

**Conference Report by Jackie Holderness**  
**Inspiring Lives: People of Faith at the Heart of the Community**  
**January 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 2026**  
 Hosted by Christ Church Cathedral and St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin

***This conference was dedicated to people of faith, past and present, who have inspired their communities through the example of their lives. They have dedicated their talents and time to fulfilling the Gospel by caring for those in need; by working with the dispossessed; and by healing division and disunity.***

There were 57 delegates in total, including the organizing team, and we were joined by a total of 19 speakers, guests and sponsors. This year, 71% of our membership was represented at the conference.



All participants stayed at the Staycity Aparthotel, Tivoli, equidistant between our two host cathedrals. The hotel management and staff provided extremely good service and hearty breakfasts, plus the special rate we acquired offered excellent value and enabled us to keep delegate costs down.

Cathedrals Plus is indebted to the following sponsors: **Rathbones; Ecclesiastical (UK) and Ecclesiastical (Ireland); CCLA; and Westhill Endowment**. Without their generous support, the cost for each attendee would have been much higher, so a HUGE thank you to them all.

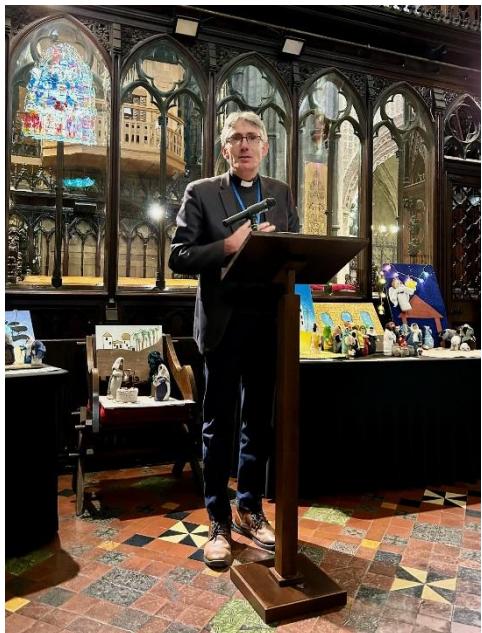


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GOOD INVESTMENT





The conference was opened by our Chair, the Very Revd Dr Anthony Cane, Dean of Portsmouth. He led us all in expressing our thanks to the hard-working Dublin team, led by Ruth Kenny at Christ Church Cathedral (CCC), and to Louis Parminter, Kryzel Bonifacio and Clark Brydon at St Patrick's Cathedral (SPC). The host Deans, the Very Revd Dermot Dunne (CCC) and the Very Revd William Morton (SPC) gave us the warmest of welcomes and showed great generosity to the conference.

We were very grateful to the helpful teams of volunteers at both cathedrals. During the conference, they helped with baggage storage, registration, signage and led fascinating guided tours. Many of us attended services in each cathedral and were impressed by the quality of both choirs. In Christ Church Cathedral, the Knitted Bible exhibition that Revd Abigail Sines presented in her keynote, was on display.



On the first evening, we were treated to a delicious Burdock's Fish and Chips supper in the Crypt of Christ Church, which was followed by an unexpected and greatly appreciated Irish coffee, laced with [Teeling whiskey](#).

Our Regional Hubs also had an opportunity to meet together to discuss the conference theme and how they share the stories of Inspiring People who are remembered in their sacred spaces and with whom they work in their communities.

In his introduction and welcome on Wednesday morning, Dean Morton explained that we were the first group to use the newly restored and refurbished Mews building at St Patrick's Cathedral, which had long ago served as Dean Jonathan Swift's stables and coach house.

On Wednesday afternoon, there were a number of optional tours and trips for delegates and we thank the guides and group leaders at all the Dublin visitor sites who entertained and informed us about their exhibits and organisations:

Teeling Whiskey; Trinity College & the Book of Kells; Chester Beatty Library; Dublinia & the cathedral tower tour teams.



Andrew Ware, Hayes & Finch

Later, on the same day, Dean Morton hosted a drinks Reception in the Deanery, before ushering us into the Lady Chapel of St Patrick's where we enjoyed a veritable feast catered superbly for us by [With Taste](#), followed by a witty after dinner talk by Andrew Ware of [Hayes and Finch](#) on behalf of our sponsors, [Rathbornes](#) (the oldest candle makers in the world).



All three of our plenary speakers spoke powerfully on the conference theme of Inspiring Lives.

**Keynote Speaker 1. Revd Dr Alex Wimberly**'s talk was titled: '**At the Heart: Corrymeela as a Community of Reconciliation**'. This was an inspiring talk about the history and current mission of the Corrymeela Community, in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. Delegates found his talk about its work on peace and reconciliation very powerful, and much needed in today's divided and broken world. Alex spoke passionately about the Troubles in Northern Ireland and how the Corrymeela Community was formed and how its continuing work on the 'Hill of Harmony' - later translated more accurately as the 'lumpy crossing place'(!) - provides visitors with a place to find peace and solace. He likened the experience perhaps to those who visit our cathedrals.

Find out more about the Corrymeela Community [here](#).



Revd Dr Alex Wimberly  
Leader of the Corrymeela Community



**Keynote Speaker 2: Revd Abigail Sines** gave a lively presentation, called The Power of Quirky, which showcased the way the arts and creativity can strengthen and deepen people's faith and bring people together into our sacred spaces and offer them fellowship.



A full summary of each of our keynote speeches can be found by clicking on their image above.

## Workshops:

Cathedrals Plus is very grateful to all the workshop presenters who contributed so effectively to the event. Each delegate was able to attend two out of the following eight workshops:

- 1. Keeping Our Cathedrals Alive:** Susanne Reid & Gavan Woods talked about their approach in overseeing the governance of cathedrals, and the aspirations and challenges they share with the whole community.
- 2. Sacred Space: Common Ground-Programming and Adjacency:** Ruth Kenny shared many useful ideas on programming events for visitors with different experiences, knowledge and histories.
- 3. The Gathering Grounds:** Julie Clements & The Revd Robert Clements shared their experience of setting up and running a unique cafe, called THE GATHERING GROUNDS which is run on an Honesty Box basis, fostering growth, healing and a sense of belonging.  
<https://kilternanparish.ie/gatherin-grounds/>
- 4. Music Outreach:** Tom Little & Tomos Watkins shared their experiences of establishing a community choir and also reaching into local schools to sing.



**Keynote speaker 3: Kelley Birmingham** is St Patrick's Cathedral's Community Officer. Kelley was our final keynote speaker. Her very moving talk focused on her experience of inter-agency working with the local community, including the displaced and those of other faiths and none. She described how church-led community events and engagement can have a profound impact on those individuals and on our wider society. Kelley explained how she harnesses the media and works in partnership with local police and social workers to achieve results and impact the lives of those in whose communities she serves.

5. **Conserving the Intangible Heritage of Churches in Times of Diversified Use: Aaron Hoey**  
explored the challenges and opportunities in conserving the intangible heritage of our churches and cathedrals.
6. **Inspired Classrooms:** Saul Penfold introduced delegates to the range of creative resources offered on the Inspired Classrooms website, linking the school curriculum subjects to cathedral or church visits. <https://www.inspiredclassrooms.org/>
7. **Invitation to a Sacred Pause:** Lydia Monds presented the idea of sacred pauses - being open to the presence of God and receiving the gift of the present moment. One of the healing 'stations' featured the four R's of prayer labyrinths: Release, Receive, Remain and Return.  
<https://ministryofhealing.ie/>
8. **Bells & Smells: Effective Outreach for Cathedral Learning Programmes:** Kryzel Bonifacio offered a range of engagement techniques and marketing strategies to reach schools and families in outreach and community events at St Patrick's Cathedral.



#### Panel Discussion:

Alice Leahy of the [Alice Leahy Trust](https://aliceleahytrust.org/) joined two of our speakers and Dean Morton on a panel that discussed the Ministry of Welcome, chaired by Louis Parminter of St Patrick's Cathedral. Alice's inspiring work supporting the homeless in Dublin inspired further reflection on the concept of 'welcome' which was explored by the panelists in their own context.



## **Inspiring Projects:**

- 1. The World reimagined: Revd Canon Jane Brooke**, former Chair of Cathedrals Plus, shared information about an exciting national project which is being run by the charity [The World Reimagined](#), whose purpose is to create a platform that honours the countless people and organisations who work to make racial equality a reality. The current Globes Project has been developed in partnership with the Church of England and funded by the Church of England's Racial Justice Unit Triennium Fund and is called the Triangle of Unity. Launched at Southwark Cathedral, the globes will be exhibited at Bristol, Sheffield, and Bradford Cathedrals, and Jane invited any delegate to contact her if they would like to join the project.
- 2. Inspiring Lives: Saints, Martyrs and Missionaries:** Sarah Page outlined this Cathedrals Plus project, funded by [Westhill](#) over a two-year period. The project's goal is to produce a range of resources for Cathedrals Plus members, based on the life stories of Saints, Martyrs and Missionaries who are connected to our sacred spaces. All cathedrals in the UK and Ireland are invited to become part of the Inspiring Lives project by sharing their experience and knowledge of any saint, past or living, together with the links those lives have to the challenges in today's ways of life. The theme for our Dublin conference marked the beginning of the story-telling and the collation and curation the stories of the saints who inspire lives.



Sarah also issued a call for film clips of short interview cameos. These might be with colleagues lay or clergy, or with friends in the community, or with volunteers in any cathedrals or sacred spaces. The interviews are to ask just three questions to find out who inspires others, how and why. See the Inspiring Lives webpage [here](#).

The sharing sessions are extremely popular at Cathedrals Plus conferences. Diana Ives from Southwell Minster once again organised a lively sharing session for colleagues in Education roles, which this year included engagement through medieval dance! Take a look at the video on our website! Some of the materials and ideas shared during this session will be uploaded to the Cathedrals Plus Resources Hub for members.



Owen Towndrow from Hereford Cathedral chaired the Visitor Experience colleagues' sharing session, where discussions ensued on

- i) how staff, volunteers, clergy and community partners bring meaning, authenticity and depth to the visitor experience and the tensions that can arise in practice, and
- ii) ways in which cathedrals engage with local communities, and how this activity strengthens mission while also shaping visitor expectations and perceptions.



**Cathedrals Plus AGM 2026.** The Cathedrals Plus Council held an informal meeting over a working lunch the day prior to our AGM. All delegates attended the AGM on the last day of the conference, and the adoption of our new constitution was formally ratified. Everyone present expressed their gratitude to Jackie Holderness for her endless enthusiasm and commitment to Cathedrals Plus, as she retires from her role at the end of this year's conference. Minutes of the AGM are available on our website [here](#).

Additional benefits of Cathedrals Plus Membership were reiterated and include the resources hub and the regional hubs network. Sarah Page expressed a plea for colleagues to contribute to the Resources Hub, our members-only resource base. She also encouraged new members to join the WhatsApp group and to point out to Comms colleagues that the number of visitors to our Facebook page continues to increase, and so is a valuable platform on which to advertise special events, job vacancies in the sector and to attract new interest in their cathedrals.

Laura Arends has kindly agreed to continue to coordinate the **Regional Hubs**. Many of these local networks organise CPD days and regular meetings, where colleagues share best practice, good ideas, support each other in overcoming similar challenges, and also celebrate successes together! We are delighted to increase the number of hubs to six now, with a new Ireland Hub meeting for the first time in Dublin during the conference.

The conference feedback forms have been summarised and key points are available [here](#). In brief, the feedback was VERY positive with the overall average mark being 9.4 out of 10 (Last year it was 9.3).

The planning group, which met six times during the year, are delighted to see that 100% of the delegates felt the conference met their expectations and needs, and 97% of delegates felt the content of the conference was relevant to their work.

**Next year's conference** will be hosted by Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral on January 12-14<sup>th</sup> 2027.

