

Mission Plan – Synopsis

Following is a brief synopsis of the Mission Plan which has been adopted by the Kirk Session of Alexandra.

Alexandra is a welcoming, caring congregation, seeking to do the will of God in a challenging inner city parish of North Belfast, and while our plans reflect our current understanding of how we as a congregation are to serve our Lord, we are open to His guidance, and are willing to adapt to His will.

In describing our plans for ‘development’ of the work, we have restricted ourselves to our agreed strategy, rather than more detailed tactical plans. This, we believe, will allow our witness in the community to evolve and change over time, as Minister, Kirk Session, and congregation work together to implement our shared vision.

Parish

Alexandra serves a parish area, centred on the York Road, which is ageing; under redevelopment; close to ‘interface’ areas; of high social need; and with weakening social cohesion, alcohol and drugs problems.

The immediate parish area of Alexandra Park Avenue, Gainsborough Drive and North Queen Street has been razed for redevelopment; however, plans for the area have yet to be finalized by the Housing Executive.

The local Secondary School (Castle High) closed last year and the local Primary School (Grove Primary), has just now closed due to decline in enrolment.

Overview of Congregation

Reflecting both our parish and the wider community, Alexandra is an ageing congregation, with a small group of committed workers.

Many of our core members live outside of parish area, yet have a sense of calling and loyalty to Alexandra.

Our Kirk Session is small numerically, but each is actively committed to God and to their calling of service to Alexandra. Pastoral care is provided to 9 local districts, each under the care of an Elder, supported by Committee members. There is also a postal district, covering members in ‘outlying areas’.

The congregation of Alexandra is very much a family, and is noted for the welcoming atmosphere evident across our activities. Visitors invariably comment on how much they feel “at home” with us.

The congregation is also committed to the work of the wider Church through training and development of PCI students by way of Summer Assistantships and 8 week mid-term placements, all of whom, without exception, speak warmly of the blessing they received while working in Alexandra.

Our dedicated and much loved Deaconess, Mrs Heather McCracken, is also a fully engaged member of the congregation, in addition to her part-time pastoral roll.

Our buildings are over 100 years old, and have been faithfully maintained. In recent years our halls and Meeting House have been comprehensively renovated and refurbished. It is a credit to the faithfulness of our people that our ongoing work and witness was not hindered by the need for extensive fund raising activity, as this work was supported by sacrificial direct giving.

We have for some time, made our facilities available for community based activities arranged by the Lower North Belfast Community Council (LNBC), and this is something that we continue to develop. We have also welcomed and facilitated commemorative services for Loyal Orders, Military veterans, etc.

Mindset

Some 10 years ago, Kirk Session agreed a strategy based on Luke 2:52 “And Jesus grew in ... favour with God and Man” and on this basis our mindset in Alexandra has been to “Grow Up and Go Out”. “Grow up” in favour with God, to equip our people to “Go out” in favour with Man.

We have a full and active programme of activities through which we seek to achieve this. Furthermore, a number of our people are actively involved in community life, as Parent Governors, members of Police Liaison Committee, etc.

Review of activities

In Alexandra we provide a diverse range of activities, each with distinctive purpose, and through which we aim to deliver a range of opportunities and styles to meet individual needs. Some of our activities are long established, yet evolving in response to changing needs, while other organisations and activities have been established more recently.

We are blessed to have a very committed leadership, albeit many of our people are thinly spread and over-stretched.

Teaching

The core of Clifford Wright's ministry was to faithfully teach the scriptures, to "equip the people of God..."

Throughout the teaching ministry of our congregation, our aim is to be relevant and to cover the whole counsel of God.

Public Worship

Our objective in worship is to be attractive, yet familiar and comforting; vibrant yet reverent, providing a balance of contemporary and traditional forms.

We meet for corporate worship each Sunday morning and evening, preceded on each occasion by prayer meetings. A recent innovation has been the introduction of a less formal evening service "Alexandra at 6:30", held at 6 weekly intervals. There is a tendency for people to linger after services to mingle and chat and, when appropriate, we provide light refreshments to encourage this.

Significant effort goes into key bridge-building services, Remembrance Sunday, BB Enrolment, GG Thinking Day, Carols by Candlelight, Alexandra @ 6:30, etc., when we know that we will have visitors who rarely attend Church.

We have been greatly encouraged by the very positive feedback received from them.

Sunday School (KFC) & Crèche - Following the Children's Address and praise, children leave for Crèche and KFC (Sunday School), staffed on a rota basis. **Bible 4 Teens** is aimed at bridging the gap of teenage years, where young people have developed beyond Sunday School age, but are not yet ready to engage fully with a sermon for adults. This follows the theme of the sermon using worksheets, etc.

Our teaching ministry is enhanced by a **Midweek Bible Study & Prayer Meeting** under the leadership of our minister. The programme follows varied formats, sometimes using DVD, interactive group study, etc. Embryonic **Home Bible Study Groups** have restarted, to provide a means of mutual support and fellowship through study of God's word, and **AMF (Alexandra Missionary Fellowship)** meets on the 3rd Wednesday of each month, to encourage our prayer life for and interest in the work of Mission.

Key Areas to Develop

- To support the development of further Home Study Groups as a way of building fellowship and enabling shared growth.
- To build on relationships developed in bridge building activities as a means of encouraging others to attend services.
- For KFC to draw in children from Good News Club, Guides and BB, establishing in them a habit of coming to Church.
- Aim to retain balance of worship, to encourage young people to exercise musical talents, etc.
- Find ways to present gospel in fresh new ways while avoiding gimmicks and retaining reverence for God's word.

Prayer Meetings

Our aim is to provide a wide range of opportunities for our people to pray, realising that this underpins all aspects of our witness. We therefore offer opportunities to pray before **Morning & Evening Services**, and during the **Mid-Week meeting**.

Prior to the commencement of each winter's work, we underpin the session with a **Start of Session Prayer Tryst**, led by members of Kirk Session.

Summer Prayer Meetings offer a time of reflection and meditation in the Meeting House. On the first Wednesday in August it has been our practice to undertake a **Parish Prayer Drive** to pray God's blessing on particular streets or areas. We have also helped to develop quarterly **Community Prayer Meetings**, in collaboration with other churches and fellowships from the parish area.

Our **Elders' Prayer Chain** enables anyone in, or associated with the congregation who wants prayer, to receive it and where appropriate, our Minister and a few of the Elders will visit and pray, anointing with oil.

We have also invited our people to join in a **Prayer Covenant** for the congregation during the current vacancy.

Key Areas to Develop

- As Elders, we have committed to meet together regularly to pray for the vacancy.
- We will continue to seek ways to help our people to come together to pray that Christ's kingdom would come.

Children

We are aware that the number of young children in the parish area has greatly diminished. Nevertheless, in seeking to address their physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs we offer a range of opportunities for children to come to a safe yet exciting environment, while at the same time building bridges with their families.

- **A Good News Club**, using the Child Evangelism Fellowship programme, is led by a key worker in the congregation,
- **Boys' Brigade (Anchor Boys, Junior Section & Company)**, while a 'traditional' organisation, continues to draw boys who enjoy the fun and activities. 'Bible Class' is often the only time our boys hear scriptural truths, and once again provides a bridge-building opportunity into their homes.
- **Table Tennis Club** allows boys and girls to mix together socially and informally, and coaching from members of the NI Commonwealth Games team is a real attraction! Cross-community coaching activities are arranged in collaboration with local schools, etc. We see this as a helpful community service, as well as providing a first step into a church environment.
- **Girl Guides (Rainbows, Brownies and Company)** is another 'traditional' organisation, and, we are blessed by faithful Christian leaders who have a vision for using the units as a vehicle of attracting girls who then come within the sound of the gospel. "Thinking Day" is a key outreach service.
- **Summer Schemes**, grant-aided by Belfast City Council, are undertaken each year. Our halls are used as a base for bible stories, choruses, crafts, games, etc., while a range of trips, visits and activities are also delivered.

Key Areas to Develop

- To build on relationships developed in our children's activities to draw families into our circle of adherents; so that they may become attendants; and then, by the grace of God, believers.

Young People (Secondary School Age)

There is a well documented "fall off" as teenagers go through adolescence, when they often rebel against what they perceive to represent "authority" and so we give thanks for the talents and dedicated service of our leaders who seek to build relationships that can weather these setbacks.

Boys' Brigade Enrolment, **Girl Guide** Thinking Day and Remembrance Services attract the largest attendance in the year, and a lot of work goes into making these as attractive as possible to family and friends, many of whom rarely attend church. We have had some very positive and encouraging feedback from these services.

The Youth Fellowship has adapted over the years to remain fresh and attractive and consistently receives strong support from within the congregation, both financially and practically.

Key Areas to Develop

- To seek all potential ways to support young people through adolescence and into faith in Christ.
- To build on relationships developed in our young peoples' activities, so as to draw families into fellowship.

Families

The life and work of a congregation can often be disparate, providing activities for individual groups, and in so doing risk fragmenting the time that families can spend together. Moreover, raising a family can be challenging, yet as families develop through stages, others may have faced similar challenges, hence we aim to support each other.

TOTTs (Too old for Teens and Twenties) first started over 10 years ago as a means of bringing families together socially with family evenings and adult nights, together with "days out" at Easter and over the summer, to provide a strong social network of support and encouragement.

Key Areas to Develop

- To seek ways in which family bonds may be strengthened.
- To try to spread the reach of TOTTs further into the adherent membership of Alexandra.

Bridge Building

As society has changed, many people no longer 'normally go to church'; therefore our role is to equip our people to reach out with the Gospel. However, we also recognise that for many, 'Church' is a foreign place in which they feel uncomfortable as they are unfamiliar with our customs and practices. This perception is growing as even the traditional attendance at church for birth, marriage and death is now largely replaced by civil equivalents.

We therefore believe that a significant aspect of our collective witness is to build bridges out into the community, enabling people to feel comfortable entering first our halls, getting to know some of our people, then be encouraged further into our activities so that they might attend worship and hear the preaching of the word of God that they might believe (1st Cor 1). Our organisations deliver an important aspect of this priority and provide a first step into and "shop window" for Alexandra.

Girls Allowed enables women from 18 to 80+ to meet together and to develop a bond of sisterhood. For some of our older members, these events provide rare opportunities to 'get out' and enjoy fellowship.

Time 4 You enables ladies from the community to meet to learn crafts as well as other life skills.

Parish Visitation: Prior to a signature series, invitation cards are circulated in the parish area. These extend an open invitation to come and join us, giving an assurance that we in Alexandra are available to provide help and support when needed.

Wayside Pulpit: Banners are strategically placed in our **Wayside Pulpit** to be visible to passing traffic and to folk who pass the church buildings on their way to the shops on the front of the road. These are refreshed regularly so that they remain pertinent, and have been reported in local press.

Love in a Box: With an increasing immigrant population in the area, we are aware of increasing social needs. We had become uncomfortable with approaches being made for money and so developed **Love in a Box**, where a box of basic groceries or clothes, together with a brief note of encouragement and invitation would be delivered to the home that has sought help.

Our **Nite Lite** outreach is undertaken by a faithful and enthusiastic band of workers drawn in from many fellowships. Meeting from 9 pm until early Saturday morning, where there is a large footfall of people going home from local pubs and clubs. Tea, coffee, soup and sandwiches are offered, together with an opportunity to talk. Literature is also distributed. The team also regularly visits Crusaders Social Club and local bars to speak with the people gathered there. We have been greatly encouraged by the Presbytery of North Belfast, as support from the Urban Mission fund enabled us to purchase a caravan to develop this work. We are also grateful to BMI for highlighting this work in their report to the General Assembly.

Key Areas to Develop

- To support, encourage and extend the work of Nite Lite in our parish area.
- To find ways to work in partnership with other churches to seed similar teams in other areas.
- To make our facilities increasingly available for use by the community, in particular during the day, placing Alexandra at the centre of community life.

Fellowship

Alexandra is widely recognised as a warm and friendly congregation that opens its doors and hearts to all with whom we come into contact. Without making it an objective, we enjoy a family atmosphere across the congregation, evidenced by the fact that people remain to "chat" together after our services.

Strong fellowship is developed by working together in common service, and we therefore seek opportunities to bring wider groups of our people together for fellowship, mutual support and encouragement. Activities such as **Alexandra @ 6:30**, **TOTTS**, **Girls Allowed** and **Home Bible Study Groups** contribute to this objective.

Presbyterian Women: We have a strong and vibrant **PW**, attended by a wide age range of ladies who enjoy a wide ranging and varied programme as they share in fellowship together and provide generous support for PCI Missionaries and Deaconesses as well as other missionary organisations.

The **Ladies Light Lunch** enables older ladies of the congregation come together, and for some this might be the only meal that they share in company. An opportunity is also taken for a time of fellowship and worship together.

Senior's Outings are also arranged to take some of the older members of the congregation for 'day trips', particularly catering for those who have no access to personal or public transport.

In Alexandra, we seek to provide support when it is most needed. This is particularly evident during times of bereavement, when a willing band of ladies will provide hospitality and refreshments following a funeral service. Our **Event's Committee** arranges ad-hoc opportunities for fellowship in a social setting, such as barn dances, treasure hunts, etc.

Key Areas to Develop

- To grow ever deeper bonds of fellowship between members of our congregation, through working together.
- To continue to provide opportunities for the 'family of Alexandra' to come together informally and socially, enabling friendships to develop.
- As our community increases in age, to find ways to prevent feelings of insecurity, loneliness and isolation.

Missionary

We believe that it is essential to take a world view, to see how God is working His purpose out in other places. Many of our people subscribe to "Wider World", the PCI Points for Prayer Handbook and to the PCI Prayer Line, all of which we regularly use to inform our prayers of intercession. **PW** and **AMF** (ref above) specifically provide focus in this area and we also support the work of the Leprosy Mission and TEAR Fund.

During Harvest, and throughout the year, we support the **Containers for Malawi** project donating educational goods for use in schools in Malawi. Our **TEAR Fund** agent keeps us informed on the work of this organisation, and while some of our people support this work on a regular basis, we also hold a lunch following a TEAR Fund service where we give financial support.

Key Areas to Develop

- To seek ways to work in partnership with others, so that wider groups can be informed of and offer support and encouragement to the work of our missionaries.

Partnership

Recognising that we do not have the resources to do all that we would like to do, we have been endeavouring to work more closely with neighbouring churches and fellowships.

We join each year with our neighbours from Jennymount Methodist in a **Watchnight Service**, alternating between our Meeting Houses.

A **Good Friday Service** is shared each year with our neighbours from Seaview Presbyterian. Once again we alternate between our Meeting Houses, and following the service enjoy a light supper and fellowship together. Under the auspices of LNBCC (Lower North Belfast Community Council), we share in a **Community Carol Service**, rotating among the Churches in the area, where local schools, etc. also participate.

As a natural development of our **Community Prayer Meetings**, we have started to seek ways in which we can reach out into our community with the word of God in collaboration with neighbouring churches.

Lower North Belfast Community Council operates the largest independent advice service in North Belfast, its founding chairman being a member of Alexandra and Key workers in the Congregation continue to attend and support the **Community Police Liaison Committee**.

Key Areas to Develop

- To continue to fully engage with our local community in fulfilment of our Lord's command in Matthew 25.
- To work in increasingly deeper partnership with other Christian faith groups in the local community.
- To better publicise the opportunity for our local community to use our halls and facilities for the benefit of the community, in particular during the day.

Conclusion

As evidenced, the family of Alexandra continues to endeavour to "Grow Up" and "Go Out", in many different ways. Established organisations work alongside innovative new activities in reaching out with the Gospel to a parish with great social and spiritual needs. As a relatively strong fellowship, we have accepted our responsibility to encourage those which might be seen as less strong and to offer to work alongside them in fellowship and Service.