

From Reformed Presbytery to Reformed Presbyterian Synod

The following article was delivered as a short address at the 200th anniversary Synod held in Cullybackey on 14 June 2011

When the twelve ministers and nine elders, representing nearly 30 congregations and preaching stations, gathered in Cullybackey on 1 May 1811, it would have seemed scarcely believable to the older among them that their Church was in this position. Twenty years earlier there was not even a Reformed Presbytery in Ireland. Now there were four presbyteries and a Synod. What had led to this state of affairs?

In reviewing the previous half century of Covenanter witness in Ireland, we may note that the first Irish Reformed Presbytery that had been established in 1763 was dissolved in 1779. Its collapse was the result of several factors, including the emigration to America of several of its ministers and the deaths of a number of others in the late 1770s. With a depleted ministry the church decided to transfer its official administration to the Scottish Reformed Presbytery and a standing committee took care of local matters in Ireland.

Despite losing its independence the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland continued to grow as new congregations were founded and new ministers ordained. The efforts of William Stavely stand out in particular. From his base at Knockbracken Stavely ministered over a vast area stretching from Donaghadee to County Cavan and was responsible for organising a further five congregations, earning himself the epithet *'The Apostle of the Covenanters'*. In December 1792, with six ministers and twelve congregations, the Irish Reformed Presbytery was reorganized by the Scottish Reformed Presbytery.

The 1790s were to be difficult years for the Covenanters. Many within the Reformed Presbyterian Church found it impossible to, as one historian has put it, 'escape the revolutionary contagion'. In 1793, for instance, Rev. James McKinney of Dervock and Kilraughts preached a sermon on the 'Rights of God'. This was denounced by the authorities as treasonable and McKinney was forced to flee to America to escape arrest. Another caught up in these revolutionary times who was forced to seek refuge in America was William Gibson whose ministry in Cullybackey ended in 1797 when he was forced to flee to America following his refusal to take the oath of allegiance. (In God's providence, the departure of these men from Ireland strengthened the position of the Covenanters in the United States and in February 1798 the Reformed Presbytery of America was constituted at Philadelphia by McKinney and Gibson along with a number of ruling elders.)

Even more so than any of his ministerial colleagues, Rev. William Stavely was drawn into the political and revolutionary intrigue of the time. To the authorities Stavely was a figure of suspicion and he was arrested and imprisoned on a number of occasions, though no charges were ever proven against him. Though vindicated, Stavely's relationship with his congregation at Knockbracken had been pushed to breaking point by recent events, and in 1800 he moved to the joint congregation of Cullybackey and Kellswater. This was where he had been born and raised and it provided him with an opportunity to make a fresh start after the difficulties of the 1790s. Here he enjoyed a successful ministry until his death in 1825.

By 1800, although the number of congregations had increased to nearly thirty, there were only three ministers – Stavely, William Gamble of Ballygey and Letterkenny, and Joseph Orr of the Bannside congregation, each of whom had a very heavy workload. The work of these ministers was somewhat alleviated by the ordination of ten new ministers between 1802 and 1809. If the foundations had been laid in earlier times, there is no denying that the first decade of the 1800s was a time of real growth for the Irish Reformed Presbyterian Church.

One was the theological conservatism of the Covenanters. Within the Presbyterian Church there was a tendency towards theological liberalism. Arianism, with its denial that Jesus Christ was divine in the same way as the Father, was prevalent among Presbyterian ministers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The faithfulness with which Covenanter ministers preached the Gospel stood out clearly and was not lost on those around them. The great nineteenth-century Presbyterian historian James Seaton Reid acknowledges '*the fidelity with which their ministers preached the peculiar doctrines of the Gospel was unquestionably the grand secret of their progress.*'

A further reason was the acceptance of the *Regium Donum* or royal bounty by the ministers of the Secession Church in 1785. Hitherto both Covenanters and Seceders had denounced this monetary offering, which was paid to ministers of the Presbyterian Church, on the grounds that it was being offered by an uncovenanted monarchy. The error of the Secession Church in accepting the *Regium Donum* was further compounded when it asked for an increased grant in 1809 in return for swearing the oath of allegiance. This was regarded as a betrayal of principle and many Seceders turned to the Reformed Presbyterian Church as the only denomination that had consistently refused this bribe. In 1806, for example, the Secession congregation of Drumillar, near Scarva, applied to join the Reformed Presbytery. In 1810 several Seceder families in the Coleraine area joined the Covenanters giving as their reason the defection from its principles of their former Church 'for the sake of filthy lucre'.

With the increase in the number of congregations and ministers, the Irish Reformed Presbytery

began to discuss ways in which it could be reorganised to take account of these changes. This matter was first discussed by the Reformed Presbytery in March 1810 and again at the August meeting of that year. It was finally decided at a meeting in Maghera on 7 November 1810 to divide the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland into four presbyteries, to be called simply the Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western presbyteries, and to form a synod which would have oversight of the presbyteries. It was also agreed at this meeting that Rev. William Stavely, minister of the then united congregations of Cullybackey and Kellswater, and the longest-serving Covenanter minister, would act as moderator at the first meeting of Synod.

In reflecting on the decision to choose Stavely as the first moderator of Synod, Professor Adam Loughridge has written:

It was fitting that William Stavely, upon whose shoulders there had rested so long the burden of leadership in the Church, should be the first moderator of Synod. He had served the Church well when it was in a disorganised state from 1779 to 1792. Now he saw his work crowned with a programme of expansion and organisation that reached its climax with the constitution of the Synod.

On the appointed day Synod convened and in his sermon to the assembled ministers and elders Stavely preached from Hebrews 3 v. 6:

But Christ as a son over His own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

The court having been constituted by him, Stavely stood down and Rev. William Gamble of Ballygey and Letterkenny was appointed moderator for the remainder of the proceedings. It has been suggested that Stavely as the local minister wished to be free of official responsibilities, though it might also have been the case that Stavely wished to see Gamble's many years of faithful service recognised by the Church. The first clerk of Synod was Stavely's son, Rev. William John Stavely of Kilraughts and Dervock. At this time there were fifteen students for the ministry at various stages in their studies and among the items under consideration at the inaugural Synod was the implementation of a uniform system of education.

It may be observed in closing that the American Reformed Presbyterian Church had formed a Synod in 1809 and the Scottish Church in 1811. These were indeed remarkable times for Covenanters.