

# Reshaping for Mission

## A Report and Mission Plan presented to the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland, 2015

by the Planning for Mission group made up of representatives of the Ministry, Christian Education & Evangelism and Administration and Finance Committees

### *The vision*

***As a denomination we want to see United Free Church congregations across Scotland revitalised, renewed and growing and to see new congregations established, so that the denomination can play its part in the mission of God's people in Scotland.***

1. **Introduction** – It is now generally accepted that Scotland, like the rest of the United Kingdom and much of Europe, is in process of becoming a secular nation. Recent works such as *The Death of Christian Britain* by Callum Brown and *God is Dead* by Steve Bruce have traced this trend on a national level, and levels of church membership and attendance bear this out. This is a trend which has been ongoing since the end of the First World War, and increased significantly since the 1960s. Many analysts of this phenomenon have taken to describing Britain today as being post-Christendom. By this is meant that the Church no longer holds the privileged position which it enjoyed in society for many centuries, whereby it was influential in the areas of politics and education and where it was assumed that a majority of the population would attend church. Children would certainly be expected to attend Sunday school, and the Bible was taught in schools as well as read in homes. In short, during this period, the Christian story was well known, and churches were well supported. However, those days are now gone. Peter Brierley's recently published document on church statistics in which he analyses church attendances across the country over the last five years, with projections to 2020, makes uncomfortable reading. It shows that most established denominations such as the Methodists, the Baptists and the Episcopalians have declined. The Church of Scotland has experienced a drop in membership since 2008 of 29%, the steepest of all denominations. Our own figures do not show significant difference. Between 2008 and 2014, our denominational membership fell from 3828 to 2757, a decline of 28%, and because our individual congregations tend to be smaller than, say, Church of Scotland churches, we will feel this decline more acutely and more immediately.

***We believe, however, that this situation, while desperately serious, should not lead us to despair or resignation, but rather should lead us to a renewed commitment to mission and confident proclamation of the Gospel.***

Though we now live in a society which could be described spiritually as “stony ground”, decline is not inevitable. Alongside the considerable decline in some denominations, Brierley's figures also record growth in others. Many of these are independent or charismatic groupings, but the Free Church of Scotland has also seen a modest increase in numbers. The Fresh Expressions movement among Anglican and Methodist churches in England has also seen growth. All this means that as a denomination we may yet, in God's grace, see our own situation transformed. We should remember that there are signs of hope and encouragement. The number of people training for ministry is higher than it has been for many years. We have welcomed mature leaders from other denominations come and join the UF. In individual congregations we see opportunities for new youth work, links with schools etc. emerging. And we continue to see people being drawn into our churches, to find faith for the first time or to have it renewed. Nonetheless, we should not underestimate the challenge involved in this.

- 2. The challenge** – If we are to address this steep decline in numbers which we are experiencing then across the denomination prayer must become the priority. We need also to become intentional about engaging in local mission. The theologian Emil Brunner has famously said, “As a fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission.” However, in practice many of us still tend to have a view of ministry which may better be described as “maintenance”. In other words, our goal has been to try to maintain a congregation and its activities, in the expectation that people will come to us, and will find or deepen faith in that context. While we may still occasionally experience people being drawn in, we need to look outward and to adjust our mindset from a view that sees church ministry as about “maintaining the congregation” (or worse, “managing decline”) to one which sees the church’s role as “engaging in mission in the community”. In order to do this, we will need to adopt a three-stranded approach.
- 3. Three aspects of mission**
- a. **Church planting** – This means the establishing of new United Free Church congregations. There are various approaches to church planting (for more details see appendix 1). Given our limited resources our church plants will probably emerge in two ways. The first will be the appointment of a church planter and the establishment of a small church planting team, which will either work in connection with an existing congregation to start a church in a neighbouring community, or will start from scratch in a new area identified by the denominational leadership. The second approach to church planting is to see a new church come into being spontaneously, as when a group of Christians meeting together realise that in their worship, prayer and mission they have become a church. This is something which God brings into being. We cannot organise it, but we need to be sensitive to how God might lead us.
  - b. **Church revitalisation** – As well as seeking to establish new churches, we need to recognise that there are many of our existing churches which are fragile and are in danger of becoming unviable. In these situations, what is necessary is the intentional commitment of resources of personnel and where necessary money to see fragile churches becoming once again living, vibrant, witnessing congregations. The good news is that churches can be revitalised, but they must **want to be**, and be willing to go through the change that will be required. This is because revitalising means recognising that whatever emerges will almost certainly not look the same as what has gone before. Revitalisation will most likely not be something which a congregation will achieve on its own, but instead will probably require outside support and guidance. For more on this see Appendix 2.
  - c. **Churches renewed for mission** – A good number of our congregations are currently relatively healthy, though we should always be aware of the challenges which all churches face these days. In order to continue to thrive, these congregations will make local mission and growth a conscious aim, rather than merely a vague hope. This may well require a re-focussing of priorities, to equip members to share their faith and free them from too great a commitment to internal church activities to enable them to spend time serving and witnessing in the local community and cultivating friendships with those not yet Christians.
- 4. Putting it into practice** – All this is of course a huge challenge. For many of us this will be a venture into new territory, and few if any of us would claim expertise in this area. However, we are not alone in recognising the extent of the task facing us and the changes required. There has been much written in these different areas of church planting, revitalisation and renewal for mission, and numerous resources have been produced. There are also many examples of churches engaging in these different activities, from which we can learn. Nor should we discount the “good news stories” from within our own denomination, even if these may seem small. The prophet Zechariah warned his hearers not to despise the “day of small things” (Zech. 4: 10). Along with this

report the Planning for Mission group will be introducing various resources for churches and will try to come alongside individual congregations to help them recognise what their needs are and how, in their context, they can begin the process of reshaping for mission and engaging in it. In all this we are dependent not on our own strategies or techniques but on the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Who knows what God may do? Nevertheless, though we believe that the Lord may well surprise us, at the same time we should be prepared for this to be a slow process, resulting in fruit over the long haul. And in order to avoid this becoming simply “another report about mission” what is required is not just assent that mission is a good thing, or even a necessary thing, but an ongoing commitment to engage in mission in our own communities.

- 5. Questions of structure and resources** – As this process continues and, we trust, as churches grow and new church planting projects are begun, it may well be that we will become aware of the need to change some of our structures. While Jesus’ words about new wine needing new wineskins are often taken out of context and used to justify any attempt to change, nevertheless they may well have some resonance here. Arguably, our current structures in terms of committees, presbyteries, ministries etc. are designed to serve the church while it is in “maintenance” mode. It is too soon to tell whether they will be adequate if we move into “mission” mode, but we need to recognise that part of this process may require structural and institutional change. Great wisdom will be required here, so that whatever changes are made are not changes for change’s sake but will genuinely promote more effective mission.

One area in particular where there will need to be both concerted prayer and serious reflection concerns the nature of those who will work in pioneer ministries of church planting and church revitalisation. The gifts and training required to work effectively in these areas may be rather different from the gifts necessary for a pastoral ministry. We hope and pray that the Lord will raise up those from within the denomination who will feel a call to pioneer, but recognising the scale of the challenge means we will need to pray for the Lord to send us others with the necessary gifts and experience to join us. When this happens, we will have to consider the question of the status these pioneers will have, the level of theological training which we will require, and how best to integrate them into the denomination so that they are committed to plant and revitalise United Free churches, albeit ones which may look and feel rather different to many of our current congregations.

There are also financial questions to be considered. Most churches in need of revitalisation will be unlikely to be able fully to support a pioneer worker, and so both church revitalisers and certainly church planters will need financial support from central funds. As a denomination we do have some not insignificant resources which can be used to finance the ministry of these pioneers, but we will need to pray that the Lord of the harvest will both send workers into the harvest and will provide for their needs. Wise and generous stewardship will be required.

- 6. Prayer** – As we have already noted, human plans and strategising on their own will be ineffective. Only God can bring about the response to the proclamation of the Gospel which we long to see. So, prayer for the impact of mission must become a key part of our lives, as individuals, in our congregations, in our presbyteries and among all our leaders. For most if not all of our churches a humble crying out to God for His leading and empowering will be the start if this process of reshaping for mission. In 1 Corinthians 3:6 Paul writes “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” May we see God at work in our day and in our denomination, causing our churches to grow and be fruitful.

Where will this process take us, if we adopt this report and commit ourselves to reshape our lives and or congregations for mission? We cannot say. We do know, however, that Jesus' commission in Matthew 28: 20 to go and make disciples of all nations calls us to be committed to engaging in mission here and now. We may sum up our hope and our vision for the church in the words which opened this report.

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In the name of the Committee

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