

# **Why The Elders Believe The Free Church Of Scotland Would Be A Good Denomination For Newton Mearns New Church To Join**

## **The Period Of Reflection**

Though concern about the trajectory of the Church of Scotland has been a topic of prayer and conversation for many years, the elders of Maxwell Mearns Castle Church (MMCC) engaged in a time of focussed personal and gathered prayer on our congregational future. We specifically gave ourselves to this from February 2023.

During this period we met in conference for discussion/debate/prayer. We invited key personnel from several denominations/affiliations to speak to us (in person or by zoom).

We investigated the prospect of becoming a totally independent congregation (or an independent congregation within the affiliation of The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIECs) and the Didasko Fellowship of Churches).

We were attracted to many aspects of the independent model of church and acknowledged our respect for many independent congregations in fellowship with us. However, our history, the positive benefits of a denominational relationship (outlined below) and the potential vulnerability from being independent led us to conclude that being part of a denomination was the preferred way forward.

We explored three Presbyterian denominations with similar theology and practice to us: The Free Church of Scotland, The United Free Church of Scotland and The International Presbyterian Church.

Several other Scottish Presbyterian denominations were evidently not compatible with us and so we did not explore further; e.g. The Free Presbyterian Church, The Reformed Presbyterian church, The Free Church Continuing etc.)

Here is a summary of our thinking and praying:

## **The History And Beliefs Of MMCC**

- MMCC had always part of a Presbyterian denomination – The Church of Scotland. Our Presbyterian heritage and denominational participation was not the issue which took the elders to burdened prayer.
- The elders did not seek to change the theology, morality or practice of our congregational life. Rather, the concern of the elders was to safeguard the future of the congregation (as a congregation) and maintain our beliefs.
- The elders recognised a biblical need to be held accountable by the broader church and that the “governance” which a denomination brings was something to be valued.
- The congregational life of MMCC had benefitted at various seasons from being part of a denomination – not least in times of crisis through her 50 years.
- Sharing an agreed theology/morality in a “confessional church” (e.g. Westminster Confession of Faith) brings a unity and sense of shared purpose while also providing a benchmark for protection against doctrinal and moral misdirection.

## **The Denomination Today**

- a. The Free Church is the second largest Presbyterian denomination in Scotland (second to the Church of Scotland).  
There are currently 110 FC congregations nationally. (The next largest Presbyterian denomination has only half this number.)
- b. We caught a sense of the vision the Free Church presently has not only for the denomination but for the nation of Scotland. Their prayerful and practical aim to revitalise flagging Free Church congregations and plant new ones we considered a healthy inward and outward focus (“A Healthy Gospel Church for every community in Scotland”.) We were encouraged by their enthusiasm for church planting.
- c. We became aware that the Free Church changed its legislation on worship in 2010/11 to allow praise items in addition to Psalms.
- d. In researching specific congregations we found several had a very similar character to our own and indicated a new breadth to the Free Church which could accommodate Newton Mearns New Church.

## **Training and Ministers**

- e. We were attracted to the fact that the Free Church has an effective seminary in Edinburgh. This seminary not only trains ministers and gospel workers for the Free Church, but for all denominations and types of ministry. The seminary offers courses accredited to the level of Masters Degree ([Edinburgh Theological Seminary - ETS](#)).
- f. When looking to the future and beyond our current minister, we saw value in Free Church oversight in vacancy and also being part of this denomination for seeking a new minister.

## **Those Who Have Gone Before Us**

- g. We became aware of a number of ministers (and congregations) who had relocated into the Free Church from the Church of Scotland. Our elders met with some of these ministers to discuss their experience. The feedback was positive.

## **Financial Obligations**

- h. While we understand that financial levies would be placed on us by the denomination, their smaller administrative structure would consume less of these contributions. Moreover, we were heartened by the fact that some of the levy is for specifically for mission.

## **Necessary Changes To NMNC**

- i. We believed that the few changes which would have to be adopted by our congregation in structure / format of worship would be incorporated in ways that maintained the best of NMNC and even assist us (especially in the need to sing Psalms more regularly).

## **Concluding Remarks**

The above is not in any way an exhaustive list of considerations but some of that which led us to become enthusiastic (dare I say “excited”) at the prospect of Newton Mearns New Church becoming part of the Free Church denomination.

We know do not believe the Free Church is in any way perfect. We are aware of some of their very public past and have become aware of some of the internal tensions at this time. In addition, we suspect that we will not always understand some of their ways because they have arisen from their own particular history. We recognise that at times we might wish for greater flexibility in decision making or procedure which being independent church would allow. However,

we believe that on balance, it will be significantly better for Newton Mearns New Church to become part of the Free Church than remain independent or to seek a home in another Presbyterian denomination at this time.