

Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs

1 June 2020

Reflections on his year in office by Rt Rev Dr William Henry, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the installation of his successor, Rev Dr David Bruce, by the 2020 Standing Commission of the General Assembly, at a special installation event this evening, in Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

Frist of all – I want to say that over the past year I have become ever more aware of the complete sense of privilege that has been afforded to me to be able to serve you as Moderator over the past 12 months. From February, a year and half ago, the time goes so quickly with little time to reflect other than to sense the reassuring presence of God and the reminder that all is in his plan.

I have been welcomed by our congregations and people over that time as I have been honoured to bring God’s Word and I am most thankful to literally feel the prayers of God’s people. I want to thank you all for that. I have very limited time constraints tonight, but I hope to give a brief insight and in reality, I fear, it will in no way do justice to the range of contacts and opportunities I have been given.

A number of people have said ‘it’s a pity this Covid thing has ruined the last couple of months of your year’ as the diary was wiped. There certainly were many visits I couldn’t make that I was really looking forward to. But like many of our ministers during this period, I have found it extremely busy and a multitude of new opportunities opened up to me.

There have been more frequent than usual meetings of the Church leaders Ireland Group and a few with leaders of GB and Ireland. I found these very rewarding and showing that we could work well together on issues where we have a common outlook. That picture from one of the Zoom meetings could be the interval round for your next church presbytery quiz – match the leader with the church!

The past 12 weeks actually afforded me an opportunity never afforded to a Moderator – to lead a service each week to which all our members could tune in. Particularly in those early weeks as congregations found their feet in broadcasting we were helping our wider church maintain their focus on God in weekly worship.

I felt it was important to produce something that looked like a normal service with all the usual elements, while still giving a sense of our wider Presbyterian identity and that we were in this together. I was also able to make phone calls to each of our active ministers to find out how they were during this difficult time of ministry – and I was pleased to hear how they were doing physically and spiritually, but also to hear of all the creative ways in which they have been leading their congregations.

Looking forward I believe we need to be ready for the tsunami of emotions and even trauma that will result from this time of lockdown. Having to deal with illness, bereavement and the usual problems and anxieties - but all at a distance which is so counter intuitive to pastoral workers - our ministers and leaders will be in the midst of that and we as a church will need to ensure that we can support everyone as best we can.

The most rewarding aspect of the role of Moderator must be the personal contact you have with others. The launch days of *Considering Grace* - that's our book on how Presbyterians responded to the troubles and then the subsequent meetings I organised with victims of violence heightened the importance of face to face encounters. As one who had entered ministry after the worst of the atrocities were past, this was poignant and a stark reminder of the trauma that many of our people still live through.

I have thoroughly enjoyed all the variety of engagement I have had with the four presbyteries I toured – Ards, Tyrone, Carrickfergus and South Belfast. All permitted me to have interaction with civic life for example with local policing, elected representatives, industry, social initiatives but most especially the church-based initiatives and local leadership and members.

The most striking lesson I gleaned from these visits was the impact that individual Christians are having in their own areas of influence. This is the principle of salt and light – churches are empowering believers to live as agents of transformation in the workplace and local neighbourhoods. Believers are scattered throughout society in homes, commerce, recreation, politics and every imaginable area of life – living as Jesus would have to do. As it gets more difficult to maintain a prominent presence of the institutional church in modern society – this basic lesson from the 1st century church will be central to our evangelistic model.

On a civic level there have been monumental changes over the past year in Northern Ireland. Around the New Year we were strong in our encouragement to restore the institutions at Stormont and glad when it happened - and I encourage all to keep praying for our political representatives in Westminster, Dáil and Stormont.

Changes to abortion law and marriage law have brought Northern Ireland more into line with the practice in Great Britain and Southern Ireland. While Brexit within the current crisis has unbelievably been side-lined in the media, its implications for Ireland north and south are no less than seismic and while engaging with politicians, I particularly valued meetings I have had with Presbyterian people in the border areas. Our church has maintained its strong authentic voice in all these matters. We have a particular perspective guided by the scriptures and the belief that God calls his people to be distinct and we must continue to speak into the public realm on these matters as people of faith

Getting back to church, there are challenges. One recurring conversation I had was along these lines: I would be chatting to passionately committed Presbyterian people who would be talking about their own families – not simply their grandchildren, but also their own kids - so I'm just thinking one generation down not two. So in my mind it's people my age and a lot younger - and while they were thankful that they know the Lord and are involved in local churches – they were not part of Presbyterian churches. We cannot ignore that fact, or bury our heads in the ground on that one. These are not people who have renounced the faith, so what is the lesson for us in PCI and what will we do about it?

Of course we do have many active and committed young people. One of my high lights was to spend time in conversation with lots of them at the MAD weekend - over a 1,000 kids praising God, hearing God's Word and responding. I also visited many of the teams on summer outreach all across Ireland, also to hang out with many of our youth leaders. I want to say to you all - thanks. Thanks for the encouragement you have been to me, and indeed to inspire and remind me it's always about God's kingdom and his Glory.

My overseas trip to Kenya was unforgettable as a setting for the church impacting local community, the Gospel bringing hope and transformation. It was a joy to see the dedication and commitment of all our missionaries as they serve the local church in reaching out. Here I was shown what Enjoying God looks like.

You have afforded me a wonderful opportunity over the past 12 months to serve God through this role in his church. I have sought to honour God and point to his son Jesus. And I pray I have been faithful to that calling as Colossians 3:17 reminds me "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Ends.

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