

**Thanks to the Newsletter for sharing this article on the incoming Lay Leader, Dr. Fergus O'Ferrall.**

**The interview was carried out by Anne Hailes**

**'I would like to encourage local societies to equip and make more effective disciples'**

'The role of the ordained minister is changing and the support of lay leadership is becoming more necessary. Obviously when John Wesley started, he rode around on horseback and visited each church in turn. Now with the motor car, the telephone and the internet, how you communicate and support people things are radically different.

'Ministers are a very precious resource and we must make sure they are appreciated and are being used in the most effective way and I would see that as using their expertise to encourage and train people to grow in their faith whether they are working in nursing, in an office, the community or at home.

'John Wesley always said go where you are needed most; are we going where we're needed most?

'It's an exciting time for the church because we've gone through a period of fairly deep reflection over the last number of years leading up to God's Mission Our Mission giving us a clear vision of what our future direction is as a church.'

Some thoughts of Dr Fergus O'Ferrall , soon to take up a two-year post as Lay Leader of Conference Fergus is looking forward to the experience. He has decisive views and a strong faith, a background in working with people from all arts and parts and he's used to gleaning opinions and sharing his mission. 'I'm preparing myself for the daunting challenge; I'm giving it a lot of thought. I'll be the third lay leader and it's wonderful to have the example of Gillian Kingston and Ken Twyble before me; it's been very helpful.'

As it happened, I talked to Fergus on the morning of his 38<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We planned a nine o'clock phone call to his home in Co Dublin so he and Iris could get away for a day of celebration in Howth. That was the plan but the house alarm had other ideas! 'It was ringing even when it was off, so we are waiting for the electrician to arrive and put it right. We might make it to Howth later in the day!' Fergus laughed and we decided God probably had a sense of humour but we were sure that Jesus had. Fergus and Iris's wedding took place in Blackrock and was conducted by the Rev Ernest Gallagher and the Rev Donald Ker with the now Church of Ireland Archbishop, Richard Clarke, Fergus's old school friend, also participating in the ceremony. The couple met at school. 'I claim she fell in love with me then. However, she went off to London for a while but thankfully we met up at a party in Dublin and we fell in love all over again.'

At that time Fergus was education officer with Macra na Feirme, rather like the Young Farmers Clubs in Northern Ireland; it was founded in 1944, an educational movement for young farmers and those living in rural areas aged 17 to 30. It was a job he loved, having been brought up on a farm in Co Longford so it was a natural progression when he was appointed Chief Executive of the organisation. Later he became President of the National Youth Council of Ireland and Director of the National Bible Society. This was at a time when he was becoming more interested in full-time Christian work, work that would lead to his many writings and current appointment as Lay Leader.

Today he and Iris live in Cabinteely and attend Dun Laoghaire Methodist church. They have three daughters - Eilis who is a senior social worker in Melbourne, Australia, where she and her partner, Jamie, now live with Finn, the O'Ferrall's first grandson; Deirdre works in Arklow as a quality control analyst in the pharmaceutical company, Servier; and Sinead who is completing a Masters in Global Health in the University of Copenhagen, having been to Africa for a number of internships.

It strikes me that Fergus is happy in his skin, a man who is proud of his family, has worked hard and continues to take on responsibilities. He is currently a governor of the Irish Times, co-chair of a new initiative by the Carnegie Trust and The Wheel (a support and representative body connecting community and voluntary organisations and charities across Ireland) to stimulate a national People's Conversation directed towards producing a New Vision of Citizenship in Ireland. His CV is impressive. Studying at Wesley College then Trinity College Dublin, he obtained a moderatorship in Modern History and Political Science, a Master's Degree in Health Services Management and a doctorate in Irish history. His lexicon of writings includes 'Catholic Emancipation: Daniel O'Connell and the Birth of Irish Democracy 1820-1830' and 'Comparative studies of Athlone, Mullingar and Longford' to name but a few. He's a member of the committee of the Methodist Historical Society of Ireland and in October will be giving the annual lecture in Edgehill Theological College when his topic will be: Methodists in Ireland: Political Identities and Changing Contexts.

'Methodism in Ireland started in the late 1740s; the 1798 rebellion led Methodism into mission to the Irish people. There was then the period of Catholic Emancipation followed by Home Rule, the Celtic Revival, World War I, the Rebellion and then Partition. All of these events impacted on the Methodist Church which had to navigate its way, especially after Partition, which left Methodists living in two different states. For a small Church it acquired a very fine reputation throughout Ireland thanks to its witness down the years and its history of lay preaching and leadership.'

Although there have been many changes, the theology and spirituality remain the same. 'Changes like the role of women in the church, the absolute equality of men and women in both lay and ordained ministry is a terrific heritage.' Fergus believes that the church may well have to rely more and more on the laity as it becomes increasingly difficult to find enough men and women to take over the regular circuits.

Why is it so difficult? 'There are different factors - people might be attracted to careers in different Christian mission organisations and not necessarily called to circuit ministry. It's time to look at the role of the 'itinerant' ministry where there is movement round Ireland. We're in the 21st century now and we must keep what is precious in Methodism and yet adapt to a much changed society. We should be looking at why we have an itinerant ministry and how we organise it. However, I believe that, when affirmed by Conference as a Methodist minister, there will always be an emphasis on the priority to fulfil the mission that the Church asks, no matter where that might be.'

Fergus also finds it exciting that the recent Covenant with the Church of Ireland means that both churches now interchange ministers. That should lead to more unity in mission when working together under the Covenant Council. 'The Methodist Church and the Church of Ireland are relatively small churches but can make a huge seismic difference working together in mission.' He agreed there can be barriers, often over heritage and tradition rather than theology. 'There is no Christian doctrine at stake. We're so used to doing things our way that such barriers may be of concern, but when people are working together they don't fear change. In fact each Church enriches the other greatly because we share so much. What the Methodist Church can bring is a renewed emphasis on mission. 'I love the way our President Brian Anderson described the Church as being a nimble Church that can be more flexible when reaching out to people because we are not rigidly tied into structures.'

As Lay Leader of Conference, Fergus wants to encourage local societies to equip and make more effective disciples. 'One of the big emphases we have in God's Mission Our Mission sets out very clearly our main focus to make disciples at local level, to help people grow in their faith and make mission effective every day in their lives not just within the church but wherever God has placed them. That was true of early Methodism when you'd have been a member of a small group. Each week or each month you'd have given an account of how you were progressing and that would have been helpful in how to live out your faith. I know the Rev Dr Heather Morris with the Home Mission Department is making a presentation in every church in the whole Connexion over a period of time so every church and society can reflect on how they are fulfilling their mission.'

And so the time is approaching when Fergus will take up his challenge. He explains that the job of the Lay Leader of Conference is to introduce what's called a Conversation on the Work of God. 'I would like to lead that conversation throughout the whole Connexion around a number of issues - are we being effective? Are we aware of God's mission? How does it apply to us at local level? What are we doing to equip people to live their faith every day?

John Wesley said that if you desire to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ you are welcome into the Methodist fold; it was the love of Christ that urged him on to do field-preaching and bring the gospel to the people. In something of my own guiding Scripture, in his letter to the Corinthians, 5: 14 - 20 Paul said that the love of Christ compels us and urges us on, so we're just Christ's ambassadors; wherever we're placed we're representing Christ. What an honour, what a privilege!