

## Gateway Christian Fellowship Session Report 2020

We ended last year's Session Report with the words of Isaiah 40:31

***But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.***

We did not know then that the year 2020 would be a year when some of our members in particular and all of us in general would especially need the Lord's strength and sustaining grace as we have faced totally unexpected and extremely difficult events. However, we are comforted by the knowledge that the Lord is still on the throne of the universe and is working out his purposes for his glory and the good of his people.

Many of our personal plans and expectations for the year 2020 had to be put on hold or shelved altogether because of the worldwide pandemic of coronavirus. We are thankful to God that while some members did catch Covid 19 none has been too severely affected so far.

We recognise that it has been a difficult year for all because of not being able to meet as a church family or with friends or family for long periods. Many events including Church camps and conferences were cancelled or had to be held on-line. For long periods churches have been unable to meet and not having our own building has made that particularly challenging for Gateway Christian Fellowship.

### **Public Worship**

As a congregation we continued to meet for morning worship each Lord's Day until mid-March at 11a.m. in the Maldron Hotel. At that point, the worsening coronavirus pandemic and the associated lockdown meant that we were prohibited from meeting and, like all churches, had to resort to on-line streaming of our services. This was done from the minister's home and we are thankful to those members whose technical expertise enabled this transition to take place with few hitches.

Government restrictions eased to allow churches to meet again from July however hotels were not allowed to open to host events and we were unable to find an alternative venue. From the end of August we were able for six weeks to meet again in the hotel. This required a risk assessment to be carried out and a "Protocol for Worship Services in the Maldron Hotel" being developed to ensure the risk of spreading the virus was minimised. The worsening pandemic in the autumn resulted in the hotel becoming unavailable once more and we reverted to the on-line option. For several weeks in November and December we were able to join with the Bready congregation for evening worship at which our minister was the regular preacher.

During our minister's summer holidays we were pleased to have one of our former members preach to us from the family home for a couple of weeks. We were also able to tune in to the live streams of Letterkenny/Milford and

Dervock on a couple of occasions. Over the summer we enjoyed a couple of outdoor times of psalm praise and fellowship in the garden of one of our members.

The average attendance at morning worship prior to the lockdown was 23. No records were kept of those participating in the on-line meetings though we are aware that most of our members and adherents and some others from further afield accessed these meetings.

We value Rev Neilly's faithful preaching week by week. Stephen had to adjust quickly to preaching from his sitting room to a small audience, but he did that well. Over the year the main expository preaching has been from Acts chapters 10-12, the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20, and other series on the "I AM's" of Jesus, and Psalms 31-35. John's gospel continued to provide the focus on those occasions when celebrating the Lord's supper. A children's address was included in the service on most occasions.

While we always value the work of our precentors, they too had to adjust this year to the new situations. Our thanks are due particularly to those who pre-recording the psalms being sung on the live streams and to another member for leading the praise on many of our Zoom meetings.

While we recognise that any on-line option does not fulfil the need for God's people to meet to worship Him, we are thankful for the technology which has enabled us to hear God's word read and preached and enabled us to sing His praise together in some sense.

We appreciate all the work which a member continues to do in keeping our congregational website up to date and another member for making regular updates to the Facebook page.

During the spring lockdown Stephen sought to encourage members and others with a daily blog initially based on Sinclair Ferguson's book "To Seek and to Save" and then on Psalms 105-139. We thank him for all the time and effort he put into encouraging us from God's Word at that time.

During the year Session investigated several potential worship/outreach venues but to date these have proved either unsuitable or unavailable. We continue however to be alert to venues which may become available if the pandemic wanes.

### **Work of Session**

The Session of the congregation was constituted for formal business 17 times during 2020. The Lord's Supper was celebrated twice during the year, in January, and September. There were no baptisms or new members received into the congregation in the past year.

Sadly, many of the Session meetings in the past year resulted from the need to exercise discipline in respect of one of our members, in accordance with the requirements of scripture as summarised in the subordinate standards of

our church. After numerous attempts to encourage this member to repent this discipline culminated in their excommunication from the congregation in June after warrant was received from the Western Presbytery. We continue to commit all affected by this situation, to the God of all comfort praying that they would receive the grace needed in their pain. We continue to pray too that this individual would come to acknowledge their sin and repent of it.

Session Members attended the meetings of the Western Presbytery, and Synod as required, most of which have taken place via the medium of Zoom.

Visitation of the members and adherents took place in the first half of the year mostly via Zoom.

We commend the members and adherents of the congregation for their prayers and practical support for those who have experienced difficult times during the past year.

### **Bible Study and Fellowship Meetings**

Lord's Day evening meetings took place at the minister's home until the lockdown made this impossible. Thereafter meetings took place via Zoom. Once a month this meeting took the form of a prayer meeting. Some evenings we did further study of the passage preached that morning. We have also made use of a number of books to focus our thoughts, namely "God, Adam and You" by a group of writers, "Joy in the Sorrow" by Matt Chandler and "Where is God in a Coronavirus World?" by Professor John Lennox. At other times we have had times of praise or shared about Christian books we had read during lockdown.

At a Zoom meeting in September, a missionary couple with Wycliffe International in Mali, shared something of the work of Bible translation in which they are involved.

In November and December when our main worship service took place in Bready RP Church, our evening meeting was switched to 11a.m in the morning. The format was then changed to be more of a worship meeting with singing, a children's address, a short message on the book of Jonah and a time of prayer.

The Thursday evening Bible study continued weekly. We finished our studies of some Old Testament characters and in March began a Ligonier Ministries DVD series by Rev Sinclair Ferguson on the "Basics of the Christian Life". Through screen sharing on Zoom we were able to complete this series remotely. We also completed the Christian Institute DVD series entitled "Living Christianity" and began another Ligonier Ministries DVD series entitled "Foundations of Grace in the Old Testament" delivered by Steve Lawson. Attendance at these "Zoom" meetings has been encouraging.

The ladies fellowship has met monthly mainly for Bible study and prayer and continued to use a study booklet on Contentment. Some of the ladies have joined some of the on-line talks organised by the Baptist Union of Ireland.

## **Outreach and Service**

Because of the pandemic many of the activities which were planned did not take place. However, Stephen spoke at a Christianity Explained Course run in the Maldron Hotel in January and February. While there were few outsiders present it was a worthwhile event. The student lunch was held on Wednesdays during the Jan-March term time at the manse. Around 10-15 students from the nearby university consistently attended this. We appreciate all those ladies who regularly provided and served the food for these lunches. Unfortunately, the student lunch was one of the victims of the pandemic and was not possible during the remainder of the year.

In the early months of the year Stephen continued to do door-to-door work and leaflet distribution in the Shantallow area when weather and time permitted. He was assisted by one of the members.

We offered Professor John Lennox's book "Where is God in a Coronavirus World?" for no charge on Facebook and the Congregation's website. A small number of requests was received, and copies were also distributed by members and adherents to friends and contacts as they had opportunity.

The Go-Team planned for the month of August had to be cancelled.

Towards the end of the year arrangements were made for delivery of some of our stock of outreach leaflets to homes in the Shantallow area through a delivery business, "Bull Ads". We pray that God would use these leaflets to alert people to their need of salvation.

In December, an advertisement in the Derry Journal containing a "QR code" was used to direct people to the congregation's website and in particular to a sermon on the incarnation. We are aware that a small number of people did make use of the link to access this sermon.

During the year one of our members began an on-line "Sabbath School" at a suitable mid-week time with the children in our fellowship.

As we continue to navigate another year when many of our normal activities remain curtailed, we do so encouraged by the words of Lamentations 3:22-23

***The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.***

Respectfully submitted.  
Graham Fallows (Clerk)