



**The Rev. Robert E. Alexander
(1943 – 1975)**



The Rev. Robert E. Alexander



The Reverend Robert E. Alexander : A Personal Remembrance

It is always a joy to be back in Fitzroy. So let me begin by thanking Ken for the excellent idea of highlighting the history of Fitzroy through this series of addresses on the different ministries across the years – and thank you, Ken, for including me among your guest preachers, and for the warmth of your welcome here today.

This sermon will be somewhat different from those which have gone before it, in that each of them has been a careful historical analysis of a figure of the past and of the period of history in which they exercised their respective ministries. I will be speaking today of someone too recent to acquire that kind of treatment – for many of you knew Mr Alexander. Quite a few of us sat under his ministry, and had our lives immensely enriched and influenced for good by the person he was, and the ministry he exercised here from 1943 until his retirement in 1975, and indeed right up to his death in 1995.

I came up to Queen's in 1953, and I attended a pre-term event organised by what was then called the Bible Union. There I met Alan Flavelle, by then a graduate, and student at Assembly's College as we then called it. He was also student assistant here in Fitzroy, and we became very good friends. So I quickly became aware of Mr Alexander, and I knew the high regard in which he was held by many of his students. I first stood in the pulpit of Fitzroy at a student Day of Prayer Service back in 1954. I recall that on one of the rare Sundays that I stayed in Belfast for the weekend coming to Church here with a fellow-student called Bill Campbell. As we came in through the door, he spotted Joy Alexander in the porch, and said to her, "*Where is the most comfortable seat in the house?*". Quick as a flash, she replied, "*In the pulpit.*" I little thought, that day, that I would soon be sharing it Sunday by Sunday with the Rev. R. E. Alexander.



Not long after that, Mr Alexander sought me out. Alan Flavelle had moved on to Mourne, and Mr Alexander had been without an Assistant for a year. I was about to graduate from Queen's. He asked me if I would be interested in coming to him – and would I be willing to take an evening service to give the Kirk Session a chance to hear me. I readily agreed, took the most nerve-wracking service of my life, and was duly invited to become R. E. Alexander's student assistant for the three years of my college course at Assembly's College, as was the custom of those days. It was the start of a long and happy partnership for me.



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It so happened when my college years were over, the General Assembly decided that from then on assistants would be ordained, and after six months as a licentiate, would normally stay for two more years before seeking a charge of their own. In actual fact, I stayed longer than that – from October 1957 until May 1964. But enough about me.

Those years in Fitzroy Avenue were the best training any future minister could have had – partly because of the unique congregation that Fitzroy has always been, but even more so because of the privilege of getting to know, and working with, the Rev. R. E. Alexander.

Background

Robert Ernest Alexander was born on 4th December 1911 in Broadlea, near Raphoe, in County Donegal. His father, William Alexander, a descendent of one of the early Presbyterian settlers in the Laggan Valley district of County Donegal, was Clerk of Session in Ballylennon Presbyterian Church. His mother, Jeannie McIlwaine, came from Belfast, where she was a teacher and a musician. They met when William Alexander came up to be a representative elder at the General Assembly.



When he brought his bride back to Broadlea, the old family home for generations, bonfires were lit on the surrounding hills to welcome her.

Brought up with such a heritage of faith around him, it was not surprising that young Roy came to faith in Christ in his early teens, and soon afterwards heard God's call to the ministry, to the great delight of his parents.



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Education and Early Ministry



Magee College, Londonderry



Trinity College, Dublin



Presbyterian (Assembly's) College



St. Enoch's Church (Carlisle Circus)

He entered Magee College, in Derry, where one of his grand-daughters is now a professor, and graduated in Arts from Trinity College, Dublin in 1934. He completed his remaining two years of theology at Assembly's College and served his assistantship at St. Enoch's during the ministry of the Rev. Gordon Young, about whom he always spoke with admiration and affection. There was something of the pioneer about this quiet and gracious young man from Donegal. During those early years, he conducted one or two missions for boys and girls, and he also travelled over to Stranraer on a number of week-ends to supply one of the pulpits there.

On 31st May 1936, he was licensed by the Presbytery of Raphoe and, less than a year later, he was ordained and installed as Minister of Trinity Church, Ahoghill on 21st April 1937. On 29th July 1938, he married Miss Mildred Alexander, B Sc, a young teacher from Cookstown, whom he had met at the Portstewart Convention. In due course they became the proud parents of Joy and Daphne. Their ministry in Ahoghill was a very happy one, and made a deep impression on that quintessentially Presbyterian village, with its three strong congregations.





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Fitzroy : The Early Years



When the time came for him to answer the call to Fitzroy Avenue, one of his office bearers said to him, “*I would seek the Lord’s mind on it, but I wouldna go.*” Thankfully, he did not take that elder’s advice. He accepted the call, and was installed in this prestigious congregation in succession to the Very Rev. Dr. J B Woodburn on 11th May 1943. One of his friends quipped, “*Fitzroy exactly fits Roy!*”

But his private papers present a very different picture, portraying this quiet and self-effacing man besieged by self-doubt, feeling ill at ease, and deeply inadequate for such a task. Yet the God who had called him here led his steps, and brought peace to his troubled heart. He also equipped him to exercise an outstanding and fruitful ministry in this place.

From the outset, the warm humanity and gentle godliness of Roy and Mildred Alexander won the hearts of their congregation, and of those who were to link up with it in the years ahead. 1943 was, literally and figuratively, a dark time for Britain, and for Belfast. Many members of Fitzroy were away playing their part in the war. One of the first things that Mr Alexander did was to visit their families, and then to write a personal letter to each one of them. It was an inspired idea. As well as being pastorally sensitive, it bound individuals and families to him, and became a legend among the many legends of the congregation. Pastoral visiting was indeed something of a nightmare in those war-time years, stumbling around in the black-out. On at least one occasion, Mr Alexander bore the scars of walking slap into one of the air-raid shelters that stood at the end of almost every street.

As early as 3rd October 1944, a Presbytery Visitation noted that the number on the Communion Roll and in attendance had increased considerably, and that no less than twenty-two young people had been admitted to the Lord’s Table for the first time. The report went on to say,

“Mr Alexander discharges all his duties with exemplary fidelity and acceptance, and has gained the respect and confidence of his people by his character and work.”

Such tangible growth was no mere flash in the pan – it was to be steadily maintained and increased in the years ahead.



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Fitzroy : The Post-War Years

On 19th April 1949, Special Services were held to mark the 75th anniversary of the opening of the present buildings, and to mark the occasion Mr Alexander wrote the little book, ***Fitzroy Avenue Presbyterian Church – Past and Present***. It remains a valuable record of the congregation's story until that time, and reveals Mr Alexander's ability to research the past and to write the story well.

It was Alan Flavelle, I think, who nicknamed him "The Quiet Man". But if he was quiet – a modest and gracious man – he was also wise and strong and he had a wonderful sense of humour.



He valued his friendships and never forgot his friends. Above all, behind that quiet exterior there was a warm and compassionate person who loved his people deeply. There was also an able mind and a well-earthed approach to every aspect of ministry. He had "*the common touch*." He got alongside his people, young and old, and not only in the Church, but also in the City Mission Hall in McClure Street, in the 9th Boys Brigade Company and its Old Boys events and Bible Class, in the Bowling Club, and other Church organisations. He was especially involved in an innovative work amongst young marrieds called "The Mariners" – an idea which I think he had picked up in the United States. Roy loved to travel, especially to America and the Holy Land, and many a story from his travels was ploughed back into his sermons. Indeed, there was a little gentle fun poked at his love of showing his Holy Land slides! Folk had a quiet smile, too, at some of his oft-repeated phrases, such as, "*Owing to the inclemency of the weather ...*"



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Fitzroy Avenue Parish

What sort of area was this in the 1940s and '50s and '60s when his ministry was at its height? The dignified terraces and densely packed streets of Belfast's university quarter were undergoing rapid change. In those days about one third of our 620 families lived in the old parish area – roughly between the railway and the river. However, the big houses were becoming offices, families were moving out to the new suburbs, and the strong protestant community of the Lower Ormeau was becoming nominally catholic, and many of them had no time for Church or Chapel.

Fitzroy Avenue Church c1947



Around us, neighbouring congregations like Donegall Pass, Elmwood, and Crescent were declining and, eventually, the former and latter became part of this congregation. Fitzroy itself became no longer suburban but, once again, an inner-city Church. Those who maintained a connection travelled in to Church, but their children increasingly found their identity in congregations nearer their homes, where their friends were. The problem was further exacerbated by the coming of the Troubles and, in the long run, the once strong uniformed organisations that had played such a vital part in the congregation's mission became smaller and smaller, and eventually had to close. In my time here, the signs of change were already plain to see, but the congregation was still numerically strong.

Some 620 families belonged, and the area around the Church was full of bed-sits and lodgings. Lots of protestant students and young professional people lived in the locality, and Mr Alexander was ready and willing to reach out to them with the challenge of the gospel, and a warm and welcoming congregational fellowship.

Patterns of Ministry

Regular missions were a feature of congregational life, led by such men as John Dunlop, Ernie Logan, David Orrock, and Michael Perrott. The Church-wide Mission of 1955 brought the Rev. Glanville Rees as the missionary to Fitzroy. It was to be an outstanding mission that brought a surge of new life into the congregation, and led to the formation of the home groups, which have continued to this day. This mission was preceded by a joint visitation of the parish along with members of All Saints. This was the first of several such joint outreaches along with All Saints and, sometimes, Rugby Avenue Congregational Church.



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R. E. Alexander was, himself, a powerful evangelist. Over and over again, his sermons ended up at the cross with a tender and loving appeal to his hearers to put their faith in Christ for salvation. There was nothing narrow about his evangelicalism and he was broad in his sympathies. His teaching ministry was carefully prepared. He delighted in well thought-out series of sermons and, his mid-week service was often devoted to the exposition of Bible books, or the explanation of key doctrines, sometimes based on *The Shorter Catechism*. Special Services were held from time to time, often with a “big name” preacher.

Yet on normal Sundays, he preferred to be in his own pulpit. Over summer Sundays, he would sometimes have arranged a series of “request services”, when members could request favourite hymns and anthems, or ask to hear again a sermon that had impressed them. Apart from that, he did not often repeat a sermon – after all, Max Lowry, his Clerk of Session, kept a careful record of every text! Mind you, he had one favourite sermon that did come out from time to time – it was on the text “Come unto me ...” and he was able to preach it without a note!

He was also keenly aware of social needs, and was not afraid to speak out when he became aware of injustice and exploitation, most notably in the disgraceful housing of socially deprived families in the area around the Church. From 1961 to 1970, the Rev Alexander was the joint convener of the General Assembly’s Committee for the Presbyterian Residential Trust, a job that gave him great satisfaction as he saw capital raised, and the work expanded and placed on a firm financial footing. He was also, for ten years, the Clerical Secretary of the Belfast City Mission and, in 1973, he was Moderator of the Synod of Belfast.



McArthur Hall, MCB

During my time with him, the Methody girls who boarded in McArthur Hall were regular attenders at Fitzroy during term time, occupying the pews that, until recently, were to the sides of the pulpit. (Methody’s male boarders attended Crescent Church!) He always welcomed them at the start of each new term, arranged communicants classes for those who requested them, and organised social evenings (usually in the Manse) to build friendship with them.

His was a multi-faceted ministry, but perhaps his real strength lay in his knack of keeping close to his people through his visitation in their homes. When I first arrived, I was given a leather-bound, loose-leaf book containing the names and addresses of all our families. Together, we set ourselves targets for each week’s visiting – on top of visits to hospitals and the elderly. One of my private dreads was when the boss would, about once every two years, announce that he felt that more needed to be done to encourage folk out to Church. “*Let’s do a blitz of the whole congregation,*” he would say, “*just five minute calls around everybody over about three or four weeks.*”



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I can still recall the sense of relief I felt when the job was done, and the latest piece of promotional literature had been safely delivered to every home. Sometime the elders, too, were involved. There is an entry in the Session Minutes for 1955 noting improvement in the evening and mid-week attendance following the efforts of the elders.

Yet for him, visitation was also a much deeper thing than mere house-calls. It was a vital pastoral opportunity. I'll never forget how, one day, he felt God telling him to pay a particular visit. It was to a home that neither of us enjoyed visiting – a rather complaining old lady with a very smelly dog! She never seemed to show much interest in anything spiritual, but, that day, he knew he had to go – and he went! He found her open and responsive and he led her to the Lord – and that very night she died. Many were the lives he touched and taught and influenced around a family fire.

He was also very good at training his assistant. He did this less by precept and more by example. Punctuality, good preparation, a quiet dignity, and no foolish pretension – those were the marks of his own ministry, and they soon rubbed off on his students! He seldom set out to “instruct” us – though, if necessary, he could make his point gently and firmly. When he said, *“You got away with that well.”*, you knew it was all right. I remember him saying to me on one occasion, *“You’re doing fine. You’re learning to preach a bad sermon well!”* I guess I needed that! He was also generous to his assistants. I recall a couple of occasions when we had a well-known preacher with us. After a well-filled morning service, we expected another full house in the evening, and he said to me, *“I’m going to sit down the Church tonight. I’d like you to lead the service and welcome our guest.”* That was the kind of man he was – a big man in every way. When I became his first ordained assistant, he saw to it that I got lots of experience at taking weddings, communions, baptisms and all the other tasks that would prepare me for a parish of my own.

He was very open to new ideas, and he liked to give his assistants their head. Yet he also instinctively knew when caution was needed. Sometimes, in the folly of youth, I might have wanted to tackle something head on, and he would have said to me, *“I’d let it ride, if I were you.”* Many of our problems in the good hand of God will solve themselves if we quietly wait for His time, and I learned to treasure that wise advice.

As I look back on my years as his assistant, and compare notes with other former assistants, we are just so grateful for this quiet man who was such a “father-in-God” and a friend to us, and from whom we learned so much. His preaching was simple and clear, but never shallow. It was also, at times, memorable and powerful. His ministry was down to earth and practical, marked by gentleness and love. The congregation was very proud of him and, on at least three occasions, they organised special presentations to honour him.



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Post Fitzroy

It was, therefore, a sad blow to the congregation when, in 1974, he suffered some months of illness, followed by a serious heart attack. It seemed, at first, as though he would never be able to preach again. I remember being present on 14th February 1975 at his farewell evening – it nearly broke my heart to see him so failed. I feared for him in the ordeal of having to speak, though, in the event, he managed it well.



Carndonagh & Malin

God, in his goodness, raised him up, and gave him a fruitful retirement, and he was able to do some ten years of much-appreciated ministry in Carndonagh and Malin, then in Suffolk, and finally in Moville and Greenbank.



Moville & Greenbank

I recall one Sunday Margaret and I were having a break in Greencastle, and we dropped in on a morning service at Moville. What a welcome we received and, later in the afternoon, we spent an hour with them at the Manse. *"You'll never guess what I did this week,"* he said to me, with a twinkle in his eye, *"I've just started a Youth Fellowship."*

He preached his last sermon on 31st May 1992 in Great Victoria Street to help out Billy Finlay, another former assistant, during a time of illness. When his preaching days were done, he was happy to be back in Fitzroy and he greatly appreciated Ken's ministry here, and he was always delighted to be back among old friends! In his last years, Ken found an appropriate little job for him. When a funeral took place in Church, Mr Alexander met with the family circle in the minister's room and then led them into Church to their appointed seats before the service began.





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The Alexander home was a supremely happy one and they were a wonderfully united couple. Mrs Alexander was a gifted teacher in her own right and, in later years, she worked for the Department of Education at Queen's. She was also a wonderful asset in the life of the Fitzroy, as she had been at Ahoghill. Many were the tasks that she undertook. But, most of all, she was a great encourager, a warm and loving presence, who loved, most of all, to work quietly behind the scenes.

She was a very pastoral person, who brought love and encouragement to so many people. They were, rightly, proud of their daughters, and their daughters' husbands, and of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and they kept close links with their wider family circle.

On 28th July 1995, R.E. Alexander slipped quietly home to God in the 84th year of his life, and the 59th year of his ministry. His name is commemorated by a plaque in the south transept¹, adjacent to the memorial window to the Rev. Shaw. It is a name that will be fondly remembered by all of us who knew him, and a name rightly honoured for a most effective and life-changing ministry.



To God be the Glory !

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¹ Although Fitzroy Church is on a North-South axis, it is traditional to refer to the Pulpit as being at the East end of a Church.



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The Rev. R. E. Alexander - A Challenge to the Present Generation

Union Theological College, Sunday Evening 17 February 2008

It has been very special being back today, not least to have had the opportunity, over recent weeks, to relive the life and ministry of my beloved boss, the Rev. R. E. Alexander, from whom I learned so much and who gave me his support and friendship for the rest of his life. What I want to do, in the few minutes that I have just now, is to point up one or two things that I believe the Fitzroy of today and tomorrow can learn from his ministry.

1. The Importance of Commitment

Commitment is not a very fashionable word these days. Our's is a generation where it is 'cool' to be 'laid back', to 'play it by ear', to 'do what you feel comfortable doing', to 'let it all hang out', to 'go with the flow'. That is the spirit of 'Cool Britannia'. Those very phrases may be a bit dated now, but what they stand for is evident in the life of our nation, and look where it has brought us! And it is evident too in the life of the Church. Somehow, I feel it sits uncomfortably with the clarion call of Jesus, who said,

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”

Matthew 16: v24-25 (New International Version)

The kind of Church that Mr Alexander led, and the kind of people whom he gathered around him and entrusted with leadership, were people who were regular, dependable, and committed. You knew they would be there, twice on Sunday, and at whatever else they had taken on. All over the Church today, that kind of spirit is becoming harder and harder to find. I know the world is more complex. I know that young people are obliged to work really hard to achieve their grades. I know that many young professionals feel trapped by employment that actually thinks it owns them, body and soul. I know that family life demands much more of us if we are to be good parents. But I believe that if the Church is to rediscover its mission, then people, irrespective of age or gender or class or culture, will have to rediscover what **real** commitment means – a commitment that puts Christ first as Master and Lord.



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2. The Importance of Evangelism

As I tried to make plain this morning, evangelism was one of the priorities of Mr Alexander's ministry. In a most gracious way, he tried to sound the call to conversion, and urge all who had not yet handed over their lives to the Lord Jesus to do so without delay. In that task, he sought to involve others along with him – elders, youth leaders and Church members. I came across this little gem from a piece of publicity about a forthcoming Guest Service :

“Invite your friends to come with you to Church, and sit with them. Come early and enjoy the singing. Pray for God's blessing both before and after the service, and especially pray for your guests. If you have a car, bring a full load and, if necessary, go back for others. Accept this Guest Service as your opportunity for Christian Service.”

Vintage R.E. Alexander! It really resonates with folk like myself, who was to be involved for a lifetime in CSSM and Parish Missions. Sadly, I see less of that kind of passion today to bring others under the sound of the gospel, and to provide specific opportunities where they can hear a clear and unequivocal invitation to become followers of Christ. Yes, I know that evangelism is a lot more difficult today, and that many in our generation are far removed from the Bible and the knowledge of what God requires of them. Yes, I know that we must present the gospel in “seeker-friendly” ways. Yet God is still able to speak by His word and Spirit, powerfully and urgently, if we can build bridges of friendship, and invite them to listen to Christ's appeal. How else will they hear? Who else will bring them? That too is a lesson that we need to rediscover for our time.

3. The Importance of Action

For a man of such great personal modesty, R. E. Alexander was a man who got things done, and motivated others to join him, and become doers too. This principle applied not only to his evangelism, but to his pastoral work, his social concern, to the raising of money, and to all the various groups and organisations that made up Church life. People sometimes say, mockingly, of Presbyterians that if a problem arises, the first thing that they do is to set up a committee. And sometimes the accusation goes on that this is the one sure way of getting little or nothing actually done. There is a great tendency today in society in general, and also in the Church, to multiply committees and structures, to involve more and more people in discussion, to produce documents and refine policies – and to what does it all amount? God rebuked Moses with the words, ***“Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.”*** And James said, ***“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*** There is so much more that one could say, but I think it really is obvious from this morning's address. Perhaps the weak point of the Alexander era, and it was not, in any sense, his fault, was that while the Church had some wonderful men and women of prayer amongst its ranks, corporate prayer seemed, on the whole, to attract only a very small number of members. I guess that was widely true then, and it is still true today. Yet, therein lies the real secret of spiritual power and effectiveness.