

New Futures: Former Places of Worship Programme

The pews of St Fillan's tin tabernacle are full on a Highland-grey June evening. Though the Episcopal church's congregation in Killin has dwindled to single figures, dozens sit between its wood-panelled walls, keen to have their say on the next chapter in the building's life.

Pilgrims, tourists, and locals alike poke their heads into St Monans Auld Kirk, standing sentry over the Fife coast. Drawn to the hypnotic white nave of the church, bathed in Saturday afternoon light, they find a series of information boards, one spotted with colourful round stickers, another detailing the history of the church, and a final board displaying stylish architectural renders, proposing a vision of its future.

An assorted crew of Christians and a smattering of Buddhists make their way into Fogo Kirk on a rainy Sunday morning in rural Berwickshire. They're there to hear a peer, a member of their congregation, rather than an ordained minister, give a service in the newly interdenominational community-owned church.

"Will we be the generation that fails to respect and protect Scotland's unique religious heritage, or will we provide the solutions and the support to manage this tumultuous change with care, imagination and vision?" was the question posed by Victoria Collison of Historic Churches Scotland and Sarah Pearce of the Heritage Network in the spring 2023 edition of the *Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland Magazine*.

Since then, beneath the cries of 'somebody must do something', communities across Scotland have quietly stepped up to meet the moment, and a religious and civic upheaval has begun to take place. While many make their way to private buyers or other faith groups, a small but significant cohort is being claimed by the communities that have cared for them for generations, determined to see them remain in local hands well into the future.

But why do Scotland's communities, overstretched and underfunded as they are, find themselves in this position? At their 2021 General Assembly, the Church of Scotland made a difficult decision. Faced with rising costs and falling congregations, they decided to sell a significant portion of their estate. With the money raised, they planned to reinvest, repairing the fabric of their remaining assets and refocusing their mission where they could have the most impact. In doing so, they hoped to right the ship and strengthen the institution for years to come.

Four years on from this decision, however, the Church of Scotland's financial situation is ever more precarious. At their 2025 General Assembly, the Church laid bare the challenges they faced and reaffirmed their need to sell more assets. Though startling at the time of its announcement, the initial estimate of 400–500 churches due to

be sold has come to appear modest. A close reading of the eleven Presbyteries' Mission Plans, documents which detail the process of amalgamating congregations and earmarking buildings as surplus to requirement, reveals that the total number of churches at risk of disposal over this period may be closer to 800.

Whatever the final figure, the future of Scotland's church buildings, and the distinct cultural and heritage value embedded in them, feels increasingly uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the process of selling these buildings is well underway. Reports going back to 2022, published by the General Trustees (the property-owning arm of the Church of Scotland), reveal that 231 churches have already been authorised for disposal as of May 2025. The Church of Scotland has also made clear that, due to the need to raise capital, they have adopted a policy of selling assets to the "highest clean bidder", and that although they consider off-market sales to communities on a case-by-case basis, this is entirely at the Church's discretion and on their terms.

St Fillan's Episcopal Church, Killin, was built in 1876 by the 7th Marquis of Breadalbane as a place for his shooting parties to worship, and known locally as the Grouse Chapel.

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In the knowledge that the sale had begun, and with the spectre of yet more sales looming, the Community Ownership Support Service (COSS) launched the New Futures: Former Places of Worship programme in January 2025. This programme, enabled with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic Environment Scotland as well as Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS), the umbrella organisation under which COSS sits, provides specialised support to community organisations considering bringing a church into community ownership.

DTAS is a member-led charity that promotes, supports and represents development trusts, community-owned and led organisations which work to combine community-led action with an enterprising approach to address and tackle local needs and issues, across Scotland. In the early days of the New Futures programme, the churches team drew on the knowledge and experience of DTAS's 349 member development trusts and held a 'DTAS debates' session

to discuss the question: "How can Development Trusts play a role in the future use of land and buildings being disposed of by the Church of Scotland, and when should they say no?"

Given a space to express their views on the ongoing church sales, attendees shared a common feeling of frustration and uncertainty. The significance of church buildings to the communities attending was clear, and there was a deep concern about what might happen should they cease to be community assets. Many attendees felt that the buildings were too central to the life of their community to risk them entering the open market, where they could be snapped up by developers and turned into flats – or worse – short-term holiday lets.

However, despite the attachment felt by attendees, they also recognised that churches are inherently complex buildings, and that taking them on means dealing with unique challenges not associated with other assets. One hundred churches at risk of closure in Scotland are Category A-listed, and a further 389 are B-listed. Many of these buildings are associated with scheduled monuments, such as war memorials and graveyards. Furthermore, ecclesiastical exemption ends when the buildings enter community ownership, meaning that new owners often need to spend significant sums to bring a church up to modern building standards before they can make use of it. Faced with these conditions, many community organisations have concluded that the burden placed on them would simply be too onerous to consider buying a church, despite the building's value to the community.

For those who have made the decision to pursue acquiring their church, they face the added challenge of entering funding limbo. The sector's go-to pot of acquisition funding, the Scottish Land Fund, is on the brink of closing to new applicants, set to allocate its remaining capital before the end of the parliamentary term. With its fate resting on the outcome of the next election, it's not clear whether communities will be able to rely on the Land Fund in future to complete their buyouts. Yet despite the challenges, communities refuse to down tools and give up. Many are finding creative solutions to raise the necessary capital to buy their churches and turn them into a usable asset.



St Monans Auld Kirk has been a place of worship since 1265, but ceased being used by the local congregation in 2022, when the Church of Scotland announced plans to sell off 400 churches across Scotland. © Development Trusts Association Scotland

The 'Save Bedrule Kirk' campaign has called upon the international diaspora of the Turnbull Clan, brimming with enthusiasm for their Scottish ancestry, to raise the £35,000 needed to buy the church. Action Porty, a development trust based in Portobello, Edinburgh, has recently raised £168,525 through a community shares offer to renovate Bellfield Church, which they acquired through a Community Right to Buy in 2017.

Other communities draw on alternative sources of wealth, latent in the land they live in. Dalmellington Parish Development Trust, with three turbines taking up half of their logo, are expert at making use of the lucrative community benefit funds from Ayrshire windfarms. They managed to secure £120,000 from the South Kyle Wind Farm Community Benefit Fund to buy the Kirk O' the Covenant Church building.

With positive stories emerging across the country, hope remains for the future of Scotland's churches. Yet absent is a national strategy, and with no obvious funding pathway, clear winners and losers are beginning to emerge. Community organisations with highly skilled boards, paid employees, and sources of wealth to draw on have found creative ways to finance the acquisition and development of their church, whereas groups which lack the specialised skillsets, experience, or means, are struggling.

In these circumstances, the New Futures team can step in, helping to

plug the gap between community organisations, giving struggling communities a fighting chance. But due to the mounting financial pressures under which the Church of Scotland is operating, and with hundreds of churches soon to enter the market, the question of whether the help available will be enough to meet the demand remains uncertain.

In light of this, Collison and Pearce's question has yet to be definitively answered. The scale of the challenge facing those looking to bring churches into community ownership is immense, and often insurmountable. Many churches will inevitably be sold to private buyers. Communities are nevertheless fighting to protect Scotland's unique religious heritage, finding solutions to save and repurpose their churches under immense pressure. As the New Futures programme matures, its mission will be to disseminate these solutions, making sure that the victories earned by Scotland's community landowners can be replicated, and to support new solutions as they emerge. By working together, pooling the skills and knowledge of communities across Scotland, a chance might yet remain to find new futures for Scotland's churches. ■

If you want to find out more about the New Futures programme or are interested in bringing a place of worship into community ownership, contact Harry Whitmore, Churches Advisor at the Community Ownership Support Service, at harry@dtascot.org.uk