

CONNOR

connections

Hitting
the right
notes!
Meet Bello Duo
pages 4-5





Kayden takes on his mentor at drafts.

Emotional support for P7 children

Kayden missed playing football with his teammates during lockdown. Afton missed seeing her friends at school.

For children everywhere, the pandemic and closure of schools have had a major impact, and for children in primary seven facing the challenge of a move to secondary education, it has been particularly hard.

Transforming Lives for Good (TLG) is a project that supports young people in their school setting, helping them to mature emotionally and cope with the learning environment.

Connect Base, the North Belfast Centre of Mission, has been offering TLG in the Greater Shankill area since 2017. The practical work was halted due to Covid-19, but now they are running a new transition project, using TLG, which focuses on helping children prepare to leave primary school and supporting them in the move to secondary school.

A number of volunteer mentors have been trained to offer TLG in Malvern Primary School in north Belfast. Each coach meets the same child for an hour a week, supporting them using craft projects and other resources. The mentors will then join the children in September in their new school, and will also come together with the kids for two summer activity days.

Afton is getting to know her mentor, Heather Carson, from the Parish of St Stephen and St Michael and St Luke in Lower Shankill. As she decorates her new



Mentor Heather Carson and Afton using some of the TLG resources.

journal with colourful stickers, Afton says she is hoping to go to the Girls' Model Secondary School. Looking back on lockdown, she says: "I missed my friends and I missed stuff I do at school that I can't do at home, like the arts and crafts.

"I am good at art, and I like make-up, so I think I would like to be a make-up artist when I am older," she adds. She and Heather are about to begin Afton's chosen project which, reflecting her love of art, is entitled 'Brilliant Beads.'

"We will be looking at colours, textures, patterns and the shapes and sizes of the beads," explains Heather. "It gives us opportunity to chat."

The focus of TLG is emotional therapy, and the resources provided to each mentor include an 'Emotional First Aid Journal' and a 'Friendship' book. The arts and crafts are designed to encourage children

to speak freely about their thoughts and any issues or worries they might have, and also to explore all the positive things they experience.

"We are looking at how the children feel to be back in school and how they are re-establishing their friends," Heather says. "We talk about their week, their emotions and how they feel. If there is a particular issue, we draw it out and see why it has happened and how we can make it better."

The mentors also have regular contact with teachers and parents.

In the next-door classroom, a battle of nerves is taking place, as TLG mentor Harris Crothers takes on P7 pupil Kayden in a tense game of drafts. A parishioner of St John's, Ballyclare, Harris signed up for TLG having retired from the building trade.

"I was born just off Agnes Street and I am concerned about the lack of educational activities in this area," he says. "If I can only help one person, it will make a difference."

He pauses to make a move on the board, Kayden watching intently. Kayden is hoping to go to Hazelbank College next September. "Maths is my best subject," he says, though he seems to be pretty good at drafts too! Lockdown meant Kayden couldn't get out and play his beloved football with his friends, but he is now back training with Shankill Juniors.

"I hope I can be some help to him in the move up to big school," says Harris.

The Rev Linda Cronin, rector of Glenavy Parish, is also a TLG mentor in Malvern Primary School. "I decided to train for TLG as I have had previous experience in this area," Linda explains. "I felt able to give an hour to one child per week and I was interested in this ministry and how it may prove useful in the future in my own parish.

"At my first one-to-one session, we had a good time getting to know each other and having fun, as well as deciding that next time we will be making salt dough!"

Karen Webb, Lead Evangelist at Connect Base, said: "We are aware that many more children in this area will be struggling with anxiety, emotional distress and will have fallen behind in learning. The TLG training for coaches/mentors is exceptional and no coach feels ill prepared going into a session with a child.

"We would love to be able to go into more schools with this wonderful programme, but we need more people prepared to train as a TLG mentor."

For more information, please contact Karen at karen.webb@churcharmy.org.

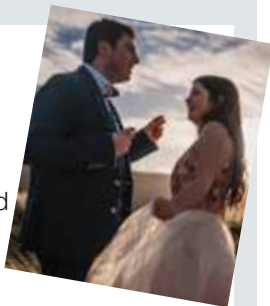
Summer 2021

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Cover photo:


Bello Duo - The voices of Antrim parishioners Victoria McClements and Conor Taggart have brought hope to many during the pandemic. Picture: Shane Doyle




Please contact us if you would like to contribute to the next issue of 'Connor Connections.'

Karen Bushby,
Connor Diocesan
Communications Officer,
Church of Ireland House,
61-67 Donegall Street,
Belfast, BT1 2QH

Tel: 028 9082 8874
Mob: 07766 103880
Email: dco@connordiocese.org

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A joy to meet for worship again



What a joy it has been over the last number of weeks to be able to meet for worship together!

I have been blessed to join a number of congregations since our churches re-opened at Easter and I have thoroughly enjoyed each of those services.

They have been conducted carefully, cautiously, still observing the necessary restrictions, and we haven't been able to join together in all the things that we normally do in church. Nonetheless, meeting in person with other church members to offer our praises to Almighty God has been a wonderful gift.

Gradually, other aspects of our church life, its organisations and opportunities for midweek meetings, will resume too. In the meantime, we continue to make use of the technology to help us carry on the mission of the Church.

This year, Diocesan Synod meets online for the first time on June 24, thanks to the help of our diocesan team. At the Synod, I'm looking forward to introducing a new member of that team - Victoria Jackson, who has been appointed Children's Ministry Officer in Connor Diocese.

Some of our parishes will already know Victoria from her previous work with the Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade.

She brings a wealth of experience and great enthusiasm for supporting parishes in their work amongst children of primary school age.

She and our wonderful Youth Officer, Christina Baillie, will be a source of help and advice to parishes as they resume work amongst the younger members of the congregations.

Our return to meeting in-person has been careful and responsible, but naturally some are still cautious, perhaps waiting until the Government's vaccination programme is more fully implemented before returning. Each of us naturally needs to look at our own particular circumstances as we think about going back to church.

But let me echo the words of Hebrews 10:25 as I encourage you 'not to neglect our meeting together... but encourage one another.' Each one of you is a vital part of your parish family - without you, something is missing!

I look forward to meeting with you in your parish church, soon.

Yours aye,

+George

Clem celebrates his 100th birthday



Many congratulations to Clem Shaw, a parishioner of St Thomas' Church, Belfast, who was 100-years-young on June 2. Thanks to the easing of restrictions, the Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison, was able to join Clem for a socially-distanced birthday party.

Bello Duo shines a light in the darkness

When the world went into lockdown, a young couple whose musical careers were literally floored by the pandemic used their amazing talent to brighten the lives of others.

The result was the birth of Bello Duo, and through their music, Antrim parishioners Victoria McClements and Conor Taggart have brought joy and hope to thousands of people worldwide.

Victoria, 20, suffers from a rare and life-threatening illness, and during the first Covid-19 lockdown last year was shielding at her grandparents' home in Kells, as her mum Audrey, parish administrator in All Saints', Antrim, is also a key worker.

Seated in her grandparents' summer house, a refreshing breeze blowing through the open doors, Victoria and Conor share their inspirational story.

Victoria is a former pupil of Antrim Grammar School. "I had planned a gap year after my A Levels. I always wanted to do music, but it is a difficult profession to get into," she says. A member of Belfast School of Performing Arts, Belfast Operatic Society and other local theatre groups, Victoria is professionally trained in musical theatre. Her talent earned her a place on the Diamond Choir which sang in St Paul's Cathedral to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's Diamond Jubilee back in 2012.

In 2019, she got the coveted role of Kim in the Grand Opera House youth production of 'Miss Saigon.' "It is one of my favourite musicals and I always wanted to play the part of Kim," she says. "I worked really hard at it and I got the role. It was the best show I have ever done. It was great to get my name out in the musical theatre world in Northern Ireland."

Victoria met Conor when she started working with his singing waiter company, Singers Secreto, in October 2019, singing primarily at weddings. Friendship blossomed into romance. But with lockdown the following March, functions were cancelled. This was devastating for Conor and the 180 Singers Secreto staff he employs in Ireland.

The 24-year-old has a degree in Business and IT from Queen's University Belfast, and set up his company a couple of years before the pandemic hit. The concept is that the nervous waiter serving guests at a function has a catastrophic fall and then



Victoria and Conor in Victoria's grandparents' garden in Kells, where Bello Duo first came about.

surprises everyone by bursting into song. With the pandemic, their work dried up.

"We have done a few virtual events, for example with comedian Paddy Raff, but apart from that, it has been completely dead," Conor says. "Financially this past year has been very difficult."

Conor is now campaigning to have the ban on live music lifted in Northern Ireland so Singers Secreto can get back in business.

Bello Duo was formed during the lockdown of spring 2020. "I was shielding with my grandparents, and each Thursday we would go out and clap for carers," Victoria explains. "A neighbour asked us to sing, so we agreed to do a song. It was quite petrifying!"

'When you are feeling down and angry, singing really releases your emotions.'

"There is something a bit random about doing it on the doorstep," Conor adds. "You feel as if someone is going to shout 'turn that noise down!'"

In fact the opposite happened. As Conor and Victoria sang uplifting numbers like 'The Prayer,' and 'You Raise Me Up,' people shared videos on social media.

"We shared our singing on Facebook Live, and each week we found more and more people were tuning in and writing lovely

comments," Victoria recalls. "One person wrote: 'You are the highlight of my week.' We were getting around 250,000 views each week!"

"People from church were very supportive, especially those older people who couldn't get out because they were shielding. We included some upbeat music and literally had people dancing in the street!"

There were benefits all round, Conor says. "It was a lovely thing to do and was great for our mental health after going from two or three gigs a week to literally nothing. Singing is a great way to express yourself and get things out."

Their biggest supporters were Victoria's grandparents, John and Eleanor Howard, who shared photos of the neighbours dancing, organised music, and even agreed to be interviewed for 'Nolan Live.'

Last December, with an easing of restrictions, Victoria and Conor took to busking on the streets of Belfast. "We didn't earn a lot, but we decided we wanted to make the most of it, so we booked a recording studio and put some of the songs we had sung on the doorsteps onto an album. We figured our families might buy it," Conor explains.

They entitled the album 'Out of the Darkness.' "It features songs that had given people a glint of light at a time when we thought we were coming out of lockdown," Victoria says.

A promo video was the next step, and for this, the couple worked with Shane Doyle of D6 Photo/Cinema. It was filmed on the north Antrim coast last December.

"It was a long and freezing day," Victoria recalls laughing. "I was up at 4am and we started filming at 6am. I was wearing a sleeveless dress, shivering, my heels sinking into the ground. We filmed 'The Prayer' on the beach with candles set on the rocks, but the tide came in and almost washed them away."

At times the temperature dropped to -2 degrees. In the video, you can literally see their breath as Victoria and Conor sing.

But the stunning location inspired the couple to record and film their own version of 'Danny Boy,' a move that was to catapult them onto the international stage. "Once the video came out, the album really took off," recalls Conor. Before they knew it, their version of the famous song was number one in the vocal download chart in South Africa (pushing Josh Grogan into second slot and Frank Sinatra into number three). At the same time, it was number four in the UK vocal chart, despite



Victoria and Conor pictured while recording the video for their album 'Out of the Darkness' on a freezing December day on the north Antrim coast. Picture by Shane Doyle.

competition from the likes of Ed Sheeran.

"Lots of magazines picked up the story and we have been featured around the world - some articles we can't even read because they are in languages like Danish," Victoria laughs. As a result, album sales in countries like the USA and Australia have rocketed. As well as local media, they have had their own four-week show on London FM, and starred in a St Patrick's Day broadcast with the New York-based Catholic Faith Network.

The couple are now working on writing their own songs, and while they have big dreams for their future, they are also realistic. "When I sing at weddings, I sing what people want to hear," says Conor. "Sometimes I try and sound like Bublé or Sinatra, but singing as Bello Duo helps me find Conor's voice.

"I would love to do a live theatre tour. I hope that when the world reopens there will be opportunities for Bello Duo. But you have to be the person who is willing to be the waiter who falls on the floor and the next night sings to a theatre full of 500 people."

Victoria agrees: "It doesn't matter if we are singing to 10 people or 1,000 people, we give it our all."

Like Victoria, Conor has a solid background in musical theatre, having

secured a last-minute seat at the London production of 'Les Misérables' when he was just 10. He has since performed in 'Les Misérables' five times, playing the lead role of Jean Valjean three times.

While Victoria dreams of singing as Bello Duo on big stages, her achievements to date are amazing as she has Addison's disease, a rare disorder of the adrenal glands which affects just one in 100,000 people. She is now dependent on steroids.

"It is something I don't let get in the way as such. I'm very motivated," she says. "If I set my mind on something I will achieve it. I have bad days, but I just try and get on with it. If I am really sick and vomiting or have broken a bone, I need to have an emergency injection within half an hour to ensure I don't have adrenal crisis. It has just happened once, but my mum took me straight to hospital."

Victoria was diagnosed with Addison's the day after her 12th birthday. "It is very rare, I was the only female in Northern Ireland to have it at the time." Conor interjects to point out that Victoria is already famous in the world of medical text books!

"I live with it. I have learned to read my own body and don't try to push myself too far," Victoria says. "I stopped playing hockey because of the risk of injury. That is what turned me to music. When you are feeling down and angry, singing really releases

your emotions."

Victoria remembers clearly those early days before her illness was diagnosed. She had no energy, was frequently vomiting, lost weight and her skin became darker. "I lost a crazy amount of weight, you could count every bone in my spine. The only thing I craved was salt and vinegar crisps - with Addison's you crave salt.

"When I couldn't eat or drink or even keep water down and was crawling to the bathroom to be sick, then falling asleep on the bathroom floor, my mum took me to A&E." In hospital, Victoria was diagnosed with Addison's disease. "They started me on medication and a few days later I had perked up. Visitors were allowed to bring me anything I wanted to eat, which was great!" she recalls.

Victoria's courage at the time made an impact on those she met. "The nurses were really good," she says with a smile. "One of them found us on social media, performing on the doorstep as Bello Duo, and sent a lovely message. I am very lucky."

Lucky, talented, dedicated and brave. Victoria and Conor wave goodbye from the doorstep that launched their blossoming career, and Conor heads inside to take a call as part of his ongoing campaign to allow live music to return for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Streetreach to return in 2022

Due to the pandemic, Connor Youth Council decided to postpone this year's Streetreach until 2022.

Diocesan Youth Officer Christina Baillie said: "Streetreach is a very special event in the Connor Youth calendar. While Covid-19 restrictions are easing, we believe that in early July we will not be in a place to deliver the event as we would wish. Therefore, we have chosen to postpone Streetreach to 2022. We want to be in a place where we can truly bless the community of Mossley Parish and provide a great experience for each leader and young person who takes part.

"In addition, we sadly won't have our friends from Christ In Youth visiting in 2021, so are hoping that this can resume in 2022 and deeply bless our time."

Christina said Engage Connor Youth did not envisage running Streetreach Online as in 2020, but is still hoping to mark the event in some way this summer.

Christina speaks at major conference

Christina Baillie, Diocesan Youth Officer, made a presentation on research she did for a recent Master's Degree at the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry (IASYM) Regional European Conference on April 8.

This had been due to take place in Helsinki, Finland, but due to Covid-19 was rescheduled to an online conference.

Christina said: "The IASYM academic community are marked by their encouragement and welcome. It truly did resemble the values of youth ministry!"

Christina's presentation summarised the research she had completed as part of her Master's at Belfast Bible College which focused on how young people connected their faith and understanding of God to the difficulty they faced in life.

Summer Madness

Summer Madness is planning to run a three-day, non-residential event from July 2-4 at the Ulster University in Coleraine. Youth groups can sign up to attend one or all days and it will cost £12.50 for a day ticket. A refund will be given if the event cannot take place.

Visit the Summer Madness app: www.madapps.uk/sm/app.



Here comes summer!

Summer is coming and with the easing of restrictions our young people are cautiously coming out of their Covid-19 enforced hibernation. We find out how the summer will look in some of our parishes.

The Church of the Good Shepherd, Monkstown

As the summer comes, our hope is that we will be able to gather in ways that we haven't in the last year and that our children and young people will know that they are loved and cared for by God and their church family. In these spaces as we share together the difficulties of these months will be eased and we will all start to feel more connected again.

Rev Ruth Patterson

United Parish of Templepatrick & Donegore

Our youth fellowship of eight young people started meeting on Sunday nights in the vicarage for a short time of food, chat and games. We watch a Christian video series as part of preparation for four of them getting confirmed. Unusually we are planning to have a periodic social event over the next few months - starting with go-karting and a carry-out. We hope to keep the momentum going as we build fellowship, so when we return to more normal youth fellowship in the autumn, we are in a better place to think of spiritual things.

We felt that we needed to meet face-to-face as the young people are tired of Zoom chats, and with schools and Education Authority youth clubs being open 'for business,' we should be too. It has been a most difficult year for young people mentally and spiritually and so regaining real contact is a top priority for our parish.

Rev Jeremy Mould

St Brigid's, Parish of Mallusk

After this season of lockdown, it's so important that we meet the needs of our young people for social interaction with games and fellowship nights, and also for outreach. Through Street Pastors, I have found there is a willingness to engage like

never before from young people out on the streets. So be prayerful and be bold.

Peter Kirch, Youth Leader

Grouped Parishes of Ahoghill and Portglenone

We kept our online Kidzone going throughout last summer and up until the end of May, when we ended with a Children's Day Service that had good involvement in spite of restrictions.

Kidzone is now on a break until September, when hopefully we will have the children back in-person in the parish hall. We will have some contact with them over the summer, having given them sunflower seeds in their Children's Day gifts and tasked them to get growing - there will be a prize for the tallest flower in late August.

Our Youth Fellowship was a harder slog and meeting together on Zoom worked well for a while, but we are holding off getting together again until September. We really feel we need to see each other in-person with minimal restrictions and we hope that will be possible after the summer.

Confirmation Classes have been happening online - we have 16 candidates (eight teenagers and eight adults), with the Confirmation service taking place in mid-June.

Rev Dennis Christie

Church of the Resurrection / The Hub Belfast

With more opportunities for in-person youth ministry, I'm really looking forward to reconnecting with young people and rebuilding relationships in that way. I'm hoping that this summer we'll be able to create opportunities for lots of fun and community, but also to create safe spaces for young people to feel heard and valued and to process this past year together.

Amy Atwell, Youth Leader



Victoria Jackson, former Chief Executive Officer of the Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade, has taken up her role of Children's Ministry Development Officer for Connor Diocese.

Victoria a familiar face in the diocese

Victoria Jackson, former Chief Executive Officer of the Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade (CLCGB), takes up her new role as Children's Ministry Development Officer for Connor Diocese during June.

Victoria is a familiar face in the diocese, having supported many diocesan and parish events organised by the previous Children's Officer, Jill Hamilton.

She is married to Paul, and grew up in Hollywood, Co Down, where she was a member of Hollywood Baptist Church.

A past pupil of Sullivan Upper Grammar School, Victoria has a Degree in Human Nutrition and a Master's in Health Promotion, both from the University of Ulster.

She was appointed Development Officer with the CLCGB in 2014 and became the organisation's Chief Executive Officer in 2019. During her time with CLCGB, the organisation opened nine new CLCGB groups. Victoria also wrote and introduced a new Scripture course and introduced Junior Leaders' Training for members aged 15-18 so they could go on to be adult leaders.

"Over the years, the organisation has grown and we have done a lot more competitions, events and online activities," Victoria said. "We now have 1,000 members in Northern Ireland."

Victoria's faith developed from an early age, and when she finished university, she sensed God calling her to work for him

full-time. The job of Development Officer with CLCGB was advertised soon after she graduated.

'I love working with children... and telling them about God'

"God truly does know us better than we know ourselves, He knew that I would love this job and this organisation, that the people in it would become like family to me and that the role would suit me so well," she said of the CLCGB.

"We have the most amazing volunteers, who are very dedicated and inspiring to work with. I love working with children all around Northern Ireland and telling them about God, and there are so many opportunities to do that in churches and Brigade groups."

Victoria has been looking forward to the move to Connor Diocese. "I am excited about building on the amazing work that Jill has done," she said. "I am looking forward to being part of the diocesan team and to getting to know the volunteers and leaders and see what they need and go about meeting these needs."

"Children's mental health has been impacted over the last year, and we can help parents and leaders to support their children.

"I am excited about the opportunities that opening up from lockdown will bring. Having a blank slate will provide opportunities for change and for doing things differently. It will be good to support churches and help them bring in new volunteers."

Victoria and Paul are members of Dundonald Elim Church, where Victoria is in the worship team. She loves music, travelling and dogs.

The Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison, said he was 'delighted' that Victoria had accepted the invitation to become Children's Ministry Officer.

"I look forward to having her join the team of staff who serve the parishes of Connor Diocese," Bishop George said. "Victoria is no stranger to the diocese, particularly through her work over the last six years leading the work of the Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade in the Church of Ireland.

"She brings a wealth of skills and resources to her new role and will be a blessing to those involved in the important ministry of making Jesus Christ known amongst the children of our parishes."

All Aboard year three now available

Material for year three of Connor's All Aboard Children's Ministry Programme is now available on the diocesan website www.connor.anglican.org.

All Aboard is a three-year Bible-based teaching programme suitable for children aged four to 11. Each year is made up of 36 sessions. The programme was produced by Jill Hamilton, former Connor Children's Project Development Officer.

The programme is jam-packed with interactive and engaging activities to help teach Bible stories in a fun, interactive way. It comes with lots of ideas for storytelling and is designed to meet the needs of a wide range of abilities.

The All Aboard programme is available free to leaders in Connor Diocese. For those unable to download the programme, printed copies are available from Diocesan Office in Church House. Please contact lorraineogilby@connordiocese.org to arrange a time to collect these.

Duke of Edinburgh was 'great character'

The death of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh on April 9 prompted the Very Rev John Bond, former Dean of Connor, to revisit his personal 'Book of Memories.'

Dean Bond met the Duke on several occasions, including at a Garden Party in Hillsborough Castle in June 2014 (below).



Dean Bond, who also met the Duke during a separate visit to Armagh, attended an In Service Course at Windsor for a month, living at Windsor Castle. These courses were set up by the Duke of Edinburgh for the clergy and the caring professions.

Dean Bond said: "I also represented the Church of Ireland at the opening Service of the General Synod of the Church of England in Westminster Abbey and later in Church House in 2015 in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh."

He added: "The Duke was a great character and will be sorely missed by Her Majesty the Queen, the Royal Family and the numerous organisations of which he was Patron. We give thanks for the achievements in his life and his legacy."

Munch on Mondays

As part of its growing Compassion Ministries community outreach, the Parish of Ballynure and Ballyeaston (Ballyclare) launched 'Munch on Mondays' on May 10.

The rector, the Rev Jonny Campbell-Smyth, said: "This initiative works in partnership with Co-op Foodshare who, like many supermarkets at the end of each day, dispose of so much perishable food that is still good to eat but has reached its 'display by' date. This food will now be donated to us, thanks to Co-op Ballynure.

"We therefore want to bless people who are finding it hard to make ends meet. Each Monday the food will be set out from 11am at the front of St John's, Doagh Road, Ballyclare, and will be given away free of charge. We pray that God will bless those who receive each week."



Three generations of Duke of Edinburgh Gold Awardees, from left: The Ven Dr Stephen McBride, vicar of Antrim and Archdeacon of Connor; his son Alex, a primary school teacher; and Stephen's father Donald, a retired teacher.

Three generations of Gold Awards

The death of His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh in April rekindled proud memories for three generations of one Connor family - Donald, Stephen and Alex McBride.

Grandfather Donald, his son Stephen and Stephen's son Alex are all holders of the Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award. Alex received his Award in February 2016 - at the time, the McBrides were only the second family in which three generations had achieved this.

Stephen, vicar of Antrim and Archdeacon of Connor, and retired school teacher Donald were the first father and son to be awarded the Duke of Edinburgh's Gold Award.

Donald, now aged 80, completed his award in 1960 through the 72nd Boys' Brigade Company which belonged to St Mary's Parish in Crumlin Road. This was only four years after the Award scheme was launched and Donald, as one of the earliest recipients of the Gold Award, travelled to Buckingham Palace in May 1960. The flights for Donald and his parents cost £24.

Stephen said: "My dad encouraged me to complete my Gold Award with the hope that perhaps we might be the first father and son. I did most of my work for the Gold through completing the disciplines necessary for gaining my Queen's Badge in the 118th Belfast BB Company which belonged to Holy Trinity Parish in north Belfast.

"I gained my Gold in 1979 through the Scout troop attached to Inst (RBAI) under the leadership of the late Ronnie Hiscocks. The school Scout troop had an excellent tradition in helping pupils gain their awards and enabled me to complete the expedition section. I went to Buckingham Palace in 1981 with three other pupils who had also gained their Gold Awards."

Stephen's achievement did indeed mean that he and Donald were the first father and son to gain the Award. "At the Palace we had a short meeting with the Duke. My memory of the day was one of awe in getting the opportunity of meeting the Duke in person," he recalled.

Stephen's son Alex completed his Gold Award through Antrim Grammar School and Donald and Stephen accompanied him to Kensington Palace to receive the Award in February 2016.

"Even though we just missed out on being the first grandfather, father and son to gain the Award, we were presented to the Duke. It was a privilege to have another opportunity to meet him," Stephen said. "On this occasion, I was so impressed at how a man who was 94 was blessed with such energy. He did his best to engage with every recipient in the room and make them feel special."

In 1997, Donald and Stephen, as the first father and son Gold Award recipients, received invitations from then Prime Minister Tony Blair to attend Luncheon at The Banqueting House, Whitehall, in celebration of the Golden Wedding of Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh.

“There were around 300 people in attendance from many walks of life. Linford Christie, Cliff Richard, Maggie Smith, Shirley Bassey and the Archbishop of Canterbury were a few of the celebrities I spotted,” Stephen recalled. “My dad had a one-to-one conversation with Margaret Thatcher for over 10 minutes. The Secretary to the Cabinet Office was at my dad’s table and he gave us a guided tour of 10 Downing Street after the dinner.”

‘Of the many legacies that the Duke has given his name to during his life, this is surely one of the most enduring’

Stephen added: “During her speech, the Queen memorably said of Prince Philip: “He is someone who doesn’t take easily to compliments but he has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years, and I, and his whole family, and this and many other countries, owe him a debt greater than he would ever claim, or we shall ever know.”

Stephen described the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme as invaluable in the life formation of many young people over the past 65 years. “Through



A proud day for Donald McBride, pictured at Buckingham Palace in May 1960.



An historic occasion - Donald and Stephen McBride, the first father and son to receive the Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award, with Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace in 1981.

its various sections, it encourages you to develop personal skills, for example through the playing of a musical instrument, to engage in a sporting activity and to look beyond yourself and participate in some form of community service,” he said.

“Of all the many areas of life, perhaps the most important factor of the Award is developing a sense of perseverance. I will never forget my expedition on the north Antrim hills on a very wet and windy trek in late October 1979. In those days, camping equipment was much more basic than today’s lightweight tentage and waterproofing was almost non-existent, but there was a great sense of achievement in completing the task.”

Stephen said one of the Duke’s many pioneering developments was St George’s House in Windsor. “He saw it as a place where people from many different areas of life who ordinarily may not have met together could meet in confidential surroundings to listen and exchange views,” Stephen said.

“It has been a haven which has provided a backdrop that has managed to diffuse difficult situations when people of opposing opinions have been able to meet in person and hear viewpoints which would have been very different to the ones they held to. I had the opportunity to attend two meetings in St George’s and they were transformative in my ministry and life and I feel honoured to have been chosen to attend them.”

The Duke, Stephen commented, has been paid many compliments over the years for his service and commitment to a great variety of causes. “The photomontages of him and tributes that have been broadcast reveal a person who lived his life to the fullest and encouraged those around him to take risks and live life on the edge where possible,” he said.

“He has led by example and in everything he was connected with, he gave of himself to the fullest. The Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme was far ahead of its time in 1956 and its success is to be seen in its thriving 65 years later. Of the many legacies that the Duke has given his name to during his life, this is surely one of the most enduring in that it is open to every young adult to participate in throughout the Commonwealth.”

Donald said he believes that being a Gold Award holder helped him secure a post in Orangefield Boys’ School in Belfast, in the early 1960s. “The headmaster, John Malone, had recently introduced the scheme in the school and was very keen to have a staff member who had gained the award. So in having the Gold Award, it was seen as an important element in my CV,” Donald said.

Alex, 27, is now a P7 teacher in Antrim Primary School. He said: “The Duke of Edinburgh scheme has given me many life skills which have helped me in the development of my career.”

Youth groups benefiting from Glencairn project

Stephen Whitten, Church Army Evangelist at Connect Base, Connor's North Belfast Centre of Mission, has been waiting eagerly for the two-household rule to be relaxed.

"This means I can start having regular groups at the Glencairn Community Garden again for the summer, but until then it will be just me and one volunteer from the estate," Stephen said.

"He has been busy over the past few months, digging a small pond, laying woodchip, planting flowers and shrubs (donated by a local business) and even building a rockery flowerbed.

"Everything has been recycled waste from the estate. The rocks were given by a local landscape gardener, the pond is made from a reused oil tank, and the soil came from a local lady who was getting a load removed from her garden."

Glencairn Community Garden, which featured in the spring issue of 'Connor Connections,' is a work in progress on a derelict piece of land beside St Andrew's Church, Glencairn. Even in lockdown, the project has captured the imagination of the local community and continues to grow.

Stephen said youth groups under the Education Authority (EA) are an exception to the two-household rule as the EA prioritises engaging young people in positive activities.

"From early June, I will be running sessions for a small group of second year boys from Glencairn Youth Club which will count towards an award scheme they are doing," Stephen explained.

"This will include things like tree planting, building flower beds, preparing ground for planting, making and decorating outdoor furniture from logs, as well as talking about the value of caring for the environment.

"The final session of the scheme involves camping out under a tarpaulin on Black Mountain which I hope to join the group for, weather permitting of course! It is a great opportunity to get to know some of the young teenagers from the estate and I hope these sessions will lead to further involvement in the Garden."

Quiet Garden brings hope to town centre

New life and new hope are blooming in a once overgrown walled garden in the heart of Ballymoney town.

The Quiet Garden is an eco-friendly initiative from Ballymoney, Finvoy and Rasharkin (BFR) Parish Caring Association as part of its mission to build 'bridges of hope' into the community.

The project is blossoming in a disused walled garden behind St Patrick's Parish Church, transforming an overgrown piece of land into a social and therapeutic space for the whole community.

The rector, the Rev Andrew Sweeney, explains: "Ballymoney, Finvoy and Rasharkin Parish Caring Association has, over the past seven years, sought to develop strong positive links with our community. We currently run a debt counselling service and life skills course to empower people on low incomes and with special needs to improve their quality of life. We have initiated the Job Club which gives the unemployed essential skills when seeking employment. We work closely with the town's Food Bank and we refer many clients to its doors. We have launched a weekly free lunch to offer the lonely and marginalised in our community a safe space for friendship.

BRIDGES

"For some time now our purpose has been to be build bridges of hope into our community."

Andrew said that he has long wanted to create a quiet space for the whole community, and this aspiration led to the creation of the Quiet Garden.

"We are confident that the development of the Quiet Garden will build a sense of connection and belonging, recognising that a programme of activity is often essential to people's wellbeing," Andrew says. "We believe the Quiet Garden has the potential to help individuals transform aspects of their lives. It will be closely linked to our debt counselling service, Christians Against Poverty, and 'Fresh Start,' a new programme they offer which supports people with moderate addictions issues."

Andrew continues: "The Covid-19 pandemic has left many people desperate for contact and social engagement, and by creating a beautiful community garden, we believe it has the potential to reduce



loneliness, anxiety and depression for all who find rest and work there."

A recent report from The King's Fund advocated greater use of Social Therapeutic Horticulture, as it facilitates recovery and social inclusion among people experiencing mental health difficulties.

Work on the garden started in early spring of 2020 under project manager Stanley Stewart. "Symbolically, a hole was cut in the wall, opening up this space for all to see," Andrew explains. "Lovely new gates were designed and fitted after drainage was put in, the ground was levelled off and concrete bases were located."

The garden really began to take shape in March, when Stanley and a team shaped the paths and laid the natural gravel.

INDIGENOUS

On Easter Saturday, under the guidance of arborologist Robin Crowther, a small team of volunteers spent the full day planting an indigenous wood with trees supplied by the Woodland Trust. An avenue of limes and a horn beam hedge leading from the gate to the centre piece, a seven-metre high oak tree, were also planted.



The Rev Andrew Sweeney in the Quiet Garden after tree planting which took place over Easter.

The next phase of the project was the construction of a community cabin in the garden's sunniest spot. "From here, you can look across the grassed lawns towards a cottage garden soon to be planted with insect-attracting plants." Andrew indicates an area directly in front of the cabin site.

"We will be building a barked play area for children here. We are very keen for the garden to be used for educational purposes, so we are in discussion with a local primary school, hoping they will consider an eco project in the garden.



The community cabin taking shape during May.

"How marvellous to have trees with such interesting and local provenance!" Andrew smiles, adding that the whole parish was excited about this project.

UNIQUE

"Community garden projects are nothing new, but we think this space has the potential to be fairly unique because of its central location," he says. "There are virtually no green field sites for recreation in the heart of the town. The walled garden is right beside the Glebe Estate and close to the Armour Day Centre, local surgeries, the CAMS team and the Library."

The garden is something of a secret gem in the heart of the town. "If you talk to many local people of mature years, they will regale you with daring tales of clambering over the wall of the garden to pilfer the rector's apples!" Andrew adds.

"I am indebted to The Church of Ireland Priorities Fund who enabled this project to become a reality by their substantial financial support."

'We believe the Quiet Garden has the potential to help individuals transform aspects of their lives'

"The line 'If you built it they will come' from the film 'Field of Dreams' has been part of my inspiration for the project. I know that might seem a little corny, but the plan has always been to create a beautiful space that will fire the imagination enough for members of the community to develop it further."

The project has already received a donation of little beech trees grown from seeds found around Co Antrim's famous 'Dark Hedges' and cultivated by Julie Smith and her son Campbell.

Theology underpinning the garden project

By the Rev Andrew Sweeney

Too often in Northern Ireland, the Gospel is seen as anything but good news. It is so narrowly defined that it would be impossible for a sparrow to get through the eye of a needle, let alone a camel!

God never intended for his wonderful news to be defined for all humanity in such a way. The full story of redemption and restoration was always about the renewal of ALL things, not just personal conversion and wait for heaven. This is just half the story that God could have achieved without planting us on earth. No wonder if this is often seen as not very good news at all!

Once, the world was perfect - a beautiful garden in fact! One day it will be perfect again - a glorious day when our Lord returns - when heaven and earth will be fully consummated and fully restored.

Christians are called to be a creative minority who live out the fullness of God's story. We must recognise that we are made in God's image and our purpose is to join God in the renewal of ALL things.

Our narrative is subversive so, not only are we God's beloved creation, we are also called as his heirs to re-create the garden as it once was. The Quiet Garden project is such a powerful metaphor that underpins a full theology of God's wonderful news, in which he empowers us to play our part in a way that expresses our true and full humanity. This is life with a purpose - life in all its abundance!

An increasingly fragmented and fractured society has left individuals longing for hope in a hopeless world. At its best, Christian community can be such an influence for good by being engaged in its local context. So rather than being seen as just plain weird, others will be prepared to ask the question: 'What is the reason for the hope that you have?' (1 Peter 3:15).

Our church is inspired by the vision its leadership has cast for the creation of a therapeutic garden community set in the fallow walled garden. Our plans are moving ahead and we believe that 'if we build it, they will come.'



Mrs Paddy Wallace, a parishioner of All Saints', Antrim, with her Maundy Purse.

A Royal honour

Paddy Wallace, a parishioner of All Saints', Antrim, has been honoured by Her Majesty the Queen with the Royal Maundy.

Sadly, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Paddy was not able to receive the Maundy Purse in person as, in keeping with arrangements last year, it was sent to recipients in the post.

By tradition, Royal Maundy takes place every year on Maundy Thursday. The reigning monarch gives a gift of money to the elderly - to one man and woman for each year of the monarch's life - that was 190 purses this year!

The recipients are chosen from the local community and, in normal times, distribution of the Royal Maundy takes place at a different cathedral each year.

Paddy was nominated for the Royal Maundy by the Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison. Her citation reads:

"Paddy has been an active member of the parish of All Saints', Antrim, for many years. Over those years she has served

diligently and humbly in a number of roles. She is well-known throughout the diocese and the whole Church of Ireland, having served firstly as Connor Diocesan President, and then as All-Ireland President of the Mothers' Union. In these roles she endeared herself to many across the island with her unique blend of warmth, encouragement and professionalism.

"At the first parish branch meeting after Paddy was elected as All-Ireland President of the Mothers' Union, she told the members that her most important role was still being a member of All Saints', Antrim, Mothers' Union.

"This is but one example of Paddy's humility. Over the years, she has exercised a ministry of encouragement and hospitality to her vicar and other clergy and many of the parishioners. Even when holding high offices in the Mothers' Union, she always found time to fulfil many more everyday

commitments in the parish, such as arranging the Flower Guild.

"Paddy's working life was that of a teacher. In the 1980s she was promoted to the role of vice-principal of Parkhall College, Antrim - one of the three secondary schools that then served the town. As such, she was a member of the senior management team that raised the school from being Antrim's third-ranked secondary school to first position in the same rankings.

"An enlarged Parkhall is now the town's sole secondary school and it is thriving. Its success is largely due to the foresight of that senior management group, to which Paddy made a significant contribution."

Paddy, 80, is married to John and the couple have three sons. She said news that she was to receive Maundy Money had been very exciting. "I was quite overawed. I did not expect it in the slightest. I am very honoured," she said.

Paddy was on crutches following a hip operation. "This really boosted me for I was feeling a bit down," she said. "John is really pleased because he knows I have done a lot over the years."

She said much of her work in the local community came about through Mothers' Union. "We have been involved in community organisations that support families, and others are continuing that work," she said.

Receiving her Maundy Purse in the mail was not quite the same as taking it from the hands of Her Majesty. "I would have loved to meet the Queen, and I am sure I could have managed to travel in a wheelchair, but it is just lovely to have received the honour," Paddy said.

As has been a Connor tradition in relation to the Royal Maundy, Bishop George also nominated a member of another denomination, and this year that nominee was Dougie Crowe from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Dougie, 75, was brought up in north Belfast before a move to North Down. He is a member of Eglinton Presbyterian Church where he has been Clerk of Kirk Session for 22 years, and a long-time member of the 92nd Belfast Company of the Boys' Brigade, serving as an officer for more than 50 years.

Dougie uses his professional skills to great advantage in committees, boards and councils of the Presbyterian Church, and retains a great passion for the United Appeal for Mission. He serves as a trustee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and Chairman of PCI's Pension Trustees.

Long covid - the day that redefined my life

The effects of so-called long covid have left Magheragall parishioner Sharon Cummings, nee Nettleship, feeling positive about the future, despite the daily hardships caused by the illness.

Sharon, vice principal in a Belfast school, has been battling Covid-19 since the start of the academic year. "Friday September 4 2020 was a busy day in work," she recalls. "I had a challenging three-hour Zoom meeting and my head was banging.

"When I finished the meeting, I was desperate for a cup of tea, lunch and some fresh air. But a colleague was waiting to report a member of staff who had just received a positive Covid-19 test result.

"We consulted guidelines, necessary procedures, phone calls to parents, letters home, etc and I waited with a group of pupils as their parents collected them. I have no idea how I made it home. I felt dreadful, as if someone was using a kango hammer on my head.

"That night was horrendous, sweats and nausea, with head continuing to pound. The next morning I went downstairs and my husband Robert was cutting the grass. I suddenly realised I could not smell the grass. In a panic, I phoned for a covid test and got one for that afternoon."

Early next morning, Sharon heard her test was positive. "That day has redefined my life in so many ways," she says. "I spent 21 days in bed, only leaving the house on day 22 to attend the Covid-19 Clinic as my breathing was a growing cause for concern. This started the journey of chest x-rays, cardiac tests, countless blood tests, courses of antibiotics/steroids, opticians appointments, podiatry examinations – you name the test, I have had it!"

Sharon continues: "I sometimes look back on the months that have passed as a surreal series of events that have happened to somebody else. I had trained for a half marathon the previous year and completed the Great North Run in September 2019, so I considered myself as fit and as healthy as I had been in years.

"I am continually on the go, mum to two teenage children, busy job, completing a part-time qualification at Queen's University, voluntary village committee member, as well as running a self-catering business - so I probably felt I was not a person who would be knocked for six by this virus."

Nine months since her diagnosis, Sharon is classed as having post-covid syndrome/ long covid and has not been able to work.

She has written to MLAs on the NI Executive Health Committee to seek specialist treatment clinics for people with long covid, and in April started some online study - embedding children's and staff mental health into the school curriculum.

"I have gone from a shuffling walk for five minutes per day several months ago, to 10 minutes per day and am now slowly walking a mile or two on Monday and Friday mornings," Sharon says. "I participated in an excellent covid recovery programme offered by NI Chest Heart and Stroke, learning about the need to pace my activities, set small and realistic goals and to be kind to myself."

Sharon has undertaken a course of respiratory physiotherapy to enhance her lung function and improve oxygen levels. "This has been of tremendous benefit. I never thought I would have to learn how to breathe properly," she comments.

"I still cannot smell or taste, my GP is hopeful both senses will return. The odd time I believe I can smell a burning smell and I have checked with fellow long covid sufferers and this is quite common - a phantom smell sensation. So odd. I am now the wearer of glasses, having had periods of blurred vision and eye inflammation. I often wake up with mouth ulcers and have had three root canal treatments in the past few months. Currently, I am sporting so many verrucae I have lost count! All related to my immune system. At times I get really tired and am the first in the house to bed every night."

But Sharon says that while some people might view this as a dark and challenging period, she looks back and sees great

progress. "I have hope for the future and a return to life pre Covid-19," she says. "I am more mindful, more appreciative of family and friends and see greater beauty in small detail and the world around me.

"I have learnt a lot, mostly about love, support, care and true friendship. So many kind gestures, too numerous to mention, and the care of NHS staff has been amazing. I am also blessed that neither Robert nor my children contracted the virus - for that we will be forever thankful."

Sharon is keeping up her walking and physio and is reading again after a period of inability to concentrate. She graduated virtually with a Master of Science in Educational Leadership and has started to think again about promotion opportunities to manage her own school.

Sharon added: "I have a new group of people in my life, covid survivors, and we are all a great support for each other."





The Rev Canon Kevin Graham and his sons Jamie and Luke are in training for Macmillan Cancer Support's 'Mighty Hike' marathon challenge.

Kevin and sons step out on 'Mighty Hike'

The Rev Canon Kevin Graham is in training for a marathon walk which will raise funds to support those living with cancer.

Kevin, rector of St Bartholomew's, Stranmillis, and Connor Director of Ordinands, will be joined by his sons, Jamie, 23, and Luke, 18, on the Giant's Causeway Mighty Hike along the north coast.

Cheering them on will be Kevin's wife Cheryl, whose terminal cancer diagnosis last November has inspired the trio to take on this Macmillan Cancer Support challenge.

Kevin said: "I have run many marathons but those days are over, however the thought of walking one was quite appealing. I spoke with my sons Jamie and Luke to see if they would accompany me.

"They agreed, so on June 26, regulations permitting, we will take part in the marathon walk from Ballycastle to the University of Ulster at Coleraine along the Causeway Coast - 26.2 miles to be exact!"

Cheryl received treatment for breast cancer

in 2010, when Kevin was rector of Movilla Parish, Newtownards, Diocese of Down. In 2020, she underwent gene testing, which revealed she had the BRCA2 gene which, Kevin explained, means Cheryl is at high risk of other cancers.

There were plans for surgery that would reduce the chances of any cancer spreading but, due to lockdown, these surgeries did not take place.

Last November, Cheryl was called for an MRI scan. A first biopsy indicated no cancer, but a biopsy of a second area of concern did not have the same outcome.

"We were told on November 19 that it was cancer," Kevin said. "It came as a bit of a shock, we had the diagnosis and the prognosis in the space of a week."

The prognosis, which the family received on November 26 last year, was that the cancer had metastasized and was terminal. Cheryl has undergone chemotherapy, and

other treatments will follow.

"We are hoping that time will be added because of the treatment," Kevin said. "We hope that the tumours will reduce in size and that will be a better starting point in terms of fighting the cancer. Other treatments will continue. This is palliative care, but not in the way people think, it is about management of the disease.

"Cheryl is very hopeful. The destination hasn't changed, but hopefully the journey will be longer."

Kevin said the family had been supported by Macmillan in 2010. "The pandemic has meant that support has not been so easily available this time.

"There is nothing we can do medically for Cheryl other than support her, but we can still help others who are facing cancer by raising funds for Macmillan."

Since deciding to take on the marathon challenge in January, Kevin has completed more than 1,400km in training, with his longest walk to date being 21km, which is a half marathon.

If you would like to sponsor Kevin, Jamie and Luke in this challenge for Macmillan Cancer Support, please visit <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/grahamfamily2021>.

St James' took direct hit in Blitz bombing

For parishioners and people living in the vicinity of St James' Church on Belfast's Antrim Road, the night of April 15 1941 would have been one of indescribable fear.

For in the hours of darkness, bombs dropped by the German Luftwaffe in what was to be known as the Belfast Blitz saw the church take several direct hits.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the Blitz. On Easter Tuesday night 80 years ago, April 14/15, 180 German bombers participated in a major attack lasting almost four hours. Their bombs and incendiaries fell mainly on densely populated working class terraces in north Belfast, killing 740 civilians.

A second attack came on May 4/5, when 200 bombers launched a raid that lasted three hours. More intense than the Easter raid, it devastated much of the city's industrial heart in the dock area, as well as parts of east Belfast and the city centre - Belfast Cathedral was fortunate to escape.

In the course of the Blitz, more than 1,000 people died, or were declared 'missing



The west end side aisle in St James' after the bombing. The black curtains on either side of the window were to prevent interior lights revealing the location of the church at night.



Inside St James' Church after the Blitz.

presumed dead.' Half the city's houses were destroyed or damaged. Officials estimated that as a consequence of the air raids, by late May 1941, 220,000 people had evacuated from the city (about half the population) because of panic and fear.

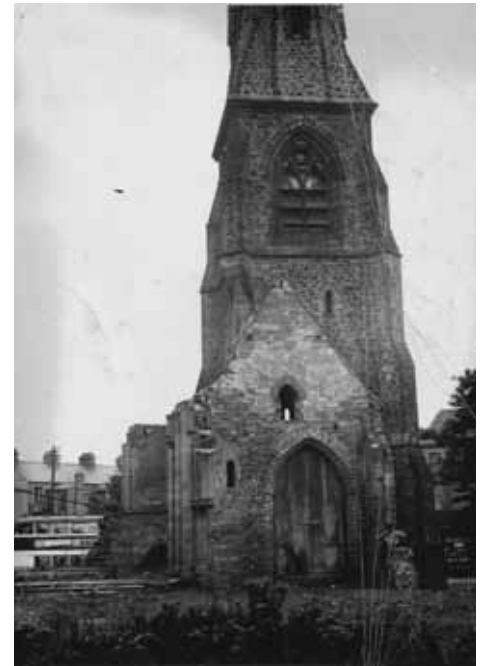
St James' dates from 1870 and was a significant Anglican presence in the rapidly increasing population north of the city. When the German Luftwaffe bombed the area, they were targeting the nearby waterworks, intending to disrupt the water supply to firefighters. Air raid sirens sounded at 11pm, when anti-aircraft guns were fired at the German planes.

But two bombs landed in the church - one

blasts shook the city centre, but the cathedral remained a beacon of hope.

"In addition to the years of conflict, a shifting water table has impacted on the cathedral's 50 foot timber piles. All of these factors have placed stresses and strains on the stone structure of the cathedral, producing cracks in walls and arches."

St Simon's dates from 1923-1930, and the grant will help fund the installation of a kitchen and toilet and reordering of the church's interior.



Only the bell tower of St James' was intact after the Blitz.

in front of the pulpit and the other beside the font. Another fell on the adjacent parochial halls. Alongside the church, many homes and businesses were destroyed.

Although the halls were badly damaged, resourceful members converted them into a temporary church which opened on July 13 1941, using whatever ecclesiastical furniture could be salvaged. This included the Holy Table, reredos, and prayer desks.

The bell tower was the only part of the church to remain intact, preserving its bell which had originally been crafted for use in England in the 1300s, but which had come to be included in a peal of bells at St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. It was gifted to St James' in 1938. It had rung to mark the accession of Elizabeth I, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the victories of the Battles of the Boyne and Aughrim.

The church was rebuilt and consecrated on September 11 1954. It was erected on the old foundations and architecturally follows the original with modifications. The parish was grouped with the nearby Parish of St Peter in 1996 and they became one united parish in 2005 before the closure of St James' three years later.

Many of the furnishings from St James' are now used in St Peter's, and the names of parishioners from St James' who died during the two World Wars continue to be read aloud each year on Remembrance Sunday in St Peter's.

The 80th anniversary of the Belfast Blitz was marked in Belfast Cathedral on April 16 at a special Choral Evensong which featured eye witness accounts of the evening.

Funding boost for two historic buildings

Two Connor churches are to receive grants from the National Churches Trust.

A £14,960 grant was awarded to St Anne's Cathedral and £10,000 to St Simon's, Donegall Road, Belfast.

The grant will support repairs to 23 structural cracks at St Anne's. The Very Rev Stephen Forde, Dean of Belfast said: "Eighty years ago, the Blitz of 1941 destroyed many of the surrounding buildings, but St Anne's Cathedral survived. Through the 40 years of the Northern Ireland Troubles, multiple bomb

'It was hard to make connections'

I started my deacon year in Broughshane on September 6, the Sunday the church reopened. It was an exciting time, filled with promise, but hopes that parish life could return to normal were quickly dashed, with lockdown measures being introduced into the area within a few days.

We were able to continue our two weekly services, informal Morning Call which took place in the church hall and Morning Prayer in the church, and pre-recorded the service at home for those who wanted to watch online.

By Christmas, we had the technology in place to livestream the services from the church building. This was a huge blessing when churches closed again in January.

As I couldn't meet the congregation personally, I started a 'Date with a Deacon' session on a Wednesday over Zoom - a chance to have a coffee and get to know some of the parishioners. We made use of technology to continue Bible study on Zoom and when churches were closed, had an informal online coffee time just before our weekly service.

One challenging aspect was not being able to visit parishioners. Instead, I was only

'We have reached the unreachable'

When I began training for ministry, my idea of what it looked like contrasts to what it has been, but it's a stark reminder that God's ways are higher than mine.



People say 'I'm sorry your deacon year hasn't been what you imagined,' but in many ways it has been so much better!

As a people person, I've missed taking part in pastoral visitation and the buzz of people chatting after the service. I've missed children running up the aisle and tugging at my pocket as I preach.

A camera in front of you simply doesn't do these things justice. I've missed many things, but they have not disappeared, they have just had to be adapted. This year has called for more creativity than ever, but it's been a great opportunity to try new things, to get it wrong sometimes and to have the permission to try again. I am ever



able to speak with them over the phone or online. It was hard to make connections and get to know parishioners as I would have liked.

Another disappointment was that all the organisations which usually met in the parish halls had stopped or moved online. It has also been difficult to gain experience in funeral ministry and the other occasional offices. But I am thankful that the pandemic gave me time to work on my dissertation on the rite of marriage in the service of mission and to concentrate on teaching and prayer ministry.

As I look towards my future ministry, I feel

thankful for a supportive rector and church family who have encouraged, prayed and supported me.

As lockdown began we saw signs saying 'The building is closed but the church is still alive.' I think we've all lived up to this.

Someone once told me that the Church is the only organisation that seeks to support those aged 0-100, and we've seen through this pandemic how people who would have never crossed the door of a church building have been enabled to worship in their living rooms. Although online worship is no substitute for physical worship, we have reached the unreachable and drawn people to the feet of Jesus when they needed it most.

I pray that something good will come out of the pandemic, that we'll appreciate teachers more, our supermarket staff, our community businesses, our healthcare workers, our postmen and postwomen.

Regardless of the positive, we must always remember that behind every statistic there is a family and friends who have lost a loved one and perhaps never got to say goodbye.

Sarah Crawford, Derryvolgie

privileged. It is a very exciting time to be in ministry and there is a lot of work to do post-pandemic. But my prayer is that I continue to grow, to learn and to reach out into communities that need the message of hope and love more than ever.

Andrea Cotter, St Patrick's, Broughshane.

'Hope, peace, comfort and spiritual nourishment'

Covid-19 changed all our lives. During these challenging times, many churches adopted new technology, such as Facebook and Zoom to video-stream services. Bringing Christian worship into people's lives via technology was important, as we all had to continue to live out our Christian faith at home.

During my internship year, most of my ministry has been online. This allowed me to be more creative by using studio backdrops of outdoor locations to share the Gospel message.



I thoroughly enjoyed working alongside the Rev Jonny Campbell-Smyth and the ministry team, and this gave me the chance to connect with the communities of Ballynure and Ballyclare by sharing the message of the Gospel via social media. I believe that through this technology the church has been able to bring the message of hope, peace, comfort and spiritual nourishment to people each morning.

My internship has been practically restricted in terms of a physical appearance in church, but technology has proven 'that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,' (Romans 8:39).

As I go forward as a curate in my future ministry, one thing Covid-19 has made us more aware of is the teaching of Jesus, who taught us to love our neighbour and to care for those in need. This is what makes our churches relevant for today, reaching out into our local community. No matter what challenges come our way, we must do our Christian duty as we walk with Jesus - sharing his ministry is an important part of our lives as we follow Christ.

Alan McCracken, United Parishes of Christ Church and St John's

A year like no other

'Challenging, eventful, affirming'

One of the inevitable questions some of my pupils at Hazelwood Integrated College, where I am Head of RE, ask when they find out I am ordained for the Church of Ireland is: "Do you feel any different?"

Last September, when we deacons processed into the sunshine outside St Anne's Cathedral, it did feel as if there was something different. I can say this with a degree of confidence, as I am no stranger to deaconate ordination, having been ordained deacon for the Roman Catholic Church nearly 30 years ago. But my memory of that day is feeling underwhelmed by it all - not quite ready.

The day of ordination last September could not have felt more different; surrounded by family and friends, I remember feeling blessed and ready to take up the challenge to work as a deacon in Jordanstown. And in the conferring of a title there is a change which struck me as oddly profound when it was pointed out that having worked within the parish for the last four years, I now hold a distinct role within the church. I was



no longer introduced as 'Brendan who is our..... mmm what do we call you?'

Working as a deacon during lockdown was challenging, eventful, but most of all affirming. While pastoral visits might still not be encouraged, this year has seen me taking on further responsibility such as leading services of Morning Prayer on my own and assisting with funerals. As restrictions ease, Canon Nigel Baylor is keen for me to widen my experience and get involved with those preparing for baptisms and weddings in the next few months before my final ordination.

Brendan O'Loane, OLM, St Patrick's, Jordanstown

'Standing at people's doors... unable to touch... felt so cold'

Covid-19 changed my ministry dramatically. It was quite frightening to adapt to online worship. One of the biggest challenges for me was standing in front of an empty church and talking to a camera.



We also set up a weekly parish quiz and Bible study on Zoom. Sunday School also moved to Zoom. We developed a rota for phoning all our parishioners.

With the help of the PSNI, Connect Base and ROC, we delivered children's packs and ran Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade and Baking Buddies online. We are currently involved in Transforming Lives for Good in a local primary school. Our rural dean, the Rev Tracey McRoberts, organised online Holy Week services in which all local clergy took part.

Unfortunately our community has seen an upsurge in street violence. I attended a service in which clergy from all denominations gathered at both sides

of the Peace Wall to pray for peace and reconciliation in our communities.

For me, the really distressing aspect of ministry during this time was not being able to visit homes or hospitals to pray with those who were sick, dying or bereaved. Standing at people's doors, not being able to physically touch them, just felt so cold and disengaged from their pain. I found it very difficult as I have known many of these people all my life.

Thankfully, as things are looking a bit brighter, we are starting to plan for our new 'normal' and hopefully some face-to-face activities.

I have looked to Psalm 121 time and time again over the last year because it reminds me that our help in all situations is found in our awesome God. Even in these hard circumstances he is in control - we never walk alone.

I hope that God will continue to use me in this place in whatever way he sees fit, to grow his Kingdom here on the Lower Shankill where there is a very real need of his presence and love.

Janet Spence, OLM, St Stephen's and St Luke's and St Michael's, Lower Shankill Area

'There have been some really joyful times'

It has definitely been a far different deacon year than the Rev Nicholas Dark or I would have imagined! It has been a year of trying to gain as much experience in parish ministry as possible, while also struggling to write a 15,000 word dissertation.

There have certainly been difficulties doing ministry during a pandemic - not being able to visit people in their homes or in hospital, not being able to grab a cup of coffee after services, and at times, having to preach in front of an empty church to a mobile phone!

One of the most challenging parts of this year for me has undoubtedly been the lack of opportunity to get to know the congregation of Magheragall as well as I would have hoped.

However, despite the difficult circumstances of doing ministry this year, there have been some really joyful times, and I have been able to learn a lot. One



of the real highlights has been leading a weekly Bible study over Zoom on the Book of Acts. In the midst of everything that is going on with Covid-19, it has been a real blessing to meet weekly with brothers and sisters in Christ, to open God's Word together, and to hear how he has been speaking to each of us during the week that has passed.

As my deacon internship comes to an end, I am looking forward to being able to start my curacy without being in lockdown or facing so many restrictions! I pray that God will continue to lead me to those to whom he wants me to minister and to serve him wherever and in whatever capacity he calls me.

Nathan Irvine, Magheragall Parish



Prayer Walking on the Shankill Road on Tuesday evening, April 13, are, from left: The Rev Tracey McRoberts, Karen Webb, the Rev Jack Lamb, the Rev Canon James Carson and Stephen Whitten. (Photo: Tim Webb).

Prayers for peace have been answered

Prayers for peace were shared across north Belfast during a period of rioting last April, with local clergy stepping out in the midst of the violence to be 'a presence on the street.'

As 'Connor Connections' went to print, the Rev Tracey McRoberts, rector of St Matthew's Parish where much of the violence was focused, said relative calm had returned to those areas which had experienced the worst of the trouble.

Tracey and other clergy from the Shankill area took to the streets on April 8 to pray for peace in the midst of scenes of rioting. The following day, a Prayer Vigil was attended by representatives of different denominations, among them the Bishops of Connor and Down and Dromore.

The Prayer Vigil, held at Forth Spring Community Centre on the Springfield Road, was organised by Tracey and the Rev Martin Magill, Parish Priest in St John's, Falls Road, at the suggestion of their bishops.

Trouble the previous Wednesday night saw a bus being burned out just outside St Matthew's Parish Hall. The following night the unrest was centred on the interface at Lanark Way, again in St Matthew's Parish. Tracey, accompanied by the Rev Canon Jim Carson, rector of nearby St Stephen's and St Michael's Parish, and the Rev Colin Duncan, minister of Woodvale Methodist Church, walked from the Ardoyne Roundabout to Lanark Way.

"We were just a presence on the street and

spoke to people who were spectating," Tracey said. "I didn't think about my own safety at the time. We wanted to show that we were there. We did not speak to those involved in the rioting. You are unlikely to get through to these young people when they are in that frame of mind. Sadly the Church holds little sway with them.

"The people who were watching said they could not sleep because of the noise and felt safer being outside knowing what was going on than staying in the house. I didn't come across anyone who was encouraging the violence, people were saying 'isn't this dreadful.'"

Canon Carson said the main focus of the walk that evening had been to pray for calm and peace, and wearing their clerical collars had provided opportunities for the clergy to interact with people. He said the experience of being out on the streets that night was 'quite surreal.'

The Rev Colin Duncan, of Shankill and Woodvale Methodist Church, welcomed participants to the Prayer Vigil on April 9, saying: "Here we are together and we're here to give a show of unity that together we are making a stand and a voice against the violence that we're seeing on the streets, a violence that serves no practical function or purpose at all."

Readings and prayers were led by clergy of different denominations. They then walked together from Forth Spring Inter Community Group on the Springfield Road where earlier youths had been throwing petrol bombs, fireworks and missiles at the police, to the gates at Lanark Way, scene of violence two nights before. Poignantly, the clergy had to make their way to the gates from both sides of the peace wall as they had been closed.

The Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison, said: "Churches on the ground in this part of the world and right throughout the province where there have been various situations, they are our communities... and we simply want to encourage the local Christian communities to play their part and to seek to be what influence they can be."

Roman Catholic Bishop Noel Treanor described the vigil as 'a contribution on the part of us as church leaders to the local clergy who have been on the streets during these events.'

Tracey's rectory is close to Twaddell Avenue, a flashpoint in earlier Loyalist protests. "In the aftermath of recent rioting in north Belfast, we are pleased to report that things have quietened down again," she said.

"Prayer has been answered, and we thank God for that, but we are not being complacent. As ever, the quiet work of many in the area continues behind the scenes. Who knows what will happen over the marching season, but I no longer try to predict what will happen on our streets and take a day at a time. Continued prayer would be appreciated."

June strides out!

June Butler, All Ireland President of Mothers' Union, has completed two walks in Connor Diocese as part of her fundraising '21 in 21' challenge.

Her first took place in Belfast on April 13 when June followed a route from Stranmillis to St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast.

On April 26, June walked along the coastal path from Portrush to Portstewart, starting at Holy Trinity Church, Portrush, and finishing in Agherton Church, Portstewart.

As fundraising at branch level has been suspended because of the pandemic, June has set herself the challenge to walk 21 kilometres, made up of three legs of 7km, in each of the 12 Church of Ireland dioceses in Ireland, and asking for sponsorship from MU members and members of the public. She hopes to do a third Connor walk later this year.

The Rev John Anderson

The death on April 17 of the Rev John Anderson, rector of Billy and Derrykeighan, due to Covid-19, caused widespread sadness across the diocese and beyond.

John, who was 46, was married to Eleanor and father to Simon, Hannah and Emma. He was rector of Billy and Derrykeighan, from 2005, and prior to that was curate-assistant in Magherafelt, Armagh Diocese, from 1998 until 2002 and then the Parish of Ballymena and Ballyclug from 2002 until his appointment to Billy and Derrykeighan.

Before ordination, John studied at Queen's University Belfast, then Trinity College, Dublin, and the Church of Ireland Theological College.

John was ill for just over a week when, despite the careful support of the medical staff of the Causeway Hospital, he passed away in the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital.

The Bishop of Connor, the Rt Rev George Davison, gave the address at John's funeral service, held in St Colman's Parish Church, Derrykeighan, on April 21. John's remains had earlier been received at Billy Church on April 19, where he rested before being moved to St Colman's the following evening (both conducted by the Rev Malcolm Ferry).

In his address, Bishop George reminded people that just two weeks earlier, John had written: 'This is Easter week when we can all have the assurance and the comfort that Jesus Christ left behind an empty tomb. Those who believe in his victory over death know the grave but to be a gate to a fuller life.'

"He was writing in the context of a Facebook post expressing sympathy on behalf of the parish to Her Majesty The Queen on the death of the Duke of Edinburgh. None of us knew just how poignant those words would be, nor that we would be gathering as we are for John's own funeral service today," the bishop said.

"As we gather as a family, still in shock and grief, I hope that we might simply do two things today.

"Firstly, give thanks to God for all that was good and lovely in John's life, for all that he meant to so many people, but particularly for who he was to you as a husband, dad, son, brother.

"But also, that we might listen to that message of resurrection hope that John



devoted his life to proclaiming and find hope in the midst of our sorrow."

Bishop George highlighted characteristics which particularly stood out about John.

"Commitment - John was a churchman to his core. From his early days growing up in St Peter's in Londonderry... it was obvious to all that John's faith and his commitment to Christ and His Church was leading him to a lifetime of service in the Church," Bishop George said, adding that John gave of himself unstintingly in every aspect of his ministry.

‘Those who believe in his victory over death know the grave but to be a gate to a fuller life... None of us knew just how poignant those words would be..’

He spoke of John's intellect. "John had a great appetite for reading and thirst for knowledge. Not just in formal learning, though he showed aptitude for that in his gaining of a BD from Queen's University and an MPhil from the Irish School of Ecumenics in Dublin. But John's thirst for information and learning was an everyday thing...

"So it was that his talks and sermons and his conversation were so interesting, peppered as they were with little nuggets of information that he had read and stored

away, ready to share at the right time."

Bishop George said John was a man of warmth of character and wit. "John had a great sense of humour - quirky at times - that endeared him to many people. So many people have spoken over the last few days about his kindness to them, about his friendliness and his sense of humour, and about how they will always be grateful to John for the way that he has played a supportive part in their lives... John was a faithful priest and pastor and that warmth and wit meant that he was one who touched people's lives deeply."

He spoke of John's sense of devotion, to 'Ekklesia,' as he referred to the Church, and the people of his parishes.

"But there can be little doubt about his devotion to his family," Bishop George said. "From those early glances between a curate and a choir member across the chancel of St Patrick's, Ballymena, through a memorable trip to Edinburgh to get engaged, John's relationship with Eleanor grew and flourished. Over 16 years of marriage he has proved himself as a caring and supportive husband and then when Simon and Hannah and Emma were born, a loving dad too.

"But you have been a team, a family whose skills and abilities complemented one another. How would a confirmed technophobe like John have managed without you at his side to record his talks and upload them to Facebook for him over the last year?!"

"You have described John as 'your rock,' the one that you could depend on, but I'm sure that John would be the first to acknowledge that you were his rock too!"

"And when relationships have been so good, so strong, it's all the harder when they are taken away from us. That's why a day like this is so hard, for all of you, his family, who shared life with John so deeply."

The bishop shared some thoughts from John 14 which Simon had read earlier in the service, taking comfort from the words that Jesus speaks to Thomas: 'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no one come to the Father except through me.' "It's as if he's saying to Thomas, don't worry about that, I've got that covered, you just keep on trusting me, walking with me, and I will get you there," Bishop George said.

Sincere sympathy is extended to Eleanor, Simon, Hannah, and Emma, John's mother Jean and his brother Philip. He was pre-deceased by his father Don.



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