

Being present *in Sligo*



Jonny McClure talks to Fiona Simpson from Sligo Presbyterian about being present where God has placed her.

Part of PCI's 'Present' initiative is focused on how we can be present where God has placed us to be his witnesses. This will be different for individuals across PCI, as well as congregations, depending on the context of where we find ourselves.

Sligo Presbyterian has been exploring ways to witness to the multicultural and often transient community that surrounds it. Fiona Simpson, an elder at the church, explains more.

Fiona, can you tell us a bit more about what life and church looks like in Sligo?

Church life in Sligo is very multicultural. We are meeting and working with people from over 28 nationalities from all over the world

– North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. Interestingly, there are also a variety of reasons for how they have ended up in Sligo. Some are studying, some migrated for work, some are refugees and others are asylum seekers. The transient nature of these groups means that there is a high turnover of people in Sligo and in our church.

How would you describe the faith story of the people you're encountering?

It's a complete mix of world faiths and none. There are people who are Muslim, Buddhist, new age spiritualists and we have even encountered a range of tribal faiths and religions that were



previously unknown to us. Often these religious views are coupled with strong cultural values and traditions. We have also been enriched by the Christian faith and witness of some of the African people who have come to live in Sligo.



He knows who is coming through the door before we do and why he has placed them with us.



Present 

WHERE GOD HAS PLACED US TO BE HIS WITNESSES

How is the church trying to be present as a witness?

We run a project called Haven, a weekly international friendship group. It's informal and changes week to week – sometimes people are involved in crafts, playing table tennis, preparing food or they could be getting help with some homework from English language classes. We go with the flow, building relationships and showing God's love to people in a practical way.

While Haven runs weekly, we have hosted other events throughout the year. This past year, we were involved in Sligo's culture night and ran an event in the church hall called 'Food for Body and Soul' with Sligo Gospel Choir providing music and Haven members providing some multicultural food. Over 200 people attended, many of whom had never been inside a church building. Food and sharing stories are key elements in other nights too, like an international food night at our ladies' group (PW) and a church newcomers' night.

Each Christmas, we have a Christmas party at our local International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centre, which is home to almost 200 people, including children, and we provide everyone attending with a gift to show them they are thought about and loved.

We do different things because we know it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. We've got involved in the university freshers' day and have increased our social media presence. It's amazing to see how God uses different things. We had a parent contact us from Indonesia, who had seen us online, about their daughter coming to Sligo and she now plays flute in the church praise group.

How have you navigated the language barriers?

Technology is very helpful – from using Google Translate in personal interactions to adding Ukrainian subtitles to our Sunday morning service, we have been able to make

ourselves and our faith more accessible. We realised that prayer was very important to a few Ukrainians coming to Sunday worship – they told us they knew we were praying but didn't understand what we were praying for, so the subtitles enabled them to participate in those prayers.

We're conscious of the language issues and have partnered with the formal English language class provider to add support to the learning during Haven.

We also have free gospel literature available in 14 languages. It can be hugely significant when people encounter the Bible in their own language – it makes them feel welcome and wanted. These are relatively simple and small things but make a big impact and show people we have thought about them.

Is the work difficult when you don't know how long people will remain in Sligo?

It is difficult because you give a lot and



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the person may suddenly move on. I think of one Muslim lady who came to Haven for some time and every week we built more of a relationship. Then she was gone – her husband had got a new job and they moved away. It can feel like we haven't seen much fruit, if any, and then a new person arrives and we start all over again.

We're dependent on patience, prayer and God's grace. We have to remember it's for God's glory and he is present in their lives wherever they go. He knows who is coming through the door before we do and why he has placed them with us.

I think about it like a paper chain, like the ones we made when we were young. The chain is their journey and we are a link in the chain. It's only God who knows the bigger picture, so we meet them where they are at. That might be for two weeks, six months or two years, but we try and give our best to each person, ensuring that they hear the gospel in church and that we show the extravagant love of God in our actions towards them at Haven.

I have to remember to make myself present as it's a great privilege to be involved in another person's life at these significant moments, but it can only be done by surrendering to God. God tells us: "Be still and know that I

am God and I will be exalted among the nations." This takes the pressure off, especially knowing that there are problems that we aren't equipped to respond to. Ultimately, I remind myself before Haven each week that, "We love because he first loved us." Being present is all that's needed from me, God is in control.

Are there any other challenges?

The challenges all make building relationships immensely slow, often background trauma makes fostering trust difficult too. It takes an incredible amount of time and commitment to find common ground and build relationships and I've realised that it's not simply going to happen in an hour on Sunday morning or in Haven.

I need to be willing to be present outside of church hours. That's what demonstrates to folks that you're interested in them and you care about them – by making yourself available. Being present in the community, being their friend, being willing to give them time and then in God's time, we share more in life and the gospel.

What encourages you in this work for the gospel?

I have been so encouraged as I have seen God's hand at work in the lives of

people around us. I've seen the wonder in people as they've experienced a church service for the first time. One Christmas we had a group of Muslim women at the front of the nativity service intrigued to see what our children did at Christmas. It was a huge step for them and equally huge for us.

People who I never would have imagined have turned up, barriers broken down, cultural divides removed and blended into friendships. My husband and I have been invited into homes for significant cultural moments and celebrations and we've invited people into our home which has been personally very significant.

We've given people Bibles who have never had one or given a Bible to someone who had to leave home without theirs.

It is a privilege for me to share with international newcomers to Sligo as they navigate their way in a new environment, being with them in times of joy and sorrow, being with them in ordinary, everyday life and being present where God has placed me to be his witness.

Jonny McClune is PCI's congregational witness development officer.