**LAUNCH MATERIAL**

**GROWING IN**

**FRUITFULNESS**

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**This material can be used as a sermon outline or in Midweek or Home Bible Study settings. It offers a way of introducing the vision of fruitfulness as a way of the congregation viewing their life and witness by unpacking and applying Jesus’ teaching in John 15v.1-17.**

***A way into the passage:***

1. **FRUITFULNESS**

The church today faces many challenges in terms of its life and witness. As society becomes increasingly disinterested in God and numbers dwindle in congregations we often find ourselves:-

* facing a bigger task with a smaller number of people
* needing greater energy, but feel increasingly weary and tired
* having the message of hope that the world needs to hear, yet feeling less hopeful than ever about just being able to survive

Feeling like that, we often find ourselves swinging toward one of two extremes. We tell ourselves, ‘let’s content ourselves with just being faithful’ and keeping going as best and as long as we can, or we chase the latest ‘recipe for success’ hoping that it will almost magically turn things around.

In John chapter 15, Jesus offers us another option – seeking to be fruitful in the place and time He has put us to live and witness for Him. The vision of fruitfulness Jesus paints is:-

*More than merely faithfulness to the way we have always done things in a changing world;*

*Often less than success in the eyes of a superficial world;*

*But always the growth of His Kingdom that is not of this world.*

***A way through the passage:***

1. **GROWING IN FRUITFULNESS**

So, how can congregations like ours be sustained, live and grow through this season in which we find ourselves today? What would it look like to imagine ourselves as a ‘fruitful congregation’? What would be involved? Speaking to His first followers in John chapter 15, Jesus sketches it out like this.

1. **Picture (verse 1) – Church: it’s a field, not a factory**

Have we borrowed too much of the language of the world around us in how we have come to view the life and witness of the church? We find ourselves imagining the church as a well-oiled machine built around programmes and plans, structures and systems. These things can and do have their place, but Jesus pictures the church as a growing place, a field rather than a factory. Church is a community of different people brought together, grown and tended by God. Its life and witness is unpredictable, subject to seasonal variations, atmospheric conditions, bumper harvests, droughts and famines. With that picture of the church we are much better able to make sense of what and who we are and where we find ourselves today.

*Do you see and experience church life and witness as something that happens more like in a field or a factory?*

*What difference does it make to see church as a growing, rather than a manufactured, thing?*

1. **Pain (verse 2) – Growth: it involves pruning**

Often we want gain without pain in the church. We want to keep everything the way it has always been yet see dramatically different results while avoiding the pain of change. But Jesus’ picture of growth involves the need for pruning. It reminds us that fruitfulness in the natural world is not arrived at by accident, or without the hard work of tending the crop and the pain of change and loss.

*In what ways might we be avoiding the need for pruning so that we can be fruitful - or even more fruitful - in our congregation’s life and witness?*

*What areas of our church life require more work and maybe pruning?*

1. **Promise (verse 5) – Expectation: look for the fruit**

Often the more we avoid change, the more things decline and the more we lose all sense of expectation that anything can ever be different than it is now. Jesus encourages us to expect and look for fruitfulness in our life and witness as a church.

*What do we expect God to do in us and through us in our congregation’s life and witness?*

*Where do we see signs of fruitfulness in increasing depth or growth?*

1. **Prayer (verse 7) – Ask: fruit is given from above**

 At the centre of this passage comes a reminder of the need to depend upon God if our church’s life and witness is to be fruitful. Just as fruitfulness in the natural world is the result of God’s unseen hand of blessing, so also in our church life. Central to this is prayer. When we remain in, and depend on, Jesus and His Word, our wants and our ways align with His and answered prayer becomes a reality.

 *Where does prayer fit in the rhythm of our congregation’s life and witness?*

 *In what ways might it sometimes appear that we think we can be fruitful by our own efforts?*

1. **Purpose (verse 8) – Him: it is not about us**

 Church life is busy, an often seemingly endless round of meetings, programmes and events. As such, it is easy to lose sight of who and what it is all for. Jesus reminds us that every aspect of our congregation’s life and witness is for our ‘Father’s glory’.

 *When have you found yourself losing sight of what you do in the life and witness of your congregation being for God?*

 *How might we better keep the focus of all we do being for the ‘Father’s glory’?*

1. **Pathway (verses 9-15) – Follow: it is modelled by Jesus**

 One of the Bible’s pictures of the church is as being the ‘body of Christ’ on earth (I Corinthians 12 v.27). As such, Jesus chooses to make Himself seen and known through us. If our life and witness is to be fruitful, then it will be marked by travelling the same path that Jesus Himself walked when He was here on earth. In verses 9 to 16, that path is described as a mixture of appreciation of God’s love (v.9), obedience to our Heavenly Father (v.10), joy in God (v.11), love and service towards one another (v.12&13), friendship with Christ (v.14&15) and learning from Him (v.15).

 *In what ways did Jesus model each of these qualities of spiritual fruitfulness in His life?*

 *Which of these marks of a spiritually fruitful congregational life and witness stand out for us? Why?*

1. **Privilege (verse 16) – Appointed: right here, right now**

 Often today we approach involvement in the life of the church as consumers. It is something we can ‘take or leave’ as we please, when we do or don’t feel like it. Jesus reminds us that it is not like that. Rather He has ‘chosen’ us for the privilege of being members of His Church and playing our part in its life and witness. More than that, He has ‘appointed’ us, individually and as a congregation, exactly where He means us to be fruitful for Him in place and time.

 *How would you describe the place in which your congregation finds itself appointed to bear fruit for God today?*

 *How would you describe the time in which your congregation finds itself appointed to bear fruit for God today?*

***A way out into our congregational life and witness:***

1. **THE FRUITFUL CONGREGATION PRAYER JOURNEY**

Over the next few months, as a congregation we will be taking part in an initiative called ***‘Growing in Fruitfulness’***. Returning to Jesus’ teaching on fruitfulness in John chapter 15 again, we will be:-

* ***thinking further*** about what fruitfulness looks like in our life together as a congregation and the witness we seek to bear
* ***deciding together*** on two areas of our congregation’s life and witness which we want to prioritise so as to develop greater fruitfulness
* ***beginning to prepare*** the ground for a local expression of growing fruitfulness for Christ

There will be a number of ways for everyone to be involved, including prayer. As a way of approaching this next period of church life together, we encourage you to sign up for ***The Fruitful Congregation Prayer Journey*** which will help us to pray in a focused way for all aspects of church life over any given four-week period.

To receive this short daily devotional and prayer prompt to your mobile or tablet, just sign up today at:

<https://www.presbyterianireland.org/Prayer/Prayer-Journey>

Hard copies are also available to those who prefer to work through the material in that way.