

A Collaborative-Ministry Church

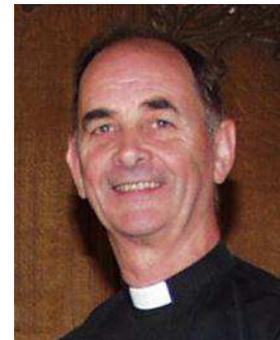
Perspective

The first episcopal congregation in Selkirk was formed in 1851 at the initiative of the Duke of Buccleuch's domestic chaplain and the Rector of St Cuthbert's, Hawick. The present church of St John the Evangelist was opened in 1869, the last episcopal church to be erected in the Borders. For many years it was a typical charge (parish) of the Scottish Episcopal Church, with a succession of Rectors, who shaped its life supported by the Vestry (for English readers this is equivalent to the parochial church council). In the 1960s and 70s it had a Sunday School, Youth Group, Choir and all the other organisations characteristic of a flourishing Anglican congregation of the time.

By then the traditional textile-based industrial life of the Borders had begun to decline. In the 1970s it was largely replaced by electronics, but in the recession of the early 1990s, the largest electronics companies closed, and around a thousand workers in the Selkirk area were made redundant. Some of this loss was reflected in the church as members moved away. In the late 1980s our average Sunday attendance was around 80 but today it is about half that figure.

Finances in the '90s

In 1995 Bill Elliot, our Rector at the time, encouraged us to undertake a study course entitled *Mission 21: Making Your Church More Inviting*. As we evaluated our strengths and weaknesses we found our sense of identity as a community becoming stronger despite our falling rolls. Eventually we came to see that, with our small numbers, even though our *per capita* giving is amongst the highest in the Diocese of Edinburgh, the days of funding a full-time Rector were coming to an end. But as our communal spirit continued to grow members were increasingly contributing to our common life.



This was particularly evident in our worship. By the end of the twentieth century lay people were reading the lessons and leading the intercessions each week, three lay preachers were preaching up to five sermons a year each, and we were holding a monthly Eucharist of Healing at which a team of lay ministers offered prayer and the laying-on of hands for anyone who wished. Nevertheless, keeping a Rector was costing us over 60% of our income, and each year we were eating into our capital by between £1000 and £5000.

Bold decisions

We knew that when Bill retired in 2006 a decision would have to be made about how to sustain our leadership. So, in 2004, a working party was set up to investigate different models of ministry and church organisation. It visited other churches in the Borders, the Diocese and the Province; it invited people to come and share their experiences with us; it studied articles and books on patterns of ministry; it met twice with the Bishop of Edinburgh, who provided a receptive ear and much support.

The working party reported in 2005, and when Bill retired the Vestry took the bold decision to use our remaining financial reserves to appoint a full time priest-in-charge for an agreed term of four years with the specific task of leading us into a self-sustaining model of ministry that would not be dependent upon paid clergy. Bishop Brian enthusiastically agreed to these plans.

It all becomes very real

The profile we drew up for this appointment included the following:

The congregation and Vestry will be looking for a priest-in-charge who will enable members to deepen their own faith and spirituality so that they in turn can benefit others through their ministry. Encouraging and training members to increase their participation in church life would be essential, so the successful candidate would be an enabler and guide, and someone who can discern and encourage the gifts that individuals have. By the end of the four-year appointment we would hope to have formed a working Lay and Ordained Team Ministry within St John's to take us into our future.



Prebendary David Sceats had long been involved in local ministry development in England, as well as in ministerial training and the teaching of theology. He and his wife had a holiday home in the Ettrick Valley, and had worshipped with us in the summer for many years. We were truly delighted when he applied and was accepted by the Bishop. He started his work here in April 2007.

Down to work

There was soon a further increase in lay participation at Sunday worship: church members began to lead the first part of the service, with David presiding at the Eucharist and preaching on most Sundays.

Over the next few months the Vestry, with David's support, identified the ministries our church needed, and set up [a process through which the congregation could identify its leaders](#). This enabled the Vestry to invite appropriate people to form a Ministry Leadership Team (MLT), so called because it would lead and enable the ministry of all the members of the church, rather than 'doing' all the ministry itself. The MLT would serve for five years until the spring of 2013, when its members' term of office would end and the calling-out procedure would be repeated. In October 2008 the Bishop commissioned the team.

Increasingly leadership came to be seen as a team responsibility and, encouraged by David, the MLT gradually took on more and more of his leadership role, until, by his retirement in 2011, it was ready collaboratively to undertake most of the work that had traditionally been the Rector's.

Moving on

When David retired in November 2011 he moved to his home 'up Ettrick' and became just another member of the congregation (though he's still part of the MLT as well, and has been commissioned by the Bishop as 'non-stipendiary priest at St John's'). Meanwhile, we continued to flourish. Many of our services are now conducted with the Reserved Sacrament, and we have five lay people authorised for this ministry (not all of

whom belong to the MLT). Our authorised lay preachers, including two new ones, take their turn at nourishing our faith with the ministry of the Word. As gifts are recognised, more and more people are getting involved in new initiatives and in building on established pastoral support networks. A strong educational emphasis is continuing.

It was always our vision that the members of St John's would serve the world in their baptismal Christian ministry; the MLT serves them by enabling, supporting and organising that ministry, and in setting a vision for the life of St John's. In 2012 this crystallised in the drawing up of a vision statement and accompanying five-year rolling mission plan for St John's, which is reviewed and updated by the MLT at each of its meetings.

We already have a ministry to the retirement homes in Selkirk and a pattern of pastoral care in response to need has been established. A funeral ministry team has come into being, and its members have met with great acceptance as they have conducted recent funerals. Our new pattern of leadership has enabled church members to engage actively with ecumenical projects such as Fresh Start Borders, the Selkirk Holiday Club, the Selkirk Fair Trade Town initiative, the Selkirk Churches Food Bank, and School Chaplaincies.

Where we are now

Our first MLT reached the end of its 5-year term of office on Palm Sunday 2013. By then we had called out a new team to succeed it. We recognised that members of the first team could be reappointed, but that, equally, others could be asked to become members of the new team. We used the same process as before, because it worked so well the first time, and the Vestry eventually approached a number of members of the congregation with an invitation to form our second MLT. Seven responded positively, and the new team was inaugurated on Easter Sunday 2013. The details of the team members can be found on the contact page of our website, www.stjohnselkirk.org.uk. The new team was commissioned by Bishop John, our current Bishop of Edinburgh, at our Harvest service in October 2013, which was also our annual Gift Day – an appropriate occasion on which to give official authorisation to the second MLT at St John's.

Being a collaborative ministry church has ceased to be a novelty for us, and has simply become part of who we are. We have been able to move on from preoccupation with questions about structures, leadership, roles and authorisation and to refocus our attention on the much more substantive issues of what it means to be an effective community of God's kingdom in the twenty-first century. It has been our experience that being a collaborative ministry church has helped us in this. We have discovered in practice what we had been told in theory – that the organising principle of God's kingdom is not a hierarchy of power but a participation in service, and that the mission to which the Church is called is to be a sign of God's kingdom in the world. As the Affirmation of Baptism of the Scottish Episcopal Church puts it, 'this is our task, to live and work for the Kingdom of God'. Demonstrating a reality as revolutionary and transformative as the reign of God cannot simply be a matter of describing or announcing it. It has to be *done* – both in terms of what we are in our structures of life and order, and in what our members are in their own life, discipleship and ministry.

Whatever next?

Life in God's church, however, never stands still! By the summer of 2015 we were beginning to come to terms with the fact that David, our former Rector and officially-commissioned non-stipendiary priest would reach the age of 70 in 2016, at which point

the rules of the Scottish Episcopal Church meant that he would have to resign his Commission as the ordained minister with whom the Bishop shared the 'cure of souls' at St John's. The only canonical authorisation available to him then would be a Warrant (more or less equivalent to 'Permission to Officiate' in the Church of England). As a member of the congregation he could continue as part of the MLT, but his change of canonical status would leave us without anyone to exercise the Bishop's oversight at St John's.

Meanwhile, our neighbouring episcopal church, St Peter's, at Galashiels, had also set out on the journey of collaborative ministry, and, with the guidance of its Rector, had called out a Shared Leadership Team. Its Rector had also reached retirement, and had moved away from the parish (he now lives in Selkirk), leaving St Peter's, too, without anyone with whom the Bishop could share the 'cure of souls'.

So the Bishop came forward with a proposal for a long-term solution. St John's and St Peter's would become a 'Linked Charge', jointly appointing a half-time 'Area Rector' whose role would be to support the Leadership Team and continue the development of collaborative ministry and mission in each congregation. The formalities were completed early in 2016. A memorandum of Agreement was drawn up between the two Vestries, the Constitutions of the two charges were revised, and we are now a Linked Charge with St Peter's. We have produced a new parish profile and have begun to advertise the position of Area Rector.

It's probably fair to say that we have mixed feelings about this development. We are very happy to be linked with St Peter's, and to share in a new chapter of the story of collaborative ministry in the Scottish Borders. And we look forward to welcoming an Area Rector who will share that journey with us and support us in discovering its new directions. But we also recognise that this 'solution' to the 'problem' of how to 'regularise' collaborative ministry reflects how deep-seated in both the rules and the culture of the Scottish Episcopal Church is the assumption that, in the end, the church is constituted by its clergy – that churches are still (in Wesley Frensdorff's words) 'communities gathered around a minister rather than ministering communities'. That's an assumption that we believe needs changed – a change that is what collaborative ministry is all about!

We very much welcome enquiries and visits from people who want to find out a bit more about our experience of being a collaborative ministry church. And we look to the future with anticipation and hope as well as with a sense of dependence on God's Holy Spirit.