

30 August 2020

Dear friends,

I never cease to be amazed by the resourcefulness of human beings when faced with challenges, and I include church folk in this. My recent visit to my home country of Northern Ireland has given me two examples of such ingenuity.

On the North Coast, near the Giant's Causeway, in the seaside resort of Portrush, we encountered an energetic form of church. We spent an afternoon watching some of the younger members of my Irish family learning to surf. This was as part of "The Surf Project" which is being run by the Methodist Church in Ireland. Over four weeks in the summer children from six years up can choose a morning or an afternoon to meet at the Methodist church, change into wet suits, jump on and off boards in the sea, and once dry again have bible stories and games in the church building. The motto of this project is *"Living life to the full" We seek to enhance personal, social and spiritual welfare through surfing.* This group has banners with their emblem (see below) which is a traditional sign for the Trinity with three triangles connected by a circle - in the middle of which they have introduced a wave. I love this intermingling of the old and the new. It makes me wonder what new look we might give our banners and our activities.



My second example of church ingenuity comes from Downhill Demense, again on the Irish North Coast. Here in the 1700s elaborate buildings were commissioned by Frederick Hervey when he became Bishop of Derry. A round building called the Mussenden Temple still stands, perched on the edge of cliffs, high above the Atlantic. This classical building is a copy of the Temple of Vesta from Tivoli in Italy. Lord Bristol, as he became, loved to travel and gave his name to the chain of Bristol hotels. He used this rotanda as his library but interestingly he let his catholic servants have the basement or crypt for their services and paid the wages of a priest for them. I have very mixed feelings about these buildings. On the one hand, I think it was immoral of the bishop to create lavish buildings at a time and place when there was so much poverty. However, I have read that he spoke of commissioning this building in part to create employment for the poor people of his district. In addition to this good intention,

Lord Bristol also showed a largeness of heart in providing for his Roman Catholic workers. This was particularly notable in a country that has often bred antagonism between church denominations. So people can be endlessly surprising. Again this makes me wonder what new uses for our buildings we might find and what projects we could undertake to help boost employment and help our communities at this pinch point?

All the churches in our Circuit have already had to be creative and innovative in our ways of being church since the current pandemic began. We have kept our church links through posted and emailed services, messages and phone calls and also by "streaming" services through social media platforms and holding services and meetings through the electronic platform Zoom. Not forgetting the messages and services on the Circuit website!

Recently in our churches we have been making decisions as to what activities we will start offering back in our church buildings. These activities will look very different to anything we have done in our buildings before all this started. There will be new procedures we have to put in place, as directed by the government to minimise the risks from the COVID-19 virus. When we come to worship services we will all have to wear masks, and to keep the specified distance from anyone not in our household. We will not be able to stay around inside our buildings for conversation and services will have to be shorter, with the government recommending 30 minutes and no communal singing! Yet, even so many of us are looking forward to seeing our friends and gathering together to help connect with God and each other. Though how we can do things will have changed, I believe that we will still be able to know the Spirit of God flowing between us and have encouragement to reach out to help our neighbours and community.

I finish with a prayer from Psalm 33 verse 22

"May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you." (NIV)

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