

# COME HOLY SPIRIT, REVIVE YOUR CHURCH AGAIN!

## The Installation Address, given by the new President, Rev. Jim Rea

### Introduction

Some of my friends know that I am very fond of ice cream, and there is nothing to beat the ice cream made on the Newtownards Road.

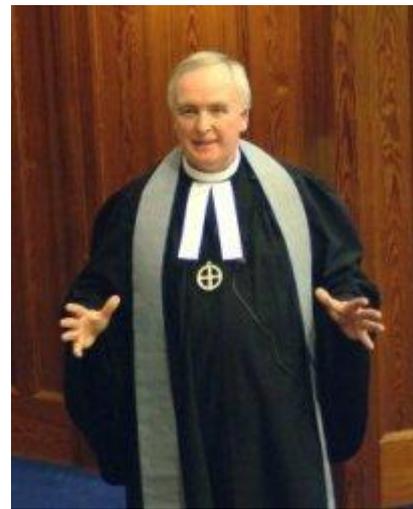
I always found it hard to pass Archie Desano's little shop and often used to speak to the late Archie about his delicious product. He would tell me how his father, an Italian Roman Catholic called Pasquali, ran away from home and eventually came to Belfast to set up a shop. In fact I was to discover that Archie's father was a really good businessman. He changed his Christian name to Sammy, became an Orangeman and did a roaring trade around the Shipyard. I used to say, "Archie if I only had the recipe for that stuff I would be millionaire." "I'll give it to you sometime," he would reply.

One day when I visited the shop Archie handed me a tiny piece of paper with the ingredients for the ice cream on it. "There it is," he said, and after a pause went on. "You can have; it but I tell you this, you'll never make it." I did not need to be told. I knew that only Archie and a few of the family had the full, secret formula. The correct temperature and timing were the vital but undisclosed dynamics in the creation of this delicious product.

I've never forgotten that comment. "You can have the recipe but you'll never make it." I can't help but see parallels in the Church. As I look at the churches in Ireland I see good recipes, good programmes in training and evangelism, and many wonderful new ideas. Things are changing. We are building new relationships with the Church of Ireland through the covenant, which gives us new flexibility, both in the deployment of our resources and in the sharing of mission and ministry. Programmes to resolve conflict and help us share the future have already made their impact. We are looking radically at how we manage the church through the Connexions Programme. Alpha is another programme that has impacted many people throughout this island in an amazing way.

These things are all most exciting and commendable. Yet in our quieter moments, as we reflect, we see that something is missing. Our society becomes increasingly materialistic and secular and sadly in some situations in the North even more sectarian. As the Churches struggle for relevance we ask, "What is needed?"

May I suggest that what we most need is the dynamic of the Holy Spirit coming in full measure? I am happy to call it revival, a term in this dear land of ours which is often hackneyed and misunderstood, but not foreign to the secular world - sometimes even used in the sports columns of the press to describe the new found fortunes of the team. "Ports in revival," I read a couple of years ago, describing the Portadown FC renaissance. I regret to say the renaissance of this club has sadly waned, especially since I became their chaplain!



My theme then is, "Come Holy Spirit, revive your Church again", and I mean nothing that is exclusive. My prayer is for revival that will sweep over the whole people of God on this island. As we look at some of the manifestations of revival, may I say that to a degree some of the characteristics we will be considering are already present? They are not new dynamics; they do happen personally and corporately, even if in small ways. But it is the Spirit coming in revival power that will really revolutionise the church, and impact on this divided nation.

We are not there yet; the recipes may be present and some good things are happening, but the dynamic is missing. The Scottish theologian Sinclair Ferguson poignantly describes revival as, "when professing believers are aroused and non-Christians are brought into the kingdom in large numbers."

What happened on the day of Pentecost and in the early church is not in itself revival, but the ideal model, for which we must always look. It was the beginning of the mighty working of the Spirit in the early Church. Dr Ferguson referring to this says, "The early church was and is the model of what the Church should be like and somehow its dynamic has been evident in times of spiritual awakening and religious revival."

Sunday next is Pentecost. Today is the 6th of June, the anniversary of D Day in 1944, when 59 years ago the allied invasion of Europe took place. D Day meant there would be a VE Day. On this anniversary day we pray for the beginning of a spiritual victory for the Churches in Ireland and the beginning of a new Pentecost.

So what can we expect if the Spirit comes in full measure as on the day of Pentecost? Well lots of things will happen, but I want you all to catch the last bus! While I do not profess to know the mind of God, I see things happening in the early Church that I believe can happen again. Let me highlight five...

## **1. When the Spirit comes there is a transformation in relationships**

The group who met on the day of Pentecost formed a motley crew.

*Acts 2:8-11 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, I can go on; they were 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs- - we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (NIV)*

However it was an amazing meeting. They were not there to hurl insults at each other or to express their differences, but, and I quote from the KJV, Acts 2:1 - *And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. (KJV)*. These people with historic, cultural and ethnic differences and prejudices are now meeting together and relationships are being transformed. All are welcome in this new Kingdom.

Now the question remains, can the Holy Spirit transform relationships in Ireland today? I believe he can. In Northern Ireland we have had the Belfast Agreement, and for a while our optimism was realised with an assembly; but now there is breakdown and regrettably no elections in the foreseeable future. Despondency, disillusionment and worst of all apathy bites again. The reason for this needs no in-depth analysis. It is clearly because people do not trust each other. Honesty and integrity are constantly being questioned and relationships in

many places continue to be polarised. Sadly people at all levels in public life engage not only accusing but abusing one another.

However many of us grew up with it. As a young lad living in North Belfast my neighbours told me never to trust the other side. This intolerance is ingrained in many of us and it fuels the sectarianism that some of us are quite unwilling to admit to.

What can change us is the Holy Spirit. To hear the memorable words of Gordon Wilson, when he prayed for those who killed Marie, or the testimony of Michael McGoldrick after the murder of his son, or to listen to Jim Tate a former loyalist para military with Paddy Kelly a former member of the I.R.A. sharing their stories together, is a living testimony to what the Spirit can do. It has been for these people painful and sacrificial.

I will never forget being at a prayer breakfast and listening to Michael Cassidy, leader of African Enterprise, tell the amazing story about the Church in Rwanda, at the time of the terrible civil war. During a Church service one morning men appeared at the door of the Church requesting that all Hutus leave the building and asking that the Tutsi members remain. Those making this order were part of the Hutu army militia going ballistic over recent killings by Tutsi tribesmen. Their aim was to slaughter all of the Tutsis who remained in the Church and to let the Hutus go free.

The leaders begged for time and went inside to discuss the situation with the congregation. After some prayer there came the answer to the militia. It was simple; "In life we belong to Christ together, and so in death belong to him also; we are brothers and sisters together in Christ." There was silence and then the shooting began. Within half an hour 500 people were dead. Relationships transformed by the Holy Spirit brought the ultimate sacrifice. Michael Cassidy told me some days ago that the Rwanda people have been inspired by that example and have seen amazing results with new Churches coming to birth. Truly the blood of the martyrs has become the seed of the Church.

If we seek the Spirit's power are we ready to say, "Whatever the risks, we are neither orange nor green, Protestant nor Catholic, we belong to Jesus Christ." Will we begin to repent of the 'God of Ulster' mentality or the link between Irish culture and Christianity? Will we lay aside the mistaken view displayed on T-shirts that 'God's a Prod', or, for that matter, an Irish republican?

While we criticize our politicians sometimes for not doing enough are we giving the lead in transformed relationships? Can we truly say with Paul in his letter to the Galatians?

*Gal 3:28-29 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (NIV)*

Paul further engages us in the Corinthian letter as he challenges us see people differently, to see them no longer from worldly or human point view but rather what they can become and what Christ can make them to be.

But then there is something else...

## 2. When the spirit comes there is a commitment to social concern

Truly these early Christians had radical social attitudes. They shared their resources and ventured into community living.

*Acts 2:44-45 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (NIV)*

The early church was known for its radical social action. Remember, Mr Wesley said that there was no holiness that was not social holiness. As we celebrate the 300th anniversary of his birth on the 17th let us not forget his amazing commitment to radical social change in England. Dr Skevington Wood writes, "Wesley was to come face to face with the poor and they were to become his constituency throughout his long years of gospel ministry. He has also been described not only as a preacher of the gospel but as a prophet of social righteousness."

Our own Dudley Cooney comments in "Methodists in Ireland": "To the working classes of eighteenth century England, with whom the Church had largely lost contact, and who had no vote in the government of the country, the Methodist preachers delivered the liberating idea that each individual was important to God."

And we should be encouraged when we realise that Methodism has been deeply committed to the cause of social concern. Our missionary work and the work of our City missions shine as lamps in dark places. The Container Ministry and the visits of Irish Methodists to work on third world projects are an inspiration.

Yet in the 21st century someone has described Methodists in Ireland as "middle class, aged 55 and homeowners." Sometimes those who are most critical of our outreach to the poor, the marginalized, the asylum seekers and the immigrant workers are those within our Churches. We should feel ashamed that when William Booth sought to reach the prostitutes and vagrants of London his critics were among his own good Methodist New Connexion members. But Booth pressed on and formed the Salvation Army.

You see, when the spirit comes we will be powerfully moved. Paul says in Corinthians, "the love of Christ compels me." When Tommy Coey, an alcoholic, discovered the power of Jesus and his Spirit, he saw the need of the men and women in East Belfast. His love for those who were unloved was without question and so he started a day centre. Some Church members were sceptical. Tommy is now in glory, but what he developed was to become the East Belfast Mission.

If the Church is to experience the Spirit in any measure we will live uncomfortably with the world. We will not always be in line with public opinion on subjects such as the promotion of alcohol as a necessary ingredient of modern living, the exploitation of the poor by giving endless opportunities to gamble on the lottery, or the concerns we have about how the people of Iraq are given back their freedom. And what about third world debt? Are we comfortable with the attitudes of many Western leaders on this one, and their unwillingness to take the debt burden from the poor?

G. K. Chesterton once pointed out that one does not switch on the light to gaze at it, but to look at what it illuminates. When people are illuminated by the God's Spirit they will be

deeply committed to the need around them. I remember a lady once saying to me, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care."

Then, of course...

### **3. When the Spirit comes there is a sense of wonder in worship**

I have to admit I am a bit of a traditionalist. I like the hymns of the Wesleys, and my dad ingrained in me a love of the Old Gospel Hymns of the Sankey and Moody period. But I am not averse to new forms of worship. I guess if I have to work the PowerPoint in heaven I will be in difficulty, but then there is more to worship than methods and order.

Sadly I have observed people in Methodist Churches singing the great hymns with faces that suggest that "they are standing over a bad smell." - (a Donegal saying, according to Ivan McIlhenney). A.W. Tozer, considered worship as the "missing jewel of the evangelical Church."

Many of our young people seem far more excited about worshipping God than those in the older age group. It is moving to listen as they speak about awe and wonder in their midst. I will not easily forget my experience. There he was at the Holy Week Service, kneeling at the communion rail taking bread and wine but sobbing uncontrollably. I found it a little embarrassing. As the service came to an end I approached him and asked why he was upset. "Oh" he said, "I am not upset! I am overcome by the grace and love of Jesus. I am so thankful for what he has done for me." I should have known better, for some years before I had knelt with him in a psychiatric unit as he sought the power of Christ to deliver him from his addiction. Deliverance became his experience and for the twelve remaining years of his life there was wonder in his worship.

The singing was poor and untuneful, but I'll not easily forget the experience of wonder at a prayer meeting on the Shankhill Road as we sang, "Can you wonder why it is I love him so? When I think of all he's done, And for me, the guilty one, Can you wonder why it is I love Him so?"

But it's not about the songbook or about the hymns. Wonder is found in the great liturgies of the Church, in the traditional forms of worship and in the free worship of the Renewal. Let us show tolerance and balance in our understanding of the different ways of worshipping, but essentially in the sense of wonder we look for.

William Temple put it so powerfully when he writes, "Worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, To feed the mind with the truth of God, To purge the imagination by the beauty of God, To devote the will to the purpose of God."

The early Church experienced it, as in Acts 2:43 - "Everyone was filled with awe, and the apostles did many wonders and miraculous signs." (NIV)

And then fourthly...

#### **4. When the Spirit comes there is confidence in the message**

Have you ever considered the transformation in Peter? We see him in the gospel story not able to stand up to a little girl as he denies Christ. But now transformed by the Spirit at Pentecost, he engages with the archenemies of Christianity: Acts 4:10 "Then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified."

When the Spirit anoints us our confidence is renewed. In an age when we are up against secular society, when demands for conformity at times has restrained us, when we have wrestled with difficult and complicated issues, when the Church sometimes, sadly, has lost its witness by the failure of its messengers, the Spirit alone can bring back confidence.

In the late 1980s I was in the USA and scheduled to speak to some of the students at the University in Columbus, Ohio. The night before I stayed in a rather run down motel. The heating system sounded like a mini earthquake in perpetual motion and I didn't get a wink of sleep. "Why did I ever let myself in for this?" I thought. My talk at the University the next morning didn't seem all that inspiring and drew the usual questions about Christians at war in Northern Ireland.

Afterwards a lecturer with a broad Irish accent called Dona introduced himself and soon declared himself as a one-time sympathizer with the Provisional IRA and advocate for the arms struggle. I was bit shocked. He explained that he had gone to America to advance his career as an academic but wasn't forgetting what was happening back in Ireland. He took me to dinner and the story began to unfold. He told me how, after coming to the States, he had taken up jogging and how after an injury he required the services of a physiotherapist. "You know," he said, "that man while he worked on my leg told me about Jesus Christ and as a result my life was turned around and my attitudes completely changed."

As I left him I walked on air. I came away with my confidence restored. Ringing in my ears were Paul's words, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. It is the power of God unto salvation." That encounter reminded me that nothing does more to engender confidence than when people are converted to a living faith in Jesus Christ. Three thousand new converts in one day in one place, no wonder their confidence was high!

The early church was now to be encouraged by phenomenal growth and it is my prayer that everyone in this island, from every religious tradition, would be similarly encouraged as they experience the Holy Spirit falling in power on our churches. It seems often like 3000 days before we bring one person to Christ. The early Church brought 3000 in on one day! Acts 4 tells us that 5000 men alone were added.

This is phenomenal growth, and revival brings growth. It was with such confidence that Mr Wesley rode 280,000 miles on horseback to preach at least twice per day. What a legacy he has left! He put aside all ecclesiastical propriety to share the gospel with the people of these islands and saw thousands of them enter the Kingdom.

Finally:

## **5. When the Spirit comes there is constant engagement in prayer**

Acts 2:42 - *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (NIV)*

It must be said that if prayer was the continuing experience of the early church it has been a forerunner to revival through church history. The name of James McQuilkan may be known in these parts. He with Robert Carlisle and John Wallace started praying in an old school house only a few miles away at Kells, the result being that they were to see the kindling of the 1859 revival in this part of the Island.

It was Corrie Ten Boom who once asked, "Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tyre." Often in this country we have come together in moments of crisis and prayer has been wonderfully answered. I do commend initiatives for prayer pioneered by people like Brother David Jardine and Derick Bingham, which have rendered amazing results in times of great crisis. It was Archbishop William Temple who said, "Coincidences happen when people pray." It has been said, "When people work people work, but when people pray, God works."

Can I ask that we make prayer our steering wheel in these days and not just the spare tyre? That once again we seek the face of the living God? My Calvinist friends remind me that revival is an act of a sovereign God to which I say, "Amen"; but that very same God reminds us, as he did Solomon of old, that if we fulfil these conditions he will answer.

2 Chr 7:14 - *If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.*

We have much to repent of in this island. A book by Sandra Wilson caught my attention recently, "Hurt people, hurt people," and although we, hurt people, hurt each other, yet there is hope. This is a sermon from an optimist! God can change this community, this country, its churches and its people, through repentance, prayer and transformation of personal attitudes.

The Christian Renewal Centre in Rostrevor is now one of the houses of prayer for Ireland and daily they pray for revival. Great things are happening in places like Stoke-on-Trent, where church leaders are praying and God is working. Prayer rooms for praying 24 hours each day are being set up around the country. Can we do it? I believe if even small numbers of people gather in prayer, radical changes can happen in this land of division and hatred, for God makes special promises when his people pray.

In 1787 Mr Wesley preached in this town in the Presbyterian Meeting House. The large congregation was deeply affected by the power of the spirit in their midst. In his book "The Hammer of the Lord", published in 1973, Dr. Colin Morris suggested that if Methodist Church membership in Britain were fed into a computer and a prediction requested, the predicted life-span of the denomination would be 36 years; so according to that we will be out of business in 2009! Well I would have only one year left to retirement, so it would not be so bad!

But then he observed that if computers had existed in 1872 when transportation was horse-drawn, the prediction might have been that by 1972 the whole world would be covered seven

feet deep in horse manure! Fortunately factor X, the combustion engine, has nullified that hypothetical prediction.

And for the Church, in our bad moments, when we feel despondent from hearing negative predictions for the future, factor X is the Holy Spirit. Let Peter have a final word...

*Acts 3:19 - Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. (NIV)*

It is my prayer that such a revival, modelled on the New Testament pattern, will do more than increase our piety, that it will radically change our attitudes in this community. And so I shout aloud tonight to every corner of this island - and what I pray is the cry of all of us:

*"Come Holy Spirit revive your church again!"*

## CONFERENCE 2003 BIBLE STUDIES

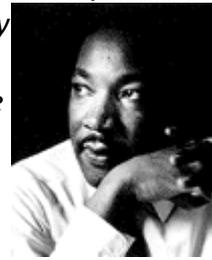
### 1. VISION

#### I HAVE A DREAM...

**The First Bible Study at Conference 2003,  
given by the Rev. Kenneth Wilson**



*"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama... will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope."*



You have just read a little fragment of the Martin Luther King "I have a dream" speech. Jesus also had a dream:

*"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." John 4:23-24*

My talk is not so much a Bible Study, as a talk about Vision, and how to impart that vision to our churches. M.L. King saw things differently - so did Jesus. The account of Jesus meeting the woman at the well ends with Jesus pointing to the harvest. It was ready and waiting - but no one had the eyes to see. Jesus saw things that no one else saw. The story is full of the clear sightedness of Jesus, and the distorted vision of the rest. For example:

1. In Samaria, all that the Disciples saw was a wasteland, inhabited by unbelievers. It was a no go area! Whereas, Jesus got excited and saw fields ready for the harvest.
2. And the woman - she came looking for water, boasting of how Jacob had given them the well. Whereas, Jesus spoke about living water, and of a well that never runs dry.
3. And especially, while others saw a shamed woman, even a dangerous woman, Jesus saw the beauty hidden under her addictions. He saw a possible missionary of the kingdom.

So he is able to see things differently. And he wants us to see things differently. As I see it, the ConneXions programme is more about people than about buildings. It is more about changing hearts and minds, than about changing structures. It's about seeing things differently.

So we need a major shift in our vision of the church & the world we live in. Some people would call this a paradigm shift. Let me give you an example of a paradigm shift: A man is driving along a country road in a red Ferrari. He comes up behind a woman in a little Fiat Punto. She is weaving all over the road and will not allow him to pass! He flicks his lights, and sounds the horn. Still she will not let him pass. In exasperation he puts the two wheels up on the verge and pulls up beside her. Through the open window she shouts "Pig! Pig! Pig!" He yells back "Cow! Cow! Cow!" and charges past her and around the corner - and crashes into a pig! You have just experienced a paradigm shift!

For us the \$64,000 question is: how can we begin to see things differently? How can we get our Methodist people to grasp hold of a new dream that is so glorious, that - they willingly die for it? - they will look foolish for it? - They will take risks for it? Where does such a vision come from? And what will it cost? Visions and dreams tend to cost a lot. Both Jesus and M.L. King died because of their vision.

I suspect that, like me, you would love to have all the advantages of the connexions programme - without any of the pain. But we need to face the fact that it will cost us a lot, and we will get things wrong as often as we get them right! - At times we may look foolish. - Some people may well leave our church, for it is no longer the safe place of their childhood. - Some people will fight like mad: "Why should I give up some of the beloved traditions of my church?" And that is a very good question! Why should we be asked to give some of the things we know and love? Is the gain worth the pain?

As I see it, only when we are convinced that the gain is nothing less than the thrill of winning our generation for Christ, only when we see that some of our beloved traditions are hindering the work of Christ - only then will the pain of change be acceptable. Our challenge, in all the ConneXions programme, is to capture the imaginations of our people, even though they appear at times to be apathetic to any movement of the Spirit.

As we work through the ConneXions' Bible Study Workshops we are trying to find the path God wants us to move along. We want to catch God's vision. What is the next mountain he wants us to climb? None of us is quite sure at present. But I'm convinced that one way forward is for every local church to hammer out again a vision statement, or a mission statement. I'm not sure we have taken this seriously enough in the past. "Lord, why are we here? Why are we in this place with these people? What do you want of us? What are the hindrances to your work? And, you see, when we hammer out a vision like this before the Lord, then we will own it. Every last person in the local congregation will memorise it; tell it to strangers; embroider it on their underwear; - until it becomes part of our DNA!

Recently I heard of a church with this as their vision statement: REACHING LOST PEOPLE, BECOMING FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS. And in that church, every time they had a hard

decision to make, they would stand back and ask: does this enhance the vision? Or, does it take away from the vision?

Three hundred years ago a man was born who changed the face of religion in these islands. It was because Wesley had a vision of what the church could look like that he was able to change things so radically. Methodists, of all people, should be open to change! This conference is calling us to get a clear vision of the job again; to see the big picture; to see why we are here; and hear again what God expects of us.

Tomorrow is Pentecost. For a moment, think again of the message of Acts chapt. 2: the wind, the fire and the new language.

1. And what a wind! It was a violent storm. I remember sitting in a house in the West Indies. There was a hurricane on the way. We filled the bath with drinking water, and stocked up with food, for when the trees fell we would not be able to get to the shops. The doors and shutters were tightly closed, and we were in darkness. Then the wind came: 60 mph, 80mph, 100mph. Would it reach 150?? The noise was deafening. We were terrified, for you cannot control a wind like that. It must have been like that on the first Pentecost.
2. The ball of fire, before it separated, must have been equally scary. The disciples were not in control. Was this the awesome presence of a holy God? How does one respond to a power like this?
3. And then the new language - with everyone hearing in their own tongue!

So the message from that first Pentecost is this: Hold unto your seats - there is going to be so much power available...

- To dream.
- To change the world.
- To clear away the road blocks.

And we get a picture of a local church at the end of chapter 2:

- a church that was alive and growing.
- Full of love and dynamic energy

I am convinced that the local church is central to the connexions programme. **For there is nothing on earth like the local church, when the local church is functioning well.** I believe that with all my heart. To serve the local church is the most fantastic job in the world!

Two Sundays ago in Bray, Rosemary told us of her journey so far with Christ. She came to faith through the CE in Burr, but lost her way for a while and made some wrong choices. Jennifer, her first baby, developed viral meningitis and is severely handicapped, and has to be taken around in a wheelchair. Adam is a healthy boy, but then David was born with a serious heart condition. Last year her husband walked out on her. Against all the odds, most Sundays Rosemary brings her three children to our church. People were deeply moved as Rosemary spoke of her strong faith in Jesus, and of the inspiration her faith is to her. As she sat down, she received a spontaneous round of applause. And over coffee afterwards many

embraced her and thanked her for her story. A few days ago I spoke to her about the service, and she said that she went home feeling ten feet tall.

You see, **there is nothing on earth like the local church, when the local church is functioning well.** Two weeks ago, a young mum in Bray with a child in a wheelchair said "amen" to that!

In 1963 M.L. King's dream lifted ten's of millions of people - as he imparted his vision to others. You and I must not allow the ConneXions vision to bite the dust on the conference floor. The vision must be taken and shared with others.

**Someone** has to stand up in your local church, and paint a picture of the future that will make hearts beat faster. - "Yes, I want it to be like that!" - "Yes, I can commit myself to a church like that!". You see, a vision tells people why they are doing what they are doing! We need to hear Methodist people saying to us: "You want me to give more? Please tell me why!" "You want me to change the structures? Please tell me why!" "You want me to reach out into the community? Tell me why!" "Please tell me that the gain will be worth the pain!"

Church could be a place of teaching & learning; worshipping; embracing; serving & giving. The value of all this is that once we have bought into the vision of the local church new things become possible. Remember: **there is nothing on earth like the local church when the local church is working well.** People begin to see that there is no door that Christ cannot open; there is nor life that he cannot save. And then, if people join our church, and begin to complain that we are expecting too much of them: "Why are you always urging us to run Alpha Courses? To give more to the poor?" We simply answer: "Because that's who we are!" "It's part of our DNA!" And if you find that unacceptable, you may have to move to leave, and find a church that is less demanding."

M.L. King cast the vision for 10's of millions. Jesus said: "Go into all the world and make disciples!" You and I must go back from conference and cast the vision in language that people can understand. We need to say:

- This is what we are about!
- This is what we may need to change!
- These are the advantages!
- And the gains will make the pains well worthwhile!

## 2.PILGRIMAGE

### OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

#### The Second Bible Study at Conference 2003, given by Mrs Louise Wilson

When my daughter was very young (pre-school age) I used to read to her a book by Dr. Seuss called '*Oh, the Places You'll Go!*'. The 'blurb' on the back cover describes the book as such:

*"Dr. Seuss's message to those setting out in life is hilarious, exciting, realistic and full of hope. There will be loneliness, there will be slumps and frights, but above all, if you've brains in your head and feet in your shoes anything can happen - if you want it to."*

Those of you who are parents can identify with me when I recount the excitement and anticipation I used to feel for my daughter when reading words to her such as:

*"You'll be on your way up!  
You'll be seeing great sights!  
You'll join the high fliers  
who soar to high heights."*

And the closing lines of the book:

*"... you're off to Great Places!  
Today is your day!  
Your mountain is waiting.  
So . . . get on your way!"*

Some 10 years later I still look at my daughter and think: *"Oh, the Places You'll Go!"*. What parent doesn't think that for his or her child? I'm sure our parents must have thought that for each one of us. How much more must our Father in Heaven think that for us, His children?

### **"Oh, the Places You'll Go!"**

No one here can disagree with the fact that life is a journey. Because our individual lives are journeys then so too must the lives of our individual churches and the life of the Methodist Church in Ireland be a journey. After all, what is church? A body of individual people. A journey we take with and for God!

It is true that sometimes in our lives we go backwards; sometimes we go round in circles; sometimes we do get stuck in one place for a while (maybe in a wilderness); and sometimes (I pray most of the time) we go forwards. Each of us can identify different places to which we have been in our own journeys through life.

- Places when decisions and choices have to be made about in which direction to travel.
- The heights of excitement when we soar like eagles.
- Places of disillusionment when 'the bubble bursts.'
- The 'slumps' or wilderness places when hope seems far away and fear or loneliness is our only friend.
- Places when nothing happens and we just seem to be waiting, endlessly waiting.
- And the places when we are not just at the top of the mountain but we can actually move the mountain!

No doubt many of you can identify with these places for your own lives. But I imagine most of you can also identify with them for your churches. While we would all wish our churches to be soaring like eagles and moving mountains all the time, that's not realistic and there

will be times when a church is in the wilderness or the waiting places. As long as we realise this is only a temporary stop on the journey and not where God wants us to be. We must learn from the experience and allow God to move us on! When you are in a slump it's important to remember that the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth! We should always be moving, journeying!

My parents and your parents watched expectantly with excitement and anticipation to see where we would go with all we inherited from them and all the nurturing we received from them. How much more must God want us, His children, His Church, to 'go places' with the spiritual inheritance He has given us!

The Bible is full of stories of people journeying with God. In the account of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, we see many times how God cared for and forgave the people, despite their constant moaning and complaining and their outright disobedience. This is because God had a plan for them, there was a place God wanted them to go!

God had brought these people out of slavery and bondage to freedom and throughout the journey had continually provided for their every need! They had come to the borders of the Promised Land and, on God's instructions, Moses had sent out 12 spies to explore.

Let's just pause for a moment and think about that. God was in control:

*"Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which **I am giving to the Israelites.**"  
Numbers chapter 13 verse 2*

God had prepared the land with its blessings and its problems - He knew what was ahead. Isn't it interesting that He sent spies into the land first so that they too would know what was ahead? He didn't try to hide from the Israelites the dangers of the place they were going. Why should those dangers be a problem, or an obstacle - after all God was in total control?

In Numbers chapter 13: verses 26-28 and verses 30-31 we hear the result of this exploration into Canaan:

*"They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. ..." Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.""*

All of the spies saw the goodness of the land that God had promised. But 10 of them also saw obstacles to prevent them from journeying into it. Their fear of the unknown was more powerful than their faith in the God whom they had known throughout every day of their

journey thus far! And the fear and lack of faith on the part of these 10 influenced all the people.

We read from Numbers chapter 14 verses 1-4:

*"That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.""*

Let's just picture this scene for a moment. These people had been on a long journey. During their trek out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and through the other times when God had miraculously provided for them with quail, manna and water, they must have been 'dreaming dreams.' (Despite all the complaining and moaning.) There must have been times when they were looking forward, imagining and speculating among themselves what the Promised Land would be like and planning what they would do when they reached their destination. Well, here they were - face-to-face with it and too frightened to do anything about it!

It was God who had given the Israelites the dream in the first place. It was God who had taken them out of Egypt. It was God who had been their constant companion on the journey. God didn't want them to stay in the comfort of Kadesh and He didn't want them to go back to Egypt; He wanted them to journey forwards! But they couldn't believe that the God who had given them the dream would give them the resources to realise the dream. Instead of going forwards, they wanted to go back. Back to the ties of familiar bondage.

As we all know, the fear of the 10 spies resulted in none of the Israelites realising the dream. A handful of people determined the fate of an entire nation. Their lack of faith cost everyone 40 years in the wilderness.

What about us? What about the Methodist Church in Ireland? Are we going places for and with God? David Watson points out an uncomfortable truth in the following parody of a well-known hymn:

*"Like a mighty tortoise  
Moves the Church of God;  
Brothers we are treading  
Where we've always trod."*

Does that describe us? Does that describe your local church? We have spent time 'dreaming dreams.' Now that we are on the point of realising them are we, like the 10 spies and the rest of the Israelites, too frightened to do anything about it?

Des Bain reminded us on Saturday that it is the journey that's important, not the destination. True, we don't know exactly where we're going - but God does! On Saturday at

the MWA Service, the choir sang to us that, *"I have walked along with Jesus, for He trod the path before me and He knows the way to go."*

The ConneXions Report didn't just appear out of thin air or out of the mind of one person. It is the result of much prayer, and thought and discussion. In itself it is a vision that God has given to His Church. But in itself it is just the beginning of another stage on our journey. I'm not a student of Methodism (I haven't even been a Methodist that long) but I do know that what John Wesley founded, inspired and envisioned was a movement!

Ken Wilson reminded us on Saturday that our local churches need to catch a vision and yesterday our President challenged us to 'hear the call of God.'

Are you and your church going to be like one of the 10 spies and fix your eyes on the 'giants', the problems, the obstacles? Or are you going to be like the 2, like Caleb and Joshua, and keep your eyes fixed on God? They knew they had to go into the Promised Land because it was God's purpose and plan for them! In our local churches we must seek God's vision, His purpose and plan for us. Then we must step out onto the next stage of our journey to realise that vision, always trusting that God, through his Holy Spirit, will provide. In that way we will also be helping to realise the vision that God has given to all of us through our President and allowing God's Spirit to revive our Church!

***Oh, the Places We'll Go!***

### **3. PICTURE OF A CHURCH**

## **WHAT DOES YOUR CHURCH LOOK LIKE?**

### **The Third Bible Study at Conference 2003, given by the Rev. David Campton**

*1 In light of all this, here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, a prisoner for the Master, I want you to get out there and walk- better yet, run!- on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere.*

*2 And mark that you do this with humility and discipline- not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love,*

*3 alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.*

*4 You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly.*

*5 You have one Master, one faith, one baptism,*

*6 one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all.*

*Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.*

*7 But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift.*

*8 The text for this is, "He climbed the high mountain, He captured the enemy and seized the booty, He handed it all out in gifts to the people."*

*9 It's true, is it not, that the One who climbed up also climbed down, down to the valley of earth?*

*10 And the One who climbed down is the One who climbed back up, up to highest heaven. He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts.  
11 He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher  
12 to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church,  
13 until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.  
14 No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors.  
15 God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love- like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do.  
16 He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.*

Ephesians 4:1-16 (Message)

## **What does your church look like?**

When we are asked that question most of us naturally think of a building. Buildings of different shapes and sizes, styles and ages... Some with stained glass windows, some with boarded up windows... Some with pews... some with seats... Some with organs some with electric pianos...

One Presbyterian colleague was visiting a local primary school a few years ago, when he was invited by one of the teachers to come in and look at the work of her class's first R.E. lesson...She had asked them, as she had for 20 years and more, to draw a picture of their churches. All had drawn pictures of church buildings, except one child who was a member of this minister's congregation... She had drawn a group of people. When asked why, the young child explained that her minister said that the church was not the building but the people. "At last!" The minister was thought... After 14 years at least one person in his congregation had grasped what he was on about.

We all know that the church is not a building... But we need reminders of that every now and then... That's why the notice board outside our building in Sandy Row says: "Sandy Row Methodist Church Meets Here..." The church of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit which empowers it cannot be imprisoned within a building... It is much more dynamic than that...

But as we meet here in conference, we need to be aware that there are other, inadequate pictures of the church... Ask a systems analyst about the church represented here, and we may find him drawing up a hierarchical diagram... With conference as the nearest thing to God... Is that the way we picture the church? Top down... With conference in June as the mountaintop from which we descend like Moses to the masses? Our particular form of church government at present, may have strengths, but it also has weaknesses... And it isn't ordained in scripture... It has served us well... But just the same as any church building, it can outlive its usefulness... And romantic attachment to its past glories should never prevent us from modernising it, or, shock horror, taking a bulldozer to it and starting again, if that is what is necessary to served the present age. Because as Louise Wilson reminded us

yesterday, the church, and particularly the Methodist Church, is a movement not a museum... Be it a museum for uncomfortable seating arrangements of days gone by... A museum of outmoded musical instruments and styles... Or a museum of quaint organisational structures...

What should our church... at a connexional or a local level look like? It isn't easy to offer a single picture... Scripture certainly doesn't:

If we turn to Jesus' descriptions of the church, we find him talking in dynamic, organic terms... He picks up the Old Testament image of the people of God as a flock... I've always wondered why we see that as any sort of a positive description... Sheep are not the brightest of animals... They're prone to wander and they're woolly... The good side of it is that we have the best of all possible shepherds...

He also picks up the other grand Old Testament image of the Vine... Where the church is seen as branches of Christ himself... Ruthlessly discarded when seen to be fruitless, pruned when profitable... Never left untouched from season to season. Always growing... And whereas our traditional hierarchical images of church are top-down... This is bottom up...

But Jesus, like us also thought in terms of buildings... because in the first recorded use of the word church in its Christian context, he told Simon, the Rock that he would build his church upon his confession of faith... But let us remember that that church, established on a rock was not set up as a redoubt into which to retreat... But a stronghold from which to sally forth and take the fight to the enemy... Jesus said:

*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

Matt 16:18 (NIV)

Simon Peter himself used this image of the church as a building when he described a unique building project in the second chapter of his first letter... Alan Macauley can't be with us today because he is away having bricklaying lessons in advance of the summer mission trip to Zambia... But such lessons would be pointless for the building project outlined by Peter. It is no ordinary building project... He doesn't encourage the people to buy a brick... He tells them they are the bricks... Living stones, being built into a spiritual house... There is a world of difference between bricklaying and drystone dyking... With the first every brick is the same, with the later every stone is different... Working with living stones requires even more care...

The key thing in this building is that Jesus should be central to it... It's well seen that Peter was a fisherman rather than a builder, because he can't decide whether Christ is the cornerstone or the capstone... I've worked with builders like that! But what and whichever, Jesus is central to this building project...

Paul too picks up on this image of the church as a building project... In his letter to the Ephesians he refers to the church as a "holy temple..." And this was to the city which knew all about temples, housing as it did the Temple of Artemis one of the Wonders of the

ancient World... That temple, grand as it was, was built on fairly boggy foundations just outside the city walls... And as the city fell into disrepair, it sank slowly into the ground, until now there is no sign of it to be seen... The temple Paul was proposing however had much better foundations... build on the faithful witness of previous generations of apostles and prophets... Again with Christ as the living cornerstone...

Paul uses other images in that letter. He describes the church as the family of God... or to be more accurate and more inclusive, the household of God... Not a tight knit wee nuclear family, but a sprawling conglomeration of family, close friends and servants... And as I look on this more inclusive picture of my family, I give thanks that we are one family in heaven and on earth...

But of course the most memorable image of the church which Paul uses in the letter to the Ephesians and elsewhere, is that of a body... With different people performing different functions according to their giftings: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers... with Christ as the head directing everything that takes place... But as we look at the body of Christ is it a healthy body? I took a look at myself in the mirror and health was not a word that came to mind... I have often compared the church to the Venus de Milo in the Louvre in Paris... a truly beautiful statue... The church should be beautiful... But what is missing... Arms? What about life? The lifebreath of the Holy Spirit which stirred the early church into life at Pentecost... And which we still depend on... A body can function without arms... not as well as it might, but it cannot function without its head, or its breath...

When it comes to the church it doesn't take us to have a medical degree, or even a theological degree to look at Christ's body and diagnose its ills... It happens often over coffee at conference... We may even have a fairly gloomy prognosis... Everyone has a different prescription... Alpha twice yearly... A good dose of Connexions... A Willow Creek enema... But we need to be sure that we are really responding to Christ's leading in this, and not following a fad... Today the GMC redesignated Seroxat as an addictive substance... Years after doctors had been giving it out willy nilly as an anti-depressant, and causing more problems long term than it initially solved... Let us be prayerful if not careful in our use of prescriptive programmes...

But action does need to be taken... And sometimes that action needs to be radical... Today, my colleague at Forthspring, Bernie Laverty, is undergoing surgery... She's getting a nose job. But it is not for cosmetic purposes, it is because she hasn't been able to breathe properly for years... As we engage in surgery on our church and churches it should not be for cosmetic reasons, purely to make it more attractive to an outside world which is obsessed by image, but to address fundamental issues that effect how we carry out God's work in this world. But we must do something... We need radical surgery... The question is whether it will be elective... With us choosing to go under the knife... Or emergency with God intervening for the sake of his Son... Going back to the image of the vine... Do we want to be pruned or discarded?

But after all the surgery and treatment, what will the body of Christ look like? Well that depends on where you are and what God wants of you... We need tall lithe athletes for basketball... Short, skinny ones to be jockeys... But neither of them would fare well in the

sporting arena of this gentleman...There is no "one-size fits all" in the body of Christ... Whether that be regarding church building, worship style, organisation or programmes... But each local manifestation of the body of Christ, should be the very best it can be for what God has called us to do...

### **So what does your church look like?**

Sorry, whose church? This church is not yours or mine... It does not belong to John Wesley or any of the saints of years gone by... Nor is it something we hold in trust for generations to come... It is now, has always been and always will be, the Church of Jesus Christ.

*15 We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do.*

*16 He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.*

Ephesians 4:15-16 (Message)

### **A Prayer for the Body of Christ**

O God our Father,

You grant us gifts so that together we may act as the body of your Son.

Help us to recognise those gifts and our important place in that body.

Breathe your Holy Spirit into us,

Bringing life to every part of your body,

Empowering us to serve you.

Grow in us so that we may grow in our knowledge of you and your ways,

So that your church may grow in grace reflecting your glory for all to see;

A beautiful, fit and healthy body.

Lead those who lead us

May they lead as humble servants in the service of the King,

And may we follow...

Wherever you may lead...

In Jesus' name and for his sake,

Amen.

