

Update on the Proposed Union of Freeland & St Machar's Ranfurly Churches

This article has been produced by the two Session Clerks to keep both congregations updated with the latest information as we move towards a union. It includes some background information, some recent developments, a timeline for the next three months and some detail on the congregational votes which will take place in around three months' time.

The Background

In 2021 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland decided to take radical action in response to falling numbers of ministers, a decline in membership and a drop in income. Presbyteries were required to produce, and to implement, a five year mission plan, which entailed a major readjustment with a reduction in the number of charges, and the creation of some team ministries where deemed appropriate, to ensure congregations were better equipped to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and to serve their communities going forward.

For us in Bridge of Weir, Clyde Presbytery decided that the two Bridge of Weir churches should unite as one charge. At the time neither of our churches was particularly enthusiastic to embrace this but there was nevertheless some recognition in both churches that the coming years would prove challenging, and this has indeed been borne out, such that the Kirk Sessions of both churches are now agreed upon union. It was also unrealistic to imagine that Bridge of Weir could remain untouched in such an extensive national readjustment exercise.

Our Vision

Whilst the process of union undoubtedly brings its challenges on a more positive note it also brings fresh opportunities for service and friendship, and a chance to reappraise how we can best serve our Lord together in the Church and in the wider community. In our recent discussions our elders have highlighted the following vision aspirations-

- A church at the centre of the community, both geographically and metaphorically
- A church that is both welcoming to all, and outward looking
- A church where there is a strong emphasis on building relationships, both within and outwith the church, particularly with families and children
- A church with a strong emphasis on worship, service, witness and unity
- A caring church, caring for both members and abroad in the community
- A church rooted in God's Word

The Basis of Union

In recent months a union steering group, comprising representative elders from both Kirk Sessions, has been working through the Basis of Union and then liaising with the Kirk Sessions over this. The Basis of Union is a formal document which the Church of Scotland requires both Kirk Sessions and the Presbytery to agree upon prior to union. It contains ten clauses covering a range of topics, some of which are relatively straightforward eg parish boundaries.

One clause covers the name of the united charge. After a process that included consultation with the congregations the name of Bridge of Weir Parish Church of Scotland was agreed.

Two of the clauses covering major items were actually decided at Presbytery level in its Presbytery Mission Plan. The church building chosen as the place of worship for the united charge was the Freeland building. There was to be one minister for the united charge and due to the unrestricted tenure of Rev Gray and the reviewable tenure of Rev Marshall, the Basis of Union proposes that Rev Gray shall be the minister of the united charge. (The reasoning underlying these decisions can be discussed at the congregational meetings noted below.)

On 11th November the Kirk Sessions both approved the steering group's draft Basis of Union. This has subsequently been approved by the relevant departments of the central Church of Scotland and been passed back to Clyde Presbytery for approval there, and we trust this will not be withheld.

Timeline for the Next Three Months

In January we will issue the final approved Basis of Union and a background information Question & Answer document for perusal by the congregations. Also in January we will hold two congregational meetings—on Sunday 19th and on Thursday 23rd—where members of the steering group will be available to discuss the proposed union and answer questions.

If members and adherents have any questions they would like answered it would be helpful, where possible, if these could be submitted to the Session Clerks in advance of the January congregational meetings.

We hope to be in a position to hold the congregational votes on Sunday 23rd February. We require the assistance of Presbytery personnel for the votes. We will confirm the vote date well in advance.

Please note only members or recognised adherents who appear on the congregational rolls will be permitted to vote. If you worship regularly at one of the churches but are unsure of your status please speak to your Minister or Session Clerk by early January to make sure you do not miss out on voting.

The Congregational Votes

All members and adherents will be entitled to vote in person on the designated day.

In Freeland Church there will be one vote along the lines of :-

“Do you agree to Freeland Church entering a Union with St Machar's Ranfurly Church to become the Bridge of Weir Parish Church of Scotland?” Yes or No

In St Machar's Ranfurly Church there will be two votes along the lines of:-

“Do you agree to St Machar's Ranfurly Church entering a Union with Freeland Church to become the Bridge of Weir Parish Church of Scotland?” Yes or No

“Do you agree to accept Rev Kenneth Gray as the minister for the Bridge of Weir Parish Church?” Yes or No

The vote will be conducted by Presbytery officials at the close of the morning worship services on the designated day. Please note only those physically attending the church that day will be able to vote. There will be no postal or proxy voting (-this is Church law). A simple majority will determine the outcome.

If the votes are all positive then further preparations will continue for the formal Union which would take place on 1st October 2025 (or earlier if Rev Hanneke Marshall has accepted a calling elsewhere before then). The funds and assets of the two churches will be merged. The church building of St Machar's Ranfurly would be sold or otherwise disposed of (timescale not entirely clear yet), and the manse of St Machar's Ranfurly would be sold, let or otherwise disposed of. The proceeds of any property sales would remain locally.

If however one or more of the votes is negative Presbytery would then be remitted with the task of deciding the way ahead. In the first instance a team from Presbytery would come down and visit the relevant congregation/congregations to assess matters further before any definitive decisions are undertaken. Members may wish to enquire further about the potential consequences of a “No” majority vote at the congregational information meetings.

In recent months the union steering group, comprising elders and the ministers from both churches, and the Kirk Sessions have been working well together to progress the union. We recommend to both congregations a positive vote in each instance to secure the healthiest outcome for both current congregations and, most importantly, for the prospective united church.

