

# Cathedral Church of St Machar Old Aberdeen

Charity No. SC 008157

**PARISH PROFILE OCTOBER 2020**

The charge at St Machar’s Cathedral became vacant in July 2019, with the retiral of our Minister, the Rev. Barry Dunsmore after four and a half years. This profile has been approved by the Kirk Session. It is our own view of what we are as a church and congregation, and it sets out the issues which face us and our community. It is intended as a guide for ministers who may be interested in this charge.

In this connection it should be noted that, (as permitted in terms of Act 1 of 2015), the Kirk Session has resolved, after two secret ballots, to depart from the Church’s position on Candidates in Same Sex Marriages and Civil Partnerships. It will therefore be prepared to consider candidates in such relationships.

**Background**

St Machar’s Cathedral is one of the most instantly recognised buildings in the North East of Scotland. Its history of continuous worship for over one thousand years and the austere beauty of its architecture make it a leading tourist attraction. And its magnificent acoustics mean that it is a highly effective and popular setting for musical performance of all kinds.

But above all, it remains what it has always been – an active worshipping church, with a strong tradition of formal liturgy and challenging preaching, We in St Machar’s see the maintenance of our historic building, the welcoming of visitors and the performance of music as important parts of our mission. But the core of it all is worship.

The vacancy occurs at a time of substantial change at a number of different levels:

 In the Cathedral, we are in the second phase of a major programme of physical renewal.

 The Presbytery of Aberdeen and Shetland has recently completed and approved a Plan which aims to reduce drastically the number of churches in Aberdeen, and which has given us some interesting challenges.

 And of course we are in the midst of a global pandemic.

All of these things have implications for us and affect the ways in which a new minister will lead worship and witness.

**The Parish**

St Machar’s Parish covers the ancient former Burgh of Old Aberdeen and a little more. It has 7000 residents of whom over 5000 are students. The challenge of establishing and maintaining a relationship with such a large number of transient residents is one which we constantly address.

But substantial though the student numbers are, there is still a significant part of the parish which has no connection with the University. These residents cover all ages and a variety of social groups. The large traditional houses of the Chanonry are close to the social housing developments of later years.

And it should be noted that the parishes of our partner churches, St Stephen’s, St George’s and St Mary’s have a quite different social demographic. While we are at an early stage of establishing the basis of the Grouping, we look forward to working with our partners in joint initiatives in outreach.

**The Congregation**

After a recent review of the roll, we have 431 members and 100 adherents. We are a gathered congregation and only a small proportion actually lives in the parish. Indeed many come a significant distance, drawn often by our style of worship, preaching and music.

The membership consists of people of all ages. A significant proportion is past the retirement age, but many young people, students and others, worship with us. Some are attracted by the opportunity to sing in our choir and others simply by the nature of our worship and the splendour of the surroundings. We also have a small Sunday School, and are blessed in that in the last twenty years many who went through the Sunday School have remained church members.

**The Buildings**

*The Cathedral*

St Machar’s stands on a site which has seen worship for over one thousand four hundred years. The splendour of the building, and its long history, draws visitors of all sorts, from casual tourists to serious scholars, from people searching for their family roots to people simply looking for a quiet place to pray and seek the comfort and solace that the presence of God alone can provide. We in St Machar’s are very conscious of our mission to the many people who come to us for reasons other than formal worship.

We are conscious too that our stewardship is a short one and we are determined that the building we have inherited from all those who went before us is maintained in good order and that the community who worships here continues to be an active working church. It was against this background that we embarked upon what was planned as a three-phase programme of improvements to the Cathedral building.

The first phase involved the replacement of our old pews with modern bench seating which is both more comfortable and more mobile. The removal of the seating required the removal of a concrete plinth in the nave and its replacement by a new floor of Moray sandstone. This work, completed in 2018, was funded entirely from our own resources.

The second phase, which at the time of writing is due to be completed in a couple of months, involves the replacement of the roof, the repair of most of our fine stained glass windows, and the restoration of our wonderful heraldic ceiling, exactly 500 years old this year. The ceiling is one of the glories of the Cathedral, having been installed by Bishop Gavin Dunbar on the authority of Pope Leo X in 1520. It is thought to be the oldest flat ceiling in a British public building, and is of great historical and artistic significance. The restoration work is funded by a combination of major grants from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic Environment Scotland, and smaller grants from a variety of trusts and other grant-giving bodies, together with our own programme of fund raising.

It was a condition of grant from NLHF that we produce an Activity Plan demonstrating how its grant would be used to enhance understanding and awareness of the heritage of St Machar’s. We have drawn up a comprehensive plan to increase visitor numbers and to enrich their experience. In furtherance of those aims we have employed an Education Officer and an Outreach Officer (both half-time) who together are responsible for the implementation of the Plan. We will be very happy to send an electronic copy of the Activity Plan to any Minister interested in coming to St Machar’s.

The third phase of our original proposals involves the extension of the footprint of the building to provide more office accommodation, modern wcs, rehearsal and storage space, better interpretive space, and the provision of a community café, ideally to be run as a social enterprise, and encouraging the community we serve to regard the Cathedral as a natural place to come to.

The question of when or if we will be able to complete Phase 3 remains open. Our original proposal would have been difficult to get through the formal approval processes for a Category A Listed Building and a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Funding was a challenge even before Covid 19. But most important our first ideas were justifiably criticised by our own people. So it may be some time before we are able to form a realistic plan for the provision of what we had envisaged. But we do not wish to lose sight of the original aims.

*The Gatehouses*

At the entrance to the Cathedral stand two gatehouses built in 1832. These buildings were in the ownership of the Local Authority for many years but were acquired by St Machar’s just over twenty years ago. The two-storey buildings are small and limited in scope but are regularly used for small meetings. In one the Sunday School meets every week, and in the other two members of staff (our Education and Outreach officers) are based.

*Dunbar Street Hall*

Dunbar Street Hall is a free standing building located a couple of streets away. It was donated to the Kirk Session at the end of the nineteenth century. It is extensively used by community organisations, ranging from youth organisations to old-time dancing. Church meetings often take place there including meetings of the Kirk Session. It has been used when necessary for worship when the Cathedral itself is having major work done, and it is the focus for many of the Cathedral’s social and fund raising ventures.

*The Manse*

A few years ago, we took the difficult decision to sell our traditional manse, which was adjacent to the Cathedral. We were able to purchase a fine detached five-bedroom property in the Mid Stocket area of the City, very close to Mile End Primary School and in the catchment area of Aberdeen Grammar School. It is also conveniently located for Aberdeen Royal Infirmary.

The Kirk Session’s Fabrics Committee is in charge of the repair and maintenance of these buildings. Each has a specific named ’Guardian‘ on the Committee, who takes a close interest in the condition and the use of their particular building.

**OUR VISION IN ST MACHAR’S**

Our Mission Statement was originally formulated in 2000 and has been reviewed and endorsed on three subsequent occasions. It is noted below. In addition, there have in recent years been Elders’ Conferences which have helped shape and develop our vision. There is currently outstanding a Local Church Review. This was begun just before Barry Dunsmore retired but was suspended owing to the burden of work imposed by the then ongoing Presbytery Plan and the vacancy. And then, of course, came Covid 19. But as a Session we have identified a number of priorities for the future and are keen to discuss these with a new minister.

**Mission Statement**

We, the Kirk Session and people of St Machar’s, reaffirm our trust in the sovereign love of God, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, whose love for the world is declared in the gospels and is continued in the ministry of the Church. We participate in this ministry through the celebration of the word and sacrament, through lives of prayer and devotion, through education, nurture and pastoral care, through costly service to each other and the world, and more particularly in welcoming the stranger the outcast and the sinner into the community of God’s people, in healing mind body and spirit, in sharing our resources of time talents and money, and in gathering new disciples.

We celebrate our heritage as we use our historic buildings, music and arts as witnesses to the glory of God and the life, suffering and resurrection of our Lord. We seek to arraign Christian unity in partnership with the churches in north east Aberdeen, and through participation in the world church. As an eco-congregation, we further good practice ourselves and seek to extend an understanding of our responsibilities to the created universe.

In these commitments, we seek to take part in Jesus’ ministry to the world and its peoples.

The Mission Statement has done us well for the last few years but is now due for review, a review which would have happened in the now suspended Local Church Review. But there have been other occasions when the Session has taken the chance to reflect on its activities and mission and to refocus its priorities. The first of these was the Elders Away Day held in November 2015, when our then new Minister, the Rev Barry Dunsmore, led us in a day’s reflection which had a number of outcomes, of which the most immediately significant was our commitment to a three phase programme of improvements and enhancements to the Cathedral.

But important as the restoration of the roof and ceiling are, our vision for the building did not stop there. In addition to being a place of active worship and prayer, and a historic building attracting many visitors; we aimed to enhance its role as a community facility. Making the church familiar to people was seen as the first step in mission, and our new Education and Outreach officers are working to bring in more people and involve them in the history and iconography of the Cathedral as a place and as an institution.

**Elders’ Away Day 2019**

When Barry Dunsmore intimated his intention to demit, a lot of things were happening. The Presbytery had begun the preparation of the Presbytery Plan and there was also a Local Church Review underway (later suspended). So the Session took the chance to review its priorities and came up with the following:

* Pastoral Care; there was a strong feeling that we needed to strengthen our commitment to and management of pastoral care. (This is a Kirk Session commitment in which a new Minister will have to be involved.)
* Christian Education: there was identified a need to support the work of the Sunday School and also to look more closely at Adult Bible Study and other activities.
* Working with Neighbouring Churches: we are actively involved in the Donside Partnership of Churches, an ecumenical body which fosters joint outreach projects such as the starter pack scheme, and joint worship initiatives. And we were by this time aware that the Presbytery Plan, whatever form it eventually took, would have implications for us. Whether or not we were involved in any formal union, it was clear that we would have closer links with the three other churches in our parish grouping, St George’s Tillydrone, St Mary’s in King Street and St Stephen’s in Powis Terrace.
* Eco Congregation: we have been accredited as an Eco Congregation for some years now and want to take it seriously. We need to re-focus and review the way eco issues are led and developed.

**Presbytery Plan**

The Presbytery Plan was conceived with the radical mission of reducing the number of churches and ministers in Aberdeen by a third. It did so by creating Parish Groupings of around four existing churches, with the expectation that the grouping thus created would achieve various forms of rationalisation such as union between some, and in some instances a team ministry. In the Old Aberdeen Grouping, it is expected that St George’s will close shortly and unite with St Mary’s and the charge thus created will work towards a further union with St Stephen’s. We are left as a separate charge but are involved in the Parish Grouping. The basis of the Grouping is not yet determined and discussions are at an early stage. One interesting aspect is that the St George’s building, once the union is complete, will not be sold but will be retained to be an asset for the whole Grouping and there are opportunities for its use as a worship centre or as a community facility.

The Presbytery Plan, at one level, does not radically affect St Machar’s. But it does offer us the chance for close partnership working, both in worship and outreach, with churches of different traditions and with congregations and communities with different needs. As our initial contribution to partnership working each of the three partners churches was invited to nominate a representative to our Nominating Committee. The expectation therefore is that the Minister of St Machar’s will work closely with colleagues in the Grouping, in particular in mission within the Tillydrone area.

**LIFE IN ST MACHAR’S**

All of the above sets out the background but the next section tries to give an idea of what life is like in St Machar’s.

**Worship** is the principal function of the Cathedral. There are two services each Sunday. The morning service at 11 am is attended by around 100 worshippers, while the evening service at 6 pm has a regular following of between 20 and 30. The evening service is held in the small Mitchell Chapel situated in the south-east corner of the Cathedral.

Communion services are held frequently in St Machar’s. At morning worship Communion is served on the last Sunday of Each month, while at evening services, it takes place on the first Sunday. And Communion is also served on Christmas Day Easter Sunday and at Pentecost.

Services in St Machar’s tend to be formal and with great emphasis placed on preaching and prayer. Music also plays an important part in services as in so many aspects of life in St Machar’s. We have a very fine choir under the direction of our Director of Music, and it includes up to eight choral scholars, typically students, whose services are paid for by a very generous legacy left to the Cathedral by a former Organist and Choirmaster, James Lobban.

**Special Services**

Because of its age and size, the Cathedral is a natural venue for services of regional or public importance, and for memorial services for public figures. We also host annually the ANZAC Day Service in association with the local Australian and New Zealand communities.

Every year we take part in an ecumenical service with our friends from St Mary’s RC Cathedral and St Andrew’s Episcopal Cathedral. It will be our turn to host it again in 2022.

Local schools are always welcome visitors for various services. St Machar Academy, Aberdeen Grammar School and St Margaret’s School all have annual events in the Cathedral.

And as we have reached the Quincentenary, in 2020, of our heraldic ceiling, we have for some time been planning a high profile service. This was to have been held on 22 November 2020, but the pandemic has forced us to postpone this celebration. But we still intend to hold it when we are free of the pandemic, and to invite the individuals and organisations who represent the descendants or successors of the figures whose shields are on the ceiling, and, of course, many other local and national figures.

**Music**

Music plays a central role in the life of St Machar’s. In worship, praise is led by a splendid choir under the direction of our much respected Director of Music, Dr Roger Williams, MBE. In addition, the Cathedral’s fine acoustics and unique setting attract musical performers of all kinds. Aberdeen Bach Choir has its home with us and performs regularly in the Cathedral. Other Choirs, Orchestras and smaller ensembles such as the Dunedin Consort and the Scottish Ensemble, provide a programme of concerts throughout the year. We regard the Cathedral’s qualities as a performance venue an important strand of our mission to bring as wide a range of people into the Cathedral as possible,

**Outreach**

We reach out to our various communities in many ways:

*Welcoming Visitors*

The cathedral is open every day of the year from 9.30 to 4.30 (10 to 4 in winter). As a major tourist attraction, as a building of considerable age and beauty, and as a place for private prayer and contemplation, the Cathedral attracts over 30,000 visitors each year. We wish to increase that figure and the work of our Education and Outreach Officers will encourage more structured visits and learning experiences for individuals and groups.

We take part, every year, in Doors Open Day, as part of our aim to share our building and its history with as many sections of the community as possible.

*Performance*

As is said elsewhere, we can accommodate large choirs and ensembles. We have a positive policy of encouraging the use of the Cathedral for musical performance. Over 4000 people attended musical performances in the Cathedral in 2019.

*Charitable Fund Raising*

Every two years the Session, through its Outreach Committee, identifies two charities, one locally based and the other overseas, which it supports for two years. Over the years we have worked with and for organisations like Aberdeen Cyrenians, CFine Food Cooperative, and overseas bodies like Christian Aid, Water Aid, and the Uganda Schools Trust, with whom we have very close links. Currently the two Charities are Mental Health Aberdeen’s Youth Counselling Project and the Leprosy Scotland Mission. Our first contribution has usually been from the collection taken at our Service of Nine Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve. We have also taken part in a very successful Burns Supper this year, in conjunction with the St Machar Rotary Club, which raised a four figure sum for the charities.

Every Harvest, every Advent, and every Lent, we collect food and other donations for various partner organisations, including the St Vincent de Paul Society, Instant Neighbour, and CFine.

And we continue to commit to Christian Aid with House to House Collections, Bread and Cheese lunches, and with a very popular Plant Sale in the early summer.

*Reaching out to the Parish*

We try to encourage our parish to regard the Cathedral as an accessible place of worship and prayer. We deliver Christmas and Easter Cards to every household in the parish, with details of the appropriate services.

We target the return of students every term with offers of coffee and cake as they pass our door on their way to and from classes (although Covid prevented us this autumn). The returns are perhaps not huge but it can be very rewarding when a contact is made; now in addition to those who sing in the choir we have a number of students who worship regularly with us whose first contact was through an invitation to coffee as they made their way back to a hall of residence after classes.

*Christian Education*

The Sunday School meets every week in the East Gatehouse. It is run by a Coordinator who manages the curriculum and the materials . The weekly lessons are delivered by a small team of volunteers who take it in turns. There are up to 12 children on the books, but the average attendance is about 8. The children attend the opening part of the morning service and leave after a short children’s address.

Adult Education is less structured. A former minister used to hold very successful study groups attracting over 20 people on a regular basis and recently we have had Lenten Study Groups held in the Gatehouse.

*Weddings Funerals and Baptisms*

St Machar’s is a popular venue for weddings. Although the numbers had been falling recently it was not unusual for there to be over 30 in a year. At the moment we are unable to consider that kind of wedding. But we look forward to the day when we can again see a bride coming through the west door.

Funerals are also regularly held. No services have been held in the Cathedral during the period of the pandemic so far, partly because of the restrictions imposed by the Scottish Government, and partly because the works on the roof and ceiling have made services impossible. But services have been held at crematoria and at gravesides, conducted by a retired minister who is a member of our congregation. In a typical year (if we ever see such a thing any time soon) we would expect there to be about 8 – 10 funerals in a year.

And it is our joy to welcome children and occasionally adults for baptism into the church. We baptised six children last year. The tradition is for the congregation to gather around the family by the font in the north aisle and the warmth of welcome for the new arrival (of whatever age) makes this service a special occasion for all involved.

*Friends of St Machar’s Cathedral*

This is an independent charity set up almost 50 years ago by a previous Minister. It is aimed not just at the congregation but at all those who have an interest in the Cathedral and care about its music and liturgy, history and architecture. It has organised events and lectures and has raised money for various enhancements to the fabric, or events in celebration of the life of the Cathedral. It has for example provided items like a new hymn book stand and new display stands and helped to fund a new pulpit fall. It has also commissioned the composition of one of the pieces of music intended for performance at the Quincentenary Service, and during the period of lockdown, it sponsored a series of virtual music recitals released on YouTube.

The Minister is ex officio the Chairman of the Council of the Friends

**The Kirk Session**

St Machar’s has a Unitary Constitution, with the Kirk Session being responsible for all matters of governance, finance, and property. There are currently 36 members and the Session meets at least 9 times in the year, conventionally on the last week of the month.

Much of the Session’s work is carried out by committee, with regular reports to Session. There are currently four committees:

(a) Finance and Personnel: all matters of Finance and staffing

(b) Fabrics: all matters affecting the structure maintenance and repair of the Cathedral, the Gatehouses, the Dunbar Street Hall and the Manse.

(c) Outreach: all external relations, including music performances in the Cathedral visitors to the Cathedral and the Cathedral’s own charitable ventures.

(d) Hall Management: the day to day management cleaning and letting of the Dunbar Street Hall.

All Committees are convened by a senior elder and all involve other non-elders, from the congregation and from the wider community.

*Staffing*

St Machar’s employs a number of part time staff:

1. Church Secretary based in the Cathedral four mornings a week. An invaluable first point of contact for many seeking help from St Machar’s. This post is line-managed meantime by the Joint Treasurer;
2. Director of Music: responsible for the performance of all music in services (under the direction of the Minister) and for developing and leading the choir. The post reports directly to the Minister.
3. Beadles: there are currently three beadles, covering not just Sunday services but also throughout the week when the Cathedral is open to the public. These posts are managed by the Cathedral Manager,
4. Education and Outreach Officers: these appointments are to fulfil our objectives in increasing and improving the visitor experience – a condition of grant from NHLF. Their tasks do not directly involve the religious life of the church. They are line managed by the Session Clerk along with the Convener of Outreach.
5. Choral Scholars: 8 scholars selected every year and paid a retainer to sing in the choir at services and elsewhere. They are managed by the Director of Music.
6. Hall Cleaner: line-managed by Convener of Hall Management Committee.

One other vital person needs special mention: we have a Cathedral Manager who is a senior elder and in this role a volunteer, but whose various responsibilities, including the management of the Beadles, will greatly assist the Minister,

**Finance**

General income and expenditure have been approximately in balance for a number of years. Small deficits were not considered significant, and were easily met by the general reserves which at 31 December 2019 totalled about £72k. The rough balance of income and expenditure has been maintained in 2020 despite the pandemic.

Because of the way in which the annual accounts are put together neither the income nor the expenditure on the Cathedral’s development programme is concentrated in one particular year making it difficult to see what has taken place. The replacement of the seating and relaying of the floor of the central area of the nave (phase 1) in 2018 cost about £320k, and was covered by a legacy left for this purpose. Preparation for phase 2, taking plans to RIBA stage 3, was completed in February 2019, and cost around £100k. This was met by the Cathedral’s fabric reserves. The delivery of phase 2, replacing the roof, repairing the windows, and restoring the ceiling, is ongoing and has been estimated at £1.853m. It is clear that this will not be exceeded. At the end, the Cathedral will have general reserves of about £100k, but, as we committed £550k from fabric reserves to the project, very little capital will remain in the Fabric Fund. Until we rebuild our capital reserves, expenditure on fabric maintenance (in recent years about £15k per annum) will have to be met from general income.

The appeal to cover the £1.853m cost of phase 2 is about £99k short of target. Vigorous efforts are being made to close the gap, and the Kirk Session is reasonably confident that it will be closed in the coming months. We have borrowed £275k from the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland, but this is solely to assist with cash-flow; we hope to repay it at some point in 2021.

**Covid 19 Postscript**

This Profile describes life in St Machar’s as it was before Covid 19, and as we hope it will be again after the pandemic is under control. But of course life in St Machar’s, as elsewhere, has been severely disrupted. The last ’normal‘ service took place on Sunday 15th March, We then introduced ‘Online’ services. Each week, a short service was recorded involving one of the ministers who have given such loyal service to the Cathedral since the vacancy period started.

When the Scottish Government eased the restrictions to allow a limited form of worship, we were not immediately able to recommence, as by that time the contractors had reached a critical stage in their works and we could not get access to the Cathedral. Since 20th September, however, we have resumed weekly worship, observing social distancing and without singing of any kind. We are currently attracting congregations of around forty, and there is also deep appreciation of the recorded services from the many in the Congregation who have not so far felt able to come to church but who nonetheless need the spiritual comfort of taking part in worship.

We have tried, through regular bulletins emailed or posted to the Congregation, by use of the Website and the Facebook page, through the quarterly magazine and by personal contact, to reassure the congregation that we are still available.

We cannot be sure of the date when life will return to normal in St Machar’s as elsewhere. Indeed, everyone now realises that it will take some time and we may never totally return to the status quo. Whatever the eventual outcome we will all be faced with challenges in worship in outreach and in pastoral care, to ensure that the Cathedral continues to draw people from all over the country for so many different backgrounds and for so many different reasons.