

An Update on the Creation of the Presbytery Mission Plan from Clincarthill Parish Church (April 2022)

Please read this carefully and in its entirety!

It is important that we all understand this process, are aware of how far along we are, where it will lead, and appreciate the implications for our congregation. It is a lack of these things which will cause hurt, as we engage in unhelpful speculation, and perhaps inadvertently share misinformation with one another.

Introduction

Our problems really begin in 1929...

Presbyterians in Scotland are really good at falling out with one another. Prior to 1929, there were at least 6 Presbyterian denominations in our country, all created from various schisms and secessions. This was deemed to be damaging to the witness of Christianity in Scotland, so in 1929, a large reunion took place to form The Church of Scotland as it exists today.

The challenge in bringing together several denominations is: what do you do with all the existing congregations and buildings? (Sound familiar? There really is nothing new under the sun...). It was agreed that every congregation/building would be given a parish to serve, leading to the sometimes nonsensical situation of small communities served by several congregations. This oversubscription of congregations and buildings would become a millstone around the neck of the newly re-united Church of Scotland: a millstone we carry to this day.

When you add into this a decline in membership of the Church of Scotland, you create a recipe for disaster. Membership of the Church of Scotland peaked in 1957, at just over 1.3 million; and it has been in decline ever since. By 2020, this has declined to 297,435 – that's a loss of around 77%, or 1 million people, over a 60 year period.

Generally speaking, the Church of Scotland has failed to do anything meaningful to address this decline. There have been forms of adjustment, like linkages and unions, but no significant effort to address the systemic problems that allow for an approach of decline management. These issues have been exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. For clarity – the pandemic **is not** the cause of these issues, they already existed. What the pandemic did do, however, was make it clear that the previous approach was no longer sustainable, and drastic action is required.

1. General Assembly 2021

In 2021, the General Assembly determined the Church of Scotland needed to reduce the number of full-time ministry posts across Scotland from around 1000 to 600. That's a 40% reduction! To achieve this, each Presbytery was given an allocation of the 600 posts, and tasked with creating a Presbytery Mission Plan by the end of 2022. This Plan will allocate posts, make clear a congregations future, and articulate how Presbytery intends to achieve the aim of advancing Christ's Kingdom. We then have 5 years in which to implement the Mission Plan, taking us to 2027.

Glasgow Presbytery received an allocation of 84 posts. Of these, it was determined 12 were given due to Priority Area weighting (additional resources are granted to Priority Areas due to the perceived additional needs). 12 posts are, therefore, ring-fenced for Priority Areas. A further 7 posts have been allocated to Presbytery-wide posts, including roles in the Presbytery Office, the Pioneer Minister to the Arts Community and a Transition Minister. The number of posts for local allocation is, therefore, 65.

Currently, Glasgow Presbytery contains 126 charges. Based purely on numbers, already we can see that this works out at approximately 1 post for every 2 congregations. Another potential metric is population: 1 post equates to approximately 12,000 people. Either way, if Clincarthill were to remain unchanged, we would qualify for just under 0.5 of a ministry post. This should make it very clear to us that "carrying on as we have always done while the change whirls around us" is not an option.

At this point, I am sure you can appreciate the magnitude and scale of what is before us. I share all this with you, not to frighten or depress you, but because it is right and proper that we, in faith, take a realistic view of this situation, and look it full in the face, acknowledging the challenge, while not being overwhelmed.

2. Zones and Clusters

Presbytery recognised that, for us to fulfil the General Assembly's instruction by the end of the year, it is better to empower local congregations to make plans, which gather local support, rather than impose something from on high. To that end, Presbytery established 5 Zones. We are in Zone 5, containing 18 congregations, with a base allocation of 10.5 posts (again, fitting the rough metric of 1 post to 2 congregations).

Next, congregations have been invited to form local "clusters". A cluster is 2 or more congregations who agree to come together and develop a united mission plan for their area. For the sake of clarity: **a cluster is not a form of adjustment**, and we are not talking about anything like a linkage or union at this stage. This is simply a local agreement to work together with neighbouring congregations in forming and implementing a mission plan.

To that end, I and other office bearers have been engaging our neighbours in conversation to establish which congregations are likely to cluster together. At this point, there are several possibilities but nothing clear, and certainly nothing has been agreed.

Time is tight. The deadline for Clusters to be agreed by Kirk Sessions is Friday 15th April 2022. We will, therefore, know our cluster in the next week or two, so be assured you will be informed when there is information to share.

3. Mission Plans and Implementation

Once a cluster is agreed, facilitators will be provided to work with office bearers from the congregations to form a Mission Plan. This will involve 6 2-hour sessions. An update on progress is expected in May, with the draft Plan completed by June. In terms of post allocation, the agreed cluster and Mission Plan will form the basis for the discussion as to how many posts will be received.

Then we move into the implementation period, lasting until 2027. What that looks like, I do not know; and it feels like it is in the distant future right now: there's a lot to do between now and the end of the year!

I know some of you will have questions about things like the continuation of our congregation, and the status of the building. Unfortunately, I do not have the answers to these things at the moment. The present conversations are solely focussed on the development of the Mission Plan and the deployment of posts; not the number of congregations, and not buildings. On the topic of buildings, the General Trustees have been conducting their own audit, which will factor into the Mission Plan; but until that audit is completed and made public, the question of buildings remains uncertain.

Conclusion – There Is Hope

I appreciate that this all may be overwhelming; but I needed to share it, and know that you are with me as we wrestle with this process. To avoid any accusation that I am being gloomy, let me be your Pastor and speak a word of Truth.

Who are we? Members of Clincarthill? Members of the Church of Scotland? Yes – but not primarily. We are followers of the risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We are called to faithfully follow Him in our daily lives. That we can do, no matter the circumstances and no matter what happens to any particular congregation or denomination.

Faithfulness does not guarantee worldly success, nor does it ensure that any particular congregation will remain. But it does call us to maintain our integrity and exercise our faith in Jesus Christ: to engage in this process without any agenda other than to seek the glory of God and the building of His Kingdom. That may seem like a position of powerlessness, but I think it is one of strength: it puts the outcome firmly in the LORD's hands, taking the pressure off us. All we do is simply find ways to authentically and with integrity act as followers of Jesus in all this.

I can assure you that, when we stand before the LORD, He will not celebrate if we "kept Clincarthill alive at any cost". But He will be pleased if we sought to keep His ways through this process. For what is more valuable to the follower of Jesus than, when all this world has passed away, to hear those words, "well done my good and faithful servant"?

As always, if you need to talk about any of this with me, please get in touch using my new contact details.

Your fellow servant of Christ,
Stuart