

open

Christianity

an occasional newsletter
of hope for Christianity in Ireland

issued by the Open Christianity Network

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Friends –

Here is the second issue of the newsletter now called the *Open Christianity* newsletter, which follows 38 issues of the old 'Le Chéile' newsletter. Meanwhile discussions continue about the possibility of turning this into a four-times-yearly printed magazine, with the more-frequent email newsletter continuing in reduced form, for information about events, etc. Our thanks to all who receive this newsletter who have responded to our questions about this. Out of 130, forty have replied, three-quarters of them in favour. We would still be glad to hear from the others, by mail or email. God bless.

Hilary

Two 'firsts' at Dublin's RC cathedral

Archbishop Alan Harper, the Church of Ireland's Archbishop of Armagh, was the preacher at St Mary's Roman Catholic Pro-Cathedral in Dublin for the opening service there of last month's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This was the first time a C of I Archbishop of Armagh had preached at Dublin's main RC cathedral.

During the service, the Roman Catholic Church was welcomed for the first time into full membership of the Dublin Council of Churches.

(Church of Ireland Gazette, 8 February 2008)

St Patrick's defends sale of rosaries

The sale of rosaries in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, has been criticised by the secretary to the Northern Ireland-based Evangelical Protestant Society. In a letter to the *Irish Times* last month Wallace Thompson said the beads had no place in 'a Protestant Cathedral'. The Revd David Williams,

Canon-in-Residence at St Patrick's, later said 'There are people who use the rosary in their prayer lives. Thank God for them.'

In a radio interview Wallace Thompson referred to the Pope as 'the Antichrist'. Further correspondence in the *Irish Times* included a letter from the Revd David Frazer of Co.Meath, who said he was disturbed that people like Mr Thompson were liable to produce such language from the Articles of Religion of the Church of Ireland. It is unacceptable, he said, that the Church of Ireland should retain statements of doctrine which refer to 'the sacrifices of masses' as 'blasphemous fables and dangerous deceits'. He called for the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, at its next meeting, to disown that language.

Priests speak out on Corrib controversy

Three north Mayo priests have called on Minister for Energy Eamon Ryan to consider an alternative location on the Erris coastline for the Corrib gas refinery. Fr Michael Nallen, Fr Michael Gilroy and Fr Seán Noone last November proposed Glink as an alternative to Bellanboy, saying that it would avoid an onshore pipeline of any length and would help to resolve 'the current impasse'. None of the three are members of the pressure group Shell to Sea.

To date, the 'impasse' continues. The first day of February was declared a 'Day of Solidarity', and protests were held locally. A candelit vigil was held outside Belfast City Hall that evening.

Archbishop criticises health system

Archbishop of Dublin Dr Diarmuid Martin has described the Irish health system as an example of the uneven distribution of economic growth and wealth in a globalised world.

He told a Berlin conference attended by Chancellor Merkel...that free market regulation had its place, particularly in ensuring efficiency, but not if it reduces people solely to their economic value as workers and consumers.

'In many ways, Ireland finds itself in a leading position in Europe. But Ireland falls back when one looks at healthcare,' said Archbishop Martin.

From The Irish Times, 16.02.08

Quote

'How is it that in a wealthy country which proudly proclaims its Christian heritage, we can neglect sick people, such as those with cystic fibrosis; or be indifferent to the plight of children with autism; or deport poor immigrants while imploring America to welcome illegal Irish immigrants?'

*'GL', 'Thinking Anew' column,
Irish Times 16.02.08*

Getting it together

Carnlough, Co. Antrim, is small but has shown that valuable ecumenical initiatives can be taken by small communities. Encouraged by the covenant between the Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland, for nearly three years now there has been united morning worship in St Mary's Church, Ardclinis. Alternate Methodist and Church of Ireland forms of service are used, involving ministers from each church.

Methodist Church Notes, Irish Times, 12.01.08

Quote

'In this culture of rampant individualism, where the golden calf of money is worshipped, where the media bombard us with pressures to 'shop till we drop', the motif of being in exile seems very appropriate. 'How shall we sing the Lord's song?' is exactly the question when the culture of the Beast and a globalised, unchecked capitalism tramples on the poor exactly as was happening in the time of Isaiah. Part of the problem is that the churches and faith communities, like the Jews in Babylon, are too easily assimilated to such a culture. Perhaps another Confessing Church is needed, a Church of the faithful remnant, as in the days of Dietrich Bonhoeffer under Nazism, to witness to prophetic truth.'

*From 'The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope'
by Mary C. Grey
published by Darton, Longman & Todd*

The Open Road

*We follow the open road,
Till the light of the day is dim,
And the watchman sees the spires,
Away on the world's rim.
Not for us are content, nor quiet, nor peace of mind,
For we go seeking cities that we shall never find.*

Amongst the many ways there are today of practising Christianity, perhaps the way of the pilgrimage is one that appeals to many people. Many writers have expounded its merits but John Bunyan is one of the most moving. The idea of the journey is found in many religions and it is an expression of the search for God. Christianity and Islam will speak of their certainty that there are simple and well worn paths by which God may be known, but for many of us these paths are not enlightening, and the more we use them, the further away God appears to be. As we follow these paths we keep on getting messages that to find God we just need to go a little further – *the watchman sees the spires away on the world's rim*. But we never seem to get there, and to find God, or even to find out who he or she is. Can God be thought of as a person?

This is a lonely road to travel, and in travelling we keep on getting messages from the churches, and others, that we are wasting our time. Just listen to us and you will find God, they say. But then we are told that God is the sort of person who interferes in the world, but we see with our

own eyes that he does not interfere to protect the children of Darfur, for example. The God that we seek will be consonant with our experience and will not have to suspend our observation of how the world is to accommodate him.

And as we travel this lonely road, at first we think that we are travelling alone. But as we look about us we find that there are many small groups of pilgrims travelling on the same road. Many have not seen each other and think that they are alone in their travelling. But they are not alone. Travelling in this way is a great company of pilgrims who can be called "searchers". Some remain within the fold of organised religion and others have chosen to be outside it, but the object of the journey is the same, and all who travel it are aware that they *go seeking cities that they will never find*. So if you are one of these pilgrims, keep a lookout for others travelling the same road as you are travelling. You may not want to travel with them, but at least acknowledge that that you are on the same road as they, and encourage them. Perhaps one day all those who seek without expectation will meet together and travel alongside one another. But the most important thing is to keep travelling.

William Odling-Smee

Quote

'The Episcopal Church [of the USA] is in good heart ... However ... there is widespread anger because of the way that the Episcopal Church has been perceived to be treated by the Primates and by senior members of the hierarchy in the UK and around the world. The position of welcoming lesbian and gay people is not some arbitrary piece of rights-based legalism; rather, it's worked out from the profound desire that "the Episcopal Church welcomes you" and is rooted in an understanding of the Gospel and Baptism which seeks to turn no one away.'

*Philip Chester and Giles Goddard,
writing in the current newsletter of 'Inclusive Church'.*

Every churchyard a Garden of Eden

The Garden of Eden Project is an exciting new project that has been launched to address climate change and encourage sustainability in the community.

Féidhlim Harty writes: 'We all now know that in combination with reducing our own carbon footprint, we need to plant trees to act as a carbon sink to reduce the excesses of global warming. The Garden of Eden Project has a two-fold benefit for the environment. By growing trees with edible fruit, nuts and berries it contributes to locally grown food, cuts down our food miles and helps to reduce our carbon footprint, as well as providing extra trees to act as a carbon sink.'

The Garden of Eden Project is offering fruit and nut trees at reduced prices to encourage your church to plant trees this coming autumn. Place your orders now.'

For further information contact Féidhlim Harty at reeds@wetlandsystems.ie, or on 023-52983.

'Belief and Unbelief: a literature festival...

... on the theme of 'Religion and Spirituality' takes place at the Triskel centre in Cork this week, Feb 21 – 23.

Speakers and readers include Thomas McCarthy, Billy Ramsell, William Wall, and Padraig J.Daly, Jim Cotter and James Harpur, Ilya Kaminski and Gerard Fanning, John W. Sexton and Leanne O'Sullivan, Mark Patrick Herderman, Matthew Sweeney. A panel discussion on 'Spiritual Writing in a Secular World' will be chaired by Hilary Wakeman.

Details on www.munsterlit.ie, or from the Triskel 021 4272022, or from munsterlit@eircom.net

Theology of Ecology

How can Christians respond to the reality of global warming? That is one of the subjects Fr. Seán McDonagh will be addressing at the next meeting of the Cork Theology Forum on Saturday 1st March.

Seán McDonagh is a Columban priest who has long been an activist in the field of ecological and environmental matters. In his latest book, *Climate Change: The Challenge To All Of Us*, he describes the causes and consequences of global warming and examines the response to it from governments, industry and the churches.

The meeting is from 10am – 1pm, in the parish hall of the Sacred Heart church on Western Road, Cork. Fee €15, (members €10) Includes coffee/tea at 11.15

Contacts & queries to John Scanlan, 10 Wallace's Ave. Ballinlough, Cork. Email: justjohn@eircom.net

Presbyterians and Progressives

Intriguingly, the 'Presbyterian Notes' column in last Saturday's *Irish Times* devoted most of its space to writing about Bishop John Shelby Spong, emeritus Anglican bishop of Newark, NJ, USA. What was intriguing about it was that the article was not based on any Irish connection, but on an interview with Bishop Spong in the Scottish church magazine, *Life and Work*. The writer made the point that the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) 'accepts the right of free expression of religious views.'

Bishop Spong is well known for his progressive views, and is the author of several influential books, such as *Christianity Must Change or Die*. The column writer said that the bishop supports the view that insistence on an inherent literal view of the Bible obscures truth and inhibits faith, adding 'His views have gained for him death threats – not from terrorists – but from so-called fellow Christians.'

The interview was organised by the Progressive Christianity Network, which was described as 'interdenominational, worldwide, with local groups that circulate newsletters and radical quarterlies, and hold conferences with key speakers drawn from biblical and theological scholars of highest repute.'

The Open Christianity Network of Ireland is affiliated to the worldwide Progressive Christianity Network.

Quote

In order that the great vision of the transfiguration of creation, present in the texts of the table fellowship of Jesus, and in the narratives of the Last Supper, can embody hope once more and restore the prophetic cutting edge of Eucharist so that we also can 'cry freedom' in the marrow of our bones, the Eucharist itself must be experienced as an invitation *to know subversively*. Knowing Jesus is consuming wisdom, and this wisdom will ever be in conflict with the knowledge of the dominant powers.

*From 'The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope' by Mary C. Grey
published by Darton, Longman & Todd*

In the next issue of this newsletter:

reviews of two excellent books,

Gordon Lynch's *The New Spirituality* (I.B. Tauris)

and Brian C. Taylor's *Setting the Gospel Free* (SCM Press)

Quote

The seeker and the church must break Christianity open into life... This breaking open sets the gospel free from its imaginary ownership and limitation by the church, and takes on the responsibility of moving it into our experience of God-in-life. (p.13)

Jesus set religion free for himself and his followers. Jesus' gospel, his good news, was the proclamation of the end of religion as cult and the beginning of God-in-life. He brought the end of religion that required, through institutional power and ideology, a certain code of behaviour, worship and belief. It was the end of religion as a closed system. Jesus shifted his disciples' gaze from the interior concerns of religious cult to the immediacy of God in each moment. They looked to nature, human celebrations, inclusion of the marginalized, relationships of love and forgiveness, the creature's very real union with the Creator, and the purpose of suffering. Jesus' religion was an open system, pointing out toward life. And yet Jesus did not leave Judaism. He faithfully used its form until the end.... (p.18)

All too often in times of tremendous change the church manifests itself as a closed system, clinging desperately to a theology that has outgrown its usefulness. It forgets that theology about God is not God. Theology always has and always will develop and even change as a people's awareness of God develops and changes. Unfortunately, the church often clutches its truth as if it were a thing, a possession to protect. ...But as the *I Ching* reminds us, dangerous times are also times of great opportunity. The window is now open for a breakthrough in the development of the church. (pp.74-75)

*From 'Setting the Gospel Free',
by Brian C.Taylor (SCM, 1997)*

*Subscription to this newsletter is free.
News items, letters, reviews always welcomed*
