

REPORT TO STIRLING PRESBYTERY BY STIRLING ST. MARK'S ON ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRIORITY AREAS COMMITTEE'S 'CHANCE TO THRIVE' INITIATIVE

Moderator,

I have been asked to speak about St. Mark's experience as part of the Chance to Thrive initiative.

There are 63 congregations which serve the 5% most deprived areas in Scotland. These are the Church of Scotland's priority area charges. Stirling St Mark's is the only one in this presbytery. 23 of the 63 are vacant.

In October 2011, I reported that we had been selected as one of eight priority area congregations join the Chance to Thrive initiative, to be run in partnership the Ministries Council's Priority Areas team.

All we knew then was that it would run for a minimum of three to five years, and give us the chance to clarify and then deliver our vision for our role in serving our community. We would have the support of the Priority Areas team in Glasgow and, apparently, volunteers of the type that money cannot buy.

Chance to Thrive was launched at an event in the Scottish Parliament.

We didn't know where this would lead us, but we were up for the journey.

Now we have learned that we are among seven of the original eight who are continuing for the next three years, and have been joined by six other congregations.

So where have we been, what have we done, and how far have we got?

We formed our own Chance to Thrive group at St Mark's – not just board or session members, but invited anyone interested, or sceptical, to join – and they did.

We have been getting around and opening our eyes. We have been to meet our seven sister groups in the congregations at Lochee (Dundee), Larkhall, Maryhill, Cranhill, St Mark's Drumchapel, Castlemilk and Red Road where the church stood in the shadows of the famous high flats. They have come to meet us. Each is very different, with their own challenges and opportunities. They have inspired us, and sometimes we may have inspired them.

Together with them, we have also been to see examples of good practice among other churches or groups serving their communities – in Bellshill, Garthamlock, Langside and Neilston. We have been invited together to present our stories and meet both the moderator and the Scottish government minister for communities; we have been professionally assessed and evaluated for three years by the Carnegie Trust; and St Mark's has told its story at priority areas gatherings at Carnwadric and

Gartmore House, and we have led a morning service at New Kilpatrick Church in Bearsden.

At St Mark's, our group has spent over four years now with a remarkable volunteer mentor, and three enthusiastic support volunteers, finding out about the needs and challenges of our community, and working out how might help to meet them, and by so doing to show the gospel in action.

This has tilled the soil, and some of our scattered seed has flourished.

About ten volunteers, some from the congregation and some from the parish, have been running a Fruit Barra in the church hall every Friday morning selling fruit and veg straight from the Glasgow market at cost price.

The Eyewitnesses Group has explored Raploch's social history with local people and community groups.

Sainsbury's superstore is in our parish, and every second Tuesday at 5.30pm we hold a 'messy' family service in the training room there, and have a meal together in the cafeteria afterwards. Our partnership with Sainsbury's has blossomed, and they have helped us to provide food hampers at Christmas, and they asked if they could facelift our halls – and then did!

They also let us use their logo to brand ourselves 'St. Mark's @ Sainsbury's', and we sometimes use their slogans of 'Try something different today' and 'Live well for less' to suit our own message.

Over the last year we have been looking at our buildings, and how they might best serve us in future. We went on a Saturday bus tour of six Edinburgh churches to see what they have done, and checked out several more, including the hall here.

And then we worked up a brief for a feasibility study to look at our buildings and land, and how we might change or improve them, or even replace them, in order to serve our community better over the next decades. With funding from the general trustees for the study, we interviewed three architects and appointed Page and Park in the autumn.

We asked them to go through an engagement process with our Chance to Thrive group, as well as local groups and people, and then come up with three different options. The first option is just something which would make a significant improvement; the second is something more radical, to transform our existing buildings, perhaps with partial demolition and extensions; the third is to provide us with something really fit for our 21st century purposes if we were to clear the buildings from the site and start again.

We will hear and see their first outline ideas next Tuesday, and then there will be more discussions and, no doubt, many changes before they can be worked up in detail.

We still have the fourth option, which is no change. But we are excited about what we might be able to do and provide in future that we can't do now.

We are also inspired by the other Chance to Thrive stories. In Castlemilk, the East and the West congregations linked, then united in one of the buildings, but wanted to be Castlemilk Central. So they are disposing of both buildings, designed and got planning permission for a new one in the heart of the community, raised £1M in less than a year and are now on site, well under way and moving in this September.

In Drumchapel, the boxing club which uses their premises re-roofed and re-furbished a derelict hall for the congregation.

And among the next six churches already, 20 people from the village of Patna in Ayrshire have just visited the east end of Greenock to find out how a congregation can operate with no church building at all, but just a base in a shopping unit.

Most importantly, however, we hear about different ways to serve our communities – food banks, cafes, drop-in centres, youth work, gala days and celebrations, connecting with asylum seekers, and many other forms of Christian outreach.

I have heard it said that the priority area churches are at the prow of the ship heading into the storm that will be hitting the whole of the Church of Scotland. But perhaps they are showing how it might be possible to ride those waves.

We can't just wait for a minister, because there aren't enough and one may not come. We probably can't wait for kirk sessions either, as they are probably too old and tired. And we shouldn't wait until we have got enough money, because if we are not doing anything, then why would anybody give it to us. A lot of the activities cost nothing except our own time and commitment, but then we have been amazed when people want to give us money to support us. And they have.

What I think has enriched us most during the Chance to Thrive journey so far is the sense of sharing and encouragement, and feeling part of a bigger church. For three years, four members of other congregations have travelled forty or fifty miles to join us for all our evening meetings at St Mark's and accompany us on our journey. And we have shared the trials, tribulations and triumphs of seven other congregations and are about to do the same with another six as we set out on the next phase.

Moderator, I am happy to answer any questions, now or later.

David Russell

Presbytery elder, Stirling St. Mark's (March 2016)