

Dear friend,

As I sit down to write my annual letter to the congregation of First Antrim I find it hard to believe that as a family we have been among you for almost four years. This time has undoubtedly been a time of transition for both the congregation and for the Parker family. For us it has meant following the Lord's leading to a congregation with many differences from the ones we left. For the congregation of First it has meant following the Lord's leading in calling a teaching elder who is not a carbon copy of the Very Rev. Dr. John Dixon! Esther, Louise, William, Rachel, Abigail and I have greatly appreciated your prayers and practical demonstrations of kindness, consideration and love over these years of transition and want you to know that they have been a source of great blessing to us all. Be assured that you have been in our thoughts and prayers as well.

It has been good to welcome Mr Philip McClelland to the family of First as our student assistant for the church year 2012-2013. Philip is no stranger to the congregation having been our summer assistant in 2011 and 2012. I know many have benefitted not only from his pulpit ministry but also from his pastoral care. We look forward to Philip becoming full-time assistant from summer 2013 until, God willing, he is called to be teaching elder in another congregation. I continue to be grateful for the ministry of our part-time pastoral visitor, Rev. Dr. Crawford Ballentine, whose main area of responsibility is the pastoral care of First Antrim folk who are admitted to the Antrim Area Hospital, and for the ministry of Rosemary Spiers, our full-time Deaconess, who, in exercising her wide-ranging pastoral responsibilities, has been a blessing to many in the congregation, Please pray for us as a ministry team as we seek to serve you. We meet each Monday morning in the Church Library to report, plan and pray. I must also express gratitude for the ministry of the Church Administrator, Mrs Heather McKelvie, as she has been a tremendous help to all on the ministry team.

On the subject of **pastoral care**, you perhaps remember that in my September 2011 letter I asked you to pray for the Kirk Session as we considered some models of pastoral care that had been proposed by the Panel on Pastoral Care, and commended for use throughout the Church at the 2011 General Assembly. Over the past sixteen months the Kirk Session has been progressing this matter with a view to enhancing and improving the pastoral care we provide. Districts are in the process of being reconfigured so that elders will have a more manageable 'flock' to pastor and so be more able to fulfil the Apostle Paul's exhortation to church elders to, Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28). More specific details of this district re-configuration will be communicated in due course. I would ask you to continue to pray for the Kirk Session concerning this particular matter. I also commend to your prayers our new Clerk of Session, Mr Lyle Creighton, and our new Deputy Clerk of Session, Mr Harry Latimer, as they settle into these roles. I am sure you will all agree with me that we are thankful to God for the dedicated and sacrificial service of our previous Clerk of Session, the late Mr Ivan Gillespie, who was called home to be with his Lord and Saviour after a short illness in October 2012.

I also asked you to pray, in my last congregational letter, about the possibility of First Antrim becoming a **Christians Against Poverty (CAP)** centre where Christian love could be demonstrated by offering debt management counselling and the giving of practical help to those in need. We believe that the Lord did indeed guide us to work alongside Greystone Road Presbyterian Church in CAP ministry and the Antrim CAP Centre was officially launched in September 2012 when Helen Johnston, the then Director of Centre Development of CAP UK, addressed the congregations of First Antrim and Greystone Road at a united gathering for public worship in Greystone Road meeting house. I commend to your prayers the Centre manager, Mr Robert Jones (Greystone Road) and Debt Coaches, Mr Angus Cuthbert and Mrs Michelle McCabe (First Antrim), along with the many Befrienders involved in this ministry. We are already aware that many folk have been helped practically and spiritually, with some individuals coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The **Church Property Review Team (CPRT)** has done a sterling job in keeping the congregation up to speed regarding the current state and condition of our meeting house. You will recall that at a congregational meeting in early October 2012 the proposal was brought to the congregation that we should progress the revised option 4 [a new build behind the existing façade] to planning approval stage. The details were clearly explained to us in an excellent booklet produced by the CPRT and the congregation voted to accept the proposal. Needless to say, I encourage you all to be much in prayer that the Lord will continue to lead and guide us as we move forward on this big issue. In the near future I am thinking of preaching a series of sermons on the books of Haggai or Nehemiah (or both!) as they have much to say to God's people concerning preparation for, and behaviour during, major building projects. This will obviously mean breaking into the series on the exposition of the Gospel of Luke, but in the providence of God and the will of God I will do that.

The long established **Small Groups Ministry** at First Antrim finds itself in a bit of a hiatus at the moment. Regular united midweeks have been working well since October and many folk have shared how they are benefitting from studying an overview of the Bible in the series The Big Picture. The series will be completed, God willing, over the next few months but the Kirk Session would covet your prayers as to the way forward concerning our Small Group Ministry, as we think about the Church Year 2013-2014.

It has been encouraging to hear much positive feedback on the recent change of format to our monthly **TOGETHER services**. I trust that these times of corporate worship will be to the glory of God and to the spiritual benefit of all who attend. It has also been a real joy to hear of a number of folk connected to the congregation who have experienced new birth and conversion as they have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and also to observe spiritual growth in disciples of Jesus in First. I also trust that those who were able to attend our Annual Congregational Meeting at the end of March 2012 (although circumstances prevented any of the Parkers from being there) not only enjoyed the meal but, like the event the previous year, felt better informed as a result of hearing short reports covering different aspects of congregational life in First Antrim.

As far as my pulpit ministry goes, you know that I attach great importance to it, being convinced that my main calling has always been to teach and preach the full Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I plan, God willing, on Lord's Day mornings to **continue an exposition of the Gospel of Luke** before breaking into it with a **short series on pastoral care** (as we think about implementing the new district reconfigurations referred to above) then a **longer series on Haggai/Nehemiah** (as we move, God willing, beyond planning approval stage of our proposed major building project). On Lord's Day evenings I will complete the series on Daniel before, perhaps, turning to a another Old Testament book, possibly Zechariah which has many things to say to God's people who live in days when there is much discouragement all around. As I have said in previous letters, I covet your prayers as I seek to plan my preaching and to fulfil God's calling to teach and preach in First Antrim, and, can I assure you that I am always available, after either of the Lord's Day services or by arrangement at another time, to chat about pastoral issues or concerns you might have as well as to answer any questions you have.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, once wrote, It concerns us to know the purposes we seek in life, for then, like archers aiming at a definite mark, we shall be more likely to attain what we want. There have been many changes in First over the past five or so years, and, as we can see, there are many potential changes looming ahead. Most of us find it difficult to manage change and even God's people can become so disorientated that we lose sight of our definite mark and the purposes we should seek in life. What will help us not become disorientated as we manage change? What will help us not lose sight of our definite purpose in life as, as disciples of Jesus, we endeavour to manage change? The answer is found in obedience to the words of the writer to the Hebrews; **Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God** (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Managing change may be difficult but it is made easier when we fix our eyes on Jesus and seek to honour Him. May God, for His glory, give us grace to do so.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Your friend and minister,

Rev. Dr. Bill Parker