



## The President's Covid-19 Story

### Rev Dr Tom McKnight

*I was thinking recently about the distant past. It was Sunday, the 15th of March, in the year of our Lord 2020. I remember going to church that morning. I also remember that we sang four hymns, each of which has special resonance as I think about what has happened since. We started with "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah", 465 in Singing the Faith. "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand".*



*Since that day, our weakness in the face of the virus has become apparent. What we have been asked to do has not seemed like much: wash our hands, stay home, keep socially distant, but above all we have needed to do something the government has not asked us to do: to pray for God to hold us in his powerful hand. The last verse begins: "When I tread the verge of Jordan bid my anxious fears subside", and then it ends with praise: "Songs of praises, I will ever give to thee." We face our fears with praise.*

*Then we sang the contemporary setting of the 23rd Psalm written by Stuart Townend, which assures us of God's presence with us, even when we must walk the darkest path. Our third hymn, "The Church of Christ, in every age", was by the great British Methodist hymn writer Fred Pratt Green, who died in 2000 at the age of 97. Its first verse reminds us that the Church of Christ must "keep on rising from the dead". When we once again are able to gather for worship, hopefully in September, as a church we will, in a sense, need to "rise from the dead". I now have a file folder on my computer labelled "Worship during the coronavirus pandemic". In it I have nineteen Worship at Home sheets, which I have prepared for my church in Donaghadee from materials produced by the British and Irish Methodist churches, for each of the nineteen Sundays since gathered worship was proscribed for health reasons. If my church is able to resume gathered worship on the 6th of September as hoped, I will until then be preparing five more. When we do resume gathered worship, things will be different. There will be social distancing with limited seating. There will be hand sanitiser stations. There will be a one-way system. There will be special rules for celebrating Holy Communion, including standing, rather than kneeling, at the communion rail. Singing in church may, or may not, be permitted by then.*

*The final hymn Donaghadee Methodist sang as a church before lockdown was "May the mind of Christ my Saviour", written early in the Twentieth Century by Katie Barclay Wilkinson. The last verse of that hymn goes: "May I run the race before me, strong and brave to face the foe, looking only unto Jesus as I onward go." The race before us seems long as we cope with the pandemic and what it means to come out of lockdown. May we look only to Jesus, as we "onward go."*





## The Lay Leader's Covid-19 Story

### Hazel Loney

*In recent conversations with friends and family I have found myself saying, more than at any other time in my life “I don’t know”. We have listened to the opinions of experts, virologists epidemiologists, scientific advisors and commentators, and as we strive `to do the right thing` one thing is for sure, we are still struggling with a new virus which is challenging even the brightest and best brains across the world.*

**RISE** TO  
THE  
MOMENT

So, we ask what has the Church to say on the whole matter? Christian writers and commentators have moved quickly to write books on the subject and get them published, helping us to think through the issues a global pandemic brings. Theories about the origin of the virus and opinions about what God is saying to us all are diverse and varied but what have we learned from the experience of having to forgo corporate worship and facing a winter of uncertainty?

Most of our congregations have been quick to use technology, with Zoom, YouTube, live streaming, Facebook etc. This has been such a blessing and a bit frustrating at times. As

*a preacher I am tired preaching into my own face!! One thing is sure, the gathered expression of worship is particularly important, I miss it desperately, but so too is the coming out from behind our church walls and being heard in the public space. Some drive-in services have been successful, and summer has facilitated that so far. Many people are saying they now join in two or three services on Sunday and some non church goers have started to listen in.*

The mayor of London has expressed his thanks to the Christian churches particularly, for their work during this difficult time, so for many this has been a chance to show our faith in action. MCI has been quick to be generous in sending financial help to our partner countries where life is much tougher than here. My heart weeps for the world right now. I think of refugee camps near Syria, asylum seekers and migrants and displaced people with nowhere to call home. Some of the African countries struggling with bad governance and lack of adequate health care could be facing hunger, the pandemic has exposed the cracks in their systems. Yemen is heart-breaking.

Nearer home we have an economic crisis looming and job losses predicted, young families facing big challenges, our business community struggling. As we struggle on through this time of not knowing what should we be about? It strikes me that the first thing is, not a cop out, but sincere and earnest prayer for our political leaders, church leaders, scientists, researchers, and medical people, teachers etc. We should be mindful of the importance of our giving both to our churches and charities right now. I am glad we have called a special time of prayer in this season of unlocking on 24th August, if you have not signed up yet, you should.



*In Romans 8 Paul reminds us that there are times we do not even know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. This struck a chord with me in the midst of my not knowing. I don't know lots of things, there are a lot of whys, so I groan for the world and when words run out, that is enough. As disciples of Christ we share in his heart for the world when it turned his stomach and made him weep, but he did more than that he gave his life that the world might be redeemed. So as we come out of lockdown ,and I trust we stay out ,we should be communities of disciples willing to weep with the world but also to give ourselves in practical ways so that the places where we find our selves notice us, not because of our impressive buildings or even our regular gatherings but because of our living presence in our communities.*

*In the world's brokenness Christ came to us, in the incarnation he became one of us and gave his life as a ransom. Jesus told his disciples in the upper room, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" and he is still sending us, as he was, to give ourselves for our world. The great commission is not finished yet, so we need to keep on being and saying the truth as its revealed in Christ Alone.*





## Fiona's story

### Rev Fiona McCrea, Carnalea Methodist Church

I've been asked to share a little of our church's journey through lockdown, the changes and challenges we have experienced and what we're looking forward to in the weeks and months ahead.

Have you ever read the Stormie Omartian book entitled 'Just enough light for the step I'm on?' I don't think I've ever actually read the book but I have definitely quoted the title multiple times and for me it sums up how I feel about the journey of lockdown.



In CMC we have faced lockdown one step at a time and each step forward has been into the unknown but we have journeyed knowing that God goes before us, beside us, behind us and within us. The subheading of Stormie's book is 'Trusting God in the tough times' and this has been the case for our church family, we have continued to trust God through these challenging months and have sought to continue to love God and serve others throughout this time and in new ways.

As I wrote I began to list what our church family has been up to over the past few months but decided that would take too long to describe to you, so let me share some highlights with you, using the headings of the MCI commitments which continue to be at the forefront of our minds...

Warm-hearts – as part of our discipleship the congregation have received a daily devotion entitled 'Ponder, praise and pray' from Monday to Friday and on Saturday a member of the congregation has shared what God is doing in their life during lockdown. Through our zoom prayer and coffee meetings we were able to broaden this sharing to hear many stories of what God was doing in our lives and the lives of those around us and to encourage and pray for one another. Prayer continued in many different ways and we moved our bible study online and even began a book club! Many in our congregation have commented on how their faith has grown and developed over this time and how it has become a part of everyday life rather than squeezed into a Sunday!

Tough hands – pastoral visitation of our elderly and those most vulnerable switched to phonecalls, emails and texts and this care for one another extended throughout the church with the bowlers checking in on one another, the ladies group phoning each other etc. This love and care incorporated all ages and our children and young people were kept connected by our youth worker and volunteer leaders through zoom lunches, zoom YF, zoom YC and zoom bible study, we were so grateful to IMYC and the TOM team for their resources! Recognising that even our youth were tired of screens they finally decided in July to brave the elements and meet in our church car park, socially distanced on a camping chair with an umbrella (it has rained a lot during July and August!!)

One of my favourite parts of lockdown was our Sunday services which we shared with the five other churches on the Bangor and Holywood circuit, hearing different voices leading, doing prayers, readings and worship from around the circuit and including some of our older members, who can no longer attend church in person, was such a blessing. The church finally seemed to include everyone, not simply those who could come to the buildings at 11am each Sunday!



Wet feet – a few years ago we ‘adopted’ Ailsa Lodge as our nursing home in CMC and over lockdown our pastoral worker organised boxes of love to be delivered there, filled with treats and messages of love for the staff and residents. We also supported Storehouse North Down through weekly food and financial donations which a member of the congregation collected and delivered to Storehouse. This care for others extended into our whole community in very creative ways as CMC folk became Jesus’ hands and feet when shopping for those shielding, sewing PPE, baking goodies to treat neighbours, holding community quizzes and much more.

I hope you have enjoyed this whistle-stop tour of life in CMC church family over the past 6 months, the buildings may have been closed but the church was not!

So what have we learnt in this time? We have been reminded afresh of God’s goodness and faithfulness in the good times, the tough times and the uncertain times. We have been shown how God is present with us at all times and in all places, He is not restricted to a building and a certain day of the week and neither is our faith. We have learnt what the body of Christ can do when we all use our gifts and talents and have seen and heard stories of discipleship, mission and pastoral care as the church family has been empowered for service. We have seen people grow closer to God and take more ownership of their personal faith development and we have seen God at work!

What are we looking forward to? I heard this phrase yesterday... ‘we used to think we knew normal but now we are in a new normal!’ For the first few weeks I felt like we were treading water until we could go back to ‘normal’ but over the past months I have come to realise that the future will look different and that this can be exciting and hopeful. The verse I have been coming back to again and again in recent weeks is Jeremiah 6v16a...16 This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.

Although I feel I have more questions than answers right now, I am trusting God that we have ‘just enough light for the step we are on’ and that he has great things planned for CMC and the community we are part of. We are at a crossroads with lots of unknowns... will we reopen our buildings, will we wait? Will our organisations start back in September or will they remain online? As a church family we are asking God where the good way is for the future of CMC and we plan to walk in it.







## Annie's story

### Rev Annie Deche, Newry Methodist Church

I am humbled to share with you the journey covered since the novel coronavirus pandemic was first reported in Northern Ireland and Europe in general. This includes the lessons learnt from the changes and challenges occasioned by the virus, the promise and opportunities jointly embrace over the period.



*The Public Health Agency confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the country on 27 February, 2020. Immediately, the church instituted measure in compliance with government guidelines aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. At the time, the mass media was awash with grim stories that pushed us all into a general state of anxiety.*

Looking back, I am encouraged and proud of the steps the church took to soulfully support the community. The decision to explore and utilise online platforms enabled the church leadership to meaningfully engagement to congregants. On 15 March, 2020 a post on the Newry Circuit Facebook page quoting Psalms 91: 10-11 was uplifting. It read: 'No harm will come to you. No sickness will come near your house. God will command His Angels to protect you wherever you go'. This has been our prayer through the days, weeks, and now months since the pandemic began.

We began livestreaming our sermons to take the gospel to the homes of our members and the community, a move that has influenced me and others positively, cheering one another with messages of hope and encouragement. At first, I did not have the confidence that I would be able to pull through with online preaching and teaching. As a matter of fact, it was a big shock for me when I was asked to present sermons live on Facebook because it's something I hadn't done before. It, therefore, took me a considerable period of time to finally agree. I immediately teamed up with the administrator of the Circuit, who has been very supportive of the Ministry – she made me an administrator of the church's Facebook account and in a short three weeks, we livestreamed our first sermon. It was a tense moment because the camera had been placed upside-down because we had no idea that it should be at an elevated position when making a livestream.

Generally, this has been a learning process, and my confident has grown by watching from my able colleague's services and webinars. I am also grateful we received a new lay preacher into our team who took up some of the services, and also circuit leaders who lead worship sessions and sermons whenever I needed a break. I will never forget our audience, the lovely music, and the lovely people of Newry, who gave us valuable feedback that improved on our presentations.

God richly blessed us with the big come back on 31st May 2020. It was great seeing members of our congregation come for the first Drive-In Service at the open space in front of Newry Methodist Church. The service was held on warm sunny day, and when the sweltering heat of the sun became unbearable, some of the congregants disembarked and sat in front of their cars till the end of the service.



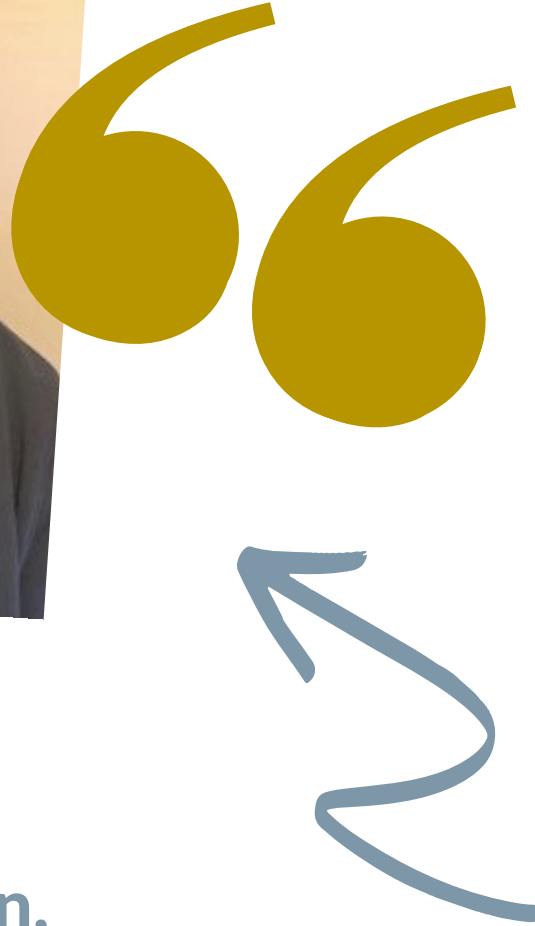
listen to the preaching. These drive-in services continued for four weeks, the attendance growing even under hostile weather conditions. The thirst for God's word and fellowship was evident as numbers of congregants kept increasing. The impulses of the weather notwithstanding, God remained at the centre of our worship.

Then came the going back to church and we observed social distancing rule and this has been going on since July 5. We have indeed, appreciated the fact that during summer we have always had one joint service and this has worked perfectly well. Nevertheless, I had to cancel the baptism of a little child that had been scheduled for May 31 following the family's request to reschedule it to August 2. I was so nervous on how this would happen as we had earlier received strict guidelines on baptism during the pandemic. A second request for baptism followed which was done on July 26. It was a 'social distanced' baptism, which caused me to have butterflies in my stomach in the period preceding the event. I kept emailing my District Superintendent to advise and give guidance on an appropriate way to conduct the ceremony. In the end, guidelines were observed and the glory of God shone. It was indeed an interesting baptism service. I stood at a distance, then extended my hand and poured the first drop of water from the little tiny jug I was holding. The second was such a big drop and the baby just moved a little bit, but slept throughout the service. He woke up as I was concluding, and at the point where I was asking the congregation present to follow up and support this family to bring up the child in the ways of Christ. He sent the congregation into a roaring laughter when he popped his cute eyes open and gave me a lovely stare, which was essentially a sign of affirmation to my call for support to the family.

We are grateful that the online bible studies, church council and executive meetings, and the breakfast prayer were fountains of spiritual nourishment that made us see the goodness of the family of Christ. The true Balm of Gilead, the Lord Almighty also kept our members safe from the virus. Indeed, God kept our circuit members together, caring for one another in significant ways.

We ask God to give us his love, strength and wisdom to support elderly members of our community, who are not sure if it is still safe to return to church. Let us treat each other with empathy during this difficult period. The work of God continues and we pray for total restoration as the COVID-19 disruptions will come to pass. As has been stated by our President, we remain believers in a God whose 'Grace has no Limits'.





## Andrew's story

### Rev Andrew Gibson, Donaghcloney Methodist Church

In Donaghcloney the four churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Elim) in the village have been working closely together for the past few years under the banner of "Donaghcloney Together." We have held events, church services, prayer meetings, breakfasts and missions. When the restrictions were beginning to be eased all the ministers had the same idea – let's have an ecumenical Drive-In Service!



The churches were used to working together so this felt like a natural fit and we all felt that the people in the village would almost expect it. The Presbyterian Church car-park was the biggest in the village and had two levels and could fit 80-100 cars adequately. We planned to have four Sundays initially, with each of the ministers taking a Sunday each to preach on the first four “I am...” sayings of Jesus in John’s Gospel. We organised a set-up team, were able to secure a lorry container, sound equipment and stewards to direct cars.

On the first Sunday we waited with trepidation – would people come? It happened to be a very sunny afternoon and almost 90 cars came. It was so hot that the keyboard leading the worship overheated! Over the course of the next few Sundays we had every possible weather condition – from torrential rain and wind to cloudy and overcast – we had them all! We didn’t drop below 70 cars every week. We kept the format very simple – one of the ministers would lead, we would sing one/two hymns at the beginning, the minister would pray; whoever was preaching would read their passage and preach and we’d sing one final hymn to finish. The whole service usually lasted around 40-45 minutes.

When the four ministers had taken a Sunday each to preach it was now into July and we wondered whether we should keep going. But the feedback was very positive and we decided to complete the series with the other three “I am...” sayings. Our own District Superintendent Rev Dr Stephen Skuce spoke at one of these.

What have we learnt from these? People were hungry for church, online services are ok and reach many people but folks were also looking for interaction, contact and fellowship (albeit socially distanced!). Drive-Ins are a great way to do this and are not too difficult to organise. Through technology we were also able to live-stream these as well for folks not able to physically be there.

People are looking forward to returning to church, (if they’ve not already done so) but many others are unsure about what that may look like. We also found that in conversations through car windows, etc that people were, and are, hungry spiritually, perhaps in a way that they haven’t been for some time. In these uncertain times folks are turning to churches and God for hope, comfort and direction.

As we now move back to Sunday Services inside buildings hopefully that same hunger is still there within our own people and visitors as well. In Donaghcloney we have Prayer Meetings and other events planned between now and Christmas. How they’re impacted by COVID-19 remains to be seen, but hopefully can still run and reach folks. Colossians 4: 5 declares, “make the most of every opportunity.” May we all do that in this unusual season.





## Lorna's story

### Rev Lorna Dreaning, Enniskillen Methodist Church

Everyone has responded in their own way to lockdown. It has been a time of thinking outside the box for everyone and no less for Roy and myself. As a couple working in ministry we have been able to develop services and Bible studies, perhaps more than others. It has been a challenging but rewarding time for us in Enniskillen and for our family who have had to endure and sit through all our services with no exceptions.



Sometimes we have had to battle with internet connections and the noise of PlayStation on high volume. When lockdown was announced we sprang into action providing a foodbank for firstly our own vulnerable community in the church, and then into the wider community ending up visiting over 70-80 homes a week up until the end of June. I was absolutely amazed at how the funding for this came in. We were spending £1000 a week on groceries and every penny was provided by Gaelic, football and rugby clubs encouraging us to keep going. Community spirit was at an all-time high.

Secondly there was the need to look at how we would provide spiritually for our people and that has led to many services, evenings of praise and Bible studies. We have received many letters and phone calls which have intrigued us. But many encouraging our online singing on a Wednesday night which seemed to speak to those mainly with dementia and suffering loneliness. We had a lovely phone call from a man whose wife suffered from dementia and he said it was the only time in the week he could relax with her and get her settled.

I suppose going online for me was something I have always been opposed to. It just never appealed to me at all. But since lockdown I have come to the realisation how much value it has been to so many who cannot get out to church in a way they once did. I suppose when we talk about evangelism we think of missions and church doors open but this has given both of us a new appreciation for evangelism and how easily it is to reach so many in today's society. And also, how we need to be thinking outside the box.

One of the most unusual events was my first covid wedding. I feel so sorry for brides who have made great plans and spent a lot of money on preparations. I was to have four weddings this year, three of which are now put back to next year, and two which have been squeezed in at last minute. I was asked to have this wedding in the manse garden but when talking to the congregation a member offered to hold it in theirs. There was only three weeks planning. It was very different and dependable on the weather which for Fermanagh was quite kind to us. Even though I was the one standing in the pouring rain outside the gazebo. We got the happy couple married despite me looking like a drowned rat.



The Coopers hosted a picnic provide by the ladies from the church and the register was signed in their kitchen/conservatory. Definitely not a conventional wedding. And then to the 'mart'. This is our third month of being in the farmers mart on a Sunday morning. And I have to say it has been a very worthwhile experience. We as a congregation are working as a team every week with provision of the lorry, (mobile pulpit), the sound the organ the cameras etc, and it is allowing us to keep track of everyone as well. We as a circuit have come together along with the Derrygonnelly circuit and are strengthening relationships in every way. We had dogs at church and cats and people in pyjamas. Its been amazing and proves that it doesn't matter where or how we preach the Gospel, the message is still the same. Not even mentioning the homes that can hear us on a Sunday morning in the vicinity.

So here in Enniskillen its been extremely busy, but we have gained a fresh perspective for the work of God which is in many ways exactly what we needed. I know it will continue. We have concerts planned for the mart and we plan to hold our harvest weekend there as well, but we look to God who has started to do a new work in our midst to continue it and lead us and guide us.

