

Cramond Kirk minister to become Moderator



Reverend Dr Russell Barr has many qualifications to become Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, but one of them has to be that he chose somewhere really original for his first press call.

The press convened this morning at the Tardis that is the distribution centre for Fresh Start, a charity which Dr Barr founded in 1999. A small door on Ferry Road Drive enters into a deceptively large space where much good work is done for those who have experienced homelessness. They offer starter packs for former homeless people who are setting up their new homes. A starter pack includes essentials such as cooking utensils and cleaning stuff to help with the first few days in a new environment. The charity also works in partnership with Edinburgh organisations such as Bethany, the Rock Trust and Cyrenians who might be in a better position to offer help.

The idea for the charity came from Barr's meeting with Sam who was homeless and who had been allocated a flat but could not afford to buy anything to turn it into a home.

Barr has just stepped down as Chair of the charity earlier this year, but it is clear that he knows a lot about homelessness and what causes it. He said : "Homelessness is a damning indictment on our modern society. It is a disgrace and should not happen in the UK which is the fifth richest economy in the world.



Rev Dr Russell Barr will be installed as Moderator of the General Assembly of the

Church of Scotland on 21 May when they meet in Edinburgh.

He continued: "Reality is very challenging. It is not fun being homeless. It is a dispiriting situation. But with some support most people can pick up the threads of their lives again. At Fresh Start one particular story that we love is of a guy who now runs a garage. He serviced our vehicles and did not charge for labour when he sent in his invoice. We only realised later that he was a former client of the charity, and this was his way of paying back.

"I long to live in a modern and progressive Scotland, but with homelessness still at the levels that they were 20 years ago then it is clear that we have work to do. Tackling the obscenity of homelessness must be a key priority for the Scottish and UK Governments because if you believe in a progressive modern Scotland you must make sure that people are properly housed.

"The people you see on the street are just the tip of the iceberg. Lots of research has been done about relationship breakdown and substance abuse, but poverty is the basic underlying cause.

"If you look around you what you will see here are the starter packs which our volunteers prepare. On the other side of the room there are training bays where some of our volunteers can learn to paint. So they will be helped to learn how to paint and decorate their new home. Nobody will do it for them, but they will learn what to do."

Barr is the latest in a line of five former pupils from Kilmarnock Academy who have gone on to become Moderator including Rt Rev Lorna Hood who was Moderator till 2015. Although he left school with no qualifications at all he has gone on to receive a doctorate from Princeton Theology Seminary in the US. He first attended the University of

Edinburgh where he studied History and Philosophy and graduated with both an honours degree and a masters degree in Theology from New College. His epiphany came from meeting Bill Hodgson a history teacher who made Barr realise his academic potential and that he could pass exams.

Now the Moderator designate has been invited back to his old school Kilmarnock Academy to hand out the prizes this summer!

[Fresh Start](#) began when a group of Edinburgh's churches got together to find ways of helping those who had been homeless and last year they handed out 11,000 starter packs.

The man who will be Moderator on Saturday said that he finds his position at the moment both exciting and daunting, but although a bit nervous he is definitely looking forward to the new job.

He told The Edinburgh Reporter : "I have a background as a parish minister, and that has always been my life so I hope I can draw on some of the experiences I have had working in three very different parishes in Easterhouse, Greenock and Cramond.

"In particular I am interested in the training of students and candidate ministers and I hope that I can encourage that. I am also keen to expand the engagement of the church in its wider community.

"Around us is Fresh Start the charity that I founded in 1999, which provides a number of services for people who have been homeless. It helps people make a new home for themselves and that engagement with local congregations and their local community, meeting some of the needs that people have is something I like to encourage too."

Stewart Ferguson Operations Manager at Fresh Start said that Russell had been inspiring as Chair of the charity: "Russell began the charity and has stayed with it throughout his time

at Cramond. He has helped us enormously with his connections across the church community. HE is a well kent face among staff and volunteers here at Fresh Start”

In his younger days Dr Barr was an aspiring golfer and he says he will draw on his sporting past both as a golfer and a rugby referee in his new role.

The parish of Cramond will be 'empty' for the year that Rev Dr Barr is Moderator, but it will not be unattended as the parish will be covered by Rev Tom Cuthell who was one of Barr's supervisors.

Dr Barr is married to Margaret a retired secondary school teacher and they have a son Robert and a daughter Lindsey. He has three grandchildren Eva, Caterina and Alessandro.

