

Why do we need more churches?

Rick Hill discusses reimagining PCI through church planting and multiplication.



I was always told that you shouldn't have favourites. That certainly goes for favourite pupils and favourite children, but what about favourite churches? Having served in denominational roles for over a decade and having visited countless congregations, should I be bold enough to admit to having a favourite church?

Well, I do have a favourite church. It isn't my own church. In fact, it isn't on this island and it doesn't even have a burning bush logo at the front, to my knowledge.

My favourite church is found in several chapters in the book of Acts and was located in a place called Antioch. Here, in modern-day Turkey, arose one of the most important

Christian communities of its day, notable for its devotion to the Lord, its hunger for teaching, its multicultural membership and strong missionary focus. It was in Antioch that followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26) and it was this church that served as the launching point for Paul's missionary journeys, playing a crucial role in the spread of Christianity to the Gentile world.

What a church! In a time of disruption and difficulty, opposition and uncertainty, stood a church which charted a different path, that enabled "a great number of people" (Acts 11:24) to know Jesus and sent out its most prominent leaders to extend the work of the gospel elsewhere (Acts 13:2-3).

An alternative path

As we consider the times we are in, it would be easy to allow an age of shrinking congregations, cultural shifts and demographic challenges to tempt the church to retreat. But what if we, as the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, could choose an alternative path – one of faith, courage, vision and bold beginnings?

Alongside our shared understanding of the need to reconfigure existing charges and revitalise congregations, has come a renewed affirmation that planting new churches should be a heightened priority in our mission. To not retreat but recalibrate. To not just save what we have, but sow for what we believe God can do.



10+10in10

A vision worth praying for: 10 + 10 in 10

PCI's Council for Mission in Ireland has sought to emphasise that church planting is strategically essential for the future health of the Church. This isn't new territory for PCI. Historically, we have been a church-planting movement, responsible for establishing over 500 congregations across Ireland. Recent success stories in Maynooth and Donabate remind us that fruitful planting isn't a thing of the past but is possible now, and we believe it can become habitual in the decade ahead.

And so, we have sought to develop a vision worth dreaming about, praying over and working toward. In June, the General Assembly officially affirmed this as a vision to be embraced prayerfully, practically and prophetically by the whole Church. This conviction is captured in the phrase, '10 + 10 in 10' – a shared, decade-long goal of:

- 10 newly constituted congregations;
- 10 new church planting projects;
- in the next 10 years.

Creating two separate categories seeks to emphasise that a goal in church planting is to see the establishment of fully constituted congregations and offer support to those already on this journey, while also leaving room for the envisioning of new church planting initiatives not yet imagined or begun. While we have previously been hesitant to embrace numerical goals, one minister wisely pointed out that there is a book in the Bible called Numbers! However, creating a target is not about metrics for the sake of it, but about sharpening our focus to plant with purpose and build with boldness. And so, this vision seeks to be a declaration of forward-looking faith, as well as offering a target to pray towards and hold ourselves to account.

Why plant new churches?

Some may understandably ask, "Why plant new churches when some are closing?" It's a valid question and the answer is multi-layered.

Geographical and cultural gaps: A glance at the map tells us we're absent in too many places. There are towns and even cities across Ireland with minimal or no Presbyterian witness. Planting new churches offers the opportunity to meet people where they are, with the flexibility for the gospel to be embodied in a way that relates to different cultural contexts. By planting churches in Maynooth or Wexford or Balbriggan, the distance people have between them and the church has been reduced.

Missional effectiveness: Church plants tend to be agile, mission-driven, and especially effective at reaching the unchurched and younger generations. In fact, all current church plants within PCI are engaging people not previously connected with another church. As the late Tim Keller said, "The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the body of Christ... and the continual corporate renewal and revival of the existing churches."

Stewarding well: We must also face hard truths. Some congregations may reach the natural end of their life cycle. That isn't failure – it's the rhythm of gospel-shaped ministry – life, death and resurrection. Some of our current church planting efforts have arisen from the ashes of previous church closures. And while revitalisation remains part of our strategy, it doesn't negate the call to birth new life elsewhere. In this, we reject false binaries of revitalisation versus planting. It's both/and, because healthy churches don't just survive, they multiply.

Churches planting churches

Importantly, this isn't a centrally controlled programme. The Council for Mission in Ireland isn't seeking to plant 10 churches. The call is to the whole Church – to presbyteries, congregations and individuals – to consider where new opportunities can emerge. Some initiatives are already underway – in Balbriggan, Belfast and Wexford among others – but many have yet to be imagined.

The invitation is wide open. We encourage congregations to not simply ask, 'How do we grow bigger?' but to consider 'How can we reach wider?' and 'Where can we plant next?'

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This cultural moment

There is something happening in our culture – something subtle yet deeply spiritual. Some have described it as 'the surprising re-birth of God', others 'the quiet revival'.

Whatever the label, this is a missional moment. We have a chance to take new ground – not in a spirit of competition, but of conviction. Not just to maintain our institutions, but to multiply our witness. New churches mean new worship, new community, new outreach and ultimately, new people changed by the gospel.

So, let's be a church that gives, that goes, that risks and that plants, because we believe in the God who makes all things new.

Current church planting initiatives within PCI

Balbriggan

Overseen by Donabate Presbyterian and led by Rev Josh McCance, this church plant was launched in 2020. Set in one of Ireland's most ethnically diverse towns, around 25 nationalities worship together in a community centre in Balbriggan each Sunday with midweek home groups helping to strengthen fellowship.



The Bridge

Having engaged in several outreach initiatives in the town centre of Banbridge, Ballydown Presbyterian sent a church planting core team to establish 'The Bridge'. Led by assistant minister Scott McMenemy, it meets weekly for worship in rented space in the town centre, with a number of families and young people involved.



Central

Situated in the former May Street Presbyterian, Belfast and led by licentiate David Dickinson, this church plant of Carnmoney Presbyterian has grown in recent years, particularly among younger generations. In June 2025, the General Assembly agreed to the constitution of Central as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, with steps being undertaken to do so in the coming months.



The Village

In recent months, a new work has been established in the Village area of south Belfast led by mission pioneer, Gary O'Rourke, and supported by South Belfast Presbytery. While the current focus is on outreach and community engagement based in halls owned by Richview Presbyterian, the aim is to develop a core team and a new worshipping community in due course.

West Belfast

Since 2022, Rev David Moore has been serving in west Belfast and has formed a small core team under the heading 'An Tionóllann' (or 'The Gathering') to help re-connect with an area where several Presbyterian congregations closed during the 1970s and 80s. A worship service is held on the first Sunday of each month in An Cultúrlann, a cultural heritage centre on the Falls Road, previously Broadway Presbyterian Church.



Covenant

Commissioned by Hill Street Presbyterian and led by Rev John Graham, a launch team was formed to establish a new worshipping community in southwest Portadown. It has been meeting weekly for worship since April 2025, with much early encouragement.



Wexford

Rev David Curran was installed as minister of Wexford church development project in September 2024. Since then, a weekly home group Bible study has been established, along with some outreach initiatives. Following a modest renovation of the former Wexford Presbyterian building, which closed in 2022, there are plans for monthly worship services to commence in September 2025.



Grace & Hope

This church plant has been meeting for four years at Carlisle Circus, having been established by West Kirk Presbyterian, drawing on resources from the closure of a nearby congregation. Led by Rev Peter Burke, Grace & Hope meets weekly for worship with a diversity of people drawn together. It has facilitated a number of outreach initiatives, including linking in with the nearby International Meeting Point.



Save the date

A major church planting conference is planned for Saturday 7 February 2026 with Rev Neil MacMillan (City-to-City Europe) as keynote speaker. It's a day to help encourage new church development and equip church planting teams. Come join us.