

### ***Future Focus 3: The journey continues***

*Report to the Kirk Session, Páraic Réamonn, April 22 2024*

“The longest journey begins with a single step.” Or, in our case, three steps.

Last autumn, our treasurer, Ewart MacKenzie, sounded a threefold alarm – at the congregational committee, the kirk session, and then an extraordinary and well-attended congregational meeting on Zoom. He also proposed a congregational recovery plan and asked for volunteers, because the crisis we faced wasn’t primarily financial (money was just the canary in the mine) but rather a crisis of membership and commitment.<sup>1</sup>

At the congregational meeting, Ian Colliar proposed that we invite Rob Rawson from Scotland to lead the congregation through the Church of Scotland’s *Future Focus* process. And lo! it came to pass that Rob did that, at two well-attended meetings in January and February. (At *Future Focus 1*, 43 participants, not counting Rob and Laurence; at *Future Focus 2*, 36.)

Yesterday, April 21, we held a third *Future Focus* session, this time without Rob, in which participants tried to turn the energy and enthusiasm of the first two meetings into an action plan, beginning this autumn.

A congregation can never sit still or rest on its laurels. If inertia sets in, it’s only a short journey to rigor mortis. More than two months after the February meeting, we couldn’t be sure that we hadn’t relapsed into stasis.

But two emails (from Christine Buhler and Laurence) later, aided by some last-minute coaxing and cajoling, and we ended up with 33 participants, including Laurence, in a Salle that once again was alive with energy and enthusiasm.

A short slide presentation reviewed where we had got to in the previous meetings and then zoomed in on what the informal planning group,<sup>2</sup> on the basis of those two meetings, identified as our key weakness as a congregation:

*We are not a natural community.*

Unlike, say, a congregation in a small Scottish town, we don’t bump into each other in the High Street. We are an emphatically *gathered* and widely scattered congregation, bringing people together from the city and canton of Geneva, the canton of Vaud, and the départements of Ain and Haute-Savoie in France voisine.

This means that if we are to become, more than we are, a “missional” community – more actively involved in all kinds of mission, outreach, and service – we need to become more of a community tout court.

Before we can be the church in (but not of) the world, we need first to be the church!

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<sup>1</sup> Ewart also proposed a congregational recovery plan, on which he reports in the forthcoming annual congregational report for 2023) and called for volunteers. *Future Focus* was a natural follow-on from that.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Buhler, Jane Broere, Christine Colliar, Han Broere, Ian Colliar, and me. No one appointed us to talk to Rob or plan the meetings. We just happened, by a kind of spontaneous combustion. But then the whole process, starting from Ewart’s initial alarm, has something of a whiff of Pentecost.

Plenary discussion followed. Peter Tulloch made the important point that, in dividing up the congregation geographically, whether we live in France or Switzerland, Geneva, Vaud, Ain or Haute-Savoie was less important than whether we live on the “left bank” or the “right bank” of Lac Léman. Maria Olivei said that, although she and her husband Moises had been back in the congregation for a year, she didn’t feel that she really knew the congregation or that others in the congregation knew her.

We then spent about an hour in three groups, looking at programmes and activities that could deepen our community, help us to know each other better, and provide a firm foundation for the congregation as we go forward.

There follow the reports from the three groups: Events, “transversal” groups,<sup>3</sup> and neighbourhood groups.

## **Events**

### *Participants*

Han Broere  
 Georgina Cofie  
 Lily Geissbühler  
 Ewart MacKenzie  
 Maria Olivei  
 Moises Olivei  
 Jenny Rietbergen  
 Laurence Twaddle  
 Rosaleen Walker

### *Proposals*

A number of possible events were proposed. These might serve the building of internal community, outreach to others, particular focus on younger people, or a mixture of more than one. In no particular order, these were:

1. Lake boat trips
2. Reformation Tours in Geneva (these already exist)
3. Summer treasure hunts including supper (car/walk)
4. Ski trip
5. Quiz nights
6. Talent shows
7. Theme days/nights
8. Food or drink-inspired events (e.g. wine-tasting or cooking)
9. Film nights
10. Day trips/outings
11. Cultural outings
12. Joint events with other congregations (Scots Kirk, Lausanne, other denominations)
13. Church gear (production of congregation-inspired caps, clothing)<sup>4</sup>
14. One-off strange or unusual events
15. Monthly Sunday events
16. Introductions during worship

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<sup>3</sup> Promptly renamed “transvestite” groups by one wag in the meeting.

<sup>4</sup> “Make COSG great again”

## 17. Away days and retreats

### *Logistics*

1. Coordination, probably by a dedicated team or sub-unit of the congregational committee.
2. Timing - the congregational calendar could help with this.
3. Accessibility - as far as possible, there should be no physical, financial or other obstacles to anyone participating in any events
4. Publicity - events would have to be communicated effectively both inside and outside the congregation.

### **Transversal groups**

#### *Participants*

Jane Broere  
 Ian Colliar  
 Alex Craeye  
 Freda Craeye  
 Laurent Djamen  
 Antoinette Djamen  
 Gillian Friedli  
 Mark Jeffrey  
 Rebecca Dirks McDonald  
 Mwai Makoka  
 Cornis van der Lugt  
 Ellen Walker

#### *Preliminary points*

We first tried to define what we understood by transversal as opposed to neighbourhood groups.

- We agreed that a transversal group would have a particular theme or objective without any limits as to the geographical location of any member.
- However, this would not exclude the possibility that a neighbourhood group could, if they found it useful or desirable, practice an activity or focus on a theme which is also proposed by a transversal group.
- In this way people could be free to participate in a local group or in a wider group, or even in both if they wished.
- The important point was to encourage and propose as many connections and sharing opportunities as possible.

Then we asked everyone to propose what kind of groups they thought might be desirable for the congregation to create and if anyone among the participants would be interested to launch, lead, coordinate or participate in. We drew up a preliminary list and after some more reflection, streamlined it to come up with the following activities / themes on which groups created by the congregation could focus :

#### *Existing groups*

Two groups already exist in a more or less formally organized way :

- Crafts – coordinated by Christine Buhler (focuses mainly on the annual St Andrews church fair)
- Choir and Musicians – coordinated by Páraic Réamonn – group newly revived

*Possible future groups*

- Reading book-club – Gillian proposed to coordinate
- Parents group – Cornis proposed to coordinate
- Eco-congregation – Cornis proposed to coordinate
- Discussions / Ethical issues – Christine & Ian proposed to coordinate
- Theology – Mark proposed to coordinate
- Bible study / Spiritual growth / Prayer
- Accessibility group – Ellen proposed to coordinate
- Men's group – Laurent proposed to coordinate
- Walking
- Games (parlour / board)
- Women's group
- Visitors / hospitality

**Functioning and essential requirements**

- Each group would need at least one officially designated contact person / coordinator with its public contact information and “mission statement” on the church website. The coordinator could invite one or more people to assist or replace them when needed.
- Group activity format could be in person, online or hybrid, whichever the members find practical or appropriate.
- The members of a group should be autonomous to organise their activity as they wish, provided all are welcome and the purpose of the group is clearly defined.
- All communication, whether formal, informal, internal or external should respect basic rules of confidentiality
- Use of WhatsApp or other applications should be properly coordinated.
- Publicity for or news about a group should be properly coordinated in consultation with the congregation's Communications Team

**Neighbourhood groups**

Arthur Askew

Sherree Atkinson-Bret

Christine Buhler

Christine Colliar

Mary Couper

Mak Ikeda

Fiona Parrott

Páraic Réamonn

Eleanor Strittmatter

Jürg Strittmatter

Peter Tulloch

- When we meet for worship on Sunday, we do not necessarily know each other
- Neighbourhood groups can be a way of getting to know people and quickly welcoming newcomers to our congregation
- These groups would hopefully strengthen our church community
- Would probably need about six geographical groups, more linked to right and left sides of Geneva than cantons or neighbouring France categories

- The groups would have elastic boundaries. Members would not be obliged to attend the group nearest to them but might choose to attend another group which was better suited for a variety of reasons.
- Locations for meeting would not be fixed but most likely would be hosted by group members, considering accessibility. No pressure on individuals to take turns hosting
- Content and structure would be determined by each group and hopefully evolve into other domains like Bible study, prayer, social events
- Overlap with other, themed, groups is not a bad thing
- Initially one person would need to be approached and asked to set up a group in the designated area
- Once set up and running there would not be one convenor/organiser/chair person – no hierarchy
- Communication within groups could be done with WhatsApp

A small group - Arthur Askew, Christine Buhler, Christine Colliar, Mary Couper, Mak Ikeda and Páraic Réamonn – volunteered to work on determining the areas, identifying the first time convenor, presenting to the Kirk Session and CC, publicising and making it actually happen in the autumn!!

### **Resources**

Many resources for groups are available from the Church of Scotland and other organizations. Two mentioned by Rob Rawson in previous meetings were:

- *Conversations in Disciples* (attached)
- ACORN as a way of reaching out to others beyond the congregation (and within)<sup>5</sup>

### **Follow-up**

- Report to kirk session and congregational committee
- A report for the annual congregational meeting in June
- Publicity for upcoming groups and events in a pre-summer congregational newsletter
- Come the autumn, a Big Bang!

*With many thanks to all those who took part in the three Future Focus meetings, without whom none of the above would have been possible.*

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<sup>5</sup> See “Acorn, the simplest way of following God in mission”,  
<https://ascend.churchofscotland.org.uk/2022/03/acorn-the-simplest-way-of-following-god-in-mission/>