

Embracing reality, sustaining hope

This paper is intended to stimulate more than discussion – its a call for change and action now to prepare us for the future. The pace of change in church life has been rapid but it is only likely to increase.

At a national level, there is a well known impending crisis in the number of ministers – reducing from 700 to 400 in five years time.

At a local level we have a number of vacancies that have been long term and a number of retirements pending in the next five years.

Whether we like it or not, whether we agree with it or not, it is the end of one minister, one manse, one parish. Continually changing boundaries to make parishes bigger and bigger is unsustainable - whilst on paper it might look like one minister one parish, it is impossible to be involved in many communities in the same way. Smaller islands in particular, which have not always been best served by the church, will lose out once again in the readjustment, unless there is some creative thought applied.

There is also a big change in the expectations of ministry – those trained in the last five years are trained in this context of decline but also in a hopeful expectation of mission and team work, quite different to that of previous generations.

At present there is a grave injustice inherent in the one minister one parish model – the interim moderator role is the primary mechanism for a minister in a neighbouring parish to support a vacancy. But this props up an outdated model of meetings based administration and does little to nourish and encourage those in long term vacancy.

It is too easy to criticise the structures and processes that prevent innovation – instead we need to do what we can now and not wait for church law to catch up.

We need a model of ministry that is flexible, adaptable and team based. We need to initiate this change at a point when we are relatively well provisioned with staff and set in place an approach that can adapt as ministry numbers fluctuate.

We need a model of ministry that embraces the ministry of the whole people of God, without dumping all the expectations of a minister onto a congregation, wearing everyone out in the process. Leadership is necessary,

Principles –

Ministry as a team based approach

By organising our existing parishes into area teams, we need not worry about parish groupings / hubs etc but begin a process that can accommodate these things at a later date. We also need to work more concertedly with other denominations.

Ministry as a shared resource

The teams are there to resource the whole area – not just the parish in which they live. This is a change of mindset for minister, elders and congregations. An elder with gifts in financial administration should be a gift to the area not just the parish. Existing ministers are already required to take an active role in presbytery – this needs reshaped and new ministries need to come in on this understanding.

Ministry as a range of gifts

It is no longer an option for a congregation to call a minister without reference to the skills and gifting needed across the Presbytery./ We need a range of gifts and as people come and go this needs reflected.

Ministry as primarily missional

If we are to reverse decline it will not come from doing what we are currently doing. The emphasis on ministry therefore needs to shift outwards from congregation to community. Worship and pastoral care are still important but the emphasis towards discipleship and outreach needs to be reflected in resources of time, money and people.

Much of the anxiety over church closure is that it is viewed as the end of the line for a community. This need not be the case. A missional presence in every parish means ensuring the church continues to have a role but that role changes to reflect need and uptake. North Ronaldsay, for example, has enough money to support input and encouragement for the next ten years, when the future of the island community as a whole will be clearer, but it is not and will not be a viable church congregation on its own. Orphir has a vibrant cafe that reaches out to its community but need not operate from the church building. We need to retain a missional presence in every community and spend accordingly – but this need to be bricks and mortar manse and kirk.

To make this concrete the following is proposed.

A move now towards three area teams – North, East and West. This does not mean moving to three ministers, but to three teams. However, in ten years time, unless there is a significant change, that will be the reality. In fact there could be only one minister across all of Orkney if we continue wringing our hands and blindly hoping for change. It is therefore a model that can accommodate further decline, whilst also being a way of encouraging further growth.

North – the existing outer isles parishes – currently 2.7 FTE ministers with 1 in post and 1.7 vacant. Rousay (West) and Shapinsay (East) are not presently part of this arrangement but could be.

East – Kirkwall (Cathedral and East Kirk) , East Mainland, South Ronaldsay and Burray – currently 4 FTE ministers with 3 in post and one vacancy. Also currently includes Shapinsay. Some, but not all, support for North Isles would need to be based here.

West -Stromness, Birsay, Harray and Sandwick, Orphir and Stenness, with Hoy, Flotta and Walls, Firth and Evie, Rendall and Rousay - currently 4FTE ministers, 2 in post and 2 vacant with OLM providing support to one vacancy and a locum to the other.

An ongoing challenge for us is transportation. This is not likely to change and we are at the mercy of timetabling with little ability to influence this. It is wildly unrealistic to think we can demand changes to the ferries to suit the small numbers of people wanting to come to church. Changing the timetable will not lead to revival. Further timetable changes are expected following the poor outcome of budget negotiations between OIC and Scottish Government, and these will likely make things more challenging. It is therefore easier for people on the Mainland to visit outer isles than it is for people on one outer isle to visit another. We need to embrace this as a reality. Resident ministers, meeting the needs and expectations of fifty years ago on islands with low church attendance must cease. That does not mean giving up, it means imaginatively reconfiguring our resources to accept this reality and creatively seek to support communities in outreach.

Allied to this is a shift to focus on children and families – these are primarily absent from many congregations and without families there is no future for the church. Too much church resource has

been focused on the pastoral care of existing members rather than the missional care of families outwith the congregation. This needs rebalanced.

Put bluntly, we need to tell some existing vacant congregations that they will not get a minister. Not because it is unlikely, but because it is a poor use of a scarce resource. We need children and families workers more and these can work across parishes.

We also need to tell some existing congregations with ministers that they cannot hold on to their minister to the exclusion of elsewhere. Minister must become shared resources and that starts with existing ministers.

A congregation of less than 50 must accept they cannot call a minister. North Ronaldsay and Rousay, for example, are house groups. House groups have a vital role to play if they are nurtured and encouraged as house groups, but they are not parish churches nor should they be.

Immediate steps

1) Approve and explore three team approach

- Approval of the principle of three team ministries in Orkney.
- Discussions in these teams as to what is required, based on local church review findings

Discussion between teams as to how to help one another.

2) IT feasibility study – cost £10k (invitation to tender)

Feasibility study on connecting churches with superfast broadband to enable shared leadership of services and training. Commission a piece of work to explore:

option 1 – connecting into the education network using line of sight microwave transmission from church buildings to schools. Where there is no church building, using the existing school or community centre.

Option 2 – connecting into domestic broadband - which islands and locations this is currently fast enough and which require upgrades

For either option, also recommending the kit required suitable to that context for both broadcasting and receiving. For example, webcams, network infrastructure, microphones, PCs and projectors vs ipad and TV.

3) Explore how to support children and family work across the Presbytery – pay someone to draw up a job spec for two family workers and a program of work across the parishes. A model might be an afternoon toddlers group, after school primary group and evening secondary group, running this program of work in several locations which reduces preparation time.

These are things we could agree immediately.

But further action is required.

A concrete radical plan

Within the three teams there are particular challenges that need acknowledged and dealt with. In four years of being here I have seen very little progress with any of the acknowledged challenges.

It's time to make some decisions – if not the ones detailed here then other ones. What cannot continue is a blind stubborn insistence that everyone everywhere gets a minister.

North – there is only one viable base for a minister in the North Isles – Westray. It has a large enough community and an active congregation. Papa Westray is a house church that can be supported from Westray. In order to support other islands, the Westray minister would need to spend some time on the Mainland to release others on the Mainland to visit outer isles. Stronsay, Sanday and Eday would be supported in this way, with a monthly worship service (not necessarily on a Sunday morning) and quarterly communion, linking in by video link on other occasions.

Linked to this would be to reconfigure the Cathedral post. Through the winter cathedral attendance is poor – move to a bi monthly Sunday afternoon service, offering a distinctive cathedral service as a gathered community that will include other denominations. In the summer to offer a weekly Sunday afternoon service and a weekly Friday evening pilgrim service. The additional capacity generated would enable support of other communities, particularly in the North Isles.

Could we pilot a missionary post in the outer isles? Since the vast majority of people have no church connection what might this look like? Can we utilise

East – the Cathedral post would reduce to 50%, with the other 50% of the post being support to the North Isles. South Ronaldsay and Burray – using the technology offered for a housegroup wishing to gather, otherwise encouraging people to the East Mainland or East Kirk.

East Mainland would provide pastoral lead in the south isles, with a part time pastoral assistant to help.

East Kirk would be training hub for east, along with Milestone for the west. Pastoral assistant to help, with Cathedral providing pastoral care to outer isles.

Serious consideration needs given to the plethora of Kirkwall churches and how to provide support – is there a way to partner with eg Salvation Army and Episcopal Church to divide up Kirkwall pastorally so that the East Kirk is not expected to be everything to everyone?

West

Stromness Kirk is a dreadful inaccessible building whose reconfiguration will be extremely costly. Is this the best use of resources? It is suggested they partner with Stromness Baptist, move to holding an evening service that reflects liberal worship (and complements the morning evangelical worship of the Baptist Church). A move to the Town Hall in the short term would allow exploration of how the two churches together might be accommodated, either by making the Town Hall more accessible, or by building elsewhere. This evening service would be for everyone in the West Mainland.

Orphir Kirk, likewise, requires a huge expenditure for little gain. Dissolve the linkage with Stenness and Flotta, Hoy and Walls, Stenness coming in with Finstown (solving the manse problem for Finstown) and run Orphir as a vibrant house church, running the weekly cafe from another location.

Evie and Rendall have refused to unite with Finstown. Evie could be offered to come in with Milestone, Rendall given the choice between Milestone and Finstown. The Rendall Kirk could become a community trust since there is a strong desire to retain it (working like St Magnus Birsay). After school work could therefore continue regardless, with the nature and regularity of worship services there depending on whether they come in with Milestone or Finstown. Evie could be reconfigured into a retreat space, as respite for ministers both here and further afield.

In terms of existing ministries, Milestone would need to release their minister to help support children and families work across the presbytery, Stromness to support Hoy, Walls and Flotta with a pastoral assistant to help with load across the West Mainland.

We also need to reduce the administrative burden, here are some suggestions

- one safeguarding panel for Orkney, trained to be the point of contact for issues across the Presbytery.
- One safeguarding co-ordinator for each team
- one treasurer for each team – exploring whether this person could be employed across all three teams to keep the accounts. This includes moving eventually to being three registered charities, with ring fenced money for different parishes and activities, all accounted for together.
- One property convenor for each team – again this could be shared across teams but having a property convenor for each church is no longer viable.
- Other suggestions??

All this would result in:

North: 1 resident Minister (1 Minister on Westray, 0.5 at Cathedral) plus 1 children and families worker, 0.5 OLM

East: 3 resident Ministers (2.5 workload = 0.5 at Cathedral, 1 East Kirk, 1 East Mainland) plus 1.5 pastoral assistant, 0.5 children and families worker, 0.5 OLM

West: 3 resident Ministers (1 Stromness, 1 Milestone, 1 Finstown – presently 2 minister – when up to 3 presbytery responsibilities would be added to rebalance teams with East and North) plus 0.5 OLM, 0.5 children and families worker and 1 pastoral assistant.

This gives a ministry quota of 7 FTE, down from 10.7. This is still generous when compared with parish sizes further south, reflecting the challenges of tight knit remote rural communities. To reflect the reduction across the country, we should reduce from 10.7 to 6.0, and I am not proposing this.

The challenge therefore is, if you don't like or approve of the details in this proposal to present an alternative proposal that has a maximum of 7 FTE ministers.

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