

Catholic diocese 'has no objection' to Enniskillen bombing memorial



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Rt Rev Joseph McGuinness, administrator for the Diocese of Clogher, said in a letter that the church had "no objection whatsoever to a permanent memorial being erected to the victims", and that it would carefully consider an application to site it on church land.

His remarks came amid fears that community relations between Protestants and Catholics could be damaged in the town amid an ongoing row over the placement of a memorial for the atrocity.

On the 30th anniversary of the bomb on Wednesday, a temporary memorial was unveiled to the 12 victims.

The bombing killed 11 people outright and left 68 injured, while a 12th victim, Ronnie Hill, died after spending 13 years in a coma

Bereaved families say they have attempted to have the memorial erected permanently at the site of the blast but that the local Catholic diocese owns the land and has not yet given them permission.

However, the St Michael's Diocesan Trust, part of the Diocese of Clogher, said it was only informed of the application in late September.

The site of the bombing is now home to the Clinton Centre built on land owned by the diocesan trust in 2002.

In remarks released in a parish letter on Armistice Day, Mr McGuinness said there had been much "ill-informed" comment on the issue.

He said: "I want to state firmly that the Diocesan Trust has no objection whatsoever to a permanent memorial being erected to the victims of the Enniskillen bombing.

"The creation of a public memorial is both a way of providing solace and comfort to those who grieve, and also a way of drawing the community together in remembrance and solidarity."

Mr McGuinness said: "The Ely Centre, under whose auspices the memorial was created, submitted an application to the Trust to negotiate a lease of a portion of the land at the front of the Clinton Centre with a view to placing the memorial there.

"The hope was expressed that the Trust could come to a quick decision in time for the unveiling of the memorial on 8 November.

"The Diocesan Trust willingly agreed to give the proposal full and careful consideration, but made it very clear that the matter couldn't be resolved in such a short space of time, given the issues which would have to be considered."

He added that the trust was "not trying to be in any way obstructive, but rather has had to begin to address complex issues which have only recently been posed to it".

The Monsignor said that it was also "quite untrue" the diocese had a problem with the use of the poppy symbol, or that it had a hand in removing the temporary memorial - adding that was done by the "organisers".

Concluding, he added: "None of us wish to add in any way to the pain of all who have suffered so dreadfully over the last 30 years.

"Neither should we cease to continue the work of reconciliation and healing in our community in a way that draws people together in genuine and mutual respect."

The day after the bomb attack, loyalist paramilitaries killed a man in Belfast in retaliation for the bombing.

No-one has ever been held to account for the blast. Report courtesy of Belfast Telegraph

Statement on Clogher diocesan web site:

<http://www.clogherdiocese.ie/2017/11/letter-to-the-people-of-st-michaels-parish-enniskillen-lisbellaw/>

Faith and hope shine at concert celebrating Rev Liz McElhinney

Faith and hope shone brightly at a special concert in Shankill Church on Friday night to celebrate the life of Revd Liz McElhinney, who died from Motor Neurone Disease (MND) in June.

Over a thousand people made the journey to honour a remarkable woman, some from as far away as Sligo and Roscommon. It was a fitting tribute to Liz's legacy as a wife, mother, grandmother, friend, colleague, minister and counsellor.

Compere, Bishop Ken Clarke, Mission Director of SAMS UK & Ireland and a close friend of the

McElhinneys, spoke for many when he described Liz as: “Caring, compassionate and consistent – a joy to be with; a privilege to know. She was a joy carrier”.

The special concert shone a spotlight on Liz’s Christian faith, and especially her faith in the face of suffering.

A selection of her poems, read by the acclaimed actor, Ian McElhinney and his actor son Matthew (Liz’s godson), was at the heart of the evening. They were all written following Liz’s diagnosis 2 years ago, and resonated with her love for God, for people and for nature. She enjoyed life in all its fullness.

In a short film, Dr Sharon Heron, Liz’s creative writing mentor, said that Liz’s vision for the poems grew steadily as she wrote of her experience, hoping that “some glory might be brought to the Lord she loved”.

As well as the poetry, and a truly inspiring video testimony that Liz gave 6 months after her diagnosis, the concert featured musical performances from the cross–community Lurgan Musical Society, Shankill Parish Choir accompanied by Carl McCambley, soloist Nicola Brown and traditional Irish musicians led by

Sean Hanily from Dublin. The music was uplifting but poignant as many remembered the vibrant presence they had lost in Liz.

Twenty of the poems have been gathered into a printed collection entitled *Solid Joys, Lasting Treasure* illustrated by Liz's son, David, and each ticket holder received a copy.

“The poems in this booklet are witness to Liz’s spirit swelling and her faith deepening, even in the darkest and most difficult and painful of times,” said Bishop Ken Clarke.

“She pressed on in the midst of pain and discomfort, the loss of independence and a raft of other challenges. But with her co-climber Christ beside her and within, she struggled to the summit.

“Liz had discovered in Christ not only a ‘bridge over troubled waters’, but the best thing we should all seek and find.”

A pledge of £10,700 raised on the night was made to MND Association (NI), represented by Chairman, Stephen Thompson.

The fundraising continues with further copies and a CD of the collection read by Ian

McElhinney available to purchase at www.simplyorderit.com/mnd/ or on Kindle from Amazon.com.

Former Dean of Belfast says he will probably leave Province for good

After spending most of his adult life in Northern Ireland, including some of the bleakest and bloodiest years of the Troubles, Rev John Mann is now likely to see out his days across the Irish Sea, the News Letter reports.

He was until recently the dean of St Anne's Anglican Cathedral, but as he approaches retirement he has swapped his Belfast ministry for the more sedate surroundings of semi-rural south-west England.

Here he looks back on his time in the Province, and forward to what the future may hold for the Church of Ireland, and the country at large. "It's an entirely different sort of ministry altogether," he said of his new patch, the tiny Dorset town of Swanage and its surroundings.

"It's a holiday, sea-sidey ministry. There's lots of caravans and second homes. It's a bit like Newcastle or Portrush. "Some people would



Rev John Mann with first grandchild Edward and wife Helen

look on this very much as a sort of step down. I don't look at it in those terms.

“It is time for something different for us.” Born in London, the 62-year-old's soft southern English accent contains no hint of an Ulster inflection despite having lived here ever since enrolling in Queen's University Belfast in 1973 (where he initially studied pharmacy, before radically changing tack and opting for theology).

His career began when he was ordained in the largely-loyalist parish of Cloughfern, on Belfast's northern edge, in 1979. He then served in east

Belfast, Ballyrashane in north Antrim, Cloughfern again, and south Belfast, before becoming dean of St Anne's in 2011.

In all, since 1979 he has spent only about five years outside Northern Ireland, during a stint in Hampshire.

In recent times he and his wife Helen (who comes from the Isle of Man) had begun asking themselves: "Is this is it for the rest of our lives – or are we going to move back to England?"

He estimates that he has maybe about another five years of ministry left, then must decide where he will retire.

And whilst he has been reluctant to sever his Northern Ireland ties (he still owns a bungalow in Portrush, and continues to check the Northern Irish news every day), his son David and daughter Rowan both now live in England, and "it is probably less than likely" he will spend his retirement in the Province.

As to what might become of the Church of Ireland which he has now left behind, he noted that churches generally are suffering from dwindling and ageing congregations, adding that

Anglican parishes in north and west Belfast in particular are under “real pressure”.

However a raft of other areas too are being forced to contend with “too many church buildings to maintain, with fewer people attending church and less resources”.

“The church has to make difficult decisions,” he said. “Probably some more churches will have to close and congregations amalgamate.”

Does he ever see a time when St Anne’s Cathedral itself will be deemed surplus to requirements?

“No, I don’t,” he said. “It’s essential to the city. In a way the Church of Ireland actually could manage without St Anne’s. It’s got quite enough churches. “But for the city of Belfast, if you need a big civic space where you require a service, then where else can you use?

“The Ulster Hall wouldn’t be the same, the Waterfront Hall wouldn’t be the same. In a way that’s why it was built.

“Of course to maintain and run a building like that costs a huge amount of money and that will be one of the really big challenges over the next

decade – that St Anne’s can become resilient to the kind of financial pressures that are the reality of today.”

To aid this endeavour, the cathedral nowadays has a “business arm” employing two people, who aim to generate revenue from events, tourism, and the cathedral car park which stands close to the city centre.

During his 44 years in the Province he has conducted funerals for Troubles victims, but said that he has also witnessed “great moments of reconciliation”.

When asked what he will not miss about the place, he replied: “I think the sort of political deadlock we’ve seen in Northern Ireland.

“I’ll not miss that one bit! At times it’s so depressing to see.

“But I’m always hopeful. I think that there’ll be a breakthrough one day.” ‘

As to whether he can foresee a day when the Church of Ireland (which he has now departed for the Church of England) will ordain gay clergy, even a gay bishop, Rev Mann said: “I think it’s a situation of never say never, really. “One doesn’t

know what the future holds. I'd certainly say it's very, very unlikely at the moment. But I'm away from the scene now.

“Like most people, I think I find it quite difficult to see where the steps forward will go.”

Churches “need to respond pastorally to people that are feeling excluded,” but “to resolve the theological differences is going to be extremely difficult... with sensitivity, we hope we can move closer towards resolving these questions”.

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Book Spot: I Married a Soldier by Brenda Hale and Rachel Farmer

Brenda Hale's husband was no battlefield novice. Captain Mark Hale had served with the British Army in Kosovo, Bosnia, the Falklands and Iraq, and completed six tours of Northern Ireland. But in March 2009, when the father-of



Fighting: after Captain Mark Hale was killed, Brenda, above, had to fight to get her family support

two was deployed to Afghanistan, both he and his wife knew this time would be different.

At first, things ticked along as usual. Brenda and her daughters, Victoria and Alexandra, then 16 and seven, had grown used to Mark's long absences from the family home in Northern Ireland. Brenda had long known the highs and lows of life as an Army wife: the empty space on Mark's side of the bed; the aching longing for the

man she loved; the ecstatic joy of their reunion each time he safely returned.

For more than four months after arriving in Helmand Province, Capt Hale emailed morning and night, and phoned twice-weekly. But by August, the Afghan presidential elections were looming and the number of British casualties was mounting. July had seen 22 British service personnel killed, making it the worst month for this country's losses since operations began in 2001.

On August 12, when Capt Hale – who, as Battle Group Logistics Officer, was theoretically desk-bound – called home, Brenda begged him to stay at Camp, given the dangers outside. “He laughed and said: ‘Staying in is boring’,” she recalls. Next morning, she checked for his daily email, to find nothing.

We're sitting at the kitchen table at her house in Hillsborough, County Down, where, through tears, the 49-year-old recounts the most painful day of her life, with an emotion hardly blunted by the passing of the years. Her story is a stark reminder ahead of Remembrance Sunday of the unsung heroes and heroines left behind by war: the families of those who give their lives for their country; wives, children and parents who carry



Tragedy: Captain Mark Hale

their suffering for decades after their husbands, fathers or sons fall.

“I dropped off my girls and came home,” says Brenda. “I checked my messages and still nothing. I started to feel ill. Bile was rising from my stomach to my throat. I sent Mark an email saying: ‘Sweetie, still no word from you. I’m really worried. I hope everything is OK. I love you.’ No sooner had I hit send when my

front door was rapped and I started to shake. I knew who it was.”

A man and woman stood on the doorstep, and the man flashed his Army ID. “I closed the door because I knew they were coming to tell me he was hurt,” she says. “And you’re shaking and in some sort of trance where you hope with all your heart this is a dream.”

Reluctantly, she admitted them to deliver the words she had dreaded: “Capt Mark Hale this morning died of his injuries in Camp Bastion.” She later learned he had been caught in an improvised explosive device blast while helping an injured soldier to safety during a patrol near Sangin. After 26 years in the Army and aged 42, he was the longest-serving British soldier killed in Afghanistan.

‘I went spinning into the abyss, unable to mourn or grieve’

Brenda registered the news with a violent physical response. “I didn’t cry or scream, but my teeth started to chatter and didn’t stop chattering for 18 months. I was in complete shock and absolute denial, with pain like you cannot imagine. I was going to have to tell my children their daddy wasn’t coming home and be

responsible for their pain and grief when I couldn't even cope with my own."

This was no less harrowing than she'd anticipated. "Not my daddy!" screamed Victoria. "It should be me! Just bring Daddy back."

Alexandra, too young to know about her father's job, responded with the heartbreaking innocence of an uncomprehending child. "How can I show him my new shoes?" she asked, bewildered.

It was a shattering climax to the relationship Brenda had started with the tall, dark and handsome soldier from Dorset she'd met at a disco in Bangor, Co Down, at the age of 16. This being Northern Ireland in 1985, when the Troubles were raging, dating a British squaddie was fraught with peril, and Brenda's parents were anxious. "[The IRA] bombed discos and other places soldiers went to, so it just wasn't a safe place any parent would want their daughter," she says.

But such risks were of little concern to Brenda. "I just needed to be with Mark. We needed to be together and to do whatever it took."

Two years of letter-writing followed, as Mark was posted to Berlin. By 19, Brenda had turned down a university place and married her soldier,

and before long the pair had bought their first home, in Poole. Then, the loneliness set in.

“We were only married a few days and he went to the Falklands for three months,” she recalls. “When we moved into our flat, he had another six-month tour of Northern Ireland and I was left on my own. But this was the life I needed to live to be with Mark. I married that soldier, and there was no way I was ever going to ask him to leave the Army. By that stage, he had started to progress through the ranks and we both really enjoyed Army life.”

Two decades later and newly bereaved, her goodwill was to ebb away. Mark’s will, it transpired, had been lost when his previous regiment had amalgamated to become the Rifles, meaning his wife had to go through probate to eventually receive her due. Meanwhile, the family was left with little money and struggling to cope.

“Mark’s wage stopped immediately, and I had a mortgage payment due and needed food,” says Brenda. “Everybody thinks you’re going to be looked after, but the deaths in Afghanistan were going up and the system was inundated. There were holes in it, and I fell through every one. Mark did everything we ask of our soldiers,

believing that if anything happened I would be looked after. I went spinning into the abyss with my daughters, unable to mourn or grieve because my initial concern became: 'I have bills to pay'."

She was advised to apply to various charities for heating oil, and was told an Irish charity would furnish her daughters with shoes.

"I thought, 'Where's the dignity? Where are the politicians who stand at the Cenotaph wearing their poppies on Remembrance Sunday, laying wreaths in front of the cameras?' There was no one."

The Military Covenant, which entitles former members of the Armed Forces to some priority medical treatment, plus assistance with housing and school places for children, was of no use to her: it does not extend to Northern Ireland, where Sinn Féin, the second largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, has indicated it would oppose any policy that prioritised military veterans.

Spurred on by a desire to improve the lot of Northern Irish families such as hers, whose relatives die fighting for the British Army, Brenda entered politics, serving as the DUP's member of the Legislative Assembly for Lagan Valley from

2011 until her defeat in Assembly elections in March this year. In this role, she became a persistent advocate for the fair treatment of service families, taking her concerns to London.

“Westminster is the only parliament with authority to actively deploy our troops and so should look after them no matter where they’re based in the UK,” she says.

There has been some progress, she believes. The Queen’s speech in June mentioned “delivering on the Armed Forces Covenant across the United Kingdom”. The DUP, upon whose votes the Government now relies, say the last four words were included at their behest.

But more understanding – and funding – is needed, says Brenda, whose moving memoir *I Married a Soldier* was published this summer. “Myself and my girls and all the soldiers with life-changing injuries are collateral damage,” she says. “If we can’t afford to look after them, then we can’t afford to go to war.”

I Married a Soldier by Brenda Hale and Rachel Farmer is published by Lion (£9.99).

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