

The first 20 years

including

“Moira Marches on”

a short history of Moira Baptist Church 1987 - 2001 by David McFarland

As presented to a meeting of the Irish Baptist Historical Society September 2001
and published in the Society's Journal 2002, but with minor amendments.

and

“The Word of the Lord grew and multiplied”

A brief update of the happenings at Moira Baptist Church 2001 - 2007
by David McFarland



This is the message from the one who is holy and true, the one who has the key of David. What he opens, no one can close; and what he closes, no one can open:

“I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can close. You have little strength, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown. ” Revelation 3:7,8,11.

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Moira marches on

“Commander” JC Henry of the new Baptist Missions “expeditionary force”, known as the Evangelism and Church Planting Team, reported in the December 1986 issue of the Irish Baptist, under the title – Moira marches on. (Note the language of battle)

*“On July 1st 1986, the BM team moved into a **new field of operation** in Moira, seeking to promote the formation of a New Testament Church by means of the New Testament evangelism. By early August, **resulting from successful forays using house-to-house tactics** combined with a **tent crusade**, they had **established a small but secure bridgehead**. These meetings were friendly, inspiring and almost too comfortable. Everyone agreed we must seek to keep moving forward. The only way open at this time was to hire the local Orange Hall for regular public worship services. We did and God greatly blessed the special opening meetings. Saturday night support arrived from all over the country. The hall was packed. By thus going public we have further **consolidated our position as a force** for God in the community. The **volunteers in our still small unit** are keen to do their bit for the **KING and the extension of His Kingdom**. Happily there are others showing a desire to join with us. Pray on for Moira and its little Baptist Fellowship. **The battle is just beginning.**”*

Fifteen years on, we in Moira Baptist Church are thankful to God for victories, yet the battle has only begun. We are still marching on and Jim Henry’s battle theme is not inappropriate, as we shall see.

Moira has always been a very strategic place. (No wonder it has been chosen as the site for the new Baptist Centre.) It was a flourishing village when Lurgan had only a few houses and Belfast was little more than a ford on the Lagan. Numerous surveys and finds carried out by archaeologists in the past two centuries tell how Moira has been inhabited some thousands of years before the coming of Christ. The ancient village sat on one of the five great roads that led from Tara of the Kings to the great fort of Dunseverick on the coast of North Antrim. Dunseverick was the port from where Irish chieftains travelled to Scotland.

Early in 7th C, Conal ruled what are now roughly South Antrim and North Down. He fled to Scotland after murdering the High King. On the mainland, he raised a large army of Britons, Saxons, Scots and Picts and after nine years, returned to Ireland with the support of Ulstermen. The opposing army of the new High King met him at Moira. However, in the course of a six day battle on the banks of the Lagan, Conal and the Scottish army was routed and its commander slain. It was one of the most decisive and bloody battles Ireland ever saw. Sir Samuel Ferguson considered it *“the greatest battle, whether we regard the numbers engaged, the duration of the combat, or the stake at issue, ever fought within the bounds of Ireland”*.

It is with the recording of the Battle of Moira in the Annals, that we first hear of Christianity in the area, with a few references to the Abbots of the old Abbey at Magheralin. One Thousand years later (late 1600s) the Presbyterians came to Moira. John Wesley visited the village twice – in 1756 and 1760. The latter occasion is recorded in his journal: *“I rode to Moira. Soon after twelve, standing on a tombstone near the Church, I called a considerable number of people to ‘know God and Jesus Christ whom He had sent’.*” In the 1820s a Methodist church was formed. But it was to be another 160 years before Jim Henry led his troops into battle and Baptists came to Moira.

For many years Moira has been an attractive location. The construction of the Lagan Canal at the end of the eighteenth century brought with it much trade to the area. This was followed in the 1840’s by the arrival of the railway, which extended the line from Lisburn to Lurgan and Portadown. The railway station is still as it was built more than a century and a half ago. The building of the M1 motorway in the 1960’s closed the canal and, by taking most of the traffic from the West that once passed through Moira, might have threatened the future of the village. In fact it was the opening of the Moira motorway junction in 1966 that has largely accounted for the growth in population. More and more people were prepared to see Moira as a place from which it is easy to commute to work. A new mission-field was developing. Among those attracted to live there was a growing number of Baptists who had to travel at least 5 miles to attend a Baptist church.

Other believers were finding there was not much “evangelical life” in some of the village churches at that time. The time was right for Church planting.

Baptist Missions interest in Moira began in 1985. In January of that year, the Mission produced a document entitled 'Strategy for the future in Ireland'. Part of that document reads: *'We would envisage some use of 'Team Ministry' in Church planting situations in the North, together with allocating our Evangelist to given areas for specific periods of time in order to 'test' the initial response'*.¹ The Mission identified 'towns and areas' for such Church planting exercises. The first three named were Ballymoney, Moira and Saintfield. (God has honoured this strategy and within two years of the document being produced, churches were formed in Ballymoney and Moira. Saintfield was to follow soon after.)

A decision was made to send the first church planting team to Moira in the summer of 1986. Its aim was to plant a Church *"through gospel preaching and the 'welding together' of Baptists who already were living in the area"*.² This was done with the knowledge and cooperation of the neighbouring Baptist Churches, some of whom supplied names of their members living in the village and area.

The outreach began in April, with three days of house-to-house visitation as a means of testing of the response. The first call was to a lady who just an hour before had prayed that God would send someone to give her spiritual help. That day Mrs Sadie Andrews openly professed saving faith in the Lord and within days, her mother came back to the Lord. What an encouraging beginning the Lord gave! In Jim Henry's report to Baptist Missions for April 1986 he says *"I do believe that a carefully planned programme with the support (enthusiastic!) of local churches could see a church planted and growing in this area.... I look forward to the summer months."*

On 1st July, the Moira team came together for the first time. Joining Jim Henry was his BM colleague, Cecil Johnston and two Bible College students. Stanley Black (Carrduff) and David Whitmarsh (Lisburn) had been given summer appointments by the Mission. A thorough visitation programme to every home was carried out with great profit. A Tent Mission was conducted in the Demesne for two weeks from July 27th to August 10th. A number of Baptists in the town supported the outreach and then began immediately to consider how best to bring together the Baptist folk who lived in the area. A significant statement is recorded in the BM report of the summer campaign in the Irish Baptist Oct. 86 – *"It was our intention that Moira '86 would lead to Moira '87 and beyond, God willing"*.

A home was opened on Tuesday nights for prayer and Bible study. Some fifteen to twenty people attended those meetings and enjoyed such tremendous fellowship together that nobody wanted to go home. There was real excitement as they considered how to move forward! The desire was to begin Sunday Services and establish a gospel witness on a regular basis and they did not wait too long.

By October that year the Lisburn Star had printed an article on the Baptists in Moira and announced the beginning of a Baptist Fellowship. Meetings were to be held in the local Orange Hall. To quote the Star, *"Jim Henry looks forward to the time when Moira Baptist Fellowship will be a permanent work in the area. "It is hoped that a permanent site may be found for the erection of the church building and to serve the growing Baptist community in Moira", he said."* Indeed the first publicity leaflets distributed in the village to announce the new services, said, *"We are planning to erect a Church building on a permanent site."* Men and women of faith were on the march.

A service of Praise was held on 1st November with a packed congregation and tea for all was served in the local Primary school. Sunday services commenced the following day and prayer and Bible Study night moved to Wednesday. Those involved in the early days tell of the practical commitment needed by the small fellowship. Each Sunday they had to arrive early to clean up after the excesses of the occupants of the previous evening. A fire had to be lit and kept stoked all day and even then everyone was cold. This as much as anything, reinforced their conviction that they needed a place of their own soon and so began the search for more suitable accommodation.

¹ Baptist Missions archives.

² Statement at the opening of Moira Baptist Church 3/1/87

Ten days after the first public meeting, representatives of the Fellowship met with men from Baptist Missions and Lisburn Baptist. The Lisburn church expressed its interest in and commitment to Moira. They disclosed that they had been actively seeking to acquire a site in the town. The men from Moira identified their priorities to be the securing of a site for a suitable meeting place and the formation of a local Baptist Church. They recognised the need to protect their autonomy, yet realised that they were dependent on the goodwill of others. Baptist Missions promised continued support with Pastor Baxter planning to become personally involved. There was recognition that when the Moira Baptist church came into being, it would not be the daughter of any existing church but would be composed of people who already held membership in different Baptist churches.³

Within two weeks of that meeting, the Moira Baptist Fellowship decided that it would be best if a church was formed and notified Baptist Missions that they had set 3rd January 1987 as the date for constitution. This was just 6 months from the arrival of the BM team! This small force was well and truly on the march! Its income was less than £60 per week and yet they had big visions of having a Pastor and a building of their own. Before the next year was out, they would have the former and be well on their way to having the latter.

Towards the end of 1986, the fellowship sent out a special announcement inviting everyone to “celebrate the formation of Moira Baptist Church”. The letter included the line “anyone wishing to join the church may have more information from Mr Allen Cameron” – presumably this was aimed at Baptists living in the village. There was a degree of reluctance by some Baptists and some local churches to support such a new venture. Right from the beginning, Baptist Missions had given the neighbouring Churches notice of their intentions for Moira and had asked for details of “Baptist folk” from Moira who attended their church. In response only 4 addresses were given and only one couple ever joined the church. One church informed us of two couples getting married and coming to live in the area and for years both those couples have been deeply committed members. But it has taken years before many Baptists living in Moira have joined the church in their village. To this day a considerable number prefer to worship where they have always worshipped and the friends in Moira will always respect that.

The service on 3rd January 1987 had one hundred and fifty people present to witness twelve foundation members agree to the principles and doctrines of the Baptist Church and sign the membership book. The local paper said the Irish President attended but his name was Pastor Wm. A McGilton, Baptist Union President that year! The speaker was Pastor J Birnie, Chairman of Baptist Missions and Pastor J McBratney of Lisburn brought greetings from the neighbouring churches. The offering that day of £500.02 more than doubled the church’s bank balance.

January was a busy month. The first baptismal service was held in the Lisburn Church building on 21st Jan. Sadie Andrews was one of two people to be baptised and join the church. On 26th January the church met for its first Business meeting. Twelve members were present. Four deacons were elected, Sunday school staff appointed and applications by two new members accepted. The church agreed to set aside offerings on the first Sunday of each month for a building fund and to apply for membership in the Baptist Union of Ireland. They were subsequently received into the Union on 13th May 87.

Within four weeks of constituting, the membership had risen to sixteen. A Sunday school was started, the women held their first meeting in February and the church reported the conversion of one of those attending the services. Pastor Baxter came alongside and from March to July provided regular ministry and support. Four Baptist Missions workers were involved in door-to-door evangelism in March before moving on to the Saintfield project. On 11th March Pastor Henry wrote to thank the church for a gift he had received; “It has been a privilege and a great joy to have been associated with the beginnings of the work in Moira... (I) will always keep Moira in my prayers. Thank you for your interest in Saintfield. Pray God will do it again”. We know He did.

³ Baptist Missions Report of meeting 11/11/86

The new deacons were quickly at work and showed tremendous vision. In their first meeting they put wheels in motion to acquire a suitable site and intensive negotiations began.⁴ In their second meeting they decided to approach the Irish Baptist College about the possibility of having a student for the summer months. By April the church was moving on both fronts. Mr Jonathan Watson, a final year student, was invited to take up a summer appointment that included preaching and visitation. He wrote in response, *"I am looking forward immensely to the summer, when I shall be working in the church, as well as outside the church, in an evangelistic capacity."*⁵

The months that followed were filled with enthusiastic involvement and far-reaching decisions. The church met on 7 occasions during the year to discuss major issues, in addition to those meetings where new members were accepted.

In June a unanimous decision was made to purchase a three-acre site on Clarehill Road. Considerable negotiation had reduced the asking price from £50,000 to £40,000.⁶ One shudders to think what would have happened had the church hesitated then, considering the phenomenal rise in the price of land in Moira since then and the particularly attractive location. But £40,000 was an enormous figure for sixteen members to commit to. At the time current giving amounted to £400 per month and the balance in the building fund stood at £1,007. In a forward-looking move, outline planning permission was sought *"under the description 'Moira Baptist complex' to accommodate any future sub-development on the site"*.⁷ Development envisaged at that point included erecting a temporary meeting place and the possibility of the Baptist Housing Association building sheltered dwellings. It was to be another year of protracted negotiations before the site was legally owned. The church was delighted by the Tobermore Church's generous offer of their portable hall.

In September, a call was issued to Mr Jonathan Watson to become Pastor of the church.⁸ The minute book records an interesting voting procedure agreed by the church. Because so many members had young families, the church had agreed to have a form of "postal ballot" for those unable to be present. It appears the procedure has not been used since. Mr Watson accepted, saying, *"I feel it a high honour to be the first Pastor of Moira Baptist Church. Remember my youth and inexperience and pray that these may not hinder my usefulness"*. His Induction service was held on Sat 14th November 1987 in the Presbyterian Hall in the village. The preacher was Mr Watson's former Pastor WJK Byers and the Chairman of the meeting was Pastor JC Henry.

The purchase of a site and the calling of a Pastor in the same year were two enormous steps of faith for a young church with only twenty-four members. Interest in the Moira Church was growing in Irish Baptist circles. News spread through regular articles in the Irish Baptist. A letter was sent to Churches in the Union asking for help and over the next two years quite a number of churches responded generously. The church acknowledged the support of the Aided Churches Tithe Scheme, *"without which the church could not even contemplate engaging a full-time worker"*.⁹ Imagine the joy in Moira when Pastor JR Grant, Union Secretary came in October, bringing a cheque for £21,000. It was a gift from the Southern Baptist Convention Foreign Mission Board, Richmond, Virginia, USA. As a result of a conversation with Pastor Grant and Pastor Baxter, the Board's Director for Europe and the Middle East had taken an interest in Baptist Missions Church Planting programme.

The church was growing and two more members were added before the end of 1987. It was truly a year of blessing.

⁴ Correspondence WD Black 13/1/87 & 23/2/97

⁵ Letter 15th April 1987

⁶ Special Business meeting minutes 8/7/87

⁷ Diaconate minutes 2/7/87

⁸ Special Business meeting minutes 7/9/87

⁹ Ibid.

1988 began brightly with three new members joining. The 2nd Annual Church Meeting in February was told planning permission had been granted for permanent dwellings on the new site. This was to be pursued by the office-bearers with the proviso "*that same do not dwarf the church*".¹⁰ Sketch plans were already being drawn for a permanent church building, though it was recognised that a temporary building would need to be erected in the short term. In May the office bearers made visits to a number of churches to see recently constructed buildings. Much discussion ensued over what type of building to erect.

The year saw blessing in a number of areas, notably increased attendance at the services. It became obvious that the portable building offered by the Tobermore church was not going to be large enough for the church. God again supplied the need and, through Mr Wesley Coulter, another larger portable building was offered free of charge.

The year was not all taken up with property and planning applications. The church sought to strengthen fellowship with a church dinner in May and an outing to Co. Tyrone in August. Concern for the young people of the church and community led to the formation of a Baptist Youth Fellowship, though its beginnings were small, and a Junior Bible Class on Sunday mornings. Open-air outreach was a feature of the summer with the evening service being cancelled on the second Sunday of each month and a meeting held in the Demesne and other sites in the village. A small team engaged in door-to-door visitation on Monday evenings.

Office bearers grappled with a number of issues not unfamiliar in any new church. In October, a number of changes were made to the constitution.

Seventeen new members were added during the year making the total thirty-five but it was with regret that the church learned of the departure of eight members, including some foundation members. In fact the first six people to sign the Covenant of membership in Jan.'87, resigned before the end of 1988. This, combined with other factors, made the following year a quiet one.

The members entered **1989** with hopes that it would be a year of new things. At the AGM the church appointed two elders. Some suggested starting a Campaigners' Clan. The church looked forward to the visit of a BYE team in the summer. A bi-monthly Men's fellowship was commenced and this has proved a most popular meeting over the years. Men began to meet on Saturday mornings for a prayer breakfast.

Considerable work needed to be done to make the portable building into a suitable meeting place. They were grateful for the use of the Orange hall as a meeting place but lack of suitable accommodation restricted church activities. A team of members and friends worked enthusiastically and sacrificially on the new portable hall, determined to have it ready for the summer. After a marathon effort, that saved a great deal of expense, the hall was ready for use and invitations sent out. The letter of invitation said, "*like any new work it is difficult at times but well worthwhile*". On 22nd September, a large congregation gathered in the new hall. The preacher was Pastor Alec Judd from Lurgan. It was a great feeling to enter another winter programme with accommodation in which to grow and develop.

The summer visit of the BYE team had been a "*resounding success*". It had bound the young people in the church together and was instrumental in bringing forward two young men in the church for baptism. They were baptised on the first Sunday in the new building.

As the Pastor's letter to members at the end of the year shows, the church had grown "three-fold" in 3 years but a definite slow-down was evident. Concern was expressed at the fall in giving to the church. Despite the high profile of the church in the community in 1989, only two new members joined that year and two left. There were still thirty-five members though two of the young people were about to join at the start of 1990.

Minute books record a distinct emphasis on meeting the needs of children and young people. At the **1990** AGM, much discussion centred once again on forming a Campaigner's group but some office-bearers had reservations and most agreed the time was not right. One member pleaded for immediate attention to be

¹⁰ AGM minutes 28/2/88

given to some form of meeting for children during the week. And so began something for which the church has been recognised over the years – a deep interest in the evangelism and nurture of children.

By the end of May plans had been agreed for the Youth Fellowship to move to Sunday evenings and for a Friday programme of Junior and Senior Youth clubs to meet on alternate weeks. Both were to include games, outings and other activities with an evangelistic epilogue. It was also proposed to begin a Good News Club for children. Over the summer months great effort went into looking for leaders for this programme. At the same time the number of very young children attending made the church consider a second crèche. Once more Baptist Youth helped the church by providing a BYE team and it was reported that at least one child had been saved as a result of the team's ministry.

The development of the site for sheltered dwelling led to much discussion with the Baptist Housing Association and Planning Service. The Historic Buildings Branch were anxious to keep the proposed dwellings away from the listed St John's Church of Ireland building and the Baptist Church was anxious to keep the development as close to the West corner as possible to leave adequate scope for their buildings and for future developments.

As the year drew to a close, the church met to consider how to more effectively evangelise the community. One elder stated that the *"unsaved quite simply were not coming into our services and ... "it was up to us to go out to them"*. A Mother and Toddler group was just one suggestion, again thinking of families and children. Four more members joined during the year, two resigned and one member had to be dismissed after lengthy but fruitless attempts to persuade him to repent of serious sin.

In February 1991, the church agreed to accept an offer of £39,000 by the Baptist Housing Association for part of the site on which to erect a sheltered dwelling scheme. Negotiations had ensured that both buildings on the site would benefit in the overall development. The housing complex was to be known as Clarehill House. The church office-bearers began to think of what type of church building should be erected, thought they knew its construction was some way off.

However this was overtaken by events when in early April '91, Pastor Watson informed the Elders that he was resigning. While expressing his sorrow at leaving many good friends, he said, *"I really do feel that my ministry in the church has come to an end. I believe that a new and fresh ministry is required to encourage and build up God's people in Moira and to steer them through what seems to be an exciting and happy future. I now know that my portion lies elsewhere."* He preached for the final time as Pastor on Sunday 19th May.

A new church struggling to make an impact on a small community was well aware of being in the spotlight. There were plenty of people ready to say, "I told you so". The church was anxious to continue a clear gospel witness and concerned that their witness should be relevant and challenging. They accepted an invitation to conduct a Sunday service in Laganvale clinic, a local Nursing home. For years, on one Sunday per month, the evening service moved out of the church hall to meet in the Home. The early meetings were well attended and much appreciated by the residents and staff. The monthly service in the home continues to this day but on a weekday morning at the request of the management.

A Mothers and Toddlers Group was formed and was immediately successful. Up to twenty mothers attended with their children. This means of outreach has developed enormously over the years, being recognised and appreciated throughout the community. It is still a very powerful means of contact with those who do not normally come to church.

The Junior Youth Club grew and the number older of children necessitated the opening of a Senior club, despite the difficulties of getting enough leaders. A Good News Club for children was also in operation. A caravan had to be acquired to provide additional space for crèche and children's church during the Sunday morning service.

Before the year ended, the office-bearers were again talking about plans for a building, suggesting a multi-purpose accommodation to seat one hundred and fifty and costing around £100,000. Sketches were provided for the 1992 AGM and an architect chosen. Over the next year the design was refined, plans

submitted and the project put out to tender. Meanwhile construction work on the Housing scheme had commenced in the spring of 1992 and was expected to be completed in August 1993.

But the church leaders were not only looking to build a bricks and mortar structure; their desire was to see the church built spiritually and a strong gospel witness maintained. From the beginning of the vacancy, the elders were exercised about finding God's man to be the new Pastor and knowing God's timing. They had the dilemma of urgently needing both a permanent building and Pastoral care. A couple of Pastors' names had been carefully considered during the year and a tentative approach made, but an idea was growing that possibly a part time Pastor could meet the need. At the AGM in Feb 1993, they had a proposal for the church. They recommended that Pastor Jack Bradley, formerly of Dunseverick, Rathcoole and Cliftonpark churches and now retired, would come alongside for 6 months to help with visitation, midweek meetings and some Sunday preaching. He would not have a contract of employment or become a church member. The church wholeheartedly accepted his appointment. Jack was to provide this support to the church for the whole of 1993 and indeed continued voluntarily to be involved in visitation in the village well into the following year. His contribution to Moira was greatly appreciated. He was not seen as a part-time Pastor, though the possibility of having one was still being seriously pursued. Indeed it was agreed that pastoral care was a priority, despite the pressing need for a new building.

Office bearers got a shock when they received quotations for erecting the new building. The lowest was over £100,000 more than the church had budgeted for and so a number of options were considered to reduce cost. The Contractor with the lowest tender was chosen but the project was revised to allow only the minor hall to be completed and used as a multi purpose facility. The whole building was going to be much larger than the church had first envisaged but it would be erected in such a way that it could be completed in stages, as accommodation needs and finances dictated. Building began in the summer of 1993 with the cost to be £134,248 and hopefully be ready in the autumn of 1994. The Contractor was Coulter Developments. The present structure is a testimony to the faith of those who began the project in the first year of the church. But now, seeing the growth in recent years, those men would recognise that even their faith was too small and considerable development is urgently needed.

Over two years had gone by since Pastor Watson's departure and the fact that no name had been brought to the church for consideration had begun to cause a stir among some office bearers. Assurances had been given that the calling of a Pastor was number one priority but agreement was hard to come by. Several names were mentioned regularly and some were invited to preach, in one case for a series of services, but there was no conviction that any one was God's choice. A church meeting was held at the end of 1993 in which the elders explained how they were approaching the matter of the vacancy, particularly with reference to two names that some had considered possible Pastoral candidates. By then, the elders and deacons had moved a way from the idea of a part-time Pastor and recognised that, despite financial constraints, there was a need for a man to pastor the church full time.

Two and a half years without a Pastor had left a heavy burden for the elders but there were encouraging signs. Attendances had improved, bringing a need of more chairs and new hymnbooks. Membership grew to forty-seven and hopes were high, but beneath the surface a number of issues were causing concern and 1994 was to be another year of falling membership, falling income and falling attendances.

Difficulties arose during eldership elections at the 1994 AGM, leaving some ill-feeling and a degree of division that continued for a good part of the year. For a number of months, internal issues detracted from the search for a new Pastor, though the elders were beginning to focus on one man. This man had been approached within the first year of the vacancy but had felt it was not the Lord's time for him to move. When concerns were expressed that "little or no progress was being made" in the search for a pastor, the elders intimated that the man they were considering approaching was Pastor David McFarland, who had been assistant to Pastor Judd in Lurgan since 1991. Office bearers encouraged the elders to again make tentative enquiries. A remarkable series of providences showed both parties that God was at work in the matter and subsequently the Moira office bearers were informed that Pastor McFarland was prepared to consider a call. The office bearers met every week during July to pray for guidance in the matter. In August they unanimously agreed to take the matter further and met with David. A growing conviction that this was the way forward made the office bearers give careful consideration to the financial implications of calling a Pastor. While financial matters had never been discussed with Pastor McFarland, it was noted that giving

would need to increase by around £150 per week or 50% to meet the projected needs. But once again the office bearers were prepared to encourage the church in another step of faith. I quote: *"The general consensus however was that a step of faith was required and that, with £8,000 in the General Fund and the possibility of a new Pastor generating additional numbers, we should go forward"*.¹¹ Through all this period of decision-making, the church had benefited greatly under the ministry of David Strachan in July and Andrew Reid in August. One particular Sunday the message was *"to go through the door of opportunity, even if it was not always certain that we would have the resources to do so."*¹² History and financial records show how God honoured the step of faith.

On 28th September 1994, the church met and agreed by a large majority to invite Pastor McFarland to come to Moira. He indicated that he would prayerfully consider the matter and hopefully respond within four or five weeks. However, he had an accident and the resulting complications that lasted for many weeks left him very unwell. He accepted advice not to make a decision in such a condition and it was over eight weeks before the church in Moira was told on 3rd December that he had accepted the call. The church understood that David had given an undertaking to Pastor Judd to carry extra responsibility in Lurgan during his year as President of the Baptist Union of Ireland. It was agreed that he would come in the spring of 1995. This gave the church time to concentrate on the building.

The work had been progressing, though more slowly than was hoped, due in part to the contractor also being involved in the construction of a neighbouring Baptist church building! Every effort was now put in to have it ready for the Induction service in April.

Meanwhile the housing complex was opened on 22nd September 1994, although some residents had moved in as early as August '93. It was named "Henry Court" in memory of the late JC Henry who had done so much in bringing Moira Baptist Church into being. His widow Maureen performed the opening ceremony and Pastor Alec Judd was once again the guest preacher. The church continues to take a vital and practical interest in Henry Court and benefits enormously from those who live there and worship with us. At present we have around nine who attend regularly and six of them are members.

The fact that the vacancy was coming to an end generated some enthusiasm but the problems encountered earlier in the year were still causing unhappiness and in the last six months of the year six members resigned. Vacancies are often difficult times in any church and Moira is no exception. While twenty-two new members were added in those four years, sixteen members left and one went home to meet her Saviour – a net increase of five. Indeed statistics show that while there were forty three members at the end of the vacancy, the church had lost a total of thirty members in nine years – one through death, one through transfer, one through dismissal and twenty seven through resignation! The church was praying that in the new building and with a new Pastor, they would again see days of blessing and growth. An article in Moira in the Newscene column of the Irish Baptist in January 1995 expressed it like this, *"1995, a new year, new start, a new era, moving on, moving ahead – a step of faith"* ...and concluded, *"Please pray for us and with us in 1995 as we believe exciting times lie ahead if we continue to be faithful to God's Word"*

The Induction service was to be the first major meeting in the new hall. Members and friends worked extremely long hours to have the building ready in time but it was a very different service that first filled the hall. Ernie and Peggy Condy had joined the church in 1990 and immediately endeared themselves to the fellowship. Their faithfulness and willingness to work was an inspiration to everyone. Being more mature than most of the church, they were looked to for wisdom and guidance. Ernie was on the building committee and, with his incredible skills, spent an enormous amount of time working on the new building. All this was done despite devotedly caring for Peggy who had very poor health. She was looking forward to the coming of the new Pastor, who had grown up calling her "auntie" Peggy – she was a cousin of the Pastor's mother. But it was not to be and she went to be with the Lord. Exactly two weeks before the induction, the new hall was used for the first time and was packed for her funeral service and to thank God for her life and testimony. The new Pastor's first duty was to bury one of his flock.

¹¹ OB minutes 3/8/94

¹² Quoted in the history of the call at the induction service 28/4/95

The headline on an article in a local paper¹³ read – “A double boost for Moira Baptists.” *“Moira Baptist Church will have cause for celebration on Friday, April 28. For not only will they have their first Pastor for four years but also a new building to worship in.”* That evening the building was packed again with church folk and visitors who came for the induction service. The Irish Baptist reported, “ *So large was the number that some one hundred folk were seated in the overflow building. However in spite of today’s modern technology, a technical hitch with the CCTV necessitated a break in proceedings of the main service in order to pack everyone in. In the end three hundred people were crammed, a bit like sardines in a tin, into the main church building*”.¹⁴ What the magazine did not know was that quite a few had given up and gone home. The preacher once again was Pastor Alec Judd! (He must have enjoyed the place, for after his retirement from Lurgan, he joined the Church in Moira.) Some of us thought that, had Jim Henry been still with us, he would have had one of his usual interesting comments to make. Jim had been called home suddenly in September 1991. His co-evangelist on the Church planting team from 1988 to 1991 was now Pastor of the church he (Jim) had done so much to plant.

And so a new chapter began in the life of Moira Baptist Church. The story from there ought to be told by someone else and perhaps one day it will be. It is a story of the great goodness of God. We have seen remarkable growth in numbers. The Sunday morning congregation has risen from around fifty or sixty to an average of one hundred and seventy. Last Sunday we had around two hundred with extra seats having to be placed in the aisles. We have a large number of young families and lots and lots of babies. Membership has risen to ninety-two and we are processing a number of requests that may soon lead to us reaching one hundred or more.

Within the first year we began a programme of voluntary work on the main building. Since the external work had already been completed in April 1995, we were able to work during the winter months on plastering and fixing ceilings. On 4th May 1996 one of our deacons, Ronnie Baxter suffered horrendous injuries in a fall from the ceiling. His life hung in the balance for weeks but God answered prayer in a remarkable way. Ronnie still suffers greatly from his injuries and recently has had to give up work but is still totally committed to the work and witness in Moira Baptist.

The new building was opened on 25th October 1997. As we meet, there is work going on to complete the next phase. The balcony will give us an additional 90 seats. And as I said earlier, we are already having to look at extending our facilities for young people. We have nowhere near enough space for Sunday school or youth activities. Sunday morning is a particular problem with not enough room for children’s church and crèche. Our present debt prevents us moving to do quickly but one of these days we may have to take another great step of faith.

We are continually seeking ways to bring the gospel to a community that is largely materialistic and ambivalent. We want to show the community that we care; that we are a church with a heart. We are deeply concerned, for example, to impact the lives of young people who have nothing to do but spent their evenings in the demesne drinking and taking drugs. Over the past year we have become actively involved in building relationships with them and this summer had a very successful week of outreach to them. We are seeking to know how best to move this forward.

Another avenue inside the closed doors of Moira has been our website. We were one of the first Irish Baptist churches to be online and we use the web address on all our publicity. Only eternity will reveal its full impact but we have at least two families worshipping with us as a result of our internet presence. Today on our website we celebrate the first birthday of little Jed Taylor. He was born very prematurely to a couple of members who had had a tremendously difficult year. Daily email prayer requests kept the church informed through all the dark days and we soon discovered that people were logging in right around the world and telling us that they were praying. Jed’s miraculous progress is testimony to fellowship in prayer. As a result we are regularly being asked to pray for people in need in the community and far beyond, particularly ill children.

¹³ Lurgan Mail 20/4/1995

¹⁴ Irish Baptist July 1995

We have raised our horizons with a strong missionary interest in Baptist Missions and other agencies. One of our members served two years as short-term missionary in India and we have a continuing involvement both there and in Romania. We were thrilled when God called one of our young men, David McCavery into the ministry. Today we have 3 more young men undergoing training for service; two of them began classes this week at the Irish Baptist College. The coming of the Irish Baptist College to the Moira area is anticipated with great interest. The church has always been a supporter of the college. We hope its proximity will enable us to benefit from the input of staff and students into the area as we seek to reach out to a number of rapidly expanding villages all around us. We are looking at how we can best impact communities where we have significant numbers of our folk living; places such as Donaghcloney, Dollingstown, Magheralin, Aghalee, Ballinderry and Maghaberry.

Today the evangelical situation in Moira is radically different to what it was fifteen years ago when "Commander" Henry led his troops into Moira. The Installation of a new Minister in the Presbyterian Church last week has completed a circle where we now have committed evangelical clergy in all the churches. (We do not count the Unitarians) Moira Baptists can no longer expect to benefit so much from the attendance of believers unhappy with the lack of spiritual food and evangelical fervour in their own church. Christians in Moira have a wider choice of places to worship and serve than ever before. But what a privilege it is to have the support and practical help of Godly ministers in the work of the gospel in Moira in the 21stC. We began the new millennium with a joint outreach using the Jesus video and I am sure we can work together even more effectively in days to come. We are Baptists and committed to our distinctives and will continue to exercise a fervent witness to our community but there is a big difference between now and the past. Baptists are no longer seen as a few people who were coming to steal "sheep" and criticise the established churches in the village. We are recognised for our commitment to the gospel and to our community. Moira Baptists are respected by most of the believers in the area and most unbelievers have heard about us and from us. Our prayer is that we will be faithful to God and that He will come among us in power as we try to tell them of Jesus. We are still in a battle for souls and the enemy is not giving up but we know that our King will give us the victory.

David McFarland
September 2001

"The Word of the Lord grew and multiplied"

A brief summary of the happenings at Moirra Baptist Church 2001 - 2007

When Pastor McFarland presented his paper to the historical society in September 2001, he had no idea what Providence held for him and the church. He had been preaching through the book of Acts under the title, "A church without walls" and many testified then and since then that God spoke to the church more powerfully than ever before.

In his last sermon, two days before Christmas 2001, David preached on Acts 12 about "the church under attack". He began, "How good God has been to us. In two weeks we celebrate 15 years as a church here; we are approaching 100 in membership and I believe making a growing impact in our community. We have declared ourselves to be a "Church with a heart", and many, many people have declared that we are. We are aiming to be a church without walls and the concept has clearly gripped you and we are seeing evidence of a church beginning to reach out. Things are going well but Satan does not like it. As soon as things look good, we can be sure he will throw everything at us."

He was unaware then of the impending catastrophic heart failure that would be diagnosed the following weekend and later he would learn that he required a heart transplant.

The providences of God are sometimes very strange. The Church and the Pastor were to face many uncertain days, but always we were given grace to see that God was in control and that His way is perfect.

In almost his last words, the Pastor said, "Look at v24. "...the Word of the Lord grew and multiplied." We are part of a host that has marched through this world for 20 centuries and is still marching. Satan has rained the fires of hell against the church and it has come through without the smell of fire upon it, for nothing can stop the church of Christ. Understand the power of God. There is no greater power in this universe. Christ is building His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The devil will always be defeated in the end. We will always be victorious, whether we live or die. But this kind does not come forth except through prayer and fasting."

Under the faithful ministry and leadership of the Elders, the preaching of those who each week brought God's Word and the prayerfulness of the church, the Word grew and multiplied. What could easily have been a very difficult period for the church, became a time of both consolidation and growth, numerically and spiritually.

It gradually became clear that the Pastor would not return to health quickly and would be unable to fulfil his Pastoral ministry in Moira. At the end of April 2003, his eight-year ministry formally concluded. David and Joanna continue to be a part of Moira Baptist where they still enjoy the love, support and practical care of a church with a heart and where they still do what they can to serve the Lord.

We were blessed through a number of men, with years of Pastoral experience, moving to Moira and joining the church. They provide much helpful, consecutive ministry and their fellowship and advice is greatly appreciated.

A growing church required additional deacons; the eldership was increased to four and many members took on extra responsibilities. Attendances increased, making it imperative that the balcony was completed, so giving us almost 100 extra seats in the building. A vision for outreach grew, with quite a number of members getting involved in reaching out with the Gospel at home and abroad. One particular ministry that impacts our village is Megalife Ministries, where Wilson Archer and his team are being salt and light late at nights on the streets of Moira. Simon Mawhinney entered Belfast Bible College and Mark Steele completed his training at the Irish Baptist College. Mark was commissioned to the ministry in April 2005. He and

Heather and family have spent almost two years in England and we are delighted to know the Lord is leading them home to ministry in Sion Mills in 2007.

For years our accommodation for children and young people had been "bursting at the seams." Sunday School, Bible Class, Youth clubs, Youth fellowship, Crèche, Children's church and Parent and Toddler group all desperately needed more space and resources. In 2006 we added a wonderful suite of additional accommodation, marvellously equipped with the technology and resources useful for a growing church. The Car park was extended and resurfaced. What a far cry from the days of a leaking portable building and a draughty caravan in a windswept field! God's provision has been good.

Membership has increased, despite a number of members moving away from the district and at the end of 2006, 121 members are now on the roll. There is a growing commitment to prayer with meetings well attended and home study groups, with people hungry to know more of God, have grown in number and enthusiasm. More members than ever before are involved in all aspects of ministry. Souls have been saved and added to the church. Some of those born since the formation of the church are today saved and active in the Lord's work here. After years of sowing the seed of the Word, we wait patiently for God to bring in His harvest.

Throughout the years since 2003, the burden of the Elders has been to seek God's face for a Pastor to come to Moira. Our Elders are to be commended for their godly devotion to this task in addition to all the extra responsibilities that a pastoral vacancy has brought upon them. The Church has faithfully supported and encouraged them, as they wait with patience and expectancy for the Lord's direction to the man of His choosing.

Twenty years may seem such a short time to celebrate, and yet for us it is a marvellous landmark to the glory of God and a wonderful encouragement to spend our lives for His glory in our community. May God keep us faithful and true.

Let us give glory to God alone;

"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty. Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. We adore you as the one who is over all things.

Wealth and honour come from you alone, for you rule over everything. Power and might are in your hand, and at your discretion people are made great and given strength.

O our God, we thank you and praise your glorious name!" 1 Chron. 29:11-13.