

Response of Balerno Parish Church to Presbytery's request of 7 February 2022

Paper Two

This note contains Balerno Parish Church's ('BPC's') additional comments on the draft Mission Plan produced by the former Edinburgh Presbytery, as requested in a letter of 7 February 2022 from the new Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian. It should be read in conjunction with our previous submissions on the Plan.

The issues on which Presbytery has specifically requested feedback are:

- A. Fundamental, strategic or general issues with or improvements to the proposed Mission Plan;
- B. Comments and suggestions relating to particular parishes or congregations, unions and/or Mission Districts; and
- C. Inaccuracies or errors in the proposed Mission Plan or further context that the DSG would find useful and relevant.

A. Fundamental, strategic and general issues with / improvements to the proposed Mission Plan

1. It seems strange that the current consultation is in relation to the draft Mission Plan for Edinburgh alone now that Edinburgh Presbytery has been replaced by the Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian.
2. Edinburgh Presbytery had previously promised a *bottom up* consultation process, in which it would be fair to expect that the resulting proposals would emerge from parishes, probably through the Cluster Group process. Instead, that Cluster Group process was summarily terminated and, instead, a new Mission District approach was proposed without prior consultation.
3. Even if the Mission Plan for Edinburgh was considered an appropriate component of a wider Mission Plan for the new Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian, there is no easily discernible strategic vision in any of the united Presbytery's consultation documents, nor any reference to proposed future relationships between the former West Lothian and Edinburgh parishes. We also understand that the former Edinburgh Presbytery did not discuss its draft Plan in detail with, or share a copy with, the former West Lothian Presbytery prior to publication in December 2021.
4. We consider that the concept of a Border Mission District is fundamentally flawed on a number of grounds including that:
 - (i) it purports to continue a boundary that ceased to exist on 1 January 2022;
 - (ii) it is potentially divisive to have an internal 'border area' in the context of a purportedly unified, new Presbytery landscape; and
 - (iii) its geography and infrastructure make it an impractical proposition for implementation.
6. Edinburgh Presbytery must have developed its proposal for a Border Mission District long before publication of the draft Plan in December 2021, but it did not consult on that proposal prior to publication. It is also not a proposal that is reflected or acknowledged in the draft Plan produced by the former Presbytery of West Lothian and we are not aware that West Lothian has expressed support for a Border Mission District. We therefore believe that the proposal for a Border Mission District should be withdrawn.
7. We are also concerned that Edinburgh Presbytery appears not to have anticipated the need to make pastoral support available for its ministers, staff and other potentially impacted persons at the point of publication of the draft Plan. Given the nature of the proposals, they were always likely to give rise to significant stress and anxiety, and indeed this has sadly proven to be the case. We therefore urge Presbytery now to take urgent steps to address the consequences of that oversight, including the adoption of a structured approach to the next phase of consultation and a genuine preparedness to adjust proposals where reasonable concerns are raised in response.

8. Given the key role that Mission Districts will play in Presbytery's future structure, we also consider it essential that Presbytery clarify what their legal status will be, and what practical role and function it envisages they will have.

We cover some of these issues further in Section C.

B. Comments / suggestions relating to particular parishes, congregations, unions and/or Mission Districts

9. Proposals for a Border Mission District should be abandoned

We believe that the proposal for a Border Mission District should be abandoned, and that Presbytery should prepare alternative proposals for the churches provisionally allocated to this District, including, as outlined below, the allocation of BPC into the Edinburgh South West Mission District ('ESWMD').

10. The description of Balerno / Currie in the mission narrative (p51 of Plan) is inaccurate, misleading and/or irrelevant and should be amended

- (a) The proposed Border Mission District includes one town – Queensferry - and several villages, two of which are semi-urban.
- (b) It is correct that BPC hosts and supports the Mill Café, but it also hosts and contributes to many other community-focussed activities which are missional in character, including the Balerno Music Festival, Balerno Village Screen and Balerno Christmas Tree Festival etc.
- (c) The reference to *'traditional settings that draw many into an area of natural beauty on the western fringe of the city'* suggests a city-centric, tourist-based view of Balerno as a place to visit rather than a community in which many people live and worship.
- (d) Balerno does not feature on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, but it does feature in terms of accessibility. Public transport connections to and from Balerno are limited. Many areas within it, including new housing areas, lie beyond the ordinarily acceptable proximity limits to bus stops. Presbytery will also be aware that poverty is a fact of life even in affluent areas; Dean Park Primary School in Balerno operates a foodbank, and the Water of Leith valley-wide 'Community for Food' was set up in 2020 by local initiative as part of a Coronavirus response to provide support by delivering food parcels. At the last count it was supporting 49 families identified by local schools.
- (e) The statement that *'West Lothian sits just beyond the border of this Mission District and thus partnership with these parishes will allow more effective mission in a changing environment'* suggests that the Plan envisages parishes in the Border Mission District providing assistance to West Lothian. This assumes, however, that there will be capacity for such assistance. The proposed cut in manpower resources for BPC will be at least 50% if Presbytery's proposals are accepted. The draft Plan does not suggest that Presbytery has modelled future capacity within parishes before setting tasks and targets. The attrition rate for congregations is @4%pa. So far as BPC / Currie is concerned, the tasks arising from the proposed extension of mission into West Lothian will be undeliverable, running at @150%. Balerno may lie just a few miles from Kirknewton and East Calder, but there is no practicable public transport connection between them and it is misleading to suggest otherwise.
- (f) At p51 the mission narrative for Balerno / Currie states:
'The new border congregation will engage in conversations with parish/es in West Lothian. A union with one or more West Lothian parishes would offer challenges to, and opportunities for, the whole area. The new congregation formed by the union of these two parishes needs to pursue collegial working and needs to agree priorities and a suitable sharing of resources. The new congregation will engage with the residents of new housing developments in the area.'

- ❖ This statement of mission is flawed in that it appears to identify the principal mission area of the new BPC / Currie parish as being in West Lothian rather than in its current locale in the Water of Leith Valley. Further, it does not suggest that there is any existing mission component within the current parishes of BPC and Currie other than engaging with new residents. In fact, as noted earlier, BPC already has significant mission activities within its community.
- ❖ The statement that *'A union with one or more West Lothian parishes would offer challenges to, and opportunities for, the whole area'* is a wide generalisation and does not seem to align to the Plan put forward by the former West Lothian Presbytery for the restructuring of its parishes.
- ❖ The statement that *'The new congregation will engage with the residents of new housing developments in the area'* is unnecessary. BPC already engages in mission and outreach initiatives to new housing developments in the local area.
- ❖ The statement that *'The new congregation formed by the union of these two parishes needs to pursue collegial working and needs to agree priorities and a suitable sharing of resources'* is already, in many respects, under way. Presbytery will be aware from the report of the Water of Leith Cluster Group that this Group continues to work well together, and would form a useful component of a future Water of Leith focussed linkage or union. Presbytery will also be aware of the history of close co-operative working across the wider Water of Leith communities.
- ❖ The statement on p51 that the Challenge for Currie / BPC is to *'Deliver ministry and mission to a large corridor parish'* is not immediately consistent with the call to engage in conversations with parishes in West Lothian that in no meaningful sense form a 'corridor'. As noted below, it would much better align with a model under which Currie and BPC were both allocated to the ESWMD.

11. *BPC should not be placed in the Border Mission District but should instead be assigned to the South West Mission District along with the other parishes within the Water of Leith Cluster Group*

- (a) In the draft Plan, the parishes of the former Water of Leith Cluster Group are split up and allocated to different Mission Districts. Juniper Green Parish Church is allocated to the new ESWMD while Currie Kirk and BPC are assigned to the Border Mission District.
- (b) There are no reasons offered in the Plan for the dismembering of the Water of Leith Cluster Group, and we are disappointed that these allocations are contrary to the wishes expressed by that Group in its final report in October 2021. BPC remains firmly of the view that the sustainability and success of the Church as a whole in the Water of Leith Valley is dependent on leveraging a continued, strong linkage between all the churches in the Upper Water of Leith corridor.
- (c) We agree with the proposed Challenge to BPC / Currie to *'Deliver ministry and mission to a large corridor parish'*. Dividing BPC / Currie from Juniper Green in particular, however, is to artificially sever that corridor half-way down its length.

C. Inaccuracies & errors in the draft Plan, or further context that the DSG would find useful and relevant

12. *The Plan appears to be extremely challenging in its ambitions for Currie / BPC*

It is not clear to what extent the requirement for a 40% reduction in staffing has been taken into account by Presbytery in informing its forecasting as a necessary part of planning, and in particular in assessing whether the tasks it is setting are achievable. Looking at Currie / BPC where the proposed staffing reduction is 50% (although an OLM may be appointed), the work-load is additionally increased by the requirement to travel and work 'out of area' on top of absorbing the significant increase in the parish population over recent years which require local attention. Not many businesses could easily respond to a 40% cut in resources while still being required to meet 100% of their pre-existing targets *plus* an unquantified extra demand.

13. *The fact that the current consultation is in relation to a draft Plan for Edinburgh alone*

Pre-merger, the two former Presbyteries appear to have developed their Plans independently of each other. The formation of the unified Presbytery is, however, an opportunity to take a holistic look at the proposals in both Plans and adapt them to ensure that they work as a coherent, viable model across the entirety of the new landscape. We therefore urge Presbytery to step back and review both Plans with that mind-set, rather than rush to implement proposals that were developed in isolation and for distinct constituencies.

14. *The proposals for a Border Mission District are misconceived and impracticable, and BPC's/Currie's inclusion within it risks jeopardising existing relationships and initiatives in the Water of Leith corridor.*

- (a) The apparent absence of consultation with West Lothian before publication is disappointing when considering the Plan's proposals for a Border Mission District, including the significant transport infrastructure and geographical challenges in this area.
- (b) The title 'Border' is itself also unfortunate in that it suggests a boundary line in the middle of the new Presbytery, and therefore division into 'them' and 'us'. We are sure that this was not Presbytery's intention but we are concerned that the position and naming of this District carries unhelpful, negative connotations.
- (c) The draft Plan advances no substantive argument or vision for the creation of a Border Mission District beyond '*West Lothian sits just beyond the border of this Mission District and thus partnership with these parishes will allow more effective mission in a changing environment.*'
- (d) BPC has, with one exception, no current connection with any of the parishes proposed for inclusion in a Border Mission District. The exception is, of course, Currie Kirk with which we have enjoyed a continuing relationship of close co-operation for decades and with which discussions are already ongoing as to a connected future. The development of joint or linked working between communities is in large part dependent on shared purpose and vision. In general terms this will have developed naturally over time through shared enterprises and experiences. In the absence of that historical context, an administrative direction that simply requires such a link to be formed is unlikely to provide a solid foundation for future connection, especially in a period of static growth.
- (e) In that regard, we are not aware of any social, commercial or other connections between Balerno and Queensferry, Kirkliston, Ratho or Dalmeny, and in any event no shared purpose and vision has been identified by Presbytery that it proposes these parishes should collaborate to deliver. There is also scarcely any mention in the West Lothian Plan of the Edinburgh draft Plan¹.
- (f) The development of links is also materially dependent on accessibility, and, in that connection transport routes in West Edinburgh beyond the Edinburgh City Bypass, including within the proposed Border Mission District, are almost exclusively structured on an east-west axis. The axis of the proposed Border Mission District is north-south. There is no public transport connection linking Balerno with Currie, with Ratho, with Kirkliston with Dalmeny and with Queensferry.² The minimum road distance between the north and south ends of that axis is @12 miles. Public transport in the Border Mission District is also predominantly east-west e.g. the 44 route from Balerno to Edinburgh.

¹ *West Lothian Plan – p2 - Methodology* – 'We decided to use the provisional Mission Districts which have been devised by the Steering Group which is preparing for the new Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian. There may be some adjustments going forward, particularly along the eastern border with the Presbytery of Edinburgh: these adjustments may add to the size of Mission District One but are unlikely to alter the distribution of ministries posts.'

² Transport connections

- Balerno is connected to Queensferry, Dalmeny and Kirkliston by the extension of the 63 bus route; journey times are 70, 80 and 60 mins respectively. The main purpose of the extension of that service was to allow a more direct service between Balerno and St John's hospital in Livingston via the 40 route. A secondary purpose was to allow access between Balerno and the Gyle Shopping Centre.
- Balerno is connected to Ratho insofar as Ratho children can access Balerno High School. There is however no bus service between Balerno and Ratho beyond school specials. Journey by public transport involves at least one change and takes @60 minutes.

- (g) If the Plan's proposal for a Border Mission District was that six parishes - most of which may have had no record of working together in the past, nor specific reasons to work together in future, nor direct public transport links connecting them - were to be required to work together for no coherently stated reason, then such a Plan would have little, if any, prospect of success.
- (h) A priority aim is mandated for Currie and BPC in the draft Plan as follows: *'Imminent changes regarding the boundaries and composition of the new united Presbytery will mean discussions with neighbouring West Lothian parishes are a priority.'* However, there are no public transport routes running west from Balerno and in particular no routes to Kirknewton or East Calder, or further into West Lothian and so the logistical challenges of building such connections are immediately obvious.
- (i) Further, the fact that Presbytery is mandating the prioritisation of discussions with West Lothian parishes suggests that this aim should displace other, pre-existing mission objectives of BPC and Currie. BPC and Currie were previously encouraged by the Presbytery of Edinburgh to develop links up and down the Upper Water of Leith corridor, and this has been a key mission focus for both churches for decades. Engaging with new housing developments within the local areas is also a continuing objective for both. While BPC would want to discuss and determine its future priorities in conjunction with Currie Kirk, and without prejudging those conversations, we would be concerned by any suggestion that current mission initiatives should be deprioritised and subordinated to the formation of new ties with parishes in West Lothian which are already occupied with their own restructuring plans - particularly in the context of a 40% reduction in ministerial and other resources.

In summary, it therefore seems that the proposal for a Border Mission District – and, indeed, BPC's and Currie's inclusion in it - lacks a clear and compelling rationale. Its establishment could also prove damaging, not just to the operation of the new Presbytery but also to the mission work of the Church more generally, by disrupting established, successful mission initiatives and linkages such as those in the Upper Water of Leith corridor. We therefore encourage Presbytery to reconsider this proposal as a matter of urgency.

Balerno Parish Church
March 2022