

# “Beyond our Church”

## Forward Plan for

### Ruthrieston West Parish Church

### Aberdeen

### 2020

#### Introduction

This proposed forward plan is the culmination of a period of intense analysis and reflection. Responding to the request made by Aberdeen Presbytery the Kirk Session conducted a structured planning process. Critically this included a Congregational Conference. The purpose of the conference was firstly to recognise and accept the very significant challenges facing our church and indeed all traditional churches and secondly to consider the future arrangements that will best serve our Mission at Ruthrieston West Church with the clear intention that in some form or other our Mission should continue.

From the outset of this process there was acceptance that the status quo was no longer an option. Therefore, working together, the congregation had to devise a new way forward. This required new thinking and imagination and renewed worshipful engagement with the Lord we seek to serve. The conference was attended by 60 members of the congregation. There was enthusiastic participation and realistic consideration of the challenge before us. Subsequently a report of the conference was prepared and distributed to all members of the congregation. Following the issuing of the report all members of the congregation were invited to complete a questionnaire and offer their own thoughts regarding the development of the church. 84 responses were received. This represents a very high proportion of the congregation worshipping week to week in the sanctuary. On this basis it is possible to have a high degree of confidence that the information obtained from the questionnaire accurately reflects the views of the congregation as a body.

Many people have positively and thoughtfully contributed to the planning process making possible the preparation of our forward plan.

At the same time the plan takes into account the proposed plan for the Presbytery of Aberdeen and Shetland embracing the opportunity created by that plan.

#### The forward plan

The forward plan proposed for RWC comprises three tiers. Initially each tier is outlined with further details being provided later in the plan.

#### The three tiers

1. **The foundation tier**, respecting the outcome of the congregational questionnaire, is sustaining our church as long as feasible.
2. **The intermediate tier**, again respecting the outcome of the congregational questionnaire, and embracing the proposed Presbytery Plan, is actively supporting the creation of the Riverside Cumulative Parish (“Riverside CP”).

3. **The ultimate tier**, which is novel, is promoting the creation of an entirely new Garthdee (and Morningside) Community Church as a joint venture with the Robert Gordon University and Aberdeen City Council.

### **The foundation tier**

The detailed proposals for the development of the foundation tier are

#### **A Team reorganisation**

Reorganisation of church teams following the adoption of the Unitary Constitution. The forward plan itself informs the reorganisation of our structure following the adoption of the Unitary Constitution. It should be noted that no hierarchy of teams is intended— all will be equally important.

- **The Operations Team** – the primary remit for this group would be concentrated on the foundation tier of our plan – sustaining RWC. This would include the maintenance of buildings; financing the church; enabling our communications and the overhaul of our web presence.
- **Pastoral care** – this is and must remain a core activity of our church.
- **Christian Education** – this should embrace the education of children of all ages (including those who have retired!). This becomes increasingly important as the amount of worship being led by members of the laity increases.
- **Development/outreach** – the primary remit for this group would be focussed on the development of our relations with the other congregations within the Riverside CP

#### **B Invitational Services**

Each year we will promote a series of “Invitational Services”. We are relatively relaxed in asking the church membership to provide the church with financial support. On the same basis we should be relaxed about asking them to invite friends, colleagues or relatives who they know might not otherwise be attending church. The services would be structured in a way that would help give insight into the various aspects of our worship addressing fundamental questions of the nature of “Why do we gather together?”; “Why do we pray?” “Why do we read the Bible?”

#### **C “Working Generation” Focus Group**

There is a relatively small but growing number of church members who are of the working generation. Owing to their other commitments having them assume responsibilities of a continuing nature may be problematic. Accepting that asking them to engage in shorter specific projects (for example the organisation of the Open Day mentioned below) may be feasible. Beyond that the focus group could create opportunities for succession planning allowing younger generation members take on the responsibilities of older members. It could also be possible for this group to work with similar groupings in the Riverside Cumulative Parish Church.

#### **D Relaunching our website**

Currently our website gives a completely inadequate not to say dismissal impression of our church. It requires to be relaunched as a matter of urgency.

#### **E Stabilisation**

The adverse press following the publication of the proposed Presbytery Plan could have been read by many as indicating that closure of our Church was imminent. If nothing else this significantly disconcerted the frequent users of our halls. In addition to contacting those users, further steps are required including

- The placement of notices outside and in the halls

- A Church Halls Open day
- Distribution of a “Contact” leaflet within the parish

### **The Intermediate Tier**

This tier relates to the opportunity arising from the creation of the Riverside CP. At this stage the following comments are necessarily initial proposals for discussion with the other constituent congregation (referred to as “the local congregations”). The proposals are derived in large measure from our experience of another collaboration namely our linkage with Garthdee Parish Church. The proposals fall into two sections. The first addresses the structural arrangements between Riverside CP and the local congregations; the second the principles that might guide the continuing development of both the Riverside CP and those congregations. For the avoidance of doubt the focus of these proposals is not buildings but church membership, in other words All God’s People.

### **Section one – the structural arrangements**

These proposed arrangements are based on the constitutional principle of subsidiarity. This means that the central authority, in this case the Riverside CP, should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which it can better perform than local congregations. Accordingly, initially Riverside CP will not supplant the local congregations but should be conducted as a separate entity.

The concept of dual eldership and membership may be helpful. Under this an elder of a local congregation would at the same time serve as an elder of Riverside CP. Similarly, each member of each local congregation would automatically become a member of Riverside CP following the inception of the cumulative parish.

In the fullness of time whenever a local congregation ceased to have an independent existence (typically when its minister demits) dual eldership/membership would cease but with congregational members remaining an elder/member of Riverside CP.

Ultimately as each local congregation ceases to have an independent existence church life would continue at the intermediate tier through Riverside CP. At this stage Riverside CP will have subsumed all the local congregations.

The Riverside CP would be led by its own Cumulative Parish Kirk Session (“CPKS”) constituted by all elders from the local congregations.

The area of responsibility of the CPKS would be restricted to those things allocated to it. Initially most matters would remain the responsibility of local Kirk Sessions. Over time there would be a gradual transfer of matters to the CPKS, reflecting the fact that responsibility will transfer according to the circumstances of each local congregation.

### **Guiding principles**

Experience shows that the strength/vigour of any central authority is dependent on the strength of its weaker constituent parts.

From that starting point the principles governing the operation of Riverside CP as the central authority might be

- The primary purpose of the Riverside CP will be to sustain each local congregation so long as feasible
- The priority of Riverside CP will be the support of the less viable congregations to the extent that combined resources allow

### **The Ultimate tier**

This involves the creation of an entirely new community church serving the Garthdee and Morningside areas.

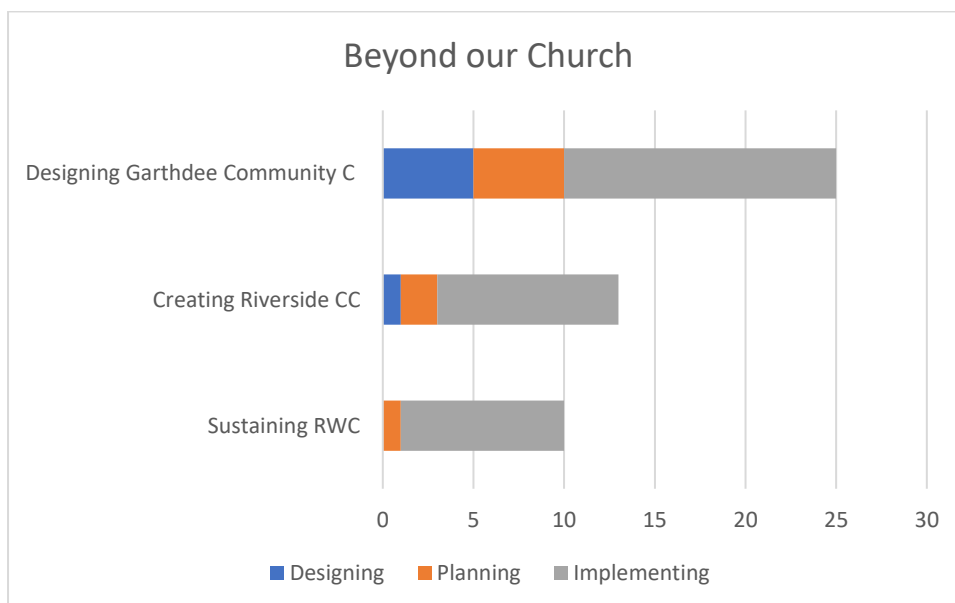
The following table comparing a traditional parish church against a new community church shows how radical a departure would be required. As such the initiative would in the first instance require the preparation of a feasibility study.

<b>Traditional Parish Church</b>	<b>Community Church</b>
Has sole occupancy of a building	Shares a building with others
Is owned by the church alone	Is owned or rented jointly
Is open for a short period each week	Is open and used 7 days a week
Is used by a relatively few people	Is used daily by many people
Is used by a well-established group	Is used by a continually changing group
Is predominately used by the older generation	Has no predominating generation of users
Is led by its Minister	Is led by a team of lay pastors and preachers
Supported by office bearers, elders and members	Supported by members and other building users
	Inspired by visiting preachers and teachers

What is proposed is a genuinely radical response to the challenges facing all traditional parish churches. It would be a hugely ambitious project and one that would have to be actively supported by the Aberdeen and Shetland Presbytery. For this to happen the proposal would first have to be embraced by the Riverside CP. For that reason, the possibility of creating a new Community Church would in large measure be dependent on the successful inception of the Riverside CP.

**Timing**

Even within Riverside CP resources will be constrained. It is necessary therefore to consider the time realistically required for the support of each tier within our forward plan. Mile stones will also have to be marked.



## **Concluding remarks**

We are on a journey and our journey continues.

And our guide on this journey remains as ever our Lord God. We are assured

*"...I will show you the most excellent way.*

*Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.<sup>1</sup>*

The traditional church as we know it will, as with all knowledge, pass away. Our ability to plan and direct our future is incomplete. But whatever we do let us now proceed in an act of faith, a projection of hope and a demonstration of love. In doing that, we need have no fear of the future. Instead, let us now embrace that future.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 8-13