**FORWARD TOGETHER / AIR ADHART COMHLA**

**SURVEY: a baseline for building and a snapshot in time**

**December 2015**

**Summary and Conclusions**

**Background**

This survey was the first step in a consultation process involving the four churches of Broadford, Elgol, Kilmore and Kyleakin in the parish of Strath and Sleat.  It was set up to ensure that each church had a voice in the parish-wide exercise of looking ahead.  It was designed to enable parishioners to contribute their experiences, positions, views and expectations in order to build a baseline which included the following:

* A fresh and up-to-date information base;
* A slice-in-time overview;
* A base from which to explore directions of potential progress and development;
* A bellwether function to identify critical areas;
* A set of signposts to guide further consultative opportunities.

In many ways, this was a particularly opportune time for reflecting on what lies ahead.  It ran parallel to the Church of Scotland’s nationwide Future Focus initiative, and at local level, its timing followed a period of uncertainty as the parish waited for the appointment of its next minister.  Parishioners were already reflecting on the changes that had taken place and beginning to consider potential directions and developments likely to engage them as they looked ahead.  As the shape of the consultation process began to emerge under the local banner Forward Together / Air Adhart Comhla, a survey was selected as an appropriate means of both enabling maximum coverage of parish members and adherents and working towards ensuring that the process was one of openness, inclusivity and cooperation.

The parishioners responded well to the survey, with 60 per cent returning a questionnaire.  The congregations of each of the four churches took up the opportunity to make their views known.  The distribution of respondents across age groups and gender was generally representative of the members and adherents of the church. As such, the survey provided a sound platform from which the range of information and understanding already available about the parish could be enhanced.  This included being able to make well-founded assessments on key areas, including:

* A measure of the mood of the parish and its appetite for engaging in discussion about the future direction of the church;
* Levels of commitment to the parish and to the aims of the church;
* The balance between concordance and diversity within and across the congregations;
* The needs and hopes of the congregations;
* Some signposts to help prepare for the way ahead.

The response also helped to direct more attention to the bedrock of the parish – the church as its people.  Basic demographic measures, with assessments of levels of support, voluntary contributions and expectations, helped to identify issues and implications for the vitality of parish life and for planning on how best to move forward together.

**Commitment to church**

Most respondents described themselves as being highly committed to church-going on a regular basis.  A majority went weekly and most of the others attended once a fortnight.  Very little was seen to prevent attendance, other than bad winter weather.  This is a positive measure at any stage of ongoing planning.  This highlights a strong sense of connectedness to the church and a depth of attachment to the community to be found there.  This level of commitment is a resource which the church not only holds but on which it can depend. It needs to be nurtured.

Looking at the parishioners’ experience of being in church, the majority of respondents felt that church amenities were fit for purpose.  Sound and visual systems attracted only a few negative comments.  Summer and winter temperatures in church were commented on by rather more, though still not by many.  Sometimes this was in relation to the comfort of others and particularly those who were older and more frail.  Access to the church was not in itself an issue, though a small number of comments flagged up the need to be thoughtful about how to ensure equal access to all areas and activities on offer when inside the church.  Such points can be addressed through very practical solutions where there is the will and the funding.

**Active engagement and voluntary support**

As in most parishes, commitment as defined by attendance could be seen to operate mainly at an emotional and passive level, but for some within the congregations were more active.

A small but committed group provided support across a range of church-linked activities.  Nearly a third of the responding parishioners supported praise and study events and other opportunities for enjoying church fellowship.  Their additional comments also suggested that if more opportunities were made available they would be well attended.

While many respondents said that they provided some financial support, the bulk of the voluntary input necessary for running activities and undertaking outreach in the communities was mainly carried out by a small core of predominantly active retirees who put in the time and effort to spread the gospel and take the word of God into their localities.  Most of the parishioners said that they did not have the leeway to contribute more actively towards supporting the church, leaving again a small group who identified themselves as potentially able to devote more time to such activities.  Their commitment is a strength, but at the same time, there is a concern that their loyalty could become overwhelmed, particularly where expectations grow as parishioners discuss new or additional possibilities, including a shift towards more inclusive community engagement.

The comments made by the parishioners acknowledged the concerns which may be said to be typical where small numbers of volunteers carry many responsibilities and undertake many duties.  At the same time, they knew that there was a wide range of skills and areas of expertise available across the congregations which could be put to use on behalf of the church.  However, they also understood that a great deal of potential expertise remained untapped, even unacknowledged.  They were clear also that as volunteers they had a preference for engaging in activities with a leading focus on fellowship and friendship.  Conversely, they seemed less sure-footed when their support was needed around the more spiritual areas of church life.  As they themselves put it, what they lacked more than anything was confidence.

What has emerged from the survey is an apparent current mismatch between fields of expertise and areas where volunteers are needed.  There are skilled and willing people, but the church is not yet fully aware of the extent of the range and scope of what could be harnessed.  This is not an insurmountable problem.  However, comments from some parishioners suggest that more needs to be done to encourage volunteers to come forward.  There is a perception of a lack of transparency about those who are invited to contribute and those who choose a role for themselves.  Thought therefore needs to be given to how the range of people, particularly those with the higher-level skills, could be deployed to best advantage.  Their roles, after all, are potentially critical and far-reaching in that they can frequently be seen to represent what the church stands for, whether what they do is predominantly evident within the church walls or out in the communities in which they live and work.  In other words, the church has need of them and they need more support. But it may be necessary to put in place a systematic programme of guidance and mentoring to prepare, develop and also ensure that the value of their input can be appreciated.

**The spiritual dimension**

It is important to highlight how much weight the parishioners put on accessing the more spiritual elements of being at church.  It was evident that they put a high tariff on their spiritual links to the church and outlined their need for spiritual experiences through worship and praise.  They sought to refresh, renew and enhance this aspect of their lives at Sunday Service and this spiritual dimension was integral to their attachment and commitment to the church.  A majority reported that they found what they were looking for at a personal level, particularly where they found greater understanding of the word of the Lord and could experience a strengthening of their faith that they could embed in their daily lives.

Indeed, when asked to rate their spiritual experiences, very few elements were rated as not working well by the parishioners in terms of meeting their own needs.  However, greater insight can be gained by looking at the relative ratings given to each spiritual dimension.  For example, the atmosphere in the sanctuary was judged to be working very well by half of the respondents.  But since other aspects of what takes place in the sanctuary were similarly rated but by a much higher proportion of respondents (particularly sermons by the minister) this could be interpreted as an alert for further attention.

Perhaps the most striking finding here is the low proportion of respondents who gave a good rating to sermons delivered by preachers.  There is no doubt that where parishioners expressed dissatisfaction it emerged, for the most part, from variations in the quality of the input of those who delivered sermons and offered prayers in the absence of the minister.  Comments highlighted that this tended to impact on the experience of spiritual outcomes which were identified as being important in the religious lives of the parishioners.  This was the single most negative issue to emerge from the survey and one with the potential to have a long-term impact if not addressed.  However, the parishioners were also very aware that no simple or knee-jerk response to this was likely to provide a long-term solution.  Even those who said that their needs were not being met by the current arrangements were also aware that a single incumbent could not logistically meet all the expectations and preferences, and that there was a need for preachers other than the minister.

Looking at the church’s performance in meeting its aims, it was clear that the aims outlined in the most recent Parish Profile were not seen by all to have been achieved.  The majority response was that more work was needed.  However, where the highest proportion of respondents acknowledged success, this related to parishioners experiencing Christ-centred leadership and attaining a spiritual satisfaction through worshipping and honouring God.  This suggests that:

* spirituality is an important part of the life of the parishioners;
* by and large the spiritual needs of the majority are being met;
* the spiritual aims of the church in action are among the aims seen to be working most successfully.

The congregational experience here could be a powerful unifying factor for the debates and discussions ahead.

**Fellowship in action**

For a majority of parishioners, fellowship was seen as a key dimension in the life of the church and greatly enjoyed and appreciated.  Almost as important to the parishioners as their need for spirituality, the friendship and social contact offered was clearly recognised as a positive element in the parish’s collective approach to living together through Christ.  Most, at a personal level, appreciated the way in which the church volunteers and office-bearers managed the process of welcoming, providing hospitality and opportunities for being together as a church community, whether at events held for praise and worship or for social opportunities, or for a combination of both.

Aware of the value of Christian fellowship within the congregations and within the communities in which the churches were located, the parishioners wanted more to be done to establish an underlying pervasive ethos to further underpin and standardise the ways and means by which fellowship was experienced as a process of sharing, giving and receiving.  They wanted to ensure that the fellowship they sought to establish could work for everyone across the board, and be as inclusive of diversity as possible.  Complacency around these issues was felt to be unacceptable.  The strength of the parishioners’ response regarding monitoring and vigilance of both ethos and action is likely to ensure that due attention is paid to this area, particularly the breadth of open welcome and the depth and spread of inclusion.

Another facet of fellowship where the majority drew attention to the need for more work focused on how parishioners might strengthen the spiritual elements within each other’s lives.  Again, this served as a further indication of how embedded the Christian message was found to be across the congregations, and further strengthened the solid foundation for future developments.

**The parish and its membership**

The parish population is an ageing one and this was reflected in the survey. While this could hardly be described as a new finding, its emergence has refocused attention on the starkness of the potentially negative impact on declining church attendance and shifts towards a less able and active membership.  In short, the age of the congregations is clearly an issue for planning in the short- and medium-term.

It should be emphasized, however, that the age of those responding could not be used to predict levels of commitment to engaging in the spiritual life of the church, patterns of attendance, or expectations and attitudes to the forms and traditions of worship and service.  In this context, age per se was not a meaningful factor.

However, as a priority, each congregation acknowledged the need to attract more people under the age of sixty.  More young people in their teens or early twenties, and families with young children who had the potential to grow up within the church community were seen to be of particular importance.  On this, the parishioners stressed the need for a re-calibration of how the church could shape and drive its outreach policies and practices.  These age-related concerns are perhaps the single most challenging set of issues to be faced by the parish.

The survey brought to light what might be described as a shadow congregation, just beyond the fringes of church-based activity.  This comprised a small number of groups, and indeed a small number of parishioners, but each with their own sense of not being fully connected to the church.  These included:

* People experiencing ill-health and disability;
* An associated cluster of carers whose sense of responsibility kept them at home;
* Parents of young children when there were no facilities for their children to attend;
* Workers whose free time for church activities was limited because of seasonal demands, shift patterns or off-island occupations;
* And some who felt disaffected, including those who chose to travel beyond their nearest church, though not necessarily because of the issues outlined above or because they all shared the same concerns.

While some parishioners observed that action was already being taken to address the concerns of some of these groups, this was also seen as an area where a small core of volunteers could be marshalled to extend further the reach of the church.  The message emerging here is that more needs to be done to ensure that what works well for the majority and is well-appreciated by many could be extended to those who do not, at present, feel fully integrated into the church community.

The survey made clear that some parishioners are already beginning to look for solutions, at least regarding access to worship, outside the traditional locations, timings and frameworks for worship.  Their suggestions focus on reaching out, enhancing the practicalities of church-within-community and embracing, if not a 24-hour culture of availability, then certainly extending availability of times and places for opportunities for worship.  The greatest challenge to be addressed here is not a shortage of ideas, but the practicalities of how they can be staffed.

**Parishioners in the community**

Beyond the church walls, the parishioners felt that their identity as Christians needed to be in evidence.  They described the importance of leaving Sunday Service with their faith strengthened, and with the objective of seeking to forge tangible links with others around them – sometimes under an overtly Christian banner, sometimes not.  They talked about how this could help them to love and show compassion, and deliver help where needed.  Though the survey suggested that at least half of the respondents felt they did not understand what was meant by Christian ministry, it could be argued that at a practical level they were delivering it.

Parishioners contributed a great deal to their communities and wanted, to a greater degree, to reach out to all kinds of people, perhaps especially to the vulnerable. They were aware that no other body could match the reach of the church in a comparable way.  However, in relation to delivering the high performance aims of Christian witness, including motivating others and acting as examples and role models, they knew that more work was needed.

**Unity and diversity**

Overall, there was a remarkable degree of unity around a number of key areas, particularly those linked to spiritual experiences and fellowship.  However, the parishioners were aware of the need to handle disagreements better, to make more allowance for diversity and to forge working concordances more effectively.  Some polarisation was also identified where the range of preferences and choices were mutually exclusive and therefore more likely to need careful management.

Most organisations have experienced the push-pull surges associated with situations where change is needed or wanted and yet where traditional approaches also retain their validity for many.  This is evident in the survey.  There is a continuum between the appeal of the traditional and the desire for new ways of doing things, between the familiarity of known and well-loved practices which, for many, give meaning to how worship and praise are undertaken and the challenge of responding to changing social mores and even the exigencies of the times.

This continuum from traditional to modern preferences is well-illustrated by parishioners’ attitudes to how music could or should be used to enhance the sense of the spiritual.  Here, there was no doubting the power of music in praise and worship and the strength of feeling around it.  Old hymns and psalms jostled for preference against modern versions; singing unaccompanied was the choice for some; accompanied, for others.  Some liked an organ, some liked a praise band, and some liked any form of music at all.  In a broad church, there could be room for all, with negotiated and agreed representation of each variation becoming the new norm.

These concerns did not reflect differences between the age groups, except perhaps the small nucleus of older people who support less integration of the delivery of children’s ministry within the body of the congregation as a whole.  This again could be seen to highlight where potential organisational solutions may work in place of, or in addition to, the more spiritual dimensions.

**Resilience and the road ahead**

The parish is becoming used to identifying where negotiation is needed in planning ahead.  As an institution, it has grown used to change.  The core business of the church has continued to be managed throughout a long interim period and could be said to be still adjusting to the new, or perhaps the rediscovered normality of more settled times.  The parishioners are accepting of change and have given serious thought to where they currently see their church and where emerging expectations are leading them.

On a parish-wide level they want more say.  The survey outlined how they thought this might work.  Perhaps not surprisingly, the preference is for gradual change, with enough time given to thoughtful planning and wide discussion.  Some respondents felt that there was insufficient widespread awareness of just how their parish was run, although the role of the Kirk Session and the elders was well known and understood.  However, without an understanding of process, what they fell back on was how it felt to them, their own experience of the process, which could, for a minority, seem negative.

Just under half of the respondents wondered if some parishioners have set their face against change, committed to the status quo, because it suits them personally.  They were aware of where dominant personalities had a greater influence on parish matters, not because they spoke for a congregation or a group, or because of the validity or value of their stances, but because they had enough confidence to make their views heard, a belief in their input and the skill to make strong statements.  These are all valuable attributes, but with the potential for skewing the balance of decision-making in their favour.

The parishioners saw the way ahead as one of moving decision-making beyond where there were felt to be entrenched positions and into more discursive forums using more open processes for ensuring representativeness.  One example of this was the expressed concern around the exclusion of women in roles of responsibility and leadership. Their absence was denounced, though not unanimously.  Also more young people were needed, not only as members and adherents but as potential role models within the secular communities and as vital links between an ageing church population and the predominantly secular and spiritual issues of our time.

The importance of a representative voice (or more likely, voices) was a recurring theme in the comments made throughout the questionnaire, but particularly in the final section where respondents were asked to look ahead.  On the basis of the parishioners’ recent experiences, approaches identified as being most helpful for looking ahead focused on a preference for direct input by individuals rather than by representatives.  The most popular opportunities provided a degree of anonymity, like surveys and suggestion boxes.  Conversational opportunities for discussion and chat, for exchanging ideas would also be appreciated.  Overall there was an eagerness for greater sharing in the challenging process of engaging, individually and collectively, in how development is to be undertaken and where it will lead, and also around the ethos and the shape of their Christian identity.

It was acknowledged that some degree of fear of change was to be found within the church community, and indeed it would be surprising if this were not so.  However, fear of change was identified by many parishioners as a potential obstacle to development.  It was described as the negative side of attachment to tradition and to embedded cultural approaches that have long influenced worship in the church.

Perhaps what this has highlighted most tellingly is the majority position among the parishioners for acknowledging and appreciating diversity and, with it, a need to ensure, at least, an acceptance of the potential of different approaches and different ways of doing things.  Some of the parishioners identified a possible pathway for this which could include:

* mapping the range and scope of skills available in the congregation;
* Exploring how to make better use of these skills and experiences;
* Involving a broader range of parishioners in the working of the parish;
* Seeking to ensure fair and democratic representation in discussions on how worship and praise is conducted; and
* working towards a broader representation of voices in church governance and leadership at each level.

The church has access to a body of committed parishioners, motivated and loyal to their parish and to their religious lives.  They are strong on fellowship and community.  They hold their Christian identity and its associated values to be important.  Each of these factors has the capacity to build a concordance in which diversity is accepted, tolerated, facilitated and even cherished.  Taken together, it indicates a church where resilience is an enabling and strengthening factor, particularly in times of change and challenge.  The unity of the people of the parish has been tested through uncertain times.  Their keen self-assessment of the state of their parish, the congregational options and preferences, and their views on the way ahead has provided a strong indication of continuing engagement and of willingness to ensure that as they go forward, they do so as a church together.