



Church slams Belfast's £400m scheme to redevelop Royal Exchange area close to cathedral

The Church of Ireland has come out against a £400m Belfast redevelopment scheme, calling for it to be refused the go-ahead.

The flagship project focuses on a 12-acre site around Royal Avenue in the city centre, formerly known as Royal Exchange.

It could include a 27-storey high-rise building as part of the ambitious scheme, which it is claimed will create 6,000 jobs.

Developer Castlebrooke has now submitted outline plans for the scheme, which include the redevelopment of a 12-acre site based around Royal Avenue, North Street and Donegall Street, including around St Anne's Cathedral.

But now, the Bishop of Connor, the Rev Alan F Abernethy, has written to Belfast City Council planners saying it objects to the plans, and is "concerned at the lack of attention that has been paid to preserving or enhancing the character of the area included in the application".

He wants the council to turn down the huge scheme.

The project is said to be the "largest ever single redevelopment in Belfast city centre".

"The area in question comprises a historic street pattern with buildings of traditional scale, grain and appearance," a letter from the bishop said.

"We feel it is essential that these qualities be preserved. We would ask that particular thought be given to how the proposals align with current planning policy statements.



Bishop of Connor, the Rev Alan F Abernethy, is concerned

"We are concerned at the lack of attention that has been paid to preserving or enhancing the character of the area included in the application.

"In particular, the impact it will have on the streetscape around St Anne's Cathedral."

He said the cathedral was "an iconic building within the city and as such the open space around it should be preserved to enable a full appreciation of its aesthetic qualities; it is our

contention that this proposal goes against" relevant areas of planning policy, affecting the setting of a listed building.

The Royal Exchange plans include a number of retail developments, offices, hotel and landscaping, along with the demolition of seven existing premises, and the restoration of listed buildings.

Developers say as many as 900 construction jobs could be created during the building work.

It is understood those behind the scheme are choosing to knock down fewer buildings, as outlined in an initial masterplan.

In his letter, Bishop Abernethy said the proposals "in the immediate vicinity of the Cathedral are not sympathetic to the character of Cathedral and are inappropriate for this context".

He said: "We are not in favour of reducing the amount of open social space in the Cathedral Quarter as there is a lack of such space already.

"We consider the application to be contrary to planning policy and would urge Belfast City Council to reject this proposal in its current form."

A spokesperson for the board of St Anne's Cathedral said: "A meeting between the developers and members of the Board including the new Dean of Belfast will take place in the new year and we are not in a position to comment at this stage."

Meanwhile, the Belfast Civic Trust said it is "strongly opposed" to a huge 27-storey building, which could become part of the plan.

In a letter to planners, it said the "application appears to envisage a height" of 27 to 28 storeys.

"We are incredulous that an application has been made for a building of this height in the middle of a conservation area. Even more so when it is in the middle of the historical core of the city.

"This building overshadows the listed and very historically important Exchange building."

But the trust - which has worked on more than 200 heritage-led regeneration projects across Northern Ireland - said the proposals fundamentally undermine Belfast's sense of place. "They are a lost opportunity for the city's existing built heritage to be reused in authentic and relevant ways," it said.

"They will dilute Belfast's distinctiveness and do nothing to make the city's regeneration relevant to people."

The charity said it recognised the need for substantial regeneration in the Cathedral Quarter.

"Unfortunately, the proposals tabled in recent months and updated before Christmas are entirely unsympathetic to the area's heritage and character," it added.

There had been a backlash from conservation groups, with the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society saying the scheme "perpetuates Belfast's complete lack of a coherent plan to enhance the city's unique selling points with quality architecture". Reports courtesy Belfast Telegraph

New Year recommendation of recent Irish books

For those with book tokens to redeem and an interest in learning more about the Church of Ireland, 2017 has seen the publication of a variety of books – theological, historical, ecumenical, liturgical and practical, writes the C

of I Correspondent to the Irish Times in his column on Saturday past.

Leading the way is a book by the Primate, Dr Richard Clarke, *Shouldering the lamb: reflections on an icon* (Dominican Publications) which is a series of eleven meditations on the biblical theme of shepherding. A former Archbishop of Armagh, Lord Eames, has written *Unfinished search* (Columba Press) which is described as a 'deeply honest and personal ... glimpse into the pain and suffering that the troubles brought to so many across the communities in Northern Ireland'.

The Revd Dr Patrick McGlinchey, who teaches in the Church of Ireland Theological Institute, revised his doctoral thesis for publication and this appeared as *Ratzinger's Augustinianism and evangelicalism: an exploration in religious rapprochement* (Paternoster). On a local level, ecumenism featured in *Does Christ matter?: an Anglican & a Jesuit in dialogue* (Messenger Publications) which has been written by the Rector of Helen's Bay, Canon Tim Kinahan and the Revd Brian Lennon SJ.

An initiative of the Church of Ireland Historical Society, *The Church of Ireland and its past: history, interpretation and identity* is a book of

essays by leading historians who consider how the Church of Ireland has used its history to define its identity. Edited by Dr Mark Empey, Professor Alan Ford and Miriam Moffitt, this book has been published by Four Courts Press. Identity is also a major theme of *Buried lives: Protestants of Southern Ireland* (History Press) by Canadian based author, Robin Bury. Another Four Courts Press book is Dr Michael O'Neill's edition of the *Episcopal visitations of the diocese of Meath, 1622—1799*. This is the eighth volume in the RCB Library's 'Texts and Calendars' series which seeks to publish critical editions of significant Church of Ireland archives and manuscripts.

Church of Ireland Publishing has recently published *Journeying in faith: a walk with Christ* by Canon Cecil Hyland, described by the Revd Ted Woods as 'an accessible introduction to the Christian faith for new members of the Church'. The large turnout at the launch of this books suggest that it is already seen as a publication of significance. Earlier in the autumn CIP also published *Sunday & Weekday Readings 2018* which is compiled by the Revd Ken Rue.

On a wider stage the Church of Ireland is part of the story which is told in the five volume *Oxford History of Anglicanism* (Oxford University Press),

In particular, volume II contains a fine summary of the history of the Church of Ireland, 1662–1829, by the distinguished Oxford historian, Dr Toby Barnard.

At least 23 missionaries killed in 2017, says Vatican

At least 23 people working for the Church were killed in 2017, a Vatican agency has said.

The majority of Church workers violently killed this year were victims of attempted robberies, Fides said, with Nigeria and Mexico topping the list countries where the most brutal murders were carried out.

The agency said 23 people working for the Church worldwide – 13 priests, one Brother, one Sister and eight lay people – died violent deaths in 2017. That number was down from 28 people killed in 2016.

Each year, Fides, the news agency of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, publishes a list of pastoral workers who died violently.



Pallbearers carry the casket of a priest stabbed at the altar in Mexico City in May 2017

For the ninth year in a row, the Americas continued to be the continent most affected by violence against Catholic Church workers with 11 people killed there in 2017; with four of those deaths in Mexico, that nation continues to be where the greatest number of priests in Latin America are killed, it said.

Ten pastoral workers were killed in Africa, half of them in Nigeria, and two workers were killed in Asia, both in the Philippines, the report said.

“Once again the majority of the pastoral care workers were killed in attempted robbery, and in some cases violently attacked – a sign of the climate of moral decline, economic and cultural poverty, which generates violence and disregard for human life,” the agency said in its report.

“Hardly any investigations conducted by the local authorities led to identifying and convicting the perpetrators and the instigators of these killings or the reasons why they were carried out,” it added.

Those killed “are only the tip of the iceberg”, it said as the report does not include the number of pastoral workers or Catholic faithful who are assaulted, beaten, robbed or threatened, nor does it document properties owned by the Catholic Church that are attacked, vandalised or looted.

The report also spoke of the Church’s concern for the ongoing kidnappings of priests and nuns, who are most often abducted by extremist groups or by captors seeking ransom. The fates of many kidnapped Sisters and priests still remain unknown, Fides said.

According to Fides, 424 pastoral care workers, including five bishops, were killed worldwide from 2000 to 2016.

Callista Gingrich formally begins service as U.S. ambassador to Holy See



Callista Gingrich presented her letters of credential to Pope Francis, formally assuming her duties as U.S. ambassador to the Holy See.

Gingrich met privately with the Pope on December 22 after introducing her husband,

former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and members of her staff.

Neither the Vatican nor the U.S. embassy provided details about their private discussion.

In a statement, the embassy said, “Ambassador Gingrich looks forward to working with the Holy See to defend human rights, advance religious freedom, combat human trafficking and to seek peaceful solutions to crises around the world.”

But in the weeks before her papal audience, Pope Francis and U.S. President Donald Trump had very public disagreements on other issues. Pope Francis had asked Trump to respect the “status quo” of Jerusalem by not recognizing it as the capital of Israel until the city’s status was determined by a peace process.

Also, the Vatican expressed disappointment that the Trump administration pulled out of the U.N. process for drafting global compacts on migration and on refugees and that the administration withdrew U.S. support for the Paris Accord on reducing climate change.

Meeting Pope Francis, Gingrich gave him a collection of sacred music recorded by the choir she was a longtime member of at the Basilica of

the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, the embassy said. She also gave him a donation for the charity of his choice.

After meeting the Pope and Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, the new ambassador was accompanied to St Peter's Basilica by Mgr Francis Kelly, a priest of the Diocese of Worcester, Massachusetts, and a canon of St. Peter's Basilica.

Court upholds \$135,000 fine against Christian bakers in gay wedding cake case

An American court has unanimously upheld a ruling and a \$135,000 fine that two Christian bakery owners discriminated against a gay couple by refusing to make them a wedding cake almost five years ago.

The Oregon Court of Appeals said the owners of the since-closed Gresham bakery Aaron and Melissa Klein had violated Oregon law by not baking the cake for Rachel and Laurel Bowman-Cryer.



After the 62-page opinion was released, the state Labor Commissioner Brad Avakian celebrated the court's decision and said: "Today's ruling sends a strong signal that Oregon remains open to all."

The appeals court verdict, released on Thursday, came almost nine months after attorneys representing the Kleins and the attorneys for the Bureau of Labor and Industries argued before the three-judge panel.

The Christian couple had argued that Mr Avakian violated state and federal laws by forcing them to pay emotional-distress damages to the lesbian couple.

Their lawyers also said Mr Avakian and the state Bureau of Labor and Industries violated the Kleins' rights as artists to free speech, their

rights to religious freedom and their rights as defendants to a due process.

The decision comes weeks after a **Christian cake artist from Colorado opened a case** at the US Supreme Court over the right to refuse to make a wedding cake for a same-sex ceremony.

Jack Phillips from Masterpiece Cakeshop with the backing of religious freedom charity Alliance Defending Freedom, said the government cannot coerce him to create artistic expression that communicates a message with which he fundamentally disagrees.

The case also mirrors the legal action faced by Ashers Bakery in Northern Ireland.

Irish Church Leaders' New Year Message

In a joint New Year Message Irish Church leaders are appeal for renewed efforts to protect vulnerable families from hardship, across the island of Ireland and throughout the world, in 2018.

The letter was issued by the Church of Ireland Primate of All-Ireland, Archbishop Richard

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Clarke, the Roman Catholic Primate of All-Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, the Rev Dr Laurence Graham, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Bishop John McDowell, President of the Irish Council of Churches and the Rt Rev Noble McNeely, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Text of the Message in full:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” (Romans 15:13).

At the beginning of this new year we add our voices to those calling for increased efforts to provide safety, security and protection for vulnerable families across the island of Ireland and throughout the world. Families are the essential building blocks of strong, resilient communities. Our experience in pastoral and social care underlines the centrality of family wellbeing to effective, long-term solutions to the major social challenges we face today.

In Ireland, we have been particularly shocked at the rising levels of homelessness, one of the most tragic and glaring symptoms of a broken system that is leaving too many people without adequate support. The protection of children,

our future parents and future leaders, is one of the primary reasons for the existence of social welfare systems, yet in the Republic of Ireland one in three of those living in emergency accommodation is a child. In Northern Ireland, families with more than two children are among those most at risk from the combination of welfare changes, cuts to services, and cuts to charities providing vital support to children and young people. Across the world, over the past year, the number of families displaced by conflict, persecution and destitution has continued to rise, placing the lives and futures of more children at risk.

Families are the hope for the world. In our churches at Christmas time there is a particular emphasis on family as we come together to celebrate our appreciation for God's gift of hope to a suffering world in the birth of Christ. We are reminded that God did not choose the wealthy and the powerful to be the protectors of his Son, but a family that was vulnerable, without a home and forced to rely on the kindness of strangers. It is deeply unfair that so many parents in our society today feel that they are failing because they cannot provide security for their children, and that many are reluctant to ask for help because of stigma and shame.

We do not underestimate the challenges faced by our political leaders in these uncertain times, but we have a vocation to witness to the fact that the essential purpose of political leadership is to protect the common good. We appeal to them to focus their efforts in this coming year on measures that will alleviate the hardship experienced by families near and far, restoring hope and preventing people being pushed to the margins of society.

In August 2018 the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland will host the World Meeting of Families. As Christian churches we have taken the opportunity presented by this event to explore together how we can celebrate the importance of families to our churches and the wider community, recognising that our pastoral care of the family is an essential part of our contribution to society.

We pray that the coming year will bring hope, joy and peace to all families who are struggling.

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