



For
now

*– belonging to the church
in unusual times*

*To all members of the
Presbyterian Church in Ireland.*

We need each other. We don't really need more meetings or programmes but we need each other. Our life together is the gospel made visible. The gospel produces a body with many parts. Our spiritual health depends on being with each other, and allowing the body to work, grow and reproduce the gospel. If we can't be with each other, we find it unnatural to worship, difficult to pray and a struggle to resist temptation. We need each other, because without this vital fellowship together we suffer, and the church is picked-apart.

During the last year, being with each other has been difficult, and for periods of time, impossible. This little booklet, *For Now*, is a first step to help us reconnect with each other, as we prayerfully hope 2021 allows us to do. At its core is an invitation to look again at the great invitation in Hebrews 10 – that we draw near to God, spur one another on and encourage one another – not as an option, but because we need each other if we are to keep the faith.

I know that as you read this booklet and take its message to heart, it will do you good, bless the Church and help us all map a way back to our life together.

May God bless you



Rt Rev Dr David Bruce
Moderator of the General Assembly



Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:19-25



Confident in the face of chaos

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought much upheaval, challenge and chaos to so many aspects of life that we have come to take for granted. It has been a season of life when confidence has been shattered, normality has been interrupted and we have felt less assured as we have gone about our daily lives. It has gone against the grain of so much of who we are to be told to remain at a distance rather than to come close.

So how encouraging to read these words from the letter to the Hebrews which tell us that we can have confidence through Jesus and the way he has opened for us to draw near to God with full assurance of faith.

Drawing near to God in every circumstance

The language used in these verses is significant and drawn from the way in which those in the Old Testament met with God in the Temple. There is mention of the 'Most Holy Place', 'the curtain', a 'high priest', 'sprinkling' and 'washing'. At that time, worshipping and meeting with God was something that happened with others in a very specific physical place. However, these verses show that, through what Jesus has done for us, meeting with God is no longer restricted to an earthly temple in Jerusalem.

That is something worth celebrating and reflecting on in the times we are living through. God's presence is not limited to a building. Access to worshipping him has not ceased. The relationship at the heart of the church's life has not been closed down. We can still draw near to our heavenly Father in any and every circumstance of life because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Our need of the community of the church

While we can be especially thankful that God's presence isn't limited to a building at this time of restrictions on gathering together, we also need to remember that it can only be fully experienced in the community life of his people.

As we wrestle to keep a firm and unswerving hold on the hope we find in Jesus, we need to be mindful of the crucial role we play in one another's lives. We find renewed strength for the journey as we spur each other on when the going gets tough, love wears thin and every simple good deed requires extra effort.

An old African proverb says: "If you want to run fast go alone. If you want to run far go together." Our interactions with other followers of Jesus encourage us to go the extra mile and keep us in the race for the long haul.

A time for plurals not singulars

There are no singulars in this passage, only plurals – lots of 'we' and 'us'. The New Testament wasn't written to individuals setting out to follow Jesus on their own, but to groups of people to be read together in community.

In Christ we are adopted into his family, and become members of the 'house of God'. While we might be used to thinking about the things God has done for us in these verses in a very personal, individual way, the sense of isolation we have so deeply felt as a result of Covid-19 restrictions is a reminder that the Christian life is a journey God intends us to undertake with others, not a socially distanced walk.

Pursuing the habit of meeting together

Habit is a powerful thing. Curiously, good ones are hard to form and maintain, bad ones seem to come so quickly and easily to us. In these verses we are strongly urged not to fall into the bad habit of giving up meeting together. That has become a temptation easy to fall into as the usually simple act and rhythm of attending worship and other church activities has become so complicated and more difficult to navigate due to circumstances arising from the pandemic.

More than a mere habit though, committing to the regular - even if sometimes interrupted - activities of church life is for the good of our spiritual health. They provide the necessary places in which we can experience the power of encouraging one another in God. Always best in person, still helpful when digital, even life giving when simply conversational, our committing to remaining connected to the community life of the church has become more important than ever just now.

Another day is coming

As those who find our hope in Jesus, our eyes are fixed on a better day approaching. It's not just the time when the Covid-19 crisis finally draws to a close and life returns to greater normality, although we look forward to celebrating that moment. It's that bigger horizon when Jesus comes again and all suffering, sorrow, sickness and separation is ended forever. So, confident in God, drawing near to him, holding on to the hope we have by faith, let's take every opportunity to spur one another on and encourage each other all the more for now and until present circumstances give way to what is yet to come.

A prayer

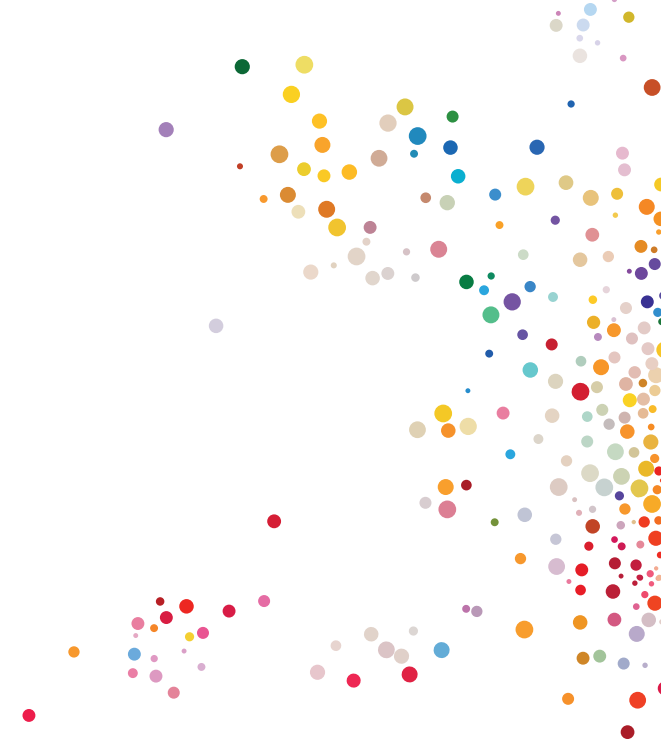
Faithful God,
we come with confidence into your holy presence,
thankful for the way that you have opened to us,
through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus,
our great high priest.

In these days in which we feel so deeply,
the brokenness of separation from brothers and sisters,
the deficit that distance causes to relationship,
the restraint of restrictions on our gatherings,
remind us that we can draw near to you,
finding faith and assurance in this moment,
forgiveness for our sins and shortcomings.
We give you thanks for this house of God,
this community of your people,
your church, our congregation,
into which you invite us to live together in faith and hope.

Help us not to give up and turn inward,
but to reach out and give ourselves to one another,
as we are able,
in person,
on screen,
by telephone,
connecting to care,
engaging to encourage,
through simple habits of love,
in worship, word and deed.

Lift our eyes to the horizon of a new day dawning,
post pandemic,
when life as we know it is restored;
but even beyond that,
to the coming again of Jesus,
when life as we have never known it is revealed -
no more suffering or sorrow,
no more sickness or separation,
when we will be forever, together, with the Lord,
in the hope into which he calls even now.
In Jesus' name,

Amen



Some Psalms to read and use for prayer at this time

- God's presence – **Psalm 46**
- God's shelter – **Psalm 91**
- God's goodness – **Psalm 103**
- God's strength – **Psalm 27**
- God's power – **Psalm 96**
- God's restoration – **Psalm 23**
- God's help – **Psalm 124**
- God's praise – **Psalm 100**
- God's keeping – **Psalm 121**
- God's answer – **Psalm 13**

Keeping in touch for now

Everyone's individual circumstances are different for now as we continue to work within necessary restrictions and restraints on what we can and cannot do. Health and family circumstances can add extra constraints and challenges to engaging in church life.

Nevertheless, it is important to do what we can to stay connected and keep in touch with others for our mutual encouragement in God.

Do what you can to do so:

- Regularly telephone another member with whom you are friendly for a chat so as to maintain basic contact with others;
- Feel free to get in touch with your minister, elder or other regular pastoral visitor for a chat, or to ask for prayer, or help with a particular need;
- As you are able make attending worship a priority when in person services are allowed;
- Tune in to digital worship as your access to technology allows;
- Take the opportunity to attend other gatherings, as restrictions allow, for Bible study or prayer, whether in person or digitally;
- Encourage children and young people to engage with what the congregation and its organisations are doing to maintain connection while not meeting each week;
- Sign up for your congregation's social media communications;
- When restrictions begin to ease, set yourself to quickly recapture the habit of meeting together.

Remember the importance of spurring one another on and encouraging one another as we continue to live through these unusual times in everyday and church life.



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