

## churches sign up to Olympic outreach

**W**ith the London Olympics only a year away, many churches are drawing up plans for engagement and outreach during the games. This might involve hosting athletes' families, or erecting big screens to show events.

*More than Gold* is an organisation co-ordinating the Church's response to the Olympics. Chairman Lord Brian Mahwinney said 'It has even been suggested to me that *More Than Gold* could well turn out to be the largest venture of inter-church cooperation the United Kingdom has ever seen ... I have no doubt that they will seize the moment and rise to the challenge.'

More than 15,000 athletes and 500,000 spectators are expected to visit London for the games. In the past, *More than Gold* has provided more than three million cups of cold water to spectators at the Atlanta Olympics and organised sports clinics alongside the Sydney Olympics.

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*christianitytoday.com, 14 May 2011*

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## cerebral palsy families call for better NHS treatment

**P**arents of children with cerebral palsy in the UK have started a campaign for the NHS to provide micro-neurosurgery called selective rhizotomy (SDR) and more physiotherapy to help these children walk. The Department of Health said this treatment could be considered by doctors if outcomes were monitored, and the campaign group *Support4SDR* is pushing for the less invasive

form of SDR to be accessible to all who need it in the UK. Chair of *Support4SDR*, Kim Wakefield, is the parent of one of the 77 children who have travelled to the US to have this operation, at a total cost of about \$40,000.

The treatment has not only been shown to improve walking, but it reduces general spasticity and pain. The quality of life for these children dramatically improves; more confidence, being happier and more comfortable. Twenty more children from the UK are booked to undergo the procedure at the St Louis Hospital in Missouri in the next two months. In light of this new evidence, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) revised their guidelines in December 2010 to allow the procedure, though notes that the side effects and risks of the treatment can be serious. NICE advises that doctors can consider offering the treatment as long as its results are monitored and risks are explained to families and patients.

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*bbc.co.uk, 20 June 2011*

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## cystic fibrosis drug offers fresh hope to sufferers

**L**ess than a year ago, leading scientists from Queen University Belfast were awarded about £1.7million to research and develop the new drug VX 770; research which also involved specialists from Europe, America and Australia. It is now believed to be a breakthrough that will have significant implications for Cystic Fibrosis (CF) sufferers in Ireland, the UK and the world at large. VX 770 has been called ground-breaking treatment

because it treats the basic defect caused by the gene mutation in affected patients; specifically targeting the 'Celtic gene' common in Ireland.

By improving protein function, the drug has been shown to improve lung function, quality of life, and also lead to a reduction in disease flare-ups in those receiving treatment. These effects have been shown even among people who have been living with CF for decades. The new drug will be submitted for licensing in the autumn of 2011 and is expected to be available to patients as early as 2012. As a result of the recent work, researchers from Queen's University, University of Ulster and clinicians from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have been selected to join the European Cystic Fibrosis Society Clinical Trials Network, and are hence involved in the advancement of CF treatment on a global level.

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*bbc.co.uk, 20 June 2011*

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## 'the end of the world'

On Saturday 21 May 2011 at 6 am, the rapture was supposed to occur - mighty earthquakes and fiery rain sweeping through successive countries to mark the end of the world as Jesus returns. These were the biblical interpretations of the 89-year-old retired engineer and leader of California's Family Radio network, Harold Camping. He predicted a similar event in 1994, later putting its non-occurrence down to mathematical error. Along with his followers, Camping poured over \$100 million into a worldwide campaign of street-preaching and giving out tracts; adverts on billboards and posters - largely financed by the sale and swap of radio stations. Advertising

popped up across the globe from Iraq to Lebanon to Israel to Jordan, the Philippines to Vietnam, where thousands of the Hmong ethnic hill tribe gathered together on the Thai border in anticipation of the event. Friends in CMF Zimbabwe saw the billboards there and in other parts of Southern Africa. Also backing the campaign was Camping's radio show (heard worldwide) and a website that featured a countdown clock.

On the appointed day, the clock was at zero underneath the banner headline: 'Judgment Day: the Bible guarantees it'. Besides Mr Camping (who was nowhere to be found) and events like the eruption of the volcano Grimsvotn in south-east Iceland (hardly unusual!), life carried on as usual. Those who expected rapture were disappointed and some were offered counselling as their hope crumbled. Mockers filled the internet and news headlines with jokes whilst the American Atheists and Humanist Association held 'rapture parties' to celebrate Earth's survival across America, and even just a few miles from Family Radio itself. Less press coverage was given to the fact that the majority of Christians around the world were not moved by the prediction, or its eventual flop.

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*guardian.co.uk, 20 and 22 May 2011,  
dailymail.co.uk, 23 May 2011*

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## late abortion statistics

The ProLife Alliance (PLA), a charity campaigning on abortion, was recently victorious in a bid to make statistics about late abortions available to the general

public. Data released in 2003 showed that some babies had been aborted after the usual legal limit of 24 weeks because of a cleft lip and palate. The 1967 Abortion Act permits abortion after 24 weeks only in cases where the mother's life is at risk, or the child will be born with severe physical handicap or mental disability.

At the time, the PLA were concerned that the cleft palate case was an abuse of the Act, weeding out the 'less than perfect' babies, and there was a high profile legal challenge involving the Reverend Joanna Jepson, who herself was born with a jaw deformity. After the name of a doctor involved was leaked, the Department of Health (DoH) announced that it would no longer release statistics on late abortions for medical conditions where the number of the abortions was less than ten. The stated aim was to avoid parents being easily identified. Previously the DoH had released statistics even when the number of abortions was just one or two.

In response to this, the PLA called on the Information Commissioner, maintaining that the Freedom of Information Act (2000) required release of this data. This was supported by the Commissioner as well as the Information Tribunal, which ruled in their favour, ordering a release of the data.

The DoH then appealed to the High Court to maintain non-disclosure of late abortion figures. The Court however supported the previous ruling by the Information Tribunal. Josephine Quintavalle of the PLA, stressing the importance of this decision, afterwards said: 'This is a great victory for freedom of information and accountability and most importantly for the rights of the disabled unborn child. There is no proper mechanism for

the scrutiny of abortion provision other than the meagre information provided by statistics...'

Dr Evan Harris, a member of the BMA medical ethics committee and former Liberal Democrat MP, normally a pro-choice campaigner, said it was 'hard to see why successive governments' had fought the Information Tribunal decision. The missing data were finally released on 4 July.

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*bbc.co.uk/news, 20 April 2011,  
christianlegalcentre.com 21 April 2011*

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## global birth rates fall

A significant decline in birth rates has been noted since 2008 in many developed countries, according to a recent study. Previously birth rates had been rising across 26 of 27 EU member states, for the first time since the 1960s.

England and Wales joined the USA and Latvia in seeing a marked fall in birth rates following the economic downturn of 2008. Study leader Tomas Sobotka of Vienna said 'The young and the childless, for example, are less likely to have children during recessions ... Highly educated women react to employment uncertainty by adopting a postponement strategy, especially if they are childless. In contrast, less-educated women often maintain or increase their fertility under economic uncertainty.' Previous recessions have been thought to be too short-lived to have much impact on birth rates. ■

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*independent.co.uk, 29 June 2011*

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