

25 March 2022

Dear friends,

At it's meeting at the start of March the Presbytery of Gordon, of which we are a member congregation, was presented with a draft Presbytery Mission Plan which is currently under discussion and will be adopted at the May meeting of Presbytery. Often things that happen at the regional and national level of the church don't affect us too much at our local church level but in the case of the Presbytery Mission Plan the effects will be felt by every congregation and every member. You may have read for example in the P&J that roughly 20 church buildings are due to be closed in our area. You may also have read in November last year that the beautiful, ancient Brechin Cathedral is to be disposed of by the Church of Scotland. These changes to the church are taking place all over Scotland and it's not just about buildings – it's about ministers too. In this month's Pastoral Letter I would like to bring you all up to speed with the changes that are afoot and how they will impact our life and worship at Kintore Parish Church.

Background

Without dwelling too much on the history and causes of the current changes I will just note that Christianity in general and church attendance in particular has been on the decline in the Western world since the 1960's. The Church of Scotland has not been immune to this trend. In the decade since 2010 our membership nationally has decreased by 25% from 400,000 to 300,000. We are facing a similar drop in ministers from 800 to 600. Added to that, for complicated historical reasons dating all the way back to 1843, the Church of Scotland has roughly twice as many buildings as it actually needs. And while that sounds like a good thing – we have all these wonderful property assets all over the country, the family silver handed down to us by previous generations – the truth is that many of those buildings are underutilised, of no commercial value and are actually costing us money to keep.

In 2018 a 10-year Radical Action Plan was presented to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to try to respond to the changes we are facing. The General Assembly rejected the plan as not being radical enough. In 2019 a revised plan – a 3-year plan – was presented and accepted by the church. Some of the details of the plan don't affect you and me directly – things like the structure of the church's committees and the amalgamation of Presbyteries (our regional councils) into fewer, larger bodies.

Presbytery Mission Plan

What does affect us though is that in 2020 all Presbytery plans across the country were suspended and Presbyteries were given until the end of 2022 to revise their plans. The Presbytery Plan regulates how many buildings we need (or can afford) and how to distribute the number of ministers we have available to us around the Presbytery.

In the case of our presbytery (Gordon), 20 of the 52 buildings across our Presbytery are slated to be closed (and a further 3 are under review). Our buildings at Kintore are not among those identified for closure. The total number of ministers in our Presbytery will drop from 20 at present to just 11 plus 5 additional ministerial posts made up of half-time positions and development workers over a 5-year period.

At Kintore, we have been placed in an area grouping with the congregations of Kemnay, Cluny, Monymusk and Echt & Midmar and Blairdaff/Chapel of Garioch. Currently this grouping has 4 ministers but the new Presbytery Mission Plan has allocated just 2 ministers and 1 Ministries Development Staff post for the future, with the intention that we make the reduction within the next 5 years.

From Area Group to United Congregation

With the closure of two of the buildings in our grouping we will be left with 6 worship places and just two ministers. The question then, is how to provide ministry to so many places with so few ministers.

Within our area grouping we began working together during lockdown to produce a weekly online worship service which is available on all of our websites. If you have been in worship on a Sunday this past year you will be familiar with the faces of Revs Euan Glen, Sheila Mitchell, Joshua Mikelson and myself and Tose along with Stella Gauld from Blairdaff/Chapel of Garioch who appear in the weekly “Blether” where we share news from the various congregations. We also established a steering group comprising ministers and Elders from each congregation to begin working on a model for future teamwork that could form the basis of covenant agreement between us.

As we looked for a model for collaboration we were guided by 2 principles: 1) to work together; and 2) to try to maintain a “missional presence” in each of our existing parishes. i.e. even if there isn’t a church building in every one of our villages and towns, folks there will have somewhere local to meet with fellow Christians for worship, study and fellowship. As we looked at the various options for adjustment open to us it became clear that the only reasonable way forward was to form a united congregation with a team of ministers. A model for such a parish structure has already been tried on Shetland and there are an increasing number of churches around the country considering this option.

What a union would mean is that there would be just one parish (the frontrunner for a name for the new parish is “West Garioch Parish Church”) with one membership list and one set of finances but with 6 places of worship – each with a Local Leadership Team to arrange local affairs. Ministers would work together in a team ministry across the whole parish sharing responsibility for worship, pastoral care, leadership, chaplaincy, etc. We would start with a team of 4 ministers with the plan for this number to reduce to 2 (plus an extra ministry staff member) over the next 5 years. I’m aware that the concept of team ministry is rare in the Church of Scotland and many of you may not have seen it in practice before. Luckily 3 of the 4 current ministers in the group have worked in team ministries elsewhere and we are actually quite excited about the prospect of working together.

This change in ministry is probably however the biggest change that we will have to come to terms with at Kintore (bearing in mind others will be losing their buildings too). It will mean that I will not be minister at Kintore exclusively but that I will also have responsibility for the other churches in the group. On the other hand it also means that you will gain 3 new ministers (at least initially). It will also mean that ministers will preach around the different churches on a rota and that in time we will begin to make use of lay worship leaders and new ways to use technology to share services. It may also mean that there will not necessarily be worship at Kintore every Sunday and that from time to time we will be invited to share worship with other communities in the group.

Our Kirk Session (the Elders at Kintore who lead us) is keeping a close eye on developments and participating in the conversation about the union. All of the Kirk Sessions in the group have agreed in principle to support a journey towards union but, as you will appreciate there are quite a few details that we need to clarify before we give the final nod to the union. As the move to a union would affect the ministry of the church, the congregation will also need to agree to the change for us to implement it. We anticipate that the Kirk Session will bring a proposal to that effect to a special meeting of the congregation in the second half of this year. I would therefore ask you to commit the matter to prayer and to use the next few months to ask questions about the coming changes. The Elders and I will be happy to hear your questions, concerns and suggestions.

With much love,
Rev Neil Meyer

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