



Fitzroy – A River of Faith for 200 Years



Introduction

As I entered my final year of ministry at Fitzroy, I felt that I should explore in Sunday sermons the story of our congregation's journey with Christ for almost 200 years. My desire was not to wallow in nostalgia but to trace the hand of God among us since 1813 in order to refresh the faith of our members for the future. My goals were to acquaint a new generation of Fitzroy worshippers with the largely unknown ministries of my five predecessors and highlight the ever-changing and challenging context of Christian witness in the city of Belfast.

From humble origins as a small group of families associated with the Secession Synod, meeting in various loaned premises, the congregation moved to its own premises in Alfred Place in 1821, close to the centre of Belfast. Soon it outgrew these premises and relocated to Alfred Street in 1837 and then in 1874 to its current location close to Queen's University.

When the congregation in the Alfred Place Meeting House moved 50 metres round the corner to Alfred Street, John Edgar installed a missionary rather than sell or demolish the original building. So successful was this enterprise that two further congregations (at Argyle Place and Eglinton Street) were established – a diagram detailing the connections between Fitzroy and several major Belfast congregations is included on the inside back cover of this booklet. The much-loved Alfred Place building was later used for some of the General Assembly's Collegiate classes before it was finally closed, a development which saddened the Rev. Edgar. His friend and colleague Professor W. D. Killen records in his 1867 *Memoir of John Edgar*,

“Dr. Edgar had always regretted that a building which had proved of such utility was eventually sold, and converted into a warehouse.”

The addresses, some presented by people who had an association with the minister, shed a unique light on how the faith of our predecessors has moulded the way in which we live for Christ today. There was considerable variety in the style of the addresses, from the social and historical approach through academic and comparative approaches to a personal reflection on Rev R E Alexander, a minister still remembered affectionately by our senior members.

The very architecture of the Fitzroy is rich in spiritual heritage. It is theology in stone; the theology sourced from the Psalms and the stones from the sandstone quarries at Scrabo. For example, the huge bell tower points us upwards, like a giant finger, to the Lord of heaven and earth who is **“our refuge and a tower of strength against the enemy”** (Psalm 61:3). The twin circular engravings above the main entrance remind all who go up its steps into the House of the Lord that **“Righteous people will flourish like palm trees and grow tall like the cedars in Lebanon”** (Psalm 92:12). Scan every area of the building carefully with your eyes and the sculptures will yield up their secrets and speak to you in silence of the beauty of God.



Fitzroy – A River of Faith for 200 Years



The River of Faith series opened with an address on the Rev. Dr. John Edgar, Minister of the Alfred Place and Alfred Street congregations, whose passion for Christ led him to tackle the big social issues of his day. That social conscience and practical action continued to flow through the congregation and its ministers, and continues to inspire us in the twenty-first century. Our extensive youth ministry, the Nightreach initiative among local students, the continuing support for the mission of the Presbyterian Church at home and overseas, the ministry of reconciliation in a very divided city, and the desire to introduce Jesus Christ to others, are just a few examples that reflect the strength of our concern to touch our community, city and world with God's love.

Fitzroy's river of faith was widened when we opened our doors and hearts to members of the Donegall Pass and Crescent congregations in 1973 and 1976 respectively – tributaries bringing their own unique qualities to strengthen the flow.



On the 17th February 2007 we held the final service in the series under the famous portrait of John Edgar in the Gamble Library of Union Theological College. Short retrospective and supplementary thoughts were delivered on each of the five ministers and these have now been incorporated into this booklet along with the original addresses.

The series concluded with a talk presented by Sandra Mulholland and Joy Bell (a daughter of the Rev. R. E. Alexander) on what we, today, can learn from the senior members of our congregation.

The Rev. Alexander's excellent booklet on Fitzroy's history, ***Fitzroy Avenue Church – Past and Present***, written in 1949 to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the opening of the present building, is included as an appendix.

Finally, I must pay tribute to Rev Paul Gilmore, Dr Godfrey Brown, Philip Orr, Joy Bell and Sandra Mulholland for the research they put into bringing their section of Fitzroy's story to life. However, we could not have reached the stage of compiling one document out of many without the tireless work of Nigel Henderson whose acute mind and passion for bringing new information to light has enhanced the quality of this publication.



Fitzroy – A River of Faith for 200 Years



Val and I have loved being part of Fitzroy's life over the last 32 years. It has shaped our own lives profoundly. It has been a huge privilege and blessing to share our lives with people whose faith, love, generosity and integrity we respect so much. Our prayer for your future is the simple Celtic Blessing I have often used during the services:

*May the Presence of Christ always surround you,
may the Peace of Christ caress your spirit and
may the Love of Christ always fill your heart.*

Yours gratefully in Christ,

Kenneth N. E. Newell



The Very Rev. Dr. Ken Newell

