

A Vision for 2030 Discussion Paper

Introduction

The congregation of St Michael's has been serving Linlithgow for almost a millennium. In the course of its history, its sanctuary has been built and rebuilt at least three times. It has witnessed destruction at the hands of King Edward of England, the birth of Mary Queen of Scots, vandalism from the troops of Oliver Cromwell, along with many other celebrations and tragedies.

While there has been much change across the centuries, what has remained constant is the desire of the people of Linlithgow to seek God and worship him in this place. That desire, however, has now largely come to an end. Statistics show that church attendance in Scotland has more than halved over the past three decades, while attendance at Church of Scotland churches dropped by 40% in only fourteen years. This numerical decline is reflected in attendance at St Michael's. While we are still blessed to have hundreds of active members, the majority of our membership is inactive, and we are not recruiting enough attenders to maintain our numbers, let alone grow.

Numbers only tell part of the story, however. For while numerical decline can be more easily quantified, the *spiritual losses* are even more severe. Social critics, commentators, and academics all agree that the decline of Christianity in Britain has led to a decline in community, a growth in individualism, and a rise in loneliness and poor mental health. Self-harm and self-hatred among young people are at an all-time high, with Britain's youth topping a worldwide poll of those believing there is no purpose in living.

Our context has changed rapidly, but it is not clear that the Church has. When faced with unprecedented social change, there has been – and still is – a strong temptation to *resist* change, to preserve what is within our control from the changes around us. We can think to ourselves “I like the way things are – why would I want to change them?” After all, while the world around us has changed, *we* are still the same.

As long as we begin from the question “What meets *our* desires and needs?”, however, then two things will happen. First, overlooking the changed outlooks and needs of our neighbours, we will fail to meet them, and continue to be irrelevant to the vast majority of them. Second, we will continue to decline. That is because God created the Church for a *purpose*. That purpose was not to meet its own needs, desires, and interests. It was not to preserve an historic building, or maintain a certain kind of worship. The Church was created to reveal the glory of God to the world through loving and blessing our neighbours, and making disciples of all nations. It was created to meet the material, emotional, and spiritual needs of *all* people, regardless of whether those needs are similar or different to ours.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said that the Church is the only society set up for the benefit of those that are not its members. In order for us to see clearly, therefore, and to have a 2030 Vision that is of God rather than ourselves, we must not only ask the question “What meets *our* desires and needs?” but ask instead “What

meets the desires and needs of our neighbours?" We can feel, at times, that putting others and their needs first is a loss: the loss of our identity, the loss of our heritage, the loss of control. Yet it is precisely by *not* considering others that we will lose everything, for if the practical and spiritual needs of our neighbours are not met then St Michael's will die. It will then become, at best, a tourist attraction, with the work, and passion, and memory of St Michael's as a congregation lost forever.

That is not what God wants. God does not want us to die but to live. God does not want us to decline but to grow, and he has given – and will give – St Michael's the resources, people, and inspiration to discern and further his will. He has given us a unique position in the town, and is calling us now to regain our place not only as the geographical heart of the town, but its *spiritual* heart: a place and a people who manifest the love and grace of God, through whom our neighbours are brought to the Father through Christ in the power of the Spirit.

What follows is an attempt to articulate some of what God is calling St Michael's to do in the decade ahead. It does not cover *everything* that we will do, but primarily that which is new and unfamiliar. It is not the creation of the Minister, the Session Clerk, the Kirk Session, or any one individual or group. Rather, as the product of our 2030 Vision Workshops, it represents the reflection and discernment of 150 of our members, with further insights drawn from people within and outwith the congregation. Some of the proposals will be controversial, while some will be met with universal approval. Yet in discerning the way ahead, we must remember that it is not our will that should be done, but the Lord's alone.

The Elements of a Vision

The 2030 Workshop process was a response to our changed context, and the challenges facing the Church in 21st century Scotland. It was an attempt to not only preserve the present at St Michael's, but to imagine a *future*, one in which the people of Linlithgow identify with and are actively involved with our church.

The 2030 Workshops involved 150 people from across St Michael's: different ages, different groups, and different levels of involvement. After conducting this process, analysing the results, and creating a set of eight characters who offered us their 'good gossip' about St Michael's in 2030, a number of common themes emerged:

- The need to capitalise on the wonder and 'wow factor' of our Sanctuary
- The use of more technology to illuminate the visitor experience in the Sanctuary
- The need for flexible seating in the Sanctuary to accommodate events and new forms of worship
- A desire for new forms of informal and alternative worship
- The importance of the internet and social media to reach and engage with new people

- The need to offer a warm welcome and excellent hospitality to all
- The need for a new church centre that bring churchgoers and non-churchgoers together
- The importance of investing in needs-based mission to our neighbours, including emotional support and material aid
- Taking a stand on matters of social and environmental justice

A Vision for 2030

Having listened to the congregation, and the characters that came from our consultation process, the following is offered as a vision of all that St Michael's could be in 2030.

The vision for the future of St Michael's is of an outward-facing parish church, at the heart of Linlithgow, providing relevant worship, events, and an improved visitor experience in a renovated Sanctuary that manifests the beauty of God to a new generation. It is a vision of expanded hospitality to our neighbours in a renovated Cross House, where different generations, groups, and faiths come together for community, support, and the sharing of resources to make Linlithgow a new creation. It is the vision of a community animated by hope, that becomes a blessing for our town through its service, its facilities, and its witness.

In order to achieve the correct balance of welcome, welfare, wonder, and worship, we must retain both Cross House and our Sanctuary. Cross House will be our primary welcoming and serving space, our 'shop window' to the town, which our neighbours can access and engage with no matter their beliefs. Yet the Sanctuary will remain the primary space for worship and wonder. The 'otherness' of this ancient building, set aside from - but at the heart of - Linlithgow, provides the beauty and wonder needed to jolt our imaginations from the mundane and lift them to another place. The Sanctuary is the natural site for civic events in the town, a special place the people of Linlithgow go to celebrate, mourn, and remind themselves of their shared identity. By developing Cross House and the Sanctuary, and by clear signposting in each location to the activities that take place in the other, we *deepen* this connection, and provide new entry points for those on the margins of our town to find community, hope, and faith. We will make it clear that we are a *living* community of faith, and that Church is not about leaving everyday life behind but going deep into it, to discover the presence of God in the midst of our lives.

We will now flesh out this vision, and the principles that animate it, by outlining four areas of future development: worship, events and guests, service, and community. As has already been said, these do not sum up *all* we will be doing in the future, but only those things that are new or unfamiliar.

Developing Worship and Leadership

The 2030 consultation process made it clear that St Michael's must offer a menu of options for worship in the next decade. While maintaining traditional worship in the

Sanctuary, participants wanted new opportunities for contemporary, informal, and creative worship. This new menu of worship will be provided, in part, by our new full-time Pioneer worker, who will develop forms of worship and prayer that are relevant and intuitive to non-churchgoers. This will include new forms of prayer and worship in Cross House.

In order to facilitate these new forms of worship and ministry, however, we will need to better identify, develop, and deploy the gifts of the congregation. We need to equip those with the gift of welcome and hospitality, the gift of teaching, the gift of evangelism, and gifts of loving service. As such, we will begin a regular programme of training at St Michael's. The first will be an invitation to those who want to create new forms of church with our Pioneer that are relevant and attractive to non-churchgoers, and will begin in November 2020. This training will identify skills and giftings in participants, and provide scope for further training schemes for worship leaders, mission workers, and other forms of ministry. Where possible, we will seek to offer training that is accredited by Presbytery, or the national Church of Scotland. These training schemes will harness and develop the great wealth of skills found at St Michael's, and lead to the establishment of new forms of Church in our existing buildings and throughout the town.

A further outcome of the 2030 Vision process was a desire for the replacement of pews in the Sanctuary with flexible seating. Replacement of the pews with suitably high-quality flexible seating would allow for a much greater range of worship to take place, with the Ministry Team particularly excited by new opportunities for school events. While we love our Sanctuary, as a parish church, we must also enable *our neighbours* to love and utilise it. The rationale and opportunities for pew removal are explored in more detail in a further discussion paper.

Events and Guests

The removal of pews from the Sanctuary was not only one of the clear conclusions of our 2030 process, but also makes financial and missional sense. The Sanctuary is the largest extant building in Linlithgow, and its tower and crown of thorns are the symbol of the town. Flexible seating would allow this remarkable space, steeped in history, to be appreciated and enjoyed by a much wider group of people. Conferences, concerts, and arts events would be made possible, bringing in revenue, new partnerships, and new connections with our neighbours. With the retention of both the Sanctuary and Cross House, St Michael's will be able to offer a wide variety of break-out and catering options for conferences and events, and will be in a position – placed between Edinburgh and Glasgow – to attract national events.

In addition to these physical and organisational changes, we might also develop partnerships with the many tour operators and guides who bring groups to the Palace and Peel, recognising that our position next to one of the top-10 tourist attractions in Scotland brings great possibility.

Developing Welfare

A church that does not meet the needs of our neighbours is not the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus came to serve, and heal, and redeem, and we, his Body, are called to do the same. The 2030 consultations revealed a consistent desire for St Michael's to serve the needs of our neighbours, with an emphasis on poverty and emotional distress.

To meet these needs, St Michael's is in the process of establishing a new Listening Service. This will provide a confidential support service for those suffering emotional distress, and will provide that 'listening ear' for people starved of real connection and compassion. We will also seek to partner with health professionals and other groups to enable referrals and publicity. In addition to this emotional care, St Michael's could also develop our relationship with West Lothian Foodbank and First Steps. We could look at opportunities to provide skills support for the unemployed through Christians Against Poverty, and the possibility of community meals for vulnerable adults. In addition to these, we could seek to build upon our excellent Sunshine Singalong service by exploring partnership with CrossReach to host a Heart for Art group in Cross House for those living with dementia and their carers.

In relation to international mission, we will try and raise the profile of international projects within the congregation and wider community. This could be to encourage financial support of these projects, but will also include better signposting to international schemes that people can join and travel overseas with. In addition to the Logos Hope project that Luke Davidson is currently serving in, connections could be made with the Vine Trust – founded in Bo'ness – and other related initiatives. In addition, we will maintain our connection with Rev Hanna Dally at Holy Family Church.

Developing Community

Linlithgow is blessed with many different community groups, who contribute a great deal to our town. Yet much of the potential of these remarkable groups is missed due to a lack of communication between them, and their disconnection from the Church.

For that reason, St Michael's will seek to redevelop Cross House into a Centre for Community and Wellbeing. The vision is of a community, in the heart of Linlithgow, where different generations, groups, and individuals work and socialise together, creating new synergies that bring benefits to their members and users while innovating new forms of service and community development.

At the heart of the redevelopment is a "Village Square": a new social space where hall users, local groups, and church members meet, socialise, and brainstorm together. There will be a beautiful, friendly social space, with tea and coffee facilities, and a new kitchen for large catering events. To enable better accessibility, there will also be a lift and new toilet facilities.

Around this heart will be hotdesking space, a counselling suite, and rooms occupied by groups that can help St Michael's achieve God's vision for Linlithgow. The new hotdesking space will address the growing need – post COVID – for facilities for remote working, and the company that many lone workers crave, and will have WiFi, printing facilities, and bookable meeting rooms.

In the upper part of the Centre will be a counselling suite, hosting our new Listening Service as well as our counselling tenants. This meets the growing mental health challenges affecting Scottish society, and represents St Michael's commitment to caring and loving our neighbours.

Two or three other rooms will be occupied by community groups from the town. These will be groups that St Michael's identifies as being crucial for the future of Linlithgow and the mission of St Michael's. These groups will be given free or very cheap office space, and will become founding Members of the Cross House Community. Fruitful – yet circumspect - discussions are ongoing with a number of groups in town to scope this possibility out.

Being a Member of the Cross House Community will entitle groups to the use of common spaces in the Centre through a booking system, the ability to host events, and free or subsidised refreshments from our new social space. The Members of the Cross House Centre will partner with St Michael's to deliver a programme of activities, volunteering, and skills development, that will provide the basis for synergies amongst the users of Cross House, and opportunities for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Part of membership will also be the expectation of contributing to a volunteering Time Bank, where those with skills and professional competencies offer them to the community and, in turn, receive them back.

By bringing together different groups, business people, young families, and church members all in one place, and by encouraging synergies of cooperation, business, and care, the Cross House Community Centre will reflect all that is best about Linlithgow, and mirror the new creation God wants our town to be.

Conclusion

An ancient community of faith responding to the changed Scotland of today with welcome, welfare, wonder, and worship. An accessible, flexible, beautiful Sanctuary, and a vibrant Community Hub full of every generation, group, and type of person. This is the vision revealed by our 2030 Vision Workshops.

Yet while this vision is inspiring, it is also one that requires us to build partnerships with other groups in the town. While we may feel disappointment that we cannot do all of this by ourselves, this is not something to be lamented. For it is the very means by which our neighbours and groups in the town will hear the Gospel, and the very means by which God's mission will advance in Linlithgow. For it is through humility, the humility that comes with faith, that the power of God will be manifested in St Michael's, and the Kingdom draw near.