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Glasgow minister considered Catholic switch over merger plans



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Senior Reporter



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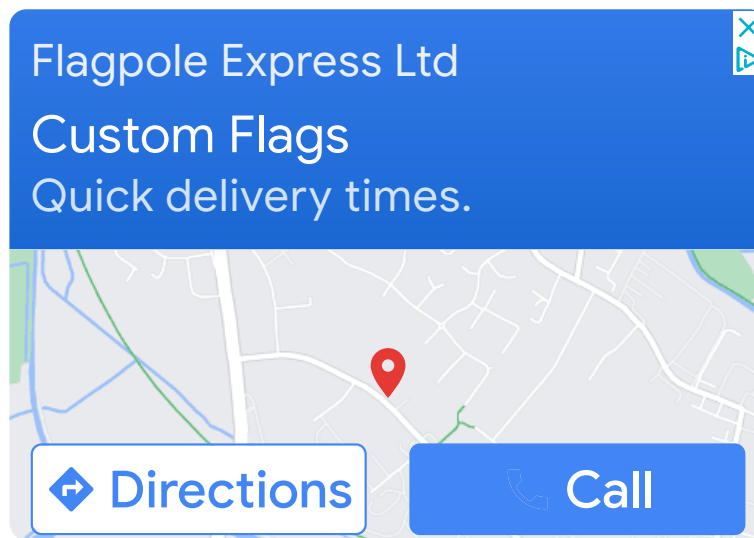


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A GLASGOW minister has said he considered converting to

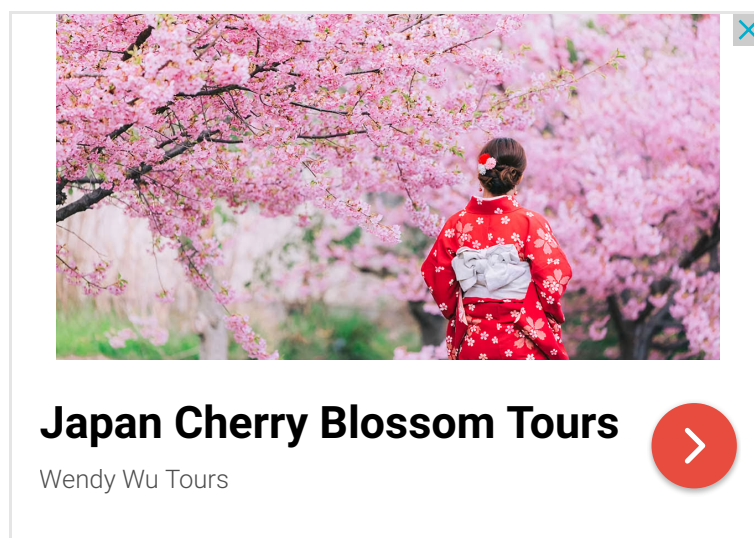
Catholicism in protest against plans by the Kirk to cut the number of ministers and close churches in some of the city's most deprived areas.



Reverend Brian Casey of Springburn Parish Church said the proposals amounted to "walking away from the poor".

The Kirk is looking at its whole portfolio as part of a cost-cutting review, with dozens of churches expected to shut and congregations merged.

Rev Casey said Glasgow is the only presbytery in Scotland where "priority area" parishes are affected, which rank in the bottom 5% of the social deprivation index.



The Church of Scotland has already closed a number of churches under a "prune for growth" strategy, which it said

had led to it losing a third of its membership who refused to go elsewhere.

Like many others, Springburn Church provides an extensive range of crisis services including a food bank, emergency cash for bills and benefits advice, support for those battling drug addiction, advocacy for asylum seekers and a safe space for people to disclose crimes including abuse.

Rev Casey, 52, said he had recently supported a woman whose benefits were cancelled in error, who was not eating and had developed pneumonia. He said she had been told by social security staff to have her dogs euthanised to save money.

The General Assembly has repeatedly affirmed that the gospel imperative is "priority to the poor".

The three parishes have been categorised as Zone 2, mainly made up of clusters in the north east of Glasgow where up to 34% of the population are income deprived and 39% live in the 5% most deprived areas.

Springburn has a child poverty rate of 38.9%. More than a quarter of the population are Church of Scotland with 32% Roman Catholic.

"Our promise to always prioritise the poor has been a total lie," said Rev Casey, who has advised the Scottish Government on drug death strategies and is a former policeman.

"Not only are we feeding our community and providing birth, death and marriage support as well as school chaplaincy to one of the toughest schools in Scotland, we are providing drop-in support and food and fuel support for our parish.

"I conduct on average 170 funerals per year (376 during year one of lockdown) based on funeral directors working with me to ensure that families don't have to pay for a celebrant, currently costing £200 cash, on the day of the funeral.

"Taken on top of that is the fact that Springburn has had a huge growth spurt in terms of social housing since 2019 and the numbers in my parish may well have as much as doubled.

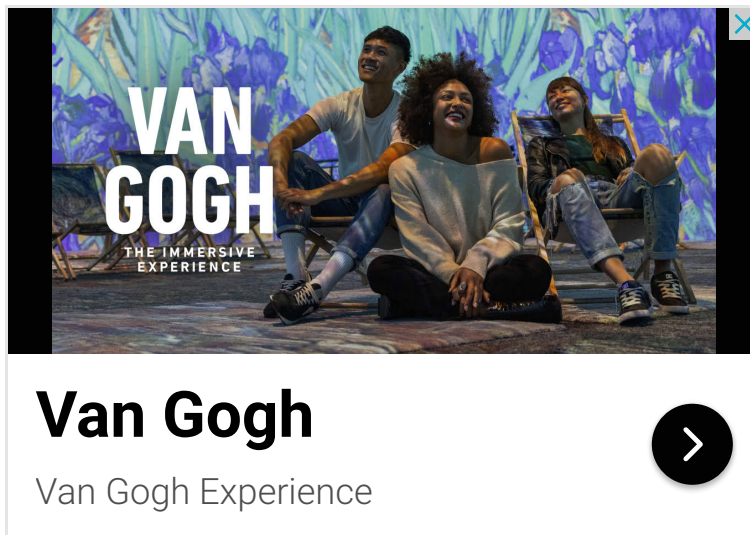
"I am also being made aware by Glasgow City Council that the Red Road Flat area is about to be redeveloped with social housing meaning that by the time 2026 comes and the union is complete, there may be 1.5 ministry staff to cover around 18,000 'priority area' people."

The Kirk has pointed to the rising costs of maintaining the churches, fewer people going to church and a declining number of ministers for the shake-up – which it says will create a “lean and fit mission for the 21st century”.

Under the plans, some ministers with short-term contracts will not be renewed.

Rev Casey said he had contemplated converting to Catholicism, switching to the unpaid Open Episcopal Church or looking for another job outside the ministry because the plans could potentially leave him "jobless,

homeless and selling out the people I love in Springburn".



He said: "The Roman Catholic Church has more of a structure and spirituality to it.

"The one thing that stopped me was that there is a lack of liberality, plus the fact I wouldn't get paid enough. They only get about £8000 from their diocese, which is pocket money if you have a family.

"No other presbytery has closed priority area churches. It does just seem to be Glasgow."

Under the current plan, his parish will be supported by a part-time Ministry Development Assistant (MDA) but Rev Casey says provision will still fall short, given the communities they serve.

He said: "Colston Wellpark has an ordained local minister which is kind of an auxiliary minister. He can do our job but isn't paid. The current OLM works a lot of hours already as well and is probably close to full-time."

Rev Grant Barclay, clerk to the Presbytery of Glasgow, said: "In 2021, against a background of falling minister numbers, a decline in membership and a drop in income both nationally and locally, the General Assembly tasked the local church with creating five-year mission plans that would ensure Church of Scotland congregations are properly equipped to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and to serve their communities for the coming decades.

"This reduction affects all areas including Glasgow, which requires to use its reduced number of posts to serve everyone in the greater Glasgow area.



"The extent of the reductions means that priority areas will be affected, though to a lesser extent than non-priority areas since additional staffing has been earmarked for them.

"Presbytery mission plans must have been agreed by presbyteries, the Faith Nurture Forum and the general trustees by December 31, 2022.

"Glasgow Presbytery is continuing to determine its mission plan with a view to having this approved by other agencies of the church in the coming months.

"The wide-ranging reforms, which will involve congregations uniting, a move toward shared ministry and reducing the church's buildings footprint, are designed to help local churches work together effectively and efficiently, living out the Five Marks of Mission in a dynamic and sustainable way.

"The church is committed to providing ministry to all parts of Scotland and, in order to achieve this with a reduced number of ministers, needs to be creative in making use of this scarce resource."



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