



## Belfast City Council

<b>Report to:</b>	Strategic Policy & Resources Committee
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Applications by 2 Church-based organisations for use of City Hall grounds to hold assembly/concert type events</b>
<b>Date:</b>	18 March 2011
<b>Reporting Officer:</b>	G Millar, Director of Property & Projects
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	George Wright, Head of Facilities Management (Ext 6232/5206)

### Relevant Background Information

Members will be aware that the Committee has delegated authority for routine requests for use of the City Hall grounds etc. to the Director of Property & Projects on the basis of an agreed set of criteria. However it was recognised that there would still be occasions on which the nature, scale and/or scope of the request means that it is appropriate to place the matter directly before the Committee.

The very recent requests from 2 separate Church-based organisations detailed below fall into this category, and the direction of the Committee is therefore sought.

The first request is from New Life City Church. The Church's pastor, Jack McKee, would like to have a "CU @ the CROSS" event in the City Hall grounds between 3pm and 4pm (set up 2pm) on **Saturday 18 June 2011**.

The event would involve four large crosses being carried from the four compass points of the city along the main arterial routes to meet at the City Hall at approximately 3.00pm. Each cross would be followed by an estimate crowd of 200-300 people.

When the estimated crowd of 800-1,000 people reach the City Hall grounds there would be a one hour outdoor event consisting of singing, drama and speaking. The special guest for this event would be Arthur Blessitt from the USA, who has previously walked through the streets of Belfast carrying a cross in 1971, 1972 and 1979.

The purpose of the event is to 'promote the positive message of the Christian faith as one of love, forgiveness and reconciliation'. Various churches from across Belfast will be supporting the event with the lead being taken by New Life City Church.

No access to the main building is required, and the organisers will be providing their own stewarding, staging and PA system etc.

A formal request is being made to the PSNI and the Parades Commission in respect of the march through the city, however if for any reason this permission is not granted the organisers would still wish to use the City Hall grounds for the event.

The second request is from the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a local church based in Belfast. They would like to stage a 3 hour "Place of Victory for all Nations" event in the City Hall grounds sometime between 12noon and 6.00pm on Saturday 23 April 2011. This date can be moved if necessary.

The event would be an open-air gospel concert involving bands and choirs from various churches in Northern Ireland. Entry to the event would be free and is suitable to people of all ages. The organisers have previously held the event at the Exhibition Centre in the Europa Hotel and estimate up to 1,000 people would attend. No further details are available in terms of what the event actually entails.

The organisers apparently have experience of organising large scale events and will be supplying their own stewarding, staging and sound system. No access to the main building is needed.

### **Key Issues**

This is the first time that Church-based organisations have formally requested to use the City Hall grounds for this type of large-scale event. Both events may attract up to 1,000 people and are being held over an extended period of time. The council's bye-laws provide that *"no person shall preach, lecture, or take part in any meeting for political, religious, or any other purpose, or take part in any public show, performance or demonstration, except with the prior consent of the Council and in such part of the Grounds as may be set aside by the Council for that purpose."*

These requests inevitably raise the question as to whether or not the City Hall – as the political and administrative headquarters of the council – is an appropriate place for religious meetings, or whether this important public space ought to be used in a purely secular capacity.

Members will also be aware that a special meeting of this Committee has already been agreed to consider a report on the future use of City Hall, including the issue of charging for the use of the main building and grounds and amended criteria governing access to the grounds etc, and may therefore wish to defer taking a decision on this request at this time, in order to allow for consideration of the use of the grounds for religious purposes as part of that wider debate.

Alternatively the Committee may wish to look beyond these 2 specific applications and to deal with the broader issue of access to the City Hall grounds for religious events in the round, and thereby create a policy position for future application.

In practical terms, both events would involve substantial set-ups including staging and sound systems. Although the events will provide their own stewarding, Members should be aware that they are taking place on a Saturday during the summer months, when the grounds are extensively used by local people and by visitors and tourists. If approved, these events would not have exclusive access to the grounds but would be taking place alongside the other users of the grounds.

Consideration also therefore needs to be given to the potential for other users of the grounds to object to or take offence at religious events taking place. Although both events are being promoted as cross-community, other people using the grounds may perceive them differently, and those with no religious beliefs may complain that public displays of religion are inappropriate and ought to be pursued in places of worship and in the home, rather than be facilitated on public property.

The Committee will also be aware that the creation of a precedent in these cases could potentially create very significant additional demand from all faith groups and denominations in the future.

If permission is granted for one or both of these events a full event-management plan with appropriate risk assessments would be put in place.

**Equality & Good Relations implications**

This matter has been considered in liaison with the council's Good Relations unit. It is felt that this proposal could potentially have adverse implications both for equality and good relations in the city, given the high profile of the City Hall building and grounds and the stated commitment of the Council to provide a shared space that can be enjoyed by all.

**Resource Implications**

There would be no direct resource implications in respect of either application as the organisers would make the appropriate arrangements in terms of stewarding, staging etc.

No access to the main building is required and the organisers would be required to comply with all the standard terms and conditions including indemnities and lawn reinstatement etc. if approval is given.

**Decision (s) required**

The direction of the committee is sought on whether or not to approve the requests from New Life City Church and RCCG for use of the City Hall grounds for the stated purposes. Several options are available in this regard, namely:-

- (a) to defer any decisions until after the party briefings and the special Committee dealing with the use and management of the City Hall have taken place; or
- (b) to agree a policy position on the use of the grounds for religious purposes, and then apply the policy to the 2 current applications; or
- (c) to deal with the 2 specific, current requests on their individual merits.

**Key to Abbreviations**

None

**Documents Attached**

None