

Oscailt

Oscailt since January 2005 has become the monthly magazine for Irish Unitarians. Originally it was the calendar for Dublin but due to popular demand by non members this new format was born and continues to grow and flourish.

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Front Cover: Mavis Ramazni
(photo P. Spain)

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Oscailt

Our magazine title, ***Oscailt***, is inspired by the account of the **Healing of the Deaf and Mute Man** in St. Mark's Gospel, Chapter 7. Jesus commands the mans ears to open up with Aramic word "Ephphatha" - open ! The Irish word *oscailt*, (from the verb *oscail*, to open), means an opening, or, metaphorically, it could mean a revelation or a beginning.

Cover Picture

This months cover is of Mavis Ramazni at the service on the 13th February she read the lesson from Mathew 25.

Mavis Ramazani, the mother of two daughters, is originally from South Africa. She was an asylum-seeker for several years in Hatch Street Direct Provision centre in Dublin. She set up 'Cooking for Freedom', which supported women in Direct Provision who wanted to cook for their families (at that time there were no cooking facilities in many Direct Provision centres, only basic canteen food), and which was supported by Dr. Emer O'Reilly and the Dublin Unitarian Church. Mavis now has refugee status and works for the Irish Refugee Council.

Church reopening.

With the easing of Covid restrictions the church is gradually coming back to life. We will of course continue to ensure that people are safe in our building but we are looking forward to more normal days ahead.

Service of reflection & Remembrance 11.00 Friday 18th March.

March 18th has been designated a day of commemoration and remembrance of Covid. While this church may not have lost any members to the covid virus there are many people who experienced bereavement during the time when funerals were limited to just ten people. The ritual of a funeral service is part of the scaffolding that supports the bereaved through the early days of loss. The absence of a traditional funeral has affected the grieving process for many people. While others may not have suffered bereavement for everyone the past two years have been a time of worry, isolation, unease and loss. We need to acknowledge our losses. On Friday 18th March at 11.00a.m. we will hold a service of music, readings and reflection. Volunteers for musical contributions are welcome.

Good Friday 15th April 2022

For almost twenty years on Good Friday we have held a service where we read the names of more than three thousand people who died in thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland. This is not the best attended service but it is an important one because we are the only group that remembers every lost life. After some discussion the Managing Committee decided that rather than just allowing the service to fade away that we will hold the service this year and discuss future services at the AGM in April.

Sunday 24th April AGM of the Congregation. (see page16)

Sunday Club

Our aim is to gradually resume Sunday club and our Junior and Senior

Coming of Age programmes. To do this we need to re-establish our rota of volunteers to take Sunday club. If anyone is willing to help with Sunday Club please let have your name and contact details. We promise that volunteers will have support in leading Sunday Club.

Rotas

This church depends volunteers. We have a rota for people to act as welcomer, readers at the service, flowers. Our Choir is made up of volunteers. When we resume after service tea and coffee we will need volunteers to make and serve coffee and tea and to do the washing up.

Services

It is said that everyone has at least one service in their head. If anyone would like to take a service please let me know and I can slot you in!!

To all our volunteers I say thank you for your help and we welcome offers of help to maintain the smooth running of the church.

Kylemore Abbey

I am sure that you all know the beautiful Kylemore Abbey in Co. Galway. The Abbey was built by Mitchel Henry who was a Unitarian. Mitchel Henry was baptised in Cross Street Chapel Manchester. To honour the memory of his wife Margaret, Mitchel Henry built a beautiful gothic Church in the grounds of the Abbey. The Abbey is now home to a congregation of Benedictine Nuns. The Abbess Sister Maura Hickey has given her permission for us to hold a short service in the Church. The setting is beautiful, the grounds are wonderful, the food served in the restaurant is great. We will explore the possibility of making a trip to Kylemore in Spring/early Summer.

Welcome back I hope to see you soon.

Bridget

What age are you?

My address today offers reflection on the value of socialising, building friendships, forging relationships, and working with others who are older or younger in years than each of us. A sociologist might refer to inter-generational connection and point out the potential advantages of social, emotional and vocational connection across generations. Put more simply, I am making the case for the benefits and likely gains of ‘hanging out’ with those beyond your immediate age group.

There is a lot of evidence, both anecdotal and scientific, that we all benefit from being in the company of people who are different ages to us, who are younger than us, who are older than us. We can learn from them, be inspired by them, be frightened by them, derive love and affection from them. And they from us also; it is of course a two-way flow of benefit.

My thoughts here are prompted by two things that happened to me in the past year. The first will probably appear to you all as an onset of paranoia. However, over the last five years, I found I was increasingly finding myself in the company and presence of people that I am, now inelegantly, describing as older people. Men with grey hair, and sometimes grey beards. Woman of the same uncertain age. Whenever my wife Rita and I went into a restaurant, such people were also there. When we went to the theatre, such people also followed us there. I was perplexed.

But five years ago, I formally retired from a wonderful 35 years of teaching and working in a third level institution. There I worked with students and colleagues of all ages from 17 to 70. No particular age group or cohort was pre-eminent – not even students, as my work often involved engagement with mature, world savvy, learners. Interaction and communication across all age groups in this university environment seemed perfectly natural. On retirement, I no longer had access to this diversity of age groups.

And then one day last year, as I crossed the threshold of my Biblical three score years and ten, I looked in the mirror and saw that *I had* - just like many of those older people who had been following me about over the past five years - grey hair and a grey beard. I had not found my tribe. Rather they had found me, indeed found me out. And I resolved to be more proactive in connecting and communicating across generations into the future.

The second incident, prompting my thoughts here this morning, fills me with a certain sense of shame. Late last year, I was chatting with someone who is a friend, and a teacher to me. She was describing somewhat tetchily how her daughter, who was in her second year in a Dublin university, was shirking some domestic duties and had been reluctant to take up a lucrative part-time local job opportunity.

‘Sounds to me like she is a snowflake’, came my mischievous comment. Now calling someone a snowflake is not nice. Here is how Wikipedia, the free online encyclopaedia, defines the word. ‘Snowflake’ is a 2010s derogatory slang term for a person, implying that they have an inflated sense of uniqueness, an unwarranted sense of entitlement, or are overly-emotional, easily offended, and unable to deal with opposing opinions. Common usages include the terms ‘special snowflake’, ‘Generation Snowflake, and ‘snowflake’ as a politicised insult.’ Wow, what had I done? Another old foggy calling out a young millennial as she tries to come to terms with an adult world.

My sense of anxiety, and shame, for my name-calling, was further compounded a few weeks later when I read a book review by the journalist Fintan O’Toole of Sally Rooney’s new novel entitled *Beautiful World: Where Are You*. O’Toole argues that Rooney is the novelist who speaks for the millennial generation, i.e., those young people now in their twenties and thirties. I quote: ‘Sally Rooney is regarded, not without reason, as the novelist who best expresses the lives of those born into the western middle class in the 1990s. They are, like Rooney herself, turning 30. They live in a very 21st-century world of precarious employment, rampant consumerism, inadequate housing, fluid sexuality, social-media saturation, instant celebrity and the existential dread of the climate crisis.’ Wow again.

This is some burden that millennials are carrying. When I was turning 30, employment was indeed precarious, and consumerism was starting to ramp up. But housing was adequate, sexuality was not yet fluid, the echo chambers of social media did not exist, celebrity was only a phenomenon to be found in Hollywood, and a climate crisis only affected those who wore sandals in wintertime. And here was I calling a millennial a snowflake...

Serendipitously, I met up with this snowflake before Christmas. I found that she was attending the same university that I had gone to, was studying broadly the same subjects, and was experiencing much the same challenges, disappointments, and anxieties that I had experienced in my first years in college. Only I felt this young woman was engaging with

them, and overcoming them, in a way I had not 50 years earlier. Much was learnt from our conversation, including some words of advice that might usefully be passed on to my two grandchildren should they decide to pursue third level education. And thankfully, and with great relief, I also learnt that her mother had not related to her my snowflake gibe.

So these are my recent entanglements across the chasms of age and generational difference that occasioned the actual title of this address. What age are you? This is not meant to be asked in any inquisitorial way, but as an encouragement to you to think about age difference and how a broader age inclusiveness could benefit the way we live our lives. In other words, consider hanging out with others beyond or outside those who are your immediate age peers or contemporaries.

There is compelling scientific evidence to indicate the value of doing just this. In his 2018 book, entitled: *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations*, by Marc Freedman, an American psychologist, synthesises much empirical research to explore the benefits of intergenerational connection. Freedman contends that when younger and older connect, the intergenerational relationships built, are a route to positive outcomes in early life, *and* a key to happiness and well-being in an adult's later years.

The significant benefits of a caring adult mentor on children's well-being have been emphasised in study after study. The adage that all a child needs to flourish is the unconditional love of one adult has been proven. Stable interactions with older people matter in young people's development. But, you may ask, what do older adults gain from relationships with young people? Freedman points to the seminal *Harvard Study of Adult Development*, which began tracking more than 1000 people eighty years ago and continues to this day. Of the study's findings, one is pre-eminent: relationships are the critical ingredient in well-being, particularly as we age. And this connection is facilitated, not only by bonds with partners and peers, but also by ties spanning generations.

The Harvard study highlights the importance of what psychologists call 'generativity'. Generativity means investing in, caring for, and developing the next generation, intuitively as a way of ensuring the long-term survival of the human species. Intergenerational volunteering to promote the well-being of younger generations is an example, and is proven to be good for older people's mental and physical health. Indeed, the Harvard study finds that older adults who do so are *three times* as likely to be happy as those who do not.

Freedman concludes in his book: ‘Today, an accumulating body of research on purpose, generativity, relationships, and face-to-face contact suggests that engagement with others that flows down the generational chain is likely to make you healthier, happier, and probably live longer.’

Rosita Boland is a journalist of many decades’ standing with the *Irish Times*. She recently wrote a piece entitled ‘Age shouldn’t matter when it comes to friendships’ in which she celebrates longstanding friendships with four people, two considerably older, and two considerably younger than her. She writes warmly of how these friends have enhanced her life over a long period.

I quote her. ‘There is no rule that says our most important friendships all have to be only with those people we happened to meet in school or at college: people of our own age. Of course I have plenty of other friends who are my vintage, and those are relationships to also treasure, but for different reasons. But I cherish those friendships with people both older and younger. They have made my life so much richer. So here’s to ‘age fluidity’ in all our friendships.’

On the face of it, the family as a unit offers a wonderful exemplar of intergenerational connection. A Sunday lunch with three or four generations of a family in attendance is an image beloved of painters, novelists, musicians, and indeed sociologists. However, it can be argued that the cross-generational dynamic within the family is different from that between the family and the wider municipality. The family at times can be inward-looking, overly hierarchical, and lacking in civic spirit. So, by all means we must celebrate family relationships across the generations, but we must also cross the threshold of the family into the wider public arena of work, sports, places of entertainment, schools, churches all the building blocks of a healthy community and an inclusive society. It is here that the potential value of bonds and ties along the generational chain are usefully nurtured.

A final point to be made about connection across the generations alludes to the quality of empathy. The ability to understand another person’s perspective is challenging. The capacity to sympathise with another’s experience and anxieties is demanding. There is a need to walk a mile in their shoes, no matter how difficult. And while empathy is always key in establishing and maintaining relationships with our peers and contemporaries, a case can be made that this quality becomes more important across the generations.

To conclude, here is a verse from a song that exhibits warm and magical empathy on the part of two Liverpudlians in their late twen-

ties, imagining enduring love into the sixties of their life.

Aiden
You'll be older too
And if you say the word
I could stay with you.
I could be handy, mending a fuse
When your lights have gone
You can knit a sweater by the fireside
Sunday mornings go for a ride
Doing the garden, digging the weeds
Who could ask for more.
Will you still need me, will you still feed me
When I'm sixty-four.

O'Drescoll

Address to the Dublin Unitarian Church congregation January 2022

Life as a Refugee

I am going to talk about four things in this address: a refugee journey; a terrifying country; a terrifying sea crossing; and why we Irish and Europeans, supposedly people with Christian values, need to act to help these desperate people coming to our country in search of a new life.

I am going to start with a not untypical refugee story. Zainab is from Iraq. She is a 34-year-old single mother with a twelve year old daughter and twin boys aged eleven. She now lives in a former council flat in a south London suburb. In Iraq in the aftermath of the second Gulf War she had lived a relatively comfortable life; she worked as a maths teacher and was married to Ahmed, a technician on a military base. In June 2014 ISIS fighters arrived on her doorstep, looking for her husband, who had befriended American soldiers on his base. They poisoned the family's pet dog and left a note saying "We will slaughter you like we have slaughtered this dog." On a second visit they smashed up the house, and looted family's jewellery, mobile phones and cars. Zainab hurriedly packed a few belongings and took the children to stay with her parents on the other side of town. Ahmed had moved to live in supposed safety on the military base, but a few weeks later was kidnapped by a pro-government Shia militia group – she wouldn't hear from her husband for another 14 months. She thought she was safe at her parents' house, but a week after her husband was kidnapped ISIS fighters arrived there too. They smashed up the house again, took her sister away and shot her elderly father dead.

A businessman friend then suggested that her best chance of getting the children to safety was for him to pay some money he owed to Zainab's family to a smuggler who would take her and the children to Europe. He took them to a town in Iraqi Kurdistan near the Turkish border and introduced her to smugglers who put them on a lorry which crossed Turkey – a journey of over 1,600 kilometres - to the city of Izmir in the south-west, one of the main jumping-off points for the thousands of mainly Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan refugees trying to reach Europe. Zainab approached strangers in the street looking for a boat to the Greek islands. They joined a Syrian group and were brought by a smuggler at night to a beach outside the city, where they were told to board an inflatable dinghy. "My children and I climbed on the dinghy, crying. My children didn't know what was happening. They used to associate the sea and the beach with happiness. They didn't know this dinghy could lead to death."

In the event, the boat started to take on water midway through

the journey and the captain made all the passengers throw their bags overboard. Zainab lost all her family's clothes, except what they stood up in. But they made it to Greece. They were picked up by police and allowed to continue to Athens by ferry. She had been given the number of a smuggler in Athens by her Iraqi businessman friend. On this man's advice she insisted that she wanted to go to Britain, as the safest country in Europe with the best human rights record.

Along with other refugees from Iraq and Syria they were then taken by yacht to Italy. They were then hidden in the back of a lorry and taken on a circuitous route – changing lorries in Austria – to France. In Paris they switched to a car which took them to Calais. Zainab had started out with 30,000 dollars – the money her friend owed her family – but little of that was left (Greece to France alone had cost 11,000 dollars). Here they were taken to a dirty tent hidden in undergrowth beside a motorway, part of a makeshift camp largely populated by refugees from Sudan. “The children had never seen anything like it and they were crying the whole time. They were saying: 'Didn't you say we would make it to France. Where are our bedrooms? Where is our house?’”

After a week, and after hearing that the smuggler who she believed would take them across the English Channel had been stabbed in a fight and disappeared, she moved to another camp run by Kurdish smugglers, using her language skills to pretend to be a Kurd. It was a camp with around a hundred inhabitants, all men, overseen by a dozen armed smugglers, strewn with rubbish and smelling of sweat, unwashed bodies and urine. After a month in this camp, in desperation she gave her last 2,000 dollars to a smuggler who said he needed it to buy a car for their journey to England. A few more weeks went by and nothing happened. The smuggler then told her he was not returning her money, and challenged her with a sneer to report him to the authorities.

Finally, four months after arriving in Calais, and nearly six months after leaving Iraq, their luck appeared to change. A smuggler took pity on her and got her and the children with other refugees into a refrigerated lorry carrying vegetables bound for Dover. However the refrigeration was turned off, and the lorry stayed parked in a car park beside Calais port. After three or four hours the oxygen started to run out and people started to suffocate. Children in the group were crying and screaming. The driver shouted from outside that he wouldn't open the door and didn't care about what was happening inside. In the end somebody managed to phone the French police and they came and released the group.

They walked an hour and a half back to the tents. Zainab told her children that they would have to try again in another lorry. The children were very quiet, saying only 'OK, Mama.' Three days later the helpful smuggler put them on another vegetable lorry in Calais port. They waited

for 16 hours for the lorry to move. This time they made it safely across the Channel. They knew they were in England, but once again the refrigeration was turned off and the group in the lorry, including many children, were in danger of suffocation. Finally, the driver called the police and the doors were opened. And their terrible journey had ended.

I'm now going to turn briefly to a terrifying and almost unknown country from which tens of thousands of people try to get to Europe every year: Eritrea in north-east Africa. Eritrea is a totalitarian state, which has been ruled by one dictator, Isaias Afwerki, since it broke away from Ethiopia, which ruled the country until the 1990s. The threat of a return to war with Ethiopia has allowed Afwerki to impose compulsory and indefinite military service on all young people – effectively treating them as modern-day serfs for the duration of their lives. Torture and indefinite imprisonment await those who rebel.

The former president of the country's only university (now disbanded), Welde Giorgis, says the average Eritrean is now “a helpless victim. That's why you see these large numbers of Eritreans leaving the country at great risk to their lives. Many die from dehydration crossing the Sahara desert at the mercy of smugglers. Many have drowned in the Mediterranean. Many have become victims to organ harvesters in Egypt. But nobody cares. Eritrea has become an earthly hell, an earthly inferno for its people – and that's why they are taking such huge risks to their personal lives to escape this situation. It has become unlivable.” When I worked briefly as a volunteer in the 'jungle' refugee camp in Calais in 2016, one of the largest groups in the camp was of young Eritrean men. They were extraordinarily tough young men, real survivors – climbing into the dangerously exposed undercarriage of a lorry heading for England held no fear for them after all the terrors they had been through.

What many of them had gone through included a horrific crossing of the Mediterranean sea from Libya to Italy. For my reading this morning, I was originally going to read the appalling story of a very ordinary Italian leisure sailor who came across hundreds of African refugees drowning in the sea after their overloaded and unseaworthy smugglers' boat sank. But because there would be children in the congregation today, I was afraid it would give them nightmares. If you read one book after this service, read this small book, *The Optician of Lampedusa* (Lampedusa is an Italian island in the Mediterranean and the book is only a little over 100 pages long). This is the plight of the 21st century refugee at its most tragic and heart-rending.

Another book I read while preparing this address was an extraordinary account by *Guardian* journalist Patrick Kingsley, who followed a Syrian man, Hashem al-Souki, for much of his 2015 refugee journey

from Egypt to Sweden. In Serbia he came across a priest who was acting as a one-man humanitarian relief operation for hundreds of Syrian, Afghan and other refugees hiding out in a disused brick factory on the outskirts of a town near the Hungarian border. In every terrible human situation, there are always saints, and Father Tibor Varga is one of these. "I'm totally convinced that when you help the needy, you're helping God with something. If you ask a bank for a loan, you have to pay it back. And if you give a loan to God, he will pay you back with much more interest," he told Kingsley.

He bemoaned Europe's mean-minded response to the Syrian refugee crisis – in 2015 the EU agreed collectively to take 120,000 refugees from that war (although some states like Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the Czech Republic opposed and later opted out even of this limited gesture), at a time when 9,000 refugees were arriving in Greece alone every day. Germany later accepted nearly a million Syrian refugees on its own. Tibor Varga said rightly that the EU was (and still is) frightened that a big influx of refugees would erode its European values. "But what values will there be to uphold if we abandon our duty to protect those less fortunate than ourselves?" he asked. "If Europe is not able to show a better way of life to them, a more moral way of life to them, then they will think that their morality is better than ours. They need to see some higher standards of morality on this so-called Christian continent, based on solidarity and generosity, kindness and justice and love. If not, they will set up their own."

Andy Pollak

Dublin Unitarian Church

13 February 2022



**Dublin Unitarian Book Club's
choice for January 2022.**



HAMNET

by
MAGGIE O'FARRELL

Note: The name Hamnet and Hamlet were interchangeable in Elizabethan England.

When in school Maggie O'Farrell learned that in 1596 Shakespeare's son Hamnet died at the young age of 11. No one knows how he died but at the time Bubonic Plague was rampant throughout Europe. In this novel O'Farrell posits the idea that it was the plague that took the young boy.

Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway when he was 18 years of age and she was 26. She was pregnant at the time and over the centuries has been much maligned as having trapped the young playwright into an unhappy marriage. They had three children, Susannah and twins Judith and Hamnet. O'Farrell reimagines the lives of this family against the backdrop of a parent's worst fear, the death of a child. She asks the readers to forget everything they know about Anne, called Agnes in the book, and to open themselves up to a new interpretation of her marriage to 'Will'. She said in an interview that if the marriage was so unhappy then why did Shakespeare buy Anne a huge mansion in Stratford and he bought and invested in lands there. He also chose to return to Stratford to live which in her estimation does not speak of a man who was unhappy in his marriage.

There are two parts to this book, the first alternates between the days just before Hamnet's death and the earlier lives of Agnes and Will. The second part is after Hamnet's death and describes how a family are coping or not, after such a tragedy.

The book opens with Hamnet frantically searching for help as his sister Judith has taken ill. There is no one at home, his mother is out with her bees, his grandmother, aunt and sister are on errands. Only his cantankerous grandfather is there drinking ale in his glover's workshop and is to be avoided. The writing is very descriptive and you are immersed into the sounds and smells of the time. She creates great atmosphere and you can feel the boy's panic as he looks for help. You can also feel the fear and anxiety as the household returns and sees Judith's buboes and the realisa-

tion that plague has visited them. Judith does recover and it is Hamnet who succumbs to the plague by infecting himself when he comforts her in her sleep. He trades places with her in a very Shakespearean twist by making a pact with death to take him instead.

O'Farrell also takes us back to the earlier lives of Agnes and Will, whose name is never mentioned, he is referred to as the son, the husband, the Latin tutor, the playwright. Ironically it is Agnes whose voice is heard and her story that takes centre stage.

She is a free spirit, a child of the forest as was her late mother. She is fiercely protective of her little brother. She is a herbalist, a healer and has insights into people and the future. She is equally feared and respected by the townsfolk. She meets Will, the Latin Tutor who is indentured to teach her half brothers on their farm where she lives with her controlling step mother. She is treated like a servant and she longs to escape her stepmother's restrictions.

The Latin tutor too is unhappy, he does not want to work in his father's glove business and longs to escape his father's many abuses. The two misfits fall in love and embark on a forbidden liaison. Agnes falls pregnant and they marry and move to Henley Street in Stratford next door to his parents. It is Agnes who sees how unhappy her husband is and knows that he must escape just as she had to. She connives a plan to have him go to London to expand the glove business but he now has the opportunity to write and so he embarks on a new career of playwright.

This is very much the story of a marriage and family and how it survives the challenges it faces, there is separation due to work, there is the toil of domestic life at home and the living at close quarters with the in laws and family. The lives of the women are to the fore and you feel their interdependence as they work together to keep homes, farms, vegetable gardens and of course there is the support and help during pregnancies and childbirth. So when someone becomes ill with plague, the whole community is affected. When Hamnet dies he must be buried immediately. The pain and grief of Agnes is heartbreakingly described as she struggles and delays to let her son go, to lay him out as she must. Her husband is not there yet, he has been sent word that Judith is ill but when he does get home it is to find that it is Hamnet that has died.

The effect of such a tragic event has a huge impact on everyone. Agnes withdraws into herself, she is consumed by guilt be-

cause as a healer she failed to save him and she did not see it coming. She falls into a numb depression. The playwright channels his grief into work and returns to London much to the annoyance and hurt of Agnes. They are on separate paths of sorrow.

After four years the Playwright writes a play called Hamlet. Agnes is infuriated that he could sully the sacred name of their beloved son Hamnet by using it for a play. She goes to London to confront him and to perhaps regain their marriage. He is not home but is at the playhouse staging the play so she goes there and it is on seeing the play that she realises her husband's pain and grief transformed into the tragedy of Hamlet.

She says “ he has brought him back to life in the only way he can, her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son. He has taken his son's death and made it his own”.

All of the book club readers enjoyed this book and agreed that the writing , while overly descriptive at times is wonderful. The characters are very well drawn but may be a bit unbelievable in some aspects, but that's fiction. This is one we would all recommend.

Alison Claffey

Dublin Unitarian Church

DUBLIN UNITARIAN CHURCH

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING PRELIMINARY NOTICE

The 2022 A.G.M. of the Congregation will take place
in the Church after Sunday service.

Sunday, 24th April 2022.

Send nominations, motions, and any
other items for the Agenda to the:

secretary@dublinunitarianchurch.org

The closing date for the receipt of nominations etc.

Sunday, 27th March 2022.

Denise Dunne
Madam Chairperson