

Church News Ireland



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Short reading and a prayer daily on this site

Image of the day

Limerick and Cork Cathedral choirs sing together for Cork International Choral Festival



The Choirs of St Mary's Cathedral Limerick and St Fin Barre's Cathedral Cork sing together for Cork International Choral Festival

On Sunday 4th May, the choir of St Mary's Cathedral, Limerick travelled to St Fin Barre's Cathedral and joined forces with the resident choir to sing for both services that day.

St Fin Barre's Cathedral Choir had travelled to Limerick in November 2024, and so this was a return visit, cementing the collaboration firmly. It was also the weekend of Cork International Choral Festival and so an appropriate time to join together and the number of visitors at the services was higher than usual

The choirs sang Mozart's Missa brevis in D and the verse anthem 'See, see the word is incarnate' by Orlando Gibbons. The two choirs had lunch together in The Flying Enterprise and the convivial atmosphere continued there over a burger! At Evensong they sang the Canticles in A by C. V. Stanford with Mr Peter Barley from Limerick conducting and Mr Matthew Breen, Assistant Director of Music at St Fin Barre's Cathedral, at the organ. The anthem was the festive Easter classic, also by Stanford, 'Ye choirs of new Jerusalem'.

News

The National Churches Survey: giving churches in Northern Ireland a voice

The National Churches Trust is carrying out a UK-wide survey to help policymakers, the media, and the wider public better understand the challenges churches face and to highlight the vital work that churches, like yours, do.

May 16, 2025

This survey has the support of denominations, faith, and heritage groups across the country and we encourage you to take part



Your response will provide essential evidence to build a clearer picture – to tell a stronger, more informed story about your church, and others like it, so that together we can address some of the biggest challenges facing churches and help ensure their future.

Please complete the National Churches Survey and encourage others you know to join in too. The more churches that take part, the more impactful it will be. The survey opened on Tuesday, 6th May, and runs to Monday, 30th June.

Take part in the survey and find out more information at www.nationalchurchestrust.org/survey



Pre-Loved sale of Ladies Fashion
and Accessories in
St Columba's Church Hall
Kings Road on
Saturday 17th May 2:00 – 5:30

Come along and bring a friend.

Enjoy tea / coffee & homemade treats
Admission by Voluntary Donation
(£5 suggestion) Payment by Cash **ONLY**



Education

Ben excels in major musical competition

Congratulations to Ben Glover, U6R at Methodist College, Belfast who competed in the Northern Ireland Young Musician of The Year competition, being only 1 of 2 singers to qualify for the final.

Ben also excelled at the Larne Music festival, winning Open Vocal Solo for the second year in a row, along with placing 2nd in Sacred Song and 3rd in Musical Theatre. Which led to him being invited to sing at a gala concert celebrating 100 years of the festival!

School's Post16 Service Leadership Programme links with North Belfast Foodbank

A school writes - Year 13 have been engaging with aspects of Catholic Social Teaching as part of the Post-16 Service Leadership Programme. One group has been learning about Preferential Option for the Poor, with a particular focus on local poverty.

They were delighted to be invited to the North Belfast Foodbank Warehouse yesterday to help to process some donations. The students have also gained valuable insight



into the work of the North Belfast Foodbank when Sean McCloskey visited to speak to them recently.

We hope that this will inspire some of our students to volunteer to serve the local community further. Many thanks to North Belfast Foodbank for linking up with us on this programme.

Cathedral Calls

Exhibition - Saving St Paul's: The Watch and the Second World War

St Paul's Cathedral commemoration of the 80th anniversary of VE — Victory in Europe — Day, included a special evensong on Thursday past.

The Church Times reports that the service featured readings, music, and prayers, honouring those who served, fought, and died in the armed services, as well as remembering Londoners who lost their lives during the Blitz, and throughout the war.

After the service, there was a blessing of the “Lamp Light of Peace” on the west steps by the late Queen Elizabeth’s pageant master, Bruno Peek. The cathedral also joined in the national bell-ringing at 6.30 p.m.

A statement from St Paul’s Cathedral said that the service recognised “the resilience and fortitude of the people of London — both in 1945 and today”.

Throughout the day on Thursday, members of the public were able to see a replica Spitfire which was located in front of the cathedral.

In a photo message posted on social media on Thursday, the St Paul's Cathedral Instagram account announced their new exhibition, **“Saving St Paul's: The Watch and the Second World War”**.

The post said: “How did St Paul's survive the Blitz? Spoiler: it wasn't luck alone. Meet the brave volunteers of the St Paul's Watch — ordinary people who risked everything to save a London icon.”

The exhibition is free, and is on until October of this year.

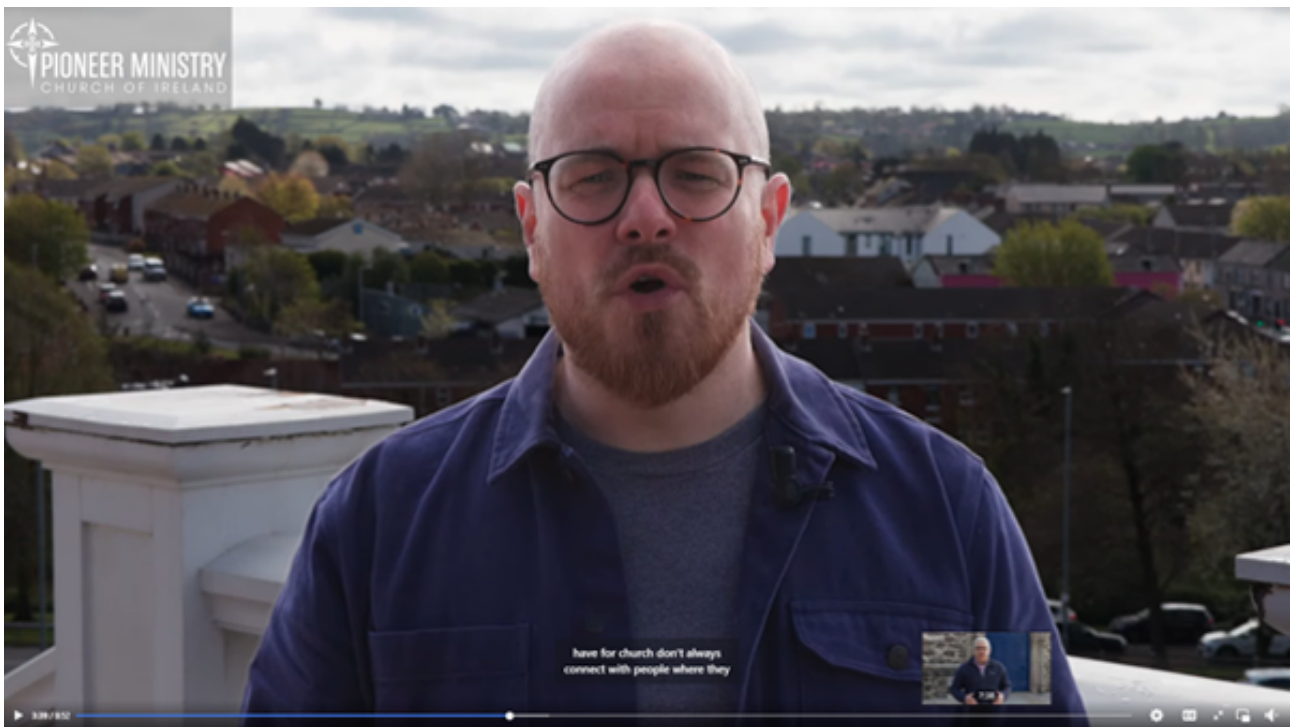
Church Times correspondents witnessed the events of VE Day in 1945 (News 8 May), and reported: “St Paul's held its great service of thanksgiving earlier in the day. People surged up the steps and into the nave where many stood in the alleyways because there was no room anywhere else. There were men from the British fighting Forces, American soldiers, office workers, shopkeepers and labourers, women with babies, girls with tricolour paper hats, and children with flags and rosettes.

“The Dean went at once into the pulpit, where he read thanksgivings and intercessions for those who were still fighting in the East. After the Te Deum and the blessing, the great congregation could scarcely find its way out of the cathedral for the press of another great congregation attempting to enter for the next service.”

Clergy and ministry

Focus on South Lisburn Community Church

Pioneer Ministry in Connor Diocese is the focus of a new video from Church of Ireland Pioneer Ministry, highlighting the work of the Rev Peter Meenagh in Lisburn.



Last November, Peter was commissioned as a Pioneer Minister (in training) for ministry in the South Lisburn Community Church.

The commissioning took place in Lisburn Cathedral and was the first Service of Commissioning for a Pioneer Minister in Ireland.

In the video, Peter talks with passion about his work in Hillhall Estate, Lisburn. We also hear from the Rev James

May 16, 2025

Boyd, Connor Pioneer Ministry Advocate, and the Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison.

See - www.pioneerministry.org.

Events

Come on a journey to Comber

The town is renowned for coffee, cycling, craft and fine cuisine.

Places to visit in the town centre include the beautiful **St Mary's Church** beside Comber Square. The church dates back to 1840's and has many interesting memorials within it, as well as some beautiful examples of stained glass.

Situated in Comber Square is a large statue of local hero, **Major General Rollo Gillespie**. It was erected to commemorate his heroic exploits in India during the 19th century.

Did you know? **Thomas Andrews, designer of the RMS Titanic** was born in Comber. Signage in the town indicates places connected to the Andrews family.

A captivating and beautiful place to explore, the town and the surrounding area are home to a number of hidden gems worth exploring for their settings alone as well as for the centuries deep stories they have to tell, such as Mahee Island, **the ruins of Mahee Castle, and Nendrum**

Monastery which was founded in the 5th century by St Machaoi.

Situated not far from town centre is the popular and award-winning WWT **Castle Espie Wetland Centre** which provides an early wintering site for almost the entire East Canadian High Arctic population of Brent geese!

The reserve has the largest collection of ducks, geese and swans in Ireland. Nature walks around the centre allow visitors to get close to the wild birds while taking in the beautiful scenery of the Lough.

Comber is also **a foodie's haven** with renowned eateries ready to tantalise your tastebuds.

And, it would be remiss not to mention the **Comber Earlies!** After achieving EU Protected Geographical Indication status in 2012, the Comber potato (Comber Earlies) became a global brand. The humble spud is now celebrated annually at the Comber Earlies Food Festival in June, together with the Comber Earlies Growers.

Read more about Comber <https://bit.ly/3QWiv8s>

In the media

Church of Ireland parish building severely threatened by listed building processs - Belfast Telegraph

Sam McBride, the Northern Editor of the Belfast Telegraph, recently wrote the major account printed below of the process and reflects on its effect on All Saints Parish Church in Belfast.

Sam McBride contended that NI's irreplaceable built heritage is crumbling at an alarming rate, with a broken system that's hurting both owners and structures.

He stressed that, “Stormont is listing buildings but won’t give money to repair them, so they’re collapsing at an accelerating rate. Yet in the Republic, vast sums are being spent on retaining priceless built heritage.

Sam McBride continued - Imagine a government official turning up at your door with a legal order compelling you not to make basic alterations to your property such as replacing the windows and forcing you to pay astronomically more for the building you own.

That's what happened to a Church of Ireland cleric last year, and now his congregation is preparing to move out of the building where they've worshipped since Victorian times.

What happened involved a complex area of competing rights, but one in which Stormont is currently failing everyone.

For decades, Northern Ireland has had an appalling record of protecting its built heritage.

Beautiful old buildings have been either deliberately flattened by developers or left to rot while planners have permitted jarringly unsuitable modern architecture beside historic buildings, ruining the character of many towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

Protecting buildings is partly about their intrinsic value. When Notre Dame erupted in flames, Parisiens wept. Belfast doesn't have Notre Dame, but when Bank Buildings burned uncontrollably in 2018, people stood around in mournful silence.

The fragility of a building many of us had passed countless times without any consideration was suddenly inescapable; the fabric of the city as it had been for more than a century was being destroyed.

People are crucial to cities, but so are buildings. This union of the living with the built is what gives distinctiveness to human settlements.

The costly restorations of both Bank Buildings and Notre Dame were acts of defiance against what we know to be inevitable: Our buildings might outlast us, but ultimately they too are mortal. Even the Great Pyramid of Giza, the oldest wonder of the ancient world, is slowly crumbling.

Increasingly, there is recognition that preserving these buildings for as long as we reasonably can is not only about emotion and nostalgia, but involves economic benefit.

As tourism becomes increasingly significant, tourists do not want to travel thousands of miles to see the same shiny

glass office blocks they have at home; they want to see and touch the history of the land to which they have come. To imagine a Belfast without Queen's University's Lanyon Building, City Hall, Parliament Buildings or St Anne's Cathedral is to immediately imagine an uglier and more architecturally impoverished city.

The good news is that legislation means the owners of these buildings are compelled by law to preserve them. The bad news is that Stormont is in charge of implementing this legislation.

That system is failing to protect buildings, which are falling down, and it's failing the owners of those buildings, who are being forced to take substantial costs with derisory support from the government.

Five years ago, the congregation of All Saints Church near Queen's University in south Belfast came to the view that their old building was unsustainable.

The heating system was a century old, the roof needed repairs, and the need for a 1,000-seater church no longer existed.

The church, which sits in the Holyland area and has a significant student attendance, engaged an architect and other experts who came up with a plan to demolish much of the structure.

The proposal would have kept the façade and some other key features while enabling it to facilitate newer ministries — which now include weekly student dinners and English lessons for refugees — alongside new apartments.

But when a pre-planning application was submitted to Belfast City Council in January 2024, the church got a shock. Eight years earlier, officials from Stormont's Historic Environment Division (HED) had visited the church to consider its potential for listing, but nothing more was heard about that.

Only after a considerable sum had been spent on plans did the church find out that the building was to be listed.

HED quoted an architectural journal from 1905 which described the place of worship as “one of the largest and most beautiful in the city”.

The officials described All Saints as “a robust presence on University Street” which was “of local interest and social and cultural importance”.

The church pointed out that the Institute of Irish Architects called the building “quite grim and institutional”, partly because its proposed design had never been implemented, with the absence of a tower and spire, along with the replacement of the envisaged white sandstone with red brick to save costs.

The Rev Trevor Johnston, the church's rector, said that the church had secured the support of local and regional politicians, as well as historic architectural experts who disagreed with the arguments being used to justify the decision.

After four meetings with HED, the church finally met the officials' boss, DUP minister Gordon Lyons, and told him that the building was guaranteed to shut if it was listed — which would mean the charitable work undertaken in the building would cease.

Repairing the roof alone would cost hundreds of thousands, the Rev Johnston said, with a bill of more than £2m to restore the church to its original state.

He said that churches exist to spread the Christian faith, and “aren't museums for a bygone era”.

The process — in which he said there was no chance to appeal — created “endless, unanswerable problems and has had a significant impact on the leadership of the church causing unnecessary stress to all involved”, the Rev Johnston said.

Paradoxically, the listing is unlikely to actually protect the structure — and that's because Stormont isn't prepared to come up with the cash to repair the buildings it protects in law.

A listed building has to be maintained in a way appropriate to its character and cannot be altered or demolished without prior approval. It requires listed building insurance which is more expensive because repairs will be costlier.

Yet the Rev Johnston said they haven't got any money from Stormont.

He said: “If every listed church building in were to receive support from Stormont, the amount available would equate to roughly £270 each”.

He said that when they met HED “the unreality and unrealistic solutions offered were breathtaking — one HED civil servant suggested that we consider opening a high-value coffee shop, pub or restaurant in the building”.

There are examples of churches being turned into thriving alternative venues, such as the Empire Music Hall and An Cultúrlann.

But there are far more cases of empty buildings lying derelict. With the listing constraining any future development, the Rev Johnston doesn't think they will even be able to sell the building: “The system has failed us and has failed to sustain our building or protect the historic purpose for which it was built — that is, to house an active church community.

“When a building is statutorily listed, there would then need to be a full amount of compensation or funds for appropriate relocation.”

There is an inherent tension here. Churches — especially where congregations are declining — will often want to use their money for charitable or mission purposes, rather than to prop up increasingly old buildings which swallow more and more money as they age.

Yet many of these old buildings are among the most beautiful in Belfast. All Saints might not be the city's greatest

architectural treasure, yet modern church buildings are overwhelmingly bland halls with a few screens at the front — cheaper to build, more functional for many congregations, but certainly not worth saving due to any physical beauty.

If someone doesn't pay to preserve these old buildings, then they will be lost.

If the system for saving such structures managed to do so, then many people might be happy with such an outcome — even if it creates problems for owners.

But even that's not happening. This week the Department for Communities — of which HED is part — admitted that it's failing to protect listed buildings.

An expert report commissioned by the department examined a large sample of the almost 9,000 listed buildings in NI.

It found that the condition of listed buildings has declined by almost a quarter in the last 20 years.

A third of listed buildings are lying vacant, increasing their vulnerability, and that number has increased significantly over recent years.

Fewer than a quarter of listed buildings were found to be in good or very good condition; 36% were found to be in poor or very poor condition. These buildings are, quite simply, crumbling.

Mr Lyons' department accepted that the condition of listed buildings is “getting worse and this appears to be speeding up”.

Listed churches were in fact more likely than other listed buildings to be in good condition. But as church attendance drops and ageing buildings become ever more expensive to maintain, this contains a significant risk.

Even where church attendance isn't dropping, it often involves displacement from attendance in older traditional buildings to newer churches, often from newer denominations.

In a statement, Mr Lyons accepted that the report “paints a very worrying picture of the state of our listed buildings” and called for a “proper appreciation of our built heritage”.

He added: “Heritage is a key driver of tourism to NI and a source of civic pride and identity. Once lost, it and the potential that it holds are gone forever.”

Mr Lyons has only been minister for little more than a year. He didn't create this problem.

Indeed, part of the issue is that most politicians have taken limited interest in this area. Listed buildings are not one of the sexy areas of political debate which swing voters' allegiances in elections.

Yet, they have intangible importance to so many other issues — from tourism to quality of life.

John Anderson, vice chairman of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Association, said that the grants to re-roof listed buildings tend to be about £6,000 for most buildings or £12,000 if it involves thatch.

“The joke among owners is that those sums wouldn't put the scaffolding up,” he said.

“It's not HED's fault — the fault lies with the mindset within the politics of Northern Ireland.”

He said that the tiny sums allocated by Stormont contrast with the largesse of the Irish Government which this year has a heritage fund of €170m, much of which goes to protect old buildings.

Mr Anderson, who has just returned from three weeks in rural France, said that most of the buildings there are heritage buildings: “They're refurbished to a modern standard to give people a good standard of living but here the mindset is you have to have a McMansion and the result is totally boring and characterless.”

He said that the department used to allocate about three or four million pounds a year for listed building repairs. Even if that low level of funding was restored, he said “you're going to see a result quite quickly — and that might change the minds of local people and local councils about these buildings”.

For the Rev Johnston, his church building was listed last autumn. “Sadly, the listing of our building has sealed the fate of our church meeting there and will end

our presence and service of the local Holyland community,” he said.

“The building is exorbitantly expensive to maintain, and we don't have the resources required.”

The department said that the budget for repairing listed buildings is now £500,000 - double the £250,000 last year.

It said it has a duty to list buildings which meet the statutory criteria. It said that many churches are listed and function well. It added: “There is significant scope to change buildings, within these constraints and more to change churches in active use.”

There is an irony here. Stormont is itself a listed building and has been maintained well. Yet the decisions taken by those who move within its fine walls are failing to protect much of the rest of Northern Ireland's irreplaceable built heritage.

Speaking to the soul

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

Church News Ireland

May 16, 2025

The publication of Church News Ireland is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD. He may be contacted at houstonmckelvey@mac.com

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www.churchnewsireland.org

**Link in Monday through Saturday from
early morning**

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