

Dear Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch members

Feb 2021

Most of you will be aware that discussions have been ongoing for the last year about the future, not just of Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch church, but of all the parishes in the presbytery. Declining and ageing membership, financial stresses, too many unaffordable buildings, ministerial retirement and a low number of new ministers in training, have meant that the church nationally and regionally have been needing rethink how we 'do church'.

Historically, the Church of Scotland has been committed to a geographical model, with the 'ordinances of religion' being provided to each parish via a unique church and minister, although latterly, the lack of available ministers has often meant linkages and unions. Nevertheless, church members have continued to find their sense of identity, and to build relationships through a connection to 'their' local church.

Unfortunately the demographic changes mentioned above mean this is no longer feasible. For the last few years the Church of Scotland nationally and regionally has been slowly trying to get their head around what an alternative model might look like. The arrival of Covid 19, and the subsequent pressures it has placed on the church has accelerated the need for change at the very time when getting together to discuss those changes and communicating them to the wider congregation is most difficult.

Back in 2018 each presbytery was given estimated figures as to the likely number of ministers they would be able to afford and sustain by 2023.

Currently our Presbytery of Gordon has 25 charges comprising 28 congregations. There are 21 full time equivalent ministers of word and sacrament (FTEMWS) in post. In 2018 the planning team was told they

were to work to an expectation that the presbytery would only have 14.9 such posts by 2023. One of the effects of Covid has been to make even these reduced figures appear optimistic.

As a result a greater emphasis is being placed on team work and collaboration. In the proposed plan, congregations have been placed into 'parish groupings', based on both geography and established working relationships. Each grouping is expected to work together and develop what is known as a covenant agreement around the Five Marks of Mission, namely

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Each parish grouping is also facing reduction in the number of ministers and a reduction in the number of their buildings over the next 5-10 years.

Four congregations, including Blairdaff Chapel of Garioch, have been placed under Guardianship status. This means they will not be able to call a minister, but will otherwise continue to operate with all the responsibilities and structures of any Church of Scotland congregation. Currently, a guardianship allowance is available to help pay for a locum to cover Sunday worship and some pastoral work, but it is unclear as things change nationally how long such payments may be available.

Guardianship is to some extent a temporary measure, while the future of the parish is discussed. Congregations can move in and out of

Guardianship, but it is important to recognise that there is no real prospect that BCOG will be able to call their 'own' minister.

Of the four congregations put into guardianship, Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch (BCOG) is the only one not to be put into a parish grouping. This is probably because it was unclear in the discussions to date, which grouping felt most appropriate, with some feeling more aligned to the Kemnay/Kintore/Monymusk cluster, others to Inverurie and others to Inch/Huntly.

After seeing the first draft of the plan, the BCOG session queried this isolated status. Being part of a grouping does not provide any guarantee of future retention of buildings or extra ministerial support, but it does give the congregation a wider network of support upon which to draw. After thoughtful discussion and majority agreement about which grouping felt most natural, the session gave feedback to the planning team about their preferences.

Accordingly, the second draft of the plan includes the statement "further options to be explored, including incorporation into a parish grouping, but in the first instance this charge is to be placed into Guardianship"

Alternatives to Guardianship include dissolution of the parish in its current form, or moving into a new status as a 'worshipping community'. Dissolution of the parish would mean that Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch would no longer exist as a united congregation. Some have wondered whether the parish might be 'split' into two halves, each joining a separate parish grouping, however to do this the current parish would first need to be dissolved. The buildings and any other assets would return to the control of presbytery and members would be supported in joining other congregations/parish groupings.

The national church has yet to decide or agree structures for the proposed 'worshipping communities' but it would likely take the form of a more informal worshipping group set up to work in the area, who would be accountable to a 'sponsoring' congregation. Such a community would not hold any property nor have the full structures (session, various office holders, etc) or responsibilities of a parish church.

If you have thoughts or comments or questions about the plan, please speak to your elder or contact your Interim Moderators, Rhona Cathcart or Mark Paterson.

These are clearly challenging times and it is very difficult not to be disheartened. It is small comfort that virtually every congregation in the country, large or small, is having to face major changes. The session appreciate your support as they wrestle with this challenge and try to discern the best way forward for Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch. In the meantime, prayers for a clear ongoing vision of God's plans for the parish would be appreciated.

“For you know the plans I have for you’, declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.’”
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Let's do our best to keep hopeful in these challenging times. We have every confidence that God has a plan for BCOG even if may not be what any of us expected.

Kind regards

Your interim moderators,

Rhona and Mark

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