receive progress report on Church reform

Despite the challenges of the last two years, the Church of Scotland is steadily moving forward with a programme of radical reforms begun in 2019 aimed at ensuring it is "lean and fit for mission in the 21st

century." - Very Rev Dr John Chalmers outgoing Convener of the Assembly Trustees

The reforms will streamline church structures through reducing the number of presbyteries, undertaking a large-scale review of Church buildings and developing new and creative mission plans that can be carried out with 600 full-time ministries supported by local elders and members.

"It is hard to remember a time in the recent history of the Church of Scotland when so many far-reaching instructions of the General Assembly have been implemented at the same time," the Assembly Trustees (ATs) say in their report to the 2022 General Assembly.

"Our belief, which we hope can be shared across the whole Church, is that in the grace of God the work which has begun will lead to renewal and growth."

The goal of the reforms is to ensure the Church continues to achieve its mission of "inspiring the people of Scotland and beyond with the Good News of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic worshipping, witnessing, nurturing and serving communities."

The challenges of ministry

The Assembly Trustees' report recognises the heavy burden that ministers have carried in championing reforms amid the pandemic.

Ministers have been expected to embrace new technologies and explain Covid regulations while engaging in everything



Very Rev Dr John Chalmers outgoing Convener of the Assembly Trustees

from mission planning and building reviews to comforting grieving families.

"We must all offer thanks for the strengths allowed to many," the report says, "whether in full-time ministry, other ministries or support positions to bear not only their own burdens but to aid those who have struggled."

The ATs have charged forum staff with reimagining and revising the initial training programme for Ministers of Word and Sacrament as well as a programme of education and training open to all believers.

Finance during the pandemic

Commissioners to the 2022 General Assembly will receive reports that show the Church's financial situation is complex. To finance renewal, the Assembly Trustees have set out to rebalance the Church's finances, bring costs within budget and ensure presbyteries and local congregations are supported to grow. At the same time the pandemic led to many local congregations facing a significant drop in income and less overall income for the Church nationally.

As the ATs explain in the Annual Report:

"The 2019 Special Commission recommended eliminating deficit budgeting and the ATs want to implement this; however, because the pandemic reduced the Church's income substantially, there will be deficit budgets on ordinary operations for at least the next two to three years until (1) the new Presbyteries become fully operational, (2) the Faith Action Plan is established and (3) Presbytery Mission Plans have been completed."

However, this year's operating deficit of £3.1 million is less than budgeted and the Church remains on course. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the ATs say in their report, "...people have been faithful: faithful to their calling, faithful in their service, faithful in their giving and faithful to God."

Giving to Grow

Approved by the 2021 General Assembly, a new financial structure will retire the Mission and Ministries system and introduce the Giving to Grow scheme, which will begin on 1 January 2023.

This year's Annual Report includes detailed proposals for Giving to Grow, which is based on the actual cost of a Minister of Word and Sacrament and aims to build and strengthen the local Church. To help congregations faced with higher contributions, the ATs have created transition funding which will come from reserves.

The ATs have also created new funds to support growth. The Seeds for Growth Fund, which had to be suspended during the pandemic and which promises up to £25m over the next 7 years, will now accept applications from January 2023 and the Pioneer Mission Fund, which opens this week, will provide individual grants of up to £10,000. A third fund, the 2022 Small Grants Fund will support short-term projects.

Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, Convener of the Assembly Trustees, said, "the opening of these funds is a signal of the Church's intention to provide new ways of reaching those generations that are missing from our pews."

The AT's report notes that CrossReach will continue to need financial support from Church reserves for the time being because of the difficulties facing the social care sector. At the same time, CrossReach has made considerable progress toward financial stability and since 1 December 2021 has been paying the Living Wage to all staff.

"We record our gratitude for the work of the staff in this arm of the Church as it provides social care across Scotland," the AT's report says. "Staff have courageously and inventively worked to keep people safe and in communication with their relatives, counsellors and support services."

Progress on Presbytery reform

The General Assembly of 2019 set the ambitious target of reducing the number of Scottish Presbyteries to around 12 by the General Assembly of 2024. It is now expected that by 2024 there will be 10 or 11 presbyteries in Scotland.

Since 2019, five approved presbyteries have already successfully been created:

The Presbytery of Aberdeen and Shetland was created on 1 June 2020, uniting both presbyteries

The Presbytery of Fife was created on 1 January 2021, uniting the presbyteries of Dunfermline, Kirkaldy and St Andrews

The Presbytery of Clyde was created on 1 September 2020, uniting the presbyteries of Dumbarton and Greenock & Paisley

The Presbytery of Forth Valley and Clydesdale was created on 1 January 2022, uniting the presbyteries of Lanark and Hamilton

The Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian was created on 1 January 2022, uniting both presbyteries

The approved Presbytery of the South West is due to form on 30 September this year.

Currently still under discussion and due to report to this year's General Assembly are the Presbyteries of Lothians and Borders, Highlands and Hebrides, Perth, Forth Valley and Clydesdale (with the addition of Falkirk).

The proposed Presbytery of the North East and the Northern Isles is due to report to the General Assembly in 2023.

The Presbyteries of England and the International Charges remain in discussion on what Presbytery reform means for them in their unique positions.

The Faith Action Plan

Over the last three years central office budgets have been reviewed and downsized. Last year staff took part in a pay and grading review, due to complete its work this summer.

The central structures of the Church are also changing, with new proposals coming to commissioners in the AT's report. Last year's General Assembly approved the Faith Action Plan, which guides the work of national office staff. With the new Head of Faith Action now in place, a programme is being developed that will tightly focus on supporting local church and aligning work plans with the Five Marks of Mission.

After the 2020 General Assembly, the ATs set up a special task group to review how the Faith Action programme can best be delivered. The D10 group has now made its recommendations and its proposals will come before the 2022 General Assembly.

The key proposal is for the formation of an Active Faith Leadership Team, which will be accountable to the General Assembly, to champion the Faith Action Programme and oversee its work. Half of the team's members would be

"suitably skilled" members drawn from each of the new Presbyteries.

Instead of the existing two forums, the group proposes to define four programme areas, each led by a convener appointed by the General Assembly who would also sit on the Active Faith Leadership Team. The proposed four programmes and working titles are:

Mission: represents the Church and its mission both nationally and internationally. Includes international partnerships, Ecumenical Relations, Priority Areas, new ways of being church, digital ministries, and congregational engagement and support. This group would forge strong connections with The Guild.

People and Training: would engage with recruitment and leadership, training and support for a Church that values the 'ministry of all believers'. While much of this involves ongoing, daily work it also includes significant strategic and policy development, in line with the priorities of the Faith Action Plan.

Resource and Presence: would support the 'business' elements of the Faith Action Programme such as Life & Work magazine, the Storytelling Centre, and the Tiberias Hotel, the Jerusalem Guesthouse and Tabeetha School in Israel/Palestine, and on ways of helping to resource the Church's work.

Public Life and Global Justice: engages in theological enquiry and reflection on issues of justice, ethics, public theology, political and social policies. Includes current work

on the legacy of slavery and racial justice, climate change and net zero, migrants and refugees, drug addiction and substance misuse.

The conveners of the Active Faith Leadership Team and the four programmes would represent the team at the General Assembly and between Assemblies.

Other areas of work that are highlighted in the Assembly Trustees report are the Equality Diversity and Inclusion group, Stewardship and the Under-40s group.

In the media

Mother Teresa's campaign against abortion in Ireland featured in new documentary

The documentary questions whether donations often went to the Vatican bank instead of directly to the poor in her care, Lynne Kelleher writes in Sunday World.

Mother Teresa's role in campaigning against abortion in Ireland is examined in a new documentary on the nun who became one of the recognised faces in the world.

She befriended presidents, popes, and royalty but the programme puts a spotlight on the complex woman behind the blue and white sari.



The Nobel laureate famously obtained a ceasefire to rescue children from war-torn Beirut, rescued dying AIDS prisoners from a New York jail, and built orphanages around the world.

But the documentary questions whether donations which poured into Mother Teresa's charity often went to the Vatican bank instead of directly to the poor in her care.

She first became known to the world in the late 60s when a BBC documentary crew revealed how she was caring for the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta.

But a British doctor, who worked with her mission in India, revealed in the programme that he was appalled by the standards of medical care given to the people she rescued from the streets.

The series, *Mother Teresa: For The Love Of God*, gives a compelling portrait of the complex religious icon through

insights from some of her closest friends and bitterest critics.

There are several Irish links to the nun who was considered a latter-day saint in the documentary

Her interview on the Late Late Show with Gay Byrne in 1972 is also featured in the three-part Sky documentary series.

The nun, who was born into poverty in North Macedonia, went to Dublin at the age of 18 to join the Catholic Sisters of Loreto order, and a year later she moved to Calcutta, now Kolkata, to become a teacher.

[[] <https://www.sundayworld.com/showbiz/movies/mother-teresas-campaign-against-abortion-in-ireland-featured-in-new-documentary-41627578.html>]

Charity watchdog opens investigation into management at Green Pastures

It was billed as 'the church that helps you fall in love with Jesus', but now it's fallen out with itself, Mark Bain writes in the Belfast Telegraph.

Green Pastures had humble beginnings in 2007, led by Pastor Jeff Wright and situated alongside the Wrightbus factory in Ballymena for which his family was known.

But the dreams were big and the project to match it evolved, Pastor Wright leading the flock — then around 900 people — on what became known as Project Nehemiah.

The dreams of Old Testament biblical proportions are now threatening to come apart at the seams.

Northern Ireland's charity watchdog has opened an investigation into the management of the Green Pastures church after it said a concern had been raised.

It comes after reports that the church founder and long-standing leader stood down from his position as 'lead pastor' at the weekend in an internal governance row which last week saw eight senior members of the church's executive committee resign.

The church has yet to comment, but the Charity Commission has now confirmed that an investigation is ongoing: "The commission is continuing to work with the charity and can confirm that a concern about the charity Green Pastures, The People's Church (NIC101855), has been opened," it said yesterday.

"No further comment will be provided while the investigation is ongoing."

Yesterday at the church, as impressive in its scale as its ambition, all was quietly running as usual. Though not oblivious to the wrangling behind the scenes which, it was said, had led to "a very painful time for all of us", there was still a sense of calm, but also a sense that none of those who help out day after day had any real idea of what was going on within the management of the complex.

None of the church leadership was around. Instead, a community initiative was under way. Pool was being played,

coffee being served. There were welcoming smiles. The only sweat dripping was in a large gymnasium at the far end of the first floor of the main church building. Downstairs, dusty floors off the main entrance foyer betrayed more work behind the scenes.

The church has long had ties to Wrightbus, a company of which Jeff Wright was formerly a director. It was originally formed in 2007, situated at premises next to the Wrightbus Factory near Galgorm before land was purchased on the outskirts of Ballymena in 2012.

A 97-acre plot of land, which was once valued at £75m, was sold to the church for a reported £4m, where work began with the intention of developing not only a new church, but an entire village community complex.

Plans included social housing, a hotel, a supermarket, a car showroom, riverside restaurants, an outdoor pursuits centre, a training and education centre, student accommodation, a nursing home, an all-weather football pitch and a wedding chapel.

In just over a decade, a small, obscure church has turned into a behemoth, one of the biggest developments in Northern Ireland.

But in 2019, when Wrightbus went into administration, it emerged that the church had been given £15m by the business over a six-year period. That led to protests outside Green Pastures in the weeks that followed.

May 11, 2022

Pastor Wright later revealed his family received death threats following the collapse of the business, which has since been taken over by Jo Bamford. "I have learned that there's a time to speak and a time to be silent," he told his congregation at the time.

He remains silent today. Neither the church nor Pastor Wright have been available for comment.

Belfast Telegraph 05 May 2022

Speaking to the soul

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

Church News Ireland

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