

# Special Guest on Pilgrim Way

Fife route features on Radio 4 Ramblings programme

BBC broadcaster Clare Balding was a special guest on the Fife Pilgrim Way in December.

Clare, and her producer Karen, were walking some of the path to record an episode of her BBC Radio 4 show Ramblings, which will be broadcast at the end of January.

The Fife Pilgrim Way team of Tom, James and Craig met Clare and Karen at Clatto Reservoir on a very wintry morning, with temperatures as low as minus six degrees. Craig set up a scope at the bird hide and Clare was able to observe the swans on the icy water.

They then walked to Ceres where they were joined by Peter Milne from Ceres Church, Dr Paula F de C Martin from Fife Folk Museum and Grant Robertson from Ceres Highland Games, before continuing further on the path.

The Fife Pilgrim Way follows a 64-mile medieval pilgrim route across the county.



Ramblings features Clare and guests sharing inspiring conversations in the Great Outdoors.

The Fife episode will be broadcast on Radio 4 at 3pm on Thursday January 30 and just after 6am on Saturday February 1 and will be available on BBC Sounds. ■

**Welcome** to the Life and Work monthly newsletter, a free resource helping Church of Scotland members stay up-to-date with everything going on in the Church and its partners.

Each month there will be exclusive features, news and updates from Church organisations.

The newsletter is free to download from [www.lifeandwork.org/newsletter](http://www.lifeandwork.org/newsletter). Feel free to share with church members, friends and family, and get in touch if you have any comments or suggestions.

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# Persecution at Record High

This year's World Watch List reveals one in seven Christians now facing high level of persecution

MORE than 380 million Christians around the world now face high levels of persecution and discrimination, according to the compilers of this year's World Watch List (WWL).

The figure represents one in seven Christians around the world, and is an increase of 15 million on last year's figures and 140 million since 2018.

Open Doors International, which compiles the WWL, blames a combination of 'chaos' – ongoing conflicts and areas of lawlessness – and 'control' – authoritarian regimes that systematically persecute Christians – for the worsening figures.

Each year WWL ranks the 50 nations where Christians face the most extreme persecution and discrimination.

The worst country in the world to be a Christian remains North Korea, where Christians face possible summary public execution if they are discovered. Somalia stays at number two on the list, while the rest of the 'top ten' countries also remain the same from last year, in a slightly different order – Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan.

Further down, the list, the sharpest rises are seen in Central Asia. The largest rise is in Kyrgyzstan (up 14 places to 47th), where restrictions on religious freedoms and violence against churches have increased. Kazakhstan (38th) and Tajikistan (39th) also rose in the ranking.



A house church in Kyrgyzstan

"The threat from authoritarian regimes in Central Asia has intensified to the point where many Christians in the region are in a state of fear," says Frans Veerman, Managing Director of Open Doors World Watch Research.

The most violent place in the world for Christians is Sub-Saharan Africa, with Nigeria (7th), Mali (14th), Burkina Faso (20th), Central African Republic (27th), Niger (28th) and Democratic Republic of the Congo (35th) all appearing on the list. Open Doors states that government instability and civil conflict in these areas has created a vacuum in which Islamic militant groups can target Christians. The growing violence is also causing a refugee crisis as millions of people are forced to leave their homes.

In the Middle East, the report warns that several Christian communities are 'on the verge of extinction. Syria (18th on the list) has seen a continuing exodus of its Christian communities, which now face an uncertain future under the country's new leaders.

Released at the beginning of each year, the WWL uses extensive research, data from Open Doors field workers, their in-country networks, external experts, and persecution analysts to quantify and analyse persecution worldwide. They analyse pressures faced by Christians in private, family, community and national life, and the threat of violence. Each edition is certified by the International Institute for Religious Freedom. ■

## Neuroscience and Faith

NEUROSCIENCE will be used to explore the relationship between faith and science at this year's Annual Public Lecture by Heriot-Watt University's Chaplaincy in Edinburgh.

Dr Sharon Dirckx (right), an author, international speaker and former brain imaging scientist, will deliver the free lecture, entitled *Are Humans Unique?*, on Monday 3 February, from 7pm-8.30pm at the James Watt Centre on the University's Riccarton campus.

Dr Dirckx studied biochemistry before moving into research in the area of Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging [fMRI], a type of scanning that enables scientists to look inside the brain – without cutting into it – at its structure and activity, in all kinds of situations.

"I became fascinated with this technique and studied for a PhD at the University of Cambridge, before conducting postdoctoral research into the brain networks involved in human cocaine abuse at the Medical College of Wisconsin in the United States," Dr Dirckx explained.

She describes her lecture at Heriot-Watt University Chaplaincy as a 'neuroscientific exploration of mind, soul and consciousness.'

"I'll consider different philosophical and scientific approaches to the essence of humanity," she said. "By taking a materialist approach to mind, soul and consciousness, I'll show that matter is not all you need to explain everything about understanding humans. I'll also show how clinical neuroscience and theological considerations create a complex picture."

Each year, the Chaplaincy's Annual Public Lecture explores the relationship between science and faith through a current issue or scientific development. Are they mutually exclusive, or might they combine to offer deeper insights into the world as we know it?

The Reverend Jane Howitt, Chaplain of Heriot-Watt University, said: "We are delighted that Dr Dirckx is presenting our annual public lecture and look forward to hearing her insights into science and theology."

Dr Dirckx will also be the guest preacher on Sunday February 2 at Heriot-Watt University's 58th annual Anniversary Service. This celebrates the University receiving a Royal Charter in 1966 and will take place at 10.30am in Currie Kirk.

Dr Dirckx's career includes working for 12 years as a lecturer and tutor at the Oxford Christian Centre for Apologetics (OCCA), a charity that works with local churches to help people respond to difficult questions and objections to Christianity in workplaces, schools, the media and the arts.

The lecture is free and open to the public. Light refreshments will be served from 6.15pm.

The lecture will be interpreted into British Sign Language (BSL).

To attend this event in person, register via Eventbrite by Thursday January 30: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/are-humans-unique-heriot-watt-chaplaincy-annual-public-lecture-tickets-1109134153109>



## What's On

### Legacies of Slavery Webinars

**Wednesday January 22, 7-9pm**

**Wednesday February 5, 1-3pm**

**Online**

Following a General Assembly report in 2023, the Church of Scotland has committed to acknowledging its historical connections to Transatlantic slavery, and their enduring impacts, including racism and inequality.

These two online seminars will be led by the Rev Dr Elijah Obinna, convener of the Racial Justice Programme Group, and the Very Rev Sally Foster Fulton, and will include prayer, dialogue, and shared learning - including insights from an ecumenical pilgrimage to Jamaica.

Visit <https://forms.office.com/e/H6P69H3WiC> to register.

### Restoring Faith in Community

**Wednesday February 5, 12.30-4pm**

**Interfaith Dialogue Centre,**

**110 Flemington Street, Glasgow**

Marking World Interfaith Harmony Week, Interfaith Scotland are co-hosting this event with Police Scotland and Action on Prejudice.

The event will explore dealing with difficult dialogues, building bridges and restoring faith with Police Scotland, and being an active bystander. Register at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/restoring-faith-in-community-tickets-1144036256239?>

### Christian Aid Supporter

#### Gathering

**Tuesday February 25, 10.30am-12pm**

**Online**

An opportunity for supporters to hear from Christian Aid partners and prepare for Christian Aid Week in this, the charity's 80th anniversary year.

Sign up at

<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/events/gathering-2025>

## In February's Life and Work

### 'More Than We Could Ever Have Hoped'

Churches offering a regular warm space in the depths of winter

### Becoming a Christian at 40

A reader's reflection

### Stories of Ordinary People

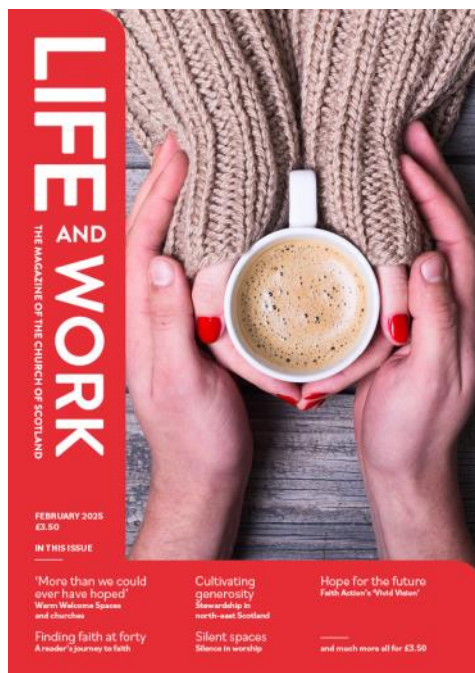
John L Bell talks about his latest book

### Connection and Purpose

Neill Shaw highlights how churches in Priority Areas provide a welcoming home for people experiencing hardship.

### Cultivating Generosity

Stewardship in north-east Scotland



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## The Big Picture

St Margaret's Inch, Forfar Loch by John Crichton



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