

## **McCracken Memorial Presbyterian Church**

### Minister's Report for 2023

January 2023 perhaps began with many of us thinking about getting into shape following the over-indulgence of Christmas. It was perhaps appropriate then that we began a series of five sermons called finding your shape. Using the five letters, S.H.A.P.E. each of us were invited to reflect upon how God has shaped us through our Spiritual gifts, our Heart (things that we're passionate about), our Abilities, our Personality, and Experiences in life. We recognised how God has uniquely shaped each one of us to enrich our life together as a church family, the Body of Christ. Accompanying each sermon were questionnaires to be used to help us reflect on what we uniquely have to offer in service of God and one another. Ideas and opportunities for involvement in church have since been posted in our vestibule and it's been lovely to see some people step into new spheres of service and witness in our church and community.

2023 was the year that our Friday Night Youth Club (Crackerjax) really took off with numbers consistently up in the thirties. This has been under the leadership of our youth and family worker, Bethan along with a team of committed volunteers. It has brought the added bonus of Bethan seeing many familiar faces from Friday nights when she is invited along to speak at school assemblies or School Scripture Union Groups.

Our Inter-Church Lent services started up again in 2023 after a three-year break following the COVID-19 pandemic. There was good representation on each of the Sunday evenings from McCracken with a sense of warm fellowship as we worshipped together, and mingled afterwards over supper in the various churches.

After reaching out to Glenveagh School in the Spring of 2023 we were delighted to be able to host them for their 30th anniversary celebration service after the church building had worked so well for them on their 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It was another very special service, filled with joy and thanksgiving, and also tinged with some sadness as staff and pupils reflected upon the past few years.

In June I began my Sabbatical which lasted to the 21<sup>st</sup> of August. It began with a very special church leaders retreat in the surroundings of the beautiful Lee Abbey in North Devon. It was so nice to spend time in the company of other church leaders from across England who were also on Sabbatical. From the outset there was a wonderful sense of God's presence there, as we enjoyed daily times of worship and inspiring teaching, as well as time to ourselves to roam the stunning coastline. It was truly refreshing.

After a family holiday in July and some helpful reading I finished my Sabbatical at the New Horizon week in Coleraine which was also very uplifting and encouraging. Cover at McCracken during this time was provided by Rev Liz Hughes and Very Rev Dr Norman Hamilton O.B.E. both of whose preaching was very much appreciated by the congregation.

In September we had our Back to School with God Service and Barbecue which was well attended. Later in the month Kirk Session took an Away Day together with Malone Kirk Session. This was led by Rev Alan McWilliam, leader of the Cairn

Course which has been helping us think more missionally about how we do church at a time when church attendance is in decline across our country. The retreat was held in Murlough House, Dundrum and enjoyed by all.

In October the BBC approached us asking if our Sunday morning service might be broadcast on Radio Ulster. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> October we had a good turnout from our congregation and choir members, joined by tens of thousands across Ulster and beyond for uplifting worship, and a sermon on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, challenging us as to what it means to be a 'neighbourhood church'.

December of 2023 was even busier than normal for the Advent season in McCracken. We ordained three new elders on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December: Grace Bamford, Philip Courtney, and Julie Dick. We then celebrated a very special anniversary on the following Sunday, as our senior minister, Rev Dr David Irwin reached 60 years of ordained ministry. In our service he was presented with a gift from our congregation and afterwards we enjoyed a lovely cake prepared especially for the occasion.

In June we said goodbye to our church secretary, Laura Landi, and were very ably assisted over the summer period by one of our younger church members, Hannah Sheppard. In October Valeria Pinelli began as our new church secretary and has quickly adjusted and made her home among us. I express my thanks to Valeria for how well she has done in producing our Chronicle Magazine, keeping our website up to date, and providing the order of service for each week as well as all the work involved in the compiling and printing of our 2023 annual report book and directory.

I also express my thanks to our Honorary Treasurer who not only keeps our church accounts but also annual statistical returns, charity commission reports, insurance records, and maintaining our church data base.

Our congregational secretary Brian Henderson is not only secretary to the congregational committee but is faithfully there sometimes early in the morning or late at night making sure everything functions in our church.

And our Clerk of Session has always been a great support in her role of overseeing Kirk Session, with her deeply caring pastoral heart. Rosemary has shown great courage and determination this past year as she awaited surgery on her knee, and we continue to keep her in our prayers for continued recovery.

I'd also like to thank our Kirk Session, Congregational Committee, Musical Director, Youth and Family Worker, our Church Care-Taker, and all of those who serve in so many ways in our congregation. Unfortunately, there's not enough space here to list you all.

Whether you are active or inactive, at church or confined to home, all are valued and beloved members of the Body of Christ, a value and a love that very importantly is not at all based upon our usefulness, or productivity, but on the immense worth placed upon us by God Himself in the giving of His Son.

*Glory be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.* (Ephesians 1:3)

Rev Barry McCroskery, Minister

## Kirk Session Report for 2023.

2023 in McCracken was a year of change. The wind of change blew through Kirk Session, indirectly brought about by the influence of the Cairn course, changes within our congregation and the desire for a few Elders to move on, from District responsibilities, to the Elder Statesmanship of Elder Emeritus. This necessitated us having an Election for new Elders and a more in depth look at the need for 21 District thus giving a more business like approach to our meetings whilst not forgetting that we are a Spiritual body within the Church.

Kirk Session met regularly throughout the year and a small Task group was set up to discuss the possible changes in Districts. Eventually after much discussion at several meetings, it was agreed that the number of Districts would be reduced to 15 in total. 14 covering mainly local areas and the 15<sup>th</sup> serving outlying areas. The number of Rulings Elders would not be reduced and so 15 individual Elders would retain Districts and the remaining Elders would be divided into A Growth Group and A Pastoral Group. Elders would volunteer for these groups and would include Elders with Districts. We were very sad to see our long standing Elders decide to retire from Kirk Session. These highly respected and dedicated Elders were Mr Ian Dickie, Mr Jim Finlay, Mr Graeme Jones and Mrs Doreen McKelvey. Each of these Elders have been greatly admired and trusted by the members living in their Districts and will be greatly missed for their pastoral care, encouragement and spiritual support as will their wise counsel and thought provoking contributions at Kirk Session meetings. Hence in January the plans for the election of new Elders began. Announcements were made to the Congregation and nominations requested for the beginning of April. On receipt of these the Kirk Session then agreed to those chosen and the Moderator approached those with the most nominations. Three members agreed to let their names go forward and the Congregation voted on those at the Annual General Meeting, consequently, Mrs Grace Bamford, Mr Philip Courtenay and Mrs Julie Dick were unanimously elected as Elders Elect.

In May we celebrated the Coronation of King Charles the third with a special reception after Church and greetings of loyalty were expressed.

The General Assembly was attended by Maggie Blakeman for her second year as she was unable to attend the previous year due to an attack of Covid, however she attended in 2023 and provided us with an in-depth record of the meetings.

Also, a big change was brought about by our Moderator having a long overdue and necessary Sabbatical as is part of the ruling of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The seven weeks that he was away from the church during the summer months were covered by three retired ministers, the Reverend Dr. Norman Hamilton, the Reverend Morris Gault and the main part being covered by the Reverend Dr Liz Hughes who on her weekly visits was accompanied by her husband, the Reverend Brian Hughes. The ministry of these two very experienced and spiritual ministers was greatly appreciated and enjoyed by all. They left with gifts saying that if they lived closer they would become members of our church as they were so impressed with the warmth and friendliness they had received. We were also grateful to the Reverend Paul Jamieson, from Hillhall Presbyterian Church who provided pastoral cover during this period.

During the summer the Task Group from Kirk Session held an interview for a new Church Secretary, We were very fortunate to meet Mrs Valeria Pinelli who joined us in that capacity and has fitted in to our ways and hers seamlessly.

The Kirk Session is always aware of those rejoicing in births and those mourning loved ones and our thoughts and prayers have been with these members.

In the Autumn we held a joint retreat with Malone Presbyterian Church Kirk Session in Dundrum. This was a successful new venture and discussions together and separately were facilitated by the Reverend Alan McMillan of the Cairn Course who travelled from Scotland to be with us. An enjoyable and worthwhile day.

An intensive six week training period began in the Autumn for our new Elders Elect and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December the Ordination of the three new Elders was held under the auspices of the South Belfast Presbytery. A very moving service followed by speeches of welcome and a reception in the hall.

All these events led us to Advent when we held one of our six annual Sacraments of Communion, and as a special event a service was broadcast by the Northern Ireland British Broadcasting Corporation. Our thanks were given wholeheartedly to the Reverend Dr. Bert Tosh, Producer of Religious programmes with the BBC locally. His relaxed and light hearted manner made the whole experience a joyful one and listeners gave excellent reports of all aspects of the service. Our Gift Day service and Nativity Play followed together with a very special Sunday service when we celebrated with our Minister Emeritus, the Reverend Dr David Irwin on the occasion of his 60 years of ordained ministry. At this special service gifts of a globe lamp reminding David and Maureen of their World travels and a bouquet of flowers were presented and afterwards at a reception with a celebration cake there were speeches from the Reverend Barry McCroskery, myself as Clerk, who reminded David that at his suggestion I became his Clerk of Session and the Reverend Ivan Steen, Windsor Presbyterian Church which was David's first church. These greetings were graciously replied to by both David and Maureen.

We, in McCracken, are very grateful to have many dedicated members who serve in various capacities, both asked and voluntary, from singing in the choir to weeding in the garden, some members doing both!. Our Youth Worker Bethan Dillon, Sunday School Superintendent Juliet Mills and Young people's Elder David Scott who care for our younger members spiritual knowledge and learning, the Women's Bible Study group, our Prayer groups and Axis. Brian Henderson our most efficient Congregational Committee Secretary, Alastair Rankin our Honorary Church Treasurer expert, Mervyn Hughes our dedicated Property Convener, our Hospitality Team, our Musical Director and Choirmaster Richard Brown and all the Choir members, Denise Hughes and the publishing team, the dedicated leaders and helpers of the Babies and Toddlers group, too numerous to mention, we are indebted to them all.

Finally our most sincere thanks go to our dedicated Minister, the Reverend Barry McCroskery whose exemplary ministry and dedication to all our members is greatly appreciated. His ministry is an example of true devotion to all with whom he comes in contact. He is by our side when needed, encouraging and supporting us with a kind word, a hand held, and an encouraging prayer. We thank God for the gift to us

of a sincere, sensitive and devoted servant of Our Lord and Master and for the Manse family, for Elsy Rebecca and Gisell.

To God be the Glory.  
Rosemary EC Simpson  
Clerk of Session

## Congregational Committee Report

At the first meeting of the year held on 26<sup>th</sup> January the Annual Accounts for 2022, plus the submission to the Charity Commission, were tabled and approved. The proposed salaries of the church staff for the year then commencing were also agreed at this meeting.

It has been the usual practice that in advance of each of the Congregational Committee meetings the Honorary Treasurer circulates detailed financial statements for perusal and consideration. These include up to date records of all the income received and all the expenditures incurred since the previous circulation, together with the previous year's corresponding income and expenditure figures. This enables direct comparisons to be made as a means of spotting at an early stage any concerning income and expenditure trends that Committee members should be aware of. When meetings were less frequent during the worst of the pandemic the Honorary Treasurer also circulated electronically at the end of each month his comments on the state of the church finances and this he has continued to do. We as a congregation are greatly indebted to Mr Alastair Rankin for the thoroughness with which he oversees and attends to the church's financial affairs, a task that I on behalf of the Congregational Committee wish to thank him for continuing to undertake.

Our gratitude is also due to Mr Mervyn Hughes and the members of the Property Committee for their diligence in ensuring that the church properties are maintained in a good state of repair and for expeditiously dealing with any issues as they arose. In a previous report I mentioned that one of the church's three heating boilers had ceased to function and it was unable to be repaired. During last summer a second boiler ceased to operate and so it was considered it was time to install a more up to date heating system in advance of the onset of winter. At a special meeting convened in October this issue was discussed and it was approved that the work should proceed without delay and that it be paid for with a withdrawal from the church's holding in the PCI General Investment Fund. The installation of the new boilers was programmed to coincide with the school's autumn half term holidays when many of the users of the hall were also taking a break so the level of disruption was minimised.

In last year's report I mentioned the replacement of the metal framed windows in the Youth Centre with double glazed uPVC units. It was agreed that part of the bequest received from the estate of the late Roberta Campbell, a former Sunday School teacher and member of the choir, be used to pay for this work. This has now been acknowledged with an appropriately worded plaque at the entrance to the Youth Centre.. Further information about these and other property matters may be found in the Property Convenor's report.

Mr Ivor Kinghan voluntarily kept the grass to the south side and rear of the church cut throughout the growing season and the programme of church gardening and tidying of the grounds on the first Tuesday of each month has kept all looking as it should. Thanks are extended to Ivor and to those who regularly volunteered to help with these tasks. A special word of thanks is again extended to Mr Raymond Todd for willingly providing the means of conveying quantities of gardening waste to a recycling centre. This included the Christmas

trees after the festive season. The trees were erected by members of the gardening team and decorated by those that regularly meet in the Axis study group.

On Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February the Annual Congregational Lunch was held in Harlequins Rugby Club pavilion. This very enjoyable occasion was well attended.

Church premises continue to be much used. On Sunday mornings the Prayer Group meet before worship in the Minor Hall, the Sunday School members during the latter part of the Sunday morning service adjourn to the Dowling Hall and after worship there is a time when the adults attending church can enjoy further fellowship together with refreshments also in the Dowling Hall.

The Women's Bible Study, Axis, the Indoor Bowling Club, the Luncheon Circle, "Babies and Toddlers", the Coffee Drop In, the Presbyterian Women, the Art Club, "CrackerJax" and the uniformed organisations all are again meeting regularly. Also a number of external organisations use our church halls for activities such as Ballet, Pilates, Keep Fit, Judo, Unislim classes and by the Belfast Philatelic Society for its monthly meetings.

Several Messy Church gatherings and the Summer Holiday Bible Club organised by Mrs Bethan Dillon also took place in the Dowling Hall during the school holidays.

On Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> May the sanctuary was used for a service to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of Glenveagh Special School with refreshments provided afterwards for parents and some of the teaching staff attending the service.

The Church's facilities were made available on 12<sup>th</sup> July to those participating in or watching the parade.

The Macmillan Cancer Support Coffee Morning in September raised the magnificent sum of £1,085. Two movie nights in the weeks before Christmas when "Paddington 2" and "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe", were shown also attracted good audiences.

Members of the Flowering Arranging team ensured that the church was decorated with flowers on each of the occasions that Sunday services in the sanctuary took place and they organised the decoration of the church at Harvest with food items for donation to the Storehouse charity. Choir members installed and decorated the candle holders in place for the Candle Light Carol Service.

Members of the Hospitality Committee continue to organise the refreshments following Sunday morning worship in the Dowling Hall, at the weekly Thursday morning "Coffee Drop In", the monthly Luncheon Circle meals and at other times when requested to do so.

Births, baptisms and the anniversary of deaths still continued to be acknowledged in appropriate ways and Mrs Di Hanna reports on these and other Congregational Care matters at the Congregational Committee meetings.

Mrs Laura Landi, our former Administrative Secretary, resigned at the end of May to commence full time employment. For six years, in addition to "The Chronicle", she produced the copies of the Annual Reports, the Sunday morning Orders of Service and the Sunday service Power Point slides using her training in Marketing and

Communication and IT skills to great effect. Whilst seeking a suitable replacement we were blessed with having the services temporarily of Miss Hannah Shepherd, who had just completed her university studies and was available, to cover the period of vacancy before her permanent employer required her to commence her new duties. Mrs Valeria Pinelli was appointed and commenced as Mrs Landi's replacement as Administrative Secretary in October. The transitions between the three ladies proved to be as seamless as one could wish for and we wish all three well going forward. Mrs Bethan Dillon's knowledge of computing and internet technology has also proved to be invaluable. We thank each of them for their innovations, enthusiasm, cooperation and willingness to readily address all of the challenges as they arose.

Mr Trevor Templeman, the Church Caretaker, continued to attend to the caretaking duties. We are in the fortunate position that our premises, as indicated above, are being widely used. This can be very disruptive to the pre planning of work so Mr Templeman's times on the premises often have to vary. We thank him for his flexibility in this regard and his willingness to continue to do all that was asked of him. I would also express thanks to Miss Janet Scott and Mr Ian Mawhinney for undertaking some of the caretaking tasks during a period when Mr Templeman was unwell.

We also thank Mr David Kennedy for organising and participating with others last October in a thorough cleaning of the sanctuary.

To fulfil all the expectations of our congregation and others using the premises is a mammoth task. It is therefore appropriate that this is shared amongst as many of the congregation that remain fit and able and we are grateful to all who have assisted in any way. Additional help is always welcome so if you consider that you could offer some assistance please don't hesitate to make this known.

In conclusion the members of the Congregational Committee would wish to again record their heartfelt thanks to Rev Barry McCroskery for his chairmanship of the Committee meetings and for his leadership, encouragement, wise counsel, guidance, support and his pastoral care of the congregation.

Brian Henderson  
Honorary Secretary

#### Honorary Treasurer's Report

The generosity of McCracken members continued through 2023. Our Freewill Offering income increased from £93,425.00 to £99,316.20 – an increase of 6.3% while donations to our Building Fund increased by 7.5% to £10,932.00. This latter increase was very welcome as during the autumn we learnt that we would have to replace our boilers at a cost of £25,239.00. The balance funds required to meet this necessary expenditure were realised by selling 2,068 shares in the General Investment Fund of PCI. The total sale proceeds amounted to £25,001.09 including a profit of £10,152.85 over the average purchase cost.

Despite the boilers being out of action for a period our gas bill increased from £12,235.25 to £17,640.25 partly due to there being no government help during 2023.

We are fortunate that the various groups that use our halls generously contribute towards the cost of heat and light and general wear and tear.

The various assessments issued by the Financial Secretary's Office showed a small increase over 2022 while salaries and associated expenses increased by £2,203.56. This relatively small increase was mainly due to the fact that Laura Lundi, who had been our secretary since 2017, resigned in May and her successor, Roberta Pinelli, did not start until October. I wish to thank Laura for her unfailing courtesy and wish her well in her new position. Hannah Sheppard ably covered the intervening period. Roberta, who prefers to be called Valeria, has proved to be a very able and willing successor.

While the amount received for other charities reduced from £37,379.12 to £31,921.56 this was largely due to there being only one Moderator's Appeal in 2023. Once again, the amount contributed to the United Appeal - £7,904.50 – was considerably less than our Target of Honour of £10,457.00.

Donations to our Outreach Fund increased by over 17% enabling the Outreach Committee to continue to support the David Gordon Memorial Hospital at Livingstonia, Malawi, Stephen and Angelina Cowan's work in Tuum, Kenya, Taughmonagh Presbyterian Church, the International Meeting Point, the Leprosy Mission, the Corrymeela Community and the Simon Community.

According to our records there are 203 families claiming a connection with McCracken. Unfortunately, 25% of these families did not contribute to any of our funds during 2023. If these non-contributing families contributed to our funds during 2024 our finances would be in a much healthier position.

As always, I wish to thank the various members who assist in counting the collection each Sunday and especially the team leaders, Anna Scott, Brian Henderson, Ian Mawhinney and Des McFaul. When the new Committee has been elected in 2024, I will prepare an updated rota. Finally, I wish to thank our Independent Examiner, Tim Browne, who completed his examination very quickly and assisted me in completing the daunting Annual Statistical Return required by Presbytery and the Financial Secretary's Office. If any member wishes to see a more detailed Income and Expenditure Account and Statement of Assets and Liabilities please get in touch with me.

Alastair J Rankin  
Honorary Treasurer