

Kirk faces tough future but Covid drives online boost and activity growth

BY KIRSTEEN PATERSON

ONE of the oldest institutions in Scotland is at a crossroads signposted long ago but hastened by coronavirus. At almost 500 years old, the Church of Scotland is present in every corner of the country, with more than 330,000 members worshipping across around 1280 congregations.

Those congregations are smaller than before and using buildings that are older and more expensive to run than ever. Assembly trustees were appointed last year to chart a new path, but Covid has reduced the projected annual income by £20 million.

The grim figures paint a picture of an institution on the wane, a religious relic.

Yet they've emerged at a time when the Kirk has undergone a resurgence of activity, with increased attendances at services held online during the unprecedented period of closure and its network of community ties used to help deliver pandemic aid to those on the margins.

Food provision, pastoral care, family support – all have continued during these challenging six months and are set to continue through what promises to be a tough winter.

But with the sale of buildings and reduction of ministries on the cards, how long can the Kirk continue to feed and serve people of all faiths and none, and what will Scotland look like with a reduced Church of Scotland presence?

Already several assets are under offer or for sale on the organisation's website – stunning B-listed Jamestown Church near Loch Lomond, blonde-stoned Collessie Church in Fife, mothballed Lionel Mission Hall on Lewis.

And there are more – manses, flats, terraced houses. Quarff Church in Shetland, a six-bedroomed home in Fraserburgh. The Kirk furloughed around half of its staff and ceased non-urgent work, but it hasn't been enough.

Rt Rev Dr Martin Fair, the Moderator, says moves to online sermons



Church of Scotland Moderator Rev Martin Fair

may have "broken the dependence on buildings". But these buildings have allowed ministers and members to carry out work that has changed lives, and continues to provide crucial support.

In Inverness, Rev Fiona Smith of Ness Bank Church says that premises has become "a real hub" for the community thanks to its catering-grade kitchen, paid for by the congregation in 2011. It fuels Inverness Foodstuff, a three-day-per-week drop-in for those in need. Or at least it was a drop-in until the crisis forced the cafe to transform into a collection and delivery service.

Run in conjunction with partners, it helps connect those sofa-surfing, sleeping rough and living in temporary accommodation with hairdressers, council officials, nurses, dentists and mentors.

It is also feeding more people who have fallen into hardship through job losses and income cuts, including families with children. "We have fed thousands, it's a lifeline for people," the former solicitor says.

"We accept everybody, it's transformational – I go in in my jeans and I'm just Fiona. It's more than the Church that's involved, but it's the Church that has been instrumental – without our building, without the vision of this church to put that kitchen in we wouldn't be where we are."

Children's clubs use facilities at Ness Bank Church, as do parents' groups and others. Like so many Kirk sites, the facilities provide much-needed community space.

Through CrossReach, which offers residential care homes, prison visiting and more, the Kirk also has one of the largest care providers in Scotland.

"The Church will survive," says Smith. "That's an absolute certainty. But we've got major issues to face."

"There's so much good that comes out of a parish church like Ness Bank. My congregation are a wonderful bunch who care passionately about people. The place would be poorer without us, and I don't think people do see that."