

## Ness Bank Church of Scotland, Inverness

# SANCTUARY

When Columba came to Inverness in 565 AD, we are told he banished a dreaded beast from the local river to become the Loch Ness Monster, and opened with prayer the gates of King Brude's castle which had been barred against him. Inverness became a Christian city – a tradition reflected in social, civic, religious and business life.

Today Inverness is full of people of all faiths and none, residents, visitors and tourists. But as they crowd across the bridges and through the city centre, or look up and down the river from the newly opened Castle Experience, they cannot fail to notice the architectural wealth of the city's many prominent church buildings.

One such is Ness Bank, the City Church, which lies in the shadow of the Castle and by the side of the river, with its own significant history over 125 years, and home to a congregation whose origins date from 1787. It remains today a place where the organ thunders out as the congregation gathers Sunday by Sunday, and during the week the halls accommodate groups serving the homeless (including the award winning Inverness Foodstuff), supporting the addicted, hosting church groups, nurturing the young and celebrating the musical culture of the Highlands.

But most of the time, like other city centre churches, it remains a closed door to people passing by – its beauty hidden, its resources under wraps, its traditions a mystery to those who cannot see.

The Sanctuary Project seeks to change that. Refurbishment will make the interior accessible to the public, with an income-generating café supporting regular midweek daytime openings. Without compromising the existing use for worship or community groups, guests will be welcomed into the building to share information, engage in conversation, and enjoy contemplation. Locals and visitors, groups and individuals, young and old, those who are able-bodied and those with special needs, people of all faiths and none – all will be invited to share the time and space.

Outside the building on the riverside, the existing entrances will be made more obvious and attractive. Inside, a new staircase and lift will provide safe, easy access to the first floor Sanctuary. There a new kitchen formed from store rooms and office space will serve light meals and snacks to guests. The rest of the space will be open for people to inspect the stained-glass windows and reflect on the stories they tell; to admire the beautiful organ and imagine its glorious music; to view the ecclesiastical furniture and understand its significance and function; to engage through discrete interpretation with the values, history and current activity of the living congregation; or to sit in peace and quiet in the middle of a busy city. A Sanctuary indeed!

The refurbished space, equipped with audio-visual resources and the capacity to livestream, will also be available for musical performances and other presentations, civic and community events, conferences and informal gatherings, as well as traditional Christian weddings and funerals.

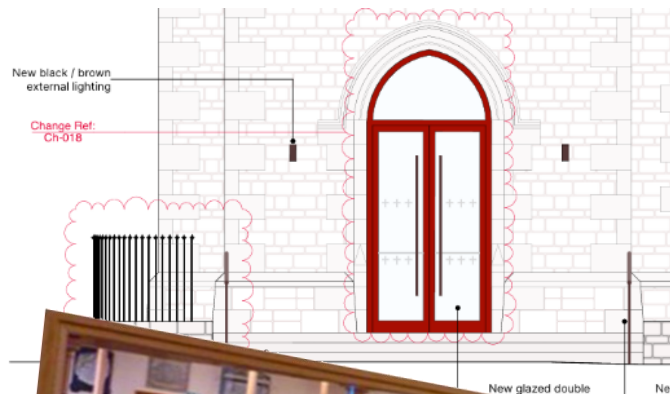
Inverness can rediscover its roots and shape the future of this significant building in its midst.

## Aim of the Sanctuary Project:

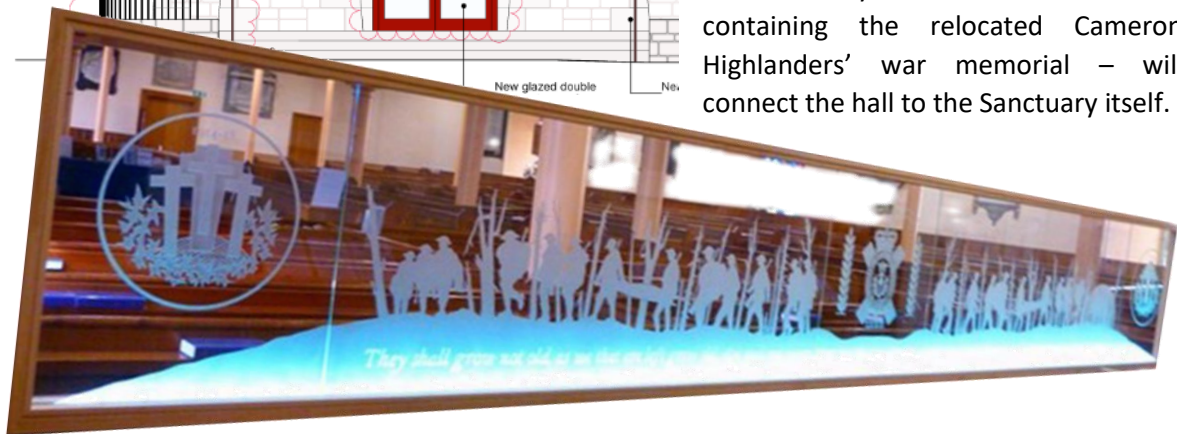
- to Open the church doors on a daily basis to local residents, visitors and passers-by;
- to Provide a place of friendship, comfort, rest and peace in the midst of the city;
- to Reveal the Christian culture of the congregation to interested inquirers;
- to Enable those with mobility issues to access an older building without restriction;
- to Enhance existing community activities by extending the space available.

## Elements of the Sanctuary Project:

1. **Riverside Entrance and Stair:** Ness Bank was designed with 12 steps leading to the main door on Haugh Road providing access to the Sanctuary on the first floor. Internal staircases to the lower halls are narrow and steep. But most pedestrians pass the church on the riverside, where the entrances are unwelcoming, and inaccessible to some.



New self-opening glass doors in the main riverside entrance will welcome visitors through landscaped gardens into an enhanced lobby with new accessible toilets. From there a new compliant staircase will lead gently to a redecorated entrance hall at the back of the Sanctuary. New internal windows – containing the relocated Cameron Highlanders' war memorial – will connect the hall to the Sanctuary itself.



2. **Internal Passenger Lift:**

Even with a compliant stair, some will find internal access to the first floor difficult. The Haugh Street entrance to the first floor is already accessible with a ramp installed in 2006. However the pavement leading to this from the riverside is narrow and steep, and can feel dangerously exposed to traffic.

A new internal passenger lift will be installed in part of one of the smaller ground floor rooms, opening off an internal corridor close to a new self-opening external glass door with an enhanced access ramp. It will lead up directly to the front of the Sanctuary on the west side, providing admission to all the facilities and activities there, including new and refurbished accessible toilets.

3. **Sanctuary Space:** At present the Sanctuary seats around 580 in fixed pews. It is well heated, and equipped with a wonderful pipe organ and modern audio-visual facilities. But the configuration is inflexible, limiting use to Sunday services and occasional events.



Removing some pews from the front of the church and the east and west transepts will open up a flexible space of 160 m<sup>2</sup> for exhibitions, displays, and informal gatherings, while retaining the overall seating capacity for large events.

4. **Café Area:** Ness Bank is well equipped with a modern kitchen serving the downstairs halls. However internal arrangements make it difficult to serve food upstairs which has been prepared downstairs, or to transport people down.



When catering is also required in the halls, there would be capacity issues in serving the Sanctuary at the same time.

By converting underused first-floor office and storage space, and removing a surplus stair, a suitable new kitchen will be created adjacent to the Sanctuary, with appropriate storage and an accessible toilet. Close to this a new servery area in the east transept will facilitate a commercial café in that part of the church, and provide simple catering for other events taking place in the Sanctuary. This hospitality will be available to all, without restriction of movement or disruption to catering arrangements elsewhere in the building.

5. **Sanctuary Redecoration:** The building is beautiful – stained glass, organ pipes, wood panelling, and ecclesiastical furniture. But the great heights and large expanses have not often been within reach for many years, and the passage of time has left its mark.

Internal scaffolding will allow the walls to be repainted, together with minor repairs to the stonework and alterations to the lighting. Electric cables will be discretely fitted and up-dated. New infra-red heating panels in the east and west transepts will allow these spaces to be regularly used efficiently and in comfort. Existing significant historical features will be carefully preserved.



## Cost of the Sanctuary Project:

<b>1 – Riverside Entrance and Stair</b>		
External Work – doors, walls, ramp, lighting	£ 71,770	
New complaint Internal Stair	£ 50,130	
New ground floor toilets	£ 29,200	
Installation of War Memorial Glass	£ 22,160	£173,260
<b>2 – Internal Passenger Lift</b>		
Including partitions, doors, service, redecoration		£ 74,500
<b>3 &amp; 4 – Sanctuary Space and Café Area</b>		
Including structural work, kitchen and servery		£164,990
<b>5 – Sanctuary Redecoration</b>		
Including scaffolding and infra-red heating		£189,500
<b>Additional Items</b>		
Main Contractors Preliminaries	£180,000	
Design and Planning Fees	£111,372	
Contingency (10% of construction cost)	£ 78,250	£369,622
<b>TOTAL COST</b>		<b>£971,872 + VAT</b>

(Design work by LDN Architects)

(Costs estimated by McLeod and Aitken, chartered Quantity Surveyors)

(Specialist advice will be sought on the application of VAT to a listed building)

## Funding for the Sanctuary Project:

<b>Allocation from Congregational Reserves</b>	£ 50,000	
<b>Congregational Fundraising 2025/26</b>	£125,000	
<b>Allocation from Recent Legacies</b>	£371,000	
<b>Funding from General Trustees</b>	£340,000	
<b>External Grants received</b>	£105,000	
<b>Balance sought from External Grants</b>	£174,000	<b>£1,165,000</b>

## Benefit of the Sanctuary Project:

At Easter and In August each year the congregation has opened its doors to visitors, with volunteers welcoming guests for a few hours each day, Monday to Friday, with minimal advertising – just a sign on the door! In 2025, over 19 days in August, 1209 visitors were welcomed from 34 countries and 5 continents. Over 100 left written messages or prayers on the “Prayer Tree”. With basic interpretation of the building and its history and purpose, simple opportunities to engage in reflection and contemplation, and Highland hospitality – a welcome and a smile – visitors stopped, talked, absorbed and participated to a greater degree than ever before.

With these opening hours extended, access to the building improved, additional material on display, and the hospitality enhanced to include good quality food and drink, there is no doubt that numbers will be significantly increased and the experience enriched. This would lead to a better understanding of the work of the church and its place in the history and life of Inverness, and an increased engagement in the social and community work taking place in the building. In our diverse and global society, an understanding of others is an essential ingredient of integration. And in our busy lives, a place of Sanctuary to stop, rest, think and pray is a blessing indeed!