

Proposed Union between St Nicholas Buccleuch and Newbattle

Why is this union being proposed?

The Church of Scotland is in serious crisis. Almost all congregations are getting smaller, income is falling, and there are not enough ministers to go around. In 2010, the Church planned to have about 1000 ministers. In 2021, it decided that it could afford 600. It currently has just over 500 active parish ministers. There are very few people coming into ministry. The General Assembly has therefore decided to reduce the number of congregations by about 40%.

Because the Church of Scotland maintains a commitment to provide ministry in every part of Scotland, that means that ministry is being spread more thinly. Every presbytery has been given an allocation of ministry posts and has to decide how to distribute them within its own area. There are fewer posts available than before; therefore congregations and parishes are being united.

No one thinks this is ideal and many people think the Church of Scotland is approaching this crisis in the wrong way, but we are where we are and have to abide by policies and decisions made above our level.

What is Presbytery?

Presbytery is the regional level of church government in the Church of Scotland. The General Assembly, which is the top level, makes decisions on policy for the whole church. It passes some of those decisions to presbyteries for implementation at regional level. When this the Presbytery Planning process began, we were part of the Presbytery of Lothian, which covered Midlothian and East Lothian. Now we are part of the Presbytery of Lothian and Borders, which covers the former presbyteries of Melrose and Peebles, Jedburgh and Duns, effectively the whole of the southeast of Scotland except Edinburgh and West Lothian.

Every congregation is represented on Presbytery by its minister and at least one elder. It meets four times a year. Much of its work is done through committees.

What is the Presbytery Plan?

In 2021, the General Assembly passed the Presbytery Mission Plan Act, which set up the process which assigned a certain number of ministerial posts (both Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Mission Development Staff) to each Presbytery. Presbyteries cannot have more ministry posts than the General Assembly allows.

Presbyteries then had to decide how to allocate these posts. Each has had to draw up a Presbytery Plan which says which congregations will be allocated ministry posts, and therefore where there will be unions and dissolutions of congregations, because there will be fewer posts available than there have been up till now.

The Presbytery Plan effectively says what will happen to each congregation in the event of a vacancy. Because many ministers have full tenure (the right to stay in their charges until they retire), the Plan may take some time to implement.

Why is a union between St Nicholas Buccleuch and Newbattle under consideration?

Presbytery initially proposed uniting St Nicholas Buccleuch with St John's and King's Park or dissolving St Nicholas Buccleuch. St John's has subsequently united with Newton. The Kirk Session at St Nicholas Buccleuch felt that the two Dalkeith congregations are so different that a union between them would not work. St Nicholas Buccleuch has a traditional style of worship and liberal theology. St John's is increasingly a gathered congregation (one to which a significant number of people travel from a wider area, as opposed to drawing most members from within or close to its own parish) with a more conservative theology and a quasi-Pentecostal worship style.

The Kirk Session of St Nicholas Buccleuch felt that St Nicholas Buccleuch and Newbattle were more compatible congregations in terms of theology, worship style, and demography, both drawing the majority of their members from their own parishes. Both Kirk Sessions asked Presbytery for permission to explore the possibility of union between the two congregations and this was granted in April 2022.

What is a union?

When two congregations unite, all the members of both congregations automatically become members of the united congregation, all the elders automatically become elders of the united congregation, and all the property (buildings and moveable assets) and financial assets remain the property of the united congregation.

What is a deferred union?

A deferred union is a union which is agreed and approved but not enacted immediately. It allows the congregation which is already vacant to call a minister, with the involvement of the congregation which is not yet vacant. The new minister would begin work in the congregation which was already vacant and then, when the other congregation fell vacant, the union would be enacted and the new minister would take over full responsibility for the united congregation and parish.

In our situation, Gayle will be coming to the end of her contract and leaving at the end of June. If the union is agreed by then, a nominating committee comprising members of both Newbattle and St Nicholas Buccleuch would be formed. When the committee is able to nominate a minister, she or he would preach in both congregations (probably at a united service) and members would be able to vote on whether to call that minister. She or he would be inducted to "Newbattle in deferred union with St Nicholas Buccleuch" and then, when Sandy demits, would automatically be the minister of the united charge, having been called by both parts of the united charge.

What is dissolution?

When a congregation is dissolved, it ceases to exist. Its property is sold, and the assets are divided between the Presbytery and central church funds. They are no longer available to be used locally. Members are given certificates of transference (their "lines") and encouraged to find another congregation to join. Elders are no longer members of a Kirk Session.

Who would be the minister?

We don't know. Gayle will be leaving at the end of June and Sandy has said he does not want to take on the united charge, believing that a new start requires a new minister.

Would there be other staff?

The Presbytery Planning Committee has decided that, if Newbattle and St Nicholas Buccleuch unite, it would be allocated one full time minister of word and sacrament and one full time equivalent Ministry Development Staff (MDS) post. In practice, this could be made up of two or more part-time postholders.

Newbattle currently has an MDS, Jennifer Stark, who is working part time. Jennifer started in October 2023 on a one-year contract. Her post is due to be reviewed before October 2024.

Which buildings would be used?

The Presbytery Plan is for Mayfield and Easthouses Church and Newtongrange Church to be retained. The buildings belonging to St Nicholas Buccleuch would be disposed of.

Newbattle Kirk Session has decided to sell the current Newbattle manse and buy a more suitable property which will become the manse of the united charge. The St Nicholas Buccleuch manse will be sold in due course as it will no longer be required.

What is the process for agreeing to a union?

The Presbytery Plan shows St Nicholas Buccleuch and Newbattle will unite. Work on preparing the Basis of Deferred Union has been done and this will be voted on by the Kirk Sessions in April. If they agree, it will be presented to the congregations and every member who is present at the meeting will have an opportunity to vote for or against. No postal or proxy votes are allowed.

The Basis of Union will be checked by a committee of the central church and by the Presbytery Planning committee to see that it is legally correct before Kirk Sessions or congregations vote on it. Finally, Presbytery as a whole, or the Presbytery Council acting under powers, will ratify the Basis, at which point it will be ready for implementation when the time comes.

In voting, elders and members need to consider all the issues. It may be tempting to vote against as a form of protest, but that temptation should be resisted. A vote against should only be cast if there is something legally wrong with the Basis of Deferred Union or if an alternative to union, which is genuinely viable, can be proposed.

What is a Basis of Union?

A Basis of Union is a legal document which sets out the terms on which a union will take place. Members will be able to see the draft that is being prepared and will be asked to vote on whether or not to accept it. A Basis of Deferred Union is a very similar document, but which allows for a delay between agreement and implementation.

What would the united congregation be called?

The Church of Scotland requires congregations to be named according to a set formula, i.e. geographical name, optional church name, and (Church of Scotland). The proposed name for the united congregation is Newbattle: St Nicholas Buccleuch (Church of Scotland).

Is there an alternative to union?

Yes. St Nicholas Buccleuch could be dissolved in which case all its assets would no longer be available for local use. Newbattle could theoretically continue on its own with a slightly reduced staffing allocation. However, it is likely that there will be a further round of planning (i.e. further reductions to the number of congregations) by the end of this decade, so such a situation is unlikely to last long. A united congregation has the potential to be significantly stronger and will certainly have more financial assets at its disposal.

How would the minister of a united charge cope with the additional workload?

An increase to the staffing allocation, if this is achieved, would help. An enlarged Kirk Session and bigger membership mean that there would be more people and more talent upon which to draw. And it does not necessarily follow that the minister will be active in every school in their parish. For example, at the moment, the minister of St John's and Newton is active in chaplaincy in Dalkeith High School though it is technically in the St Nicholas Buccleuch parish. There may be some congregational activities which are currently run by ministers that can be taken over by elders or other members. Equally, there may be activities which are brought to a conclusion.

Where would services take place?

This would be decided by the united Kirk Session.

How would the united congregation be organised?

Newbattle has a number of Kirk Session working groups. St Nicholas Buccleuch has tended to operate more by individual elders taking on responsibilities. The united Kirk Session would look at which working groups it wanted to continue and would seek to appoint people from both the previous Sessions to serve on them.

How long might the vacancy last?

This is a question which can never be answered with certainty. However, if agreement is reached by the June 2024 Presbytery meeting, then we could expect a nominating committee to be elected in the late summer. It would prepare a parish profile and advertise the vacancy. If there were applicants, interviews might take place early in 2025 and an induction take place some weeks after the congregations had voted to call a minister. Equally, the process could take much longer so the timeline described should be seen as purely speculative.

There are reasons to be hopeful. The Church of Scotland imposed a moratorium on filling vacancies until Presbytery Plans were fully approved. The Presbytery of Lothian and Borders is ahead of some other presbyteries in this process and our vacancies can be advertised. The moratorium means that there are ministers who have been eager to move but have been unable to do so, so there is some pent-up demand. Also, there are people who have completed their probationary placements but who have been unable to move into their first charge who will also

be looking for a charge. Finally, for reasons best known to the Almighty, charges in the Central Belt of Scotland tend to attract more applicants than those in more remote areas!

When will Sandy Horsburgh demit?

He cannot say at the moment. He has a number of things that need to be resolved before he could announce a date for his demission. He is, however, of the view that a lengthy period in which the union between the two parishes was deferred would not be in the interest of anyone involved, neither him, the new minister called on the basis of deferred union, nor the congregations.

What does demit mean?

When a minister demits, it means she or he leaves her or his job. For reasons lost in the mists of time, the Church of Scotland uses 'demit' and 'demission' while everyone else uses 'resign' and 'resignation'.

Why aren't there more ministers?

The age profile of the Church of Scotland is heavily skewed to the upper age ranges. The working assumption in previous generations was that one member in about a hundred needed to become a minister to maintain the number of ministers needed. Ministers are almost exclusively drawn from those under 45 years of age. There are very few members in that age range anymore, and one percent of a small number is a very small number indeed. The Church of Scotland has sought to develop other routes into ministry, such as the Ordained Local Ministry (non-stipendiary), but the uptake for this has been small and such ministers are not eligible for full-time appointments.

If there is a union, where will all of St Nicholas Buccleuch's moveable items and furniture go?

It is important to honour the history of uniting congregations, and therefore it is often helpful to keep some items which have been part of that history and continue to use them. The Church of Scotland's Committee on Art and Architecture, a department within the General Trustees, advises that it is good practice to keep and continue to use the "best" from the uniting churches. These might be things like communion silver, some items of furniture, and audio-visual equipment. Clearly, no one wants a worship space to be cluttered with more furniture than necessary, so there would need to be a process of carefully selecting what is kept from both congregations.

Would it be possible to sell the St Nicholas Buccleuch buildings?

The Church of Scotland has no qualms whatsoever about selling historic buildings. Locally, interest in acquiring the buildings has been expressed by another denomination, and exploratory work is ongoing looking into the possibility of a community buy-out.