

Update for congregations

As you will be aware, at this time next year, the proposed aim is to be a single united church. As with any change, there are going to be many, many questions that every individual in every congregation will have. To provide as many answers, and as much information as possible, this is the first of an ongoing regular update that will be produced and distributed within each congregation.

Great things happen when we take a step out of our comfort zones, but the next 12 months will be a journey that we all embark on together, and we pray that the work we do now in fellowship with one another will ensure that we emerge stronger, more able to support each other, more able to support our communities, and more able to serve God more faithfully, and powerfully.

Questions:

Why are the 4 churches of Avonbridge, St Michael's Linlithgow, St Ninian's Craigmalen, and Torphichen Churches uniting?

The Church of Scotland is currently undertaking a process of institutional reform that aims to transform its governance structure. This is due to a national shortage of ministers, and a decline in members and income. Part of their 'Radical Plan' is to pool resources, in order to continue and sustain congregations. Where population levels are low, parish churches can be linked, united, or closed. For our four congregations, approved by the kirk sessions in each of our churches, we are going down the route of being united to create and sustain strong worship centres locally through a ministry team.

What is happening already in order for the plan to create one united church to come to fruition?

A Liaison Group was formed last year. This group is formed of an equal number of individual representatives from each of the churches. The objective of the Liaison Group is to pull together all the information about each of the churches in order to find out what would need to be done in order to successfully create one united church. The group cannot make decisions, but they have the responsibility of presenting all the relevant information, and will make informed suggestions for moving forward so that each Kirk Session can approve these, or make amendments. The way the Liaison Group have been doing this is to create a 'Workplan', and to break this down into separate work areas to make it manageable for each church to engage and shape what the future united church will be.

What areas have been highlighted in the 'Workplan'?

The 'Workplan' is divided into 7 work areas. Each area has its own objective. These areas are:

Area 1 - Outreach & Vision, objective to ensure that outreach activities and church organisations are kept fully informed and involved with the process of Union by appropriate and timely communication and involvement to ensure their smooth transition into the Union and allow for their future development

Area 2 - Children & Young People, objective to review the existing services by identifying current provision to allow for the maximum development of youth and children's work in all four churches.

Area 3 - Worship and Discipleship, objective to examine how worship services will be organised by developing a model of team ministry supported by lay members to provide the best possible services

Area 4 - Staff, objective to examine what is required to ensure that staff currently in paid employment remain in post by taking account of church law and any relevant government legislation to ensure existing staff are safeguarded and continue to provide their services.

Area 5 - Estate, objective to examine what is required to ensure that all of the current buildings and estate of the 4 churches can be part of the new arrangements and appropriate arrangements are put in place to ensure ongoing management of the estate.

Area 6 - Finance, objective to cope with the new way of finance being delegated to churches, taking account of relevant regulations to ensure efficient and equitable arrangements.

Area 6a - Management/Administration and Structure - objective to cope with the current organisation of church courts, prepare appropriate mechanisms for management and delegation of responsibilities, taking account of the relevant regulations to ensure efficient and equitable arrangements.

Area 7 - Communication, objective to review the existing services by identifying current provision to allow for the maximum development of services in all four churches.

Who will be delivering against these 'work areas'?

Sub groups have been formed for each of these 'work areas'. As with the Liaison Group, the work area sub groups have representatives from each of the church congregations. These individuals were asked, or volunteered, to be part of these subgroups because of their knowledge of their own church pertaining to that work area. The groups have now all met at least once, with the remit of fact finding, establishing what is currently happening in each of our churches in regard to each of the work areas. The next step each of these groups have is to meet again, or over a series of meetings, to analyse the current status, and then to provide an informed recommendation of what each of these areas would be for the new united church. It is important to highlight that neither these sub groups, nor the Liaison Group make any decisions, it is only the Kirk Sessions that can do this, but the objective is to listen, pray, and put the energy into making sure that the recommendations serve our communities, church family, and most importantly God.

What if I don't want to change?

Every individual within each of the congregations will have the opportunity to vote for or against the union of the 4 churches. Kirk Sessions considered what other options may be available and considered them to be significantly less favourable.

We all understand that change, whether it be in our work, families, or church family can be very unsettling, and that is why the Liaison Group was formed to guide our 4 church families through the process as smoothly as possible, and will do everything they can to ensure that each individual has all the information they need to have in order to feel comfortable with the uniting of the 4 churches and moving forward together as a bigger, stronger, more impactful church family.

What will the name be for our new united church?

That's an incredibly good question, and one which does not yet have an answer. The Church of Scotland has very strict guidelines on what a united church can name itself. These guidelines are below.

The name must include: -

- A geographical reference (city/town/village)
- An additional name to identify the congregation within that location

- The words “Church of Scotland”

The Kirk Sessions will agree the name within these guidelines over the coming months.

Who will be the ministers in the new united congregation?

The ministers in post when the union takes effect will be Liam Fraser and Thom Riddell. We cannot call anyone else until the union takes place. The Presbytery Plan is for our united church to have two full time ministers of Word and Sacrament and two non-stipendiary Ordained Local Ministers/Auxiliary Ministers.

Liam will become one of the full-time ministers, and it is likely that Thom will become one of the non-stipendiary ministers. As such, we hope to be able to call two additional ministers once the union takes effect.

Will there still be services in my local church?

The intention is to continue holding weekly services in each location as it is at present. Avonbridge church is under threat of closure; the Liaison team are advocating that this decision is reversed.

Who will lead worship?

The current ministry team along with a new worship team. It is expected that there will be opportunities and the need for greater involvement by members in leading worship in all four centres.

What time will services be at?

Decisions regarding timing cannot be made until the staffing of the ministry team and the make-up of the worship team is known.

I have more questions, who can I ask and how do I get an answer to these?

Don't worry, many questions are anticipated! Hopefully some of your questions will have been answered by this first update, however if you have other questions, [please submit them using this form](#). If you do not have access digitally, please give your question to your church's Liaison Group representative and they will be able to submit it for you.

If one person has a question, then it's likely at least 5-6 people also have the same question across the different congregations, so please do ask!

URL for question form for printed versions of this update: <https://forms.gle/3j7SibN5fhGujqgb6>

Liaison Group representatives who can submit your question for you if you don't have digital access are:

Avonbridge

Heather Stephens

Eddie Ireland

Sandra Scott

St Ninian's Craigmalen

Issy Lockhart
Elaine Stewart
Ken Thomson

St Michael's Linlithgow

Stephen Marshall
John Reid
Kathryn Young

Torphichen

Nan McDonald
Innes Duncan
Julia Miller

When your question is received, it will be distributed to the relevant work area sub group to provide the most informed answer. We will attempt to provide the answers to several of the questions that have been posed by the end of March 2024