

## UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE .....

### Rethinking patterns of Christian mission in Edinburgh

In the March 2009 survey of congregations the major concerns expressed by office bearers about the future were shortage of funds, ageing congregations, falling membership and a lack of new leadership. The concern can appear to be the survival of the current patterns of church life.

It is all too easy for congregations (and presbyteries) to become ends in themselves where, even in dramatically changed circumstances, the survival of the once-successful pattern is seen as the main goal. However, we should remember that Jesus said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it."

This paper suggests that the issue that should most concern Christians in Edinburgh is whether or not we are engaged with the mission of Jesus Christ to our neighbours.

The argument set out below is that we should turn away from the idea that we can save the life of the church as we have known it – it simply cannot be done for these are different times from those which formed the congregational

patterns that once worked so well. Rather we should journey forward in faith believing Jesus' promise that "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." He leads onwards those who would follow.

This is the time to find our life again. The people who live within the bounds of our Presbytery need the Gospel even if they are unaware of this fact. There are thousands of human beings who have no faith by which to live. In these days when the false gods of secular materialism have been found out there are opportunities and challenges that should be seized.

We should have confidence in the Gospel and in our calling as disciples.

There is work to be done – and we can do it.

#### LOOKING AHEAD

It might be argued that we have too often concerned ourselves in Presbytery with patching up the old patterns of church life in the hope that someday they will once again work as they did in the 1950's. So where things become a bit frayed we have done a little patching. When it crumbles to dust we have observed the decencies and

moved what was left of one congregation into the life of another. The Presbytery Plan reflects a best guess at how many congregational units we could retain in ten years time while maintaining some kind of spread across the city and its outskirts. Does our ecclesiastical joinery do any more than stave off the fateful day when the church, structured as we have known it, breathes its last?

This paper suggests that pursuing survival of the church as it has been is a distraction from the major challenge of discovering how we can be involved in the mission of Jesus Christ to our city. To be a missionary church is surely a more exciting and fulfilling task than clinging on to what must inevitably sink.

Only when we have reached a shared understanding of the priority of mission against the particular needs of our city and its surroundings can we begin to assess the health and viability of the congregations.

#### OUR PRESBYTERY

Edinburgh is not one mission context but several.

Some might argue that it is in fact 85 individual parish nooks and crannies (to

say nothing of chaplaincies and other forms of ministries) but for the practical purpose of taking forward our thinking about mission it might be useful to look at the following range of contexts:

- the city centre – those areas of the town where there are major offices, retail outlets, cultural attractions and leisure facilities that serve the whole city. It is also an area where many of the poorest citizens gravitate.
- the inner city – the areas just beyond the edge of the city centre where people choose to live and do business because of the proximity to the heart of things.
- the outer city – the areas on the edge of the inner city where there is local shopping, longer term residents and a sense of 'community'.
- the suburbs – those places where most houses are bought for family use, where there are few business and lots of children and young people. The adults are mainly in professional or managerial work.
- the housing schemes – where rented social housing still predominates (although in many streets built by the Council most of the houses have now been sold).

Here, certainly in pockets, are some of the sharpest forms of deprivation.

- towns and villages – these are places that people would name as home rather than describing themselves as citizens of Edinburgh; there are community events and societies with local shops and some employment; there is a greater variety of housing and social mix.

Each of these settings poses challenges for Christian mission. On the basis that we should be trying to let “the Lord build the house” the principle suggested here is that we should look at Christ’s mission first and then consider how the resources we have in terms of people, buildings and money can be harnessed to that task. By recognising common issues between contexts (which may not be contiguous parishes) we can work and learn together as we seek the way ahead.

### GOOD HEALTH

These are rigorous times for the Church. We do not live in days where the Gospel finds an easy reception so the health of Christian communities is severely tested.

In its March 2009 conference meeting the Presbytery explored the idea of using

the concept of health as a way of discussing the viability of the Body of Christ as it is found in the local congregation. This drew on work carried out by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Its thesis is that the purposes of the church are always the same wherever it finds itself.

These could be put in any order but they are:

- worship
- service
- fellowship
- discipleship
- evangelism

The purposes may be the same and the need to hold them in balance is always there but how the church offers its praise, exercises its ministry, grows as a community, develops the faith of individuals and helps others become Christians varies according to the context within which the mission of the church is exercised. For some, this context is a natural, well-defined community; for others it is a much wider area – in some cases the entire city.

Health and viability judged in these terms are not determined by numbers or wealth but by the faithfulness which leads to a balanced Christian life where

all the work of the church finds appropriate expression.

### MAKING A START

The aim of our work in the next eighteen months should be:

- an increased understanding in the leadership of congregations of what it means to be part of a missionary church.
- an increased commitment to shared working.
- the development of resources which are focused on enabling congregations, chaplaincies and other forms of ministry to exercise mission in their context
- the working up of a Presbytery Plan with an arguable basis
- a sense of confidence that there is work that should and can be done.

As a Presbytery we are required to develop a ten-year plan.

This must be shaped by the common endeavour of being part of Christ's people in the city. Letting "the Lord build the house" cannot be a solitary exercise where the strong work away in their own parish while those in tougher circumstances are left alone; nor can it be a task that ignores our brothers and

sisters in other denominations. It is also an opportunity to connect other ministries which we recognise – e.g. chaplaincies – into the bigger picture of work and witness.

If our aim is to let the Church be shaped by the Spirit into an instrument of mission in the Edinburgh of today then the old adage is probable true that, “we wouldn’t have chosen to start from here”. However, we are where we are, and neither staying put nor going back are options.

To make a start on this it is proposed that every congregation is visited in 2010. This would give us a base from which to work as we plan longer term.

Seven or eight teams of three would carry out these visits. This would mean that at least those leading the visits would “do” 10-12 congregations. In return for this commitment they should be excused other Presbytery commitments for the duration of this process.

The people conducting these visits will not be experts telling people how to run “their” church. Instead, they should be individuals who are good at engaging quickly with people and who can

facilitate (not dominate) discussion and ask the right questions. They should be open to different theologies and styles, and be good at reporting in a concise and accurate form.

The recommendations are as follows:

The Presbytery:

1. Adopt the report entitled "Unless the Lord builds the house" as the basis for its approach to creating the Presbytery Plan which would then be based on:
  - a. Mission
  - b. Context
  - c. Congregational Health and Viability
2. Suspend the present Superintendence Scheme.
3. Agree that every congregation should be visited in 2010 to explore its share in the mission of Jesus Christ within the context in which it is called to work, and to help its leaders reflect on issues of congregational health and viability.
4. Declare that these visits would be Quinquennial Visits as per Act II 1984 (which says that Presbyteries must visit a congregation at least every five years.)

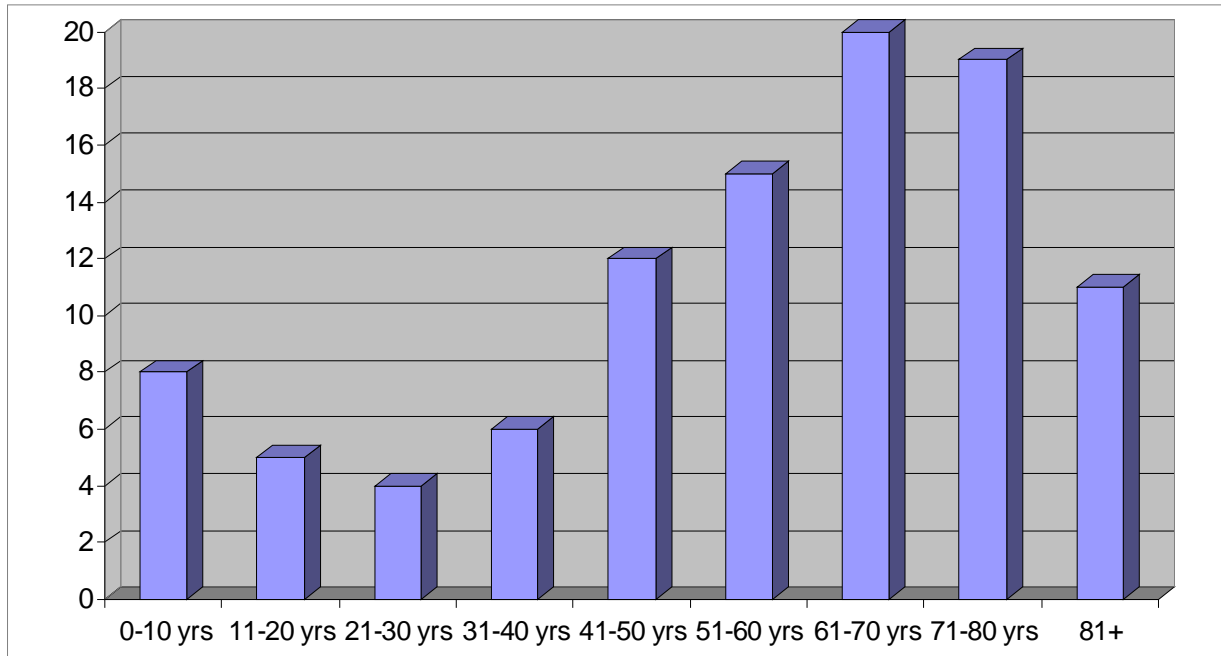
5. Agree that where there is to be a Review of Tenure or decision made regarding a vacant charge's Right of Call, this would be conducted on the same basis as the other visits.
6. Appoint a team consisting of the Rev Dr Caroline Lockerbie (Convener) and seven others to carry forward this review process and to report to Presbytery on a monthly basis from February 2010 – February 2011.
7. Instruct the Business Committee to prepare, by June 2010, a new approach to the Quinquennial Visit process for use from 2011 onwards. This should take into account proposed changes to General Assembly legislation and the work of the Panel on Review and Reform.
8. Instruct the Nominations Committee to bring forward names for a Superintendence Committee of seven persons to deal with urgent cases involving issues of discipline and/or conflict
9. Instruct the Clerk to bring forward to the September meeting of Presbytery changes to Standing Orders to reflect:
  - a. the changed remit and size of the Superintendence Committee

Unless the Lord builds the house ...

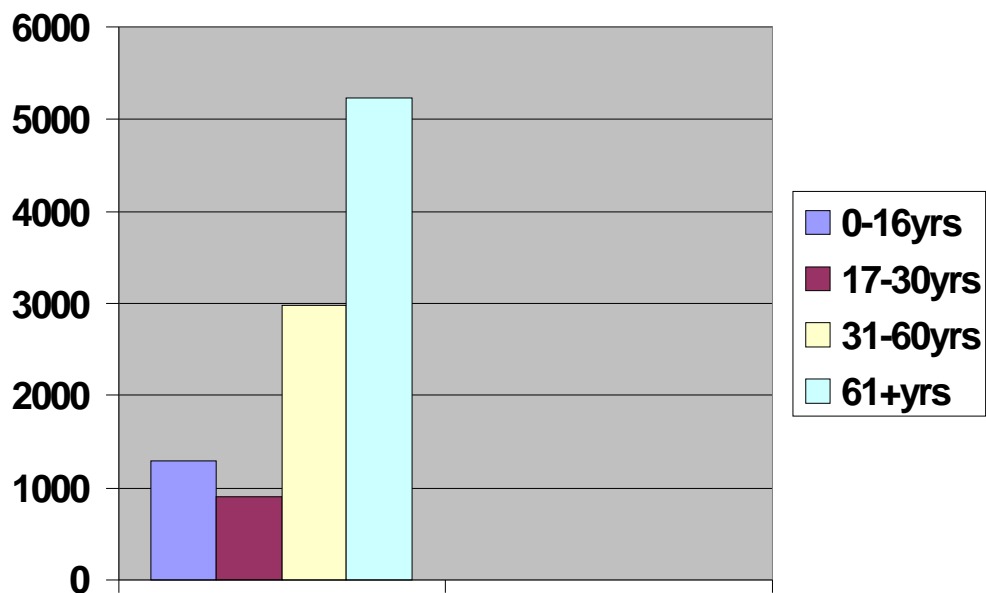
- b. The reduction in membership of the Deployment of Resources Committee from 42 to 21 members

The following statistics have been extracted from the survey completed in March

#### AGE PROFILE OF CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERSHIP



#### AGE PROFILE OF THOSE ATTENDING WORSHIP



In Edinburgh, on an average Sunday in March 2009, there were around 11000 people who attended worship out of a city population of 450000.

## GROUPS FOR ADULT CHRISTIAN NURTURE

x congregations with	y groups
6	0
7	1
15	2
10	3
8	4
10	5
6	6
3	7
1	9
3	10
1	11
2	13
2	15

## PAID STAFF

x congregations with	y staff
5	0
7	1
12	2
19	3
6	4
9	5
4	6
2	7
4	8
2	9
1	10
1	11
1	12
1	14