

# Church planting *in Ireland*

**Pip Florit** looks at the changing landscape of our churches and their missional opportunities.



Ireland is changing. The signs are everywhere, from cities to schools to streets to churches. The Ireland of 2019 is a different country from the Ireland of 1999, let alone 10, 20, or 30 years before that. What was a largely white, English-speaking island has become a multi-cultural melting pot. What was a place where most people looked to the church for meaning and morals has become more and more secularised. Society is changing in a hurry; what does that mean for the Church and its response?

In 1975, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland had 380,000 members; by 2018, that figure had decreased by 43% to 215,000 (General Assembly Annual Reports, 2018). The problem is, by no means, a lack of churches – in some parts of this island, it seems there is a church on every corner, but how many of those beautiful, steepled buildings with inviting signs outside are less than half full? And why, in the midst of declining membership, would anyone think that

the solution is to start more churches?

Could it be that in that context of dwindling congregations, new expressions of church are exactly what is needed?

Over the past 10 years, a number of Presbyterian churches have begun to examine this: what is our response to a society that is moving quickly, lauding diversity above all else, becoming more interested in spirituality and less interested in Christianity? In this society with its new priorities and new problems, the Church needs a new response.

## **Church planting**

Planting churches, in itself, is not a new thing. It is not even a new thing for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. From the mid-1920s to the 1980s, in response to migrating populations, PCI

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engaged in what was known as ‘church extension’. The need for a new church was determined by assessing households in an area; if two out of seven households were identified as Presbyterian, a church would be built. Eighty churches were started in this way, but as society has changed, this strategy has changed. Church extension was a way to give believers a place to worship; church planting is about introducing non-believers to a God who is worthy of worship.

Church planting was a key part of mission and evangelism for the Apostle Paul, but did he only plant churches because there were none? If that was the case, should church planting be as central to our mission and evangelism, when we have plenty of churches? Consider that Paul planted churches to reach people for God and if there’s anything our society needs, it is to be reached for God.

## **Church, but not as we know it**

In his article, ‘Why plant churches?’, Tim Keller cites many studies claiming that

the average new church gains 60-80% of its members from those who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches older than 10-15 years gain 80-90% of new members from other congregations. With this in mind, it seems clear that if the body of Christ is to grow, new churches and new expressions of church are needed.

Why is it that a church plant, in its embryonic state, is better placed to reach people than an established church, with its experience and programmes and structures? A church plant is church, but not as we know it, we who have attended services with a predictable structure at 10.30 or 11am every Sunday for years. A church plant might meet on a Wednesday, there might be tea and coffee before the service, it might not meet in a building with a steeple or a pulpit. In these differences, these new expressions are a platform that can allow the plant to meet needs in ways that established churches can't. A newly planted church may have the following benefits:

**Outward focus.** Many established churches have a missional focus and intentional commitment to the communities around them, but for church plants, the nature of this focus and commitment is different. The church plant's survival relies on bringing people in from the outside, so the emphasis has to be on the needs of the people outside the church walls. An established church

has people inside its walls whose needs are high priority.

**Natural contact with non-Christians.** When a church is made up of mainly new converts, there will naturally be more contact with non-believers. As well as providing more opportunities for personal invitations, this can make church plants more sensitive to the society around it and its needs.

**New attracts new.** If you want different results, you have to do things differently.

## None of this means that established churches are becoming redundant or are unable to reach out.

If you want to draw in new people, do something new. 'New' is exciting and interesting, but it's also easier to be new when the situation you're going into is new, without well-established routines or unspoken rituals.

**Breaking the mould.** In Ireland, there are certain perceptions of church – what it is, who goes to it, what is expected. These perceptions can deter new people. Church, as they perceive it, is not for 'people like them' – they may fear being judged, not knowing when to stand or sit or any number of things that are second nature to anyone who has been in church

for a long time. In a church plant, which is starting from the start, there is freedom to break the mould, making the church more accessible to those outside it, who may have certain expectations of it.

**Geography.** When most of our established churches were started, they were started where they were needed – in rural hubs or town centres. They were started where the people were. The problem is that people have moved. Fewer people stay in rural settings throughout their lives and more people live in suburbs than in urban centres. Church plants have the relative freedom of not being tied to a particular building – they can go to where the people are.

None of this means that established churches are becoming redundant or are unable to reach out. Not at all. There are many churches that are thriving, nourishing and growing the body of Christ. The problem comes when we try to separate the Church into categories – church plants and established churches. We are the body of Christ and we are not in competition with each other. More than that, what one part of the body does has an impact on the other parts. Church plants bring renewed ideas, new family members, new leaders, and new opened doors. We need to rejoice in the building up of the body of Christ, even if our little corner seems to be declining.

## The Plant: Donabate Presbyterian Church

Andy Carroll leads Donabate Presbyterian Church, which he planted along with half a dozen families from Malahide Presbyterian who lived in the area. A little more than eight years after it started, it has around 200 people as part of its community.

"I became a church planter more out of a desire and sense of call to minister in the Republic of Ireland rather than a sense that I would plant churches. When I was eligible for call, the Board of Mission in Ireland (as it was then) was seeking to call someone to plant a church in North County Dublin. I was excited about the possibility of being involved. Being from the north side of Dublin, this meant I'd be getting the opportunity to bring the gospel to an area that was close to home.

I've learned a whole lot from the experience of church planting. Maybe the thing that strikes me most is a renewed understanding of how God is often working in people's hearts and minds long before they come into contact with a church. Many of the people who have come to faith over the

years in Donabate were triggered to connect with us through a hunger for God or a longing for answers that wasn't provoked by us or by any

programme or event we were running. For whatever reason, when those longings and questions arose, we were known as a people who might be able to help out.

Church planting allows us to shape our ministry and mission to the contexts in which we find ourselves. Instead of pouring all of our resources of energy and people into ministries designed to maintain Christians or 'church-going' people, starting fresh allowed us to shape church life in ways that enabled us to connect with people who had no notion of going to church. Our very existence depended on seeing others becoming disciples of Jesus Christ and using their gifts to lead the church and see it grow further."

*Rev Andy Carroll*





## Doing it right

When it comes to doing new things, there is usually a bit of fear and even reluctance. There are many things about the way Presbyterians have done church for years that work really well. If we move away from established ways of living and sharing the gospel into the new and untested, do we risk changing that gospel, perhaps diluting it to suit our audience and our environment? Any new or different expression of church must keep God, his Word and the gospel central, but, while we don't change the contents of the package, we can change the package and to draw people in, that's precisely what we need to do.

Another important factor is the base from which a church plant grows. A new church should not stand alone, but should come from a more established base that can nourish it with support and prayer.

In recognising the importance of planting churches in the right way, PCI has assembled a church planting panel, a group of individuals passionate about seeing new churches spring up. This panel exists to see:

- **New life** in Christ grow across this island, north and south, through the planting or re-planting of churches;
- **New people** trusting in Christ who have a desire and giftedness to lead a planting work;
- **New places** springing up for planting or re-planting in diverse locations with new burdens and energy for planting to be placed on congregations, north and south.

**We need to rejoice in the building up of the body of Christ, even if our little corner seems to be declining.**

Throughout the early part of this year, Mission in Ireland rallies have taken place across the country, during which, there has been a call to prayer for this new life, these new people and new places. Let's take up this call and get behind this movement as it gains momentum. Pray that God will lead the right people to the right places. Pray for wisdom and perseverance for those involved. Pray for the church plants that already exist – thank God for his provision and guidance.

When you look at the statistics, when you listen to what society is saying, the story might not look great for the church in Ireland, but in the midst of statistics and secularism, there is hope rising up in the form of church plants – new life, new people coming to God in new places.

*Pip Florit is PCI's Mission Support Officer for Partnerships.*

## The Plant: Maynooth Community Church

In our 12th year as a congregation in Maynooth, we have come to see that there is both a simplicity and a complexity in the work of establishing new churches. The following are some of the basic things that have shaped our development, though we know that it is Jesus who really does the building.

### 1. Grace-centred community

When our new members share what struck them most as they first encountered MCC, they almost always answer with something like "the sense of acceptance and love we felt here." There is something truly attractive about a community that embodies God's grace in its interactions and, whatever the size of our congregation, this a resource that we all have full access to.

### 2. Building bridges with our wider community

In thinking about mission, we have always felt God calling us to build connections not just with people but with our town itself. From the earliest days, we have tried to connect with Kildare County Council, our local politicians, Maynooth Community Council, the university, our schools, sports clubs and other local churches. Some of this happened naturally through existing relationships. Some required quite an effort. So often we expect others to encounter the gospel by crossing our thresholds. Often it is us who need to cross theirs.

### 3. Every member ministry

Every Sunday, around 23 people are involved in our services. This is both a necessity and a blessing. Participation is a crucial element in discipleship. Creating a place where participation is encouraged, where it is ok to have a go even if it doesn't work out, helps people to feel included.

### 4. Service

Gaining the trust of our local communities is difficult. This is where service can make such a difference. Our annual arts festival, our Christmas concerts in aid of refugees and our Saint Patrick's Day breakfasts have been some of our public attempts to serve. Service changes how we are perceived, as well as leading to great opportunities to share our faith.

It has been such a joy to see people come to understand the wonder of God's grace for themselves. Ministry is often hard and discouraging but amidst our strains and struggles, God continues to draw people to himself and give them a whole new life.

*Rev Keith McCrory*

