

IRCA 2026: Opening Welcome from the Chair

Peace be with you (*and also with you*),
I greet you all in love and the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is my honour and privilege to welcome you to IRCA 2026, whether you are joining us physically here in Romania or whether you are joining online from around the world. In recognition of the diversity of languages represented by the people of our host community here in Sibiu, Transylvania, Romania I also bid you Bine ați venit! (in Romanian), Willkommen! (in German) and Üdvözlök! (in Hungarian).

The International Rural Churches Association is a global family of people who believe God is at work in rural places and communities and that God loves the people who live and work in them. My name is Heather Major and it has been my honour to serve as the chair of the International Rural Churches Association (IRCA) leadership team since the last international conference in 2023.

Because IRCA is a global family and an association rather than a formal organisation, it is important to recognise that we all come from different countries, cultures, languages, experiences, places, types of ministry and church denominations. Although the majority of recent IRCA participants come from Protestant traditions, we affirm our understanding that the body of Christ includes those from all Christian traditions and expressions. We are beautiful in our rich diversity and united by our commitment and understanding that God loves the world and everything in it, land and sea, young and old, rural and urban. We recognise that our world is in turmoil as nation turns against nation, people treat each other with suspicion and fear threatens to destroy us. In these uncertain times, it is essential that we, as the body of Christ, seek unity rather than division, relationship rather than isolation and testifies to hope rather than despair.

Our conference theme: 'Roots, Faith and Identity: People and Communities Living on the Land' reflects the deeply embedded nature of faith, culture and history in Europe (as the host region) and beyond. As we face an increasingly complicated global situation and wrestle with questions of identity and relationships with land and each other, IRCA 2026 aims to provide opportunities to share our stories as we build relationships and walk through life together as an international and ecumenical community.

Over the coming week we have people gathering in Sibiu from 13 different countries. Online we will have up to 50 people from 13 additional countries joining us in worship, conversation, learning and prayers from around the world. Over the next 5 days we will share in conversation and fellowship as we journey together in humility, curiosity and respect, seeking to form connections across boundaries as we encourage and bless one another as members of God's family and the body of Christ.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus over the coming days as we share time and space together.

And now, I would invite Reverend Dietrich Galter, the pastor of this church and leader of IRCA Europe to bring his greetings before Reverend Dr Robyn McPhail to bring her response on behalf of the visitors. Following her response, we will move into our opening worship, following the printed order.

Dr Heather Major, 21.07.2026