

Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs

3 June 2019

Reflections on his year in office by the Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

I want to give you some typical snapshots of my year taken in the glorious sunshine of Easter weekend. On Saturday afternoon I participated in the dedication of refurbished halls in the North Antrim congregation of Ramoan and was heartened by the warm friendship and generous hospitality of the people.

Rural churches have been part of the backbone of Presbyterianism for generations and are still central to the community as they seek to respond to contemporary challenges. Wherever I have travelled, again and again I have been impressed by the faithfulness and dedication of God's people.

The night before I had been to Granshaw in the greater Belfast area for a very inspiring and uplifting Communion service, which included the dedication of new pew Bibles. It was fascinating to hear some of the many stories of those who had been welcomed across the doors and found fullness of life in Jesus Christ. Such a vibrant sense of growing community as well as visionary leadership which was being expressed over that weekend in terms of opportunities for prayer and fasting. Creativity and innovation in worship services and outreach have been much in evidence as Barbara and I have travelled throughout Ireland.

Earlier that Good Friday I had participated in a special event involving Churches together in Lisburn. A cross was carried ceremonially through the city centre and the procession led by the distinctive African rhythms of the Abana Children's Choir so full of Christian joy. It was profound to see the cross held high in such a public space and for a moment to reflect on the countless hundreds of Presbyterian people we had encountered throughout the year who are making a distinctive contribution to civic society in terms of salt and light.

Easter Day itself was simply unforgettable. Now at the other end of Ireland in Kilkenny, we were in a packed church full of young families and different nationalities. I have been excited and encouraged by many signs of new life as I have visited congregations in the Irish Republic, particularly during my tour of the Monaghan Presbytery. That morning in Kilkenny, again so many told me about how Jesus Christ had changed their lives and it was such a privilege to proclaim the Easter message of Resurrection hope.

On the other hand, it is true to say that there are congregations that are ageing and at the mercy of changing demographics. These next few years will continue to bring many challenges to the denomination. What has been encouraging, however, has been to experience the way in which inner city Belfast congregations are grappling with present realities and are no longer content to settle for the status quo or decline. There is much prayer and vision casting, as Presbyteries in this city come together and look at many radical ideas, including church planting.

Church structures are becoming more flexible and accommodating, enabling new things to happen. It was an inspiration to visit Carnmoney Central as it takes over the premises of May Street and seeks to reach out to Belfast city centre on a Sunday afternoon.

It is said in the Book of Judges that Asher remained at the seashore and stayed in its harbours when he could have launched out into the ocean and experienced the joy of a great adventure (Judges 5:17). My overriding passion is to see renewal coming to the traditional Church and for the wind of God's Spirit to catch the sails of the boats, bringing them out from Asher's creeks into the wide open seas. There are many signs that the gentle breeze of God's Spirit is indeed blowing throughout our denomination.

As Barbara and I have sought to bless and encourage, we too have been so blessed and encouraged by our overall impression of a denomination in which there is a strong, beating heart. There are many differing expressions of worship from the traditional to the contemporary; a deep desire for teaching and discipleship. There are many wonderful Christian communities where people are serving and reaching out to others.

This year I have gained a renewed passion for the local church as the hope of the world. These words written by Bill Hybels now have for me an even deeper resonance: “There is nothing like the local church when it’s working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breath-taking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community.

It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalised of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness.”

Let me concentrate on one specific aspect of the local Church. I have come to a much deeper appreciation of the strength of the incredibly special relationship in our Reformed tradition between minister and people. I find myself simply in awe of my colleagues as I have experienced over and over again how ministers are leading and serving their people with transparent graciousness, servant-hearts and sacrificial love.

It is about coming to know families as personal friends, being alongside them in the midnight of critical need and sharing in their joy at noon, while holding out faithfully before them Sunday by Sunday and week by week the unchanging promises of the Word of God.

We are much more, however, than the local church, because we are a General Assembly of congregations. It is good to celebrate what we are doing together. At the beginning of February I called the entire denomination to prayer and it was exciting to have feedback about special meetings, congregations and Presbyteries coming together, people praying aloud for the first time, 24-7 prayer initiatives and special rooms set aside.

It is such a blessing to see ever greater uptake of the weekly resource produced centrally, “Let’s Pray” and it is true to say that our life as a denomination as well as individuals rises and falls at the point of the devotional – our love and our desire for the Lord Jesus Christ.

I was deeply moved by the response to the Moderator's Appeal in Indonesia which has brought in nearly £400 000 and the ongoing response to disaster relief in Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Here at home, everyone should have the opportunity to visit Thompson House, which cares for former offenders and helps in the process of rehabilitation.

I call to mind so many homes and centres run by the Council for Social Witness of our Church from, Aaron House for people with profound learning disability and our residential nursing home, Harold McCauley House, in my home town of Omagh to Adelaide House in Belfast, a place of special welcome and caring homeliness for some of our older citizens, which I visited last week.

At the Annual General Meeting of the Presbyterian Children's Society, we acknowledged the outstanding service of Dr Paul Gray who has stepped down after thirty-one years of service. During that time £13m have been allocated in grants. The Society continues to reach out to those in need and distress; the children are from backgrounds of bereavement, divorce, separation, single parenthood, medical circumstances, economic stress, parental incapacity, migration displacement and in-work poverty. In 2018 the numbers on the roll increased to 819 across 427 families with over £650 000 being paid out in grants.

When we combine what is happening centrally and locally, it begs the question as to what society would look like if the generous care and deep compassion so characteristic of the Church of Jesus Christ were suddenly to disappear or be removed. It is true to say that the tectonic plates between traditional Church and fast-changing society are very definitely shifting.

As a consensual person who is always troubled by confrontation, the most challenging aspect of my year were the consequences of decisions taken at last year's Assembly in relation to same sex marriage. I agree wholeheartedly that marriage is between one man and one woman. This is in line not only with the Bible and our confessional standards, but historical, orthodox and global Christianity, which is reflected in the teaching of all the major churches in Ireland.

It is our duty to uphold what the Scriptures teach, but to do so in a manner that is pastorally sensitive, does not turn our General Assembly into a series of case studies or a place where we create a hierarchy of sin. In a rapidly changing and secularising Ireland, as the Bible reminds us, we need to speak the truth in love and not be perceived to be closing the door to those who would see our churches as a cold place, when we know that not to be the case.

One of the consequences of last year's General Assembly was the decision by Queen's to break its long-standing ties with its sole-surviving denominational college. I have enjoyed immensely my visits to Union this year and have been so impressed by the sense of Christian community, the formation of character among students and the dedication of our staff, many of whom are acknowledged to be world leading scholars in their respective disciplines.

I speak as the proud father of our David now graduating after three years of study at Union, who has been enriched by friendships formed from diverse backgrounds and the excellent teaching of staff, who have an international reputation. It is interesting to note that these high academic standards were reflected on Queen's website advertising theology.

More positively, there is still a warm welcome given to the Church and an invitation to engage at every level of society. I was delighted, for example, to receive hospitality on my travels from the Councils of Monaghan, Antrim and Newtownabbey, Fermanagh and Omagh. It has been a pleasure to meet not only local councillors, but also politicians at Westminster and Dáil Éireann.

It has also been a privilege to develop friendship and work alongside the other church leaders as we embarked on an initiative to bring together our political parties here in Northern Ireland. After initially meeting party leaders here in Assembly Buildings last September, there ensued a series of regional events involving over 120 representatives from education, agriculture, business and women's groups and our MLAs, to name but a few.

The opportunity for discussion was much appreciated and we recently were able to meet with leaders of Northern Ireland's political parties, the Secretary of State and Tánaiste at Stormont, as they begin a new round of political talks. We presented them with a document summarising the findings of our consultations under the heading *A Call to Courageous and compassionate Leadership*.

As we move forward in our society, we must not forget those who are still left hurting from The Troubles, who feel abandoned or ignored. The single most harrowing experience of my year was to spend a morning with families in Castleberg and a similar afternoon in Bessbrook. It was difficult even to look at photos of totally innocent people who had been murdered by the IRA and to see the tears of heart-broken loved ones who have been left devastated.

We are not acquitting ourselves well as a society in relation to legacy, seemingly concentrating on high profile, costly enquiries while ignoring the vast majority of victims who hurt just as much and grieve still.

There is much more that could be said, as I reflect on my year in office. It was good to be alongside police officers to offer my support and to speak at the National Police Memorial Service at the Waterfront in Belfast. It was encouraging to visit Maghaberry Prison and to witness outstanding leadership in a regime that is humanitarian, progressive and reformative. I was blessed by visits to serving chaplains in the Royal Air Force and Army. It was a privilege to represent our Church during the visit of Pope Francis to Dublin last August.

There were life-changing visits to Jordan and to the Greek Evangelical Church in the northern part of that country. And all those day-to-day experiences of visits to congregations which are making a difference to community. For example, there are over fifty churches in the Bangor area running an organisation called Storehouse which provides food and furniture for those in need.

As I have travelled around Ireland, I have experienced so many good news stories. It has occurred to me that as a society we are bombarded by bad news stories and endless negativity. This is not to deny the brokenness of our political processes and the pain in so many lives. But as followers of Jesus Christ we have been given the wonderful privilege of telling a better story. It's about fullness of life in Jesus Christ and that amazing adventure of faith that takes us out from clinging to the shorelines as we share him in word and in deed with others.

In short, it's about "Building Relationships – Christ's love compels us". To know that we are loved by an everlasting love, that the local church is the hope of the world and to reach out to community as we share and demonstrate that better news story of Jesus Christ - And what better story can there be than that!

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