



Photography: Jamie Trimble

A real gone kid

William Scholes talks to Moderator-designate, Dr William Henry, about vision, the need for change, and how a Deacon Blue concert convinced him to let his name go forward for the job.

When you notice that policemen seem younger, you know you are also starting to get old, or at least that's how the saying roughly goes. You might say the same about your children's school teachers, your doctor or even politicians. But – and with all due deference and respect to previous office-holders – youth is not something that has been synonymous with Presbyterian Moderators.

Until now, that is, though the incoming Moderator, Dr William Henry, is quick

to emphasise that at a mere 50 years of age it is, in his case, “relative youth”. Still, when he takes over the mantle from Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen at

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the General Assembly, Dr Henry will become the youngest Moderator in living memory.

We meet in the welcome area at Maze Presbyterian Church, where he has served since 1997. Anyone who uses the M1 regularly will be familiar with the church, which is something of a landmark on the stretch of motorway between Moira and Sprucefield.

Drivers speeding past have been able to see the church buildings alter and grow over the years.

Churches, as believers know, are

more than bricks and mortar; the external changes in Maze, then, are evidence of not only a burgeoning congregation – it has doubled in 20 years – but also changed hearts. It is arguably a manifestation of the theme ‘Enjoying God’ that Dr Henry is bringing into his year as Moderator.

Talking with Dr Henry, it is obvious that clear Bible

teaching and a mission focus have been at the heart of his ministry in Maze as well as Ballinderry, where he has been stated supply minister since 2001.

That isn’t unusual in Presbyterian circles, of course. Rarer, perhaps, is the way he talks about the need for congregations to capture a “vision mindset” and embrace change – churches typically don’t do change well...

A thread that ties all of this together is a conviction of God’s calling and leading in his life – a sense so strong that it allows him to overcome his natural reluctance to be a “front person”.

It’s a surprising admission for a minister and a soon-to-be-Moderator.

“At school, if the teacher asked me a question I’d be the one with a red face,” he explains.

“I really do not like being at the front, and I’m only there because I believe God has called me there.”

Moderator is the most ‘at the front’ role in the denomination, and Dr Henry talks compellingly of how he knew it was right to allow his name to go forward for selection – with a little help from Scottish band Deacon Blue...

“I have always felt that if God has put something in front of me, then I’m going to go with that,” he says. “With the Moderator role, it became clear in my own head around Christmas time when I was at a Deacon Blue concert in the Ulster Hall.

“I realised I was sitting in almost exactly the same seat in the gallery that I had been in 30 years earlier at a youth event. At that event they spoke about



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people fully committing themselves to God in the future, wherever that takes you. Being reminded of that was reaffirming to me that sense of call.”

When interviewing candidates for the ministry, “I always wanted to hear that sense of call,” he says. “I can see it throughout my own life – for example, looking back at when I wanted to be a minister, because it wasn’t a natural thing for me to want to be at the front.”

That call emerged while weighing up what he might do following his chemistry degree at Queen’s.

“Going into that field would have been natural, and I was offered a PhD sponsored by German tape manufacturer BASF,” he recalls. “And yet at this time there was an event at our own church, and Derek Poots, then the Deputy Clerk of the Assembly, was preaching.

“He asked, ‘What is man’s chief end? Is it to have a big BMW or is it to do God’s will, glorify him and enjoy him for ever?’ That was very apposite for me. Every day going to Queen’s I walked past the BMW garage on the Dublin Road, and always thought to myself if I’m going to

work in Germany I’ll have a BMW because everyone in Germany drives a BMW... That was critical in that sense of when God has left something in front of you, to do it.”

Having been led into the role of Moderator, Dr Henry admits to having “no idea” what the year will hold and to “feeling inadequate because it’s completely new”.

If we believe in a God who calls and leads, I ask if we should also have confidence that he is with us along life’s journey.

“That is the key to moving forward and doing anything,” says Dr Henry. “In our church here, we’ve always had the sense of God being with us. You can’t be involved in pastoral ministry without an understanding and seeing the needs that people have – struggles that people go through, whether mental health issues, or whether it’s crisis or illness – and we have to be able to tell people that God is with them.”

Dr Henry talks with passion about his theme of ‘Enjoying God’ and the idea of “encountering God as a real individual”.

“That experience of encountering God is transformational for all of us,” he says. “There are two aspects to it. It’s a message for the Church. Our Church needs it. Our Church is going through a bit of a hard time,” he says, a reference to, among other things, last year’s General Assembly decision on the Church of Scotland and developments around Union College and Queen’s University.

“Because the Church can feel at times battered, bruised, that everything’s against us, we need to remind ourselves of what is most significant: it is enjoying God, his presence; he is with us, he hasn’t given up on us, he is encouraging us. It is God who makes the difference.”

The second aspect of enjoying God relates to society and culture.

“We constantly hear the idea that people don’t want God. Why is that?” he says. “The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor talks about people being



distracted. Taylor talks about people being a ‘buffered self’, which describes how we’re self-contained and we think we’re complete; we’ve got our beliefs and we’re satisfied with those beliefs.

“He calls them ‘thin beliefs’ because you can hold all these things together and you think you’re complete. For us, as Christians, we need to reach over that buffer and reach into people’s lives.”

Dr Henry says that “the thing that is really going to reach into people’s lives is Christians living authentically and passionately believing in Jesus. When people see that they recognise it,” he says.

“That’s the sort of message that I want to try and remind people about – that God is real and that we have something positive to say, even though people might feel that the Bible is restrictive and that Jesus is restrictive.”

This isn’t just the fault of ‘the world’, of course: “For too long we’ve assumed that people will always come to church and be at church, and we’ve not really been trying to show what is authentic about faith.”

We talk about what authentic faith looks like. Dr Henry points to examples in his own congregation, for example prison ministry, youth work and a focus on families, how the church has grown and the range of activities that people are involved in.

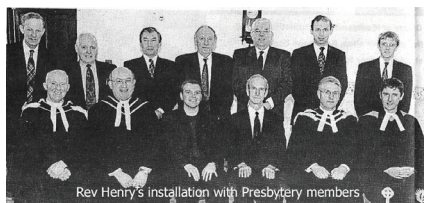
“We need to have a vision mindset,” he explains. It’s something he hopes to help share during his time as Moderator.

“You need to try and imagine what you want church to look like. So you change everything now, because unless you begin to change and adapt you’re not going to be able to get to that point...”

Churches struggle with change,

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and persuading congregations to back new patterns of ministry or lift their ambitions for the sake of the gospel can be a “matter of building trust”.



“My wider church experience has fed into this approach,” he explains, referring to spells as convener for the Strategy for Mission Committee and the Linkage Commission.

“I’m constantly coming back to our people here in Maze and saying, I’ve seen this, this is what is going to happen, we need to do something...”

And ‘we’ – as in the Presbyterian Church – do indeed need to do something: “I am not going to shy away from the issue that the next 10 years will be critical for the future of the denomination. There are many, many congregations that are ageing and we do need to embrace change.

“I’ve also seen so many examples that are positive and good – churches being

revived and others being planted, and the likes of Carnmoney Central, in the middle of Belfast in the old May Street building. That’s what we need to be doing if we are to have a voice into the future.”

If that voice is to be heard, church families should “impact the lives of the people around about us”.

“It’s not rocket science, it’s not difficult – it’s about just sharing Jesus, speaking about Jesus, showing Jesus, being involved in our neighbours’ lives, caring and showing compassion,” he explains.

Dr Henry met his wife Nora, a chemistry teacher, in a laboratory when they were studying at Queen’s – “she opened her door and all her apparatus spilled on to the floor...” – and the couple have three children.

That, plus the vibrant youth ministry and Sunday school at Maze, has given him an insight and heart for young people.

“Anyone who is a parent will know the pressures and the strains, not just social media but also exams, mental health issues, anxieties, the pressure to succeed, self-harm, suicide rates; it is all very real, and there are also changing thoughts in society about what’s ‘normal’ – with transgender and same-sex marriage issues, for example – so we do need to be very intentional about passing on the faith,” says Dr Henry.

“We do that in the home. That’s a big emphasis for me. If we’re not equipping our own people, we’re doing something wrong.

“We want to give our kids a robust biblical understanding that will equip them to deal rationally and realistically with what they are hearing.”

During his time at Antrim Grammar



School, the Scripture Union was “hugely significant for me in developing my early Christian understanding”, he explains, adding that the Christian Union at Queen’s – where he was president 30 years ago – was also extremely formative.

This leads us to talk about discipling young people and nurturing leaders. “We are going to need good, well educated, well thought through, theological leaders for the Church. That’s why CUs are critical for the future of the Church,” says Dr Henry.

“Summer mission teams, CSSM, SU camps and so on are both training ground and evangelism – they are a win-win for the Church.”

We talk about some of the other issues facing the Church at present – the continued fallout from the Church of Scotland decision among them – and how they can distract from what is most important – “sharing the message of Jesus”.

Explaining Christian viewpoints to those outside the Church can be a challenge, particularly in the context of the push in Northern Ireland towards the legalisation of same-sex marriage.

“Society may well change its view on what constitutes marriage and we can accept that, albeit with a degree of sadness, should that come,” says Dr Henry.

“But we will still have our view of what marriage is... We would see all sexual relationships outside marriage as being wrong and sinful, whether that’s adultery or sex before marriage.

“We’re not saying one is worse than another, but that we do have an ethic that is determined by the gospel and by our relationship with Jesus. We want to

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honour that.”

He doesn’t agree that the split between Queen’s and Union College was inevitable, though he says it is regrettable.

“I’m a graduate from Queen’s and Union and I’ve enjoyed the best of both. People who wanted to study theology at Queen’s now won’t be able to follow their passion. Union will be resourcing



With then clerk of session, Brian Adams, inside the old Maze building

and educating our ministers, and still wants to be involved in academic research in theology and how that relates to the public square and life in the 21st century.

“They will always have a role in equipping the local church and there may be courses that they are able to run and get people to think theologically – that’s important, the more secular our world gets.

“We want to pray for Union and the staff in the college. It’s been a difficult time for them and we want to support them.”

Politicians also need our prayer, says Dr Henry. Recent events, including around Lyra McKee’s murder and funeral, the council election results and political talks at Stormont, reflect “huge dissatisfaction and frustration that we haven’t seen progress and that we are without government”.

He voted Remain in the Brexit referendum; the decision to leave the EU is “huge and we’re going to be living with it for years to come”.

Whether substantial political progress or the return of Stormont happens during his 12 months in office does, of course, remain to be seen. What is more certain is Dr Henry’s aims for his spell as Moderator.

“Recognising that I’m a little bit younger, and that I have a family, I would really love to make the best of what I have to offer,” he says.

“I am hopeful that I will be able to involve some members of my family, and that we will be able to model mission in a holistic sense, and model something that other people can do. I want to make the year count, and to highlight the issues I think that our Church needs highlighted, which may be in terms of change and transition, and adapting to the cultural changes that are around us.

“I am going to grasp the opportunity with both hands. I don’t want to be a caretaker. We are to enjoy and encounter God – and that means doing something.”

