

Greyfriars Kirk & St Cuthbert's Parish Church

Working Towards Union Newsletter: Issue 1, Jan 2024

Welcome to the first of a series of monthly newsletters from the Working Group to keep everyone informed about progress as we move forward towards the union of our two churches. As we enter the New Year may we send you best wishes for a happy, healthy and inspiring 2024.

We intend to issue the newsletter by email each month. Please make sure the office has your current email address if you have one. Copies will also be available for collection, from each church, for those who do not use a PC and prefer a hard copy.

Who are the participants in the Working group?

St Cuthberts – Christine McGuinness (Co- Chair), Alexander Bewick, Jeannette Barton, John Kirk, Graham MacLagan, James McLean, Margaret Pollock and Scott Turnbull.

Greyfriars – Gillian Couper (Co-Chair), Catherine Alexander, Anne Bradbury, Maggie Cormack, Jo Elliot, Jamie Sutherland.

Background and progress to date:

In April 2023, Edinburgh and West Lothian Presbytery agreed a Mission Plan that involved the union of various congregations across Edinburgh and West Lothian. Under this plan St Cuthbert's Parish Church and Greyfriars Kirk are to unite. A working group has been formed with representatives from both churches and they have been meeting since mid-2023 each month.

In November we held a joint Kirk Session meeting at Davidsons Mains church halls. This was an opportunity for elders to get to know each other and to share an understanding of each other's history, culture/ ethos/ liturgy etc. We would like to share some of our findings with you and hope that you will be heartened to see that we have many similarities.

A little about our histories:



Greyfriars Kirk was built on the site of a pre-Reformation Franciscan monastery, which explains its name (after the robes the friars wore). Greyfriars Kirk was founded in 1620. It is the first church to be built in post-Reformation Scotland. The National Covenant was signed here in 1638. During Cromwell's invasion of Scotland, Greyfriars was used as a barracks from 1650 to 1653.

Little of what you see survives from the original church today. The church originally ended where the great west arch is now, above the organ. Beyond that was a small, squat tower, where the Town Council kept its gunpowder – which, possibly, in an accident-waiting-to-happen scenario, blew up in 1718. The west end of the church was reduced to ruins and a new west wall was built creating a new church.

In 1845 tragedy struck again – fire gutted Old Greyfriars and destroyed the furnishings of New Greyfriars. Restoration took many years and at the same time, a movement began towards reviving a less puritanical style of worship within the Church of Scotland. Rev Robert Lee, the minister at the time of the fire, saw an opportunity to reform aspects of worship and church order. He introduced the coloured windows, together with a pipe organ, liturgical worship and hymn singing; and he invited people to stand to sing and kneel to pray.



Between the World Wars an ambitious programme of reconstruction took place and the two congregations – Old Greyfriars and New Greyfriars were united. In 1990 a Peter Collins organ was installed and at the same time most of the pews were removed to provide a more flexible space.



St Cuthberts is one of the oldest religious foundations in Scotland. There is a tradition that a church was founded here in Celtic times by St Cuthbert and Christian worship may have been carried on in this place for some thirteen hundred

years. It was a Mother Church and later a vicarage of the Roman Church.

It became Presbyterian at the time of the reformation, was Episcopalian in the seventeenth century and then Presbyterian again. St Cuthberts has always sought to keep faith with its primary task – the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom and ‘The Kirk below the castle’ has been a lively focal point of Christian worship.

The present building, completed in 1894, is the 7th church to occupy the same site. It is particularly noted for the fine marble decoration and murals and stained glass. In the apse there is an alabaster frieze, a copy of ‘The last Supper’ by Leonardo da Vinci. The font is topped by a statue based on the Madonna by Michelangelo in the Church of Our Lady at Bruges.

In 1990 the inside of the church was altered to make it more suitable for the future by reducing the size of the sanctuary seating area and incorporating within the one building modern and adaptable halls and facilities. In 1993 the South transept was dedicated as a chapel and was renamed the Chapel of the Anam-Chara – the Soul Friend – which links back to the Celtic heritage. In 2022 the pews were removed to allow for a more functional space within the sanctuary.



In the Church vestibule there is a monument to John Napier of Merchiston, Inventor of Logarithms, and Thomas de Quincy, Alexander Nasmyth the painter and George Kemp the architect of the Scott Monument are among those buried in the Churhyard.

Here are some of the things we have in common:

Style, form and content of worship & liturgy is similar with music being a key element. Both have a ‘High’ worshipping history.	✓
Deeply spiritual buildings with long histories spanning many centuries	✓
Our outreach has a sense of mission/welfare and is to the same communities, either direct or through community partnerships and has been similar over the centuries, although approached differently by both churches.	✓
Both buildings have been adapted to meet the needs and opportunities of our time	✓
United, open and inclusive fellowship – recognises and nourishes gifts and skills of others	✓
History of both buildings draws a huge amount of visitors through both buildings annually	✓
Both buildings seek to be self sustaining through revenue from concerts / hire of facilities.	✓

Some of the things we are working on together next:

- Further opportunities for joint worship and social events to allow us to get to know each other
- Planning another away day to involve the wider congregation and community representatives
- Developing Parish profiles and combined vision to work towards a Basis of Union agreement



In the next Newsletter we will share aspects of the present context of our churches, and answer some points raised from a questionnaire given to the members of both Kirk Sessions ahead the joint meeting regarding their concerns, hopes and fears of the future Union and how we hope to address them.

Get in touch! If you would like to raise any points, ask questions or have a chat, please get in touch with Christine or Gillian through the church offices: office@stcuthberts-edinburgh.uk or telephone 0131 229 1142; contact@greyfriarskirk.com or telephone 0131 225 1900. All thoughts welcome.

