

Reshaping for Mission – Implementing the vision across presbyteries

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 of course is to find ways to help this vision become a reality across the denomination, and to help as many churches as possible both to grasp it and to begin to put it into practice in their own contexts. We recognise the limitations which we have on our time, our shared sense that we are all beginners in this area, and the hard soil of a secular Scotland in which we are seeking to sow the seeds of the Gospel and in due time to reap a harvest. At present, the Reshaping for Mission initiative is steered by a small group consisting of the convenors of the Ministry, Administration and Finance and Christian Education and Evangelism committees, along with some other co-opted members. However, we recognise that if this vision is to become a reality across the denomination, we will need to see it being disseminated and implemented through presbyteries and individual congregations in turn being helped and encouraged to put it into practice as best they can.

Our Manual of Practice and Procedure refers to “a home mission committee...in each presbytery” (Appendix 4.A.II.4), indicating that it our current focus on mission is not something new but rather is an attempt to return to something which we have in our history recognised as important. Our situation is different now, and our more limited resources mean that forming such a committee may not be practical at this stage. However, what this reference reminds us of is the recognition that each Presbytery should have a commitment to home mission. So, this document aims to indicate the key ways in which Presbyteries can support and encourage Reshaping for Mission and to encourage presbyteries to consider how best, given their resources, to take this forward. It may result in the forming of a mission committee, it may result in an existing presbytery committee taking on the remit of encouraging mission, or it may result in an individual member of presbytery being given this role supported by the presbytery. The important thing is that mission makes its way into presbytery's thinking, planning and praying, and ultimately, we hope, into the heart of the life of the denomination, of presbyteries and of individual congregations.

Reshaping for Mission has a threefold emphasis, namely

- Church planting
- Church revitalisation
- Established churches focussing on mission

Although the fragile state of many of our churches means that there is a lot of talk about church revitalisation and that may be where we are tempted to place our priorities, that is only one aspect of Reshaping for Mission. Church planting, in other words, establishing new UF congregations where none currently exists, is hard but it comes without the difficulty of having to reorganise an existing congregation who are used to doing things in a particular way and for whom the changes needed to see revitalisation happen may be hard to take. This is what makes revitalisation difficult. And churches which are already functioning well need to be sure that they are continuing to address the challenges of mission in their community. So, we hope that presbyteries will keep this threefold emphasis of Reshaping for Mission in view as they consider how best to encourage mission across their congregations.

In practice, we would like to urge presbyteries to seek to encourage Reshaping for Mission in the following areas.

1. **Facilitating prayer** – All our mission activity will be empty and hollow unless it is undergirded by prayer. We produce regular prayer letters and hope that these will be used individually and in church prayer meetings. However, we would particularly like presbyteries to explore ways in which to encourage

corporate times of prayer across a group of congregations or across the whole presbytery. Could presbyteries organise days of prayer, or have “clusters” of churches which are relatively close to each other geographically to meet together to pray, for each other and for mission across the denomination? And could there also be time set aside in regular presbytery meetings for members of presbytery to pray together?

2. **Identifying opportunities for church planting** – Church plants emerge in a number of ways. Sometimes a particular congregation will see the opportunity in a geographical area close to where they are, and will seek to plant a daughter church. Sometimes a group of Christians meeting together in some form of Bible study group or other outreach will realise that they have the potential to become a church. However, a third approach to church planting is for a need to be identified in a particular area, perhaps of new housing or perhaps where there are no actively witnessing churches, and for a group of churches to decide, under God, to launch a church plant there. And this is where the Presbytery mission group may come in. It may be that they may be able to identify an area where there is both need and opportunity for a church plant (and perhaps where there is an existing UF congregation relatively nearby which may be able to support it) and undertake to pray and work towards launching such a plant. How exciting would it be if each of our presbyteries could pray and work towards launching at least one church plant in the next three or four years.

3. **Identifying suitable churches to commit to working towards revitalisation** – Many of our churches are small and their longer term future, without significant growth and change, appears uncertain. One significant factor in a church being revitalised and experiencing fresh growth is leadership. However, many of our smaller congregations are not in a position where they can afford to call a full-time or perhaps even a part-time minister. The idea behind revitalisation projects is that the denomination will work with churches which appear to have both the willingness and the potential to aim at renewed growth and life, giving help in both identifying a suitably gifted worker, who may be an ordained minister but who does not need to be and helping support them financially. It must be stressed here that this is not simply a case of the denomination underwriting a church’s finances and enabling them to support business as usual, nor should it be seen as the church buying in someone to do the work of mission instead of them. The revitalising worker will have the responsibility to nurture the existing congregation and equip them to engage in mission together, and will also have the task of engaging significantly in the local community seeking opportunities both to serve and to share the Gospel. There is no blueprint for what a revitalised church will look like, but the existing congregation must realise that it is likely to look rather different from what is currently there. Growth may not necessarily translate into more numbers on a Sunday morning worship service – it may show itself in activities such as Messy Church or an Alpha or Christianity Explored course running in a local pub or café. It may also mean changes in the style of Sunday morning worship, or even a change of location of the church. So, for a church to move towards revitalisation it will need to show

- A willingness to change for the sake of growth
- A desire to pray for new life to emerge
- A generosity that makes the congregation willing to offer their “five loaves and two fishes” for the sake of the Gospel – this is not just giving money but also offering time and their spiritual gifts
- An indication that there is potential for new growth to happen

The interim moderator of a small congregation will be key in helping that church think through the questions of whether they want to engage in revitalisation. It should also be stressed that while a leader *in situ* is really important in helping a church move towards revitalisation, the congregation should be encouraged not just to wait until a leader arrives. Presbytery and interim moderators, within their limitations, should seek to encourage small congregations to explore ways in which they can engage in mission themselves. Indeed, this willingness to try something will itself be an indicator of whether the church truly wants to be revitalised.

4. **Sharing resources, stories and examples of good practice** – We are all beginners in this area, so we will need continually to be encouraging each other. One of the ways in which we can do this is by helping

each other to see what we are trying, what is effective, and what resources we have found that help us. There are lots of denominations across the UK who are engaging in processes which are similar to Reshaping for Mission and which may be things from which we can learn. And we will also try to encourage each other when we try things that don't work. Giving each other permission to experiment and perhaps to fail is important in this process. And doing this means we will not only focus on our church plants and revitalisation projects. Our established churches also need to be continually exploring ways in which they can engage in mission. And linking these opportunities to share ideas and good practice with opportunities to pray for each other will be particularly helpful.

Putting this into practice

The Reshaping for Mission Group is well aware of the limitations of time, personnel and resources which we face, as a denomination and as presbyteries. This paper is intended to highlight the areas of mission to which we would like Presbyteries to give attention. However, it is not intended to be prescriptive as to how Presbyteries can put things into practice. It may be possible to establish a mission committee, as the Manual of Practice and Procedure envisages. It may be that there is an existing committee which can take this on, or be reconstituted to focus on mission. Alternatively, it may be possible to appoint a Presbytery Mission Coordinator whose role will be to encourage the development of Reshaping for Mission across presbyteries. Another, perhaps more manageable, approach would be simply to include "Reshaping for Mission" as an agenda item for presbytery meetings and to give time to discussing it among all those who are there.

And in all this we should emphasise that the Reshaping for Mission group will do all we can to help and advise presbyteries as we seek to take this process forward together. Please do not hesitate to get in touch, either by contacting the UF offices or by contacting David Miller at david.millerstonpastor@gmail.com.