

Introducing Reshaping for Mission – A denominational mission plan and movement

At the Church's General Assembly in June 2015, the denomination adopted the Reshaping for Mission report, a document which is intended to encourage congregations across the denomination to be aware of the challenges which we face, and to respond to them in faith and with a renewed commitment to engage in mission in our communities across Scotland. Here is the vision of Reshaping for Mission.

“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.”

The challenge

Whether we like it or not, 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. It used to be assumed that most people 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. Until fairly recently, the Christian story was well known, and churches were well supported. However, those days are rapidly going if not already gone, and we see the evidence round about us, in declining numbers and sadly even church closures. The conveyor belt which used to maintain a constant inflow of new people into our churches through marriage and children is now almost broken. However, ***we believe 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.***

This is the hope that underlies Reshaping for Mission. The United Free Church is a small denomination with an inspiring history, but we must not keep harking back to what we have lost. Instead we need to aim to become a growing denomination with an eye on the future, focussed on God and on mission. This situation provides us with an opportunity to recapture something about what the church is supposed to be by its very nature.

“As a fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission.” (Emil Brunner)

If we're honest, many of us still tend to have a view of ministry which may 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. However, it can no longer be business as usual, with the vague hope that something will happen. Increasingly we need to look outward and to adjust our own mindset from one that sees church ministry as being about “maintaining the congregation” to one which sees the church's role as “engaging in mission in the community”.

Three aspects of mission

Some of our churches are still relatively healthy, able to afford to support a full-time minister, with a spread of ages among those attending, seeing people come to faith and involved in the life of their communities. Others, however, are more fragile, with small, older congregations which are declining in numbers and are struggling to connect with the communities round about them. And we should be aware that there are many areas of Scotland where there is no vibrant, witnessing church and where the pressing need is for new churches to be established. In response to this, Reshaping for Mission envisages a three-stranded approach.

- 1. Church planting** – This means the establishing of new United Free Church congregations. 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, 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 will bring into being, and our challenge is to be sensitive to the leading of His Holy Spirit to see where He is doing this...and to join in.
- 2. Church revitalisation** – In the case of some of our smaller, more fragile congregations, a radical commitment to bring new life into the situation, in other words revitalisation, will be vital. In these situations, we will make the intentional commitment of resources of personnel and where necessary

money to see fragile churches becoming once again living, vibrant, witnessing congregations. Revitalisation may take many different forms, ranging from renewing the Sunday morning pattern of worship and other church activities through starting new types of gatherings for worship and discipleship to a relocation of the congregation to a different place where they can better serve the community around them. Revitalisation means a congregation and its leaders accepting the challenge not of starting something new, but rather of transitioning from what is already present but in a fragile state to something renewed and vibrant. 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.

- 3. 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. They too will need to realise that the old pattern of waiting for people to come to us is increasingly not resulting in church growth, so they will need to engage in conscious mission activity in their communities, moving out to demonstrate and proclaim the good news of Jesus. 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.

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. We will need an increase in our trust in God to do new things and to bring people to faith in Jesus. We will need an increase in courage to go out to meet others, rather than just waiting for them to come to us. And we will need an increase in our imagination to see the new opportunities which God is giving to us. This can all seem daunting. However, we are not alone in recognising the extent of the task facing us and the changes required. Lots of churches are thinking about these same questions and coming up with similar responses — church planting, revitalisation and renewal for mission, and numerous re-sources 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). It is from small encouragements that faith will grow, and we will become bold to try out new initiatives and approaches in mission to reach a lost and broken society round about us.

The challenge of change

If something or someone grows, it means that change will happen. The same is true for our churches. Change can be hard and sometimes scary. We don't know what the church of the future will look like. We should expect to see new gatherings of church coming into being with new styles of worship and mission, probably meeting at different times or even on a different day to our traditional Sunday worship services. We are likely also to need to have different types of people coming into ministry, planting and revitalising churches. The old patterns of ministers who mainly pastor existing members must be complemented by new pioneers who will bring the Gospel to those who would never come near an existing church but who are still people dearly loved by God.

Above all ***we will need to pray***—individually, in our congregations and across churches and presbyteries. Only if God works will we see the growth which we desire. Anything we do that is not immersed in prayer will simply be human strategising and pragmatism, and nothing lasting will come from this. We will be producing regular prayer letters to encourage focussed prayer for mission.

We have a Facebook Group called “United Free Church – Reshaping for Mission”, which is a forum where we can share ideas, resources, prayer requests and so on. If you are on Facebook, find “David Miller” who administers the group, and send him a request to join. For more information about Reshaping for Mission, you can contact the office or get in touch with David Miller who helps coordinate the initiative at david.millerstonpastor@gmail.com .