

Presbytery of Orkney

Equipping & Encouraging for Christ



Finding a Way Forward

Parish Reviews of within the Presbytery of Orkney 2018

Introduction

Each of the 20 congregations within the Presbytery of Orkney were asked to conduct a reflective review of the life and work of their parish including their successes and their challenges.

This exercise had a number of aims:

- To encourage reflection within congregations.
- To help identify both the major challenges facing congregations – both specific challenges for individual congregations and common factors across the county.
- To look for success stories and areas of good practise that could be shared with others.
- To assist Presbytery in future planning to try and meet as many of the needs as possible with the resources available.

Suggestions of how these reviews might be carried out locally, depending on the size of the congregation, were circulated with a list of suggested questions. Each congregation was offered help with facilitating the review. 14 responses were received, 6 congregations did not submit a response.

The Next Steps

This document provides a summary of the main comments received in the review documents, seeks to highlight the major themes which emerged and identifies a few obvious areas where immediate benefit could be gained. The intention is to present this documents to Presbytery in February 2019 for discussion.

The Responses

Your Congregation's Story

Congregations generally thought they were good at welcoming people and especially good at hospitality (and baking). Success to coffee mornings, community cafes and lunches was important, not only for outreach to the local community, but also for the congregations themselves.

The large number of congregations currently without a minister is, of course, a major concern. Many of the congregations who have been vacant for some time described dedicated worship teams who are doing a tremendous job of keeping worship alive. A range of resources are being usefully used, with a good number of congregations making use of Fraser's weekly materials.

There were a couple of request of recorded sermons, which could be used as part of worship, and possibly the occasional recorded service, especially for use in the North Isles if ferry disruption prevents travel at short notice. Several congregations are actively considering web streaming of services or electronic links between congregations. There may be some benefit here in working together.

Involvement of the local members in the planning and leading of worship was almost always seen as beneficial, with those involved finding the work rewarding. A number specifically said they preferred to do something active themselves that use a pre-recorded service from elsewhere. However – *and very importantly* – there is feeling amongst many that although they are “surviving” and may even be justifiable proud of “rising to the challenge” of keeping their services running, their worship groups are gradually finding the job more difficult as folk get older and begin to “run out of stream”. In the absence of minister of their own, there was a feeling that these congregations would benefit from more frequent visiting preachers to help “keep them going”. Comment: “we are good at surviving, we are ALIVE!”.

There is a common picture of ageing congregations and difficulty attracting or retaining young people. The vast majority of congregations described their worship as “traditional Church of Scotland”, and this is clearly highly valued by current members and should be maintained, but some wondered whether some change in styles of music might help. A number of congregations run “messy church” events attracting families and young children, although finding people to run these events is often challenging.

One congregation mentioned the success they has experience with rearranging their order of service to include children at the end of the service rather than the beginning, which was seen to have a lot of advantages and we well-received.

There were suggestions from several congregations that attracting younger folk into committee position and to be Elders would be beneficial, with fixed-term appointment to committees generally seen to be beneficial.

There was some tensions voiced from congregations within linkages and from those who have recently changed constitution, where it takes time for folk to get used to new ways of doing business or having to change their expectations; however this was viewed philosophically as an important part of becoming less inward-looking (although it is still a real challenge).

The increasing administrative burden on running a congregation was mentioned, with some smaller island congregations finding it impossible to fill key vacancies (such as Treasurer), and considering employing someone to carry out bookkeeping.

Life of the Congregation

Pastoral visiting was frequently discussed in the responses, with some congregations examining the system of Elders' visits. There were several comments on the problem of making sure that visiting is constructive and appropriate. For the smaller communities, pastoral visiting was seen as a strength, and there were fewer perceived problems with "word of mouth" working well to identify those in need.

There is a range of different weekday meetings across the different congregations, with midweek Iona-style worship, bible study and prayer groups, a reading group and Guild meetings. Several people commented on the value of these groups for including folk who did not necessarily attend regular worship as well as for being good opportunities for conversation and friendship.

Congregation and the Wider Church

The links congregations have with the wider world was impressive and encouraging for the vast majority of congregations, large and small. There is clearly huge dedication to at many levels from strong support for International links (Malawi, Gogo Olive Trust, Christian Aid) and locally (The Guild, local Schools & Old People's Homes, Youth Groups, World Day of Prayer). For the congregations in larger places, there is generally good ecumenical communication with other local churches, for the smaller island congregations where they are the only worshipping community, there was a sense of ecumenical welcome, with many congregations having members with a range of denominational backgrounds.

Communication

Many congregations produce local newsletters, which are generally valued and well-received. There was some discussion over the use of websites (either managed by a single congregation or shared). A number of congregations would like to start using social media (Facebook) to communicate, but seemed unsure how best to start. Other congregations use this regularly, so this may be an area where experience and advice can be shared.

Use of social media to share services or worship resources was mentioned by several congregations, this should be explored.

Other channels of communication – newspaper, radio, notice boards are all regularly used and all have their place.

Into the Future

The single biggest challenge is the current lack of ministers available to lead worship. Whilst we sincerely hope to fill some of the current vacancies in the medium term, we know there is an acute National Shortage of ministers, which will only get worse. Many congregations have been successfully running for extended periods of time with worship groups, but these feel that they would benefit from more frequent support from visiting ministers. Some of the smaller congregations realise that

they are unlikely to get a “minister of their own”, but similarly would benefit from more frequent visits.

Uncertainly over the future was seen a worry by some, both from congregations which are currently vacant and find continuity a problem and from those with ministers who worry about the long term future.

Sharing existing resources, such as recorded services or sermons, use of technology or social media to share services is clearly an areas where we should be able to make progress. Continuing to develop and share worship resources, which are currently well-used and to encourage worship leaders should also be supported.

There is a general feeling that churches would like to attract more young people, but need help in doing this. Encouraging involvement in committee work and Eldership may be one solution to getting younger people involved. Only one congregation mentioned their concern that they do not reach the 20-30 age group – although this is probably common to all.

In general the Church buildings across the county are in good order. Two major refurbishments are currently being planned and should be supported.

Some questions were raised about how proportional the current system of calculating Ministry & Mission allocations is, this should be constantly reviewed and the local flexibility we have under the current system used to maximum effect.

There was a suggestion that Presbytery should write to Orkney Islands Council encouraging them to maintain (and expand) weekend ferry services to facilitate worship – this can certainly happen.

Reducing the administrative burden on congregations, and helping out smaller congregation who cannot find volunteers to fill the necessary posts is a clear concern. One way to achieve this is to form Unions, so that only one joint Session, Treasurer & Clerk are needed (as pursued by Evie, Rendall & Rousay). Another option might be to employ administrator(s) to cover what is needed – such as bookkeeping, either directly by individual congregations, by groups of congregations, or by Presbytery as a central resource.