

Positive response by some churches to Belfast's first Sunday marathon



Elite runner Gladys Ganiel attended a church service straight after finishing the Belfast Marathon. Also pictured are Rev Steve Stockman of Fitzroy Presbyterian and her son Ronan.

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Belfast's first Sunday marathon appeared to be well-received by residents of the city and by many Christians, either taking part in the race or cheering on the runners, Graeme Cousins writes in the News Letter

The News Letter learnt of some disruption to services for churches along the route while members of the Free Presbyterian Church continued their protest at the race's switch to the Sabbath.

However many churches moved services to accommodate the race and allow members to either take part or support the runners. Some even provided musical accompaniment to the athletes.

The full extent of the disruption to Belfast churches is likely to become clearer over the next 24 hours.

Dr Gladys Ganiel, an elite Christian runner who lives in NI, finished the race in time to pick her son up from church.

She completed the marathon in just over two hours 39 minutes, coming fourth overall in the women's category, and the first NI women to finish.

Dr Ganiel said: "The course is a lot better. It goes through places where people actually live so there was a lot of crowd support. There were loads of churches who were out singing, you don't get that on a Monday. You had some nice hymns to accompany you as you go along.

"After I finished I was able to walk to my church (Fitzroy Presbyterian in University Street) to pick my son up from Sunday School."

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Of the switch to a Sunday for Belfast Marathon, she said: “For me personally, I’m an athlete that has competed on Sundays many, many times. My belief is that the Christian principal of having a day of rest is a valid one but I don’t think it necessarily has to be followed egoistically.

“The idea of doing good on the Sabbath, going out for a run, particularly in the Belfast Marathon where a lot of people are going out to raise money, to me that is an example of doing good on the Sabbath, something that’s healthy and good for the community.

“I don’t have a personal conscience issue with it.”

Dr Ganiel said: “Most big marathons are on a Sunday. You don’t have to miss an opportunity to go to worship to compete in a Sunday event – if you’re in the Protestant tradition many churches have a Sunday evening service, if you’re in the Catholic tradition there will be a Saturday evening service.

“There’s the argument that we live in a plural society so for Christians to try to force people who may not be Christian to do things or not do things on a Sunday is not appropriate either.”

As the race made its way through greater Belfast’s residential areas reasonable-sized crowds had gathered to cheer runners on, however along arterial routes into the city centre numbers thinned considerably.

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Archdeacon David McClay of Willowfield Church of Ireland would have preferred the Belfast Marathon to remain on a Monday, but nevertheless his church embraced the Sunday switch

One spectator at Custom House Square commented: “It’s even more quiet than usual for a Sunday morning. You wouldn’t think there was a marathon going on.”

However on the Castlereagh Road where runners high-fived young supporters on their way past during the early part of the race, one resident said: “It’s wonderful to see so many runners on a Sunday morning and so many people out cheering them on.”

A spectator from Kilkenny who had made the trip to Belfast to cheer on a friend said: “They moved the Dublin Marathon

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to a Sunday about three years ago. It's far better to have it on a Sunday because then you have the bank holiday to recover."

As runners passed a number of churches along the marathon route, congregations stood outside their places of worship to give their support to the competitors.

At Willowfield Church of Ireland, although not in favour of the decision to move the marathon, the church was more than flexible in accommodating the race.

Instead of its usual Sunday morning service, the church scheduled a later service at 12noon when the marathon had passed. They also had two evening services.

During the race, volunteers from the church provided drinks, snacks and encouragement for the runners.

Rev David McClay, speaking to the News Letter yesterday morning, said: "In truth we would have preferred that it was a Monday, some of my own denomination have raised questions about that and I would agree with them. There wasn't a lot of consultation with churches in advance.

"But as it stands it's on Sunday so therefore we decided to really embrace it."

He added: "We'd be very strong on Sunday observance here as a church so there's going to be three services today, with one slightly later after the end of the marathon has passed."

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“We did feel it was important, rather than batten down the hatches, to be here and encourage the runners.

“The runners are running for lots of great causes. It’s important to encourage that and do what we can to lift the atmosphere a wee bit.”

Music was playing from Willowfield Church while members – some in fancy dress – waved placards and cheered to motivate runners.

Rev McClay said: “We were giving away water and sweets. We actually ran out of cups. We started with 2,000 of them.”

In terms of Sunday recreation he said: “Where do you draw the line? Do you not allow your children to play on the swings on a Sunday. It’s not a straightforward one.

“I wouldn’t want to say for a moment that we’ve got it right and others have got it wrong.

“We’re going with what we feel is right, we’re a very conservative evangelical church. We feel this is the right thing to do.

“Some of our members are taking part. Our folks have loved being here on the road. They feel good to be able to be out here interacting with the community.

“We’re very committed to this community. We’re very committed to this city. The marathon is happening in this city. Some of the charities that are benefitting will effect

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people in this community, for that reason we felt it was important to be part of it.

“If there have been any negative voices about what we are doing they haven’t reached my ears.”

Free Presbyterians continued to voice their disapproval at Belfast Marathon’s organisers decision to move the race to a Sunday with another protest yesterday.

It took place facing Cooke Centenary Presbyterian Church, close to the entrance of Ormeau Park.

Rev Paul Hannah said: “We held a short open-air meeting / protest where we sang hymns, prayed, preached and gave out different Gospel tracts, entitled, ‘Remember the Sabbath day to keep it Holy’.

He added: “We also plan to compile an impact report following the marathon.”

At Martyrs Memorial FPC Rev Dr Ian Brown said Sunday School had to be cancelled and the church bus could not do its usual Sunday pick up.

In the city centre numbers were down at several churches due to road closures.

Ray Wallace of First Presbyterian Church in Rosemary Street said yesterday: “The congregation is well down.

“I think it’s an absolutely terrible decision to move the marathon to a Sunday. I think it’s a mistake.

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“The reason they had it on the Monday was that it was a public holiday, people were off. There’s a lot of church goers who would like to do the marathon or spectate and they’re torn now.”

Asked if the church had considered moving its service, Mr Wallace said: “We only have a 10.30 service on a Sunday. The congregation has been here for 375 years, we’re not going to let a marathon stop us.”

Organisers said it was “a record year for the event” which saw the highest numbers ever for the marathon (5,000) – a 60% increase from last year.

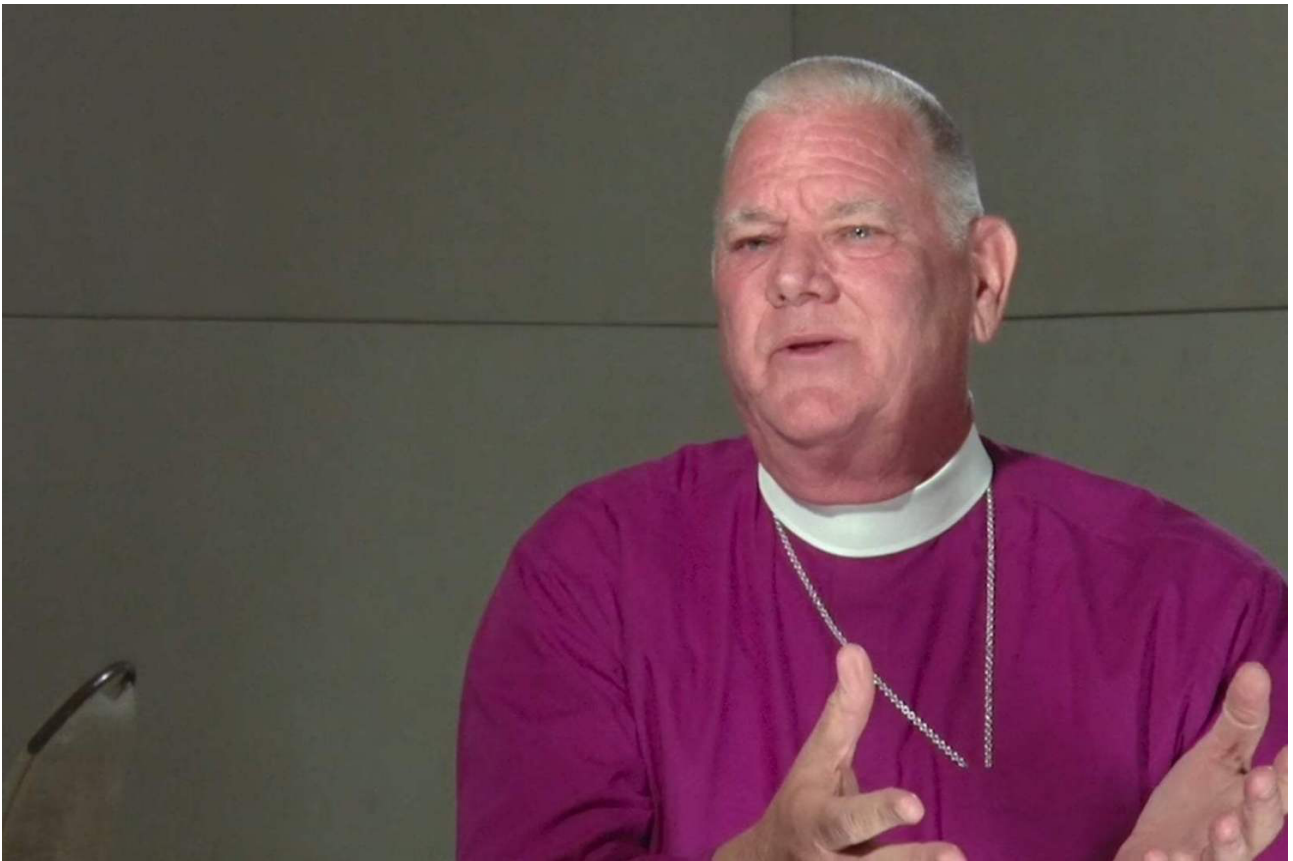
There was also an increase in team relay participants, with around 2,400 teams signed up this year.

Close to 18,000 overall participants took part in yesterday’s event.

Archbishop defeated on measure that could adjudicate who’s in or out of Anglican Communion

The Church Times reports that the Anglican Consultative Council near its close of business rejected a resolution favoured by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Oklahoma Bishop Ed Konieczny objected to the resolution. He said it had “hidden within it, [something] which sets us up



Bishop Ed Konieczny

to create some other body, or somebody, to adjudicate who's in and who's out of the Anglican Communion."

From Archbishop defeated. The averting of the crisis over the Episcopal Church's resolution was not the end of the afternoon's business.

Another resolution, proposed by Dr Atherstone, lamented "the strained and broken relationships" in the Communion, and requested that the Archbishop of Canterbury consider setting up a theological task group to "clarify the core identity and boundaries" of the Communion.

Archbishop Welby welcomed the resolution; but after Bishop Konieczny objected that the resolution had, "hidden within it,

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[something] which sets us up to create some other body, or somebody, to adjudicate who's in and who's out of the Anglican Communion".

The resolution was judged to have been accepted by general, verbal consent, but Bishop Konieczny, supported by more than one third of the members, asked for a counted vote, and it was found to have been defeated by 43 votes to 35, with 8 abstentions.

Solidarity of India's Catholic Church and Islamic organization for Sri Lanka terror bomb victims

Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the President of India's Catholic bishops and Maulana Mahmood A. Madani, the General Secretary Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind, have jointly condemned Sri Lanka's terror attacks.

The Catholic Church of India and a leading Islamic organization of the country have issued a joint statement vehemently condemning the Easter Sunday suicide bomb attacks in Sri Lanka. They also plan to send an inter-faith delegation as a gesture of their condolence and solidarity with the victims.

"We, the undersigned, condemn unequivocally these dastardly acts. The persons and the groups responsible for the serials blasts are anti-human, anti-civilization and anti-God," said the statement signed by Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) and Maulana Mahmood A. Madani, the

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Sri Lankan security forces in a Muslim neighborhood of Negombo on Monday. The authorities have been on high alert for possible attacks against local Muslims in the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

General Secretary Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind, an Islamic scholars' organization.

The coordinated bombings of April 21 by a group of Sri Lankan nationals linked to the Islamic State group, targeted 3 churches and 4 hotels that killed more than 250 people, including foreigners, and injured over 500.

Describing the perpetrators of the attacks as “the incarnation of the most heinous forces on the earth,” the two leaders said, “to associate them with any faith would be most sacrilegious to the faith itself”.

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Card. Gracias, the Archbishop of Bombay, and Madani called on all faiths to “disown and condemn such barbarous individuals and groups.”

“The terrorist attacks become all the more gruesome if launched under the garb of religion and holy mission,” they wrote, calling on people of all faiths to “disown and condemn such barbarous individuals and groups”. “It is our duty,” they wrote, “to expose them and banish them from civilized society.”

Noting that the attacks on religious places during religious festivals such as at Easter are perpetrated to create a divide between people of various faiths and communities, the two leaders expressed their closeness with Christians everywhere, sharing their sorrows and pains.

The CBCI and Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind also proposed to send a high-level delegation of various faiths to Sri Lanka to explore the possibilities of cooperation and also to offer their condolence to the bereaved families.

Their message with an appeal to “everyone irrespective of their religion, caste and creed to come forward to save humanity and to maintain social harmony and peace.”

Rachel Held Evans, Christian writer of honesty and humour, dies at age 37

Rachel Held Evans, a popular progressive Christian writer and speaker, died Saturday morning (May 4) at age 37 after a brief illness.

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Author Rachel Held Evans

Evans had been in a medically induced coma for several weeks and never returned to an alert state.

Writer and collaborator Sarah Bessey [tweeted](#) that Evans was surrounded by close friends and family at the end, and the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber [shared](#) that friends were at Evans' bedside Friday night, offering "our touch and tears and song. I anointed her with oil."

Her husband, Dan Evans, informed followers and supporters of his wife's death on her website.

"This entire experience is surreal. I keep hoping it's a nightmare from which I'll awake. I feel like I'm telling someone else's story," he wrote in [an update on Evans' blog](#).

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“I cannot express how much the support means to me and our kids. To everyone who has prayed, called, texted, driven, flown, given of themselves physically and financially to help ease this burden: Thank you. We are privileged. Rachel’s presence in this world was a gift to us all and her work will long survive her.”

On April 14, Evans, who was particularly gifted at using social media to connect with her readers, [tweeted](#) that she had been admitted to the hospital with a “flu + UTI combo and a severe allergic reaction” to antibiotics, asking for prayer and — with the characteristic humour she often used to defuse difficult conversations — lamenting she would miss “Game of Thrones.”

Later, [in an update on her website](#), Dan Evans said that she began having “unexpected symptoms” while receiving treatment for an infection and that doctors found her brain was experiencing constant seizures. Doctors had placed her in a medically induced coma while working to determine the cause and treatment, he said.

Evans is best known for her popular blog and best-selling books, including New York Times best-seller “A Year of Biblical Womanhood,” “Searching for Sunday” and, [most recently, “Inspired.”](#) She also served on President Obama’s Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

In her books and blog posts, she wrote openly about her faith journey, which led her from Bryan College — a conservative evangelical school known for promoting belief in a literal, six-day creation — [to the mainline Episcopal Church](#). Along the way, she chronicled her faith, doubt, churchnewsireland@gmail.org

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honest questions and evolving beliefs with a sense of humor.

That didn't come without controversy, including pushback from more conservative Christians over "A Year of Biblical Womanhood," which celebrated an egalitarian view of women's roles in both marriage and the church.

But in her writing she rarely lapsed into us-versus-them arguments, instead presenting a vision of the church as a place with room for everyone.

"This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes," she wrote in "Searching for Sunday."

"And there's always room for more."

Readers shared online that they recognized themselves in her words. See tribute by Presiding Bishop in News briefs below.

Today in Christian history

May 7, 1274: The Second Council of Lyons convenes with the goal of reunifying the Roman and Greek churches. Orthodox delegates agreed to recognize the papal claims and recite the Creed with the *filioque* clause, but the union was fiercely rejected by the majority of Orthodox clergy and laity fiercely rejected the union.

May 7, 1605: Russian prelate Nikon, patriarch of Moscow and the head of the Russian church, is born in Valdemanovo. When he tried to reform the church in 1642, a schism erupted, and the church deposed and banished him.

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May 7, 1833: German pianist and composer Johannes Brahms is born in Hamburg. Intensely religious, he wrote many works for the church though one never officially employed him. He even compiled the biblical texts for his "German Requiem" himself.

May 7, 1839: Hymnwriter and pastor Elisha A. Hoffman is born in Pennsylvania. His songs include "I Must Tell Jesus," "Down at the Cross," "Are You Washed in the Blood?" and "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."

News briefs

+++Presiding Bishop's tribute to Rachel Held Evans -

The following statement from Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is in tribute to Rachel Held Evans:

"Today is a sad day for our Church and for everyone who found the path home to our loving, liberating, life-giving God because of Rachel Held Evans. She was a fearless seeker of truth and servant of Jesus, and her witness will inspire and heal generations to come."

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant, Rachel. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive her into the arms of your mercy ... and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen.

Editor's note: [The New York Times obituary on Rachel Held Evans is here.](#)

+++Gospel Concert - Sunday 12th May – Fundraising Gospel Concert in Christ Church, Aughnamullen, Co. Monaghan at 7pm with choirs from Rockcorry National School, Ballybay Community choir, Ballybay Presbyterian

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church choir, Donagh Community choir and Cantenus Female choir from Carrickmacross. Also soloists Joanne Lynch and Michael Lawson from Newbliss. Compere on the evening is Mr Walter Pringle. All are welcome to this event.



+++Your prayers are requested for... Peter & Valerie Lockwood (above) are global mission workers in Nepal. Pray for Peter and a colleague as they visit Kimri village to help with some technical problems with the drinking water system, that they will be able to resolve the problem.

+++Bishop's book - The Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev Alan Abernethy, will launch his latest book, *The Jewel in the Mess*, at the Spectrum Centre in North Belfast today May 7. This is Bishop Abernethy's third book, and was written during a sabbatical he took in the early part of 2018. In it he examines how his years of leadership in the church caused

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him to lose sight of the original awe that called him to his faith.

Publishers Columba Press describe *The Jewel in the Mess* as a very personal book which looks at the idea of God without the institutions and hierarchy. The book instead refocuses on the figure of Jesus at the heart of the Bible. The book explores how, through his struggle with depression and his diagnosis with prostate cancer, the Bishop has come to find the message of Jesus in the difficult, dark and chaotic parts of life. The launch will take place today at 1.30PM in the Connor Room, Spectrum Centre, Shankill Road, Belfast.

+++Food for thought - “Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”

CSLewis, Screwtape Letters

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