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## 1 Introduction

This book is about Presbyterians and identity in contemporary Ireland. Topics explored include politics and culture; the influence of life history and geographical location; educational issues and inter-Church relations; the Orange Order; the ministry; social and moral issues; roles of women; and the future for the Church and for Ireland.

I approach this study as a Presbyterian, a sociologist and a feminist. I was brought up as a Presbyterian until the age of fifteen; I then left to join another Church. I started the study as a member of a charismatic house church, but during the course of the work my family and I returned to the Presbyterian Church and became communicant members of a congregation in Belfast.

The book is based on some 120 in-depth interviews with ministers and individuals from twenty-five different congregations across Ireland, both North and South of the border. Ministers were selected, and then up to five members of certain congregations were interviewed and questioned about the same issues, to facilitate a comparative analysis. Some individuals were interviewed without the minister being in the sample; and some ministers were interviewed without members of their congregation being included. Interviews took place in a wide range of urban and rural settings, in both the North and South. People were interviewed in all of the six Northern counties: Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry; and in the South, congregations are described in broad groupings of border, Donegal, and Dublin and Munster.

The names of the people involved have been changed and any obvious identifiers have altered or removed to protect their identities. The names of most ministers have not been changed, where they have given their consent. A few ministers chose to withdraw from the study altogether. Some ministers asked to remain anonymous, and in those cases, and where

comments from them or others may be sensitive, I have provided a rough description of the area of the country they are in, to enable the reader to understand the context while not identifying the individuals concerned.

The purpose of the study is to promote understanding of Presbyterians today in the North and South of Ireland, and to give voice to the views of ordinary members. It is also to explore Presbyterian identity, and whether that identity can transcend political boundaries and allegiances. Presbyterians are part of a majority in the North, but constitute only a small minority in the South. The range of issues studied relate to the social, political and cultural identity of Irish Presbyterians. The study seeks to explore the impact of Presbyterianism on a person's life and world view.

Questions posed include what it means to belong to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) at the start of the twenty-first century: is there a belief system associated with the denomination; what are the cultural values associated with the Church; how does nationality operate within a united denomination but a politically divided island; how are moral issues dealt with in different areas; are there differences between the North and South; how do Presbyterians see their relationships within the denomination and with the Roman Catholic community; is there a place for integrated education; what are attitudes to inter-Church marriages and inter-Church services? The role of ministers within the Church and views on their involvement in the political realm is also addressed specifically, as is the question of whether a minister should be an Orangeman or a Freemason. Finally, we look at hopes and aspirations for Ireland and the Presbyterian Church in the future.

The membership of the Presbyterian Church in 2005 stood at 270,753, representing almost one in five of the population of Northern Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland there were 12,909 Presbyterians, around one in every 300 of the population. Presbyterians are to be found mainly in the border counties of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, but with some notable exceptions further south. Throughout the twentieth century there has been a steady numerical decline in numbers of Presbyterians in the Republic. In 1939, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland had thirty-three Presbyteries, nine of them in Southern Ireland, and Derry Presbytery had many churches in the Republic. The total number of families in the Republic claiming connection with the church was 7,518. By contrast, in 1999, the Church had only three Presbyteries in the South, and Derry Presbytery had fewer churches in the Republic. The total number of families claiming a connection was 4,658.

In the North, the majority of Presbyterians live in Belfast or its surrounding area; indeed, almost half of the total Church membership lives

within fifteen miles of the centre of Belfast. The uneven spread of Presbyterians is a result of the Ulster Plantation, the British governmentsponsored emigration of settlers from England, and particularly from Scotland. In this study, a number of border churches were selected in order to gain a clearer perspective on the lives of Southern Presbyterians. Although the number of families claiming connection with the Church in Northern Ireland increased by 23 per cent between 1939 and 1999, church attendance has fallen during this period. However, there has been a marked reduction in the number of families claiming a connection with the Church between 1990 and 2005. In 1990 there were 106,669 families in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and thirteen years later there were 92,233, a fall of 13.53 per cent, or about 1 per cent per year.

The Church has 550 congregations grouped into twenty-one districts called Presbyteries. There are five synods which are under the chief court of the Church, the General Assembly. Synods are being phased out. The General Assembly meets once a year and is attended by ministers - an elder from each congregation and a few others – and makes decisions by democratic vote. There are three Presbyteries in the city of Belfast, with seventy-five congregations and almost 30 per cent of the total membership of the Church. There are three Presbyteries in the Republic, with 104 congregations, representing 5 per cent of the overall membership. In the largest congregations there are around 4,000 people, but most have between 300 and 600 people. There are about 390 ministers in congregations, and thirty assistants. There are forty other ministers in special ministries, such as professors or administrators, and about 137 retired from active duty. Around twenty women serve as ministers in congregations, around 5 per cent of the total for active ministers, some assisting and others in training. There are around 7,000 ruling elders who serve in a spiritual capacity on the Kirk Session (elected governing council) of each congregation. On Sunday mornings, around 100,000 people attend worship, while around 15,000 attend evening services. Churches hold a host of other midweek activities for children, young people, and older members, as well as women's groups, prayer meetings and Bible studies.

Identity is a key concept in this study. Identity means standing out: being different and through that difference unique - so the search for identity can only act to divide and separate people (Bauman, 2001; p. 16). The study explores what makes Presbyterians different and unique.

Chapter 2 briefly describes the theoretical context of the study in postmodernity and addresses some questions related to the role of sociological analysis. Readers who are not interested in the theoretical base of the study may wish to omit this chapter and proceed with the rest of the book. Chapter 3 explores the life histories of a selection of the ministers and some of the people, in relation both to the Church and to their personal life. Biography is an important element in this study, as it places respondents' views in a personal, social and historical context. It also addresses their identity in terms of their perception of evangelical or liberal outlooks on Christianity. It addresses their perceptions of Presbyterian identity in relation to themselves and others, and its meaning to the individual. It starts with a contrasting interview from the point of view of the 'other', with an interview with a Sinn Fein counsellor, Eoin O'Broin. It then goes on to describe biography in relation to personal history as exemplified by Hugo Hamilton. Because of sensitivities in political and religious matters, only a few biographical sketches have been included in the book.

Chapter 4 deals with aspects of identity, with particular attention being paid to values and ideals, and moral attitudes. Values and ideals are explored via portraits of John Calvin and John Knox, the founding fathers of Presbyterianism. A brief history of Irish Presbyterianism since partition is included. A description of Church structures, boards and government, and attitudes to minister's dress and types of worship within the Church is then covered. The views of ministers and individual worshippers on premarital sex, gambling and abortion are also briefly reviewed.

Chapters 5 and 6 deal with a brief twentieth-century history of Irish politics, with particular emphasis on the role of Presbyterians, and some views on relations between the Catholic Church and the Irish state, and how these were perceived by Presbyterians. In these chapters we examine the relationship between Presbyterians and politics in Ireland, North and South, in a historical context, the attitudes of Presbyterians to the Orange Order, the use of flags in church services, and the statements of the Church on the Northern Ireland situation and Presbyterian perceptions of prejudice.

In Chapter 7, concepts of nationality, culture and identity are explored. Presbyterians are asked about their perceived nationalities and concepts of Britishness and Irishness, and indeed a European identity. We look at debates on language and literature, notably Presbyterians and the Irish language, Ulster-Scots, and preferences in music and dance. The aim of this chapter is to give a comprehensive picture of the political and cultural identities of Presbyterians both North and South of the border.

Chapter 8 deals with inter-Church marriage, integrated education and inter-Church services. Views of ministers and people are reviewed, together with some of the main issues and debates surrounding community relations and related ecumenical matters.

Chapter 9 looks into a variety of ministry issues: views on training for the ministry at Union College, Belfast; conflict between the academic and the practical; the adaptation of the ministry to the modern world; and the qualities of a good minister. I also examine views on whether ministers ought to be Masons or Orangemen; Church policy on women ministers; the views of respondents on women ministers and a discussion on the perception of women's roles within the church; and the role and function of the Moderator, the leader selected for a year by the nomination of Presbyteries, is discussed, including questions of power and media representation.

Chapter 10 outlines respondents' views on the future of Ireland, and the future of the denomination is discussed, while Chapter 11 summarizes and concludes the study.

The aim of the book is to give a comprehensive view of Presbyterian people in Ireland today. It sets people's values and politics in the context of their family histories, political developments, economic developments and attitudes to the Roman Catholic Church. Modern Ireland has come a long way from the time of partition, and today is becoming much more secular, and traditional communities are changing. Since the completion of the interviews, devolved government has returned to Northern Ireland, and the views expressed on the political situation predate this remarkable step forward. Presbyterians face challenges as change occurs, but it also presents new opportunities. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland's motto is Ardens sed Virens, which translates from the Latin as 'Burning but Living'. This study seeks to let the people speak about what is important to them at the start of the twenty-first century.

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