

LOCAL CHURCH REVIEW

BERWICK UPON TWEED ST. ANDREW'S WALLACE GREEN AND LOWICK

The Process of this Local Church Review (LCR) began in the summer of 2014. The final report to Presbytery was in April 2015

Visiting Team

The team appointed to represent Duns Presbytery comprised: Rev. Ann Inglis (Convener) Rev. Bruce Neill, Mrs. Andrea Marjoribanks and Mrs. Marianne Karsgaard.

In accordance with the pattern laid down in the Act Anent Local Church Review Ann Inglis and Bruce Neill had a preliminary meeting with Rev Dr Adam Hood and his Session Clerk, Mrs. Bea Nicholson, Parts 1 and 2 of the LCR paperwork were completed, the whole team met with the principal office-bearers, Part 3 was produced and then the whole team met with Adam Hood and, later on the same day, with members of the Kirk Session and Congregational Board. That meeting was open to any members of the congregation to attend. Also, although the Act does not require it, Ann Inglis conducted worship in St. Andrew's Wallace Green on 23rd November and this was felt to have been an important part of the LCR process.

Introduction

The congregation of St. Andrew's Wallace Green and Lowick operates outside Scotland and so it is inevitable that there are differences in how the congregation operates compared with a Parish Church in Scotland. English Civil law dictates how they operate in a number of spheres e.g. marriage and safeguarding. Not having a parish they are more akin to a free church (in the English sense), nonetheless many Scots living not just in Berwick but in a much wider area look to St. Andrew's Wallace Green and Lowick for "the ordinances of religion". As a congregation of the Church of Scotland it operates under church law like any congregation in Scotland. The congregation is a charity registered in Scotland and so is subject to Scottish charity law.

The Minister, Rev. Dr. Adam Hood, has been in post for 2 years. His previous parish experience ended 20 years ago; it was in a church which had a broader age profile. The experience in Berwick is very different but he is enjoying being minister of the congregation and is enthusiastic to meet the challenges which this brings.

In the visits the team stressed that Local Church Review is primarily for the benefit of the congregation and is essentially forward looking; it is designed to help congregations see where they are, to think in a structured way about where they would like to be in five years and to set goals which are both realistic and challenging; and it is designed to help them find the ways in which to achieve these goals. The LCR is also an opportunity to check that the requirements of Church law are being met, and to take steps to help remedy any deficiencies.

Meeting with Rev. Dr. Adam Hood

For Dr Hood, this LCR has perhaps come rather early in his ministry in Berwick. He is aware that many will find it very challenging to set out a realistic plan for the next five years. This kind of strategic thinking in terms of the life of the congregation is quite unfamiliar to most, and it will take some time for people to become comfortable with it.

Adam finds his congregation friendly and supportive. People have been open to suggestions he has made and there have been changes in the style and content of worship. CH4 and Mission Praise are used and up-to-date audio visual equipment has been installed. Adam has introduced responses in worship and focusses on special Sundays e.g. Harvest, Sea Sunday.

With the help of his family and others, he has started a Youth Group. He is concerned that, given the elderly profile of the congregation, there are a limited number of people who wish to be involved with leading youth work. Adam values greatly the dedicated service given by office-bearers and others, many over long years. He is, however, concerned about the elderly age profile of the congregation which can make it difficult to find people to take on tasks so that the leadership burden is spread more widely. Inevitably this raises concerns about the future and Adam is very aware of that.

Adam's expectations have sometimes been disappointed in aspects of the functioning of Duns Presbytery. He sees the importance of ministry being a team exercise and is frustrated that Presbytery seems to spend so little time discussing how that could become a reality. He would like to see the Presbytery spending more time discussing how congregations could help each other to find ways to be the Church in Berwickshire in a meaningful and relevant way.

Part 3 of the LCR paperwork, which sets out an action plan for the congregation, was essentially written by the Minister and the Session Clerk and Adam expressed the view that it is not over ambitious and that modest thinking about the future is the best they can get. The Superintendence Committee, on the other hand, believes that a plan which is realistically modest is better than one which is unrealistically ambitious.

Adam is very involved in the community. He is governor of the Church of England School in Lowick as well as leading assemblies there. He also leads assemblies at Berwick Middle School and Tweedmouth Middle School. There are many ecumenical activities in which he is involved e.g. Remembrance. He is Chaplain to the British Legion and in that capacity hosts Armed Services Day. He is acting Chair of Berwick Churches Together. He is a Trustee of the Askew Housing Association in Berwick. Adam also took on the role of Interim Moderator in Chirnside with Hutton and Fishwick and Paxton for a year, a task which he described as a big time commitment.

In the midst of a busy life in congregation and community Adam is careful to take time for his family and for himself. His pastoral support consists in occasional meetings with Rev. Tom Nicholson. He also meets from time to time with the other members of Berwick Churches Together and the Northumbrian Community and values the mutual support these contacts provide.

Compliance with Church Law and Civil Law

Two matters gave the visiting team cause for concern:

- attendance at Kirk Session and Congregational Board meetings is generally by less than half the members. This is unacceptable in terms of the leadership, pastoral care and governance of the congregation generally, and in terms of the role of all office-bearers as charity trustees in particular. It is acknowledged that this practice cannot be allowed to continue and the office-bearers are urged to address this situation as a matter of urgency.
- It was clear from the paperwork prepared for the team that three items in the Safeguarding section had not been adequately addressed. Volunteers/employees have not all been made aware of procedures to be followed in the event of an allegation or declaration of harm or abuse; nor are the Kirk Session aware of the "Including those who may pose a risk" policy of the Church of Scotland; nor have all members of the Kirk Session attended safeguarding training. In

subsequent discussion it became clear that historically part of the problem has been a lack of clarity as to whether the congregation needed to comply with English or Scottish legislation on safeguarding matters. This has now been resolved. St Andrews Wallace Green and Lowick, as a congregation situated in England, needs to be registered with the (English) Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) and is being supported by the (English) Churches Agency for Safeguarding (CAS). Nonetheless the training offered by the Presbytery Safeguarding Trainer is valid for those who work with vulnerable groups in the name of St Andrews Wallace Green. Steps are being taken to put right any remaining deficiencies in this area.

Congregational Life

In common with most Church of Scotland congregations the roll is falling – from 433 in 2009 to 380 in 2013. Of greater concern is the fact that 200 of those members are over 75 with a further 100 over 60. Only 20 members are under the age of 45. On a brighter note there were 4 professions of faith in 2013; there were none in the 4 previous years. The number of baptisms has been around 10 per year in recent years but in 2013 there was only 1 baptism but 8 services of blessing. This reflects the minister's desire to abide by Church law and to avoid a situation where parents bring their children for baptism and make promises they are not able to keep. While there have normally been between 20 and 30 funerals per annum that number was 13 in 2013.

A Sunday Club for school age children meets fortnightly. Lack of volunteers means it cannot meet more frequently. A small number of adults (approx. 6) attend a weekly prayer group and occasional study groups. There is participation by a small number in study groups run by other churches. Services take place every Sunday in both St. Andrew's Wallace Green and in Lowick Village Hall, the Church building there having been sold some time ago. There is no service at Lowick on special Sundays e.g. Harvest, Remembrance. Around 100 people attend St. Andrew's, with around 135 on Communion Sunday and around 8 or 9 attend Lowick. There was a good attendance for Communion on the Sunday when the Convener of the Visiting Team conducted worship. There was no service at Lowick that Sunday. There are also monthly informal evening services attended by around 20 people and monthly services at Tweed View Care Home. Adam Hood has introduced The Big Christmas Sing and this attracts about 400 worshippers including participation by 8 or 9 schools. The congregation on these occasions includes many young people, together with parents and other family members.

A number of groups, which are part of the congregation, meet regularly. Some are social e.g. carpet bowls, keep fit, work party, walking group. The work party sends blankets and toys to crisis areas. As already mentioned, there is a Prayer Group and Sunday Club. There is also a choir of around a dozen members and a Guild Branch. The Guild has seen its membership drop from 35 in 2009 to 22 in 2013. An encouraging feature within the congregation is the Pastoral Care Team which visits around 20 people who are housebound. The visits take place about once a month and are well received by those visited. There are 9 visitors in the team some of whom are elders. They meet twice a year for mutual support. This development is particularly welcome at a time when all congregations need to find ways to involve lay people in ministry.

Elders take seriously their ministry to people in their districts. Each elder has 12 – 14 people in his or her district. There is good regular communication with the congregation through a quarterly newsletter which goes to all members and also by the church website which is regularly updated.

The congregation is active in its support of missionary partners Malcolm and Cati Ramsay.

Property

The Church building at St. Andrew's Wallace Green is very large, certainly larger than is required for worship Sunday by Sunday. However, the Church premises are used for public events, concerts etc. and on such occasions the building is used by more people. The office-bearers said that the building felt quite "homely" even when not filled and Ann Inglis discovered that to be the case when she conducted worship. However, use of the pulpit places the person conducting worship quite far from the congregation. The office-bearers in their "Congregation Today" part of their paperwork described the building as "very suitable for purpose" but in discussion the visiting team explored the desirability of defining that purpose and then looking at whether the building could be made even more suitable. We were informed by Adam Hood that a recent visit by Nigel Robb has been instrumental in restarting this discussion. There is an acceptance of the danger of allowing the shape and inflexible nature of the building to drive what is done and how they do it. The Church building is regularly inspected and is kept in good repair. There is no planned maintenance programme.

There is no Church building in Lowick. The congregation worships in the Village Hall.

The Manse is a modern house and is well-suited to the needs of the Minister and his family. It is regularly inspected and at the inspection the need for repairs and decoration is assessed. There is no planned maintenance programme.

The office-bearers are to be commended for keeping the property in good condition.

Finance

The financial position of St. Andrew's Wallace Green has been cushioned by substantial funds / investments from which capital can be drawn and these funds have been routinely used over recent years to plug the gap between income and expenditure. Although this is the situation it should be noted that over the period in question the market value of the congregation's stock market investments has increased substantially. None-the-less the visiting team was concerned to discover that of the five years 2009 – 13 in only one had the Receipts and Payments Account shown an excess of income over expenditure. In the other four years there were significant deficits and the average deficit over the five years amounted to £18,404 p/a. While there are sufficient funds held in reserve comfortably to cover these deficits in the short term, it is recognised by the office-bearers that the current situation is neither desirable nor sustainable in the long term and is therefore not satisfactory. The Superintendence Committee was assured by representatives of the congregation, including the Treasurer, that the situation is not as serious as the above figure would appear to suggest, and indeed that the figure quoted above only tells part of the story, and that when the sale and purchase of investments are taken into account the average annual deficit reduces to £8,776 (for the four years 2010 – 2013). After a consultation with the Convener of Presbytery's Stewardship and Finance Committee the Superintendence Committee remains of the view that, in terms of income compared with expenditure this is a congregation which in four of the five years in question experienced a significant deficit.

There is a Christian Stewardship programme in place with imaginative plans to follow the Church of Scotland 'Season for Stewardship' pattern. Perhaps it is a matter of concern, however, in the light of the above that the stewardship of money will not be the focus until 2017.

On another matter the visiting team was concerned to discover that no action had been taken in 2013 to reclaim Gift Aid on donations. Assurance was given that this matter was being actively pursued and will be satisfactorily resolved by March 2015.

The office-bearers assured the Visiting Team that they are committed to working towards achieving a

balanced budget and in this they are to be encouraged. (See Action Plan section 10)

The Future

The congregation's Action Plan was drawn up mainly by the Minister and Session Clerk. It is important that the plan should be owned by the whole Session and Board and that they should actively support its implementation. While the Minister is a key person in the implementation of the plan – and he is stated as being the person with responsibility in a number of sections of the plan – the Kirk Session, Finance Group and Stewardship Group are also given responsibilities, and it is important that these responsibilities are understood and accepted.

There are a number of good and challenging initiatives in the plan and the goals which it includes are set out in an appendix to this report. The team would encourage the Kirk Session and Congregational Board to set aside time for a study session or retreat to focus on setting priorities and on how these can be achieved. It might be considered helpful to secure the services of a facilitator to assist with this. It is hoped that all Office-Bearers can be encouraged to be part of this process. Within the five years before the next LCR there will be supportive follow up by the Superintendence Committee.

Conclusions

A lot of very faithful people worship and give service in Berwick-upon-Tweed St. Andrew's Wallace Green and Lowick. It is clear that many of them have given loyal and devoted service over a long period. With the passing of time office-holders who have given sterling service over many years can come to feel that they would now like to retire from the responsibilities they have carried. This is a perfectly natural process and it is important that those who have come to feel this should be able to withdraw knowing that someone else is willing and able to fill the office they have occupied. This will only happen with realistic foresight and proper planning.

Many good ecumenical links have been formed. This is encouraging and hopefully the ecumenical aspect of the congregation's work can be continued and expanded.

The Minister is clearly held in high regard by the congregation and he and his family have integrated well into the congregation and community. Adam is keen to develop ideas within the congregation though he feels that this review has come too soon to assess whether he has been able effectively to do so. However, the important thing is that he wishes to develop ideas and hopefully the Presbytery will find ways to encourage him to do so. He made critical comment about the Presbytery's lack of opportunities for discussion among ministers, and perhaps congregations too, of how they might work together better to provide mission to all the people within the Presbytery bounds, and this is an observation which should be taken seriously.

The convener of the visiting team concluded her report with these words, "The visiting team found much good work being carefully and prayerfully carried out in the congregation of St. Andrew's Wallace Green and Lowick. It is our hope and prayer that they will be able to build on that work and find relevant ways to ensure a firm future for the congregation. We hope that the experience of Local Church Review will be a useful tool in looking to the future."

Bruce F Neill,
Convener, Superintendence Committee.

Proposed deliverances

1. Presbytery receives the Report
2. Presbytery commends the minister, office-bearers, and leaders for their commitment to develop and take forward the ministry of the Church in Berwick and surrounding area.
3. Noting the recurring and significant deficits which appear in the Receipts and Payments Account published in the congregation's annual financial reports, Presbytery commends the office-bearers in their commitment expressed in their Congregational Action Plan (see section 10) to work towards a balanced budget within the next 5 years.
4. In the interests of clarity Presbytery instructs the Trustees of the congregation to publish in summary form their investment portfolio in their annual statement of accounts, with effect from the report for 2015.
5. Presbytery commends the Action Plan prepared by minister and office-bearers as a useful tool for the future work and witness of the congregation and particularly notes the ambitious, wide-ranging and imaginative nature of the plan.
6. Presbytery instructs the minister and office-bearers to study the LCR Report with particular attention to the action points identified in it.
7. Presbytery thanks the convener and members of the visiting team.

APPENDIX

Congregational Action Plan

(This is a summary provided for illustration – the full Plan is much more detailed and includes target dates, responsible individuals and groups and suggested evidence of success)

1. Worship

To undertake a review and, if necessary, the reshaping of the provision of worship services.

2. Evangelism

To develop a regular programme of 'messy church' type gatherings.

To improve access to the church for visitors outwith service times

3. New Service initiatives

To develop existing ministry to those suffering from dementia.

To achieve formal recognition as a dementia friendly church.

To establish a recreational Youth Group for teens.

4. Education

To develop a more structured programme of adult Christian education.

To continue to develop the Sunday Club.

5. Fellowship

To develop care for the congregation through supporting the work of elders and pastoral visitors, and seeking to recruit more visitors.

6. Relationships with the wider Church

To develop our relationship with our Mission Partners and to encourage more general interest in the work of the partner churches overseas.

7. Equipping ministry team and encouraging more people to take up leadership roles

Stewardship season for 2016 will focus on 'talents'.

8. Exploring new initiatives to maintain and enhance property

To continue regular discussions in Kirk Session concerning the best use of our buildings to support our mission.

9. Stewardship

To continue to develop plans for annual stewardship season – theme for 2015 is 'time'.

10. Other goals

To develop the work of the Finance Committee

To move towards a balanced budget within the next 5 years.

To move to a Unitary Constitution.