**Report Local Church Review of the Church of Scotland Geneva (CofSG) 19th – 20th November 2022**

LCR team: Rev Graham Austin, Mr. Ruud Witte and team leader Rev Joanne Evans-Boiten

(Rev Joanne Evans-Boiten made a preparatory visit between 8th July- 11th July 2022)

**Introduction**

Before writing anything about our inspiring time with minister, office bearers and congregation in Geneva, it is important to highlight the fact that our conversations and therefore our report will have been affected by the “Covid experience” and, at least as far as the office bearers are concerned, the uncertainties surrounding the Presbytery Plan. In short: the church from before Covid has changed and the church of after the Presbytery Plan is not yet. This brings regret, uncertainty and many questions, but, as we have seen in Geneva, also hope and a strong wish to move forward and find new ways to be church and share the Gospel.

**Background**

The Church of Scotland Congregation in Geneva’s history hails back to the Reformation when John Knox, who studied with John Calvin, would lead worship for the English-speaking refugees in Geneva. However, since most of those refugees returned in due course to Scotland and England we have to wait for the 20th century and the development of Geneva as the home of numerous international organisations, for a Scottish congregation to worship together on a regular basis once more. In fact, year-round CofS ministry has only been provided since 1956.

Since 1959 the congregation has met in the *Auditoire de Jean Calvin* at Place de la Taconnerie 1, in the city’s charming old town.

The *Auditoire* belongs to the Eglise Protestante de Genève (EPG), and though in the past it was also used by the Dutch, the German speaking Swiss, and the Waldensian Congregations, today only the CofSCG has regular services in the Sanctuary.

The *Auditoire* is used on Wednesdays and Saturdays by the EPG’s Youth programme, and is let out for concerts and other events (in a recent push by the *Auditoire’*s Committee to make the listed building pay for itself). This means that the use by the CofSG outside Sunday worship, i.e. for funerals and weddings, needs to be negotiated. Still, the general feeling is that it is a small price to pay for an arrangement which is otherwise very satisfactory. The CofSG being the main user of the premises their contribution is required when work is done to the building.

The CofSG also has more or less sole use of the “*Salle des Pasteurs*”: an upstairs meeting room which can be accessed by lift or by climbing several flights of stairs which lead to the top floor via several private apartments. The location of the room means that care has to be taken in keeping the noise levels down especially at night. Nevertheless, this room is well used: on Sundays by the Sunday school and for refreshments after the service, on other occasions for meetings and social events.

The CoSG serves a widely international and inter-denominational English-speaking community many of whom originally came to Geneva to work for international organisations and companies and then just remained after retirement. The church continues to welcome a small number of newcomers including students for whom the church is “something familiar in an unknown environment”. The congregation also includes a few Swiss people who enjoy the worship and fellowship offered. Despite being so international there is a sense in which belonging to the Church of Scotland is important (even if not always fully understood). As the church is located in the old town it also attracts visitors during the summer months.

It is hoped that a soon to be done update of the congregational roll will give a more accurate account of the number of members and adherents but it is thought that at the moment around 200 households are connected with the congregation as members or adherents.

Rev Laurence Twaddle has been the minister of the CofSG since 2017.

As LCR team we were made most welcome and office bearers and members of the congregation alike showed a love for their church and minister which was heart-warming. The words: “home” and “family” were frequently used to describe the CofSG community. Though many of those we spoke to only had found CofSG by “accident”, they discovered they had found people who welcomed them not just in words but in action, as well as a place that offered nurturing and inspiring worship.

This feeling of being nurtured was highlighted during the Covid pandemic when online services via zoom turned out to be not just a new and “more intimate” way to worship together but also a great opportunity to stay in touch with each other. Around 100 people would join every Sunday for worship from all over the world, including family members of the congregation and former members who had moved to other parts of the world. The essential role of the minister in keeping heart and soul of the congregation together was often mentioned and very much appreciated. And the help given to those who had no internet knowledge, including the opportunity to log in at the manse or at the home of other church members, meant that no one felt isolated.

**Worship and teaching**

Covid regulations having now eased, the 11 ‘o clock Sunday service takes once again place in the *Auditoire* where an average of 50 people gather to worship. As the service is live-streamed they are joined by a considerable number of people who prefer to join on line due to age, health or distance. This dual form of worship is still a work in progress but it seems to work well in general thanks to a team of committed “technicians”. Whether it will remain the way worship is led on a Sunday may need to be discussed in the future

Congregational singing (using CH4) is accompanied by a team of musicians on the organ or the piano. The new organ itself was created by the well-known master organ maker Bernard Aubertin, and inaugurated in 2014.

The choir is now also back in post and contributes to the beautiful music in this more traditional service. The musical contribution to worship is important and experienced as a form of ministry helping to lead the congregation “out of the ordinary into the realm of the divine” (quoted from the CofSG’s website)

Since Covid, some members of the team of Bible readers have not returned to worship in the sanctuary, hopefully new volunteers will soon be found to continue in their footsteps and thus contribute actively to Sunday worship.

As for the worshipers, the numbers are growing since the re-opening of the church. However, “it is hard to get things back to before” and many have noticed that a system (like that of getting the sanctuary ready for worship on a Sunday for example) that worked like clockwork before Covid, has fallen apart as some people have not (yet?) returned. This means more things to do for those who have returned including for the minister.

Yet wonderful things have come out of the covid era with regard to worship.

Indeed, for those who like a more experimental form of worship, there is now a Wednesday lunch time (12.30) service on zoom. This new form of worship came out of a Holy Week daily zoom service during covid. These services were so much appreciated that members of the congregation asked Laurence whether it was possible to continue with an “alternative form of worship” during the week. About 25 people (including people from abroad) take part regularly in this service which includes a sermon and “all kind of wild and wonderful” music made possible through the wonders of the internet.

This online service is a good way for the minister to stay in touch with a very scattered congregation, as when he sends the link for the next service to the members, he always includes a little “piece” with church information which is very much appreciated by all.

During Covid an online prayer group was also set up and it continues today. Many people find that though coming to Geneva city centre in the evening for a prayer meeting would be too much to ask, meeting together online is not only feasible but actually a wonderful way to join together in prayer. The same thing is true for the Advent and Lent Bible studies.

With a minister who is passionate about preaching it is not surprising that the sermons play an essential role in the services both in the sanctuary and online. For those who have missed the service Laurence’s sermons can be downloaded from the website.

The fellowship part of worship is important for most of the congregation. Though as we found out, staying for coffee/tea after the service is a tradition not shared by all cultures. The after-service refreshments are served in the *salle des pasteurs*. As for those who have joined the service on zoom; there is the possibility to stay a bit longer on line to catch up with friends.

The Wednesday services include 15 minutes extra so that people can have a chat after the service.

A highlight for the congregation was the Post Covid day-retreat at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey last March. Three topics were to be presented by three different speakers: 1. What do the churches do in Russia and Ukraine? 2. War in the Bible and 3. Diaconal services. These seemingly unrelated topics turned out to be prophetically relevant and linked.

**Pastoral Care**

Caring pastorally for a very scattered congregation is a challenge but one that is taken very seriously by the Pastoral Care team. “Caring for one another” is the name of this initiative originally set up by Rev. Jim Sharp. During lockdown the team focused on getting in touch with the elderly and isolated people in the congregation. Around Christmas and Easter “goody bags” were delivered containing items like; a prayer, a candle and some shortbread.

Once the Covid restrictions were lifted volunteers were once more able to organise a Christmas lunch for those who were on their own at Christmas in 2021. For a variety of reasons this tradition will be discontinued in 2022.

However, “Caring for one another” has other plans for the future, among them an “out of Covid tea” for isolated people, and creating a system to link up people with pastoral visitors. Considering the distances involved and the private nature of the people in Switzerland it is easy for someone to fall through the net and this is an issue the team wants to solve as far as possible.

The last Sunday of the month lunches for the lonely people and tourists have started again recently.

Finally, we would like to mention here that confidentiality is a big issue with people and that therefore among other things an online form has been made available for people to contact the minister directly.

**Youth**

At present the focus is on children of Sunday school age. The Sunday school leaders have been using the Montessori “Godly play”. Material, including visual aids, is available and very helpful especially for those who have no or little experience in (Sunday) school teaching. The number of stories available being restricted it may be time to add some more stories to the repertoire.

There is no youth group at the moment as most young people leave Geneva to study abroad.

Not having a youth group does not seem to be a big problem as it is felt that the minister’s services are very accessible for all ages.

**Mission**

**S**ocial events (like the Christmas fair and the yearly ceilidh) are a way of reaching out to the local community. Not only do these events attract the locals but part of money made goes to local charities such as “Mains tendues”.

Though these events are extremely successful the more regular form of mission is found in the CofSG recommendable commitment to two projects, one in Nepal and the other in Malawi

* For many years now the CofSG has been involved in a youth project in Ekwendeni. The HIV youth resource centre, for which the CofSG is the sole financer, is part of the Ekwendeni Mission Hospital and has been financed by the CofSG since 2005. It offers HIV/AIDS testing, counselling, sport, drama, music, and importantly a safe place to meet. During a recent visit to the project, an extra donation of 5000 CHF was brought to the centre.
* The Lalgadh Hospital in South eastern Nepal is a leprosy hospital which the CofSG supports generously (Its medical director is a former elder). Over the years the congregation has helped create a Children’s centre which allows for parents to stay with their children during their treatment.

As with the HIV AIDS project in Ekwendeni whenever there is a special need the congregation will step up their regular giving in order to meet the extra expenses.

**Eco congregation/ Fairtrade**

The CofSG has been an eco-congregation for the past 10 years. Which is why there is a feeling that it is time to revisit the church’s involvement and reassess where there is room for improvement. The CofSG also uses fairtrade goods where and when possible.

**Office bearers**

The CofSG has both a Kirk Session (12 elders and 3 ministers) and a Congregational Committee (CC) which is responsible for finance, fabric, mission and fundraising, the annual Church fair, church website, flowers and facilities for people with reduced mobility. The CC includes the elders and 4 extra members.

Unusually the Kirk Session has three Session clerks, with each their own responsibilities: Presbytery; minuting +local issues; and Communion + pastoral care. Sharing the traditional session clerk’s load three ways seems to work in this situation and certainly makes the, often heavy, work load of the session clerk more manageable.

It was suggested by the LCR team that considering the number of years some of the office bearers have been in post it might be an idea to introduce a 5-year active eldership which would potentially bring new people on the session. It was thought that this solution would not be an option in Geneva as more and more companies offer only short-term contracts while others replace foreign staff with locals. There would therefore not be any pool of new people from which to get new elders.

We met with a group of committed women and men who are looking to the future with hope and who are willing to look at new ways of being Church. In recent months they have had joint kirk session meetings with the Scots Kirk in Lausanne to pave the way towards the linking of the two charges. Still, despite the willingness to go forward there are many uncertainties about the implementation of the Presbytery plan and a fear of the unknown was expressed, and questions such as “how will it work?” “What will happen when the minister in Lausanne will retire?” “When and what to tell the congregation?” were asked.

We felt that this group of wonderful people is very passionate about what they do, as they thought of ways to continue to be church and minister to each other during Covid, they now look at new ways to be church and there is a strong wish to make the linkage work. However, the uncertainty about what it would mean in practice is weighing on them.

**Safeguarding**

A new co-ordinator has been appointed to the safeguarding post but training is still needed. The Kirk session is planning to appoint new people to work with the coordinator on the Protection Safeguarding Panel.

**Fabric**

The CofSG does not own its own manse but rents a two-bedroom apartment with study and good sized living/dining area. The manse is within walking distance of the airport which turned out to be ideal considering all the Presbytery responsibilities Laurence has. There is a good bus connection to the city centre too. The apartment is owned by CERN and Moser VERNER is responsible for its general upkeep. In general, this is done to a satisfactory standard. Nevertheless, we feel that the shower room could do with some upgrading. The CofSG is responsible for furnishing the flat and will presumably replace tired furniture as and when needed.

Not owning any of the buildings is seen by the CofSG as a bonus and in case both of the *Auditoire* and the manse, it has served the congregation well. However, there is a fear that with regard to the future linkage with Lausanne it may become a weakness.

As mentioned, the *Auditoire* is owned by the EPG and there is a separate organisation responsible for overseeing the upkeep of the building and its financial independence. The CofSG is represented on the *Auditoire* Committee as it is one of the users of the sanctuary and the more or less sole user of the *salle des pasteurs.*

For the upper room the congregation is sole responsible for the energy bill, and for the use of the Auditoire a percentage is billed to the congregation. A rise in energy costs is expected in 2023.

There is an issue with the lift which provides access to the upper room as it now needs to be replaced /renovated at considerable cost. The lift is small (only two people) and not always reliable, yet for older or less able people it is the only way to the *salle des pasteurs*. As this is the place for all none worship activities this is a problem which needs solving sooner rather than later. We were told that accessibility has been a topic of discussion for the committee for the last ten years and many would be frustrated by this but the general feeling is “this is Switzerland and you just have to go with the flow”.

We asked whether it would be an option in the mean time to serve refreshments in the *Auditoire*. And the general feeling was that a few years ago the answer from the *Auditoire* Committee would have been a definite “no, no” however they may be more open to the suggestion now which means it may be a possibility in the future.

**Finances:**

The CofSG is a very generous congregation and it seems that in times of true need its members are always willing to step up their giving.

Nevertheless, the congregation has sadly been hit by the Covid effect.

According to the most recent treasurer’s report, the level of giving since 2019 averages approximately CHF 124.000.-[[1]](#endnote-1) per year. This includes the yearly highly successful Church Fair (in 2022 more than CHF 15.000.- was made at this event).

Despite the generosity of the congregation this means there is a yearly deficit of around CHF 19.000.- (CHF 15.000.- more than before than before 2019). It is believed that this will be the “new normal”

Which means that “Assuming expenditure levels do not rise too much, if the new normal persists, the Church will remain legally solvent for approximately another decade”.

**Presbytery**

Being an international and interdenominational congregation with only a small percentage of members having Scottish roots, the link with the Church of Scotland is not always clear even if it is very much appreciated. The question was raised whether it would be possible for members to occasionally join Presbytery (at their own expenses), so that a closer link could be made.

**Conclusion**

It is undeniable that Covid has had an effect on the CofSG. Negatively of course as some people who were actively involved in the life of the church have for a variety of reasons not returned, but also, and more so, positively as it has shown that the people of the CofSG are indeed a true family made up of people who look after each other and who step in financially whenever necessary. Also, the online services born out of need have turned out to be a wonderful way to stay in contact with each other and to meet when distance issues would otherwise have prohibited such a get together.

Of course, there is a longing for the time “before covid” but in general this congregation led by its very committed office bearers, wants to look forward, assess where the present needs are, and make the changes necessary to respond to those needs. The session expressed a true openness to working with the congregation in Lausanne toward the future linkage despite being unsure about how this will work. The LCR team feel therefore it would be very helpful if Presbytery could give a clearer idea of what the link will mean for the two congregations.

JEB

December 2022

1. Exchange rate: 1CHF is around 1 Euro [↑](#endnote-ref-1)