

A Pastoral Letter

Letterkenny
Co. Donegal
25th March 2020

Dear friends across the denomination

These are strange and bewildering times in which we live. How suddenly our world has been brought to a standstill by Covid-19. Drastic measures have had to be taken and everyone's life has been radically impacted. We have no sense of what the long term outcomes will be personally, socially, emotionally, economically, or in a host of other areas.

Who would have thought that that which we love to do so much—to physically gather together to worship and to fellowship—would be something we would have to forego for a time for the welfare of each other and society. It deeply grieves ministers and elders to have to have taken these sorts of decisions. We feel like the Psalmist *"My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD"* (Psalm 84:2)

Yet despite all the uncertainty, we can be certain that Christ is head over all things, including this pandemic, *for the sake of the church* (Eph. 1:22). This pandemic has not caught him unawares, nor will it exhaust his supplies of grace.

When I chose as my theme for Synod's devotions last June "The Unlikely Ways of God" I had no concept of what lay ahead. We thought on how God often works in ways that are contrary to the world, contrary to perceived wisdom, and even contrary in appearance to the very goals at which he is aiming at. Yet God has a track record of going about his work in the unlikeliest of ways. So in the midst of these strange times let us expect God to work in unlikely ways.

I long for us to come out of this testing time stronger as individuals, stronger as churches, and stronger as a denomination, recounting how God has become more precious to us, and how we have seen God at work in us, in our families and in our communities.

Let me urge each of you to respond in five ways:

- to Trust
- to Pray
- to Grow
- to Care
- to Witness

A Call to Trust

We live in a world which has had its foundations rocked, where people are deeply afraid. Fear is natural, but we can bring something supernatural to our fear—faith. The old Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren said, "Fear, then, is the opportunity for faith, and faith is fear transformed by... calling to mind the strength of God and betaking ourselves thereto."

Let us turn our eyes from the things which cause us to fear, and turn them to the God who stands at the Cross, where his love and commitment to our good are written in the blood of his Son.

Our world needs to see that we have a hope that nothing, not even the uncertainties of Covid-19, nor the inside of an Intensive Care Unit, can take away—for we can say with Moses, *“But the LORD your God turned the curse into a blessing for you because the LORD your God loves you”* (Deut 23:5).

Let us also trust him for the spread of the gospel. Since Christ is head over all things for the good of the church—let us expect, pray, and work that the gospel will spread through this, and that there will be more people coming to our churches when we regather once this is over.

[A Call to Prayer](#)

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” Col 4:2

How often I have said to myself that I would love to pray more, but time is eaten up by other things. Now we have a golden opportunity to grow in our prayer lives.

Let our prayers be marked by

- a growing worship of our Triune God
- a searching of our own hearts and a confessing of our sins
- a pleading for our nations that they would turn to God in repentance and faith. That God will use the proclamation of his word in many different ways to build his church.
- an urgent supplication for those sick and ill, those involved in treating them and keeping hospitals and medical practices running, those tracing contacts, those involved in keeping essential services running (farmers, shop-keepers, hauliers), for those in government, the vulnerable and afraid, the elderly in nursing homes or isolated in their own homes, etc

[Day of Prayer](#)

But this must be bigger than simply our own prayer lives. For that reason I am calling on all members and adherents and whomever may wish to join us to set apart **Thursday 2nd April as a denominational Day of Prayer and Fasting** for the state of the Church, the Nation and the World.

[A Call to Grow](#)

“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil...” Eph 5:16

This is a time when many of us have time. Let us aim to come out of this stronger in our walk with God than when we started it. There are many resources being made available. Let us take time to read, watch, listen, and to meditate on God’s word.

There are many things you could do—from the pile of unread books, to working through each occurrence of a phrase/theme from scripture (eg. Do not fear, But God, He is able, or

pride), to watching some of the series of free teaching available from Ligonier and other places.

I wish to make a special plea to our young people—these days are a gift to you. Use these days to deepen your walk with God, to prepare yourself further for living in this world, to be ready to witness to your friends who will have many questions. And for those of you who haven't yet put your trust in Christ—now is the time to consider seriously where you will spend eternity.

A Call to Care

“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” Gal 6:2

This is an opportunity to think creatively about or fellowship within our congregations. Let's make sure that we don't leave anyone behind—not everyone is digitally connected, and those that aren't are often the most isolated in this situation.

It is also an opportunity to care for our communities. Are there ways we can be involved, picking up shopping, phoning those who are alone? Christians have the highest example and greatest command to love our neighbour—we should be known as the most caring.

A Call to Witness

The good news of Jesus is always needed and relevant but people around us are more aware than usual that they are not as invincible as they once thought.

Let us make the most of every opportunity to speak with compassionate grace seasoned with gospel salt. Let us be courageous, offering ourselves for conversation, Bible study and prayer.

It is my great desire and longing that when we gather after this, that there will be new people coming to our churches, people who have come to faith through our witness in all its forms.

Finally, may you know God's care and provision for you and your families in these days ahead. Remember Him who said, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* (2 Cor 12:9)

And remembering that Paul wrote these words from isolation in prison while facing death: *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Phil 4:4-7)

Every blessing in Christ,

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