

The future of our church

When was the last time you have been to church, or engaged with any church groups or events?

This isn't a loaded question: simply an explanation of why churches in the Western world are in the situation in which we now find ourselves.

Many of us do so very frequently and committedly, in various ways, but if you think back to the past, numbers are much lower than they used to be. Since the 1970s, church attendance and membership have steadily decreased, which has resulted in lower income – so less capital to work with - and fewer ministers, too. It's not all gloom of course, the Church of Scotland remains one of the biggest membership organisations in the country, providing an incredible amount of social care and community support – it's just that relative to where Scotland was a generation or two ago, the reality we face is different and presents new challenges.

As you know, we have been discussing the future of our church for some years now, and we're now coming to a point where significant changes will take place, in addition to our changed way of working that has gradually developed over the past couple of years.

Over the past four years, the Church of Scotland has been undergoing a restructuring at all levels, to respond to the reality of our situation: with smaller congregations, fewer ministers, and less income. The restructuring aims to help us serve our communities in the best possible way with the resources that are available, so that we may continue to serve God as parish churches. Thank you for all you have done to engage with this process in such a constructive way – first and foremost our elders, and all the members and friends of our congregations.

We are holding two community meetings to discuss what the changes mean for us in particular:

- ❖ Thursday 8 June at 7.30pm in the Fletcher Hall in East Saltoun,
- ❖ Thursday 15 June in Humbie Village Hall.

Please come along to one of the meetings if you can.

Here is a summary:

Our two linked congregations of Humbie and Yester Bolton and Saltoun will unite, hopefully on 1st January 2024. This means that instead of two Kirk Sessions having separate meetings, separate accounts, separate set ups for administrative items like safeguarding, health & safety and property, we will have one Kirk Session, where all current elders will come together. We are hoping that much of the work can be done through teams working on the different topics.

We are proposing the new name of 'Lammermuir Parish' for the united church. In due course, the current congregation of Morham & Garvald will come into this parish, too. (This will happen when their minister decides to leave.)

The ministry provision for the united parish will remain at one full-time position while I remain in post. When there's a vacancy, the allocation will be reduced to 0.5 FTE. Eventually, it is hoped that there can be a parish grouping with the then-united Haddington Church, which could reduce the administrative burden on a future minister significantly, making a 0.5 position somewhat more feasible.

We know that, because of our reduced congregation size and income, we are no longer able to maintain all our buildings as Church of Scotland properties. This is a situation faced by congregations across the country and across denominations.

It is very hard to close a building to which we have emotional connections and which carries so many memories for us.

Unfortunately, we are not in a position where we can afford all of them, so have come to the decision that, in due course, Bolton and Saltoun Churches will be decommissioned as Church of Scotland buildings. However, we are actively pursuing options that we hope will retain the church buildings for the local communities, including their future availability for family services such as weddings and funerals.

Yester Church and the Session Rooms in East Saltoun will remain, and Humbie Church and Stables are under a three-year-review. These decisions have not been made lightly, and the elders have shown much concern and diligence in determining our options.

We are proposing to hold one Sunday service for the united parish. We will invite views on the pattern of service venues and the timing of this service at the congregational meetings in June.

Yester Church is very much at the centre of the community and will continue to host community groups as well as services. To support this, some of the pews will be removed over the summer and replaced with chairs, to add to both comfort and flexibility in the use of the building.

In contrast, Humbie Church is beautifully situated in a secluded and peaceful spot, while providing ample parking opportunities to enable transport there. We hope to establish a programme of retreat days there, as well as themed fairs. Current ideas for the latter include flower arranging, choirs, and crafts such as knitting and crocheting – all part of our church life – and we would invite groups from the area to join us for displays and workshops. Additionally, we hope to establish a programme of concerts and exhibitions at Humbie Church, as well as using it more frequently as a wedding venue.

We have already begun a new way of being church. In addition to our Sunday services, and regular activities such as our fortnightly community coffee mornings, we hold a fortnightly children's group and monthly Sunday Club for children; we have Forest Church; our services are joined online by between twenty and thirty people every week in addition to our lively congregations of 40-50 people between the church buildings (especially for joint services!); we have connected more with our communities through various initiatives during and beyond the lockdowns; we have successfully applied for a community support grant to help our communities in this cost-of-living crisis; we regularly support the local foodbank and other charity appeals through the generous donations of our community.

All of the proposals for the union and future mission have been discussed by a working group made up of four elders each from Humbie and Yester Bolton and Saltoun Churches, and subsequently discussed by the Kirk Sessions.

Please help us as we face the changes: it can be difficult to navigate a new situation, and we all want the best for our church and our area, to serve God and express God's love in the best possible way.

This is new for all of us, and we would ask you to help us and give the changes a chance. Only together can we shape our church life.

In the wider church, Presbyteries, the regional bodies that oversee and bring together Church of Scotland congregations in each area, have been uniting – down from previously 46 to 10, to use the available resources more efficiently. We are now part of the new Presbytery of Lothian and Borders – uniting the previous Presbyteries of Lothian, Duns, Melrose & Peebles, and Jedburgh. The union took place on 1st January of this year, and so far, the work and mutual support have been fantastic, with many plans for joint up working. We are very pleased that the new fulltime Presbytery Clerk is the Rev Norman Smith, son-in-law of Paul Sales, and that the newly appointed Presbytery administrator comes from our parish – Caroline Kirk, whom many of us will know.

The Church of Scotland central offices have already been restructured, with a significant reduction of staffing numbers, reducing the overall cost of the work done there, while still enabling the support of the church across the country, and our national and international projects.

If you have questions or concerns, please speak to me, or any of the elders.

Thank you,
Rev Anikó Schütz Bradwell