

Being *present* in congregational life

As PCI continues to focus on what it truly means to be present to God, present to one another and present where God has placed us, the *Herald* hears how three congregations are being present to one another in God's family of the church.

Present 
FOR ONE ANOTHER
IN GOD'S FAMILY OF
THE CHURCH

Downshire, Carrickfergus

Being present in the all-age family of the church

In Downshire, our church vision is 'See God's Love, Know God's Love, Show God's Love'. This vision applies to all generations and ministries within our church family.

Over the last few years, our children's ministry has really grown, and we are very blessed to have so many children attending our Sunday morning programme. One of the ways that we incorporate the vision of seeing God's love into our children's ministry, is by once a month bringing out members of our church family to share their stories with the kids. This includes two of our groups: 'King's Kids' which is P2 to P5 and 'Team 3:16' which is P6 and P7. This can involve people sharing, not only how they have come to faith, but also how God is currently working in their lives, whether it be in work, retirement, family life or even hobbies. We ask those sharing to tell us about a Bible verse or passage that has helped or meant something to them and also for any tips that have aided how they read the Bible and pray. The children are given time at the end of the session to ask any questions they would like to know, and the kids particularly enjoy this part. We have had questions ranging from: "What is your favourite



vegetable?" to "What do you think heaven will look like?" We have found this a valuable way to build relationships between the generations.

As our children move on from kids' church to the youth programme (Year 8+) they are given

the opportunity to serve in all aspects of church life. This includes, but is not limited to, our audio-visual team, as helpers in crèche or in kids' church, in our welcoming team or in our praise band. They can serve alongside members of our church family, learning new skills and continuing to build intergenerational relationships. In Downshire, we feel that the kids seeing, knowing and showing God's love is not just the responsibility of the kids' ministry team and their parents, but it is the role of all of our church family. We can all play a part in bringing our children to faith and walk alongside them in their discipleship journey.

Hannah Crockard
Kids' coordinator

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Trinity, Bangor

Being present to God in discipleship with others

The late Dallas Willard liked to compare discipleship to apprenticeship – spending time with another person “in order to become more like that person”.

The connection involved in ‘spending time with another’ allows for something dynamic to occur. It speaks of an ongoing relationship that has an impact on life in the here and now. To ‘become more like’ speaks of growth, transformation and purpose. So the term discipleship fights against the idea that Christian conversion is a static, one-time event that confirms our place in heaven but seems to offer little to our life and our world in the here and now.

As disciples of Jesus, this means that in the here and now, we are people who are looking to spend time with him, learn from him, become more like him and become more able to do what he does.

At Trinity, one way that we have tried to engage with this is through retreat.

To retreat means to come away from our normal routines, for a time, in order to open ourselves to God. Then, as a result of having spent time with him, to then be able to return to life in a way that is somehow different. Tony Horsfall would suggest that this is “strategic withdrawal”.

In the course of each year, we aim to facilitate two one-day retreats, time where we can come away together to be alone with God. In the last two years, we have explored Jesus’ rhythm of retreat, the practice of *lectio divina* and, most recently, patterns in our life that may be holding us back in our relationship with God.

Our aim through this is not to cause people to see retreating as a couple of yearly events, but rather that through retreat we would come to relish connecting with God in a real way – and that this would spill out into having an appetite for intentionally opening ourselves to God, amid all of life’s other demands and distractions.

This was something that was caught by a church member, as they reflected on their experience in our church magazine, stating that a lesson we can all learn from retreat is that while life may contain many difficulties, “our ability to personally engage with God will never fail, and regardless of what

the coming weeks and months may bring, we should all endeavour to take time out in study, prayer and fellowship”.

Rob Gamble

Coordinator of discipleship





Courtesy of The Northern Irish Explorer

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Whiteabbey

Being present for one another pastorally

Pastoral care is such an important aspect of congregational life because it is actively reflecting Jesus' care for us as our Good Shepherd – to help both Christians and non-Christians know that we are not alone, that we are loved by him and that we need to receive the peace, strength and transforming power of the Holy Spirit in all the different circumstances of our lives, especially in our suffering.

I always come back to 2 Corinthians 1 to remind me how the Trinity, our 'three in one' God who is himself perfectly relational, gives us his compassion for others and enables us to connect with and support them. He "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (v4).

In Whiteabbey, we seek to provide pastoral care to every age group in the congregation. Our staff team meets weekly and we share who we have been in contact with or visited during the week, so we are aware of any pastoral issues and are then able to pray specifically for them. In the pastoral aspect of my role (alongside our minister Angus and our assistant minister Matthew), my main responsibility is to visit specific members of the congregation on our pastoral lists: those who cannot attend church services regularly due to ill health, others who are in hospital or nursing homes, and those who are experiencing suffering such as bereavement.

In our kirk session, our elders are divided into groups which focus on different areas of ministry in church life. The group focusing on pastoral ministry is convened by Tim, one of our elders, and in January 2024, Tim and I set up a team of voluntary pastoral visitors who have a heart for this particular ministry. Each visitor regularly visits one or two members of the congregation who

are on the pastoral lists mentioned above. I sought to pair up visitors with those I thought they would get on well with, and it has been lovely to see these relationships develop throughout the year.

At Christmas time, I coordinate a list of those we visit throughout the year and those who have been bereaved in the year that has passed, and organise our staff team, elders and pastoral visitors to visit these church members, bringing them a Christmas present and card from Whiteabbey to let them know we are thinking of them.

Although there are many times that pastoral care is difficult due to the sadness of seeing people suffer, it is also such a blessing and privilege to be welcomed into people's homes and lives, and see trust built through listening and journeying with them in what they are going through. There have been times when I've come to visit someone and they will say, "God brought you at exactly the right time" or "I was just thinking of you", which shows how it is the Holy Spirit who is at work guiding me to where I need to be and when I need to be there – how he is sovereign over it all.

We often talk about the importance of 'one anothering' in Whiteabbey – how pastoral care really applies to everyone in the congregation who cares for others, and how it is so encouraging to see this happening; whether through people praying for each other in the pew after the service, delivering a home-made meal to someone grieving or just home from hospital, or a text or a phone call to see how someone is doing. May we continue to be a church family that continues to depend on God, and to know his great care and compassion for us, so we can keep on sharing it with each other, journeying through life together towards our eternal heavenly home.



Rachel Cubitt
Deaconess

