



Being present in this season of life and witness

David Thompson ponders how we might respond when we have a sense that things just aren't working the way they used to in our congregation.

What can we do when we have that overwhelming sense that things just don't feel and work the way they used to any more in our congregation's life?

It is almost an inevitability that all of us have experience of ending up there at some point in our everyday life. Some aspect of our world changed. We thought it was just a momentary interruption to the familiar. We told ourselves that everything would go back soon to the more comfortable way it used to be. But then we move past being able to easily believe that. It becomes no longer possible to live in denial. It is no longer profitable to dismiss the way things are now as just a passing fad. It is no longer plausible to keep on going as if nothing has changed. All of that is bewildering, paralysing, traumatic, anger inducing and depressing. We feel ourselves trapped in a place where we would rather not find ourselves.

Perhaps as we look around our congregation these days that's just how we feel.

Way back when

In such seasons, one temptation is to seek to take refuge in the glory days of the past. Everything about the here

However uncomfortable it feels, now is the only time given to us.

and now is viewed through the lens of comparison with what went before. That always appears better than the present when observed through our rose-tinted spectacles, which screen out any difficulties or downsides of the way things were back then.

In church life, we have an almost inbuilt tendency to default to this way of seeing our present circumstances. We talk about times when our congregation was bigger, younger, held greater sway in its community. Even if all of that was true, seeking refuge in the comfort, safety and familiarity of that past does nothing to serve us well today.

Some future then

Another temptation is to try to escape our discomfort with present circumstances by telling ourselves that the way things are now will soon give way to some future promise. A whole industry has grown up around charting the path to those better times ahead. Books, podcasts, TED talks, conferences, programmes set out the simple set of steps to follow that can

get us there. They are the same for everyone, everywhere, whatever our church's story, setting, starting point or size.

In the fog of our present circumstances, the idea that the issues we face as a church can be boiled down to something short and simple, rather than having to wrestle with a complex mix of factors all coming together at the same time, is seductive. But by that kind of oversimplifying, the results of following the proposed solutions are underwhelming.

Living in the present

However uncomfortable it feels, now is the only time given to us. We can't turn the clock back or fast forward into the future. So, how can we live better in this moment and live with whatever circumstances we find ourselves in as a congregation today? We need to find the means of settling into a way of being present to our current challenges and opportunities that counters a temptation to despair and instead repairs in us a sense of purposeful focus.

Attending

Perhaps that starts with an intentionality about sharpening the attention we give to what is happening

Present

IN THIS SEASON OF LIFE AND WITNESS

around us. Too often we miss the shudders and shifts that are happening under our feet, so that they sneak up on us in ways that leave us coming to address changing circumstances too late.

What is changing in church, society, the patterns of living, around which people form their lives? While we may bemoan some of these things, they may not be all bad. They might be neutral, neither here nor there for the work of the kingdom, just different than we are used to. Some might even offer new opportunities unseen before.

Awareness

Beyond that general attention we give to what is changing around us, how about prayerfully pursuing a particular awareness of how God is at work in and through what is happening in the present circumstances of our congregation's life and witness? Too often church life passes us by in a daze of busyness. We could easily rhyme off all the weekly activities in our programme – who they are for, what happens at them – but what is God doing through them? That is a different question that calls for deeper reflection.

What stories can we draw upon that tell us how a youth organisation has changed a young person's life; how a

It will always be about being present to God as his people.

necessary change to the regularity of one of our gatherings has made it more possible for someone to consistently attend and benefit; how someone has come to faith through some simple contact they made with us through a community initiative? These kinds of stories often provide the pointers to how God wants us to locate ourselves in the present.

Adjusting

By giving our attention to what is happening and seeking to become more aware of how God seems to be working, it should become clearer if we need to adjust some of our ways of trying to express our life and witness as a church in the present.

PCI's 'Present' initiative seeks to underscore that the basic features of church life and reaching out to others are unchanging. It will always be about being present to God as his people. It will always involve being present for one another in God's family of the church. It will always be about being present where God has placed us to be

his witnesses. However, the particular ways in which we shape those aspects of church life may need to be adjusted if we are to make the most of the opportunities God is giving us today and to make sure we are responsive to what we are finding is not working the way it used to. Perhaps we need to sharpen some part of our Sunday worship, find different ways of being together for prayer, or think about adding evangelistic edge to an activity in the community.

Making the most of the present season

As we edge towards the season of the church year in which the frenetic activity of church life tends to slacken after Easter, perhaps this is a moment of opportunity to get people together to think, talk and prayerfully discuss what we are seeing in our congregation's life and witness and how God seems to be at work in the present.

Find out more about the Present initiative at www.presbyterianireland.org/present

Rev David Thompson is Secretary of PCI's Council for Congregational Life and Witness.