

Reimagining ministry

To help a kirk session reflect with its congregation during a vacancy on its missional priorities, and better appreciate the range of flexible models for ministry being outworked across PCI.

Reimagining a vacancy

If you are reading this then that means in the language of the Presbyterian Church, your congregation has been declared 'vacant'.

Language demands that some word or other is used to describe being without a minister, but 'vacant' is unfortunate, given how it throws up definitions such as empty, void or having neither use or purpose. Think of a vacant building and you'll imagine an unused retail unit that's an eyesore. Think of a vacant person and it brings to mind images of sadness: extreme old age; or some experience of trauma.

Who wants to be vacant?

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The fantastic reality is that your congregation is categorically not vacant!

You're not vacant because you have the Word of God in scripture that guides, inspires and leads his people into the truest understanding of ourselves and life that we can ever know.

You're not vacant because you have in your church the Spirit of God, a real and present wind that blows the vitality and life of God into all you do as a church family.

And you're not vacant because you have the love of God, shown in the remarkable sacrifice of Jesus' life, that tells you every person is of unsurpassable worth and value to God, and inspires you to a love for one another that seeks to carry each others burdens.

You might not have a minister, and you can call that many things, but with God's Word, God's Spirit and God's love you are never vacant.

So, acknowledging the uncertainty a vacancy brings, the following resource invites a kirk session, and key leaders if appropriate, to approach this time with hopefulness and a belief that it can be a helpful, healthy and fruitful process for your congregation.

What is your congregation's story?

The following questions offer a framework for a healthy discussion amongst your kirk session and key leaders if appropriate, to better understand the current context of ministry and mission within your congregation's life and witness.

Record any notes in the space provided.

In hindsight, the merger with Ravenhill has been a positive experience. I'm really happy and the last few years have been the best experience of my church life.

Elder in Ballymacarret and Ravenhill

<p>1. PLACE Give a brief profile of the community in terms of demographic, deprivation, economic activity. What other congregations or gospel witness is there in the area? Are there any shared opportunities in mission?</p>	
<p>2. PRESENCE How well embedded (specific examples) is the congregation in the community? Would the community miss the congregation if it ceased to exist? (i.e. relationship with schools, community groups etc.)</p>	
<p>3. PEOPLE Provide a brief profile of the congregation i.e. average attendance, age profile. Has this changed much in the last 10 years? What proportion of the congregation are from the community? How many people in the congregation are actively engaged in discipleship activities such as Bible study groups and prayer? How many people in the congregation are actively serving in outreach activities?</p>	
<p>4. PROGRAMME How is the congregation currently engaging in local mission? What are the potential opportunities for mission given the context?</p>	
<p>5. PREPAREDNESS FOR CHANGE How open to change are the congregation when it comes to future ministry and mission?</p>	

A variety of options with congregational stories

PCI structures are built upon the principle of the strong helping the weak, and the Central Ministry Fund exists to meet the financial shortfall smaller congregations face in being able to afford a minister.

However, declining numbers of people attending PCI congregations, has meant that many more congregations are finding themselves unable to afford a minister. Central funds are not sufficient to augment every shortfall and alongside this, there are not currently enough ordained ministers within the denomination to fulfil the volume of vacancies.

Whilst this picture might seem bleak, it has led many congregations to choose different opportunities for ministry that, in the favour of the Lord, have seen new life emerge.

The nerves we had about taking this step of faith quickly disappeared when the gradual decline in numbers stopped and we began to see God revitalising this church.

Elder in Craigavon

What follows is a list of all of the different options that a congregation should be aware of as it considers the best way forward for the next chapter of its life and witness. Some congregations are noted throughout to offer an example of how this has developed on the ground. The stories related to these congregations are told in greater detail in Appendix 1.

Spend some time as a kirk session and key leaders if appropriate, to reflect on all of the options listed and consider what model of ministry could be effective for your context.

What might be the next chapter of our story?

1. We can CALL a minister:

1.1. UNRESTRICTED Leave to Call.

This is normally granted to congregations that are maintaining or growing in numbers and are able to afford a minister.

1.2. REVIEWABLE TENURE (5 or 7 years).

This is normally granted when a congregation has experienced a decline in numbers and/or find themselves unable to afford a minister. The call could be granted for a minister on a full-time or part-time basis.

Examples: Ravenhill and Greenisland. Both congregations experienced growth in numbers under a new minister, and following the review of tenure, both were granted unrestricted status.

2. We can PARTNER with the Council for Mission in Ireland (CMI) to call a minister

CMI has resources to support ministry and mission across Ireland in locations it considers strategically important to have a PCI presence.

2.1. HOME/URBAN MISSION STATUS with Reviewable Tenure. This status is granted to a congregation at their request, and when CMI consider its location strategically important to have a PCI presence.

Examples: Craigavon (urban), and Sligo (home).

2.2. COMPOSITE CALL (Home/Urban Mission Status with Reviewable Tenure) in partnership with CMI or presbytery.

Examples: Great Victoria Street (2016-2023): ministry was 50% congregation, 50% project (Friendship House), Naas Presbyterian includes 50% chaplaincy. Dunfanaghy and Carrigart were given Leave to Call whereby ministry is 50% congregations and 50% missional project (Bewglass Centre). Another option could be 50% congregation and 50% community outreach.

3. We can PARTNER in ministry with another congregation:

To enhance the great commission in your area it might be helpful to partner in ministry with another congregation.

3.1. LINKAGE with a nearby congregation: This is where two or more congregations retain their individual status and leadership but share ministry together with one minister.

Example: Downshire Road and Ryans (Newry Presbytery).

3.2. MERGER TO START SOMETHING NEW: This is where two congregations become one. This means one congregation losing its individual status and leadership, however, a worshipping presence on its site is continued and refreshed.

Examples: Trinity Cloughey, West Church Kilcooley, First and Second Islandmagee.

3.3. MULTI-SITE: Two congregations can be one congregation under one leadership and minister with worship in both locations. Howth and Malahide have a long history of operating in this way with fruitfulness.

3.4. INFORMAL PARTNERSHIP: Two or more congregations sharing resources for life and witness in ways that are mutually beneficial.

Example: Saintfield Road and Belvoir.

4. We can SEEK other personnel:

The following options can be combined or reconfigured for different contexts.

4.1. ADDITIONAL PASTORAL PERSONNEL (APP): These are non-ordained positions and could be full or part-time. Vacant congregations are not normally allowed to employ APP's but a worker could be employed under the oversight of a minister in a nearby congregation, and seconded to work with a vacant congregation. CMI mission grants can be sought to co-fund APP roles.

Examples of APP roles are:

4.1.1. Community Outreach Worker

Examples: Trinity Cloughey and Alexandra in Belfast

4.1.2. Ministry Coordinator

Example: Whitehead

4.1.3. Auxiliary Minister or Mission Pioneer

4.2. STATED SUPPLY (likely temporary): An ordained minister to fulfil some ministry duties including leading services, administering sacraments and pastoral work.

4.3. ASSISTANT TO THE CONVENER (likely temporary): An ordained minister to fulfil some ministry duties including leading services, administering sacraments and pastoral work.

4.4. ACCREDITED PREACHER: These non-ordained individuals are trained for preaching and leading services. They are paid a pulpit supply fee and could form part of a solution for ministry in a congregation. A list of Accredited Preachers is available from the Council for Training in Ministry.

4.5. ASSISTANTSHIP: The appointment of an Assistant Minister requires engagement with the Council for Training in Ministry. Vacant congregations are not normally allowed to receive an Assistant Minister, but one could be employed under the oversight of a minister in a nearby congregation, who are working in partnership with the vacant congregation.

Example: Tullycarnet.

5. We can FINISH WELL:

5.1. CLOSURE WITH MERGER: This is where a congregation reaches the end of its life cycle, closes and its identity and people are merged with another PCI congregation. Worship is not retained on the existing site however, its financial assets can be directed towards outreach work in the wider community.

Examples: Ballymacarret, May Street, Crumlin Road.

5.2. DISSOLUTION (NO MERGER): As above, without a merger.

Example: Townsend Street

What options are you struck by?

What options would you want to rule out?

Reimagining your mission plan

Within the vacancy process, a congregation is encouraged to re-imagine its mission plan. Even if no minister is in post, every congregation has a responsibility to consider its ongoing presence.

The following tool offers a helpful framework to reflect on the current reality and the opportunities that exist to develop all aspects of your congregations life and witness.

Begin by reflecting on some familiar verses about the early church.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

Everything happened slowly which gave people time to come to terms with each change along the way.

Elder in Second Islandmagee

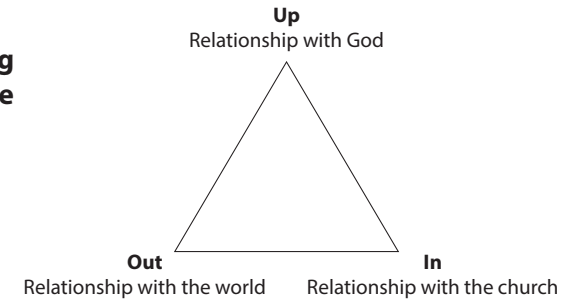
The triangle diagram is a helpful picture of how their faith was being lived out in three directions that we should be attentive to.

1. **UPWARDLY** they grew in their knowledge and relationship with God through Bible teaching, the breaking of bread and prayer (v. 42).
2. **INWARDLY** they shared what they had with each other, they met together regularly and ate together 'with glad and sincere hearts.' (vv. 44-46).

When a group of believers live out their faith in these two ways then it is a very visible witness that does not go unnoticed by others. Therefore, it is not surprising this had an impact in a third direction.

3. **OUTWARDLY** their lives of worship and care for one another drew favourable attention in the wider community 'and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' (v. 47).

We also see this pattern in the life of Jesus (time with the Father, time with the disciples, time with the crowd).



A mission plan for a congregation that wants to be fruitful in its life and witness should consider how the will of God is worked out in three directions:

1. **UPWARDLY:** in our worship and glorification of God
2. **INWARDLY:** in our discipleship and fellowship with one another
3. **OUTWARDLY:** in our witness to the world.

Take some time to reflect and discuss how your congregation is doing in each of these directions.

In doing this, think about the realities and the opportunities using the following questions.

• Reality:

- What is currently happening?
- What has changed in the last 10 years?

• Opportunity:

- What could be built upon?
- What other opportunities exist to grow in this direction?

It might be helpful in your discussion to capture this on three large sheets of paper on the wall as follows:

Up		In		Out	
Reality	Opportunity	Reality	Opportunity	Reality	Opportunity

Prioritise by choosing one opportunity from each direction (up, in and out) that seems to generate most enthusiasm in your discussion, ensuring it is achievable within your current capacity and resources.

Write a mission plan document shaped around what you have discovered from this discussion that can be submitted to the Linkage Commission.

This should include the current reality of what you are already doing and the three opportunities you have prioritised, one from each of the directions (up, in and out).

Notes:

What next?

Considering a different option for ministry and mission in your congregation can be daunting. The Council for Mission in Ireland (CMI) and the Council for Congregational Life and Witness (CCLW) have responsibility for overseeing mission in PCI and can help your congregation navigate a vacancy by offering support in the following ways:

- 1. Advice:** During the vacancy, CMI staff or representatives can meet with your kirk session to help facilitate a discussion around what is included in this booklet and offer advice and share experience from other congregations.
- 2. Equipping:** Resources and tools are available to help your congregation grow in its life and witness. These can be found on the PCI website www.presbyterianireland.org/resources
- 3. Accompaniment:** Ongoing support for a specific aspect of change can be offered in the form of CMI/CCLW staff engagement over an agreed period of time.
- 4. Grants:** CMI have funds from which grants are made for a new mission project or Additional Pastoral Personnel (APP) such as a Community Outreach Worker. Funding is granted over a limited period of time on application to and assessment by the Mission Grants Panel. More information and application forms are available from the Mission Support Officer in CMI.

Useful contacts

- Council for Mission in Ireland Secretary
- Mission Development Officer
- Mission Grants – Mission Support Officer

To get in touch either:

Email: mission@presbyterianireland.org

Phone: 028 9041 7265 (from NI) / 048 9041 7265 (from RoI)

Notes:

Stories from congregations

The stories listed below are in alphabetical order by congregation.

Ballymacarret

Closure with Merger

Declining numbers and an aging congregation led to the closure of Ballymacarret congregation in 2010. This was a long and difficult experience for the church community, many of whom had worshipped there for generations. The closure carried a huge sense of loss of people, the building and a feeling that they were abandoning the community they had served for decades. The merger with Ravenhill led to most of the church members moving there, where they experienced a warm welcome from a congregation with a similar ethos and heart for its working class community. Recent ministers have led changes. The church service is more informal now and people feel more relaxed and comfortable which makes it more warm and welcoming to visitors. New people of all ages are joining the church which is a great encouragement but there is still much work to be done.

In hindsight, the merger with Ravenhill has been a positive experience. I'm really happy and the last few years have been the best experience of my church life.

Elder in Ballymacarret and Ravenhill

Belvoir

Informal Partnership with Saintfield Road

Saintfield Road (SRPC) and Belvoir (BPC) are neighbouring congregations, albeit serving different demographics. Informal connections existed between the congregations, from family ties, friendly associations, and serving together in youth work in Belvoir. With declining numbers and an aging congregation, Belvoir was unlikely to get leave to call and South Belfast Presbytery looked to SRPC to partner in some way with Belvoir to help sustain worship and witness in the area. Over a few years, the relationship and trust between the congregations grew. The minister of SRPC took over as convener of the BPC vacancy and two elders from SRPC were appointed to the interim BPC Kirk Session.

A conversation was initiated between some representatives of SRPC and BPC and a plan emerged of what a partnership could look like. With the involvement of Presbytery, CMI and the Linkage Commission, a Memorandum of Understanding was developed which both congregations received, discussed and approved. They are currently working towards appointing someone who can help to contribute to ministry and mission within Belvoir, but as part of a wider ministry team under the leadership of Saintfield Road.

The relationship with Saintfield Road has grown as the congregations have shared their hopes and fears for the partnership. Clear communication with the congregation at every stage has been so important in helping members feel informed, thereby avoiding any misinformation.

Elder in Belvoir

Craigavon

Urban Mission, Reviewable Tenure

Originally a 1960s church extension charge, Craigavon Presbyterian Church (CPC) never developed as anticipated, largely due to the failure of the 'New City' project. Unable to afford a minister of their own, Craigavon was linked with the rural Vinecash Presbyterian church in the 1970s with its ministers covering these two socially and culturally different charges.

When the congregations became vacant in 2012, with the support of session, Armagh Presbytery approached the Council for Mission in Ireland (CMI) to explore the possibility of redesignating CPC as an Urban Mission Congregation. This proposal was accepted, the link with Vinecash was split, a 7 year reviewable tenure was given, and CMI assisted in both the search for a minister as well as providing the necessary funds so that the minister could focus solely on the revitalisation of CPC.

Over the following 9 years the congregation tripled in size and has now begun the process of looking to expand its

The nerves we had about taking this step of faith quickly disappeared when the gradual decline in numbers stopped and we began to see God revitalising this church.

Elder in Craigavon

buildings. God has been faithful and has greatly blessed the step of faith that CPC took back in 2012.

Crumlin Road

Closure with Merger

When Crumlin Road Presbyterian found themselves in a vacancy in 2016, it became clear that they were not in a position to call their own minister. After some discussions with West Kirk, Shankill Rd, a merger was pursued. Although one building was to be closed, the merger would be beneficial to both congregations as they joined resources to spearhead new work in a larger parish area.

Combined human and financial resources have made this new work possible. An Assistant Minister was assigned to develop this work and explore missional opportunities within the community. Through links with International Meeting Point in North Belfast, the door was opened to the possibility of a church plant amongst locals and internationals at the bottom of the Crumlin Road, this has been one of a number of the fruitful outcomes of this merger.

We are encouraged that Crumlin Road Presbyterian is not dead, but has given birth in a new way with its legacy enabling the planting of Grace and Hope Community Church at Carlisle Circus.

Former Elder in Crumlin Road

First and Second Islandmagee *Merger to start something new*

The journey towards a merger in Islandmagee was one of 'small steps' of discovery and encouragement over a period of years. What began with sharing a youth worker would in time lead to a shared realisation that the congregations 'were better together'.

Each step of united ministry or mission led the way towards a closer relationship between the two congregations. A united choir would begin to lead worship for joint services at Christmas and Easter. The congregations would begin to meet together for their summer services, along with united summer outreach to children and young people.

Courageous decisions by elders at pivotal points on the journey were instrumental in leading the congregations forward. This included choosing to have one Sunday morning service when the two congregations were initially linked.

The PW would lead the way and be the first to formally amalgamate and as the elders considered the future it was clear that having 'one' congregation lay some of the foundations for a stronger Christian witness for both God's glory and the good of His people.

Everything happened slowly which gave people time to come to terms with each change along the way. Together we have a bigger church family which enhances the experience of worship and fellowship, and it enables a better witness to the local community.

Elder in Second Islandmagee

Greenisland *Reviewable Tenure*

Anxiety, fear, concern, frustration and anger were some of the emotions present in Greenisland when they received leave to call under reviewable tenure. However, very quickly the church leadership embraced the status and saw it as a springboard for moving the church forward.

Once a new minister was called, a vision document and mission plan was developed to keep the church focused on the areas they believed to be important. These included preaching and teaching that could be understood and applied to everyday life, a focus on fellowship within the congregation, adapting services to be more accessible to non-church goers, and actively taking the gospel out into Greenisland village.

With this focus, the church has experienced growth with people citing a feeling of belonging and welcome from the moment they walked through the door. Many young families talk about the community of the church and how it embraced them and their children.

While Greenisland has had its reviewable tenure status lifted, it has embedded many of the principles that the congregation have embraced and the Lord has blessed.

The church is much more connected with the community and that has influenced the congregation. Younger families are joining the church and people are growing as they put their faith into action.

Elder in Greenisland

Naas *Composite Call*

Despite the challenges of having a minister who shares his time and energy between two very different roles, the “composite call” arrangement has ultimately produced positive results for Naas congregation. When they were vacant, and numerically and financially unable to have a minister of their own, and when a linkage with a neighbouring congregation was not feasible, the “composite call” provided a very welcome way forward. Now, ten years later, the congregation are thankful to the Lord – not only for how He has enabled them to remain open, but that He has grown the church family both in number and in faith. It has been and continues to be hard work, but seeing the Lord bless that work is a great encouragement to everyone.

Ravenhill *Reviewable Tenure*

Ravenhill was granted Reviewable Tenure status in 2011. At first, the congregation saw this as a daunting challenge, but it turned out to be a great motivator for change and improved health. The congregation embraced the challenge and focused on making necessary changes to become a fruitful church. They focused on improving the quality of their worship services, creating discipleship opportunities, fostering stronger fellowship among members, developing leaders and equipping every member to get involved in ministry. Additionally, the church placed a renewed emphasis on connecting with their local community and sharing the good news of Jesus. Thanks to the grace of God and the congregation’s concerted efforts, Ravenhill has grown and flourished. Today, the church is a great example of what can happen when a congregation views Reviewable Tenure status as an opportunity for change and works towards becoming a fruitful church.

Sligo *Home Mission*

Following the retirement of its previous minister in 2015, Sligo Presbyterian were granted leave to call with 7 year reviewable tenure. Engaging with the Vacancy Convener the congregation produced a mission plan with ambitious 2, 5 and 10 year targets - believing that God had something new to do in their midst. As part of the Home Mission the congregation were able to access additional support during the vacancy, especially in the process of calling a new minister, while also retaining a significant input themselves. Two of the congregation’s elders sat on the panel interviewing prospective candidates. Following the interviews, one candidate was invited to preach and the congregation held a congregational vote to decide whether to proceed to call the new minister. Being part of the Home Mission has also opened up opportunities for additional financial support, such as a grant to upgrade the congregation’s audio-visual system. As the church approaches the end of this period of reviewable tenure, it is with hope for the future and gratitude for what God has done and is doing in their midst.

Townsend Street

Dissolution without merger

South Belfast Presbytery entered into a consultation process with Townsend St congregation close to the end of Rev Lamb's ministry knowing that the congregation was not going to be able to call a minister in its own right going forward. The good people of Townsend St had recognised their situation and had given thought to how the legacy of the congregation might be handled. They had a strong desire to see the resources of the congregation used to bless the local area and presbytery as well as being of use for the denomination at large. The church leadership wanted to have something substantial to hand on as opposed to using the remaining resources in simple maintenance of buildings. Through creative partnership with groups like Lifehub NI (a Christian food distribution charity), Townsend St investment park and the Ulster Orchestra as well as PCI, a sense of onward legacy and relief was reached. The members of Townsend St Presbyterian continue to bless and work within our denomination and congregations.

I was sad when it became clear that the church was closing but we wanted a positive ending. Its encouraging to see the building being used by the Ulster Orchestra and that financial resources from Townsend Street will be used to further mission opportunities within the presbytery.

Elder in Townsend Street

Trinity Cloughey

Merger to start something new

In 2017, Trinity Greyabbey felt led to explore ministry in the lower Ards Peninsula. Soon after, a conversation began at Presbytery regarding the vacant congregation in Cloughey that was facing closure. As this was the only place of worship in a village of 1200 people, all involved felt that a Christian witness should be maintained. In consultation with the Linkage Commission a vision was developed to maintain and revitalise the Christian witness in Cloughey. A merger was agreed and Trinity Cloughey launched in September 2017. The remnant congregation of 25 people returned and by God's grace the worshipping congregation has grown to over 90. New families have been welcomed into membership and several people gave their lives to Jesus. With the support of CMI, a Community Outreach Worker was appointed in 2019 to further develop the witness in Cloughey.

I feel I want to invite other people along to church now whereas I wouldn't have done so before the merger. All generations are represented from young families to seniors. I love going to worship now.

Church member, Cloughey

Tullycarnet

Assistant Minister

Tullycarnet Presbyterian Church became vacant in April 2022. Having their own minister was no longer a viable option but East Belfast Presbytery considered that having a continued witness through the congregation was the best way of reaching the local community. Two retired ministers have got involved with preaching and seeking to envision the congregation. They have built up the 'Friends of Tullycarnet' from other local churches to pray, support the congregation and assist in outreach. The minister of Christ Church, which is in a similar local setting, has been appointed as Vacancy Convener on a 3 year term to develop and oversee a team, which is planned to include an Assistant Minister and a Community Outreach Worker, serving across both churches. This gospel partnership comprises a number of elements, which together allow a new form of ministry to be tried.

It was frightening to consider that our long-standing presence might be lost in an estate where it is desperately needed. Seeing people from nearby congregations wrapping their arms around the church with genuine care and action has been very uplifting.

Elder in Tullycarnet

Whitehead

Stated Supply and an APP

Whitehead Presbyterian Church entered a vacancy in 2021 and found itself small in number, fragile in its future outlook, but expectant about what God might have planned in the next step of its journey. At first, the church hoped for a traditional ministry model and found itself discouraged quickly as a number of factors meant that was not possible. The congregation realised that in order to move ahead they would have to adopt a different 'model' of ministry. With the help of CMI and other partner churches, Whitehead recruited an Additional Pastoral Personnel staff member to work with a neighbouring minister as Stated Supply. This appointment, initially for three years, has brought much hope for renewal and anticipation within the congregation that God is doing something new.

Facing the heart-breaking reality of an uncertain future, we prayed a lot, believing God could do a new thing in our midst. The appointment of a Ministry Coordinator with a shared vision to develop and grow our ministry in Whitehead, has been an answer to prayer.

Elder in Whitehead

