

TRUSTEES' ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 DECEMBER 2024



FIRST NON-SUBSCRIBING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BELFAST

**Also known as First Church, Belfast
and
First Presbyterian Church, Belfast**

Charity Number: NI-106097

**PRINCIPAL ADDRESS:
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CHARITY TRUSTEES

The Charity Trustees who served during the year (listed below) were members of the General Committee which looks after the temporal and spiritual affairs of the congregation in accordance with its Constitution.

Dr D Alderdice	Mrs S Martin
Prof F Alderdice	Mr D McKeown
Mr R Allen	Ms B Perry
Mr L Crawford	Mr J Swann
Mr D Kerr	Dr P Topping

GENERAL COMMITTEE AND OFFICE-BEARERS FOR 2024

Minister-in-Charge Rev Chris Hudson MBE

General Committee Dr D Alderdice (Chair), Prof F Alderdice, Mr R Allen, Mr L Crawford, Mrs S Martin, Ms N McDowell, Ms B Perry

Office Bearers (ex-officio members of the General Committee)

Joint Honorary Secretaries	Dr P Topping and Mr D Kerr
Honorary Treasurer	Mr J Swann
Property Steward	Mr D McKeown
Honorary Collector of Stipend & Freewill Offerings	Mr L Crawford
Flower Secretary	Mrs S Martin
Director of Music:	Mr R Yarr MBE, DL

Other Positions

Representative Elder:	Mr D Kerr
Malvern School Committee	Dr P Topping

Property Trustees

Mr D Kerr, Mr HJD Mawhinney, Mr D McKeown, Mr J Swann, Dr P Topping and Mr R Wallace.

OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES

First Church is a congregation of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland and adheres to and is governed by the Constitution and Code of Discipline of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. It is represented at regular meetings of Presbytery and General Synod by our Minister-in-Charge and our Representative Elder. First Church is a home for thoughtful minds and open hearts. We celebrate the dignity of each individual's search for communion with the Divine and together live out faith in community. As an open and welcoming community of faith we respect each person's unique journey of faith and spirituality.

As part of our aims, we meet regularly for the public worship of God, in the spirit of Jesus. As disciples of Christ, we seek:

- To preach the word of God in accordance with the Constitution, Code of Discipline and Regulations of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland,
- To promote the Christian Faith without any requirement for Minister, Trustee or Members to subscribe to a doctrinal statement of faith as a condition of church membership.
- To offer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion), in accordance with the Constitution of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.
- To offer pastoral care to those in need within the church community and beyond, in particular to the sick and elderly within the community.
- To facilitate access to those in need to denomination charities as appropriate. To support wider community life, through the maintenance of good relations with all other religious traditions and community organisations.

In addition, First Church seeks to support a variety of charitable causes at home and abroad each year including the annual General Synod Moderator's Appeal.

First Church's historical congregation (established 1644) reflects the social and economic history of Belfast over the past 380 years. First Church is committed to protecting and promoting the built heritage it stewards through ensuring access to the public, maintaining the condition of its buildings and developing relevant supportive partnerships.

First Church is renowned for its excellent acoustics and is often used for recitals and recordings. In partnership with others such as NI Opera, First Church has been the venue for a Summer Recitals Programme for over 30 years.

PUBLIC BENEFITS

The direct benefit which flows from the above purpose is the provision of liberal Christian religious activities open to all. The benefits are evidenced by the conduct of regular services of Christian worship, the provision of a place to worship and the maintenance of an inclusive Christian community. Full participation is open to all people without creedal test and irrespective of political conviction, sexual orientation, civil status, community background or race. Those participating in services and activities are provided with an opportunity to practice and develop their religious beliefs through interaction with others. This results in increased social inclusion and community cohesion. There is no harm arising from these benefits. The Charity's beneficiaries are all those members of society who wish to be part of or associate with a liberal Christian organisation, and other individuals that the Charity is in direct or indirect contact within the community in which pastoral services are provided.

First Church also values the built heritage under its stewardship and seeks to sustain and share this by being freely open most days of the year. We welcome over eight thousand local and international visitors each year to enjoy the heritage on display and to benefit from the knowledgeable tours given by our honorary church historian.

First Church's recitals programmes are held throughout the year with a special series of concerts in July and August. These seek to both entertain and educate audiences and are freely available to the public.

The only private benefit flowing from our purpose is in relation to those who receive benefits as a result of their holding office or employment. However, this is incidental and necessary to further our charitable purpose. There are no other private benefits.

COMMITTEE REPORT 2024

The year 2024 was a year of change in many parts of the world. History was made in Northern Ireland when devolved government returned to the province. For the first time, the post of First Minister was taken by Sinn Féin with a Democratic Unionist Deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, and Emma Little-Pengelly MLA. The arrest and charging of the DUP leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson caused shockwaves throughout the province.

The Conservative Party lost a general election, allowing Sir Keir Starmer to become Prime Minister. In the United States, despite attempts to stymie him by the legal process, or by assassination, Donald Trump won the US presidential election giving him a second term in office.

Elsewhere, war continued in Ukraine, Russia, Sudan and in Israel, the Palestinian territories, and surrounding states. The government in Syria collapsed allowing a Turkish-backed Islamist faction to assume power. Stability in the Middle East seems as far away as ever.

At First Church, the Committee began the task of implementing the recommendations of Rev Dr Brian Ammons' report on the strategic priorities for the congregation over the next three years.

The Committee advertised for a part time Church Administrator to enable us to get our affairs in order. In due course, Ms Kim Walsh was appointed to the role. Since taking her position in the Spring, she has helped to transform for the better the way we do things. Our accounts are now more transparent and informative, we now publish a weekly email bulletin, we have been successful in winning a grant for much-needed repairs to the church fabric from the National Churches Trust, and we have set a budget for the first time for the coming year. The Committee pays tribute to Mr Jim Swann for his valuable work as acting Treasurer over the past year.

First Church has been co-operating with our sister churches, All Souls', Dunmurry and Mountpottinger for social events. Together, the Four Churches organised a bus trip to the NSPCI congregations of Co Down guided by Rev Dr David Steers, table quizzes in Dunmurry and at First Church, a reading of the names of people lost in the Troubles from **Lost Lives** in All Souls' and a lecture on Caravaggio by Dr Isabella Evangelisti in All Souls'. Mountpottinger is no longer involved and has been replaced by the Belfast Domestic Mission. Further joint

events planned for 2025 include a tour of Co Antrim NSPCI churches, a quiz, a lecture, and a reading from ***Lost Lives*** here at First Church.

Our search for a new minister is now under way. Our presbytery, the Synod of Munster, has declared our pulpit as formally vacant. The post has been advertised. Applicants will meet with the congregation and lead worship during the months of March and April. The Committee will keep members informed as the process goes on.

This year we have seen a number of special services and events at First Church. In January, Dr David Alderdice led our worship at a solemn remembrance on Holocaust Memorial Day. In March we had an uplifting service of Spring readings and appropriate music. Our Minister-in-Charge, Rev Chris Hudson, led our worship on Easter Sunday. In September, a former President of the Methodists in Great Britain, Rev Dr Inderjit Singh Bhogal spoke of his work in the Cities of Sanctuary movement. Colin Flinn led our Harvest Thanksgiving Service in October. David Kerr led our Remembrance Day service in November. The Moderator of the General Synod of the NSPCI, Rt Rev Alister Bell welcomed everyone to our successful service of Carols by Candlelight.

Our Summer Recitals celebrated thirty years in existence since they were founded by the late Billy and Beth McCay. Our Director of Music, Richard Yarr is now Chair of the Recitals Committee. We congratulate Richard on becoming a Deputy Lieutenant of the City of Belfast and on his appointment to the Arts Council of Ireland, *An Chomhairle Ealaíon*.

There were no baptisms or marriages in 2024. We regret the sad news of the death of Mary McCartan on 6th January 2025. Mary had been a highly regarded health visitor in deprived areas of Belfast. Her husband, Allan Blackstock had died in 2023. We offer our condolences to Alice and Peter on the loss of their much-loved mum.

At the end of 2019, before the Covid pandemic, we had 89 adult members and 12 junior members. As of February 2025, we have 66 members in total.

In 2024, we welcomed the following people to lead our worship: Rev Chris Hudson, Mr David Kerr, Mr Des McKeown, Rev Colin Campbell, Mr Ray Allen, Rev Dr David Steers, Mr Alex Huston, Rev Paul Bates, Ms Felicity Huston, Lord John Alderdice, Rev Cheryl Meban, Rev Andrew Rawding, Mr Alan Kirk, Rev Alan Kennedy, Rev Mark Hutchinson, Prof Jean Dumas, Mr Colin Flinn, Mrs Suzanne

Martin, Rev Dr Inderjit Bhogal, Dr Isabella Evangelisti, Rt Rev Alister Bell, Rev Brian Moodie, Rev Lynda Kane.

MUSIC REPORT

Since our last AGM, music at First Church has been as varied as ever, spanning services, recitals, and partnerships. The Banham Scholars, our Musician in Residence and church choir have enhanced services and special events with commitment and flair. It has been particularly good to welcome Nicola and Alexa to the choir: a small but mighty band! Thank you to each of them.

Services with a focus on music included those to mark the start of Spring and Summer, and Music Sunday on 27 October with guest musician, pianist Ruth McGinley. Special music was also provided for the visit of Rev Dr Inderjit Singh Bhogal OBE on 29 September and Remembrance Sunday, which included trumpeter Paul Young.

The annual Carol Service, on Sunday 22 December, was very well attended and received. As ever, this was accompanied by Tristan Russcher, who also provides organist cover across the year.

Last spring, I joined the Summer Recitals Committee, along with Dame Fionnuala Jay-O'Boyle. This was Billy Reid's final series as Chair: a role which I assumed at that start of this year. We thank Billy for taking this important lead for 10 years and also Cliona Donnelly for her time as Secretary with the Committee.

This year 6 recitals took place – a return to the number programmed before the pandemic – and they were as follows:

- Wednesday 24 July: Northern Ireland Opera Alto Trio – Jenny Bourke, Naomi Cantley, Anna-Helena Maclachlan & Tristan Russcher (piano)
- Wednesday 31 July: Luke Lally Maguire (piano)
- Wednesday 7 August: Northern Ireland Opera Soloists – Petra Wells (soprano), Desmond Havlin (tenor) & Tristan Russcher (piano)
- Wednesday 14 August: David Kennedy (baritone) & Jong-Sun Woo (piano)

- Wednesday 21 August: William Curran (clarinet) & Justine Gormley (piano)
- Wednesday 28 August: Cathal Masterson (piano)

Numbers attending were consistently good and we are most grateful to each of our artists and recital partners: Northern Ireland Opera and the Royal Irish Academy of Music. Again, we are indebted to Maureen Purdy and her team for their exceptional hospitality. Also to Recitals Committee member Des McKeown for his hard work, attention to detail and impeccable introductions.

Aside from the Director of Music salary, music at First Church costs around £6,000 per year. This includes fees to the Banham Scholars, the Musician in Residence and other visiting musicians. This year you will see greater promotion of music excellence at First Church. There will also be a number of fundraising efforts to ensure that this continues well into the future. So far I am delighted to announce the following:

Music in May:

First Church Celebrity Organ Recital: Friday 2 May at 7.30pm

Andrew Forbes, Director of Music at Glasgow Cathedral, performs popular classics on the Lewis Organ, along with the World Premiere of a new work by Coronation composer Roxanna Panufnik. This event is in partnership with the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition.

Hymns and Pimms: Saturday 17 May at 7.30pm

Sponsor, celebrate and enjoy 12 hymns performed by the Banham Scholars, with interesting facts provided, and Pimms to follow!

These are sure to be wonderful events. Do bring your friends!

Finally, I would like to thank the Church Committee and congregation for their encouragement across the year, and to pay tribute to our Church Administrator Kim Walsh and Property Steward Des McKeown for all their support of musical activities.

Richard Yarr, Director of Music: 4 February 2025

TREASURER'S REPORT

YEAR ENDING DECEMBER 2024

FORMAT OF ACCOUNTS

The format of the accounts for 2024 have been amended slightly to ensure we fully comply with the Charities Commission NI good practice and for greater transparency with grant awarding bodies. The accounts now include details of the Church's investments (see note 12 on page 6). In addition, the accounts have been separated into "unrestricted" and "restricted" categories for income, expenditure and funds. (Restricted income is that which the Church has received to be used for specific purposes and the restricted expenditure reflects where it has been spent; unrestricted income is that which the Church receives with no stipulations attached to it.)

SUMMARY

2024 was a slightly better year for our Church in terms of our finances, ending with a small surplus of about £1,129 within our unrestricted Revenue account. There was also a very small gain overall in our investments of £757. (See page 2).

However, we know that this year, 2025, will be financially challenging with the recruitment of a new part-time Minister and some significant essential capital works required to the Church and Central Hall. It is vital that the Church continues to focus on maximising its revenue streams and reducing unnecessary expenditure.

KEY POINTS TO NOTE FOR 2024

Income (See page 1)

- Offerings (which includes the gift aid claim for 2023) saw a decrease of 34% to £12,105 in 2024. The Committee would continue to encourage any Members who pay UK income tax or capital gains tax to consider signing a gift aid form if they have not already done so. Also, if you have signed a gift aid form and no longer pay income tax or capital gains tax, equal to the tax we reclaim on your donations please do notify us.
- Rental income: the property rental income of the shops and car park was £52,512 which is an increase of 33% on last year's figure of £39,374. This significant increase is partly due to the payment of arrears owed from 2023. The hire of the Church and Central Hall was £11,126, a decrease of about 21% (primarily due to some organisations no longer

having budgets to hire venues). Thanks again go to our Property Steward, Des McKeown, for his tireless work in renting out our Church and Central Hall and in liaising with our property agent, Frazer Kidd.

- Income from investments and interest saw an overall decrease this year by approximately 12% to £17,075. This was primarily due to a reduction in the value of the Manse investment fund which affected the dividend being paid out. The remaining investment funds increased over this year. (See notes 11 and 12 on page 6).
- Grant income: we received a £2,650 grant from the Benefact Trust this year towards work to repair the rainwater goods in the Church. A further £10,000 from the National Churches Trust and £10,000 from the Wolfson Foundation have also been awarded toward this work and will be claimed in 2025.
- In 2024 Charitable giving and collections from special services raised £1,279 (See note 9 on page 5).

Expenditure (See page 2)

- Property expenditure, including normal repair and maintenance, amounted to £10,449. This is down from £13,426 last year. However, there are significant repairs to both the Church and Central Hall that will need to be carried out this year. This ongoing maintenance includes repairs to electrics and to the Church and Central Hall roofs.
- Utilities (electricity, lighting, heating, and water) continue to be very high, at £17,889. This is reduced a little from 2023 (£18,328) but reflect the ongoing higher prices due to global energy costs. This is an area the Finance subcommittee are considering as they review the Church's expenditure.
- Salaries in 2024 were £10,032 which related to the appointment of our new Church Administrator, Kim Walsh, in April. The Organist and Director costs were £11,430 and payments to the Musician in Resident

cost (which includes costs for Musicians at special services) amounted to £2,750. Pulpit supply was £3,120 as the Church was without a Minister for the year. With the anticipated appointment of a new part-time Minister our salary costs will increase in 2025.

- Legal and professional fees cost £2,365, slightly lower than in 2023 (£2,450)
- In 2024 the Charitable giving and collections from special services and other subscriptions and donations amounted to £3,138. This does not include the sum of £300 raised through a Four Churches Quiz Night, yet to be given to Cork Unitarian Church. (See note 9 on page 5).

Funds

- The Manse Fund (see note 3 on page 4), saw an increase of 10.5% to £85,933. (This was lower than last year partly due to a lower dividend payment resulting from the fall in the value of the Manse investments, see note 12 on page 6).
- The Organ & Music Fund stands at £12,752. This funds the Banham Scholars, the Musician in residence, and musicians for special services. (See note 4 on page 4). To maintain this fund there are plans this year to hold fundraising concerts and to apply to grant awarding bodies.
- The Kennedy Memorial Fund stand at £98.
- The General Purposes Fund stands at £91,093. This is the monies available for the Church to use for its day-to-day expenditure.

Finally, we want to thank Mr Ryan McKeown ACA on his work in preparing the accounts for 2024 and to Falconer Stewart Accounts for undertaking the Independent Examination of these accounts.

FINANCE SUBCOMMITTEE REPORT

(For specific details about the 2024 Accounts, please see the Treasurer's Report)

The Church, and especially the Finance Subcommittee, want to particularly thank Jim Swann for assuming the role of Treasurer this year (after thinking that he could put his feet up and leave these kinds of responsibilities behind!). He has provided Kim Walsh, our new Administrator, with invaluable insight into the financial running of the church and the past history of these affairs. We are also grateful to Kim who has launched herself into the practical aspects of the financial life of the church and its future planning.

Over the past few months, the Finance Subcommittee has been regularly meeting to consider how the Church can manage its finances in a more streamlined, relevant, and efficient manner. Although the Church's finances have looked fairly healthy over this past year, there will be significant additional demands in 2025 reflecting the priorities of the Church, including essential repairs to the Church and Central Hall, and the appointment of a new minister.

Jim Swann and Kim have worked on changes to the monitoring of the church's income and expenditure. The Church now works to a budget which will be scrutinised by the Treasurer and members of the Finance Subcommittee, before reporting monthly to the General Committee.

Over the next 12 months the Church and the Central Hall will need to undergo considerable essential repairs. This will require substantial expenditure (as has been referred to extensively in previous Financial Reports). The monies will come largely from the Church's reserves, helped by the grants we have received. This past year the Church has been awarded three grants (from the National Churches Trust, the Wolfson Foundation and the Benefact Trust) to help towards the repairs of the Church's rainwater goods and the resulting water damage in the main Church. (This work is to be carried out in the Spring.)

New relationships are being established with charitable organisations to explore applying for further grants. These may be available to fund future essential capital repairs to the Church's buildings and to support musical events within the Church.

In addition to investigating grants, the Finance Subcommittee is exploring ways to make cost savings without impacting on the quality of what the Church provides, either spiritually or musically. Bolstering our income is also being

planned by examining how we can facilitate donations from the thousands of visitors to the Church each year, and by running more musical events which the Church can benefit from more directly.

The Finance Committee acknowledge that 2025 is likely to be a challenging year financially for the Church but we believe it is better placed now to take advantage of opportunities that may become available going forward.

Suzanne Martin (Chair)

Ray Allen

Des McKeown

Jim Swann (Treasurer)

APPROVAL OF CHARITY TRUSTEES' REPORT

This Charity Trustees' report was approved by the General Committee at a meeting on 18th October 2025 and signed on its behalf by Dr David Alderdice, Honorary Chair.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr David Alderdice', enclosed within a thin black rectangular border.

Dr David Alderdice
Chair of General Committee