



The Church of Scotland

These Q&As were initially compiled from notes of informal meetings attended by church members in May-June 2022. Questions raised by email and at a further meeting in 2023 have been added. Some of the original responses included 'details not yet known'. These have been updated where additional information is now available.

Background

The Church of Scotland currently faces interlinked challenges that have been growing over a number of years: membership, ministers and money income are all falling. Action plans have been initiated centrally (reduced employees, reorganised structures), at Presbytery level (mergers; devolved responsibilities, additional support staff) and within Presbyteries (new Presbytery Mission Plan (PMP) with a 5-year timescale from 1 Jan 2023; existing Parishes grouped to develop ways of working together; reductions in ministerial positions; unsuitable buildings taken out of use and sold).

Discussions among the 6 current Parishes in our Grouping (Blairdaff/Chapel of Garioch; Cluny & Monymusk; Echt/Midmar; Kemnay; Kintore) about ways to ensure there is ongoing ministry and a missional Christian presence for the whole area have resulted in a proposal for a single Parish with a Team Ministry. These proposals for the union of the congregations and for the establishment of a team ministry have been approved by all the Kirk Sessions of the Congregations involved.

The public meetings were held to learn what questions members have and to provide answers where possible.

Questions raised 1 May 2022 (~25 in person)

Q1.1 Will there be in-person Sunday morning worship each week in Kintore?

A. In general, yes. Though we have held united worship at a single location when there is a 5th Sunday in the month (about 4 times a year). This has helped congregations to build some new links and we plan to continue.

Q1.2 Will this worship be led by a minister?

A. Currently there are 5 ministers for the 6 worship locations, but this is due to reduce to 2.5 over the 5 years, so other arrangements will be needed. Options include: Ministers conducting several services at different locations; Lay leaders, as for many years for our Summer worship; Presbytery training for Worship Leaders (a Presbytery course in mid- 2022, including attendees from Kintore); streamed services that combine in-person local leadership and an online sermon.

Q1.3 Which church buildings in our Grouping will close?

A. Midmar, Blairdaff – their congregations have planned this for some time – and Cluny, a more recent decision. The Blairdaff/Chapel of Garioch manse will be sold.

Q1.4 Will streamed services continue?

A. Yes, though technical details need to be agreed – currently some use Zoom, some Facebook, etc. Jim Buchan (Kemnay) has reviewed what changes would improve consistency and ease of operations.

Q1.5 Will 'our minister' be available for personal discussion about pastoral matters?

Kintore Parish Church – proposed united Parish Q&As

A. Not always – due to holidays, other personal commitments, etc. At present, when that is the case our Church Secretary knows who is providing cover, and there will be similar arrangements for the Ministry Team, via a single ‘admin contact’ email/phone. Also, as people get to know all ministers in the team, each of them will hopefully be seen as ‘one of our ministers’. Advantages of a team arrangement include making use of personal strengths and supporting each other – though team ministry is relatively rare in CofS, Neil, Joshua and Sheila all have very positive personal experience of it elsewhere.

Q1.6 Will a local group be able to fund raise for a specific cause or project?

A. Yes, in principle. But, just as at present, a process will be needed to obtain suitable approvals. For example, if it were for a property project, above a certain limit it would require approval by Presbytery as well as Session. A similar approvals process would be needed if someone offered to make a significant donation for a project they specified.

Q1.7 When will we unite?

A. Current plan is September 2023, provided all six sessions and congregations vote for union. The proposed ‘Basis of Union’ and ‘Basis of Team Ministry’ documents have been informally reviewed already by Presbytery and the General Trustees, so there should be no delay in their formal approval. Joint teams are working on details of the various practical changes that need to be in place ahead of formal union (e.g. a single charity number and main bank account) though fully implementing those will take place over a period, not all at once. The current Presbytery Mission Plan (PMP) has a 5-year timescale to end-2027, so that is the target for completing the building closures and reductions of minister numbers.

Q1.8 Can external groups continue to use our halls?

A. Yes, very much so. The rental fees are a beneficial income stream.

Questions raised on 15 May 2022 (9 by Zoom, 5 in person)

Q2.1 Will people have to travel to worship?

A. As far as possible we will try to keep worship opportunities local. Some worship places will however close (Q1.3), though Echt/Midmar, Cluny & Monymusk and Blairdaff/Chapel of Garioch all already move worship between their buildings. There will also be occasional opportunities for us to worship together as, for example, with our current joint services whenever there is a 5th Sunday in a month. In such cases people will have to travel to worship.

Q2.2 Will ministers move around?

A. Yes. All ministers in the team (initially 4, plus Tose while with us) will provide ministry for the whole Parish, including worship.

Q2.3 How will we reduce to the planned 2.5 ministers?

A. The initial plan covers 5 years, and it would be in stages by ‘natural wastage’ – leavers would not be replaced – for example Euan Glen will reach retirement age in that period. Presbytery recognised the need to train additional worship leaders (see Q1.2).

Q2.4 Uniting presents an opportunity to share insights like Growing Together with others?

**Kintore Parish Church – proposed united Parish
Q&As**

A. Absolutely, a good example. A group is already meeting to consider shared youth activities. Kemnay have a Lunch Club, so maybe we could transport people there rather than restarting our own? Other sharing opportunities include support for charities – Christian Aid, Aberdeenshire North Food Bank, etc.

Q2.5 Won't the workload be too much for the reduced number of ministers?

A. It could be, and the same applies for our volunteers. We need to be realistic and stop some activities – that applies for the whole CofS. But we can train people in some areas, e.g. worship leaders (see Q2.3). Also the overall CofS plan includes some centrally-funded specialist positions at Presbytery level (Mission Development Staff – MDS, and one of these is allocated half-time to our united parish.).

Q2.6a What happens to the unused buildings?

A. In principle they will be sold – including some manses and halls. Some are not in good condition, so not worth much, though we won't have to continue to spend on their maintenance!

Q2.6b How will that money be used?

A. The General Trustees are the legal owners and will manage sales. They then hold the proceeds centrally, usable for the benefit of the new Parish.

Q2.7 Will there be a single Session?

A. Yes, they will be the Trustees of the resulting single charity. They will have strong links with 'Local Leadership Teams' (LLTs) responsible for activities requiring local knowledge and resources. A group is working on how some Session responsibilities will be delegated to the LLTs.

Initially all current Elders will be members of the new Session. However, there is CofS guidance on the need to ensure Sessions are effective and of an appropriate size and composition. An early task for the united Session will be to decide how best to ensure that. Until recently we understood such details had to be in place as part of the Basis of Union and the joint Steering Group agreed a model, so that should aid the discussion.

Q2.8 How will buildings be managed?

A. No details yet. Requires a mix of local knowledge and resources for 'routine' matters, with Session oversight for the bigger issues. There is already a Presbytery Buildings Officer who led the buildings audit of all worship places and halls that was a key input to the Presbytery Mission Plan. He is a source of expertise and has signposted our current Property Convenor to specific CofS resources for some current queries.

Q2.9 How will the Team Ministry operate? Will there be a single Parish Minister?

A. The *Basis of Team Ministry* document outlines the working arrangements and relationships between the ministers and, since almost all of it is pro-forma, the ministers worked together to draft the details. Team Ministry is relatively rare in CofS, but three of the four ministers in our Group have experience of it elsewhere. They desire to work as a team, have been doing so and are experiencing some of the benefits even though it's not a formal arrangement. Under current CofS legislation there must be an appointed Moderator, the current ministers have agreed together that Neil will be the named Moderator of the Kirk Session, however it

Kintore Parish Church – proposed united Parish Q&As

is their intention to work collegially rather than hierarchically. The rules of the church allow for this so that, for example, the task of actually moderating Kirk Session meetings can be shared among the ministers in turn.

Q2.10 How will the Team approach be sustained over time?

- A. Both the current and future ministers will be appointed by the united congregation – hence the requirement for each of the six current congregations to vote on the *Basis of Team Ministry*. Potential future candidates will need to be sought with discernment by the Vacancy Committee and voted on wisely by the congregation.

Questions raised personally and by email after the *Bennachie Parish Church Union Prospectus* was issued to Kintore members and adherents, March 2023

Q3.1 Will a Moderator be required for the Team Ministry.

- A. Yes, see Q2.9 response, updated after the *Basis of Team Ministry* was available.

Q3.2 Will ‘downsides’ of the proposed union be documented and discussed before the vote at the congregations meeting?

- A. There are opportunities both previously in writing, at the meeting on 2 April and again at the Congregational Meeting on 23 April for anyone to raise specific concerns about “downsides” of a union. Session, in bringing the proposal of the union, is not doing so disinterestedly. We are doing so having wrestled with the matter for several years and having reached the position that a union is the only viable way forward that we can discern to ensure continuity of ministry and mission in the future, where fewer resources (human, financial and buildings) are available. If we had two or more equal or similar options to present to the congregation, we would do so. This does not mean we foresee no “downsides” to the union, but that we see them as challenges to overcome rather than reasons not to go forward with a union.

Questions and comments are welcome ahead of the vote. The advice we have been given by Presbytery about the meeting process and voting is that the question before the congregation will be for or against the *Basis of Union* as it stands. There is no limit on arguments for or against the union, but the meeting does not have the authority to amend the *Basis of Union* as it will be presented as a final document.

Q3.3 What preparations have been made in the event of a no vote?

- A. The Kirk Session do not see a viable alternative to what we are proposing and, if the congregation votes “No”, we would need to seek further guidance, which is why the Presbytery gets involved at that stage, as outlined on p8 of the Union Prospectus.

Questions raised 2 April 2023 (~30 in person, ~15 Zoom).

Introduction

Neil explained that two congregational votes are required, both by ballot, not show of hands. The **Basis of Union** is a legal document that allows the current Parishes to merge and become a single new Church of Scotland Parish of Bennachie. The first vote is for the acceptance of the Basis of Union in general (i.e. to accept the union in principle. The second vote is for Clause 8 of the document which lists the four current Ministers by name and establishes the initial Team Ministry. The way they will work together is defined in the **Basis of Team Ministry** legal document.

Kintore Parish Church – proposed united Parish Q&As

A draft Basis of Union was issued to members recently and we sought comments from Presbytery and the general Trustees (GT), the parties who have to approve the version voted on by each of the congregations involved before a Union can take place. Both Presbytery and GT required some changes, most were minor and matters of legal correctness. However, to ensure members are fully informed, the Basis of Union document will be reissued to all members, and adherents very soon. The Basis of Team Ministry documents will also be issued, as members have not previously seen that.

Because only church members and adherents can vote, the relevant lists will be available on 23 April, so names can be checked as the voting papers are issued.

Pastoral matters

Q4.1 Can there be a choice for which Team Minister takes a funeral?

- A. In general, yes, holidays and other personal commitments permitting. There will probably be a 'duty rota' operated by the Parish Admin centre but we would take account of existing relationships. Also, over time, we hope members will move from thinking of 'my Minister' towards 'my ministers'.

Q4.2 Will I still be visited by a Pastoral Visitor from my own area?

- A. Yes, the basis for pastoral care will be to use local resources and/or people known to members. But if someone moves from Kintore to, say, Kemnay by agreement they could still have their Kintore-based PV.

Note: Having Pastoral Visitors visiting locally will also help us to be eco-friendly.

Financial

Q4.3 In a Union all financial resources are pooled. So, if a group in Kintore wished to raise funds, would the amount raised go into that general pool or be kept separate.

- A. If funds are donated for a specified purpose, e.g. an external charity, they must be used only for that purpose. If the fund-raising were for a church project/activity then, just as now, Session would first have to approve any project/activity requiring significant expenditure

Q4.4 If in future someone from Kintore leaves a legacy, how would that be used.

- A. If it was just a legacy 'to Kintore Church', it would be held in the general Bennachie Parish unrestricted funds. But if it was specified for a specific purpose defined by the legatee, for example maintaining a gravestone, it would be in a restricted fund and could be used only for that purpose.

Voting

Q4.5 If I can't attend the meeting on 23 April, can I have a vote?

- A. CofS rules require attendance in person and no proxy votes can be made or counted – but folks present on Zoom will be able to vote.

Q4.6 I'm aware Session voted recent on the two documents, can you tell us the results?

- A. Session had two separate votes on the Basis of Union, just as the congregation will. Both parts were supported by a clear majority, though not unanimously. That support is why Session is now bringing the Basis of Union before members for their votes.

**Kintore Parish Church – proposed united Parish
Q&As**

Q4.7 Do the Elders also have a vote at the congregational meeting.

A. Yes, they are members too.

Q4.8 How do I know if I'm a church member? If I'm not, how do I become one?

A. If you are unsure, contact the Church Secretary, Session clerk or Minister as soon as possible (Jane, Ian, Neil). If you've been a member somewhere else, Session can approve a Certificate of Transfer though there is no planned Session meeting now until May. The same people can advise you how to obtain a Certificate.

Q4.9 I fully understand we can't just continue as now. But is there any real choice except a Union? If not, why do we need to vote?

A. Session has wrestled with these issues for around 3 years. We believe Ministers working together in a united parish is the only way to ensure ministry in Kintore for the foreseeable future. CofS legislation requires a congregational vote like this on specific matters and discussion ahead of that are perhaps a way to increase member 'buy-in' to the resulting changes even though it's not a choice between options.

Q4.10 Are all the votes in our Grouping on the same day?

A. No, because there aren't enough ministers for 6 simultaneous meetings. They are all scheduled after Sunday worship within the next few weeks.

Q4.11 What happens if one or more congregations votes against one or both of the Union proposals?

A. The Presbytery Planning & Deployment Committee would become involved. The planned Presbytery building closures and Minister numbers are now fixed for the 2023-28 period. So the onus would be on the congregation to propose a viable alternative within those limitations.

Ministers and staff numbers

Q4.12 When one of the 4 current Ministers retires or moves, how will they be replaced?

A. The current 5-year plan is for 2 full-time ministers plus a half-time Mission Development (MDS) position. We will not be able to seek a replacement Ministry Team member until 3 of the current 4 leave. This could result in extremely long vacancies if we do not work together in a union and is one of the main reasons our Session sees no alternative to a union with a Team Ministry.

Q4.13 Do we know yet what sort of MDS we will be able to recruit? Can it be another ordained minister?

A. We understand the half-time MDS position could be filled right away (i.e. before any further vacancies occur) because the MDS staffing is dealt with separately from the normal process of calling ministers. We (as a group or union) will have discretion to decide what sort of person we are looking for to fill that post and one option is to appoint an ordained minister who is looking to take up a half-time position.

Q4.14 Will the Parish be allowed to have trainee ministers?

A. Yes, because both Neil and Sheila are qualified as supervisors.

**Kintore Parish Church – proposed united Parish
Q&As**

Q4.15 Will there still be a church Secretary?

- A. The plan is to retain all current staff for the at least the first year. We are currently looking at the administrative load for a united parish and it appears that more than one person will be required.

Timing and continuity

Q4.16 If all congregations vote 'yes', when will the Union begin?

- A. Decisions of the Sessions and Congregations will go to the relevant committees of Presbytery and General Assembly for ratification and we are aiming for the Union to come into effect on or around the 1st of September 2023.

Q4.17 Will everything change on that date?

- A. No. Although the legal position will change immediately, e.g. single Session, single charity number, merged financial reserves, other areas of practical working together will take time to implement and there will be many local activities that will not need to change at all.

Q4.18 Will worship continue in Kintore every week?

- A. The two key principles that have guided us in planning for union are: 1) that we will work together; and 2) that we will retain a missional presence in each of the existing locations. This means that we will continue to have regular worship in the buildings that are to remain open (such as Kintore) and in the communities where buildings are closing (Midmar, Blairdaff and Cluny) we will find other ways for members there to still engage locally with the church (e.g. Bible studies, fellowship groups or worship opportunities). During this "get-to-know-you" phase of our working together we have had joint worship whenever there has been a 5th Sunday in the month. These joint services have proven very popular. We may consider similar occasional joint services in future but they will be the exception. Regular Sunday worship at Kintore will be the rule.

Q4.19 Will the online community that has developed continue, are there any plans?

- A. Yes, we want to continue and make this more widely available. A key need is to make IT equipment and practices more compatible in all our worship centres, and a survey has been completed. Such compatibility would allow, for example, live worship in each location led locally, with a streamed joint sermon.

Closing

Neil thanked all for the wide range of helpful questions. Work is in hand to highlight and plan the detailed changes needed before Union. Though CofS is in a situation not of their choice, our Ministers are quite excited about the future, believing we have a good Team that, by working together voluntarily, has developed a high level of mutual understanding and trust.

Rev. Neil Meyer

Parish Minister

Ian Waldram

Session Clerk