

RESHAPING FOR MISSION GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018

“As a denomination we want to see United Free Church congregations across Scotland revitalised, renewed and growing and to see new congregations established, so that the denomination can play its part in the mission of God’s people in Scotland.”

Three years have passed since the denomination launched the Reshaping for Mission initiative, and it appears that increasingly, as a denomination, we are becoming aware of this. Reshaping for Mission aims to see mission coming to the heart of our denomination’s life, and has three objectives

1. To see new churches planted
2. To see existing but struggling congregations revitalised
3. To see relatively healthy congregations intentionally renewing their focus on mission

This report considers how things have developed so far and tries to identify areas of challenge which need to be faced for the initiative to progress and to bear lasting fruit.

ENCOURAGEMENTS

Since the General Assembly of 2017 there have been more encouraging developments for which it we should give thanks to God.

- Our second new church plant has been launched in Crook of Devon, Trinity Church, under the auspices of Sauchie and Fishcross UF Church, and led by the Rev. Jerome O’Brien. This work had commenced by the time of last year’s General Assembly, but has been formally recognised as a church plant within the last twelve months.
- After a long period of waiting and praying, and some moments of discouragement, the congregation of Carnoustie UF church welcomed the Rev. Dr. Rob Barlow at the start of this year as their new minister, in another revitalisation project.
- The church plant in Torry continues to make progress, and the revitalisation projects in Kilmaurs and Dundee have also seen encouragements, with a new mission project being planned for the area around Kilmaurs and north Kilmarnock.
- New mission initiatives have been launched in a number of other congregations, such as the youth activities in Darnley church and the playgroup in Drumchapel.
- The PIED strategy, launched by the Youth Committee last year to encourage congregations to work towards developing their ministry among children and young people continues to encourage all our congregations to recognise the vital place that children and young people must have in all our mission thinking.
- The first running of the Mission Shaped Intro course, organised by the Christian Education and Evangelism committee ran in autumn 2017, and had over 35 people attending. The potential for this course in encouraging the growth of imagination in thinking about mission in our new context is considerable
- A number of congregations have been visited by representatives from the Reshaping for Mission group to discuss how to begin implementing aspects of the initiative in their own context.
- The denomination-wide Week of Prayer, held in November 2017, seems to have gone well, and in some cases to have been very enthusiastically received, though we acknowledge that material should have been made available sooner. We will rectify this in 2018. Prayer must be at the heart of all our mission activities if we are to see genuine spiritual fruit being borne.

CHALLENGES

At the same time as giving thanks for what has been started, we need to ensure that we do not lose sight of the fact that reshaping the denomination and individual churches for mission is going to be a long task. The following are areas which the Reshaping for Mission steering group recognises as being significant challenges.

- Although we have instigated some specific mission projects, the bigger challenge is the ongoing one of seeing churches across the denomination getting on board and seeking to move from maintenance to mission in their approach to ministry. The ultimate goal is not simply to launch particular revitalisation or planting projects but to see congregations of whatever size and stage catching the vision of mission in their own context.
- There have been many new churches planted across the UK over the last couple of decades, and some large city centre churches have grown significantly. However, there are far fewer examples of smaller, more traditional churches, which is what many of our congregations are, being successfully revitalised. This is not to say that we are engaging in a fruitless exercise, but it does mean that there are few models from which we can learn. There will therefore be a degree of experimentation in what we do, and we will need to be prepared for some failures along the way.
- The small size of many of our churches, often accompanied by a lack of local leadership, may well mean that there is a lack of clarity about how to take things forward in their context. Sometimes this may be due to an unwillingness to engage in mission or to try anything new. More common, however, is a lack of feeling of competence on behalf of the local leadership to undertake something new, experimental, and outside their experience up to now. This is especially so in the area of sharing our faith. Some of this, it is hoped, will be addressed in training offered by the Christian Education and Evangelism Committee, which is now being made available
- Along with equipping local leadership in congregations, there is an ongoing need for more workers to spearhead revitalisation projects and to launch new church plants. As a denomination we have continued to be blessed by the people that the Lord has brought to us from out with the denomination, and they come with experience and fresh approaches to mission and ministry which help us all. However, we still need more workers, both those to serve in pioneer positions and as ministers in more established congregations but which still need to move from “Maintenance” mode to “Mission” mode. Issues of how we train new workers and how we help new workers build on training and education they may already have had in different contexts
- Recruiting new workers for pioneer situations will necessarily highlight the financial challenges faced in supporting workers from central funds. As a denomination we have some reserves, for which we thank God, and we have been able to commit new resources to the Carnoustie revitalisation project, as well as continuing to support ongoing work. However, our funds are not limitless, and purchasing housing where that is necessary is particularly costly. So, we need to pray for considerable amounts to come in. Alongside the funds raised by individual congregations, we will need to encourage members to consider making a significant donation through a legacy in their will. And if some of our congregations reach the stage where they have to close they may be encouraged to direct the finances raised to go into new mission initiatives. This will be another way of ensuring that churches which close still leave a legacy and contribute to the work of the denomination.

PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS

- If an individual congregation, or perhaps a group of congregations, wish to think about implementing the vision of Reshaping for Mission we would encourage them to request a visit from someone from the Reshaping for Mission group to begin the conversation. A group of congregations getting together to run a Mission Shaped Intro course might also be good.
- We would also encourage congregations to share stories of mission in their own contexts, through Stedfast, the Facebook group, the Dunblane day, etc. The more we see of things happening in other settings, the more encouraged we will be and the more our own imaginations will be stimulated to attempt mission where we are. The Dunblane day conference will have quite a few opportunities to hear of some of our own local mission initiatives.
- It will also be healthy if we look outside the denomination's own activities to learn from other denominations and networks. As part of their own Continuous Personal Development, it may be beneficial for our ministers to attend conferences and training events organised by other groups and networks.

If we are to see Reshaping for Mission have a real impact to transform our denomination, we will need to be willing to persevere with this for the long haul. We should prepare for disappointments as well as joys. However, let us take confidence from the Lord's promise in Matthew 16: 18 to build His church – and if the gates of hell themselves will not prevail against this church, then we may be encouraged that secularising Scotland should yet be a place where we will see much fruit from the Gospel.

In the name of the Committee

DOUGLAS I CAMPBELL	Convener`
IAN A BOA	Vice-convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary