

December 2023 / January 2024

THE bulletin Jesus

the Greatest Gift

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

2 Corinthians 9:15

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The Light Shines in the Darkness

There will be no Christmas lights in Bethlehem this year. Last week Christian leaders and municipal authorities in the West Bank city decided to cancel all public festivities in solidarity with the suffering in Gaza due to the Israel-Hamas war. For the first time since modern celebrations began, the birthplace of Jesus will not decorate the Manger Square tree.



Photo by Jorge Fernandez Salas on Unsplash

As I am writing these words - after nearly seven weeks in captivity, 13 Israeli hostages abducted by Hamas during the terrorist group's horrific October 7 attacks on Israel were released as part of a deal



Photo by Timon Studler on Unsplash

that has temporarily paused the fighting in the Gaza Strip. The 13 were all women and young children. While many are hoping this temporary truce may lead to something more durable both Hamas and the Israeli government

are both indicating that the fighting will continue.

It would be easy to say that as we approach Christmas we don't want to be reminded of what is happening in the land of Jesus' birth - it is too unpleasant and upsetting and doesn't fit in with



Photo by Mohammed Ibrahim on Unsplash

our desire to have a comfortable Christmas untroubled by the harsh realities of suffering and sorrow in our world.

Yet when you delve into the accounts of the first Christmas story as we find it in the Gospels

you find not the safe and sanitised version that we normally see today in Christmas cards and school nativity plays. Instead we find an altogether different story that does not avoid or attempt to hide the darkness and suffering that was as real and present in the Holy Land 2000 years ago as it is today.

The land of Israel 2000 years ago was not a nation that was truly at peace. The peace that existed was the peace that was enforced by the point of a sword wielded by the conquering Roman Empire. The Jews were a people living under occupation and revolts against that occupation occurred frequently. Although technically they had their own king - Herod, he was a puppet ruler who ruled in Rome's name. Nor was he popular among his subjects - he was feared rather than loved. Israel at the time of Jesus' birth resembled a police state. Those who lived under Herod's rule knew well what it was to experience Herod's paranoia and murderous anger.

The Bethlehem that Jesus was born into was not a particularly happy place that first Christmas. There were no special lights in Bethlehem at that time either, except for the brief display of supernatural light that illuminated the skies in hills near Bethlehem as angels announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds. There was little comfort or joy among the people of Bethlehem that first Christmas night. Remember the reason so many people were in Bethlehem in the first place was not to celebrate but to register for the Roman Emperor's tax raising census.

Sadly it was in Bethlehem that terror struck without warning. Herod, realising he had been deceived by the Magi, ordered all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under to be murdered. 2000 years ago there was great weeping in Israel just as there is in Israel and Gaza today. As Matthew records, "Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was

fulfilled: “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.” (Matthew 2:18)

And just as we have seen hundreds of thousands of Palestinians having to flee their homes to escape the Israeli Defence Force’s assault on the Hamas terror network we are reminded that Jesus and his family also had to flee Herod’s attack. They became for a time refugees in Egypt.

We often forget these harsh realities that are part of the Christmas story. There are of course no Christmas cards that dwell on the slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem or the flight to Egypt but these events show us that when God arranged the circumstances into which his Son was born on this earth He did not wrap him in cotton wool but rather right from the beginning of his life he had to face the harsh reality of fear and violence that was sadly part and parcel of life in first century Israel just as it is today. In this we learn the lesson of what it meant for Jesus to be Immanuel - ‘God with us.’ He was the Word made flesh - God come in human form and experiencing what we experience, what Israeli and Palestinian experience today.



There may be no lights to illuminate Bethlehem this Christmas but John assures us that there is a light that still shines no matter how great the darkness in our world. John says of the one born in Bethlehem, “In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” (John 1:4-5)

Jesus came into a broken and suffering world in order to bring peace through his atoning death on the cross.

He first of all works peace between sinful people and their Creator and then in turn he also enables us to know peace with others, even those we consider our enemies. That is the Good News that we need to bear witness to in a world of darkness filled with fear and violence. There is still a light that shines in the darkness - there is peace and reconciliation to be found in Jesus Christ the light of the world. He alone can banish the darkness and cause his light to shine in the blackest of hearts. "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

As we conclude our series on Gospel Shaped Outreach may we be challenged and encouraged to be witnesses to the light of the world this Christmas in our context as both Jewish and Palestinian Christians seek to bear witness to it in theirs.

I wish you all a peaceful Christmas and a hope filled New Year.

Yours in His service

Michael Davidson.

Dates for Communion Services in 2024

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper will be observed on these dates in 2024.

28 January – morning

26 May – morning

25 February – evening

30 June – evening

29 March – Good Friday evening

29 September – morning

28 April – evening

24 November – morning

The Lord's Table is not just for communicant members - it is open to all who know and love the Lord Jesus as their Saviour.

SERVICES FOR DECEMBER

3rd December

10:30am Christmas Gift Family Service

6.30pm Mission Focus: Open Doors
Mr John-George Cully

10th December

10:30am Gospel Shaped Outreach 9: How Do We Speak?
Michael Davidson

6.30pm 2 Peter 3:17-18 'Grow in Grace'
Michael Davidson

17th December

10:30am Gospel Shaped Outreach 10: How Do We Keep Going?
Michael Davidson

6.30pm Carols by Candlelight Service
Rev Leslie Addis

24th December

10:30am Micah 5:1-5 'A Mighty Ruler From A Little Town'
Michael Davidson

25th December

10:30am Christmas Day Family Service - 'Jesus - The Greatest Gift'

31st December

10:30am 3 John 'Which Direction Are We Looking?'
Stephen Johnston

SERVICES FOR JANUARY

Mornings: Romans - A Letter that Makes Sense of Life

Evenings: Songs to Chase the Winter Blues Away - The Psalms

7th January

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 10:30am | Romans 1:1-7 'Greetings & Gospel'
Michael Davidson |
| 6.30pm | James 4:13-17 'If Tomorrow Never Comes'
Rev Leslie Addis |

14th January

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 10:30am | Genesis 12:1-9 'Leave and Go'
Rev Brian Gibson (Railway Street Minister Emeritus) |
| 6.30pm | Psalms 120 'The Pilgrim Path'
Michael Davidson |

21st January

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 10:30am | Romans 1:8-17 'Motivation for Ministry'
Michael Davidson |
| 6.30pm | Psalms 126 'Those Were the Days'
Rev George McClelland |

28th January

- | | |
|---------|--|
| 10:30am | Romans 1:14-32 'Understanding Unbelief' (Communion)
Michael Davidson |
| 6.30pm | Psalms 123 'Till He Shows Mercy'
Michael Davidson |



Watch online at
www.railwaystreet.org




Telephone Line Service
028 9244 8979

Railway Street Christmas Market



hosted by
Girls Brigade &
Boys Brigade



 **Saturday 2nd December**
10am-2pm



We'll have market stalls,
crafts, auction items and
a special visit from Santa

Come along and enjoy
breakfast, lunch, tray
bakes, tea and coffee
and loads of other treats

All welcome, bring a friend
and no charge for entry



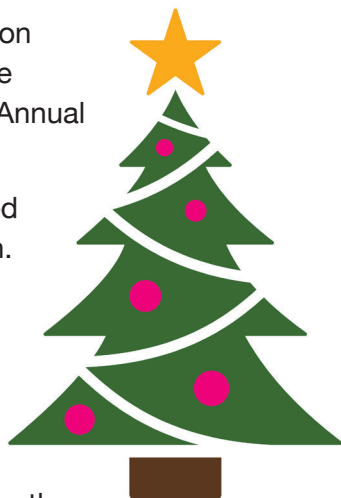
CHRISTMAS GIFT SERVICE – SUNDAY 3rd DECEMBER 2023

As a timely reminder please note that, on the above Sunday morning, gifts will be received for the Belfast City Mission's Annual Appeal for needy children.

Full details of the items being requested were included in the November bulletin.

For those intending to make monetary donations, your contributions can be increased by using GIFT AID so, to facilitate this, special envelopes are available in the vestibule and in The Link. Please take one and complete the details requested.

Late donations will also be welcome on 10th December.



Carol Service Rehearsals

Rehearsals for the Carol Service continue on **Sunday 3rd & 10th December from 12:00pm - 12.45pm after morning service.**

The time of the rehearsal on afternoon of Carol Service 17th December with accompanists is yet to be confirmed.



Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

Prayer Focus Luke 11:1 “Lord, teach us to pray.”

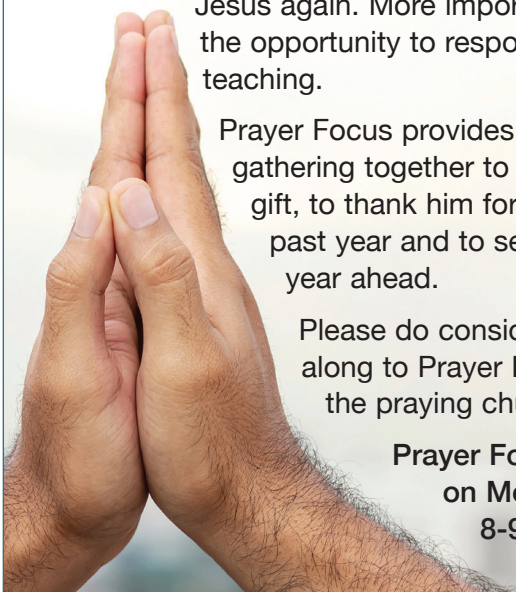
“I can’t believe it is nearly Christmas! This year has flown!” So many people are making these comments or something similar. It is a timely reminder of how quickly life goes by.

Christmas gives the opportunity of hearing of the birth of Jesus again. More importantly it gives each of us the opportunity to respond to Jesus and his teaching.

Prayer Focus provides the opportunity of gathering together to thank God for his priceless gift, to thank him for his faithfulness during the past year and to seek his guidance for the year ahead.

Please do consider this invitation to come along to Prayer Focus and become part of the praying church.

Prayer Focus will meet in the Link on Monday 18 December from 8-9pm and again on Monday 15 January from 8-9pm



Bible Discovery

This term's Bible Discovery will conclude on Thursday 7 December, reopening DV on Thursday 18 January

We meet in the Minor Hall at

**10.45am (or 10.30am in The Link for coffee)
on alternate Thursdays**

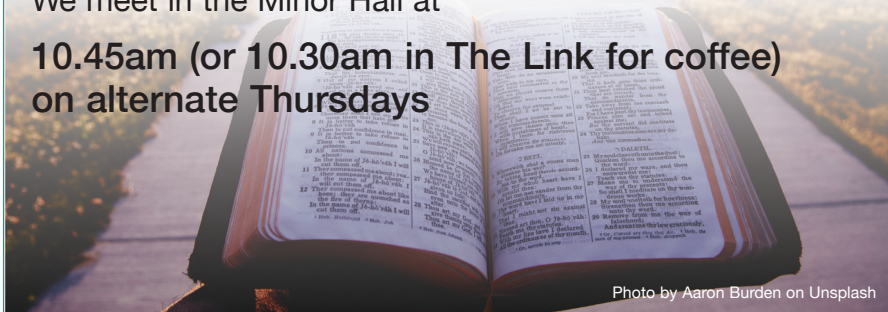


Photo by Aaron Burden on Unsplash

Wider World

Subscriptions for Wider World 2024 are now due.

The price remains the same at £7 for four issues.

Please return your money in the brown envelope provided with the December edition.

This can be given to Dorothy McClelland, or placed on the offering plate.

If there is any change in your order or if you would like to receive the magazine for the first time, please speak to Dorothy - Tel. 028 9267 7249.

To enable reordering, please return envelopes by 31 December.



Handel's MESSIAH



Please come and experience Handel's Messiah under the baton of Tom Fetherstonehaugh

Conductor with the Ulster Orchestra, guest soloists and the Belfast Philharmonic Choir in the Waterfront Hall, Belfast on Saturday 9 December 2023 at 7.30pm (please note one concert only).

Messiah tells of the real-life drama of the unmerited offer to humankind to be delivered from sin and the promise of eternal life by the long-promised Messiah. George Frederic Handel's (1685–1759) oratorio embraces some 53 passages of Holy Scripture starting from the Old Testament prophesy to the New Testament revelation of Christ's birth, passion, resurrection, ascension and second coming.

If you have never experienced hearing Handel's masterful oratorio then come along and be transformed!

To purchase tickets please call the Box office

Tel: 028 9033 4455 (open 12pm - 5pm, Monday to Friday).



Please keep any used Christmas stamps and put them in the box on the vestibule table

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All welcome

Thursday 28th December | 2.30pm | in the Link

Memories of Christmas Past
+ *Surprise Guest*

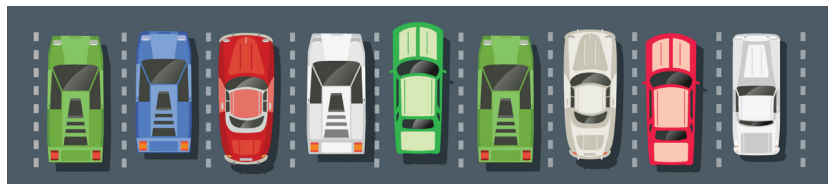
Thursday 25th January | 2.30pm | in the Minor Hall

Sing in the New Year
Country & Gospel Music by Jim Ferguson

Car Park

The renewal notices for 2024 are being sent out with the envelopes as previously done. This will give instructions for payment and when the forms must be returned. If you do not wish to renew your access, can you please return any fobs to Ian Barron or to the office postbox in an envelope with your name and address on it so it may be deleted from the system.

As explained on the form, car park fees must be received by 31st January 2024 otherwise the fob will become invalid.



Presbyterian Herald

The Presbyterian Herald is the official monthly magazine of our denomination and contains a wide range of articles and news items. It is available by subscription either in soft copy through the PCI website or by hard copy usually available on the first Sunday of each month. If you do not currently subscribe to a hard copy of the Herald and would like to please speak to our Session Clerk and he will arrange this for you.



Subscriptions for the 2024 Herald will be due in January and envelopes to collect this will be available with the January magazine. The subscription for 2024 is £20. Please place the envelope enclosing your subscription on the offering plate before the last Sunday in January 2024 to allow these to be paid in good time.

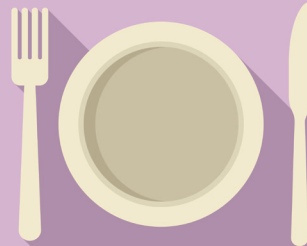
Church Secretary

We are pleased to advise that at the Congregational Committee meeting in October, Mrs Liz Fortin was elected as Church Secretary in succession to Miss Elizabeth Bridgett. We wish to record our thanks to Elizabeth for her faithful service over her seven and a half years as our 17th Church Secretary and are delighted that she has decided to remain as a member of our Church Committee.

We welcome Liz to her new role and pray God's blessing on her as she serves our church family as our 18th Church Secretary.

New Year New You What's on Your Plate?

Monday 22 January
8.00pm
in the Minor Hall



Mission boxes to be returned

ASSEMBLY BUILDINGS CONFERENCE CENTRE, BELFAST
SATURDAY 2 MARCH 2024


HOW TO
CHANGE
THE WORLD

SPEAKER:
CARL MATTHEI



THREE TALKS
FROM TITUS

WWW.IRISHMENSCONVENTION.COM

Irish Men's Convention 'How to Change the World: 3 Talks from Titus'

We have pre-purchased
a number of tickets for
this great event. Further
information will be given
in the New Year.

End of Year Accounts

As we approach the end of this year, we would remind you that to be included in the 2023 Accounts and Annual Report, ALL contributions to the church funds must be forwarded **no later than Sunday 7th January 2024**. Contributions received after that date will be included in the 2024 Accounts.

If you never had or you would like Freewill Offering Envelopes for 2024 or if you would like to subscribe to the church funds by monthly Standing Order through your own bank, or maybe as a Tax Payer you have not yet signed up to the Gift Aid Scheme (the HMRC will refund to the church 25% of all your contributions at no expense to yourself thus enhancing our church bank balances), please contact: Gordon Wallace (Treasurer) or Edith McConnell (FWO/Gift Aid Secretary) who will be happy to help arrange this.

Treasurers of our organisations should arrange to have their finalised 2023 accounts with our Treasurer or Deputy Treasurer by no later than 31 January 2024.

Finance Update

You will all be well aware of the £30,000 shortfall in the church finances for 2022; I had indicated previously that the giving in quarters 2 & 3 for the current financial year was up and at the end of September was some £15,000 better than last year and was looking promising for the end of the year.

However, the darker nights of Autumn combined with inflation



hitting individual's daily spend, along with other funding asks for our church - including repayments on the Link loan – has unfortunately seen no further improvement in our FWO in the recent weeks.

Whilst October and November see FWO remaining at 2022 levels, it will need a strong December to reduce the £15,000 which still remains as a shortfall for 2023 at this stage.

On the out-going side, costs for the year are likely to come in at a similar level to last year with Salaries and payments to PCI up by inflation, whilst heat & light costs are down from their high peak of last year as well as a reduction in our printing costs.

Congregational giving for Harvest totalled £3,535 this year and is only slightly below the 2022 level. United Appeal continues to be consistent and should meet the target of £13,049 for the full year.

Finally, repayments to the Link Loan Account are intended to be covered by the bi-annual gift days and whilst the November “Gift Day” is on going at the time of writing, it is at almost £20,000 (with gift aid) against a six-monthly need of around £24,000 on top of the regular monthly payments by a number of members.

Your ongoing generosity is greatly appreciated during these continuing difficult economic times and rising costs and our sincere thanks goes to all who continue to respond so positively.

Many Thanks

Gordon Wallace, RSPC Treasurer

Introduction to Presbytery Consultation

In the September/October Bulletin, Michael explained the background to the Presbytery Consultation process which, for our congregation began back in April when we received the questionnaires for completion and details of the supporting documents that the Presbytery Commission required. At the Kirk Session meeting in September the following were appointed as Railway Street's team to meet with the Commission:

Adam Baird, Sophie Blythe, Heather Henry, Andrew Johnston, Stephen Johnston (Chairman), Hilary Milligan, Daniel Nelson and Gordon Wallace.

Our team met with the members of the Presbytery Commission in early October to explore areas of our church's life they chose to focus on following their review of our submissions. Members of the Commission met separately with our Minister later in the month of October to discuss the same areas with him.

The Presbytery Commission prepared their report and this was submitted to the Dromore Presbytery meeting on 7 November by their convenor, Rev Paul Jamieson. Presbytery were content to accept the report as presented and our Session Clerk responded to Presbytery on behalf of our Minister and Congregation. The report was read to our Kirk Session at their meeting on 13 November by the Session Clerk and it was agreed that the full report be read to the congregation and a copy provided in the December / January Bulletin. As you will see, the Commission chose to focus their attention on some areas of our church life more than others. This is a normal part of the Consultation process and is not something to be concerned about.

Our sincere thanks go to all involved in any way in any way with the Consultation. We are especially grateful to those who served on our

team with each one making a significant and valued contribution.

We give thanks to God for the very positive outcome of the Presbytery Consultation as further evidence that He continues to build His church in Railway Street.

A copy of the report is provided below.

Railway Street Presbyterian Consultation

The Link was a hive of activity. Over 80 girls of all ages skipped through making their way to their respective sections of the newly formed GB. Parents mingled with a group of very friendly church volunteers. The smell of freshly brewed coffee made the welcome even more inviting! It was a joy to experience a genuine welcome, engaging fellowship and overwhelming excitement.

The encouragement continued as the Consultation Panel met with a mixed group of church members, Elders, Committee members, Youth leaders of varying ages. Some in the group had recently become members of Railway Street, others were seasoned veterans! The Clerk of Session introduced the group and everyone had the opportunity to highlight their involvement at the church. There was a general consensus of positivity, about the church leadership, its mission strategy, clarity in its vision through the renewed Mission Plan, a growing community seeking to connect with all ages. The GB Captain was most encouraging at the newly formed company, she was inspirational sharing the aims and objectives of GB, praised her leadership team and shared of opportunities through GB to become an integral part of growing Railway Street congregation.

We worked through the five sections with the working group and reflected upon their responses already provided.

1. Worship

Many commented on the content of Rev Davidson's preaching, a thought provoking challenge from the Word of God each week. A deep commitment to faithful expository preaching, with apt application. There is a real focus on family, welcoming all ages, but especially reaching out to the unchurched being connected through BB and GB. The service style would be mildly contemporary with music sensitively chosen to support the Biblical text. This brings a more relaxed feel to worship, that almost everyone appreciates. A comment of encouragement, "the gap between young and old has significantly narrowed!" The congregation is blessed with a number of gifted Bible teachers, a Bible College Lecturer, an Accredited Preacher and a very gifted Deaconess, who all participate in worship regularly.

The congregation is also blessed with a number of gifted musicians, they choose praise carefully and are developing contemporary and traditional praise.

2. Outreach

The new Link project recently opened has become a focus for much outreach. Every effort is made to connect with parents in a very invitational way to welcome those who are not attending church. A conscious decision was made to reach into the BB and newly formed GB company and encourage parents with no church connection to become involved in the life of Railway Street. The strong BB and GB have become the recruiting ground for the congregation with many young

families forming deeper connections.

The Link is also used for a Wednesday morning coffee morning welcoming both the congregation and the wider community.

The Kirk Session updated their social media presence and find this an effective means to reach out to the community.

The congregation have a strong link to Brownlee Primary School and make every effort to engage with the children and parents. One of the elders is the Chairperson of the Board of Governors.

The congregation is actively involved with a number of mission initiatives with many young people involved in trips to Romania with Exodus.

3. Discipleship

There is a deep commitment to expository preaching believing this is the most effective means to encourage all people, some growing in faith and those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. There is a structured curriculum for Sunday School and youth activities to dovetail into the subject of teaching in the main service of worship.

In addition to Sunday worship, there are a number of Bible study programmes in place for people to develop their Biblical knowledge, resources from Christianity Explored, PCI Tides and London Institute for Contemporary Christianity have been used. Discipleship Groups are being re-launched to encourage people to grow together informally in home settings.

4. Leadership

The group made reference to the leadership style of Rev Davidson, he is an encourager and journeys with people in all situations. The congregation is blessed with a committed, serving Kirk Session and dedicated Committee.

As a Panel, we were most encouraged by the formation of a new GB company who have over 80 members of mixed ages. There is a very healthy uptake of leadership for this new venture with over 18 people being prepared to serve the Church in this capacity. There is a growing number of people involved in the leadership of GB and BB, Sunday School and youth activities.

A mentoring scheme has been introduced helping to identify and encourage leaders into all areas of church life, including service on Committee.

Six new elders were elected in 2021 and have embraced the role with enthusiasm. Good relationships have been fostered within the Kirk Session, this has enabled decision making to flow from healthy open conversations.

5. Pastoral Care

The Kirk Session follow the enhanced traditional model of pastoral care with the district elder model. There are 18 districts, each district allocated to an elder. The Minister and Deaconess oversee nursing homes and residential care provision. The Youth Coordinator has pastoral responsibility for young people under the age of 30.

Consideration is being given to developing a Pastoral Care Team under the leadership of the Deaconess, this is at an early

stage.

There is a meals ministry for those going through times of difficulty in bereavement or illness. This ministry is much appreciated.

The Minister and his family are supported by a loving, supportive Kirk Session and Church family. The Clerk of Session meets regularly with Rev Davidson to support and encourage and share the pressures of leadership in these challenging days.

Conclusion

As a Panel, we were very encouraged meeting with the group and the Minister of Railway Street. This congregation has emerged well from Covid and, while they identify all the challenges, there is a renewed enthusiasm and confidence to move forward in Christ with the aim to see people come to faith and grow in love for others.

Recommendations

1. The Mission Plan highlights the provision of a Tot's group as a form of outreach, this could be a very helpful opportunity to connect with the community.
2. The decision to reform the home groups as Discipleship Groups could enhance opportunity for growth and development.
3. The Minister should avail of the opportunity to take a Sabbatical within the next 12 months.

Dromore Presbytery Consultation Panel

7 November 2023

What's happening?

SUNDAYS AT RAILWAY STREET

MORNING SERVICE 10.30am (live streamed)

BEGINNERS - No. 31

KIDS - Upper Room

JUNIOR YOUTH - Minor Hall

EVENING SERVICE 6.30pm

SENIOR YOUTH - Upper Room

BOYS' BRIGADE (Sept to April)

Monday - Company Section 7.30pm-9pm

Tuesday - Anchor Boy Section 6.30pm-7.30pm &
Junior Section 7pm-8.15pm

GIRLS' BRIGADE (Sept to April)

Thursdays: Tiny Tots & Explorers - 6pm-7pm

Juniors, Seniors & Brigaders - 7.30pm-9pm

PRAYER FOCUS

3rd Monday of each month 8pm-9pm in the Link

BIBLE DISCOVERY (Sept - April)

1st & 3rd Thursday each month at 10.45am - Minor Hall

DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS (Sept - June)

Tues & Wed bi-monthly 8pm-9.30pm in various homes

PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN (Sept - June)

4th Monday of each month at 8pm - Minor Hall

422 (Sept - June)

4th Thursday of each month at 2.30pm - Minor Hall

THE LINK UP

Every Wednesday 10am - 12noon in the Link