



Balerno Parish Church Kirk Session Response to the Edinburgh Presbytery

Mission Plan Consultation Document

A. General Observations:

Society is changing. We are realising how much community matters, that walking and cycling are essential for your health as well as the planet and that, to ensure a sustainable future, communities need to be more self-sufficient. The City Council talks about the 20-minute community, the aim being that most of the basic needs and services you need will be accessible by a 20 minute walk, or a bicycle ride. At the same time, mental health services are under more pressure than ever and the established connection between mental and spiritual health cannot be ignored.

The Church of Scotland has assets in a great many communities but in the main they are underused. Church halls tend to be used sporadically during the week and churches only for a few hours a week. Not only can these assets be a source of revenue, they can also nurture a wide variety of activities that help communities to thrive..

We believe that we need a Presbytery Mission Plan that can enhance existing and emerging community structures – a Plan that recognises the value of the buildings which are all within walking distance of the communities they serve and often in prominent, accessible positions. It is essential that the Plan looks for ways to make full use of these assets for the good of the gospel and the community.

The current proposals seem to be based disproportionately on the decline in the number of ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament and to equate the number of congregations to the number of ministers, thereby creating an unfortunate straitjacket for the proposals. We should be looking to adapt our ways of working to enable and empower our people and our resources for the purpose of mission.

Any Plan requires a clarity of Vision in its presentation. The Plan as presented does not address the position of the Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian if only insofar as it does not purport to set out proposals in relation to the former West Lothian Presbytery area. It would be useful if the Vision behind the draft Plan could however be more clearly expressed, especially if the draft Plan is to be seen as part of a composite approach for the Mission Plan for the new Presbytery as a whole.

B. Procedural Observations:

It is regrettable that the authors' good intentions that the Plan be bottom up in its formulation rather than top down were not sustained. Paper 1 Planning for the Future was clear that the congregations would be involved in the Plan design process. Thus " . . . over a period of a few months between October and January the conversations can take place that it is hoped will give the building blocks for a Presbytery Plan that has listened to the church locally" (Planning for the Future: Paper 1), and "One of the major planks of the strategy is that it will have its foundations in grassroots conversations and proposals." (Planning for the Future: Paper 1.) *Question:*

1. Why has the Presbytery ignored its own initial brief by departing from the model for integration and collaboration for the Valley of the Water of Leith congregations - which has been promoted by the Presbytery for the last 25 years - without consulting them on the implications of such a proposal?

The Plan proposes that the former Edinburgh Presbytery be divided up into 7 Mission Districts, but there is a lack of clarity as to the precise purpose of these entities. They currently appear to be no more than convenient administrative groupings created for the purpose of this exercise.

Question:

2. Does the Presbytery have a vision as to the purpose, function and operational mechanisms of the MDs and how they might operate? If they do, why is this not shared? If not, why have Presbytery not formed a vision and offered operational guidelines?

C. Local Observations:

The name of the *Border Mission District* implies unfinished business. When combined with the timing of the report, on the point of the amalgamation of two presbyteries, it would suggest that there may have been some thinking about cross-border integration, but the Plan communicates no clear purpose behind the proposal that there be a Border Mission District.

Questions:

3. What is the purpose of the *Border Mission District*, how does it align with West Lothian Presbytery's own strategic plan and what discussions, if any, have taken place to date between the two Presbyteries to agree this District's purpose and structure? If there have been conversations, then were constituent congregations involved, and if not why not? And in any event, if there have been then why have outcomes not been shared? If there haven't been discussions, why not?
4. Was the *Border Mission District* intended by Presbytery to be an interim arrangement until formal ties could be established between its constituent parishes and parishes in West Lothian? Or was it intended to be a permanent structure within the new operating model of mission districts across Edinburgh and West Lothian? And in either case could Presbytery explain the basis on which resources were allocated to Border Mission District?

As well as sharing the geographical definition in the Valley of the Water of Leith, the former villages of Currie, Balerno and Juniper Green are recognised by the inhabitants as a lively, closely integrated community with a long history of collaboration. The integration goes much wider than church level and to separate one of the three villages from the other two will undoubtedly create problems for mission in the Upper WOL in the future. For over 50 years there has been a vibrant 'community magazine' - C & B News - which covers all three parishes and highlights the activities in all. The young people all attend one of the two secondary schools and there are a variety of sports clubs and annual organised activities for sport and the arts. It is difficult to understand why one might favour a voluntary disassociation from a well-established community with a clear sense of identity.

Questions:

5. Why has the Presbytery Strategy Group sought to create a boundary between the proposed new parishes of the consultation paper in the densely populated areas of Muirwood Road rather than in the sparsely inhabited fields astride the A70?
6. There are minimal public transport links with West Lothian and no practical bus links. How does Presbytery envisage close operational links with neighbours in WL when there is no public transport?

While a future of integration with the other Upper Water of Leith Valley congregations may present challenges for Balerno Parish Church, such challenges would not intimidate as they have been long anticipated by members of our congregation. Our roll across the community may have declined, but the contribution and support between church and community remains considerable. We see no reason why conjunction with the other congregations in the Valley should diminish that contribution, but there is no enthusiasm for a completely new venture of building closer ties with a congregation to the west that would detract energy from our existing, local ministry. In any event on the basis that 'Mission thrives on relationships' it seems strange that relationships built up over the past 20 years, with the encouragement of Presbytery, are not seen by Presbytery as a basis for continued and

developing Mission. The absence of any sense of community or previous collaboration with congregations to the west of Balerno means that we have no confidence in the current proposal. In contrast, we would be very confident in our ability to respond to the challenges presented in alignment with congregations to the east.

Questions:

- 7 Why is the proposed Parish of Balerno and Currie not aligned with the SW Edinburgh Mission District? Can this be reconsidered?
- 8 When and with whom does the Presbytery envisage a re-engagement with Balerno Parish Church to move forward positively and confidently with mission in the well-established Water of Leith corridor?

The Kirk Session of Balerno Parish Church acknowledge that the Edinburgh Presbytery's Strategy Group have faced a difficult task. The need for restructuring and re-evaluating the disposition of diminishing resources over the congregations in the city is incontrovertible. However, it should be evident from these comments and questions that the Kirk Session of Balerno Parish Church are unanimous in their view that the current proposals present critical shortcomings. It is hoped that there can be an opportunity in the near future for dialogue between members of the Kirk Session and representatives of the new Presbytery at which the issues raised can be explored and addressed.

Malcolm Ogilvie, Session Clerk

13th January 2022