

# Reshaping for mission

## A report and mission plan for presentation to the General Assembly of the United Free Church of Scotland, 2015

Presented by the Planning for Mission group, a sub-group made up of members of the Ministry Committee, the Christian Education and Evangelism Committee and the Administration and Finance Committee

### *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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## **7. Deliverances**

General Assembly agrees

- a. To adopt the vision presented in the report as the goal of the denomination
- b. To pray regularly for mission, renewal, and growth
- c. To encourage members to pray for God to lead congregations into revitalisation and mission
- d. To encourage members to pray for God to provide and equip workers for the challenge of revitalisation and church planting
- e. To urge individual congregations to engage in the process of reshaping themselves for mission, and to encourage the use of the various resources which will be made available for churches.
- f. To use our resources of personnel and finance wisely and generously towards the fulfilling of this goal
- g. To consider the necessary changes to our structures and to our approaches to ministry which this commitment to mission will entail

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1 – Examples of church planting**

Every church which currently exists was at one time “planted”. Overseas mission has for many centuries been committed to planting or establishing new churches. In one sense, church planting, though it has not been called this, has been a continuing feature of the Scottish scene, in response to changing patterns of population and the emergence of new housing schemes and developments. However, much of this, usually referred to as “church extension” or “new charge development” reflected the basic “maintenance” model of ministry, with the expectation that these new churches, established in areas of new population, would by their very presence, attract a congregation. It was the “mission halls”, which were predominantly opened in working class areas, which engaged in more direct outreach and evangelism. However, more recently, with the recognition of the new spiritual challenges faced by churches in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, the term “church planting” has come into common use, reflecting as it does the new missionary challenge which we now face. There are various examples of different ways of planting a church. The most common one for large churches is to send a significant number of the members of one congregation to form the nucleus of a new congregation in a neighbouring town or village, or in another part of a city. In Scotland, Newton Mearns Baptist Church in Glasgow and St. Paul’s and St. George’s Episcopalian Church in Edinburgh are two examples of this. It is unlikely that any current congregation in the United Free Church would be sufficiently large enough to “give away” a significant portion of its membership to facilitate a church plant in this way.

Another approach is for a church planter, sometimes on their own initiative and sometimes in consultation with a supporting church or network of churches, to identify an area where they wish to plant a church and then to build up a small launch team. This preparation period may last a year or more. Once launched, the members of the team make friendships and serve the local community, and through their evangelism and witness people are converted and a church comes into being. Grace Community Church in Leith and Harvest Bible Church in Glasgow are recent examples of this, though it must be noted that much of the growth in both churches so far has come mainly from Christians being attracted to the church and wanting to get involved. This is not to criticise these churches. It is simply to recognise that in the current spiritual climate of our nation, it may take several years for someone to move from a position of unbelief to belief and conversion. The big challenge with this approach to church planting is the question of finance. If the lead church planter is to be fully supported, those behind him will normally need to be willing to offer support for at least five years. This means that as a denomination we are only able to support a very small number of church plants which follow this model. An alternative approach is for the lead church planter either to raise their own personal support (as cross-cultural missionaries do) or to find at least part-time job which will allow him to keep body and soul together, and plant a church “part-time”. This pattern arguably follows the pattern of Paul who supported himself by making tents while church planting in Corinth (Acts 18:3). Clay Community Church in Possil in Glasgow is one where the church planting team take this approach.

A third approach is that which is currently popularised through the Fresh Expressions movement, an Anglican and Methodist initiative. This seeks to establish Christian communities and congregations as people gather around a common interest or location. This includes such approaches as Café Church and Messy Church, and groups may meet in pubs or community centres or simply in people’s homes. There is some discussion around the question of whether these groups should be thought of as “church” or simply as an innovative approach to mission. It may be that there is no hard and fast rule here. Some of these gatherings which begin as places for folk to meet and share friendship and live out the Gospel may continue for a time and become a point of entry to the established pattern of church life and worship. Others will go on to become independent Christian congregations in their own right. It will be worth exploring the potential for creative approaches to patterns of church life as we seek to connect with a society which increasingly is not used to tradition patterns of church and finds them very strange and foreign.

At first sight this diversity of approaches to church planning may seem confusing, but actually we should be inspired by each of them to think creatively about different ways in which we can plant churches ourselves.

## **Appendix 2 – Factors encouraging revitalisation**

An online search for books on church revitalisation will reveal very few which originate in the United Kingdom, and a plethora which come from North America. The context there is rather different to our context here, so care must be taken in applying lessons learned there to our own situations here. Nevertheless, there is still much which can be learned. A recent book called *Comeback Churches*, by Ed

Stetzer and Mike Dodson, looked at revitalisation across the USA, identifying some of the key factors in churches which were revitalised there. Now, being the USA the scale is very different – what they call a declining church we might think is still quite healthy. Nevertheless, there are lessons for us to learn. They identified the following as being key factors in churches being revitalised.

- Leadership – leaders were focussed on training other leaders and reaching the lost, rather than on maintaining the church institution
- Faith and prayer
- Relevant, attractive worship and preaching
- Intentional emphasis on evangelism and growth
- Discipleship – the maturing of new (and not so new) believers, and helping them to connect faith with daily life
- Mobilising the laity, so that not everything was left to the minister
- Building relationships through small groups

They also looked at a couple of other things which we might not immediately think of as being relevant. One was **a church's facilities**, where they asked whether the building was fit for purpose. They also noted the importance of advertising, because unless people know we're here, we can't expect them to come.