



Photography by David Cavan

# Building relationships

Ruth Sanderson chats to the Moderator-designate, Rev. Charles McMullen.

Charles McMullen has finally found me, after I was wandering about lost outside West Church in Bangor. Having gone to the wrong entrance, I was helped by a man clutching a guitar case. “Go straight in, round the corner, past the cafe...”

Wowzers, I think, looking at the signs to various sections of the church. This place is pretty big! Luckily for me, Charles is now on hand to guide me through its corridors and numerous rooms.

The nursery is in full swing; tiny coats on pegs three feet off the ground line a hallway. Children’s voices are heard chattering through the corridors and the noise from a mums and tots group is coming from another room. Smiling helpers greet Charles and I. The café is being prepared by several folks in aprons. Someone is arranging flowers. People are busily working away behind computers in the church office.

It’s a Tuesday morning, and it is clear that this church is not just for Sundays.

Someone has made us coffee and Charles and I sit down to get underway with the interview in one of the counselling rooms. Perhaps a pertinent

place to chat to the next Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Charles McMullen was born and raised in Omagh. He belonged to Trinity Presbyterian under the ministry of Harry Pinkerton. Pinkerton introduced a character in his children’s addresses called ‘wee Johnny’ each week; like a soap opera, Johnny would face another challenge or learn another truth as a follower of Jesus. It had a profound impact on the young Charles, and he, like wee Johnny, came to know Christ as his own Saviour. Later on, Rev. Bill Clarke involved the teenage Charles in the life of the church, doing readings, children’s talks etc. He has been woven into the fabric of church life in some way or another

for most of his life. It was his formative involvement which first gave him an inkling that God might be calling him to ministry.

The sense of call deepened as Charles went to study languages at Trinity



The McMullen family: Lydia, Charles, Samuel, Barbara and David

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College Dublin, then on to do a master's in Modern European History at St. Antony's College, Oxford.

"I felt like a boat being tossed around at sea. It wasn't a case of running away from God's call to go to Oxford, but He was definitely working at a deeper level. When I said, 'Yes God', I felt a peace which has never left me.

"My traditional Presbyterian roots in Omagh were very important to me, but when I went on to Trinity and then Oxford it made me realise that there were Christians in the world other than Presbyterians. It had a whole ecumenical widening influence on me. In Oxford, I lived for a year in the Russian Orthodox Centre, where the warden was a high Anglican and my neighbour an Argentinian Roman Catholic. Yet those of us who had faith were all a minority in a very secular college, so it made me realise that those labels in themselves were not actually that important, which was a life-defining experience."

Charles finally came back to begin his ministerial training at Union College in 1984, and appreciated the evangelical zeal that his year group had. He found a much deeper love of the Bible, as well as strong fellowship and friendship. Of course, Belfast in the 1980s was not a bed of roses, and it was in the context of the Troubles that Charles began his ministry. He was an assistant in Harmony Hill in Lisburn, then his first charge was Legacurry. He moved from there to West Church in 1999, where we sit today.

"I've had two experiences of 'call'. Going to Legacurry," he says "was like

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falling head over heels in love; we had a romantic honeymoon experience. Then coming to West Church was like being brought kicking and screaming to the altar... I was resisting it every step of the way, but never having any peace about pulling out! It was simply because we loved Legacurry and had seen the congregation grow and had made deep friendships. Roots had gone down very deeply there."



Being installed at West Church

It's a feeling that many ministers struggle with in relation to 'the call' – wanting to remain in the safety of the familiar, whilst also wanting to be open to a move if God wills it.

"There were three on the list to preach at West Church, and I just assumed

that one of the others would get it. I remember the Sunday I preached here, there was a long silence on the drive home, and then my wife Barbara turned to me and said, 'You were yourself' – that was all I needed to hear, because I realised if they did call me they knew what they were getting!"

What strikes me is, not only did Charles not expect to get called to West Church, but he didn't expect to be Moderator either.

"A few times friends had suggested to me that I put my name forward and I've always been able to kick that to touch, but when it came up a year ago, I felt that feeling deep down, reminiscent of the call I'd had 18 or 19 years ago and the gut reaction of 'Oh please God, don't do this!' – but I realised it was a test of obedience." He shakes his head and smiles.

"One Sunday night before Christmas, we had had a wonderful weekend here at West Church and I was about to pull out from the race, when I had a phone call from a friend who said, 'I hear you might be in the running to be Moderator, please don't pull out!'"

The right call at the right time, it seems. So now that he has been elected, what does Charles see the role of Moderator as being?

"That's a very good question – and I will be finding out!" he muses.

"Building relationships' will be my theme for the year. I see that as so important – who we are as individuals with our own walk with God, and I want people to realise more and more of who they are in God, and to be sure and confident in their relationship with Jesus.



“As far as Church is concerned, I believe the local church is the hope of the world, but quite often our relationships do not reflect who we really are and what we should be. I hope there can be healing and a renewed emphasis on togetherness.

“One of the things I love about West Church is its diversity. It all hangs together very well. We have traditionalists, charismatics, people from a Roman Catholic background, Free Presbyterian and Brethren backgrounds... and even some Presbyterians! There’s a deep spirituality and a joy to life together here.”

This cohesive attitude bodes well for the wider political polarisation we find our country in at this moment in time.

“Our political situation here at the minute is dreadful. The importance of building relationships is more important than ever. Considering the parable of the good Samaritan recently – I was quite struck by the intensity of sacrificial love in it. In our politics, society, culture and theology, we are all about passing by on the other side at the moment. What does it mean then to cross those divides? To build bridges? To be confident of who we are in Jesus Christ? And then be able to reach out to others?

“Sometimes though, we have such a concentration on our own ‘truth’, that we rule out love and the importance of relationships. Of course, truth is vitally important, but it shouldn’t be at the expense of cutting ourselves off from other people and battenning down the hatches. When you combine truth with love and relationships, that’s living the life of the cross. It’s a difficult balance; we can often have our theology so worked out that we run the risk of not even needing God Himself. There is an 18-inch journey between the head and the

heart which is the hardest journey for some people.”

Charles also inherits a time of great social friction. I wonder how Charles views Brexit, after all, he will inherit the Moderatorship of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland... both north and south.

“There are Presbyterians on both sides of the argument. I was quite taken aback by the acrimony of the debate at the time of the referendum. Maybe because of my own experience of studying languages and European history, and all that the European community offered in terms of reconciliation, and a continent which has been transformed after centuries



of war, the richness of that – I voted to remain. I’m also aware of decisions being taken away from individual countries and complaints about bureaucracy, however, I think the referendum was a very blunt tool to try and sort that particular debate out.

“The Good Friday Agreement, as part of the European settlement, was a great step in sorting out our identity here and moving forward, and we want to avoid a hard border at all costs.”

The Pope will also visit Ireland during Charles’ term as Moderator – will he meet him?

“That all depends on what the Church decides. I don’t want to be presumptuous to expect an invitation! Personally speaking, I would have no hesitation.”

Charles’ grandfather, an Anglican, was a well-respected member of the community in Belleek, a predominantly nationalist village. When he died in the early 1980s, Charles was struck by how the whole village closed down and everyone came to the Church of Ireland to pay their respects. There was a great outpouring of love from both Catholics and Protestants. The experience has stayed with him, and it’s easy to see how all these gestures form Charles’ make-up.

“We are all shaped by the courses of study and life’s experiences and the fact that we are born in a certain generation for a certain time.”

One of the main influences on Charles’ life is that of his wife Barbara. His face lights up every time he mentions her.

“We met at the General Assembly in 1990.”

I nearly choke on my coffee at this. “It’s not known for being a hotbed of romance,” I say. Charles’ eyes twinkle.

“There has to be an exception to every rule!”

## ‘Building relationships’ will be my theme for the year. I see that as so important...

Barbara had been teaching English as a PCI missionary in China before returning to Northern Ireland; they were introduced by a mutual friend. By all accounts it was a whirlwind romance.

“I’m usually a very cautious person,” he says. “But not this! Barbara has been 100% supportive in my ministry and keeps my feet on the ground. I’m a conservative on the outside and a rebel underneath, whereas she is a rebel on the surface and a conservative underneath. She is half bottle full, I am half bottle empty.”

Together, they now have three adult children. So how is Barbara feeling about the year ahead?

“We had taken the decision that she

would retire from teaching this year, so it's great that the two of us can be together doing this. Also, it's been such a long time since I've done any children's addresses that we've decided she can do them when we're visiting churches."

Charles has become Moderator at an historically significant time for women in society. The birth of the #metoo movement, anger over the gender pay gap, and the refusal to accept sociological misogyny any more, have left a lot of us wondering how the Church will respond. What should the Church be saying to women (and indeed men) in that regard?

### **...we can often have our theology so worked out that we run the risk of not even needing God Himself.**

"I can only speak personally," says Charles. "We in West Church have lots of women elders and female members of the leadership team. It's who we are in Christ which is important. As far as I am concerned, I don't notice whether they are male or female, it's what they have to offer in their work. I am for women in ministry and leadership in the church."

The debate around same-sex marriage also continues, especially since the Church of Scotland has paved the way to approve it.

"When it comes to human sexuality, it feels like we are all in glasshouses about to throw stones. I am very conscious of my own many shortcomings too, and the brokenness and pain reflected in so many relationships. In terms of same-sex marriage, we want to be compassionate and understanding but we must come back to the Bible about this, and the basic definition of a man and a woman coming together. The Apostle Paul, and Jesus Himself reinforced this, so in terms of marriage, there is a biblical definition of one man and one woman."

How then, I wonder, does the church reach out to that part of society in that case? How does it reach gay Christians?

"I've encountered gay people over the years and I am so aware of hurt and pain caused – I come back to identity; our identity is in Jesus Christ first and

foremost. I don't know how many gay people come across our doors on a Sunday morning, I'm not asking that each week – we welcome everyone. I want to teach what the Bible teaches. We must speak in love and affirm people, but balance that love with grace and truth."

Charles has taken up an eminently tricky role. There's the pressure of presiding over a denomination with hard held differing opinions. Yet at the same time, in an increasingly post Christian society, being a relevant voice in that bigger cultural conversation.



that window at the back of the church? Why not the more prominent one at the front which everyone sees? After a few weeks, it's as though God said to me, 'That's the window you see.' And any time over the years when I've felt a bit tested or strained, a wee look up at that window has been very reassuring."

I wonder if Charles will think of that window often over the next 12 months. In the next year, what does he see as his greatest challenge, and his greatest opportunity?

"In terms of opportunities, getting alongside people. Especially manse families, in the trenches! Praying with them, supporting them. The challenge, however, is that in a very secular age, we do not have an automatic opportunity for our voice to be heard in wider society, and we have the tendency to come across as naysayers. So, we need to find out how we can speak the truth with love. It's a learning experience; I'm excited by day and wide awake by night! I have no idea what the year will entail. I hope that I'll have a listening ear. I hope the congregations throughout PCI will be blessed as well."



There's a stained-glass window at the back of West Church, behind the congregation facing the pulpit. It depicts a sword in front of a flame; sunlight shines through, illuminating the purple, orange and yellow colours.

"That window is very special to me," Charles tells me. "When I felt the call to West, one of my prayer partners had a picture of a stained-glass window. The night of my installation, having never been in the place, she came up to me with tears in her eyes and said, 'Charles, there's the window!' I wondered, 'Why

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*Christ's love compels us*