

McCRACKEN MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Minister's Report for 2024

Throughout 2024 we had a number of special events to mark 90 years of worship and witness in McCracken Memorial. Our current church building was officially opened and dedicated on Sunday 1st December, 1934, but the first of our anniversary events was in May, with a Family Fun Day in our church grounds followed by an Afternoon Tea. As well as the hall being decorated with various memorabilia from the 1930's, and some old photographs, all those invited were encouraged to wear a hat, which made the day all the more memorable.

Our Events and Hospitality committees were kept busy as later in the year we also had a special celebratory service of thanksgiving on Sunday 13th October with guest speaker, Rev Steve Stockman MBE. The service was very well attended, and Steve preached an inspiring sermon reminding us to give glory to God, and helping us to identify some of the 'keys' from our long history that might help us unlock the future. Afterwards, in the Dowling Hall, our oldest living member, Mr Brian Courtney who was a young teenager when our church was opened, was given the honour of cutting our anniversary cake. Our Clerk gave a lovely speech recognising with affection the contribution of many people over the years in the life of our congregation right up to the present day.

Finally, the celebrations came to a close on the actual anniversary of the opening of our church building, which happened to be also on a Sunday. The choir helped bring the events of that day alive for us as they processed in from the front doors of the church, singing Psalm 122; "I joyed when to the house of God, go up, they said to me." Ninety years previously the members of the Presbytery Commission had led the congregation into the new church as they sang those same words. The Advent celebration of the Lord's Supper was very meaningful as we rededicated ourselves as a congregation to all that our Lord calls us to be and do in the present and the future.

For the season of Lent our neighbours in St Brigid's Parish invited us to participate with them in a series of evenings on the theme of "Care for Our Common Home" based on the highly acclaimed encyclical letter of Pope Francis, "Laudato Si". This message of caring for God's creation comes at a very critical time for the state of our natural world and a matter that should give urgent cause for concern and action for Christians of all traditions. The series of very informative and challenging lectures and workshops was held in the excellent new facilities of Newforge Sports Complex and Event Hub.

Sunday 4th February saw the introduction of a new service of worship on Sunday evenings. These services have been more contemporary in style, and less formal than Sunday mornings, beginning with coffee at the front of the church. The intimate time of worship at 6:30pm on the first and third Sundays in the month has been much appreciated by a small group of our members, and the hope is that it might also provide an easy way for those without any church background to connect with church.

A group of our elders together with our Youth and Family Worker, and myself, continued to work through the Cairn Course, which has been very helpful in addressing some of the challenges of being church in today's rapidly changing culture. The course

is led by a Church of Scotland minister, Rev Alan McWilliam, who has been assisting us to put into practice some of the things we have been learning about church being a community of disciples, about preparing future Christian leaders, and about becoming more missionally minded. Through the year this group of participants meets fortnightly in what we call a 'Huddle Group' to follow through on our commitments.

Through the year we said a fond farewell to our neighbour, Rev Robert Love upon his retirement as minister of Taughmonagh Presbyterian Church. Our two congregations have worked closely throughout the years of Robert's ministry through Beehive Club, various youth outreaches, and joint Bible Study discussions. As well as wishing Robert every blessing for his retirement we greatly hope that the partnership will continue in supporting whatever new initiatives emerge for Taughmonagh in the near future.

I finish by expressing once again my sincere thanks and deepest appreciation to Kirk Session, Congregational Committee, to our Clerk of Session, Congregational Secretary, Honorary Treasurer, Musical Director and Choir, to our Youth and Family Worker, and Church Secretary, and all of you who play your part in bringing glory to God through our worship and service together in McCracken Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Let us always remember that together we ... are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9

Rev Barry McCroskery, Minister

Clerk of Kirk Session's Report for 2024

2024 was a year of anniversary and birthday celebrations. McCracken turned 90 and 3 members turned 100. What a wonderful achievement! The Foundation Stone of McCracken Memorial Presbyterian Church was laid in 1933, and the first Worship Service was held in December 1934 and so we looked forward to a year of celebration for our church. This also brought about a year of change for Elders and the Districts. We had previously agreed to reduce the number of our Districts from 21 to a more manageable 15, some Elders wished to keep their existing Districts, some changed theirs and others moved to be without and serve Kirk Session in other ways. Some Elders joined the newly formed Growth Group, Alistair Dick, Ian Mawhinney, David Scott, Juliet Mills, Barbara James, Janet Scott, Denise Hughes with the Moderator and Clerk in attendance, and also the Pastoral Care Group with Barbara James and myself with others joining at a later stage. The object of this group was to support the Minister with visiting whilst he visited more seriously ill members in need of his services during difficult and challenging times.

Our new Elders attended their first Session meeting in February and were given their Districts, Julie Dick took over Jim Finlay's District 3, Grace Bamford joined Anne Kernohan in District 11 and Philip Courtney joined me in District 12 where he had been Committee member. At that meeting Dr Sarah McClelland gave a very interesting report on Safeguarding of the children in our care and vulnerable adults, and she underlined our continued awareness of our responsibility to those when in our care.

Following an election of Congregational Committee members all active members had been re-elected with two additional, Emma Louise Lowans and Graeme Wilson.

Sadly, at the beginning of the year we learnt of the death of our much loved and highly respected Organist and Director of Music, Mr Desmond Lowans who had been our organist for just over 40 years. Our thoughts and prayers were with Margaret and Emma Louise and all other members who were bereaved during the year.

Bi-monthly evening services commenced in March in a more informal style to Morning worship, with an emphasis on informality. All members were very welcome.

Our 90th Anniversary was celebrated by a Fun Day on 1st June with activities during the day for children and young people and followed by an afternoon tea party with hats. This was very successful with a fine array of hats, many had graced family weddings, and our minister sported one from Indonesia.

The General Assembly had been moved to later in June and we were represented by Robert Lamrock who at our August meeting gave an excellent report on the discussions, and we were grateful for his input covering all aspects of the Assembly even if some were not to our liking.

In the Autumn we looked forward to further celebrations for our anniversary with a special Harvest Thanksgiving Service, when our guest preacher was the Reverend Steve Stockman. His theme was about Looking Forward whilst not forgetting the past which made us what we are to-day, with keys we possess to help us unlock the future and suggested the main one may be humility and through God's mercy we can benefit from our 90 years and press forward into the future. Food for thought and discussed thoroughly at Kirk Session in smaller discussion groups, emphasising humility, looking out for others in church and not taking things for granted, leaving us with much on which to reflect. The service was followed by a light lunch in the Dowling Hall after which a special Anniversary Cake was cut by our oldest member, Mr. Brian Courtney, Son-in-Law of our first Minister, the Reverend Dr. David Dowling. After this I had been asked by the Minister to say a few words and gave a congratulatory speech reminding members of events and members over the years. Here is a flavour of my speech:

"This morning, we were inspired by the Rev. Steve Stockman's thoughts for the future, but I also feel there's time to look back. It is, of course, a great pleasure to see our Minister Emeritus, the Rev Dr David Irwin and the Rev Alex Wimberly here, both left their mark, but the Irwins left a caring friendly happy family who cared for each other and chatted beyond the polite Good Morning. How many of us remember the Rev Dr David Dicker Dowling, when a polite Good Morning was barely whispered, yet he was a man with a huge heart and a much-loved family, we are especially pleased that his Son-in-Law Brian Courtney is here today with his son Pip and his girls. I remember Dicker Dowling well as he and my father Ian McClure were good friends. Then came the Rev Kenneth Harvey, a shy retiring man with a special affinity for the youngest and oldest members of our church family. My years in the choir were so happy from Rob Anderson to Desmond Lowans who called Shirley Laughlin, Pat Farmer, Michele Fetherston and Margaret and myself the naughty corner, chatting and plaguing him. The choir is a family within the church family with many biological

families keeping up the tradition namely the Jim Scott family, the Courtneys, the Anna Scott family and the Moscatos, 'Auntie May' McClure and the Simpson families, the Rankins, the Froggatt families, the Hanna and Scullion families, all stalwarts of the choir at some time and still to-day. Our church family has been blessed with the invaluable Brian Henderson, Finlay and Yvonne Reid, Ian and Pat Dickie, Jim and Gill Finlay, Valerie Douglas, George and Yvonne Jones, Sam and Doreen McKelvey. Many remember Colonel McCreary, Dr Gillies, Ian and Olive Moss, Terry and Denise Fulton, Bob and Maureen Bamford, William Fitch, Bertie Carson and Henry King, the 3 off us became ordained elders on the same day, all bittersweet memories, but many still fondly remembered. How fortunate the loving and caring path set down by David and Maureen is so ably carried on to-day by our own minister Barry and his family, Elyse, Rebecca and Gisell. We are blessed with Barry's caring and sensitive personality, and we have Bethan and her lovely family Bonnie and Brionne looking out for our children.

As I finish this personal wander down my memory lane, many will say you didn't mention the blanks, but they are not forgotten. As is said on Remembrance Sunday they shall grow not old as we who are left grow old but looking round our church family, we can be assured that our church family future is in good hands with so many younger families keeping up the traditions set down by us and our predecessors.

Long live McCracken Memorial Presbyterian Church and may its future continue to be to the Glory of God as it has over the last 90 years "

Whilst we celebrated our church, we were very aware of the future of Taughmonagh Church, with the retirement of the Reverend Robert Love. This was being considered by the South Belfast Presbytery and during the year by its Interim Kirk Session with 2 Elders from Malone and 3 from McCracken, Anne Kernohan, Elizabeth Simpson and myself with the Vacancy Convener. The news that the church was going to close was greeted with great sadness by the small but extremely loyal membership who were encouraged to visit other churches in the area and consider membership elsewhere including McCracken as Taughmonagh had been our daughter church and where they would be very welcome.

Looking forward we were delighted to welcome a new member, Mr Sean Virtue, following his Baptism and full Communicant membership on 17th November. Other new faces are being seen regularly now on Sundays, and we look forward to a growing, albeit slowly, congregation.

On 1st December we had our final act of our Anniversary year when we had a Service of Thanksgiving and Remembrance very fittingly with our Advent Communion Service. The service reflected the first service on the same date in 1934 with the Minister and choir processing into the church and some of the same psalms and hymns being sung. Our Christmas services were well attended and enjoyed by all, and thanks are due to our Musical Director, Richard Brown and the Choir, with a delightful number of young members whose singing enhances our Sunday services. Also thank you to Andrew Skelly who plays the organ when Richard is away.

The Women's Bible Study has been in existence for over thirty years and a sincere thank you goes to all who have been involved since it started, the members and the leaders and organisers.

Our thanks are due to our Congregational Committee Secretary, Brian Henderson, who works tirelessly in all areas of our church life, Alastair Rankin, our most conscientious and dedicated Honorary Treasurer and Mervyn Hughes, the efficient Property Convener. Thanks are also due to Mrs Valeria Pinelli, our very approachable Church Secretary, Ivor Kinghan who is always on hand to help around the church when needed and Trevor Templeman our caretaker. However special thanks go to those who take care of our young people, our Sunday School Superintendent, Juliet Mills, our Youth Worker, Bethan Dillon, and David Scott, the Young People's Elder, Pip Courtney and Anna Scott with Babies and Toddlers, and all those who help in all these areas. To all these helpers and others too many to mention we are extremely grateful.

Finally, to our Minister, the Reverend Barry McCroskery whose dedication and devotion to his congregation is boundless. He is without exception a most caring and devoted minister, who is always ready to answer a call for help even if it has not been requested having the ability to recognise when a helping hand is needed. He is most approachable and empathetic, sharing the joys and sorrows of his flock, We thank God for giving us a most dedicated, encouraging and supportive minister who with his wife Elsy and daughters Rebecca and Gisell are a greatly appreciated Manse family.

To God be the Glory.

Rosemary E C Simpson, Clerk of Kirk Session

Secretary of Congregational Committee's Report

At the first meeting of the year held on 23rd January the Annual Accounts for 2023 and 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. During the period of the pandemic when actual meetings were prohibited the Honorary Treasurer circulated electronically at the end of each month his comments on the state of the church finances and this practice continues.

We as a congregation are greatly indebted to Mr Alastair Rankin for the thoroughness with which he oversees and attends to our congregation'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 that arose over the past year. Having had to replace the gas boilers and some of the windows in the Youth Centre over the previous two years the repairs carried out over the last twelve months have been of a lesser nature and these have been reported on in the Property Convenor's report that appears elsewhere in this document. 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. Ivor also transported the Christmas trees after the festive season to the local recycling centre. The Christmas trees were put in place by members of the gardening team with the tree in front of the church also decorated by them whilst the one in the sanctuary was decorated by those that regularly meet in the Axis study group – tasks that have been accepted as the norm by both groups and we are very grateful for their doing so..

During the year and following the election of members to serve for a period of up to three years on the Congregational Committee we welcomed Miss Emma Lowans and Mr Graeme Wilson to their first meetings. The election provided an opportunity to review the number of Districts. As a consequence it was considered that several of the previous smaller Districts could be amalgamated with others thereby reducing the number.

On Sunday 4th February the Annual Congregational Lunch was held in the Harlequins Rugby Club pavilion. This very enjoyable occasion was as usual attended by a pleasing number of the congregation. In May there was the Christian Aid Breakfast that was well attended and raised £1,700 for this charity. On the first Saturday in June as part of the 90th Anniversary celebrations a lunchtime barbeque and children's festivities attracted a good turnout. These activities overlapped with an afternoon Tea Party where those attending were encouraged to wear hats that would be symbolic of the period being celebrated. Children's festivities also took place following the Sunday morning worship the next day.

The annual Harvest Thanksgiving Service was held on 13th October when Rev Steve Stockman was the visiting preacher. This was in part in recognition that he had been the Convenor of the Vacancy prior to the installation of Rev Barry McCroskery. On this occasion the service was followed by a finger buffet lunch organised by the Hospitality Committee in the Dowling Hall to further celebrate the 90th anniversary. It was especially pleasing that Mr Brian Courtney, son in law of McCracken's first minister Rev Dr David Dowling, was able to be present and cut an anniversary cake.

The Advent Communion Service held on 1st December happened to coincide with the date of the first service in the church building 90 years previously. To mark the anniversary the choir processed down the centre aisle at the commencement of the service, as was done on the occasion of the first service in the new church building.

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. During the year an informal form of worship has also been taking place on the first and third Sundays in the month with a hope that this might prove appealing to a younger group of worshippers.

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 continue to meet 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. Also the Belfast Philharmonic Society has on a number of occasions met in the church building for rehearsals.

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

The Church's facilities were made available on 12th July to those participating in or watching the parade and as a consequence of the sale of refreshments and voluntary donations received in appreciation for the use of the facilities for car parking and comfort breaks more than £780 was raised for church funds.

The Hospitality Committee held a Macmillan fund raising Coffee Morning on Friday 27th September in the Dowling Hall which raised £1,432.50.

Rev. Alex Wimberly. our former minister, requested permission to hold a fund raising Concert for Corrymeela featuring the Ballyclare Male Voice Choir and Miss Alexandra Dick, in the church on Friday 25th October. This was willingly agreed to and proved to be well attended and much enjoyed by all present.

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. The Congregational Committee readily endorsed the choir's suggestion that the offering at the Candle Light service be donated to the NI Chest Heart and Stroke charity and on the evening of the service £1055 was received.

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 Valeria Pinelli continues as Administrative Secretary Many of you by now will have met her and will no doubt agree that she is a great asset. In addition to the range of usual secretarial duties she produces the editions of "The Chronicle", the copies of the Annual Reports, the Sunday morning Orders of Service and the Sunday service Power Point slides using her IT skills to great effect. Mrs Bethan Dillon's knowledge of computing and internet technology has also proved to be invaluable. We thank both 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 limits his working times and can be very disruptive to the pre planning of work so his 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.

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

To fulfil all the expectations of our congregation and the 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,
Congregational Committee

Honorary Treasurer's Report for 2024

2024 was a disappointing year from a Freewill Offering point of view as receipts were lower than in 2023 though the total amount received by way of gift aid was higher due to our income in 2023 being higher than in 2022. The bulk of gift aid receipts from HMRC are based on receipts during the last nine months of the previous year.

Income from the organisations which use our halls increased by £1,086.89 but the amount paid in respect of our utility bills increased by 3,749.36. As a result, the Committee has increased the charges for using our facilities with effect from 1 September 204.

Our investment income increased by £1,394.66 to £9,483.00 despite having had to realise just over £20,000 from our PCI General Investment Fund holding in order to provide sufficient cash funds to pay our bills. This sale realised a gain of £9,514.61 over cost.

Assessments made by the Financial Secretary's Office in Assembly Buildings increased by £1,206.25 while our Minister's stipend and other salaries increased by £2,505.74 to £109,112.18. Our General Receipts and Payments showed an overall loss of £7,010.62 but if we ignore the gain referred to above, the loss was £16,525.23. We cannot continue making a loss of this magnitude which is similar to the loss in 2023.

Contributions to our Building Fund showed a slight increase over 2023 while expenditure was considerably reduced from £34,416.71 to £5,947.83 with the result that our Building Fund reserves have increased from £142.16 to £8,096.17.

Donations received for others showed a small increase over 2023 though receipts for the United Appeal totalling £8,342.08 while being £437.58 more than in 2023 were £1,531.92 short of our Target of Honour of £9,874.00. I am aware that several members no longer contribute to the United Appeal as their means of protesting against the decisions taken by the General Assembly in 2018 to sever our links with the Church of Scotland and other related matters.

The income available for distribution by the Outreach Committee increased slightly enabling the Committee to increase the amount given to various worthy causes from £7,887.00 to £8,810.00.

As at 31 December 2024 we had a total of £25,782.92 in the bank and our investment with the PCI General Investment Fund had a valuation of £400,914.82. We had 193 families associated with the Congregation with 195 individuals aged 65 and over, 176 aged 18 to 64 46 aged under 18 and 13 members who have declined to provide their date of birth. During 2024, 37 families did not use their Freewill Offering envelopes.

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, who have the added responsibility of lodging each collection in the Ulster Bank which has been made more difficult by the closure of our branch at University Road. Finally, I wish to thank Tim Browne who completed his independent examination very quickly.

If any member wishes to see a more detailed set of accounts, please get in touch with me.

Alastair J Rankin, Honorary Treasurer