



A noble calling

BBC reporter **Mark Simpson** chats to Rev. Noble McNeely as he prepares for his year ahead as Moderator.

Even though I have known Rev. Noble McNeely for 20 years, I only recently discovered a whole new side to him. I was surprised, and if I'm completely honest, a little disappointed. I thought I knew the man. We live in the same town. He knows my wife. He knows my three daughters. We bump into each other all the time.

Then, one weekend recently I met him at Heathrow Airport, and I got my eyes opened. It turns out that Noble McNeely is a fanatical Tottenham Hotspur supporter.

He was on his way back from watching them play at White Hart Lane in London. I was shocked. I presumed that like the rest of us in Holywood (including Rory McLroy) he was a Manchester United fan. No, he follows Spurs, and has done since the 1960s. And he is not just an armchair supporter, he goes to England to watch them when he can.

Indeed, when I met him at the airport, he had brought his wife Florence along with him. I can't imagine that many of

the other 177 Presbyterian Moderators since 1840 supported Spurs. I would imagine most of them supported Manchester United... but I am a little biased.

Now aged 63, Rev. Noble McNeely's family roots are in Crossgar, County Down, and Lissara Presbyterian Church



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in the village. It was the church which split in 1951 in a row over whether to allow the church hall to be used as part of a gospel mission by Rev. Ian Paisley. Noble's aunt, Mary Dickson, now aged 101, remembers the dispute and reminded him of it recently.

"She said, 'Noble you wouldn't be Moderator of the Presbyterian Church if it wasn't for your granny, because she wouldn't let your grandfather go and join the Free Presbyterian Church when there was the split'. So I wouldn't have been a Presbyterian if it hadn't have been for that."

Noble was born in 1954 and after school went on to gain a degree in Education at Stranmillis College, specialising in jewellery and silversmithing. After teaching for two years, he felt called to the ministry and now, almost four decades later, the 63-year-old is about to become Moderator.

He's the first 'Noble' to hold the position, and his name was the first subject we discussed when we met up in Holywood recently for the interview.



So tell me, where did the name Noble come from?

It's a family name, my father was known as Noble, he had a great-uncle known as Noble, it's just a tradition which carried on in the family.

In terms of your faith, did you always believe in God, or did you have a sudden conversion to faith?

I can't remember a time when I didn't believe in God. Church was very central to our family life. I was challenged by sermons I heard and particularly through Boys' Brigade camps regarding my commitment to Christ. I can remember at the age of 17 making a positive commitment to follow Christ.

If there is one thing you hope to achieve in your year as Moderator, what is it?

My primary desire is to be able to serve Christ and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) to the best of my ability in the coming year.

I hope to promote the idea of 'Everyday Discipleship' which is the theme of the Special Assembly in August. I'm working on compiling a small booklet containing devotional readings contributed by a number of Christian leaders and PCI members on this theme.

Many Moderators seem to take a while to settle into the role, and are wary of commenting on matters of public interest until they've been in office for a while. However, often once they find their feet – and their voice – it's time to hand over to the next Moderator. Do you think the Church should consider longer terms of office?

Many who complete their year as Moderator probably feel relieved when it is completed and they are ready for a rest. The conclusion being one year is sufficient. Possibly the role of Moderator has become more recognised as a public figure and a spokesperson for the General Assembly and, because of this, it is the media that would be more comfortable

relaxed and spread. If the Church was to consider a change, a two or three year term may be a good idea. I think

though most ministers would be reluctant to be absent from pastoral duties in a congregation for more than 12 months.

Do you use social media? How do you think the Presbyterian Church in Ireland should use it?

I don't use social media regularly, although I have Facebook and Twitter accounts. As Moderator, Twitter will be used regularly and I will have to concentrate on its use. Social media when used well and constructively is a positive means of communicating the Church's message. In today's society, I think the Church has to take advantage of this powerful media and be professional in its use.

What's your view on the issue of same-sex marriage?

Same-sex marriage is an issue that continues to create debate and regrettably contention. At the outset I would want to say that the Church affirms that all people are valued and loved by God and we unquestionably renounce homophobia in all its forms. It is also important to say that we recognise that same-sex attraction can often cause stress for individuals and families, and as a pastor I understand this and try to deal with the needs of those I am called to minister to. On the matter of same-sex marriage, PCI upholds the historic and Christian standpoint – that the understanding is that marriage is exclusively between one man and one woman – a position I endorse.

How do you view the proposed visit of Pope Francis to Ireland next year?

I'm not sure how definite the plans are for the Pope's visit in 2018 and what dates he will be in Ireland. The World Meeting of Families is in August and so the visit will not be during my year as

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Ministry history

- * Began studies at Union Theological College in 1978
- * Served as an assistant at Fisherwick Presbyterian Church (1980) and was ordained in 1982
- * Called to First Ballymoney in 1984
- * Called to First Holywood in 1997

Family

- * Married to Florence (née Weatherup) who is a paediatric physiotherapist
- * Son Colin works for an accountancy firm
- * Daughter Emma is a dentist in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne
- * Son Richard is an optometrist and is currently completing a PhD

with continuity and the same person in the position for longer. If this was to ever be considered by the Church I think the job description of the Moderator would have to be rewritten.

The busyness and the weight of responsibility could not be sustained for a longer time than one year and so the pastoral responsibility to the wider Church, the number of engagements expected, the travel involved, the events where the Moderator is the Church's representative would all have to be reconsidered and the pressure to fulfil all this and more would have to be



Moderator. The visit of the Pope to Ireland will attract a lot of attention and I am sure thousands of Roman Catholics, both south and north of the border, will be very excited and overwhelmed by the visit of the Pope to the island.

I would hope that he would get a respectful welcome by all of the people. A visit of a Pope or any special church event raises the profile of the church generally and I believe offers us the opportunity to present a vibrant witness to Christ and the gospel. While there are obviously many fundamental theological differences between us, people will, I hope, ask questions related to faith and the media will offer opportunities to discuss theological issues. We need to be proactive and take advantage of these opportunities and be missional in our response.

At the time of writing there is political deadlock at Stormont. If you bumped into the leaders of the two largest parties (the DUP's Arlene Foster and Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill) what would you say to them?

I would treat them courteously and assure them that I recognise the complex and difficult job they have as leaders in our community. I would reassure them of the Church's prayer for them and the hope of Church members that they can deal with the issues that are holding up the re-establishment of the institutions at Stormont. I would tell them that there is a great deal of frustration out there that they haven't been able to agree a way forward and I believe that there would be extreme disappointment right across the whole spectrum of society if an executive cannot be put in place in accordance with the electorate's wish. I would remind them of the comments of the current Moderator, Dr. Frank Sellar, that for our society and institutions to function well there must be good will, empathy, integrity, a commitment to openness,

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generosity of spirit and cooperation for the common good.

Do you think the Irish language should have a more formal status in Northern Ireland?

I think the politicising of the Irish language has caused negativity towards it in some quarters of wider society in Northern Ireland. I think the language should be properly respected and valued, and so greater work is required in providing learning opportunities in local communities to foster organic growth. There have been groups organising cross-community initiatives to increase understanding of the language and these programmes should be encouraged. It seems to me that there still needs to be much more work done regarding the appreciation of the language and its historical use. Many Presbyterians spoke the Irish language and helped to save it in the past. I think the main challenge is the depoliticising of Irish and then possibly a more formal use of the language with sensitivity may be possible.

How did you vote in last year's referendum on whether or not to stay in the European Union, and why?

Like all citizens, my vote is secret and generally ministers of the PCI tend not to reveal how they vote as the Church includes people of diverse political opinion. The calling of a General

Election has created another opportunity for people to express their opinion on Brexit and highlights again

the divided nature of NI politics. Brexit will be proceeding and I recognise it has the potential to affect the political and economic relationships in Ireland. We pray that political leaders in the north, south and London will address the issues related to the border and how trade is done post-Brexit in a cooperative way, as it will affect Ireland as a whole, and produce an arrangement that will not disrupt current relationships. The PCI is an all-Ireland denomination and has members living in the border counties and we recognise the uncertainty Brexit creates for them.

Back to you, which one person – living or dead – that you know/knew has had the biggest influence on your life?

I suppose the person who had greatest influence on me was my father who is deceased 28 years. The greatest influence on my ministry has been the late John Stott, whom I met a few times and had him preach in First Holywood some years ago. His sermons, lectures and many books have shaped my approach to ministry and theological thinking on various issues.

Apart from Jesus, which biblical character are you most likely to refer to in a sermon?

I think the biblical person I refer to most often is Paul.

Finally, a football question. You've supported Tottenham Hotspur since the 1960s. Who is your favourite player of all time, and your current favourite?

My favourite player at present is Mousa Dembele. My favourite player of all time is Jimmy Greaves, whom I regrettably never saw play.