

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour, if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up”. (Ecclesiastes 4:9,10).

In one of Rev Gamble’s sermon series in 2024, the Teacher (most likely Solomon) reminds us of the significant benefits of having others run the race of life with us. In setting forth the principle of partnership, Solomon articulates the advantages of joint effort and mutual toil, the importance of having a companion during times of difficulty, for warmth and protection when under threat or danger. With all our weaknesses and frailties, we need the strong support and security of a community of believers in Jesus – the church.

In 2024, Immanuel embarked on a new partnership with EMF when we agreed to a (minimum) 5 year commitment to support a little church in Jyvaskyla in Finland under the ministry of Eelis Halmemies. This decision was taken after Eelis had preached in Immanuel and met separately with the elders to share something of the work of the gospel and challenges of a being a small, reformed church in a country with an historic Lutheran tradition but is now increasingly secular.

At the end of November, we were pleased to pass on a financial contribution to EMF, raised directly from the giving from the congregation. However, the partnership is about much more than money. We pray for each other, we have exchanged videos to introduce each other, we share updates on zoom calls and our Minister was able to make a short personal visit to Finland during his summer holidays. A different country, a different culture but the same gospel and we look forward to seeing the partnership develop further in the coming years.

A highlight for the congregation in 2024 came in December with the service of Ordination and Installation of Kevin Harvey as an Elder of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in the Presbytery of North Belfast. We pray that Kevin will know God’s guiding hand as he takes up these new responsibilities and joins the Kirk Session in the spiritual leadership of this congregation.

The Kirk Session’s agenda in 2024 was again busy and varied.

Following a report from the Mission Standing Committee, the Presbytery requested the Kirk Session to complete a detailed “7p’s” questionnaire looking at all aspects of congregational life and further engagement, including identifying areas for action, is anticipated in early 2025. At a PCI denominational level, discussions are ongoing on a “reconfiguration of ministry” in response to the shifting trends both within and outside the church.

Following a consultation, the Kirk Session approved the earlier starting time of 6.30pm for the evening service during the winter months with the initial feedback broadly favourable. Average attendance is largely unchanged and the YF is able to start their meeting a little earlier. Please pray for our young people and for their protection in these days of temptation and social media.

In early 2024, permission was granted to Mr Neil Cranston to access our records for the purposes of copying for the North of Ireland Family History Society. The Kirk Session also took the opportunity to review and update our Child Protection Policy and introduce some changes to the procedures for the appointment of organisation leaders.

Some members of Kirk Session met with organisation leaders for an end-of-year debrief in June when we heard of encouragements, blessings and disappointments from the past year. Some leaders report seeing modest growth in numbers, some are stable but others commented on

the difficulty of retaining young people given the many competing attractions in the area. The growing numbers of children and young people with more complex needs and from different backgrounds was also a common theme.

The Kirk Session would again express our appreciation to Rev Colin Gamble for his faithful ministry and pastoral visitation during 2024. We give thanks for those who have recovered after a period in hospital and we continue to remember in prayer all who are bereaved and those with short and long-term health conditions, some of whom are scheduled to have surgery in 2025. We thank the members of the Caring Team who look in on others with friendship and support, particularly those who are sorrowing and lonely.

During periods of leave, we were again pleased to welcome back the Rev Frank McKeown to conduct worship.

In 2024, the Kirk Session had extensive engagement with solicitors with regard to the receipt of a rather unusual bequest from the Trust Estates of JH and EAM Hutchinson. As a consequence, the Kirk Session approved the appointment of Mr Simon Houston, Mr Kevin Harvey and Mr Alan Bridle as new Trustees of this estate on behalf of the congregation. It is hoped that the administrative work will be completed in early 2025 and the legal transfer of Trustees will be executed.

The Kirk Session would again also say a big “thank you” to all the leaders and helpers in our organisations over the past year for their dedicated service. We must pray for continued wisdom and patience, particularly as the work among children and youths is increasingly difficult. Our sincere gratitude also goes to the church secretary, treasurer and designated person for all of their work in 2024 and to the musicians, those who operate the sound desk and to numerous others who work quietly in the background. As Clerk, I would offer my personal thanks again to Russell Coates for his invaluable assistance during the year.

In general, average attendance numbers at morning and evening worship and midweek prayer meeting are relatively steady although clearly much lower than in the past. There is always room for more. The Kirk Session would again encourage the congregation to take every opportunity to gather together for times of corporate worship and prayer.

We were again very pleased to have special choirs leading the worship at both the Harvest and Christmas services and this was enjoyed by all. Our thanks to Karen Fitzsimons for arranging and leading and to all the enthusiastic members who participated. The occasional “songs of praise” after the evening service were also well received and also provided an opportunity to celebrate important anniversaries with some of our members.

At Easter, we were pleased to join again with our friends at West Kirk and Woodvale in sharing Good Friday and Easter Sunday evening services and during the year we also heard more about PCI’s new work in West Belfast with the Rev David Moore. We were also reminded by David Surgenor from the Vine Centre of the many addictions and social ills within our own district and the much-needed practical and spiritual support being provided. Immanuel’s foodbank on Monday afternoons continues to report increased demand and we thank all who give of their time and resources to help with this.

In the summer, the outreach programme continued with open-air meetings in May and door-to-door visitation in late August. Door-drops of gospel tracts again took place at Easter and Christmas and we appreciate all who took part and helped. The very limited response on door-

steps has given the Kirk Session cause to reflect and to consider prioritising the homes where we already have some family connection through the organisations or, who live in the immediate vicinity of the church.

In this context, we are planning a slightly different morning service in early new year to which families and neighbours will be invited, with a focus on the basics of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. In 2025, Immanuel will also be a host venue for one of the North Belfast Presbytery services while a revamp of the church website is also planned.

In the 2023 report we heard the sad news that Jersey Street City Mission – with whom we have had a long and important association – was closing. During 2024, it was pleasing to hear that outreach from the hall in Jersey Street was to resume in a new format as the Jersey Street Hub.

At the time of writing, 2025 stretches out ahead of us with myriad uncertainties. It may be wise to conclude by returning to the book of Ecclesiastes - despite what may be perceived as a rather bleak and pessimistic outlook that everything is meaningless, the Teacher still reveals glimmers of hope and goodness. As we journey this road of discipleship, we're not alone. Christ walks with us and will deliver us safely to His Father's home. Ultimately, the great truth of Ecclesiastes lies in the acknowledgment of God's ever-present hand on our lives and that the key to life is not in life itself.

***“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13,14)***