

Union Theological College standards at risk, watchdog warns



Union Theological College was founded in 1953. The buildings were formerly referred to as Assembly's College. It is one of a number of theological institutions including the Methodist Church's Edgehill College, and the Baptist Church college which are recognised by Queen's University.

Academic standards at the Union Theological College (UTC) are potentially "at risk" in a number of areas, a watchdog has warned, BBC News NI, reports.

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The report by Robbie Meredith BBC News NI Education Correspondent, states - The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) monitors standards in higher education institutions across the UK.

The college is run by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and teaches theology to Queen's University students.

A spokesperson for UTC said it had made "significant progress" but "there is still some work to be done".

The QAA report into a monitoring visit to UTC carried out in October has just been published.

It has 204 students at present, 173 of whom are studying for theology degrees at Queen's while 31 students preparing to enter the Presbyterian ministry are studying on courses run by the Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland (PTFI).

'Quality at risk'

The watchdog's inspectors looked at a number of aspects of teaching, learning and assessment specifically related to the PTFI courses.

The QAA report said that the college had made progress since a previous monitoring visit in 2017 but "further improvement is required".

It said, for instance, that there had been delays "in fully and formally documenting the academic framework for PTFI programmes", which had "the potential to put academic standards at risk".

Further, senior staff members had not fulfilled a "stated responsibility for monitoring and reviewing teaching,



Queen's University has a responsibility for oversight of key areas in institutions which participate in its degree programmes

learning and assessment across all pathways and within all courses or modules".

"This weakness in the college's maintenance of academic standards has the potential to put academic standards and quality at risk," it continued.

'Potential to put academic standards at risk'

The QAA said that the college did have "robust documented processes" for assessing students.

It also said that students received helpful and detailed feedback on their assignments. However, it said that a lack of ways to respond to issues raised by external examiners for PTFI exams also "has the potential to put academic standards and quality at risk".

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External examiners are staff from outside an institution who independently monitor some exams and coursework to ensure that marking is fair and consistent.

One external examiner was quoted in the QAA report as stating that some exam scripts "had no marks or marker's comments and that she had not been provided with the marking criteria".

A spokesperson for Union Theological College said they were confident it would address the matters raised by the QAA inspection.

"We welcome the fact that the QAA said in their report that the college is making progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the October 2017 monitoring visit, but further improvement is required," they said.

"The areas which the college is working on include terms of reference and membership of each of its academic committees, a robust protocol for the appointment of Presbyterian Theological Faculty Ireland external examiners, and clear evidence of student involvement in all decisions related to PTFI and the ministry training pathway."

[Queen's University is currently conducting a separate review of its relationship with the college, which is expected to be completed in the near future.](#)

In a statement to BBC News NI, a Queen's spokesperson said: "The university has received a copy of the QAA Educational Oversight report and is considering the findings. We have no further comment to make."

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Archdeacon banned from taking part in services over comments on school-admissions row

The Irish Times reports that - A retired Church of Ireland archdeacon has been barred from taking part in church services by the Archbishop of Dublin for six months after speaking out over a school admissions row.

Archdeacon [Edgar Swann](#) warned earlier this year that the Church of Ireland community was being “torn apart” due to controversy over school enrolment policies at a school in [Greystones](#), Co [Wicklow](#), which prioritised children who regularly attend church services.

His intervention followed the resignation of a long-serving principal, [Eileen Jackson](#), at St Patrick’s [National School](#) in protest over its “parish engagement” enrolment policy.

The Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Dr [Michael Jackson](#), recently wrote to Archdeacon Edgar Swann to say he was removing his permission to officiate at church services until next Easter.

It is understood that the letter stated he was taking this step because of the retired archdeacon’s decision to speak out about Canon [David Mungavin](#), who chairs the school’s board of management.

A spokeswoman for the Archbishop said he was not willing to engage in discussion of sensitive issues in the national media. Archdeacon Swann declined to comment, except to say: “It is in legal hands and I will not comment until the Archbishop has had a chance to respond.”



Enrolment policies at St Patrick's National School, Church Road, Greystones, have stirred controversy locally.

The 76-year-old member of the clergy has regularly led church services in the diocese and was due to lead a number of services in the area during the Christmas period.

‘Silent no longer’

The development is considered by church observers to be highly unusual and appears to have reopened a row which has split much of the school and church community.

In a letter written to the Archbishop earlier this year, Archdeacon Swann said the enrolment controversy was bringing the church into “public ridicule” and called for the school board to be dissolved.

“I have no wish to interfere in the internal matters of my old parish and school, but I find I can be silent no longer,” he wrote.

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“The matter is damaging the school, which has lost excellent teachers, and it is causing a serious crisis in the parish,” he stated.

Parents at the school overwhelmingly backed a no confidence vote in its board of management earlier this year.

At the time the Archbishop acknowledged that while St Patrick’s was facing challenging times, there was no evidence that the board was “dysfunctional”.

“There will be many occasions where disagreements arise between board members and within school communities. However, disagreements in and of themselves are not evidence that a board of management is dysfunctional,” he said.

Archdeacon Swann was a former rector in Greystones and served as chair of St Patrick’s National School’s board of management.

During his time, he is credited by many in the community for promoting inter-faith dialogue and pioneered joint religious celebrations with the local Catholic church.

Focus prayer on Brexit vote, Dean of Down

The Very Revd Henry Hull, Dean of Down, has encouraged churches to pray as Brexit is debated and voted upon.

He said: “It is obvious to all that at the moment the UK is going through a time of unprecedented political turmoil and uncertainty.



Dean Henry Hull

“No matter what our personal preference might be, the outcome of the current parliamentary debate and Brexit vote on 11 December will have significant implications for the UK and the EU.

“The clergy in Lecale Area Mission Partnership feel it is important to pray for God’s mercy on our land.

“To that end, St Margaret’s, Hollymount (Down Parish), and Down Cathedral will be open on 11 December for prayer (9.30 am–5.30 pm) and specific times of led prayer will be arranged at 12noon and 5.30pm.

“Please join us if you can or consider opening your own church specifically to pray at this crucial time in our history.”

C of I bishops join in weekend of mission in Armagh diocese

Friday 16th to Sunday 18th November was a momentous weekend for the Diocese of Armagh as eight of the Church of Ireland bishops joined with Archbishop Richard Clark to lead special mission and ministry activities and events within the Diocese.



The 9 Church of Ireland Bishops and Archbishops who took part in the Armagh Diocesan mission weekend.

The parishes were grouped into ‘clusters’ with one bishop being assigned to each cluster and being involved in the special events that clergy and laity within that cluster had planned and put together for the course of the weekend. These ranged from Praise and Worship Services, to Big Breakfasts, Table Quizzes, Concerts, and included community outreach activities such as volunteering in a local Simon Community hostel for the homeless to inter parish visits and to local visitor attractions.

The weekend culminated with a Diocesan service in St Patrick’s Cathedral, Armagh at which Archbishop Clarke challenged and encouraged those present with the theme ‘translating the gospel into the languages of today’ so that it can be understood outside our church and parish context. Using the words of Psalm 137 – ‘how can we sing the Lord’s

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The Bishop of Limerick & Killaloe, Kenneth Kearon with Revd Pete Smith from St Mark's Armagh, "peeling spuds" at the Simon Community hostel in Armagh

song in a strange land' – he asked the question how can we connect with a world that neither recognises nor understands our language? The Archbishop reminded the congregation that the epigraph to E.M. Forster's novel *Howards End* was "only connect". He suggested that this could be our strapline for the life of the church.

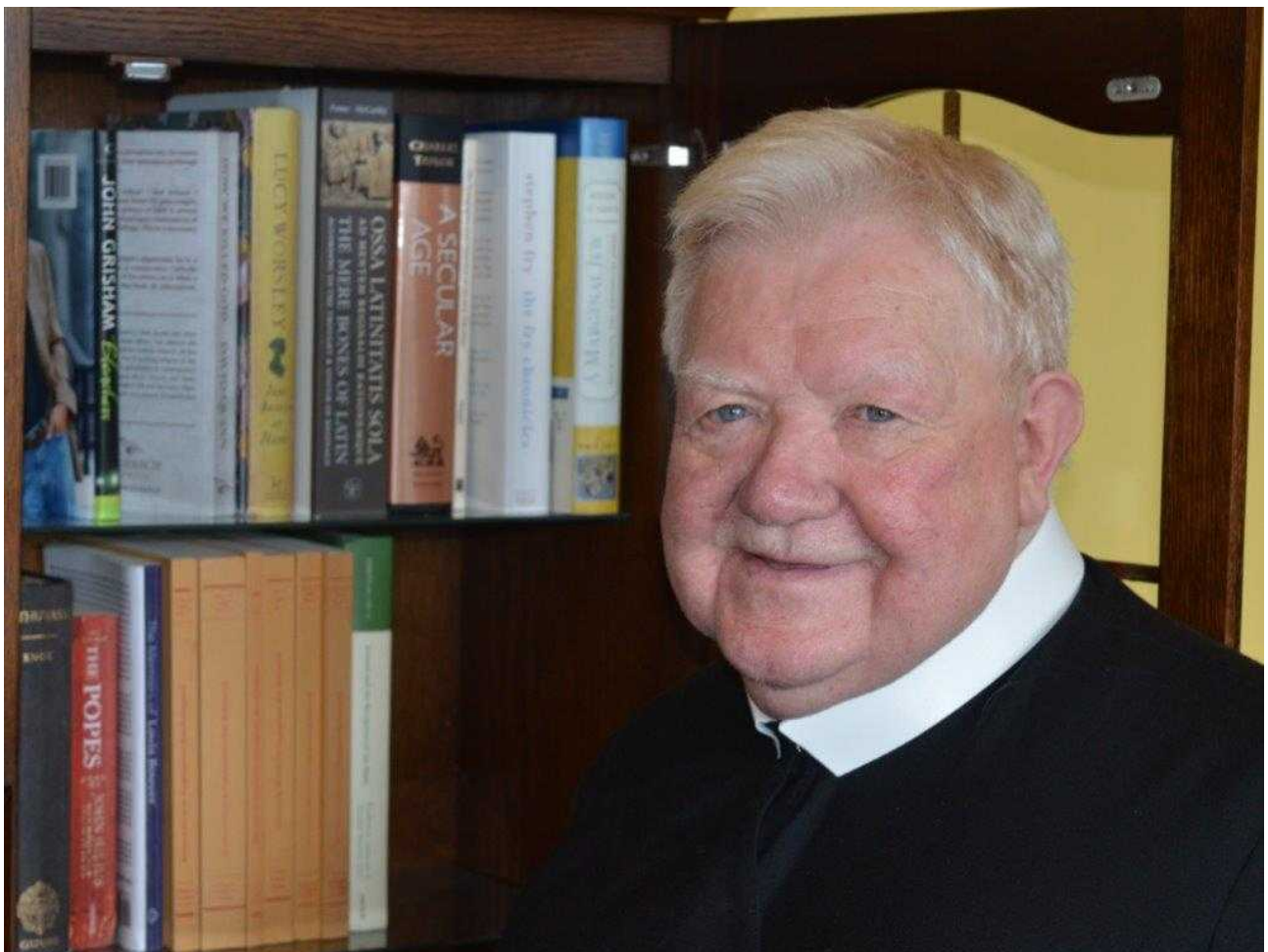
Identifying connecting points to the world outside the church Archbishop Richard suggested 3 languages: Dignity and integrity. In a society that knows abuse, disrespect and dishonesty. Everyone is made in the likeness and image of God and deserves that dignity and integrity.

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Vulnerability and humility. To bring not just our strength but also our compassion, our weakness, our frailty and our repentance. We are loved despite ourselves.

The language of Gift. In a culture where everything is treated as a commodity. Life is something that is given to us as a gift and something that just doesn't happen. What we know as the Grace of God, may be understood by us but is this fully understood by those outside our churches.

Festschrift in honour of well-known Irish biblical scholar



A festschrift in honour of well-known biblical scholar and editor of *Reality* magazine, **Father Brendan McConvery**

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CSsR, was launched yesterday evening, Wednesday 5 December, in Pugin Hall, Saint Patrick's College, Maynooth. A festschrift is a collection of writings published in honour of a scholar.

This collection in honour of Father McConvery is entitled *The Cultural Reception of the Bible: Explorations in Theology, Literature and the Arts*. It is edited by Professor Salvador Ryan and Professor Liam Tracey, Pontifical University, Maynooth, and published by Four Courts Press. In addition to thirty scholarly chapters by a host of scholars from a wide range of disciplines, there is also a number of written "appreciations" of Father McConvery by, among others, journalist and editor, Triona Doherty; historian and editor, Máire Ní Chearbhaill; Julieann Moran, National Secretary of the Society of Missionary Children, Ireland; and biblical scholar Father Wilfrid Harrington OP.

The collection of writings were launched by Mr Aidan Mathews, RTÉ, and Rev Dr Ken Newell, former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Cork church focus on Anglican chant

One Sunday this Autumn, the Rev. Elaine Murray led the usual service of Morning Prayer at St Mary's Church, Carrigaline, County Cork. However, there was a difference. Under the auspices of the Cork, Cloyne and Ross Diocesan Church Music Scheme, she had invited Peter Stobart from St Fin Barre's Cathedral to take the congregation through some of the canticles and psalms, and to explore Anglican Chant.



Anglican Chant being taught by Peter Stobart at St Mary's Church, Carrigaline.

Some members of the choir from Monkstown, County Cork led by Roger Ellis had also come along to the Service and the sound was an impressive one. Peter had chosen three different styles of chant as a way of demonstrating to the congregation what was possible with very little extra effort.

Firstly the canticle *Venite* was sung to a very simple plainchant. After just a couple of practice verses the congregation was able to break out into antiphony, with one side of the church singing the odd verses and the other side the even verses. This monastic style is one of the oldest forms of liturgical chanting.

Anglican chant proper was used for the psalm of the day. Although the chant itself was longer than the plainchant had

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been, the tune was seemingly more memorable and so caused very few problems. After a few practice verses everyone stood up so as to be back in Service mode and sang the whole psalm through.

The third musical setting was for the canticle *Benedictus*. Peter chose a responsorial format and so it was the most modern concept of the three. The principles of chanting were still the same, however, and the congregation by this stage in the morning were picking things up very swiftly. A short refrain using the first line of the text, written by Peter himself, was sung between the verses.

The Rev. Elaine Murray said afterwards that she thought the congregation had never sounded so good and that the service was exactly what she had imagined it to be. As a lover of Anglican chant she said that she was worried that without initiatives such as this it would quickly disappear completely from our liturgies.

New minister inducted at Mullingar Presbyterian Church

Saturday last, December 1, was a historic day at Mullingar Presbyterian Church. The occasion was the Induction Service of Mullingar's new Presbyterian Minister, The Reverend Daniel Reyes-Martin B.D.

Dani, as he prefers to be called, also became the Minister for Corboy Presbyterian Church, in County Longford, upon his induction.

A native of Spain, Dani comes to Mullingar from Kilkenny Presbyterian Church along with his wife, Ruth, and their



With Rev Daniel Reyes-Martin, (from left) Rev Dr Keith McCrory (Maynooth Presbyterian Church), Rev David Bruce (Church Mission in Ireland), and Rev William Hayes (Tullamore Presbyterian Church).

children, David and Miriam, and the family are residing in Mullingar.

The induction service was led by the Moderator of the Dublin and Munster Presbytery, Rev Alistair Dunlop, along with Rev Dr Keith McCrory of Maynooth Presbyterian Church, Rev William Hayes of Tullamore Presbyterian Church and Rev David Bruce, Church Mission in Ireland. The reading of the Standards of the Church was conducted by Mrs Margaret McKenna of the Dublin and Munster Presbytery.

Also in attendance were local politicians and those from the other Christian denominations in the Longford Westmeath area.

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There was also an address of welcome to Mullingar for Daniel, which included that from the Roman Catholic Bishop of Meath, Bishop Thomas Deenihan, and also the local Church of Ireland Rector, Canon Alistair Graham.

As the induction service concluded, Reverend Reyes-Martin spoke of his ambitions and hopes for his ministry in Mullingar and Corboy, ending his address with the following thought provoking statement: “We are just broken people in a broken world, trying to lead other broken people to the one who can make them whole!”

Rating hymns and sermons in an emoticon parish



A church in Norfolk has asked parishioners to rate hymns, prayers and sermons during services using [a smartphone](#)

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[app, the Times reports](#). The feedback flashes up on a big screen behind the rector at Aylsham Parish Church.

A recent rendition of "Shine, Jesus, Shine" earned 27 hearts and 11 thumbs up emojis, but also four thumbs down. A recital of the Lord's Prayer was given eight hearts and two thumbs up. The Church of England is trying to attract younger worshippers, the paper explains. Rev Andrew Beane, who's team rector at the church, says his congregation is "great at embracing new things".

Meanwhile, if social media's influence on everyday life is getting a bit too much, you might consider decamping to a tiny island off Guernsey which has no radio, television or mains electricity.

The [Daily Mail reports that there's a vacancy](#) for a warden to look after wildlife on the island of Lihou, which is accessible via a causeway for just two weeks a month at low tide. Once the home of 12th Century monks, the island is said to offer "the peace and tranquillity that can be sadly absent from modern life".

Funeral of former US President George Bush takes place at Washington National Cathedral

The Presiding Bishop of the US-based Episcopal Church led the State Funeral for former US President George H W Bush in Washington National Cathedral. President Bush was the 41st President of the United States, and the father of the 43rd President, George W Bush. He died on Friday (30 November) at his home in Houston, Texas. He was 94.



The flag-draped casket of former President George H W Bush arrives carried by a military honour guard during a State Funeral at Washington National Cathedral

In addition to Bishop Michael Curry, yesterday's funeral was led by the Bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde; the Dean of Washington National Cathedral, Randy Hollerith; and the Rector of St Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, Dr Russell Levenson Jr.

Only a small number of US Presidents have received State Funerals, including Dwight Eisenhower, Abraham Lincoln, John F Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford. President Woodrow Wilson is buried in Washington National Cathedral. A state funeral in the US is a seven to 10-day event in three stages: ceremonies within the state in which the president was in residence;

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ceremonies within Washington DC; and ceremonies in the state in which the individual has chosen to be interred.

President Bishop lay in state in the Rotunda of the US Capitol on Monday (3 December) before being taken to St Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston, where he lay in repose until earlier yesterday morning when his coffin was taken to Washington National Cathedral. After the service his body was transported to his home-state, ahead of a burial at the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.

Paying tribute to President Bush Senior, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said: "With a grateful nation, and many around the world, we of the Episcopal Church give thanks to God, the source of life and love, for the life, the public and private witness of President George Herbert Walker Bush.

"Through his enduring commitment to public service and his steadfast devotion to his family, he lived the way of Jesus through a life shaped by faith, hope and, above all, love. Through his unswerving service to our country and to the human community around the globe, he embodied the noblest ideals of his faith and his country.

"President Bush will be an enduring reminder that virtues like kindness, gentleness and goodness are among the things that truly endure, and that chart the way to our living as the human family of God. In him we have beheld a great soul, and been reminded of the hope that, by God's grace, we can live likewise. May his soul and the souls of all the departed rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen."

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Also paying tribute was Bishop Mariann Budde and Dean Randy Hollerith. In a joint statement they said: “Across his 94 years, President Bush served his country with integrity, honour and distinction. He embodied the decency of his call to a ‘kinder, gentler’ politics, and provided a steady hand to our nation as unprecedented winds of change swept across the globe. Facing the collapse of Communism and war in the Persian Gulf, President Bush’s leadership was defined by a sense of deliberation, humility and thoughtfulness.

“His commitment to service and volunteerism remains an enduring testament to the rigor of his character and his gentleness of spirit. His unfailing support for the Americans With Disabilities Act was shaped by the compassion of his heart. Indeed, of his famed Thousand Points of Light, President Bush’s example burns brightest.

“His graciousness in defeat and his continued service to his country reflects the President’s depth of character and his sense of decency. Beyond the loss of a honourable patriot, we mourn the passage of a kind of politics that was rooted in the prophet’s call to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. How much this nation longs to reclaim those better angels of our nature.

“Yet beyond the political achievements and historic accolades, President Bush was committed most to his family and his faith. He and his beloved Barbara poured their love into their children and raised them in faith. President and Mrs Bush were here at this Cathedral, on 29 September 29 1990, as workers set the final stone in place after 83 years of construction.”

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They continued: “George and Barbara Bush’s example of mutual devotion, fidelity and commitment is inspiring, and it should give everyone great joy to know that Mr and Mrs Bush’s love continues into eternity.”

Before the service, a number of tunes were played on the cathedral’s Carillon, including *God of our fathers*, *Praise my soul*, *the King of Heaven*, *My Shepherd will supply my need*, and *O beautiful for spacious skies*.

Inside the cathedral, music before the service included Elgar’s *Nimrod*, from the Enigma Variations, John Williams’ *Hymn to the Fallen*, and *America, the Beautiful* by Samuel Augustus Ward.

During the service, tributes were given by President George Bush, the presidential historian Jon Meacham; the former Prime Minister of Canada, Brian Mulroney; and the former Wyoming Senator Alan K Simpson.

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