



MISSION AS A MINORITY



FOREWORD

Mission as a minority is a call to us, as a Church, to continue being transformed by the renewing of our mind.

As a reflection on Scripture, research and vital conversations, it challenges some of our long-held assumptions and invites us to look honestly at the posture we take toward those outside our walls. It reminds us that the gospel compels us to cross boundaries - cultural, relational, historical - not expecting others to come to us, but going to them with humility, grace, and confidence in Christ. It presses us to examine our own cultural baggage and to consider afresh how we communicate, in word and deed, the good news of Jesus to people who may never have truly grasped it.

For those serving in communities where Presbyterians have long been, or more recently find themselves, culturally or religiously the minority, the insights here may feel especially timely. Yet the principles and practices outlined are valuable for all of us. In truth, the church today engages in mission as a minority, reaching out to a great population beyond our doors. The guidance offered - prayerful, practical, and deeply biblical - will resource us wherever we serve.

I commend this to the whole Church. Read it. Discuss it. Pray through it. And, by God's grace, act on it to cross boundaries with the radical, transforming message of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Rev Dr Ben Walker

Convener, Council for Mission in Ireland

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CROSSING BOUNDARIES

The starting point for mission is God. He invites us into his mission which is going, rather than expecting others to come. It involves crossing boundaries.

This motif is strongly reflected throughout the Bible, from the command to Abram in Genesis 12 to leave his people and his father's household, to the Great Commission where Jesus calls his disciples to go and make disciples of every nation. This is then played out in the book of Acts as the expansion of the church is seen in all kinds of surprising places.

The concept of crossing boundaries is captured best of all in the incarnation, as Christ himself crossed the ultimate boundary from heaven to earth in order to dwell among humanity, display a perfect example in how he lived and ultimately offer a path for all to come to relationship with him through his death and resurrection. In this, we are reminded of how we follow a boundary-crossing God and join in his mission.

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MISSION AS A MINORITY

This guidance seeks to address concerns relevant to areas where Presbyterians once enjoyed a more equal or majority presence, but which has now changed to a minority status.

As such, the examples researched were mainly drawn from within Northern Ireland, with a couple of exceptions. This has been helpful to reflect upon in a context of a changing landscape where the church continues to learn about the reality of ministering within a divided society. However, it is important to recognise that this has been the dominant reality for our congregations in the Republic of Ireland, who have been ministering as a minority for many years.

Rather than highlighting any particular scenario, the Church as a whole would do well to reflect on how, in many situations, this reality has not hindered the Church's witness in such contexts, and there is much to learn from our brothers and sisters across Ireland who, for some time, have modelled the postures outlined in these pages.

To those with eyes to see, much has changed in Northern Ireland. Those identifying as protestant are no longer a majority in many towns and neighbourhoods. In this context, it is difficult to expect the patterns of church life and activity of the past to be appropriate to the future, at least in regards to our mission to those around us. What does the gospel call us to do?

The narrative of Scripture shows that ministry as a minority is the normal pattern for the people of God, in contrast to our recent experience of privileged majority status. Being a minority is the everyday reality for most of our brothers and sisters across the world where they are surrounded by populations dominated by other religions or political ideologies, many of whom are opposed to the gospel. Has this led to the end of the Church? By no means, rather often it has led to the growth of the Church. Worldwide and within Ireland, the Church has lessons for us to reflect on, and no better time to begin to learn them than now.

Mission as a Minority seeks to help the Church look up and out at the context around us and offer some practical ways in which to grasp such opportunities. This has involved reflecting on existing practice within PCI where congregations and individuals are engaging in mission as a minority, with a number of individuals invited to share their missional approach in this context. In addition, two forum-style events gave an opportunity for wider contribution to this conversation and the cross-fertilisation of ideas and learning.

What follows is a summary of this research including a number of agreed principles and associated practices.

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PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

1. THE GOSPEL IS FOR ALL

An understanding that God has no favourites and that his commission compels us to go and share the hope of the gospel with others. The invitation to follow Jesus is the most attractive thing the world has ever seen and should be offered to all people regardless of background, culture, community or religion. Practices to embed this are:

- i. Bridge-building:** Accept that, as a church, we have too often stayed within a silo and expected that people come to us. Effective mission as a minority will understand the need to build bridges of connection into the community around us.
- ii. Intentional:** Understand that our purpose is to point to Jesus, taking opportunities, where appropriate, to move conversations in a spiritual direction.
- iii. Teaching:** Regularly remind and envision church members of the church's responsibility to be a witness to the community and neighbours through preaching and teaching.
- iv. Consider the cost:** As a Church we should regularly reflect upon whether there are things we are doing that may be a barrier when engaging in mission as a minority. What cultural or secondary practices could be set aside for the sake of the gospel?

2. CHRIST IS LORD OVER EVERY CULTURE

Respect the culture around us by valuing everyone we encounter, interacting with them in a way that builds credibility and may open other doors. Understand that some cultural practices are spiritually neutral and follow the apostle Paul's approach to mission when he became "all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." (1 Cor 9:22). Recognise that the journey from 'no faith' to 'faith' can be culturally easier than, for example, a journey from nominal Catholicism to worshipping in a Presbyterian church. Practices to embed this are:

- i. History:** Listen to historical or political perspectives without argument or judgement. Look for opportunities for dialogue that promotes a shared understanding.

- ii. WORSHIP:** Seek to remove displays of political or national identity from public worship, knowing that our primary spiritual identity is rooted in allegiance to Jesus Christ alone.
- iii. VALUE THE IRISH LANGUAGE:** Appreciate the Irish language, even learning it at a basic level.
- iv. LOCAL:** Seek to build local fellowship rather than importing outsiders into the area to boost numbers. This is key for future growth and establishing a permanent presence.
- v. PRACTICES:** Find common ground in religious practices that are still respected in the Catholic community such as prayer, baptism and the Bible.
- vi. LANGUAGE:** Consider the language we use, seeking to clearly explain how a person is saved by grace in a way that is free from religious jargon. Be aware that in some contexts the word 'presbyterian' may have negative political and cultural associations whilst in other places it is warmly received.
- vii. RESOURCES/LITERATURE:** Use resources that are appropriate to the cultural context e.g., Evangelistic tools tailored around St. Patrick or CCLW's upcoming rural resource.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

In what ways are you communicating or showing people outside church that 'the gospel is for all' and 'Christ is Lord over every culture'? How could you grow in these areas?

In any work of mission, it is imperative to get to know and serve your community. The key to developing this, initially, is listening more than speaking.

Rev David Moore
WEST BELFAST

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PRAYERFUL

Any missional work should grow from a place of prayer and dependence upon God for the work to prosper. This is God's work and he is often doing more than we can see. His grace falls everywhere so pray for all parts of your community. Practices to embed this are:

- i. Prayer meeting:** Organise opportunities for others to gather for prayer for the work.
- ii. Prayer walking:** Regularly prayer walk the community you are seeking to reach.
- iii. Resourcing:** Provide regular updates to interested people and create opportunities for wider prayer support.
- iv. Offer prayer:** Look for ways to naturally offer prayer to people you are interacting with.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING BIBLE FOCUSED

Be confident in God and his Word. Make the Bible central and a key part of relational building and programming. Practices to embed this are:

- i. Bible study group:** Establish an opportunity for people to engage with the Bible. This could be a weekly or monthly group who work through a book of the Bible or use a resource. Use neutral premises if available.
- ii. One-to-one bible study:** Personally invite individuals to read and study the Bible with you if desired.
- iii. Informality:** Look for ways to naturally open the Bible or introduce God's wisdom into a conversation or meeting.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

In what ways are you making it accessible for people inside and outside church to engage with prayer and the Bible? How could you grow in these areas?

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL CHURCH COMMUNITY

Build a community that makes the gospel visible and compelling, knowing that mission isn't merely an individual endeavour but one that is enhanced by a church community. Practices to embed this are:

- i. Hospitality:** Integrate regular opportunities for sharing food together.
- ii. Start small:** Keep it simple and don't over-programme.
- iii. One big family:** Don't always segregate by age, gender or interest.
- iv. Communication:** Find ways to make the church more visible to the wider community such as an outside noticeboard, social media and service recordings.
- v. Worship:** Reflect on existing worship services and style, considering if these are accessible to those beyond the church from your local community.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING RELATIONAL

Friendship should be real and genuine and does not always equal agreement. In some communities there will be a lot of mistrust and suspicion to break down. This is a long slow work so we shouldn't expect quick results. Be a consistent, regular presence over time, to help enable the building of trust. Practices to embed this are:

- i. Initiate:** Be intentional and take the first step in building friendships with others carefully and slowly in an unforced way.
- ii. Love:** Treat people as individuals and love and serve them well through acts of kindness.
- iii. Honesty:** Be honest about who you are and why you are doing what you are doing.
- iv. Invite:** Regularly invite people to programmes, events or services. Set high standards and live expectantly.
- v. Door to door:** Build connection, offer literature, invitations to events, bilingual calendar (English and Irish).
- vi. Events/activities:** Use obvious cultural and community events such as a St. Patrick's Day parade, community carol singing, Christmas card drop to every home, outreach events, harvest services, storytelling the Bible events.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

In what ways are you fostering a community that is attractive and how are you building relationships with people outside church? How could you grow in these areas?

7. THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A CLEAR VISION

It will be important to have clarity on initial steps, while holding lightly what might develop as the Lord makes it clear. Seek clarity on the definition of this work, whether that be a Bible study, an outreach project, a church plant or something else. This will help shape the beliefs and principles that are important and define the way that anyone involved in this work should live by and commit to. Practices to embed this are:

- i. **Write it down:** Write down your vision and values. Summarise it in a short, clear sentence.
- ii. **Repeat it:** Share the vision with others and remind people of it often.

8. THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING A TEAM

This is crucial to draw out the gifts of others and grow capacity for any work. Effective mission is not a solo task. Practices to embed this are:

- i. **Identify people:** Those who share the vision and are willing to commit to the values.
- ii. **Equip:** Train core team members and the whole congregation how to be a witness and share their faith with others.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Have you a clear vision for crossing boundaries to reach others with the gospel? Explain your answer. How can you communicate this vision simply and clearly to others and build a well-equipped team? How could you grow in these areas?

9. THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING PARTNERSHIP

Who else is serving the community? This can be other PCI congregations or like-minded churches, kingdom partnerships with others engaged in gospel work in the area, or community-based initiatives, or groups who could be door-openers into the local community. Practices to embed this are:

- i. **Serving others:** Reach out to local groups, schools (assemblies), community groups, and seek ways to serve in the community for example through sports coaching with a local club, engaging with the GAA or being present at livestock markets.
- ii. **Being served:** Look out for groups in the community who can support the work in positive ways such as the provision of neutral facilities to meet such as schools, sports clubs or community centres.

10. THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPONDING TO LOCAL NEEDS

Get to know the community and its needs, and look to respond and serve in realistic ways. A practice to embed this could be carrying out a community listening process to identify local needs. This could lead to initiatives in some of the following areas:

- i. **Social and wellbeing needs:** Foodbank provision, mental health awareness.
- ii. **Children and families:** Holiday Bible Club, parent and toddler groups, youth clubs.
- iii. **Migrant ministry:** English language or conversation classes and home visitation.
- iv. **Neutral space:** Identifying a venue in the community that could offer a drop-in café or warm space outside a traditional church building.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Who could you meet with to learn about the needs in your community? Who else is serving the community that you could partner with? How could you grow in these areas?

BARRIERS TO CROSSING BOUNDARIES

It is acknowledged that every context is unique and has its own challenges for mission. As such, the principles and practices offered are not prescriptive but intended as guidance that can be reflected upon and shaped at a local level. In so doing, it is helpful to be aware of the following cultural attitudes that may be present in your congregation or area that can become barriers to crossing boundaries.

i. WE DON'T WANT TO – it's too painful

- **Legacy:** Hurts and trauma that are still painful. Respect for victims in the community.
- **Trust:** An inherent sectarianism or deep mistrust of others.

ii. WE DON'T NEED TO – complacency with gospel

- **Religious tradition:** 'I was brought up a Catholic, I might not go but I'm still a Catholic'
- **Mindset:** Fixed mindset that congregations only see protestant people as their mission field.
- **Divided society:** Closed single identity communities – people never leave their area. Relationship building is limited due to societal barriers such as most schools being non-integrated.

iii. WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO – uncertainty or feeling ill-equipped

- **Fears and prejudices:** We need to understand that the gospel breaks barriers down. Our identity may be too deeply linked to an inherited protestant culture which can narrow our vision. How can we teach the Bible in ways that help people find their identity in Christ?
- **Theology:** We have a lack of understanding of who we are trying to reach and their theology of how to get to heaven. Cultural protestants and cultural Catholics often believe the same things.
- **Experience:** We have a lack of experience with others and a lack of awareness of fruitful models of mission in this area.

iv. WE WISH WE DIDN'T HAVE TO – we're Presbyterians, this is not our job.

- **Barriers within our own community:** Sometimes there are barriers between two Presbyterian congregations in the same town which is a poor witness. Other barriers can be class. Newcomers bring barriers but also opportunities. A primary loyalty to Christ needs to shape our attitude to mission in a way that transcends loyalties to other organisations which have traditionally been influential within our community.
- **Knowledge:** We need to work hard to explain and affirm to the congregation the importance of engaging in mission as a minority.
- **Apathy:** Challenging a misguided belief that the only missional priority is to reach the small minority of protestant people remaining.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Which of the barriers relate most to your context? How could you overcome these barriers?

There can be no doubt that mission in areas where the community is predominantly culturally Catholic, presents a complex challenge.

However, seeking to overcome the barriers noted above through courageous leadership within a congregation, while also seeking to live out the principles and practices listed earlier, could be a small start and yet go a long way in crossing cultural boundaries.

With much prayer and patience, we trust that the Lord will widen our vision and practice in local mission and that, with the Spirit's help, we might be empowered and equipped to cross boundaries in ways that enable the church of Jesus Christ to thrive in its mission and grow in its reach.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Following your reflections and discussions, what things do you wish to put into practice to enhance your approach to mission in your context?

Stories of practice

WEST BELFAST

Rev David Moore

In any work of mission, it is imperative to get to know and serve your community. The key to developing this, initially, is listening more than speaking. Who are the people we are meeting? How do they see the world? Unless I understand their outlook, their worldview, how will I ever be able to share the good news with them in terms they can understand?

Part of this is to get to know the local language and culture. Who would go to a country in Africa or the Far East but ignore their language and customs? So, we have been attempting to learn Irish. Many of our fellow Presbyterians live, learn and worship in the daughter language of Scots Gaelic, why should we be shy of doing so in Irish?

Just as whenever you go abroad people are delighted that you attempt to speak their local language, so too here. In doing so you show respect for them as people and the culture they possess, which we have found has helped to open doors for us.

None of this is news to any missionary in any other context. Get to know the people among whom you are working, learn about their language and culture - simple stuff really, anyone can do it. We just need to get our heads and hearts around it. Above all don't forget how vital it is to love those we seek to reach.

What a powerful witness for Christ it is when people show others love in his name, especially in a context where that is challenging, either to them or to us. If this feels uncomfortable remember that God loved us, while we were yet sinners, and then, secure in his love for us, by the power of his love living in us, let us love others in the same way.

Our experience is that all mission, as a minority or not, begins, continues and never ceases to depend upon prayer. The greatest tool for mission God has given us is prayer. Use it, and you will find that however long it takes, and it might take a long time, God will use you in his work of building his church for his glory, and nothing is more exciting!

DOWNPATRICK

Rev Owen Patterson

Our desire is that our community will come to know Jesus. Keeping this in focus is important in evangelism. Remember Jesus is the one who sends us, and he is the one we want to introduce people to. As a minority within our community in Downpatrick, we want people to know that we are here, and we also want them to know that our message is Jesus.

Our evangelism is on many levels. Soft evangelism involves keeping an up-to-date Facebook page which doesn't just advertise church activities but also community things. We have a signage on the street which communicates something of our message as a church.

A decade ago, we set up a food bank which has fed tens of thousands of people in our area. On a purely human level people can see that we love our community, as this is a very practical demonstration of that, and if this work is good, hopefully they will know that our saviour is too.

We have more overt evangelism like our toddler group that God has richly blessed. It is oversubscribed and 95% of those attending are not part of our church. We also run youth clubs for various ages where we seek to share the gospel. Our church services go out online, as we know most people will first watch there if they are curious. We also put a float in the St. Patrick's Day parade in the town and produce appropriate gospel literature to distribute.

We are supported by others each year in distributing thousands of biblical bilingual calendars in English and Irish, including for our local Gaelscoil (Irish speaking school). At each of our organisations we make it a priority to give quality, age appropriate, gospel books to those who come. There are other avenues like school assemblies, hospital visitation that open doors. Members of our church being involved in clubs and societies in our area mean that they too, are sign posting people to Jesus.

Above all this, God's people are praying for our community and our work too, as it is only God who can open eyes to see.

MAYOBRIDGE

Rev Seamus Burke

Mayobridge is a small village in Co Down, approximately 5 miles from Rathfriland and just over four miles from Newry. According to the latest census figures it has a population of around 1200 people. It has a few shops, a bar, a strong GAA club, a church and a primary school.

Since 2015, our congregation have been reaching into the community, endeavouring to share the gospel message. It began with a request from a couple from the Faith Mission to help run a Summer Bible Club. A team of volunteers from the church went each night for a week, helping with Bible stories, memory verses, quiz and games. It was a great success and from then on became an annual event, with our church soon taking over the responsibility for it. The school allowed me a slot at an assembly each year to promote, (what the locals nicknamed), the "Holy Club." The club, held in the GAA halls, continued for several years until the premises were no longer available to us.

Over the years we have got to know a few believers in the community and so, after discussion and prayer, we decided to hold a Bible Study in the village. We met on Tuesday mornings, twice a month, in a room kindly granted by the local bar. Numbers were small, between 4 to 9 of us, but mostly made up of locals. We met for a year in that venue before switching to a newly opened coffee shop one evening each month. I'm encouraged to be working with Rev Brian Colvin in the project, who has recently joined us for times of Bible study and prayer, helping Ryans Presbyterian to share in the ministry.

The work in Mayobridge is small and at times seems fragile, but I'm convinced that God has opened a door of witness into that community (Revelation 3:8). I see it as our responsibility to go through that door, depending on him to grow what is tiny into something that will be still there when we are not. That is what we continue to pray for.

Our desire is that our community will come to know Jesus. Keeping this in focus is important in evangelism. Remember Jesus is the one who sends us, and he is the one we want to introduce people to.

Rev Owen Patterson
DOWNPATRICK

