



CHURCH FOR A NEWSLETTER

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

**ARE THERE SEEDS OF
PEACE AND HOPE? 1**

EDITORIAL 2

**CAUSEWAY CHURCHES
FORUM 4**

**OMAGH CHURCHES
FORUM 5**

**DUNGANNON AREA
CHURCH FORUM 6**

**BALLYMENA CHURCH
MEMBERS FORUM 6**

**FERMANAGH
CHURCHES FORUM 8**

**COOKSTOWN AND DISTRICT
INTER CHURCH FORUM
NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER
2024 – JUNE 2025 9**

**NEWRY DISTRICT INTER-
CHURCH FORUM 2024-
2025 10**

**BALLYCASTLE CHURCH
ACTION 10**

**ENDURANCE INSPIRED
BY HOPE – MIDPOINT
REFLECTIONS ON
CHURCHES TOGETHER IN
BRITAIN AND IRELAND'S
STRATEGIC PLAN 10**

**ZOOM SEMINAR SERIES
2025-2026 12**



East Timorese choir who performed at the Dungannon Praise Festival

ARE THERE SEEDS OF PEACE AND HOPE?

In conversations we can identify the war zones in the world at present. There are too many to allow for much peace and hope. One thing that all the current wars and conflicts have in common with all of the wars and conflicts of the catastrophic twentieth century, is that most people who died were non-combatants, civilians. In all our current wars and conflicts, it is still by far the majority of non-combatants and civilians who are suffering and dying. It would seem that the safest place to be in a war is in the armed forces. Fewer soldiers and combatants die than civilians. The military forces that bomb, shoot and kill only do so because they have constructed the other as other and the other as less than human or non-human. The other is dehumanised, even perceived as animals, which is unjust and unfair on animals. That is why and how you kill and destroy and mostly non-combatants,

civilians and the innocent. There are two stories in the Jewish and Christian Bible of Mother Rachel weeping for her children, the innocent victims of warfare, terror and violence. There are millions of Rachel's weeping, still weeping for their children.

There are at least three forces in our world today which do not make for peace, and which are destructive of people and the environment. They are colonialism or the violent legacies of colonialism, nationalism and fascism. This year 2025 saw the publication by historian Sam Dalrymple of the book *Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia*.¹ A vast swathe of Asia - India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Nepal, Bhutan, Yemen, Oman, The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait - were all bound together under a single imperial banner, known officially as the 'Indian Empire', or simply as the Raj. It was the crown jewel of the British Empire, home to a quarter of

the world's population and encompassing the largest Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian communities on the planet.

And then in the short space of fifty years beginning in 1937, the Indian Empire shattered. Partition is part of our history and experience in Ireland. Five partitions tore this Indian Empire apart, carving out new nations, redrawing maps, imposing boundaries and borders, and leaving in the wake of those partitions a legacy of war, exile and division. A large, sprawling empire became twelve nations, millions of dead, millions displaced, its legacies alive in civil war in Burma, now Myanmar, ongoing insurgencies in regions like Kashmir, the Rohingya genocide, and earlier this year, another outbreak of warring conflict between India and Pakistan, the latter a constructed Muslim nation partitioned from mainly Hindu India in 1947. In 1971 East Pakistan after a bloody war

EDITORIAL

Welcome to the 31st issue of the Church Fora Newsletter. As you will read in this edition of the Newsletter, the Church Fora scattered across N. Ireland continue their work of building bridges in our communities, efforts which contribute to the creation of a peaceful just and reconciled community here. Sadly, events here and elsewhere demonstrate that racism is on the increase in many countries and posing a big challenge - a challenge for governments, political parties and communities. You will read in reports from different areas how Fora are taking small steps in their local communities to reach out to new ethnic communities in an effort to foster a spirit of welcome, respect and an appreciation of diversity. Church Fora also continue to pursue efforts to engage young people in their programmes.

Our most recent CONNECT conference was a reflection on the changed and changing role of Churches. The focus was prompted by the marking of the centenary of the Boundary Commission. The CONNECT theme was: '1925 the Boundary Commission and the Border – 2025 the End of the Politicised God and Religious Nationalisms?'. After some consultation a decision was taken that the general theme for educational courses for Inter-Church Fora 2025-2026 will be 'Living Faith in Today's World: Liberation and Reconciliation.' Details of the seminars and events will be shared later.

Today in our country and in the wider world we witness what has been described as 'a spiral of polarisation'. Social media has a role in this as it is flooded with disinformation that polarises public opinion and stirs fear and anger. This has been demonstrated most clearly in recent events in America where the toxic divisiveness of current political discourse has energised extremists on both the

left and right setting them on a path of mutual provocation. This toxic divisiveness is not confined to America and is evidenced in many European countries. As we have learned on the journey to peace and towards reconciliation here, true strength lies in dialogue compassion and justice – dialogue emanating from "an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. Dialogue assumes that there is room in the heart for the person's point of view, opinion, and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defences, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth." (Rabbi Abraham Skorka)

Our Churches working together are well placed to promote this dialogue as well as relational and social values including compassion and justice, values that include respect for the dignity and rights of every individual; values which emphasise our shared humanity.

At this time when the world also needs a message of Hope we remember the words of Desmond Tutu

Goodness is stronger than evil,

Love is stronger than hate,

Light is stronger than darkness,

Life is stronger than death.

Eileen Gallagher.



Ladies from East Timorese Choir

was partitioned from Pakistan and became Bangladesh. India and Pakistan's proxy war continues, both states with nuclear weapons. This is the dangerous legacy of colonialism, in this case British imperialism.

It is of course a larger story. The history of our modern world is a very slow, intentional and deliberate process by which European historical significance and cultural development flowed to the West, to Africa, to Asia and to the Americas, a great strategic European project, a brutal project in which Europe imposed itself, colonised 84% of the world by 1914. The brutal project proceeded by colonisation which extracted great wealth for Europe. There was enslavement, the Christian European slave trade, the legacies of which treat black people as inferior in the face of ongoing and resurgent white supremacism. And there was genocide eliminating indigenous populations that stood in the way of European progress and domination. And the genocide happened with the blessing of the Christian Church. Colonisation and its legacies are still with us and do not make for peace.

The nineteenth century saw the rise of nationalism and as that century progressed nationalism became increasingly aggressive and militant. It led to 1914 and WWI, the first industrialised war that was a European catastrophe with global consequences especially through the 1919 Paris Peace Conference which redrew the map of Europe and much of the rest of the world and created a disastrous and catastrophic Middle East which has yet to find peace. Now nationalism is resurgent again. Though not on the scale of many other parts of the world, we killed each other in Ireland in the cause of our contested nationalisms. Brexit alerted us to the rise of English nationalism. Now it is becoming fixated with

migrants and is racist and hate filled. In recent weeks in England Union flags have gone up on lamp posts and are being painted on roundabouts. In Northern Ireland we have had flags on lamp posts for all of the 104 years of Northern Ireland's existence. We burn flags on bonfires, effigies and portraits of politicians as well. One bonfire in July was topped by a small boat full of black mannequins, racial hatred at its most abhorrent. What is going on in England? Far-right nationalism, racial hatred, and a rising political movement that now controls some local councils wanting to clear the areas of foreign nationals, aiming for government after the next election, wanting to scrap the European Convention on Human Rights and have a British Bill of Rights for UK citizens only. That would not only undermine even destroy the Belfast Agreement, it would leave at least half the population of Northern Ireland who are not UK but Irish citizens without rights and the protection of rights. The same political movement in the councils they control have scrapped all environmental policies with zero emissions goals. That is next door, in England with some support in Northern Ireland and it is resurgent nationalism which is anti-rights and racist which is happening elsewhere on the planet, not least on the other side of the Atlantic. It is nationalism which will and is not sowing seeds of peace.

Fascism took over much of Europe after WWI. Germany, Italy and Spain, and Russia became fascist States, weaving, as Jason Stanley has said, 'a myth of distinction between 'us' and 'them,' based in a romanticised fictional past featuring 'us' and no 'them,' and supported by a resentment for a corrupt liberal elite, who take our hard-earned money and threaten our traditions...Fascist politics traffics in delusions that create these kinds of false distinctions between 'us'

and 'them,' regardless of obvious realities.' 2 (Stanley, 2020 edition, p187). Fascist politics or Fascist leaning politics rewrite the past so that they can control the future. Fascists hit the delete button on much of history and if in power will target education shaping a history curriculum that will teach children and young people a history which is uncritical and presents a narrative of exceptionalism. Fascists will create a mythologised history, a fictionalised history. Fascist politics targets categories of people, dehumanising and demonising them. It targets refugees, feminism, labour unions, racial, religious and sexual minorities. Only the pure-blooded, pure race are worthy, and they are subjugated by mass delusion. Fascism and Fascist leaning politics, as with colonialism and nationalism, destroy the peace and each snare us into an illusory peace, a false peace minus its core essential, justice.

Are there seeds of peace and hope? We humans seem to have the propensity to destroy peace. We do it through the systems of colonialism, nationalism and fascism. But we also have the capacity to make peace, nurture peace and build peace. We can pursue peace. We need civic conversations, civic Fora where we can engage together on conversations on peace and justice. We need community dialogues, dialogues of peace, dialogues of hope, dialogues of reading the signs of the times, dialogues of values and ethics, dialogues of action. We need dialogue within and between our religious traditions and philosophies of life. Sit down together in sustained conversations and dialogue mapping and naming the times we are in and identifying the shared ethics and values that make for a society and world of just peace.

Classic religious traditions,

indigenous religious traditions, philosophies of life, secular humanists, atheists, agnostics, together identifying and acting upon a shared ethic of justice, peace and compassion. The sources from which we draw these values and ethics will differ, while vitally important to each of us, are in a sense secondary. What matters are the shared values and ethics and the shared life commitments and action that flow from the values and ethics. By all means give reasons for the sources from which we draw but let the shared values and ethics become actions together for justice and peace. Such dialogues and conversations are imperative in a world of division, hate, war and destruction of human and eco life.

And where is hope? Hope is not wishful thinking, that somehow, we will turn a corner and things will get better. Or that things can't go on for ever, they will change. Such passivity and quietism have no seeds of hope. Hope is doing and action. Hope is active resistance, refusing to be taken in by the myths of colonialism, nationalism and fascism. Hope is resisting supremacism, racism, sectarianism, resisting othering, dehumanising, recognising that we are flawed and that we can engage with each other; we have that freedom, and even though we are not always clear in our thinking, understanding and life experience, we are not demons, we have imagination, reason, conscience, life capacity to engage together and act together for justice and peace. Hope is living as if justice, peace, compassion and the common good were already here. When we do justice and peace and live compassionately in society and the world, and are public about it, that is hope, that is when we sow seeds of hope and live hopefully and as people of hope.

CHURCH FORA NEWSLETTER

They sang a song of resistance, of peace and hope during the civil rights era in the US and elsewhere. It may still resonate for us in all our diversity and conflictual world.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side;

We will work with each other, we will work side by side; And we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride.

Paper first presented at a conference organised by Interfaith Forum in the Mansion

House, Dublin to mark the United Nations International Day of Peace.

REFERENCES

Dalrymple, S., (2025) Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of

Modern Asia, London: William Collins.

Stanley, J., (2020 edition), How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them, New York: Random House, p187.

Dr. Johnston McMaster. September 2025.

CAUSEWAY CHURCHES FORUM

Our Forum began the year on a positive note with the welcoming of six new members from various Churches in the Coleraine area. This was a real boost and a great blessing. Their presence has already been felt and enjoyed at our regular monthly meetings, as well as at our special events.

In March a bus load of members and friends went on a day trip to visit Belfast and to see the murals on the 'Peace Walls.' The outing also included a coffee break at the City Hall and a visit to Stormont. The day was organized by new member, Brian Eardley, and was a very memorable and fellowship-building experience.



Our annual Easter Sunday Sunrise Service at Christie Park in Coleraine was bathed in early morning sunshine and supported by more worshipers this year than in any previous year. The service, led by Pastor Bert Ritchie, followed a specially prepared order of Scripture readings and hymns, and included a brief address by Paddy De Lasa, one of the new members of the Forum. What a joy it is to share such occasions with sisters and brothers from various denominational backgrounds.

Our Annual General Meeting was held in May in the Sandel Centre in Coleraine, and after the usual reports had been presented, the following office bearers were duly elected:

- Joint Chairpersons: William McCandless and Maggie Ferris Curran.
- Vice Chairperson: Monica Dillon.
- Treasurer : Chris Crowder.
- Secretary: Roye Hamilton.
- Assistant Secretary: Rev. Sam McGuffin.



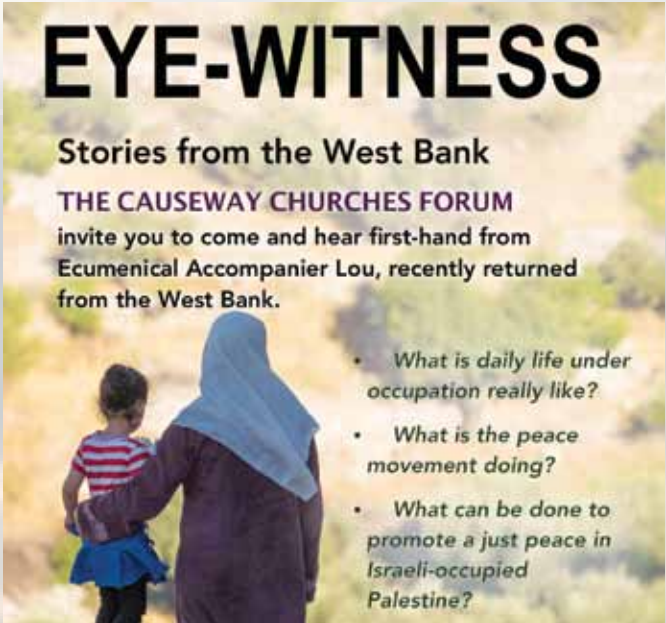
Maggie Ferris Curran



William McCandless

It was also agreed that Bert Ritchie and Chris Crowder continue in their media role, with the assistance of Christine Turner's husband, Mick. The Forum placed on record its thanks for her leadership to the outgoing Chairperson, Maura Hickey.

Immediately after our AGM, in the main hall at the Sandel Centre, we held a public meeting chaired by Eileen Kelly and billed as an 'Eye-Witness Event - Stories from the West Bank.' The speaker, Lou McGowan, gave a very informative audiovisual presentation on her many challenging experiences as part of a team of human rights monitors on the West Bank. She had worked there for three months with EAPPI - the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel. These monitors



Stories from the West Bank

ISSUE 31 - SUMMER 2025

are managed on behalf of the WCC by Quakers in Britain. The large number of people present offered many deep questions and positive comments in support of the program, and as a cup of tea was shared at the end, all agreed it had been a very worthwhile event and evening.

For various local reasons, we held our annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Service in early June this year. We called it a 'Christian Unity Service at Pentecost' and decided on a mid-week meeting with Coleraine Town Hall as the venue. Careful arrangements were made, which all worked well on the night. Sadly though, there was a very disappointing turnout. Nevertheless, we were encouraged by the effective participation of several of our new members. We intend to revert to the customary timing next January.

From its inception we have engaged with the Annual National Day of Reflection on 21st June, which was on a Saturday this year. In our case we held an event in St Patrick's Church of Ireland in the center of Coleraine, which ran from 11am to 4pm. Following a formal welcome and prayer, the names of all those who had lost their lives during 'The Troubles' were solemnly read by volunteers from our various Churches. Members of the Forum were on hand at the back of the Church to talk to and comfort anyone who was upset. Though the event was open to the public as usual, we were disappointed by the numbers attending and have decided to think carefully about what we will do to engage with next year's 'Day', which will be on a Sunday. This is an important national occasion, and we want to continue to try to help as many people as possible engage meaningfully with it.

Rev. Sam McGuffin.

OMAGH CHURCHES FORUM



Rev. Dr. Alex Wimberly from the Corrymeela Community pictured with Fr. Hasson and Graham and Pamela McElhinney

A busy Forum programme in the second half of 2024 included a Good Relations Week event when Rev. Karen Campbell, ICC, led a workshop titled "From Every Nation? A Handbook for a congregation's journey from welcoming to belonging" This was pertinent given the summer events which had demonstrated a resurgence of racism.

At another event in September Mrs Laura Coey, Evangelical Alliance, shared on her work, as Church engagement co-ordinator. With the help of power-point handout she shared information on the origins and role of Evangelical Alliance in building relationships, representation and provision of resources.

The November Church Forum meeting was largely a planning meeting for Forum events and involvements for the coming months. On Remembrance Sunday representatives of the Churches Forum participated in the Wreath laying at the Cenotaph. Members also participated in the CONNECT Conference on Saturday 30 November.

In December the Forum was represented at the final celebration marking Sacred Heart Church 125th Anniversary. The Forum

encouraged collaboration on Christmas Services when the chairperson extended an invitation for all to join Sacred Heart at 9.00pm on Christmas Eve; St. Columba's at 11.30pm; and Omagh Methodist at 9.00am on Christmas Morning.

In the new year the Omagh Churches Forum organised the Service for the week of prayer for Christian Unity, this year it was the turn of Omagh Methodist Church to host the event.

At the AGM in January Arthur Rainey from the Ulster Project and Daryl Simpson from Omagh Community Youth Choir were each given a cheque for £1000 (the result of donations at Fr. Kevin Mullin's celebration night earlier in the year.)

Church Forum co-chairs participated in the opening of St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Omagh.

Later in the spring a link was established with Corrymeela 60th Anniversary events when Rev. Dr. Alexander Wimberly, leader of Corrymeela was the speaker at the Forum Lenten lunch: his input was both encouraging and challenging as he shared his experiences of relationship building and his reflections on our context today and unfinished business. This event was very successful with approx. 60 in attendance.

In May Forum members visited the Strule Education Shared Campus site presently under development. Clergy did the blessing seeking protection for all using and working on the site. Throughout the year the Forum was involved in and encouraged by various 'Faith in Action' projects hosted by different Churches and especially - "School Uniform Give-away" and "Winter Coat Give-away".

Esther Millar.



Omagh Forum reps at Mass for Pope Francis
Esther Millar, Marie Conway, Father Hasson, Pamela McElhinney and Canon Derek Quinn

DUNGANNON AREA CHURCH FORUM



Tony Davidson, Denise Johnston, Kevin Donaghy and Ursula Mackle



Readers from St. Patrick's Academy and The Royal School Dungannon

In the September Forum meeting members reflected on what the Forum could do to promote inclusion in light of racist attacks during the summer. They made plans for a Forum Dec event to include diverse ethnic groups.

Later they held a series of 5 meetings entitled 'Explore beyond the door', exploring local Churches; these events were well-attended with participants learning more about traditions and theology in Churches they were unfamiliar with. This series helped more people gain a deeper understanding of Churches, theology and traditions and helped remove fear and lack of understanding of diverse traditions.

The annual breakfast which aims at engaging with people who are not members of the Forum was held in the Junction cafe, with speaker, Mandy Cavlin from St Vincent de Paul. She outlined the work of the organisation and how it is responding to families hit hardest by the increase in the

cost of living. In the discussion which followed some of those present shared information on how other Churches are meeting similar challenges and the shared learning was valued.

The business of the Forum AGM was conducted efficiently with new officers elected. The speaker was Rev. Karen Campbell introduced by Rev. Davidson. She talked about her work with the ICC and the Presbyterian Church including the 30 year anniversary of the Ceasefires, the project on lament with the Presbyterian Church, the Synodical Process with the Roman Catholic Church, developing healthy relationships with the 2 traditional communities as well as newcomer communities. Her talk stimulated a good discussion afterwards in which the acronym ARC. Awareness, Relationship, and Commitment were highlighted.

During Feb/March some Forum members engaged with Dr. McMaster's 7 week course in which participants from

different backgrounds together learnt about events from religious and political history in the middle East, events which have shaped identities and influenced attitudes in the present crisis.

Dungannon Area Church Forum held their annual "Praise not he Hill" on Sunday afternoon 22nd June. Ursula Mackle, the Chair, welcomed about 160 people, including Deputy Chair of MUDC Denise Johnston, to the event space on top of the Hill of the O'Neill. Rev. Tony Davidson introduced the theme, "Finding Home" using the book of Ruth. Matthew Topley, curate in St. Anne's, led the Prayers of Adoration. Lessons were read by pupils from St. Patrick's Academy and Dungannon Royal. Psalm 23 was read in English by Kathy Stephenson, in Tetum by Domingus, and in Irish by Maighread Martin. Suzan originally from Syria spoke about her experience of being a refugee, but positively finding a home now in Dungannon. The brightly dressed East Timorese choir impressed

all with their enthusiasm and sincerity singing two pieces one in English, and one in Tetum. Newmills Silver Band with Armagh Old Boys Band led all in singing, "How great thou art," "Amazing Grace, and "Be Thou my Vision." Dean Kevin Donaghy led the prayers of the Faithful. Kathy Stephenson from the Friend's Meeting House, Grange, thanked all for their attendance and participation. Most people remained afterward enjoying conversation, ice lollies, strawberries, and refreshments. Thanks to the MUDC for their help, and Tesco for their sponsorship of the refreshments.

A short act of remembrance took place at the Dungannon Workhouse Memorial Garden, South Tyrone Hospital, on Saturday 21st June We gathered to honour the memory of all who passed through the Dungannon Workhouse, especially the many who are buried on this site in unmarked graves.

Rev. Tony Davidson.

BALLYMENA CHURCH MEMBERS FORUM:

Our 2024/25 programme started in September with the 2024 AGM on Monday evening 23rd. We were delighted to have Eileen again to oversee our elections with her late

husband Tommy in attendance. Will Leitch, broadcaster and podcaster, was our guest speaker. His talk, 'In Your Mind's Eye' drew on his career as a journalist and

reporter on local, national, and international affairs and the challenges of communicating effectively solely by audio. Will currently works in a voluntary capacity with Commission

Christian Radio to which voluntary donations were given at the end of the evening.

The Very Rev. Dr. Norman Hamilton OBE, who is one of



BCMF Committee Members Angela, Jennifer, Canon Stuart and Rev. Norman with Bishop Sarah.



Viaduct Walk Randalstown

our committee members, led four public 'Conversations' on the evenings of Monday 21st October, 18th November, 3rd February, and 24th March. Our venues were the Minor Hall St. Patrick's Parish Church, Ballymena Methodist Church 'Kitchen Hub', and All Saints Parish Centre. (These were the first occasions for us to use the beautiful newly-opened space that is the 'Kitchen Hub' where we were warmly welcomed by Reverend Ruth Patterson and members of her congregation). Norman chose to focus thoughts and discussion on the NI Programme for Government: (1) A Christian Response to the Draft Programme for Government;(2) What might Better Government Look Like? ;(3) The Many Faces of Poverty; (4)The Programme for Government. Each talk attracted an audience of around fifteen people and some lively debate. We were interested and pleased to see some participants attending our events for the first time as well as other long-term and regular supporters.

We held our annual interdenominational Advent lunchtime services on Thursdays 28th November, and 5th, 12th and 19th December in All Saints Church, West Church, Ballymena Methodist Church and St. Patrick's Parish Church, respectively.

The delightful Dunclug Primary School choir joined us again in St. Patrick's Church.

Our Advent Art Installation went on display in The Venue, a town centre Christian drop-in centre.

On Thursday evening 30th January 2025, our committee met with four of our 5 North Antrim MLAs and local senior clergy. We offered a light supper before the start of the meeting. We had asked them to speak about their journey into politics, the most pressing issues they were currently dealing with and how we as a Forum might support them. Committee members and clergy were in 'listening mode' and we thought the meeting highly informative and constructive. The housing crisis and cost of living were high on MLAs lists and requests for prayerful support and greater interest from clergy and congregations was mentioned by all of them.

The Committee invited our member and good friend Bishop Sarah Groves of the Moravian Church to join us at our meeting on 2nd June. We paid tribute to her ministry in Gracehill from which she retired at the end of June 2025 and presented her with a floral arrangement and card. We had of course a cup of tea and a wonderful carrot cake

made by our Treasurer and 'master baker,' Angela.

For our annual 'summer walk' this year, we went to the neighbouring village of Randalstown. The walk was organised by our friend Mrs Christine Doherty and hosted by Canon John Forsythe and members of Saint MacNissi's Parish Council. Tour Guide, Margaret, with environmentalist, James, led us on a remarkably interesting and entertaining circular route from the Parish Centre, over and alongside the River Maine, through the town centre and back over the viaduct which once carried the rail line from Cookstown to Belfast. The viaduct has been restored and transformed in recent years with beautiful creative planting largely done and now maintained by members of the town community. We were there on an evening of the annual Randalstown Arches

Festival so enjoyed additional entertainment.

We were represented wherever possible and appropriate at other interdenominational community events, for example: Mayor's Christmas Carol Singing in Town Centre and Musical Interlude in The Braid Centre, Service in St. Patrick's Parish Church to mark Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Chairperson and other members attended a 'Welcome to the Table' invitation meeting organised in June by the Irish Council of Churches on the theme of Reconciliation as a part response to the most recent riots in Ballymena and other towns. Office bearers also attended as available appropriate information events e.g. Community Fund Committee met as usual 1st Monday of each month.

Jennifer McLernon, Chairperson BCMF.



Bishop Sarah receiving a floral arrangement from Jennifer

FERMANAGH CHURCHES FORUM

Fermanagh Churches Forum hosted their annual **Good Relations Week Conference** on Thursday 19th September 2024 in the Bridge Centre, Presbyterian Church, Enniskillen.

This intergenerational conference, supported by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, explored the theme of Building CommUNITY. Rev. Greg Alexander, Darling Street Methodist Church, facilitated the event which was attended by senior pupils from Enniskillen's post primary schools along with their teachers.



Rev. Alexander addressing Enniskillen 6th formers

Following an engaging talk by Rev. Alexander, during which he shared anecdotes about his experience of cross community relations in Cork, pupils were given the opportunity to discuss the topic in groups. The positive feedback highlighted their engagement with the issues raised by Rev. Alexander, and their awareness of shared common ground but also the challenges facing them as young people today.

Our annual Study Day, again supported by our local District Council, took place on Saturday 21st September. Members and friends travelled to Armagh and after a welcome morning coffee enjoyed a very informative guided tour of Saint Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral. We then enjoyed lunch in an adjoining Cathedral premise kindly made available to us before travelling over to Saint Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral where another informative tour was enjoyed. En route home we stopped off at The Linen Green for coffee and a little retail therapy.

The theme for our Autumn Seminars, held over four weeks in the Presbyterian Bridge Centre, Enniskillen was **Understanding the Past to Embrace the Future**.

David Bolton (former Director of Community Care, Founder & Director, Centre for Trauma and Transformation) opened our series with a talk entitled 'Understanding the pain of the past as part of the journey to Reconciliation' and the following week presented the film *The Quiet Shuffling of Feet*.

Rev. Karen Campbell, (Good Relations Officer, Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter-Church Meeting) continued the series with her talk entitled '**Racism: a New Challenge**' and completed the series the following week by facilitating open questions from the audience to a panel comprising local clergy and lay Church workers.

St. Michael's Parish Church, Enniskillen hosted the annual **Christian Unity Service** on Thursday 23rd January 2025, during Christian Unity Week. The prayers and reflections for this service were provided by a monastic community of brothers and sisters in Bose, northern Italy. Our service celebrated the 1,700 years of the Nicene Creed, which was recited by the congregation whilst candles were lit symbolising the sharing of the light of Christ.

Dr. Gary Carville, Clogher

Diocesan Communications Officer – he has recently been ordained to the permanent diaconate - preached the sermon. Bible readings and prayers of early Christian writers were read by Rt Rev. Mgr Peter O'Reilly, Rev. Greg Alexander, Rev. Steve Kennedy, Dr. Ronald Brown and The Very Rev. Kenneth Hall and by pupils from Mount Lourdes, St. Franchea's College, Enniskillen Royal School, St. Michael's College, Erne Integrated College and St. Joseph's College.

Other pupils participated in welcoming the congregation and in ceremonial parts of the service. There was a free will offering for local food banks and a delicious supper concluded our service.

Our annual **Lenten lunches and reflections** took place on four Wednesdays prior to Easter. The theme was **Easter Reflections** and the refecton was given by a speaker from each of the four hosting Churches, sharing what this special time meant to them. A recurring theme emerging from the reflections was on the important role played by women in the Easter story.

On Easter Sunday morning members and friends shared

in a **Dawn Service** at Portora, Enniskillen, hosted by Rev. Steve Kennedy, Enniskillen Presbyterian Church and on 21st May shared in the annual **Lough Derg Day of Friendship and Prayer**. The Very Rev. Harold Good, former President of the Methodist Church in Ireland and Director of the Corrymeela Centre for Peace and Reconciliation was the invited speaker.

The Connect Conference was held in Belfast on 21st June 2025. Dr. Johnston McMaster's address was entitled **1925 The Boundary Commission and the Border. 2025 The end of the Politicised God and Religious Nationalism**.

In concluding this report, the members and friends of Fermanagh Churches Forum extend to Mrs Eileen Gallagher our deepest sympathy and our prayers as she mourns the death of her husband Tommy. As we now look forward to planning for the autumn season we also want to acknowledge her guidance and tireless work in arranging our meetings, providing information and keeping us informed of upcoming events.

Janet Cross and Thomas Maguire.

COOKSTOWN AND DISTRICT INTER CHURCH FORUM NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER 2024 – JUNE 2025



Cookstown Forum members explore shared history on study trip in North Donegal

Cookstown and District Inter Church Forum enjoyed a varied programme of speakers, social occasions and a trip to Donegal. We continued to meet in Gortalowry House, Cookstown for the majority of the meetings.

To start off the 2024/2025 programme Malachy, our Deputy chairman, stepped in at short notice for the September meeting when the speaker was unable to come. He gave a detailed and interesting presentation on the environment and climate change and its effects on our planet.

In October Rev. Karen Campbell was the speaker and she is a Presbyterian minister who has been appointed to the Irish Council of Churches as a Good Relations Officer. She has worked abroad in South Africa and in the USA as well as in Northern Ireland. Karen told us about her work.

Several members of the Forum attended the annual Service of Remembrance at the cenotaph in Cookstown and a wreath was laid on behalf of the group. The speaker at the November meeting was Father Aelred Magee who is the Superior

of Our Lady of Bethlehem Cistercian Monastery, Portglenone. He was a very engaging speaker as he told us about his journey in life from musician and teacher to where he is today. The annual Community Carol Service took place on the Thursday evening before Christmas with the Christmas Story being told through Bible readings and Carol singing, accompanied by musicians from local Silver Bands. This was followed by festive supper in Bob and Bert's and lots of fellowship was enjoyed within the group.

Rev. David Cupples was the guest speaker for the January meeting. David is a retired Presbyterian minister who was in Enniskillen Presbyterian Church during the difficult time after the 1987 bomb. During a sabbatical in 2017 he walked the Camino in Northern Spain. His presentation was centred around various aspects of the walk, his bible study during it and how God spoke to him through it.

The Forum Annual dinner was held in the Braeside Restaurant, Cookstown on Friday 8th February at 7pm. We enjoyed a delicious carvery

meal followed by musical entertainment with Niall Patterson when we all had the opportunity to sing along. This is always an opportunity for lots of fellowship, friendship and fun over a meal. This year we marked the upcoming retirement of a very good friend and supporter of the forum. Canon Norman Porteus was rector of Derryloran Church of Ireland in Cookstown for 35 years and was a founder member of the Cookstown Clergy Forum and subsequently the Cookstown and District Inter Church Forum. Norman could be relied upon for advice, doing prayers, supporting our events and much more and we wish him and his wife, Janet, a long and happy retirement. Canon Drew Dawson has also retired as curate in Derryloran and we marked that also. Thankfully he is still in the area and, when time permits, is willing to support the group.

Rev. Cheryl Bruce was the speaker in March. She is a former teacher and is now the Methodist Minister in Cookstown and Magherafelt. We are pleased to welcome Cheryl into the Forum and she has been a great asset to us. Cheryl told us about her journey under the heading of 'My Life,

My Faith, my Work' and since then she has become an enthusiastic supporter of the Forum. In April we undertook a 2 day trip to Donegal. We enjoyed some lovely sunny weather as we visited several places on the Inishowen Peninsula. This included St. Patrick's Cross and the Marigold Stone near Cardonnagh, The Famine Village near Ballyliffen, the Amazing Grace Viewpoint just outside Buncrana, Fort Dunree and Wild Ireland. The guides were excellent at the various places and we had a few stops for coffee and good food. I'm sorry to say that since then the Famine Village had a fire and there has been quite a lot of damage but I understand that the thatched cottages are intact.

The annual AGM was held in May when we were pleased to welcome back to our midst two founder members of the Cookstown Clergy Forum, Rev. Dr. Isaac Thompson and Revd Father Gerry Tremmer. They were loyal supporters of the Inter Church Forum and, working together with others, made a huge contribution to community relations in Cookstown. They spoke about their time in Cookstown and the successes

CHURCH FORA NEWSLETTER

and the challenges which they encountered.

The annual BBQ brought the events to a close for the 2024/25 programme. This was held in Lissan House on a balmy evening in June when

we had a good attendance of members. The food was provided by Nicola Rea from Roast and Roux and we enjoyed a variety of the usual BBQ fare with delicious salads and breads and finished off with a selection of desserts. A few

members of the group provided some light entertainment to bring the evening to a close.

We have enjoyed a reasonably successful year but would like to welcome some younger members and also members

of the local clergy. Sadly, the Mid Ulster Clergy Forum has closed and we miss the input received from them.

NEWRY DISTRICT INTER - CHURCH FORUM 2024-2025

We are grateful for Gladys Thompson's return to the Committee as Co-Chair with Lorraine Coleman. We are fortunate to benefit from their wisdom and different experiences.

We began our activities with an historical tour of St. Patrick's Graveyard led by local historian Anthony Russell. We began inside the Church and for many local people it was their first time inside and some went up into the Bell Tower.

In October we had a talk by Irish speaker and teacher Sean McClorey on Irish place names. We were again reminded of our shared history.

Flourish N.I. who support trafficked people gave us an insight into their work and how we can be of practical help. Some members are already involved in outreach to people from other lands but we didn't realise the extent of the problem.

We were very pleased with the attendance in January at the Christian Unity Week service in the Methodist church. It was great to have both clergy and lay people from various denominations.

Some members were privileged to attend the 7 week course on Zoom led by Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster. All felt they gained a better understanding of the situation

in the Middle East. In February Deirdre Spear-White from the Ulster-Scots Association showed us how the dialect has influenced the language of all communities here. We are unaware of how much we are using Ulster Scots phrases in everyday conversation.

Father George a former Physicist and now a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church described his fascinating faith journey. He has written a semi biographical novel 'The Atomic Jesus'. We also discovered that there are several Russian Orthodox communities on these islands including in the Isle of Man.

To coincide with V.E. Day we had a Celebration of Peace Day including the dress/ music of the period. Some members old enough to remember that time, described their experiences of the time including evacuation.

We concluded our activities with a coffee morning for Anti-Ageism week. I would like to thank the whole committee especially our Treasurer Marie McShane for all their hard work and commitment. We are also very grateful for the support from Eileen Gallagher and Helen Campbell.

Jeanette McConnell.

BALLYCASTLE CHURCH ACTION

Ballycastle Church Action have two main projects, Good Morning Ballycastle and Ballycastle Foodbank. These two projects are ongoing throughout the year, the first addressing the problem of isolation and loneliness and the second addressing food poverty. Both are examples of cross community Church projects reaching into the community to answer needs while building relationships On 25th October 2024 a Service of Thanksgiving was held for these two projects. The service was very well attended. We had the deputy Mayor of Causeway Coast and Glens, Diane Stirling present as well as other local dignitaries and MLA's. The collection taken at this service was split between two projects.

December saw the usual round of community Carol services where the clergy of the three main Churches all liaise so that there are not two Carol services happening on the same

evening. In January 2025 it was the turn of the Presbyterian Church to host the service for the Week of Prayer for Christian unity. These services go on a three-year cycle so that each denomination has a chance to host. The same applies to the World Day of Prayer as it also goes on the three-year cycle. Both events demonstrate Churches working together and are opportunities for close clergy cooperation and congregations building relationships.

Our Walk of Witness on Good Friday Morning commenced at Ballycastle Seafront with a short service and then the Cross was carried by the community from there to the Diamond (centre of town) where we had a final hymn, prayer and blessing. This event is a publicly visible demonstration of Churches and communities working together to mark key liturgical moments which inspire community cohesion and journeying together.

ENDURANCE INSPIRED BY HOPE – MIDPOINT REFLECTIONS ON CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND'S STRATEGIC PLAN

In 2025 we find ourselves at the midpoint of our 2023-2027 Strategic Plan. Here we share some reflections about the changing context and what we are learning in each of our five strategic priority areas.

This strategy was prepared at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic was prompting searching questions about the future, including for Churches. Just over two years later threats to global and peace and security are multiplying. The message of hope that Churches have to share is much-needed and a great

ISSUE 31 - SUMMER 2025

source of encouragement for many. At the same time, with increasing competition for people's attention in a fast-paced communications environment, it can be a challenge to reach people, making ecumenical cooperation more important than ever.

Strengthening ecumenical engagement in Britain and Ireland

The foundational nature of this first priority was evident as we were writing the strategy. In our initial analysis a recurring theme was the concern that there was perhaps insufficient investment in formation in relation to ecumenism, meaning that those in leadership had to be proactive in obtaining the knowledge and experience for themselves, resulting in missed opportunities. Our ecumenical reflections on the significance of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea have shown that not only is this kind of space for reflection and shared learning necessary, but it is also greatly valued when it is offered. What we've heard from participants in our meetings is that this kind of sharing helps us tell a better story about who we are as Christians in an increasingly diverse society where we may have to adjust our message to engage with those who don't have the kind of religious literacy that aligns with our experience.

Our working together makes sense in a context of increasing pressure on resources but, more importantly, it conveys a critical message about the value we place on these relationships. The work we have been able to do in partnership with the national ecumenical instruments, including the use of the ecumenical fund to allow for innovation and to support investment in strategic development, has been greatly valued by our members. We have a shared interest in expanding our networks to encourage more people with diverse backgrounds and skillsets to engage in this work.

One of the areas CTBI is best known for is the resourcing of ecumenical engagement around key moments in the Church calendar including the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and Racial Justice Sunday. In recent years we have been privileged to work with a range of partners to expand our offerings in this area and to use our Lenten resource as an opportunity to connect local groups with the work of CTBI. Internationally we are also finding it beneficial to create space for British-Irish dialogue and collaboration about our contribution to the European and wider international context. We are encouraged by the affirmation from our members of the significance they place on investment in relationships and will continue to build on this by being intentional in prioritising the time and space for reflection on why and how our ecumenical engagement matters.

Working together for mission and the common good

A common thread running through diverse strands of our work – from racial justice to interreligious dialogue – is the essentially missional nature of our ecumenical relations, with a central focus on what it means to share Christ in our communities today Our coming together to engage in collective reflection about the learning from the pandemic experience, notably in the context of the UK Government COVID-19 Inquiry, has highlighted the ways in which Churches can be of service to their communities at times of crisis. In seeking to extend this learning to the challenges facing communities today we are placing particular emphasis on solidarity, respectful listening and the promotion of dialogue.

Healing society's fractures: identities, borders and nationalities

A related theme is that of healing society's fractures. Under this strategic priority we place particular emphasis on the need for continued engagement with peace process that gave us the Good Friday Agreement and the extension of the learning from that experience into other areas of identity-based conflict. Through the ecumenical fund we have been able to make a contribution to the creation of a Good Relations Officer position with the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting and have been partnering with the national ecumenical instruments in Ireland to support grassroots peace-building efforts, as well as facilitating international learning exchange.

Our 2024 AGM had a particular focus on the Churches' role and responsibility for peace-building with speaker Dr. Maria Power. In February 2025 Dr. Power was also one of the contributors to a conference on The Church and the Far Right in which CTBI was a co-organiser. This event examined the challenges posed to communities by this broad movement that is labelled 'the Far Right', with perspectives from different sectors – including Church, academia, politics, policing and media – on how we can respond.

One important area of focus for CTBI is the promotion of the Church of Sanctuary movement. This has been an encouraging area of growth in recent years offering a response to these challenges that is community-based, deeply rooted in Christian theology and, from that foundation, offering welcome and hospitality to all.

Working for global peace and justice

We support our members in working to promote a vision for global peace and security that has climate justice, human rights and relationship-building at its heart. Having commissioned an independent review of the Climate Sunday initiative we are now working with the leadership of our Environmental Issues Network to support ecumenical engagement. In 2024 we were part of a successful joint initiative to raise awareness about banking and the financing of fossil fuel exploitation, which offers a helpful model for future engagement.

Promoting ethical and inclusive leadership

Ahead of the last General Elections for both the UK and Irish Governments CTBI joined with partners to support advocacy and engagement by local ecumenical groups. It was concerning to note the feedback about increasing concerns around issues like security of candidates and hate speech, as well as reluctance of some candidates to engage in debate, or of local authorities to provide a neutral venue. Under this strategic priority we place particular emphasis on the responsibility of the Church to model the kind of leadership we wish to see in the wider society, looking at our own failings in areas such as safeguard, women's leadership, and diversity and inclusion more broadly. We are being encouraged and challenged by the Children's Ministry Network and our developing Youth Network to think about how the perspectives of children and young people are represented and valued in our work.



Looking to the future

As we reflect on the extent of our progress and the challenges we have encountered at this point in our strategic plan we are encouraged by the continued relevance of the areas we have chosen to focus on together. The inter-connected nature of the different strands helps us to cover a broad area with a small staff team guided by highly experienced and committed

volunteers on the various networks, forums and advisory groups. We look forward to a constructive dialogue with our members about how we can build on this work and engage more people.

Dr. Nicola Brady.

ZOOM SEMINAR SERIES 2025-2026

LIVING FAITH IN TODAY'S WORLD: LIBERATION AND RECONCILIATION

In the second half of the twentieth century, theology or living faith found a new expression. It began in Latin America and was a theology of the people. It so happened that the majority of people in Latin America were poor and not surprisingly they proclaimed God's preferential option for the poor. The God of justice and life was concerned that all should flourish. An active, living theology developed around social justice, solidarity and peace or total flourishing. It was rooted in their experience and understanding of God as the God of justice and peace powerfully expressed through the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. In a world of political, economic and cultural injustice, or terrible inequalities, liberation theology became not only the living faith of Latin America, it travelled and today is found in North America, Africa and Asia. Protestant and Catholic developed their liberation theologies as living faith in their different contexts.

Today liberation theology and reconciliation are global, not just as living Christian theology, but has been developing in other faiths and religious traditions. Today there is also a Jewish Liberation theology and a Muslim Liberation theology. Common to all of these are social justice and the option for the poor and the flourishing of all peoples and the planet. This also means that peace and reconciliation are shared liberation theology themes.

Liberation theology is not something confined to head-level, something to which we give, as much theology in the past, intellectual assent. Liberation Theology is practice, doing, active, transformative of life, community, structures and systems and above all of peoples lives and the life of the planet.

In the course we will look at four expressions of Liberation theology, Christian(2), Jewish and Muslim, at what it means to immerse ourselves in the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, and look at the potential for an Irish theology of liberation and reconciliation. There is the potential to transform our faith in action and bring something transformative to human and planetary life.

1. What is a Theology of Liberation?
2. A Palestinian Christian Theology of Liberation and Reconciliation.
3. A Jewish Theology of Liberation.
4. A Muslim Theology of Liberation.
5. Recovering the Prophetic Tradition and Imagination.
6. Towards an Irish Theology of Liberation and Reconciliation.



Church Fora Project part
financed by the
Community Relations Council.

CONTACT DETAILS

Irish School of Ecumenics, Edgehill College, 9 Lennoxvale Avenue, Belfast BT95BY.
(T) +44 (0)28 90775010 (E) eccgallagher@yahoo.co.uk | helen.campbell001@outlook.com