**Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs**

**4th June 2018**

**Address by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Charles McMullen, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.**

Sitting in the General Assembly as a recently ordained minister in 1990, when I probably ought to have been paying closer attention to reports and debates, I was suddenly captivated by the beautiful smile of a woman looking in my direction. Barbara had recently returned from being a missionary of our Church to teach English in China and was here in her capacity as Tearfund’s first Irish youth worker. Romance blossomed for us shortly afterwards and we were married within the year.

My best man was Trevor Gribben, the Clerk of Assembly, and it is apocryphal that he read sections of the Code as he drove us from the wedding reception to our hotel! My longsuffering wife reminds me that I actually got in to the front beside him rather than the rear seat beside her. Should romance stir for anyone else this week, there probably needs to be an overture to the Code about seating arrangements in wedding cars!

Twenty-eight years later, I am simply overwhelmed to have been called to the moderatorial chair. Throughout my life the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has been a sacred place of unnumbered blessings. Not only did it help me find a wife, but it has given me the sheer joy and enduring friendship of so many sisters and brothers in Christ.

My limited horizons have been expanded by those who are full of evangelical zeal and fervour; those who stretch minds as they illuminate theological truth or speak courageously in the public square; those willing to venture beyond their comfort zones to reach out in a deeply divided society; those who have a strong social conscience and endless capacity for others; those who have the gifts of encouragement, generosity and hospitality; those who can build halls or administer finance; those who have a worshipping heart or a passion to pray for others; and after all of that, those whose company I enjoy!

As I reflect on many people who have enriched and nurtured me on my personal Christian journey, I find myself wanting to stress the overriding importance of relationships. It will come as no surprise, then, that I have chosen as my theme for the year that lies ahead: ‘Building Relationships’, which comes with the strapline from 2 Corinthians 5: 14 “For Christ’s love compels us.”

In the opening chapters of this epistle, Paul has been repeatedly highlighting how indebted we are to Jesus Christ and all that He has done for us. Suddenly it is as if his pen itself catches fire and he is freed from all restraint, now proclaiming what should be the motivation for everything we are, think, say and do: the all-consuming, all-constraining, all-compelling, all-commanding love of Jesus Christ.

Let Christ’s love compel us, firstly, as individuals, “because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died…Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.” Christ died for you and He died for me. He died while we were yet sinners and He died to set us free. He died to take away all that is old, tired, stale and sinful from our lives, to give us a new beginning, a second chance, a new birth, an eternal hope!

The promises of His Word become alive and real, as He guides us step by step through the changing circumstances of life and brings us to our heavenly destination. He fills us with His Spirit to the measure of His fullness, allaying our fears, overcoming our insecurity, dismantling our defences, humbling us in our pride and liberating us from all condemnation. He changes us from the inside out, and shapes us to become all that He intends us to be. Now we find our significance, our assurance and our security in Him as the very apple of His eye, the daughter and the son in whom He delights.

I am absolutely convinced that the Christian life rises and falls at the point of the devotional and the closeness of our daily walk with Him. No doubt during this Assembly week together we will hear about all kinds of ministries and activities for the good of the Kingdom and its coming, but let us not forget first and foremost who we are in Christ and the importance of spending time in His presence as we gather to worship.

Our growing maturity in Him and the formation of our Christian character will take precedence over the ministry He has given us and the careers we follow. In the inspired words of the American preacher and writer John Piper: “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”

Let Christ’s love compel us, secondly, as the Church of Jesus Christ. Christ is passionate about His Church and gave Himself for it. One of my spiritual mentors and heroes is the late Selwyn Hughes, whose devotional notes “Every Day with Jesus” I have followed for over thirty years and whom I had the pleasure of meeting once or twice. He writes this very challenging sentence: “A church can be orthodox in doctrine, efficient in service, blameless in character, beautiful in ritual, rich in culture, eloquent in preaching – yet all these things are but ashes on a rusty altar if it knows nothing of a burning, blazing love for the Lord Jesus Christ”.

What does this mean and what does it look like? I have caught glimpses in the faces and hearts of so many over the years, but it is surely a picture of all that the church should be with God’s love flowing freely, creating genuine community where every member plays a part and reaching out to the ends of the world. I believe our local congregations are the hope of the world, drawing people to belong and believe, enabling the weak to become strong and the poor rich as they find fullness of life in Jesus Christ. This sense of building relationships in Christian community is the powerful antidote to the idols of self that drive so much of today’s society, whether in terms of its insistence on consumerism, individualism, autonomy, selfies and social media, or whatever works for you.

I am always the first to say that Bangor West is not the perfect Church, but at its best it reflects a deep spirituality and a real joy of life. It has charted its own distinctive course within our denomination since its beginnings in the early 1960s. Under the ministry of my predecessor David Bailie there developed a gentle emphasis on the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

Many have come to our congregation and have found a new home, new life, new hope and new beginnings. If we do not have the resources of the Holy Spirit, how can we minister into so many lives that are empty, broken, wounded, hurt, and burnt out? Several times the late evangelist Billy Graham was accused of wanting to turn the Church back fifty or one hundred years, to which he always expressed his acute disappointment. “Only fifty years? I want to turn it back two thousand years to Pentecost!” How we need an outpouring of God’s Spirit if we are to face the challenges that lie ahead!

“Building Relationships – let Christ’s love compel us, lastly, as we reach out beyond ourselves to wider society. In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul mentions several times the ministry of building bridges or reconciliation. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore God’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.”

Reconciliation is costly, because there is no fence sitting. It seems to me that we can face two extremes. On the one hand, we can insist that everyone becomes like us. We can become exclusive, cutting ourselves off from those with whom we disagree, until we find ourselves splendid in our own isolation. Michael Cassidy in his marvellous commentary on John 17, warns that championing for truth can seem heroic and courageous, but “…endless churches have been split and broken by such crusades when those who carry them out do not bear in mind and keep to purview the demands of love and unity.”

On the other hand, we can be too inclusive as we accommodate ourselves to the spirit of the age, diluting truth, biblical integrity, the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ, orthodox Christian behaviour and morals, ceasing to be counter cultural. We need to be centred between love and unity on the one hand and truth and holiness on the other hand. As I extend both hands to make that point, that becomes a picture of the Cross. It’s what we might define as a generous orthodoxy in our dealings with others. Confident of who we are in Christ, we are enabled and empowered to reach out the hand to others.

The difficulties for us in contemporary society are manifold. There has been a declining confidence in institutions as a whole, including the media, politics and even the Church. Not only are we facing a decline in attendance, but we are often perceived to be dogmatic, distant and defensive naysayers, swimming against the tide of progress and tolerance.

From our point of view, there is also the pastoral sensitivity of realising that many of the issues confronting us are seldom black and white, but nuanced and complex, often affecting our own family members. And there is the vexed question of finding reasonable accommodation where there are conflicts of identity and differing definitions of equality.

By experiencing true freedom and hope in Jesus Christ and living together in the authentic Christian community of the Church, let us have the courage of our convictions to tell a different and a better story. To tell that story we have a distinctive vocabulary to bring to the public debate- the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and all that flows from that relationship, including mercy, forgiveness, justice, peace, and what is stressed in our passage, the ministry of reconciliation.

The word of God helps us to tell that story about redemptive love, giving a voice to the voiceless, defending the unborn, the marginalised, the abused and the victimised. We can speak about the beauty and the sanctity of marriage and family life. We can stress the importance of caring for our neighbour and creating Christian community, given what was described recently by a GP, as an epidemic of loneliness. We can promote a society in which responsibilities are preferred over rights and where we give ourselves in the service of others.

And as we enter the public space, no longer out of any position of privilege or preferment in society, but taking heed of what the self-confessed atheist Timothy Garton Ash has written in his chapter on religion in his book “Free Speech”, in which he draws the helpful and healthy distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect. The former has to do with the unconditional respect I owe you as a person and the latter to do with “the persuasiveness of your argument, the beauty of musical performance, your skill as a footballer, your dedication as a nurse, your generosity to the poor or your fortitude in adversity.”

What will make the difference will ultimately be the genuineness of those stories that we share about how Jesus Christ has changed lives, the youth work and the elderly care in which we are involved, and the generosity of our giving and the sacrificial love that we display. Let Tertullian’s word resound through the ages and come miraculously to life: “See how these Christians love one another.” May there be many stories told of God’s goodness.

I want to reflect briefly on recent political developments. Last week’s referendum in the Irish Republic yielded a seismic vote in favour of repealing the Eighth Amendment. We are a strongly pro-life Church and the result saddens me personally, having seen the type of legislation the Irish Government now intends to introduce. I want to pay tribute to the church leaders and those in our denomination who contributed to the debate with biblical authority, reasoned argument, scrupulous integrity and pastoral sensitivity. We can only pray that the Government, as they legislate, will keep the promises made to the electorate to make abortion rare in Ireland.

It would be a glaring omission if in a talk on ‘Building Relationships,’ I were to ignore the present political impasse here in Northern Ireland, the subject of resolutions later this week. It has been simply appalling that attitudes have become so embittered and entrenched with such adverse effects on our schools, hospitals, businesses, the economy and the many, many victims and survivors.

Politics should not be played out on the level of brinkmanship, but of finding consensus on this small piece of land we have to share together. We need to imagine a better future for our children’s children, confronting our prejudices through tireless efforts of imagination. What if our politics were based, to paraphrase Wesley, on doing all the good you can, for all the people you can, in all the ways you can, as long as ever you can. Not a bad description of what it means to build relationships!

Recently I came under conviction as I revisited the parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s the story of the priest and the Levite who walk by on the other side, ignoring a wounded man for fear of becoming involved in an act of sacrificial love at the cost of their religious defilement or exclusion from the Temple. We must not run the risk in our politics, culture and even our theology that we cut ourselves off from the other person.

There was also the Samaritan, the person you would not have expected to provide help but who risked life and limb to do so. Love for God and one another is the greatest apologetic for our faith and the one essential prerequisite for a ministry of reconciliation, as outlined in the parable. People do not care how much we know, until they know how much we care. No outsider will believe in Jesus until an insider treats him as a brother or sister.

And the parable emerges from the summary of the greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbour as yourself.” And suddenly it strikes me how wonderfully challenging this is! I can only respond by abiding in Christ and being filled to overflowing with his grace and truth. Growing inwardly with Christ and facing outward as His body is a powerful combination, as we confidently invite all people on earth to come and experience the all-consuming, all-constraining, all-compelling, all-commanding love of Jesus Christ!

Let us build those relationships then, as we walk with God glorifying Him and enjoying HIs presence, in the congregations where He has called us to serve, together as an Assembly, and as we reach out confidently to others – for Christ’s love compels us!

**Ends.**

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