

Background Paper on "Parish Grouping"

The 2003 Act of the General Assembly anent "Appraisal and Adjustment of Charges" introduces the new instrument of "Parish Groupings", defined in the Act as follows:-

"The Presbytery may declare that two or more charges shall have responsibility for a single area.

The Basis of such an adjustment shall determine the extent to which the charges shall operate as a Parish Grouping; for instance in the sharing of worship, personnel, education, resources mission initiatives and congregational organisations etc. ."

In this post "Church Without Walls" era it is recognised that there is urgent need for radical and far-reaching change within the ways in which congregations operate.

Collaborative ministry is generally seen to be the best way forward for the church as it seeks to respond positively to the threats of reducing numbers of ministers and escalating numbers of vacancies throughout the country. Parish Grouping offers an exciting and new way in which we can be more collaborative and use our resources more effectively.

The new legislation allowing Parish Groupings to be formed has already inspired and enabled several Parish Groupings to be formed across Scotland and several groupings within Edinburgh Presbytery are currently taking steps in this direction.

Nevertheless this is very much an embryonic and continually developing way of working. Each Parish Grouping by the terms of its own agreed "Basis of Parish Grouping" has flexibility to set up the structure and ministry team which best suit its own unique situation.

This of necessity means that there is no official "blueprint" for Parish Groupings and it is in the hands of each Grouping's Steering Group to take advice and seek to identify their own area's texture and hence the style and make-up of ministry team they need.

Throughout Edinburgh Presbytery, we have already encouraged congregations to see themselves as part of local groupings and to explore ways in which they can work more closely together.

At present the main focus in Parish Grouping development rests on those congregations which are vacant or due for review themselves, and those having a neighbouring church which is vacant or due for review.

However there is no need for these conditions to be in place in order for local congregations to start recognising their neighbouring churches as "fellow travellers" and to move further towards a more formal level of cooperation and indeed commitment together in a Parish Grouping

There are in place fairly clearly established steps to be taken by cooperating congregations towards the setting up of their Parish Grouping. These are as follows:-

- Form a Steering Group.
- Identify the "texture" of the Grouping area in terms of geography, history, culture, age profile etc.
- Identify the style and structure of the appropriate ministry team
- Agree a Basis of Parish Grouping- locally, with Presbytery and with the national Parish Appraisal Committee
- Elect a Nominating Committee

It is the opinion of the Deployment of Resources Committee that the Steering Group should be made up of equal numbers from each of the congregations and during the work involved in the researching, drawing up and obtaining approval of the "Basis for Parish Grouping" there be an independent Chair from Presbytery-normally a member of the Deployment of Resources Committee.

The appropriate Ministry Team will be one which best meets the needs and goals of the area as identified by the Steering Group having researched the texture and nature of their Parish Grouping area. This will involve flagging up the style and skill-base required across the ministry team.

The newly formed, national Area Team Ministry (ATM) project is focussing on releasing " the energy of the Church together, full time and part-time, paid and voluntary for the task of mission and ministry" They plan to do this through directly supporting local Area Team Ministries.

For Parish Groupings with a commitment to developing joint approaches to mission and ministry for their shared Area, the ATM project would be willing to consider offering consultant support over a period of 12-18 months.

The Nominating Committee (previously known as the "Vacancy Committee") will be charged with the responsibility of nominating persons for all vacant ministry positions in the team. The appropriate Ministry Team for the Parish Grouping would best include a range of other ministries as well as an Ordained Minister(s). However under the present Church legislation only Ordained Ministers can be financed through the Parish Staffing Budget! Watch this space!

It is envisaged that the working of a Parish Grouping will be reviewed after 5 years.

A Leadership Group made up of representatives from the Parish Grouping congregations would be the on-going body inspiring and enabling shared activities to move forward. The size and proportional congregational representation on this group is not set but would need to allow for adequate representation and accountability while enabling efficient working. The Chair of this Group need not be an Ordained Minister and the representatives need not all be elders.

Ideally, ideas from congregations would be fed into this Group and joint ventures planned and facilitated through them.

Kirk Sessions and Congregational Boards would continue to be responsible for the on going life of their congregations but above all, committed to developing the togetherness essential in utilising a Parish Grouping to greatest effect.

Over time the number of individual congregation Kirk Session and Congregational Board meetings could reduce, as more activity is shared jointly and coordinated through the Leadership Group.

Some Elders and Board members could then be released from attending so many meetings as before and therefore available to be involved in other innovative and exciting activities in their congregation and Grouping.

It is generally accepted that, initially at any rate, individual congregations would retain control over their property and finances.

However this for many people, would restrict the inclusive "sharing" that is of the very essence of Parish Grouping and which makes it so exciting and so enabling.

The potential for growing together, while retaining each individual congregation's identity is seen as one of Parish Groupings major advantages.

Apparent similarities with "Linking" of congregations have been raised. However, in a linkage there is only one minister on her/his own and there need be no collaboration between the constituent congregations and hence no thinking or movement together. While in particular local situations there may well be collaboration this is entirely dependent on the whim of any newly incoming minister and is not an ongoing commitment.

Linking also gives no support to individual ministers but puts them at the interface between two or more potentially disagreeing congregations. Parish Grouping on the other hand makes provision for ministers to be in a situation that has already been agreed to be a collaborative one and offers the team-working situation that most newly qualified ministers are looking for and trained for.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do you think there are advantages in Parish Groupings which are not available through the linking or union of congregations?
2. From what you have seen from the power point presentation, what disadvantages do you think a Parish Grouping has?
3. What resources do you think would be needed to make a Parish Grouping work?
4. Is there a forum in your area where discussion about the future of local churches takes place? Do you think such a forum would discuss Parish Groupings?
5. Do you think all congregations in the Presbytery of Edinburgh should begin to discuss the question or feasibility of Parish Groupings? Or would such discussion be realistic only when a vacancy occurs or is imminent?
6. Do you think there is or could be a place for other denominations in a Parish Grouping? Is there an ecumenical role that a Parish Grouping could fulfil? Or do you think a Parish Grouping would be counter-productive in ecumenical terms?