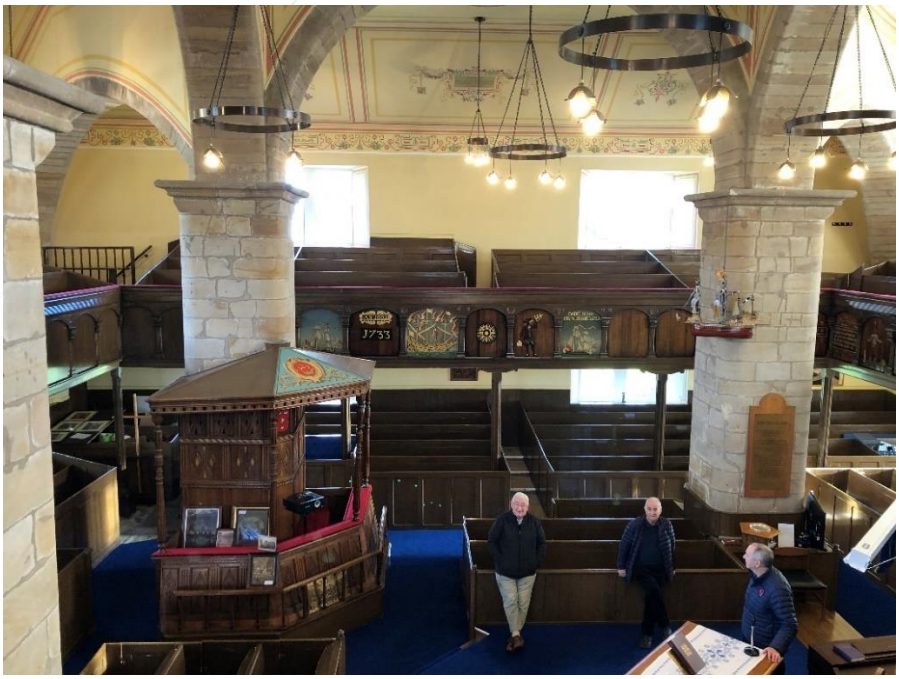
Historic Churches Working Group
Report to Fife Presbytery
Saturday 17 June 2023

Deliverance

1. Receive the report.
2. Note that when the Presbytery Mission Plan is formally reviewed, that review will be guided by this report, in particular its general and specific recommendations.
3. Thank the members of the Historic Churches Working Group with its work now at an end.
4. Create a new committee, the Historic Churches Support Group, to sit within the Board of Mission with appropriate administrative support, its Convener and personnel to be determined by the Board of Mission, the remit to be as follows:
    - To support churches in realising the potential of their historic buildings as assets for mission.
    - To support churches in engaging with partners such as trusts, including helping to identify and meet timescales for such engagement
    - To work with churches in preparing for the next round of Presbytery Mission Planning
5. Appoint Revd Dr Donald MacEwan to be the Convener of the Historic Churches Working Group for two years.



Burntisland Church

Introduction

This report is offered by the Historic Churches Working Group in fulfilment of its remit, and it sees its work as having come to its end.

Origins and Remit of group

At the meeting of Fife Presbytery on 18 June 2022, the Board of Mission described the range of responses it had received to the draft Presbytery Mission Plan, particularly over the designation of buildings (other than manses) as A for retention beyond the five years of the plan, or B for disposal within the five years of the plan, i.e. by December 2027. Emerging from this feedback, including significant disquiet at the disposal of around 30 churches including so many historic church buildings, Presbytery agreed to a proposal to form a Historic Churches Working Group, approved following a vote. The remit of this group is as follows:

1. To develop with Congregations, the General Trustees and wider community in Fife a theological reflection on the possibilities and potential for historic church buildings as assets for mission.
2. To consult with Congregations, the General Trustees and the wider community on available options for the preservation and future use of historic church buildings.
3. To develop recommendations to inform the review of building categorisations for historic church buildings.
4. To report to Presbytery within 12 months.



Crail Church

Membership

Five people, all members of Presbytery, were appointed to the group. All have experience in historic church buildings, and within the group there is experience in leading worship, sharing space with other users, fund-raising, managing restoration projects, collaborative working with others in the community and national heritage bodies, pilgrimage and hospitality. The group comprises:
Revd Dr Donald MacEwan, Convener – University of St Andrews Chaplain, and former minister of St Monans linked with Largoward
Sheila Boyd, elder, Leuchars: St Athernase
Revd Professor Ian Bradley, Professor Emeritus of Cultural and Spiritual History, University of St Andrews
Revd Dr Conor Fegan, Minister: Markinch and Thornton
Revd MaryAnn Rennie, Minister: Dunfermline Abbey



Culross Abbey Church

Activity

The group has explored aspects of its remit, in prayer, study and discussion. We recognise that not all old churches would be classed as historic, nor would all old churches easily qualify as beautiful. But many are – not least many of the churches across Fife which have been determined for disposal.

We have visited all seven churches which are A-listed by Historic Environment Scotland and designated B in the Presbytery Mission Plan. On these visits, church leaders were welcome to invite whoever they wanted to, from leadership, membership and beyond – and we always met in the church. Our aim was to experience the building, and hear how people locally understood the possibilities and potential for mission, options for preservation and future use, and who (if anyone) in their community they were already talking to about these things. The Convener took photographs, including all reproduced in this report. We visited a further church who asked us to, and held a meeting on Zoom on 11 April for people from any church in Presbytery to explore issues around their historic buildings. These gatherings gave people from the churches the opportunity to express in person to a Presbytery working group their feelings towards their historic building, their hopes for future worship and mission, and fears for the future. Some expressed negative opinions about the lack of in-person visits to the churches and congregations during the Presbytery Mission Planning process.

We held meetings with different General Trustees (twice), and a number of other bodies including Fife Council, Fife Historic Buildings Trust, Scotland's Churches Trust, Historic Churches Scotland, East Neuk Festival, Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society, and the Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum with the Fife Pilgrim Pastor. We've been in correspondence with people from the Presbytery's churches, with people from other churches within the Presbytery's bounds, Historic Environment Scotland, and others.



Cupar Old Church

Theological reflection on the possibilities and potential for historic church buildings as assets for mission

There is nothing in reformed Christian worship or life which must take place within a church building. Sacraments can take place in the home; weddings in hotels and gardens; funerals in cemeteries and crematoria; worship on hilltops and in care homes; coffee mornings in halls. But for almost all Christian history, most central aspects of Christian worship have taken place in buildings built and dedicated for the purpose, and that remains true across much of Scotland, and in our own Presbytery of Fife. But we are in a time of significant change, reductions in church membership and income, fewer ordained ministers, and fewer people willing and able to take on important voluntary offices in the local church. Presbytery Mission Plans throughout the Church of Scotland have emerged from a clear recognition of severely reduced resources. One aspect of planning is to reduce the number of church buildings. But, as we are retaining some church

buildings and not disposing of them all, what should be the criteria for this difficult decision-making process? The Working Group was formed because Presbytery recognised that decision-making up until June 2022 may have undervalued certain characteristics found in historic churches. And so we have asked this year: how can historic buildings be an asset for mission?

It is clear to us that God's presence can be encountered in church buildings in a number of ways. In gathering together, the community of faith can be led to sense God in their midst. In worship, prayer, exploration of God's word, music and singing, God can be encountered. Gathering for significant rites of passage, milestones in our lives such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, funerals and more, the church can seem to be the home for our faith, the place which has supported us in our journey. Dropping into a quiet church, sanctuary, peace can be found, and strength to face what will come our way – and not only by people who would identify as Christians or religious believers – whether the church is still used for worship or kept open by a trust.

Historic churches, in particular, can foster and augment this reality of encounter. There is often a sense of proportion, balance and harmony in historic churches, in their shape and size, stone, glass and wood, acoustic and smell which can lift us from mundane considerations to the things of the spirit. There can be an ambience of reverence; as one person shared with us, they can have "a gentle spirituality". In being old, they alert us to the steady persistence of faith in this local community, sometimes through times of immense change. In being old, they often exemplify a community's sense of itself, around a particular saint or character of a community. In our experience, for example from working with students in St Andrews, while young people can be drawn to very informal spaces often allied to theologically conservative understandings of faith, many young people are also drawn to encountering the transcendent in places of beauty, with music, silence, candlelight and reflections relevant to their lives that engage the human spirit.

Sacredness is not limited to spaces; the church's mission has never entirely been about what happens within its buildings. But buildings have been a part of our mission since the earliest years of Christianity in Scotland. How can these historic buildings be assets for mission today?

Clearly, we begin by allowing the building to be a place of relevant, attractive worship, meaningful rites of passage, and a space open to the curious and the concerned. But we don't see God's mission to the world as found solely in the church's worship and life. We see it in what happens in the church building more broadly – in significant community events forming bonds of solidarity and support, we see it in cultural expression in creative arts, we see it in celebrating the heritage of a place and its peoples, and we see it in partnership across boundaries of church and parish. We encourage as broad and deep an understanding of mission as

possible, and congregational flexibility in fostering God's mission, not least through their historic building.

In practical terms, historic churches can be open to the mission of God to the world, and to our local area in the following ways:

- by being large enough for the community to gather for weddings, funerals and larger civic events
- by being open to visits by schoolchildren and other community groups to bring history, culture and faith to life
- by being open for concerts, talks, drama, films, exhibitions and other artistic events. One person who has put on countless chamber music concerts in Fife churches told us that his audiences testify to their love of the special atmosphere in churches (even if the pews are uncomfortable). Why, he asked, does the Church not seem to find the atmosphere of historic churches special also?
- by being available for music recordings, filming and other cultural uses
- by developing historical connections with people interested in the past, offering partnerships in developing interpretation
- by offering flexible areas for children's play, refreshments and smaller gatherings
- by being open to public as much as possible, either attended or unattended. Visitors' books attest to the significance to visitors in finding the house of God open, welcoming, often peaceful, prayerful and beautiful, and with personal connections to the visitor, and with resources for prayer and discovery, not least through leaflets and QR codes
- by diversifying their income, open to opportunities for individuals and organisations beyond the congregation and churchgoers to support the church

A particular way in which historic churches can be assets for mission is in supporting pilgrims. We are blessed with the Fife Pilgrim Way (while the Fife Coastal Path also sees people undertaking long-distance walks). Churches could be pilgrim centres, offering hospitality, toilet and shower facilities, historical and spiritual interpretation, prayer and worship, charging for e-bikes. A church could configure an area within the building as a Pilgrim Chapel. There could also be accommodation within the church building, sometimes called champing, which Historic Churches Scotland told us has attracted many younger people drawn by the history, architecture and atmosphere of the building.

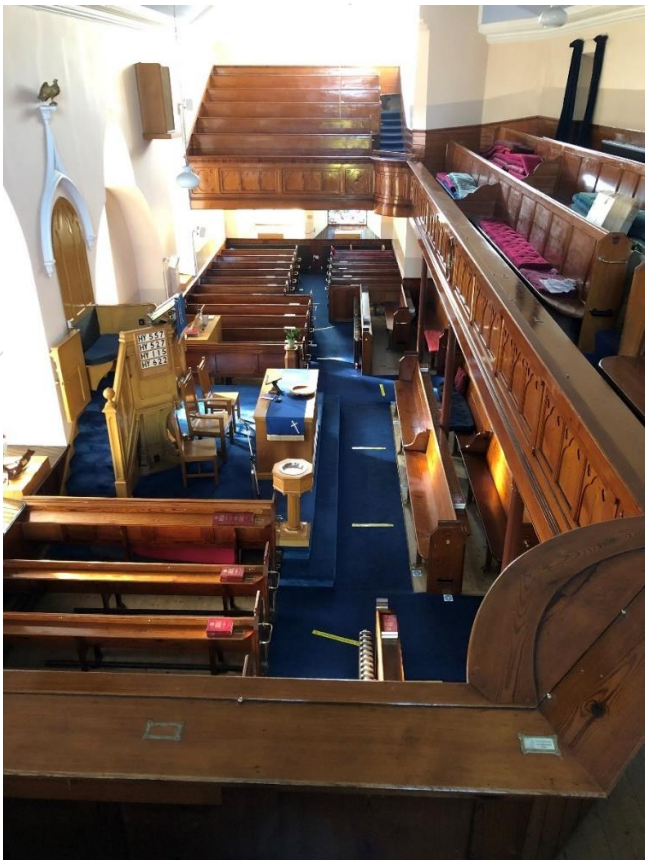
Many of these activities, if they don't already happen, could take place with little change to the building. Others would need significant alteration. The General Trustees have made it clear to us that they are supportive of sympathetic re-

ordering of church interiors so that they be better assets for mission. That requires investment, but the alternative may be disposal in some future round of planning.

And so practical matters around historic buildings are significant too. What is the access like? Is there parking? How easily can people enter who don't walk or can't climb steps? Are there toilets – which we're comfortable using? How easy is it to offer refreshments? Is the space comfortable – in temperature and furniture? These too are theological concerns – around hospitality to all who share the space, around inclusion and respect.

Also theological is our attitude in a time of climate change. A significant part of our mission as a church is environmental. The fifth mark of mission in the definition which has guided Presbytery Mission Planning is *to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth*. That may encourage us to reduce the number of buildings we keep heated and lit, and the activities we foster, and to prefer adapting existing buildings over building anew.

We are also aware of ecumenical dimensions. In many of the communities where a Church of Scotland building has been determined for disposal, there are one or more other church buildings. Could space be lent by one church to another? Could Christian communities join in worship and other aspects of the life of faith?



Pittenweem Church

Available options for the preservation and future use of historic church buildings

The previous section began to cover this aspect of our remit for historic churches which will be retained. But in coming to this second aspect about preservation and future use, we are confronted with the difficult realities which many church communities are facing. Here are some of the difficulties expressed by churches when we visited:

- Few people regularly come for worship
- There are no young people (and often very few people under the age of retirement)
- There may be a strong committed core, but these are people over 70 years old, and some over 80. Realistically, there are few years left for them in which to continue maintaining the building and running the church. And so if the church is not disposed of, they fear that they will not cope with the upkeep
- There is not enough money – to cover maintenance, utility bills and insurance, let alone enhancements
- There is no minister in their charge, and they feel this absence of leadership
- The Covid pandemic exacerbated a lack of maintenance, and certainly enhancement.

In other words, some (though by no means all) congregations feel they have come to the end of their road with their historic building. The key issue for them is often questions as to who from the congregation will look after the building in the future (even just in the next few years) and how will they afford to maintain and enhance the space. To ask them to retain and develop it beyond the five years of the plan may be overburdening them.

It is also worth noting that representatives from Fife Council shared with us that many different community groups, with non-religious identities and purposes, are facing similar difficulties regarding human and financial resources, and the future of their historic buildings.

What then are the available options for the preservation and future use of historic church buildings?

If the church is to be disposed of, we would argue strongly for a good disposal. What does that mean?

In principle: the preservation and enhancement of the fabric; the care of significant decoration and furnishings; and, ideally, ongoing public benefit from the building

to the community. Selling to an owner who then does nothing for some years can lead to deterioration, and is to be avoided. Historic churches, when no longer used for worship, can become derelict or are even demolished. But if it does remain standing, it will almost definitely retain importance as a once-public building for worship, within the visual landscape.

The continuation of worship may be desirable, but not in every case. And so good disposal also means having a significant respect for those who are affected by the loss of a place of worship deeply significant for them, acknowledging change and a sense of loss, and finding creative ways including worship to mark the transition.

In practice, good disposal could mean selling into private ownership. That could mean new investment into the fabric, and so the building's preservation. Certain internal features may also be conserved, or carefully moved to new homes. There may be philanthropically-minded individuals who would take a church on in this way for the benefit of the community – but that could only be at best for a tiny minority of cases. If a new owner converts the church into a house, there is almost always a loss of accessibility, which almost certainly cannot be reversed. The church may retain the shape of a church, but it will no longer have any public character.

It could mean selling to another denomination or religious body. We would see that in general as a promising outcome, preserving the church as a place of prayer and worship, and allowing new forms of faith to flourish therein.

It could mean selling to a business to become its premises – we all know of examples in hospitality or retail, exercise or education. Again, this has the benefit of remaining in public life, albeit for those who can or wish to use the service offered by the new owner.

None of these options offer significant prospect for ongoing use of the building for worship, for mission, as an asset for the community as a whole. But a further option does offer that possibility – being sold to a community trust. We learned that there are 70-100 historic churches in Scotland which are already community-owned. There are trusts being formed around Scotland in direct response to the current round of Presbytery Mission Planning. What does a community trust look like?

It is a group of local people who have a vision for the building, for preservation and use for community purposes. The group needs to have a serious intention to commit to taking on ownership, and a convincing business plan. It needs to offer assurance as to income – from grant-award making bodies, income generating activities etc – and that the purpose will benefit the community. Purposes could be as a museum, theatre, arts and crafts space, community hub, heritage centre,

and many more, including some combination of uses. Church members could of course be trustees.

The purpose of the building could include worship, perhaps for church festivals such as Christmas, or for funerals and weddings – but funders are likely to look for broader non-religious purposes given that the building would be leaving the ownership of the General Trustees. We also heard theological questions about so-called Festival Churches – buildings not used for regular worship but only for Christmas and other special occasions. To what extent does the building then reflect the community being the people of God? Is it then akin to any other venue?

The General Trustees say they *are happy to enter into a period of exclusivity with a locally-interested community group, subject to the group exhibiting a formal constitution, a business plan with an appropriate fund-raising element and agreement that any off-market price subsequently agreed should be predicated on an independent valuation.* (*Community Group Guidance – Information Sources*) They told us in a meeting that they would expect a trust to be functional within two years.

None of this is necessarily easy. There will be a glut of churches for sale. Locally, some communities may feel they have enough public spaces for community use already. Moreover, the people who are already committed to other voluntary activities within a community may not have the energy to take part in yet another, for the sake of the church building's preservation for public use.

One trust involved in taking on historic church buildings shared from their experience that the biggest challenge for re-using A-listed churches is the cost of re-purposing and enhancing them given the importance of the historic fabric – this tends to be possible but very expensive. The selling price would ideally reflect further costs falling on new owner, ie, not be high. Upkeep can also be expensive – though one church told us that their much more modern hall is more expensive to maintain than their historic church.

However, there is funding available for historic buildings, and some of the churches determined for disposal are celebrated far beyond their village or town, or even beyond Fife and Scotland. With trusted people from the community taking on responsibility, there can be generous philanthropy from near and far.

There are a number of organisations and resources to help churches and Presbyteries in these processes (this list is by no means exhaustive).

The General Trustees themselves have produced a document called *Community Group Guidance – Information Sources*, which the Presbytery Clerk can forward to any congregation or community member, and are also recommending the document

Your church, your community, accessible here:
https://www.heritagetrustnetwork.org.uk/a-future-for-your-church/

UK-wide bodies:

Home | The Architectural Heritage Fund (ahfund.org.uk) Architectural Heritage Fund, for feasibility, viability and development grants

Project toolkits | The Churches Conservation Trust (visitchurches.org.uk) Churches Conservation Trust, for Project Toolkits including business planning

https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/ National Churches Trust, fdvice on grants, contractors, building maintenance

Scotland-based bodies:

https://www.scotlandschurchestrust.org.uk/ Scotland's Churches Trust, for grants, bursaries, advice and support

https://historicchurches.scot/ Historic Churches Scotland. Purchases historic churches at risk – formerly Scottish Redundant Churches Trust.

https://www.heritagetrustnetwork.org.uk/a-future-for-your-church/ Heritage Trust Network, supporting community groups working with active and former places of worship in Scotland.

https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/scottish-land-fund Scottish Land Fund (SCT). Funding for community ownership of land and land assets

https://dtascommunityownership.org.uk/ Community Ownership Support Service

https://fifehistoricbuildings.org.uk/ Fife Historic Buildings Trust – already undertaking a viability study in some Fife historic churches. They manage projects to conserve historic buildings at risk, ensuring that they have a renewed practical purpose, long term caring owners and a viable future.



St Fillan's Church, Aberdour

Recommendations to inform the review of building categorisations for historic church buildings

We wish to make general and specific recommendations to inform the review of building categorisations for historic church buildings.

In general, we recognise that Presbytery needs to continue to have in mind the following criteria for deciding which buildings are suitable as part of the church's mission: accessibility for transport, ease of access into the building, comfort, toilet and refreshment facilities. Proximity of other church buildings is important; so too the availability of other denominations' buildings – we should be thinking ecumenically in a time of fewer resources and climate change.

But in accordance with our remit, and in the service of God's mission, we strongly encourage Presbytery to take into account the following issues in making determinations about church buildings:

- the length of Christian witness in the building, and on the site
- the ways the building's architecture and fabric, its art, decoration, acoustic and atmosphere enhance the experience of worship, and encounter with God
- the importance of the building to the broader community's experience of its own identity
- the church's commitment to being open throughout the week
- the church's openness to ecumenical engagement
- the church's openness to partnerships with other users, such as music performers, historical societies and others

Regarding specific churches: in the Presbytery Mission Plan, under each of these churches – Culross Abbey, St Fillan's Aberdour, Burntisland, Cupar: Old, St Monans, Pittenweem, Crail – the following words are found:
To be disposed of by December 2027
Historic – HES A
Review pending Historic Churches Working Group.

And so we feel it important that we give guidance to Presbytery in reviewing the determinations of disposal. This has of necessity to be brief, and cannot give a full survey of each building. We move roughly from west to east.

Culross Abbey. This has a long and deep history, pre-Reformation until the present day. The building is beautiful, with flexible spaces, often open to visitors and with interesting historical interpretation. Culross is at one end of the Fife Pilgrim Way, which presents significant opportunities around hospitality, fostering spirituality, and offering accommodation. However, the congregation and office-bearers are deeply conscious of the lack of people in the church to take on responsibility. And so we conclude that the determination B for disposal is right. However we would strongly encourage the formation of a local trust to see this building remain in public use perhaps with an ongoing possibility for some worship.

St Fillan's Aberdour. This church is celebrating its 900th anniversary this year. It is beautifully situated, with a deeply satisfying sense of proportion, and a simple, pleasing interior. Its space is flexible, with chairs rather than pews. It is very open to a wide variety of uses already, and has good relationships with school and local community organisations. There is a good body of keen members and office-bearers. On the weight of these considerations, we feel that retention by the Church of Scotland at this time would be of huge benefit to the congregation and parish, and would encourage a more expanded use of the building as an asset for the mission of the church within the parish. Retention comes with the condition that the congregation engage with the Historic Churches Support Group, in

preparing by June 2026 (or before) an action plan for the development of the church as an asset for mission.

Burntisland. This is a really intriguing church, with an unusual architectural design, handsome interior, unique furniture and delightful decoration in the form of guildry insignia. There are already some partnerships with local historical groups, and the church is often open to the public. There are other churches in the area, with which the church is in partnership, and extensive halls next door. While there are clearly good arguments for retention, we have to bear in mind the national and Presbytery-wide need to focus resources. We believe there is a real possibility of a local trust being set up to ensure the survival of the church as a public asset, particularly as a heritage-focussed space, and so we are not recommending retention.

Cupar: Old. This is the one A-listed church for disposal which is in a town with another Church of Scotland building (St John's). Cupar Old is attractive within, with a semi-circular shape which enhances the feel of community during worship. It has not been open to visitors, however, and the Church Centre nearby is the focus for a wide range of community involvement and a more family-based time of worship. It does not seem right to us, at a time of such difficult decisions, to retain both Cupar church buildings, and so we are not recommending retention.

St Monans. Dating to 1369, this is a landmark building set at the edge of St Monans, by the sea. Beautifully proportioned, it gladdens the heart when seen from afar and near. Inside, its furnishings are largely 20th Century, but its medieval features and its hanging model ships are noteworthy. The community has a strong sense of belonging to the auld kirk, and thousands more visit the open building annually, not least walkers on the Fife Coastal Path. However, the church congregation has chosen this year to make the church hall its site of worship, following the disjoining of the linkage with East Neuk Trinity, and in a time of straitened financial circumstances. We have no doubt that St Monans Church as a building can attract significant funding from donors for maintenance and enhancement – and conclude that new ownership, perhaps a new local trust if formed, would be best-placed to have the energy to invest in the survival and continued public use of the building. We are therefore not recommending retention.

Pittenweem. Although containing attractive and impressive stained glass, Pittenweem Church is not of huge architectural significance, save the tollbooth which is part of its structure. However its location at the east end of the High Street, and within the medieval Priory grounds, make it well-placed to be at the heart of village life. There are people in Pittenweem interested in seeing the building transformed, perhaps into a visitor and heritage centre, to complement other buildings around the Priory. There are two other church buildings in

Pittenweem which could encourage a deeper ecumenical engagement. And so we are not recommending retention.

Crail. Crail Church is nicely proportioned, well lit by tall clear-paned windows, and is set attractively in its grounds with graveyard to the rear. It is a significant host to the East Neuk Festival, and could perhaps see a wider variety of uses alongside worship. There are a number of other public spaces in Crail already. The church's office-bearers are keen to undertake restoration work to the church, but the current determination of disposal has prevented their going forward with restoration plans. On balance we can see good reasons for the retention of the church within the ownership of the church, and as the focus for Church of Scotland worship within Crail. Retention comes with the condition that the congregation engage with the Historic Churches Support Group, in preparing by June 2026 (or before) an action plan for the development of the church as an asset for mission.



St Monans Church

Recommendation: new standing group, the Historic Churches Support Group, as part of the Board of Mission

The work of the Historic Churches Working Group has been immensely interesting, sometimes encouraging, occasionally heart-breaking. It has been tempting to recommend that all historic churches be retained by the church, but we are aware that neither Presbytery nor the national church could accept such a way forward. What has become abundantly clear to us is that historic churches and Presbytery will need guidance beyond the life of this working group. If being retained, historic churches may need guidance as to enhancing their buildings to become more open to their communities, more open to partnerships with others, more aware of how to raise funds from donors and grant-award making bodies. Churches, if being disposed of, may need help in ensuring as good a disposal as possible, aware of local and national organisations who can support them and newly formed local trusts who may take on ownership.

And so we are recommending that Presbytery form a new committee to sit within the Board of Mission, provisionally called the Historic Churches Support Group. This standing committee would exist to help historic churches increasingly be assets for mission, supporting congregations with retained buildings in their being ever greater assets for mission, and supporting congregations and communities when a building is leaving the church's ownership in being disposed of in good ways for fabric and people. The meaning of "historic" is not itself specific so a working definition may be a church designated as Listed by Historic Environment Scotland. The proposed remit would be as follows:

- To support churches in realising the potential of their historic buildings as assets for mission.
- To support churches in engaging with partners such as trusts, including helping to identify and meet timescales for such engagement
- To work with churches in preparing for the next round of Presbytery Mission Planning