

Dear all

In the Newsletter about to be published in our annual report I have written a few words about the challenges facing the Church of Scotland, Gordon Presbytery and our parish together with some of the changes that lie ahead. I wanted to say more than space in those publications would allow, so I hope what follows helps to inform and prepare you for changing times.

Across the country the Church of Scotland is working towards amalgamating presbyteries so that 46 presbyteries are reduced in number to around 12.

There are two crucial statistics to hold in our minds.

The first is that the number of Ordained Ministers of word and sacrament available to be appointed to Charges in the Church of Scotland is diminishing. Gordon Presbytery is writing a new Presbytery Plan with the aim of reducing the number of these posts from 25 to 15. The Presbytery is seeking to do that by 2023 however, this is a very demanding target since those in post cannot simply be moved on.

Secondly, if you saw a recent Life and Work magazine you will have seen that in the year 2000 around 42% of the population of Scotland said they belonged to the Church of Scotland in 2020 that has fallen to just 22%. Of course, many people say they belong to the church but play no active role and may not attend worship even on communion Sundays. Sadly, our church has not been a missionary church. We have not lived up to the calling of Jesus to be fishers of men and women.

In all churches there is always inertia against change since church clearly 'works' for those within it, otherwise they would leave. Change is risky since it may alienate those who are within and not necessarily meet the needs or desires of those who are not.

A third statistic might also be helpful, that the Church of Scotland ordains around 15 people a year to a ministry where they are able to take a Charge. The 2019 Blue Book (the papers for the General Assembly) noted that just 16 people were accepted for training for the full time ministry of Word and Sacrament and a further 10 for the part time Ordained Local Ministry (who are not trained to take a Charge).

So, as our presbytery grapples with these challenges it is seeking to group Charges together and to encourage co-operative working across parish boundaries. Nothing has yet been decided. In our own situation, Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch is likely to be grouped with the Charge of Culsalmond and Rayne linked with Daviot and the Charge of Inch-Lesley-Premnay-Oyne. It is likely that the new Presbytery Plan will allocate two ministers to these three Charges. This is not a top-down process. Sessions were asked which neighbours they might naturally be best working alongside.

Importantly we should understand that redrawing boundaries on a map or grouping parishes together in itself will not be sufficient to transform the church. Indeed, there is a risk that as the responsibilities of ministers grows this further discourages people to offer themselves for full-time ministry.

When Jesus called the fishermen to following him, he promised that he would make them fishers of men and women. But he wasn't just speaking to first-century fishermen, he was, and is, speaking to you and me. The church has failed that basic call to be a church full of fishers of men and women, a church that is a missionary church.

Twice in the Gospels we read of the disciples fishing all night but catching nothing. Jesus calls to them from the shore of the Lake to cast their nets over the other side of the boat. They do so and

haul in a great catch. That is a lesson for the church. Simply grouping parishes together is much like rebuilding the boat. We can rebuild the boat so it looks a little different, a little lighter, more manoeuvrable, with all the latest technology; but if we continue fishing just as we have done, we will catch what we've been catching and that's clearly very little.

As we read on through the Gospels and then through the rest of the New Testament, we find that those fishermen Jesus called by the Lake were first followers, people who simply went around Judea with Jesus. As they did so they became disciples, people who learned from his teaching and from his actions and relationships with people. As disciples they were learners and imitators. Jesus even sent them out to undertake on-the-job training; and not just the twelve but seventy-two. Jesus prepared the disciples to carry on his mission and ministry after he had ascended to heaven. The disciples then found that they became apostles. 'Apostle' means someone who is sent. They were sent by Jesus to proclaim the Gospel and be witnesses to what they had seen. They were to make the Gospel of salvation known to others and be agents of God's love in the world winning souls for Christ.

We too are followers, disciples and apostles. We all have a role to play in the ministry and mission of God's Kingdom. That's what Paul was writing about when he spoke of the body of Christ being made up of different members, each one gifted by the Holy Spirit for a particular task, but all working co-operatively together with the aim of building up the church.

I am sure that you will have heard people say, "you don't talk about politics and religion" or "faith is a private matter". Well, that's nonsense. If the disciples had kept their faith private they would not have been apostles and the church would have died out before it had begun. Indeed, John writes, towards the end of his account of the Gospel, that he's written his book so that people may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing they may have life in Jesus' name. (John 20:31) Writing down the Gospel was one way of John witnessing and making Christ known in the world.

So, simply grouping parishes together and amalgamating presbyteries is unlikely to result in a great revival. We each need to discern what is that gift the Holy Spirit has given so it can be used in God's service.

We each need to reflect upon our faith and what it means to us. What it means to be witnesses, and share our faith with others. We need to grow in our prayer life and develop our relationship with God. When we engage in the tasks the church has undertaken, knitting groups, coffee mornings, Bible study, prayer groups, etc we need to ask, "why are we doing this?" What is the purpose of our activity? Is it to build up the church? Is it to provide an opportunity for witness? Is it a vehicle for making Jesus known in the world? Is it a way of channelling God's love? Are we proclaiming the Gospel of salvation and enabling others to develop their own relationship with God?

We live in challenging times. The Coronavirus isolation is forcing us to rethink how we can provide for people's spiritual welfare and development in ways we perhaps have never thought before. Some of these might just be of value to us in the years ahead. It might also be that we will come to a new realisation of the value of meeting together to worship God, hear his Word and be filled by his Spirit.

Of course, our enforced isolation is hampering the work to address these challenges the church faces. As and when I am able, I will keep you up-dated with the direction of travel. However, in the immediate future may God keep you safe and well. Blessings

Rev Martyn Sanders