

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

Paper One

In December 2021, we submitted Balerno Parish Church's ('BPC's') initial response to Presbytery's consultation, in which we expressed our grave disappointment with certain of the proposals in the draft Mission Plan for Edinburgh. Having now had the opportunity to consider the Plan in greater detail, and to discuss it with our Kirk Session, we regret that this remains our position.

Presbytery has now invited us to provide comments on three specific issues in particular, but we feel that it is important for us also to address a number of wider, related points in our response.

Firstly, we wish to thank the Strategy Group for its focused, dedicated work in what have undoubtedly been very difficult and demanding circumstances. We do not underestimate the complexity and scale of the challenge that it has faced, nor indeed the challenges facing the Church of Scotland more generally at this time.

We recognise that the draft Plan contains a number of good and sensible proposals, which we hope will form part of the final version that ultimately emerges from this process. At a general level, we welcome the grouping of parishes into larger units - although the Church will have to move quickly to recognise Mission Districts within its governance structure if they are to be able to fulfil their potential, and Presbytery will also have to be clear as to what it actually wants those Districts to achieve.

Similarly, we acknowledge the necessity for churches to be combined into larger units so far as the allocation of ministers is concerned and we appreciate that unions are therefore likely to be required in certain cases. Formal union should not be the only option considered, however; linkage is already a widely-used alternative, with a proven record of success. In semi-rural areas such as Currie and Balerno, there is much to be said for recognising the distinct, historical character of communities, and for harnessing the energy of each through co-operative linkage.

Despite the merits of some of the proposals in the draft Plan, however, other elements cause us significant concerns. As a result, BPC cannot support the draft Plan in its current form and we believe that it requires to be reconsidered. We have set out the basis for our concerns below and, in Paper Two, attached, have also responded to the specific questions raised by Presbytery.

a) The placing of BPC and Currie Kirk ('Currie') in the proposed new Border Mission District rather than in the Edinburgh South West Mission District ('ESWMD')

Divorcing BPC and Currie from the Water of Leith and the ESWMD in general is difficult to reconcile with current civic government arrangements, and even more so when viewed through the prism of CEC's projected *20 Minute Neighbourhood* initiative. It is clear even at present that CEC recognises that the "*schools, transport links, health services, cultural facilities and communities along the Water of Leith*" provide an abundance of common threads across Currie, Balerno and Juniper Green. Development of future public and community services will be on a "Water of Leith corridor" basis, possibly with hubs developing at both Currie and Balerno High Schools. In this context, it would be logical and natural for all of the local structures of the Church in this area to align to those of the local communities they serve – as illustrated by the long-established collaboration between churches in the Water of Leith Valley (collaboration that has, to date, been actively encouraged by Presbytery). The draft Plan, however, unexpectedly proposes a profound disruption. Diverting BPC from its otherwise exclusively eastward focus along the Valley, and requiring it instead to look north and west, misaligns it from the direction that the community of Balerno will likely take in all other respects in the next decade. The proposals in the Plan therefore create a very real risk of isolating the Church from its community in Balerno and creating an artificial boundary down the middle of what was previously a collegiate, connected grouping of parishes. This seems to us to be a destructive rather than constructive approach, and it is counter-intuitive in the context of a Plan intended to build Church-

centred communities. We strongly believe that BPC can best promote and deliver the Church's Five Marks of Mission in its 'home' Valley, leveraging the deep, longstanding relationships that it has already established in the areas that will form part of the new ESWMD.

b) **The lack of apparent rationale for the creation of the proposed Border Mission District, and for BPC's inclusion in it.**

We remain unclear both why Edinburgh Presbytery proposed the creation of a Border Mission District and why BPC was earmarked for inclusion. The fact that Edinburgh Presbytery appears to have developed these proposals in isolation from West Lothian Presbytery, prior to the Presbyteries merging, has only increased our concerns. The concept of a Border Mission District in itself seems misconceived within the new, unified Presbytery of Edinburgh and West Lothian; there should surely be no sense of 'border' in the heart of the new Presbytery – particularly one that divides it along the line of its former component halves? Furthermore, West Lothian did not seek the proposed Border Mission District arrangement; it appears to have looked at potential synergies with Edinburgh in the context of its District 1 and South Queensferry/Dalmeny but there is no mention of any others. West Lothian also proposes a sizeable parish grouping incorporating Kirknewton, East Calder and Mid Calder, mapping to an already coherent, contiguous community with a rapidly growing population and making any potential intrusion from BPC and Currie seem unnecessary and irrelevant.

c) **The logistical and geographic challenges of the proposed Border Mission District**

From a geographical and connectivity perspective, the proposed Border Mission District is clearly not a practical proposition. Even leaving aside the absence of any pre-existing transport links along its north-south axis, the axis of activity across the proposed new District follows connectivity and so is also almost entirely east-west.

d) **The feasibility of mission work across the proposed Border Mission District**

Looking specifically through the optic of mission, it is clearly essential that the responsibilities assigned to BPC / Currie under the draft Plan be proportionate to available resources. We recognize, however, that minister resources will be halved, possibly within the next couple of years, while the community grows through probable further housing expansion. Local organisations already report that they are having difficulty finding volunteers and the Church is no different in that respect. Given the timescales under which this Plan has been produced, we are concerned that Presbytery may not have had the opportunity to assess the practical feasibility of the additional mission loadings on BPC (and Currie) that it has proposed. In all the circumstances, we do not consider an ambition that BPC and Currie should embark on mission initiatives into new areas to the west and north to be realistic.

For these reasons, and for those set out in the attached Paper Two, we therefore regret that we cannot support the draft Plan as it stands. Instead, we ask Presbytery to consider the following, alternative approaches:

- As there is no clear or compelling purpose for creating a Border Mission District, and as it would be logistically impractical, we invite Presbytery to consider removing it from the Plan.
- If Presbytery ultimately decides to pursue the creation of a Border Mission District, we would ask that BPC be removed from it and instead be assigned to the ESWMD with Currie Kirk as a two church / one minister parish. (While it is for Currie Kirk to make its own submission, we understand that it is likely to make a similar request.)