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Church rejects 'Chuckle brother' Paisley

David Sharrock, Ireland Correspondent

The Rev Ian Paisley, who forged a formidable political career on the back of his fundamentalist Free Presbyterian Church, was contemplating the end of his role as a religious leader this weekend.

The writing on the wall has been there for all to see since he entered into a power-sharing government with Sinn Fein. Mr Paisley, the Democratic Unionist leader and Northern Ireland First Minister, has discovered that his church followers are not prepared to allow him to ride two horses at the same time.

In the end he was forced, against his own expectations, to choose between politics - and the compromises it entails with people he used to call unrepentant terrorists - or the purity of his church's evangelical beliefs.

The surprise came at a five-hour meeting on Friday night, at which church elders were expected to reconfirm him as moderator, a role he has held since he founded the Free Presbyterians 56 years ago. Instead, in the early hours of Saturday, the Rev Ron Johnston, the deputy moderator, announced that Mr Paisley would be standing down in January.

'In January all offices will be vacated. Dr Paisley has indicated that he will not be standing for the office of moderator of presbytery,' Mr Johnston said.

Before the meeting sources close to Mr Paisley had said that they expected no surprises, in spite of growing dissent at the perceived enthusiasm he has shown for his government partner Martin McGuinness, a former chief of staff of the Provisional IRA. The frequent sight of the two men clearly enjoying one another's company at official engagements has led them to be nicknamed 'the Chuckle Brothers'.

A spokeswoman for Mr Paisley said that 'it was his decision and he is very happy' to depart in January. But other sources painted a different picture, with the First Minister being told that unless he jumped he would face a challenge for the top post in the Free Presbyterians and a humiliating defeat.

A dozen protesters demonstrated outside Friday's meeting, handing out leaflets that posed the question: 'Is Ian Paisley a liar or a traitor?'

The leaflets say: 'Ian Paisley's own words stand as a condemnation to him. He is guilty of all that he accused others of being guilty of. There's only one thing left for Ian Paisley to do: repent.'

In November, the Rev Ivan Foster, a Free Presbyterian minister, former Democratic Unionist officer and close friend of Mr Paisley, urged him to reject Mr McGuinness, 'one who is guilty of the bloodshedding of so many of our fellow countrymen'. He wrote in a letter: 'A Paisley-McGuinness partnership would be utterly heartbreaking and incompatible with your duties as moderator of our church.'

The decision is a blow to Mr Paisley's prestige within his grassroots following and suggests that, at 81, and with the biggest decision of his life now behind him, he may soon begin to withdraw from public life. He has already acquired a retirement home on the North Down coast.

He stood down as an MEP in 2004. His successor, Jim McAllister, fell out with him over going into government with Sinn Fein and has left the DUP, and a dozen DUP councillors have also gone independent.

Mr Paisley's son, also called Ian and a junior minister in the First Minister's Office, is being groomed to take over his Westminster seat of North Antrim.

By standing down Mr Paisley has avoided a damaging split in his church. But by finally accepting a separation of church and party he is reluctantly preparing the ground for further seismic changes in Unionist politics once he has stepped down.