

GREYFRIARS KIRK GOES FOR GROWTH

Preamble: In responding to the Presbytery Mission Plan we reassure Presbytery that, as a congregation, we seek to do what we understand to be the right thing for the ongoing mission of the Church and the continuing task of building and extending the Realm of God. That being so, we will be open to all options and will seek not to put personal or congregational considerations before the furtherance of the Church's mission in the city.

We recognise that it is important for the church to tighten its belt and be realistic about both allocating ministry in an equitable way and sustaining the life and witness of the Church. We also believe that times of challenge and transition are moments when the Holy Spirit is most likely to be prompting us towards opening up new horizons and opportunities. This exciting moment requires both imagination and the investment of resources in the right direction in order to further the Church's mission.

This note makes the case that the right way forward is through a broader union of congregations in Edinburgh city centre rather than narrower unions between two or three neighbours.

The Greyfriars Situation: Greyfriars has a healthy congregational life and robust financial management and governance systems. Beyond the Kirk itself Greyfriars has been the visionary driving force in the development of three substantial and successful social enterprise charities: Greyfriars Outreach operating from the Kirk, the Grassmarket Community Project (GCP) from the Greyfriars Grassmarket Centre next to the kirkyard in Candlemaker Row and the Greyfriars Charteris Centre (GCC) in the former Kirk o' Field church in the Pleasance.. Through their three venues we support the life of the congregation, engage in pioneering work amongst those on the edge of society and offer a ministry to visitors, tourists and the arts. It is this missionary outreach which gives meaning and justification for us as a gathered congregation in the city centre.

Like many other congregations the pandemic has forced us to engage differently, through live and recorded streaming of services and through a weekly letter, a "thought for the week" from the minister, which goes out to 300 people by email and is much valued.

We recognise that the work of the Holy Spirit is never monopolised by the church; the Spirit is at loose in the world already. Our task in mission is to look outward and find where the Spirit is at work and join in, celebrating the reality that, for all the challenges we face in our churches, God is still active. We see all our activities as furthering that mission and we continually articulate the faith that holds them all together.

Grassmarket Community Project (GCP). We believe that GCP is a model for the future in taking forward *missio dei*, the mission of God, We are literally transforming lives through training, protected employment, recreation and social enterprise, bringing back into society people suffering from mental health difficulties and deep social exclusion of which homelessness is often a symptom. It has a turnover of £1m and active engagement with some 300 members. Importantly

this is achieved without recourse to congregational funds – in other words it is a business model which has allowed growth in missional activity well beyond any natural growth of the Greyfriars congregation, though anchored to the church in its inspiration and in its governance.

In terms of mission activity **Greyfriars Charteris Centre** has similar aspirations, working through partner organisations. It is based in the former Kirk o'Field church in the Pleasance after the union of their congregation with Greyfriars in 2013 and we have made it into a centre for wellbeing, enterprise and communities – of faith, need, interest, aspiration and many more. GCC works through partners in the fields of education (e.g University of Edinburgh), social enterprise (including Edinburgh Social Enterprise) and counselling (CoCo counselling).

While Greyfriars congregation is similar in size to others in the city, our missionary outreach is quite distinctive in scale and reach. In 2011 we completed an investment of £2m in the new build for the Grassmarket Community Project, whose activity is equivalent on its own to two or three city congregations. We have just completed investment of £2.3m in converting the Greyfriars Charteris Centre as a centre for wellbeing and enterprise. Pre pandemic Greyfriars Outreach generated revenue of over £100,000 per annum from concerts and events in the Kirk, and expects to do so again as the pandemic recedes. These are assets not just of Greyfriars Kirk but of the Church as a whole in the city centre, and they need to be valued and resourced accordingly. Greyfriars' fundraising and investment in Charteris, on its own, has bucked the declining trend in congregational income in the city in 2020 and will do the same in 2021.

Although Greyfriars has taken the lead in establishing both GCP and GCC, each depends critically on the support of many partners: in funding, in referrals, in professional backup as well as trustees, volunteers and employees, some of whom are church members, whether of Greyfriars or other churches, but many of whom are not. GCP and GCC represent missionary outreach among our church congregation and among our communities of volunteers who welcome summer visitors to the Kirk, steward at concerts and care for our vulnerable members at GCP - missionary outreach not just for Greyfriars but for the church as a whole in central Edinburgh.

We believe that what we are doing at GCP and GCC is God's work in just the same way as the worship and pastoral care at the Kirk. That worship is imbued with stories and insights from the work at GCP and GCC, just as the work there could not happen in the way it does without the strong underpinning of faith that comes from the kirk. Putting these aspects together we have here a model for growth rather than a model for contraction. The engagement as full partners of other city centre churches can give that growth added impetus, as they bring their complementary initiatives to the table.

Moving on, within the City Centre

The challenges we face are common to all of the city centre churches. As well as cultural changes in society, we face structural challenges in financial terms as we occupy historic buildings with big maintenance, management and insurance costs. These bear heavily on congregations which are already fully stretched.

But against these challenges there are opportunities to use the assets that we have in order to take forward a vision for mission in the city centre.

Our position is that these challenges are better dealt with, and the opportunities realised, in a wider rather than narrower union or association – therefore not just Greyfriars and St Cuthbert's in a union, but including some or all of St Andrew and St George's West (with Greenside and Broughton St Mary's) St Giles and Canongate, with a shared ministry team. In effect we want to continue the cluster conversations through to this outcome.

The reasoning behind a larger rather than a smaller city centre parish has a number of strands.

Team ministry Our experience at Greyfriars has shown the benefits of team ministry. We have been fortunate over the years in having a succession of excellent ministry probationers, and since the union of Greyfriars and Kirk o' Field in 2013 we have had a full time associate minister post, which came to an end in November. We recognise that availability of candidates and financial constraints will limit the number of funded ministerial posts available, but we want to continue the benefits offered by mutual support of colleagues, a variety of voices week by week in the pulpit, and the complementary skills brought by individuals. Increasingly the core team will have to draw on the talents and energies of lay people as well as ordained members. This diversity and collegiality is better and stronger across multiple congregations.

Facing opportunities and challenges together Long experience shows that congregational unions are difficult, they take immense energy to negotiate and implement and the usual result of pairing of congregations is $2+2 = 2\frac{1}{2}$. Although the main driver may be to reduce costs, by disposing of underutilised or inappropriate buildings, there is often attrition of congregational numbers. This is a particular danger with gathered congregations in a city centre, whose members can easily move elsewhere if the building to which they feel loyalty and affection is closed. Consolidation of up to 6 parishes into one single unit rather than in pairs or threes gives us the opportunity to forge a common, wider identity, to move away from any narrative of winners and losers in a perceived competition of loyalties.

Uniting existing congregations is not the route to church renewal. The metaphor of pruning for growth is wishful thinking in a time when church membership and church attendance are both in steady decline. We need to find other ways of meeting people's spiritual needs, which are as great as ever.

Succession Each of the congregations in question will have to deal with ministerial succession sooner or later. This can be handled in a measured, long term manner between us. Allowing us time to recruit to fill the gap is much easier than finding a single individual to fill all the requirements in a single, united charge.

Administration Coming together in a larger unit will offer opportunities to consolidate business functions such as accounting and letting of space for concerts and other events. Greyfriars conducts this activity through a separate charity, Greyfriars Outreach Ltd, which contributes significantly to the congregational budget and allows employment of staff to run it. There would be the potential to combine this activity across venues.

Buildings Our buildings are generally too big and too expensive to run for our congregations. But they represent community assets and resources for mission, broadly understood, offering the opportunities for engaging visitors and hosting arts and social events – all keeping our church life visible in the community and meeting spiritual needs in ways that complement church services.

Decisions about which to keep, which to convert, which to sell are best taken in the context of as wide a parish grouping as possible.

Future proofing We see nothing in the current proposals from Presbytery that will arrest the decline in church membership, which has been relentless over many decades. This is a challenge for all of us in the national, institutional church. Our approach at Greyfriars, as outlined more fully below, is to meet people where they are, which may not be in a Sunday service – and we believe that this is a model capable of wide replication. But whether or not that is true, in working together in a broader union the city centre churches have much better prospects of discerning and implementing changes in the way we work in a broader rather than a narrower union. If further reductions in buildings and manpower are needed in 5 or 10 or 20 years time, and this does not seem implausible on current trends, then that is best handled in a larger grouping.

Unions The previous paragraphs have argued for a wider union across the city centre, on the grounds of the benefits of team working, better growth prospects and the benefits of “a problem shared is a problem halved”. More specifically, we see some considerable difficulties with the proposed union between Greyfriars and St Cuthbert’s.

Greyfriars united with Kirk o’ Field in 2013. Eight years later the building has been transformed into the Greyfriars Charteris Centre with full disabled access and attractive office and event spaces. The building contract completed in December and we are just in the process of reopening – coinciding, we hope, with the pandemic receding. We have secured funding for two 60% of full-time equivalent appointments to take forward the Charteris vision. To realise the fruits of this investment needs all our ministerial and congregational energy. The proposed union with St Cuthbert’s alone would be a considerable diversion, without the mutual support of a wider grouping

That apart, we doubt that a joint St Cuthbert’s/Greyfriars parish ministry is a tractable job for one person, especially if vigorous mission and outreach activities are to be sustained and developed.

Our Vision for the Future – what we want to continue doing and go on developing

Our approach to mission and diaconal ministry is captured in the themes of the HeartEdge movement, which provides a forum for the great challenges of our day to be viewed anew through the lens of shared theological reflection and spiritual insight. It is a model others seek to follow, and we have been invited to become a HeartEdge Hub for Scotland. St Cuthbert’s and St Andrew and St George’s West are also HeartEdge members.

The HeartEdge themes are

Congregation: There is much to be said for a ‘fresh expressions’ approach that takes account of the distance, grown to a gulf, that has opened up between secular society and the churches. It is important to develop mechanisms that build bridges, such as mindfulness, meditation, mediation, counselling, ‘social church’ and - perhaps most importantly - listening before speaking. What are the questions that people are asking today? Do we know? Have we listened? Such activities that seek to awaken and nurture spiritual growth are a means to move people towards ‘missional’ outcomes. Our new sacred space in the Greyfriars Charteris Centre will be developed as a place to bridge the gap. We are also very conscious of our deep commitment and friendship with our

ecumenical partners in the city centre (Scottish Episcopal and United Reformed Churches) and we are committed to ongoing discussions about closer work in mission and ministry.

Culture: The Arts, music, film and literature all, at times, very effectively explore themes that can be understood as addressing spiritual formation. Indeed, the success of the film industry in tackling spiritual and faith based themes in recent years is a lesson to the churches, prompting us to embark on developing complementary forms of communication and mission. Podcasts, films and other media channels are all tools the church might use to communicate with those who are at a remove from faith. Meanwhile, we continue to open our places as venues for the arts and in the Kirk see opportunities to reconnect audiences to the sacred/spiritual dimension of much of the music that is performed. We are acutely aware that the trauma of the last two years of pandemic has awakened a longing in people to revisit the spiritual and we are already addressing that longing. We are proud of our award-winning community cinema at GCP that enables some of our most vulnerable neighbours to participate in mainstream social life.

Compassion: Greyfriars has been pioneering new forms of social care in recent years. The considerable success of the Grassmarket Community Project is testimony to the need for such innovation. The sharing of good practice, creation of new models of community development and reflection on where and how the Holy Spirit is at work to meet spiritual and material needs and challenges is at the forefront of our mission.

Commerce: The development of a 'social enterprise' culture has the potential not only to rescue congregations from financial difficulties, but also to provide the opportunity for the churches, with third sector partners, to foreshadow and pioneer an alternative social economy. Thus can we take serious account of social justice and justice for the planet, and begin to embody the values and ambitions of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. This will mean that our decisions and priorities as institutions and individuals are not just driven by purely economic concerns but that our values and mission objectives are the driver of our commercial decisions. Our most recent innovation is our partnership (through GCP) with St Mary's Catholic Cathedral to provide the only not-for-profit café in the revamped St James Quarter of the city, unique also in its ecumenical dimension.

Summary and Conclusion

We well recognise the financial and manpower pressures which require the retrenchment envisaged in the presbytery consultation document. It is the unfortunate but inevitable result of long term decline in congregational numbers and church attendance. So our central concern, is to reshape our church's activity in central Edinburgh in a way that makes further decline less rather than more likely.

By contrast to this general trend of decline, over the past two decades Greyfriars has developed and implemented a successful strategy of growth based on the theological imperative of meeting people where they are – truly missional activity. Our major investment in GCP, financial and in people, is bearing good fruit and we are confident that the Greyfriars Charteris Centre will do the same.

GCP and GCC represent significant assets, both as well equipped buildings and as substantial organisations in the context of the Christian witness in the city as a whole. The question then for Presbytery is how best to encourage and enable their further growth.

To make best use of these pioneering assets needs the engagement and support of a wide group of city centre churches also contributing their missionary activities, insights and experience. Our belief therefore is that this growth is best nurtured in a wider rather than a narrower union of city centre churches. We fear that a union of Greyfriars solely with St Cuthbert's would find us managing contraction rather than managing growth in the work of the Spirit.

What we are proposing is not the easy option, but we believe can be the path to the successful deployment of the church estate and resources in the centre of Edinburgh.

Richard Frazer, Minister

Jo Elliot, Session Clerk

1 February 2022