

Congregational Meeting with Clèir Eilean Ì Presbytery

Minutes of meeting held in St Laurence Church on 21st September 2024

Presenting Speakers;

Rev Thomas Bryson, St Ninians Church, Nairn

Rev Monica Redman, Muir of Ord and Presbytery Mission Planning Committee Convener

Mr. Simon Jackson, Reader from Fern, member of Presbytery Mission Planning Committee

Rev. Bryson welcomed and thanked everyone for their attendance. He introduced the two guests and stated the purpose of the meeting was to ask questions or make requests. Anyone wishing to speak should stand and identify themselves by name and role in the congregation.

He opened the meeting with a Bible reading from 1 Corinthians Ch 1 vs 10 and then prayer.

An announcement was read about a further meeting to be held in the church, on 26th October. This will be open to the public as well as any possible stakeholders, with the purpose of gathering ideas about how the building might be used for the benefit of the people of Forres and wider area.

He briefly reminded the attendees again about the due process followed in order to produce the current Presbytery Plan under which we are all now operating under.

Rev. Monica Redmond introduced herself and stated her role in Presbytery. She briefly explained the situation that there are currently 525 ministers in post with 64 due to retire and not enough candidates graduating. Therefore, along with serious financial constraints there is a need to restructure.

The future aim is to have enough buildings in the right places including missional congregations. Nine presbyteries formed into one, with a vision to find new ways of doing things. Her role in developing the Inverness Plan is in trying to find a positive way forward and do things as well as possible, while dealing with some very difficult decisions.

Rev Bryson opened the meeting for comments, questions and requests.

The following is a summary of what was discussed.

How was the decision made to close St Laurence?

While acknowledging how difficult it is to close any historic building, it's important to understand the buildings are not more important than the work of the church.

A letter from the Lord Lieutenant of Moray, Major General Seymour Monro CBE LVO. Was read out expressing his support for St Laurence as well as his great disappointment.

The aim of this meeting is to find a way to keep St Laurence building open and available for future events like concerts, special services, exhibitions as well as creative events.

Would Church of Scotland gift the building to the community?

No! An OSCR (Office of Scottish Charities Registration) charity does not permit trustees to give away an asset. They can however accept a lower than market value offer and sell it to a body

who is not the highest bidder. Presbytery can create an opportunity for a body or group to receive a “preferred bidder” status for a set time period. eg one year. Monica agreed to make enquiries about this.

One opinion was expressed about St Laurence being a “thin “ place where the presence of God was clearly felt and the preacher was not interested in finding a future use.

Discussion followed about a shared use of St Laurence and the need to form an organization with a legal SCIO (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organization) identity, in order to hold property, employ people and enter into contracts of its own. The building would cease to be owned by the Church of Scotland which would necessitate booking its use in order to have services on special occasions.

Could the St Laurence building be treated as a special case?

No. Only a very few buildings meet the criteria to be granted that status. Monica agreed she could have a conversation at presbytery level about that possibility but expected it would be a very short one, holding no hope of a positive outcome.

An expression of strong disappointment regarding the lack of consultation with the congregation regarding the decision to close.

This was accepted and agreed unreservedly. There had been insufficient consultation.

The Presbyterian system is such that the Minister or Interim Minister and the Presbytery Elder are responsible for feeding back information. Elders and ministers agree to uphold this system when they accept their roles. The due process was followed, and opportunities were given during the consultation process, although perhaps these had been unclear.

The importance of working together with people in order to move forward was emphasized.

The consequences of not having a minister to present our case.

The role and responsibilities of Interim Moderator to look after the business of the church, as well as the important role of Presbytery Elder to communicate matters were emphasized.

An outline of the process followed towards the union was recalled.

Firstly, how the decision to join Inverness Presbytery over Moray was taken, was a cause of unrest. Session worked to produce a future plan for the building but no visits to St Laurence was made prior to the closure announcement. As well as that, the vote for the union was mishandle causing tremendous unrest. Again, the suggestion was made to develop the St Leonard’s building for community use and retain St Laurence as a place of worship. This received a round of applause.

Did the fact St Leonard’s had an incumbent minister, while St Laurence did not a factor in the decision made?

No. The alternative proposal was considered and thoroughly discussed but rejected. We can’t afford the luxury of having a space solely for worship.

The document created by session, proposed making changes to St Laurence which would allow it to be used for mission and outreach as well as worship.

St Laurence as it stands offers many opportunities for a wider usage and only recently has a concert where 500 people were present. This is a lost opportunity for improvement

The plan is for a team ministry, for Forres, going forward and St Leonard's fits with this.

What about financial bequests and trusts made to individual churches?

All gifts as well as liabilities go into a central pot.

What will happen in the future to buildings of Dyke, Edinkillie, St Ninian's in Nairn, when their current ministers retire?

They will come together under St Ninians. The congregations will choose for themselves where they go.

Rev Bryson drew the meeting together by reminding everyone that while the Church of Scotland door is closed, the aim of this and the future meeting is to keep the doors of this building open.

Unity rather than division is needed to form a partnership and make a plan from the different views and visions for the way ahead.

The Open Day event on 26th October will be an opportunity for interested folk to express their interest and bring their ideas. Onie from the Community Development Trust spoke briefly about this meeting.

Rev Bryson reminded us all to find God's purpose in this process and be united in Jesus.

Mr Simon Jackson closed the meeting with a prayer.