

Contribution from our Clerk of Session

Christmas and New Year have come and gone for another year and most of us will look back to them with that customary mix of ups and downs that reflect our experiences of life generally - and yet there seems to be a particular edge to them at the festive season.

Many families and family circles connected with our congregation have known problems and difficulties in recent weeks. Bereavement and anniversaries of the loss of a loved one, accidents and illness, employment concerns and the breakdown of relationships have all created situations we would rather not have had to face. On the other hand, the pleasure and wonderment we see in our children and grandchildren as they unwrap their gifts, the joy of new birth and opportunities to spend quality time with loved ones who we may not have seen for some time have been positive experiences.

As a church family we look back over the past couple of months with gratitude to God for the ways He has blessed us. 'Ballywalter Remembers' proved to be a very thought-provoking and successful event. Our special services in December (the anniversary of Gareth's installation which enabled us to welcome Dr Russell back to our pulpit; the family service, carol service and Christmas morning service) were all well received. Our thanks are due to all who were involved in any aspect of these services.

The highlight of the congregation's Christmas season was 'The Gift' and the plaudits it received are well-deserved acknowledgements of the creative skill and talents displayed by the very many people who worked together to create the very professional production that resulted. May I add my personal congratulations and thanks to all who contributed in any way.

It always seems a little strange to me that other than in the weeks preceding Christmas Day, the account of that first Christmas is rarely spoken about in our churches. Yet, without the story portrayed in 'The Gift' there would be no Easter story, which is central to our Christian faith. It also disappoints me that the Christmas festivities, which constitute the biggest birthday party in the world, are so often held without the One whose birthday we celebrate, being given any thought or mention. So, the message of 'The Gift' has special significance for all of us. If I may borrow that well-known slogan created by the Dogs' Trust a few years ago and re-word it slightly:

'The Gift' is for life, not just for Christmas'.

Indeed, as Romans ch 6 v 23 reminds us, 'The gift of God is *Eternal Life*'.

Robert Kildea

Young Women's Group

The newly formed Young Women's group meets on the 3rd Tuesday of every month in the Blue Room. In November, we were treated to a cookery demonstration by Suzanne Patton which gave everyone some ideas for Christmas entertaining. In December Fiona McNamara was invited along to demonstrate the art of creating Christmas wreaths. This proved very popular as we set our green fingers to work on our own wreaths. Most recently in January Shannon Clegg put us through our paces with Keep Fit circuit training. If you haven't come along yet, and are curious about what we get up to, please join us. Here's what we have in store:

21st February Craft night

21st March Pamper evening (guest Mrs Lorna Angus)

18th April Spring Planters

16th May Beach walk

20th June Roving Supper



Elizabeth Coulter



The Beginners and Primary Classes had a wonderful time at their Christmas Party in early December. They were thoroughly entertained (and exhausted) for an entire hour by Jump Jiggle and Jive! It was an hour filled with energy and imagination, in which the children "flew" to the North Pole with special magic wands, travelled around the room wearing shiny cloaks, threw "snowballs" and wore Rudolf noses! They even had the chance to "decorate" Kathryn and Rosemary as human Christmas trees! This was followed by some much needed light refreshments. To finish the party everyone sang Jingle Bells as loudly as they could in the hope that a special visitor might appear. It must have worked because Santa arrived with a gift for each of the children.

The Sunday School Christmas service took place on 18th December and despite a few technical hitches it was a lovely opportunity to share the story of Christmas with the church family. The Beginners set the scene by dressing up as the Nativity characters as the congregation sang Away in a Manger, and Eliza, Harry, Heidi, and Jake lit the advent candles. Our readers, Ryan, Natalie, and James shared God's word with us, and we were led in prayer by Mark and James. The piano solo by Lauren, the Sunday School choir (complete with percussion band) singing "This Christmas Time" and the poem "Kings Came Riding" read by Oliver, Adam, and Andrew, all added to the atmosphere of celebration and worship.

Kathryn Chesney

The Gift : A Bethlehem Journey

A transformation took place in the church on Saturday 17th December. We hosted about 300 members of the congregation and local community for 'The Gift: A Bethlehem Journey' where we took an interactive walk through the first Christmas. Along the way we met soldiers, Mary & Joseph, shepherds, wise men, King Herod and the innkeepers to hear about the incredible events of that pivotal day.

Afterwards, guests were treated to a real life stable where they could meet sheep, calves, pygmy goats, a donkey and a pony to get an understanding of what it must have been like at Jesus' birth.

All before warming up in the hall with mince pies, crafts, games and a visit to see Santa in the winter wonderland.

The Gift served as a timely reminder of the true meaning of Christmas and the most precious gift of Jesus our Saviour. We were blessed to see how teams pulled together to make it all happen - bringing their own gifts. What a talented congregation we have! Whether in the set design, costume design, creating a winter wonderland, acting, crafting, donating materials or catering - each played a valuable role in helping us be an active presence for Jesus at such a special time in the Christian calendar.

We do hope to continue being visible in the village and look forward to hosting future events and activities with the main aim being to bless those in the surrounding area with the truth about the Messiah.

A big thank you to everyone involved, it really was a great team effort.

Claire Stewart

