



# Being *present* in the ordinary

**Albin Rankin** explores what it is to be truly present, the theme of a new three-year PCI initiative to encourage congregations and their members in the ordinary walk of faith.

**M**y earliest memory of the word ‘present’ involves sitting in a primary school classroom. ‘Present’ was the response you made when you heard your name read out by the teacher. Twenty-five years later I discovered that this was still the response expected when your name was read out by the clerk of presbytery at presbytery meetings!

In both cases, all it indicated was physical presence. Being present in this sense was nothing more than being in a certain place at a certain time. Your thoughts, your attention, your heart may have been focused somewhere else entirely.

Being present, however, is so much more than attendance. It is about attention; it is about attitude and it is about activity. In Genesis 3:8 we read: “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”

God is present but Adam and Eve are not. They are hidden. Though they occupy the same physical space, the garden, they

are not present to God as God seeks to be present to them.

In Revelation 21, John’s vision of the fulfilment of God’s kingdom provides another picture of ‘being with’/ ‘being present’: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”

What lies between these two pictures is a story that reveals the relationship, the being with, being present, that God seeks to invite us into. Through story, metaphor, dialogue, instruction, exhortation and example, the Scriptures reveal not only the obstacles to such a relationship and the offering God has made in Christ to address the obstacles, but also the open invitation to enter into this relationship and experience God with us.

Being present to God is more than just showing up. As one commentator has

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noted, the central promise in the Bible is not ‘I will forgive you’, although of course that promise is there. It is not even the promise of life after death, although that is extended through Christ to all who will trust and believe in him as Saviour and as Lord.

The central and most frequent promise in the Bible is ‘I will be with you’. This is the promise God made to Jacob in Genesis 28:15: “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.”

This is the promise Moses looked for as he responded to God’s instructions to lead the people in Exodus 33:15: “If your presence does not go with us do not send us up from here.”

This is the promise David celebrates in the shepherd psalm, Psalm 23:4: “Even though I walk through the valley of darkness I will fear no evil for you are with me.”

And this is the promise Jesus makes in Matthew 28:19–20: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

This promise ‘I will be with you’ means



that in our everyday lives, God is present.

At the General Assembly in June, the Council for Congregational Life and Witness launched 'Present'. It is first and foremost an invitation. Instead of offering a programme, or a set of studies, or even a project to work on, Present invites us to look around and see what or who is right in front of us. Present invites us to get comfortable with the ordinary.

A few months ago, I joined in a pursuit of the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights. It was a surreal experience sitting in my car on the Craigmantlet Hills outside Belfast waiting and watching for this spectacular sight. Unfortunately, I didn't get to witness this extraordinary display but the next day and every day since I have witnessed the daylight, the ordinary light that drives away the darkness, promotes life and growth and brings rhythm and shape to the life I live. My failure to experience the spectacular prompted me to look again at the ordinary and to see it as vital and just as transformational as the hilltop experience that never was.

In Romans 12, Paul writes: "So, here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." (The Message)

It is tempting to look for, or even

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hanker after, the hilltop experience. When Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus' transfiguration their first instinct was to preserve it. In our day and generation, we would film it, take a selfie, create a TikTok. The gospel writers, on the other hand, follow this extraordinary event by describing how Peter, James and John returned to the ordinary, as indeed did Jesus. What is more, Jesus'

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commission and instruction to the disciples, and through them to us, is to pursue the ordinary. You and I are to live where God has placed us as salt and light.

In the 16th century, Martin Luther faced a pastoral crisis. His parishioners were looking for more exotic forms of discipleship. They roamed all over the country and beyond, believing that their local church did not have all that they needed. Luther counselled, "Let every man stay in his own parish. There he will find more than in all the shrines. In your own parish you will find baptism, the sacraments, preaching, and your neighbour." Get comfortable with the ordinary.

John Calvin highlighted in the third volume of his Institutes: "a Christian ought to be disposed and prepared to keep in mind that he has to reckon with God every moment of his life." Romans 12 reminds us that our whole lives are to be our sacrifice of worship to God, not only our gathering on a Sunday or our quiet times. We therefore need to pause, or at the very least slow down. John Mark Comer, in his book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*, notes: "Attention is the beginning of devotion."

The invitation that comes with Present requires no additional resources, or instructions, or guidelines. Everyone can participate right where they are. Everyone can contribute through their stories and experiences. Present is not about the spectacular or the extraordinary. It is not the hilltop, but the path we travel each day.

You and your congregation are invited to be part of this initiative, to embrace what God has done and is doing right where he has placed you. There is nothing polished or packaged about this initiative. Present is not a PR exercise for PCI or indeed our attempt at a PR exercise for Jesus. The stories that will emerge will reveal our struggles, our brokenness and our failure every bit as much as our joys, celebrations and faithfulness. Present is

not an answer to all our problems but a call to see, appreciate and value God in the ordinary.

As Present unfolds over the next three years, we will explore what it means when we gather before God, how it

translates into community as we live with one another, and the way it shapes our engagement where God has placed us to be his witnesses in our neighbourhoods and networks.

Being present begins by taking our everyday ordinary life and placing it before God as an offering. In so doing we respond to what God has done, and is doing, because embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

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