

The Changing Face of Church in Aberdeen

By Dr Emma Percy and Dr Joel Pierce

Research Rationale Report
(including Background Research)
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What We Are Researching and Why

This spring the Centre for Ministry Studies will carry out a series of interviews with local clergy in an attempt to get a better view of the way expressions of Christianity are changing in Aberdeen as a result of migration to the city. The health of Christianity in Scotland can no longer be equated with just the health of the Church of Scotland or other historically white majority churches which we will refer to in this report as ‘mainstream’ (e.g. the Free Church of Scotland and other Scottish presbyterian denominations, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and the Roman Catholic Church). Increasingly, to understand Christianity in Scotland, one needs to attend what Christianity means to the Christians of the various diasporic communities (henceforth, Global Christians) who are forming a larger and larger percentage of Scotland’s religious believers.

This is especially true in Aberdeen where migrants make up a disproportionately large percentage of the city’s population. The effect of such migration can be seen, in part, in the analysis of quantitative data on church attendance. For example, in the 2016 Scottish Church Census, Aberdeenshire, was the only council area which bucked the trend of falling church attendance. The city of Aberdeen still showed a decline in overall attendance, but it was much smaller than in other cities. In his analysis of the results, Peter Brierley attributed both these trends in the region to the large number of Polish Catholics who had moved to the area to work in the oil industry.¹

As our preliminary research indicates, if and when a future church census takes place, it will likely show that an increasing number of Aberdeen’s Christians are not just Polish Catholics, but also Global Christians with roots in places as diverse as Nigeria, Southern India, Hong Kong, and Romania and whose Christian practices range from Eastern Orthodox to Pentecostalism.

In our research we will take a qualitative, ethnographic approach, seeking to document the self-understandings of ministerial approach and strategy of various clergy in the city of Aberdeen who minister to Global Christians. This research is modelled on other research already carried out in Edinburgh and will complement an ongoing Scotland-wide quantitative study due to be published soon by Brendan Research.² It is hoped that the final report will show how Aberdeen forms a unique but integral part of the changing face of Christianity in Scotland.

¹ Brierley, Peter, “The Fourth Scottish Church Census: The Results Unveiled” (2017), 16 (retrieved from: <https://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/scottish-church-census>).

² See, <https://www.cswc.div.ed.ac.uk/2023/07/global-christians-in-edinburgh/> and <https://www.brendanresearch.com/work>, respectively.

A City Gathering People from Across the Globe

Although Aberdeen is the most remote of Scotland's four major metropolitan areas, it has a long history of international ties, having historically acted as the primary port city of northeast Scotland. That said, its isolation has meant it has had unique experience of with regards to migration. For example, the large Irish migration to Scotland in the late 19th and early 20th century did not significantly impact Aberdeen.

Aberdeen's industrial history was radically altered with the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves in the North Sea and the subsequent development of Aberdeen as the oil capital of Europe which commenced in the 1970s. The international nature of the oil industry has meant a regular exchange of workers and researchers between Aberdeen and other oil producing regions across the globe. It also has increased job opportunities in both the oil sector and other tangential industries.

In light of this, it is not surprising that despite being much smaller in population than Glasgow and Edinburgh, Aberdeen still boasts a substantial population of international migrants. While measurements of migration depend to a great extent on how an 'immigrant' is defined, statistics of residents born outside the UK and residents who are not-British citizens can serve as rough proxies for measuring migration.³ As of 2020, estimates of the percentages of Aberdonians who were born abroad (25%) or are not British citizens (20%) are around two and half times that of Scotland as a whole for which the numbers are 10% and 8%, respectively. By these measures, Aberdeen is the most diverse city in Scotland, with only Edinburgh for a rival.⁴

Area	% of Residents Born Abroad	% of Residents who are not British citizens
Scotland	10	8
Aberdeen	25	20
Dundee	12	10
Edinburgh	23	20
Glasgow	15	12

Due to their great populations, Glasgow and Edinburgh do have larger numbers of migrants. 2021 estimates of residents born outside the UK and residents who are not British citizens were 90,000 and 75,000 respectively for Glasgow versus 56,000 and 46,000 for Aberdeen. However, the gap is narrowing between Glasgow and Aberdeen with growth among these groups as percentage of population increasing by 17% and 27% respectively in Glasgow between 2011 and 2020 against 79% and 46% in Aberdeen.⁵ While these estimates remain just that, only when the full results of the 2022 census which are released will we have more exact figures, they still indicated that in terms of being a place where migrants seek to set down roots and create communities, Aberdeen is an increasingly appealing destination. This suggests that one cannot understand Aberdeen, and indeed Christianity in Aberdeen, without taking into account the importance of migration to the area.

³ Both the difficulty in defining immigration and that such statistics can only be approximations for it is evident in the fact that as a naturalised British citizen, one of the authors of this report falls into one category and not the other, while a British citizen born abroad would present the opposite case. It should also be noted that confidence intervals in all of these estimates are large indicating that they should be regarded as, at best, rough estimates in the absence of published census data.

⁴ Unless otherwise stated all data in this section is based on estimates made by the Office of National Statistics and can be found at [Local area migration indicators, UK - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/localarea/migration/indicators)

⁵ Edinburgh outstrips in Aberdeen in terms of growth by percentage of population who are not British citizens (64.6%) over this same period, but lags behind in terms of the growth in the percentage of the population born abroad (61.4%).

The Changing Face of Church in Aberdeen

Global Christians arriving in Aberdeen may find a home in existing churches, but might found new churches, some independent and some affiliated to denominations in the countries from which they have migrated. Using data available on the public web including church websites and the OSCR Scottish charities database, we have compiled a list of churches in Aberdeen which were either founded by Global Christians or have dedicated ministries to Global Christians. Following a similar study in Edinburgh, we have provisionally grouped the churches and ministries which we have identified into three groups. The first of these, Model A, designates independent churches formed with the mission and intention of ministering to Global Christians of a particular ethnic group. For example, Aberdeen Chinese Christian Church whose roots the city date back to 1968 summarise their mission as “to serve the Chinese & effectively share with them the Gospel of Christ in the Grampian region”.⁶

Model B churches are ones founded and primarily staffed by Global Christians which aim to be multicultural or multinational. An example of such churches are the local Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) congregations. These are part of an international organisation headquartered in Nigeria which aims to establish RCCG churches and parishes in every nation on Earth.⁷

Finally, Model C names those groups developed within in mainstream churches which allow those of similar cultural-linguistic backgrounds to worship and fellowship together. This may involve specific language provision. As an example of such a group of Global Christians, we have already noted the large number of Polish Catholics in the region, many of whom participate in Polish-language services.⁸ Our initial research also shows that the Roman Catholic churches are increasingly drawing congregants with roots in other parts of the globe. Our initial discussions with members of the Catholic clergy indicate that there are currently ministries which serve Nigerian Catholics, Filipinos, Ukrainians (about 10% of whom are Greek Catholics), and Indian communities originally from Kerala and Goa. As a result, regular masses are held in a number of different languages.

There are also examples of traditional Protestant denominations exemplifying Model C ways of doing church. For example, local a Baptist church is providing simultaneous translation into Farsi for the community of Iranian asylum seekers worshipping with them. Such Model C approaches may also involve incorporating liturgy into regular Scottish services. An example of this would be Nigerian services of dedication for a new baby, and the use of a Nigerian Baptismal liturgy in an Episcopal Church.

While a helpful heuristic for understanding the mission of ministries and churches, these categories need not be rigid boundaries and it is possible to move across them. For example, according to its website Pilgrim’s Church began as a Malayalam outreach ministry of King’s Church (Model C), a large Assemblies of God congregation in Aberdeen, before setting up as an independent church in 2015 (Model A).⁹

⁶ <https://aberdeenchinesecc.org.uk/accc-history/>

⁷ <https://jesushouseaberdeen.org/about-us/>

⁸ For more information on the importance of this community in Aberdeen, see: Bruce, Steve. *Scottish Gods : Religion in Modern Scotland 1900-2012*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, p.71 <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/abdn/detail.action?docID=1698588>.

⁹ <https://www.pilgrimschurch.co.uk/about-us>

We anticipate that as we talk to more clergy in the area we will learn about more stories of groundbreaking ministries and ways that Christianity in Aberdeen is coming to reflect the true diversity which exists in Christian churches worldwide.

Part of our aim in also will be to understand the challenges, both current and anticipated, facing Global Christians in Aberdeen and their strategies for addressing them. For example, many Global Christians attending both new and mainstream churches have families with children born in Scotland. The future of some of these congregations and newer churches will depend on whether these children echo the trends of decreased religiosity across generations evident among British people more generally or find alternative ways of integrating their religious heritage and identity as they become adults. We will also be open to hearing about other possible challenges, such as those presented by government policies around immigration and the anticipated decline of the North Sea oil sector.

As our preliminary research has shown, Global Christians are an integral part of what Christianity is in Aberdeen. Research that seeks to recognise and understand the importance of faith and practice for the Global Christians who have settled in this city is valuable in understanding the current expression of Christianity in Aberdeen. As we develop this research and complete a final report in the coming months, we hope to fill out this picture in more detail.

Appendix 1

Below is a partial list of some of the churches and fellowship groups serving Global Christians in Aberdeen along with a tentative assignment of a model designation to them based on information publicly available on the web. Please let us know if there are churches which need to be added or information that needs to be changed.

Name	Model	Primary Language	Tradition
Aberdeen African & Caribbean Fellowship	C	English	Multiple
Aberdeen Chinese Christian Church	A	Cantonese; Mandarin, and English	Evangelical
Castlegate, St Peter's, Filipino Fellowship	C	Tagalog	Catholic
Cathedral, St Mary of the Assumption, Polish Service	C	Polish	Catholic
Cathedral, St Mary of the Assumption, Grupo de Conexión	C	Spanish	Catholic
Christ the Beauty of Holiness International Ministry	B	English	Pentecostal
Deeper Life Bible Church	B	English	Pentecostal
El Shaddai Universal Ministries	A	Tamil; English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Jesus House Torry, Aberdeen	B	English	Pentecostal
Love Citadel	B	English	Pentecostal
Mastrick, The Holy Family, Syro-Malabar Service	C	Malayalam	Catholic
Omega Fire Ministries Aberdeen	B	English	Pentecostal
Pilgrims' Gospel Church	A	Malayalam	Pentecostal
RCCG - Graceland Parish	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Higher Ground Assembly	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Living Truth	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Restoration Chapel, Stonehaven	B	English	Pentecostal

RCCG - Victory Assembly Banchory	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG- City of the Great King	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Fountain Of Love Inverurie	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Jesus House Dyce	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Montrose Tabernacle for All Nations	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Pavilion of Grace	B	English	Pentecostal
RCCG - Fountain Of Love	B	English	Pentecostal
St Thomas Indian Orthodox Church Aberdeen	A	Malayalam, English	Orthodox
The Greek Orthodox Parish of Saint Matthew Aberdeen	A	Greek; English	Orthodox
The Stone Church Aberdeen (Word Alive Ministries)	B	English	Pentecostal
The Watchman Cathedral - Watchman Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement (WCCRM)	B	English	Pentecostal
The Word Charismatic Ministries International (The Peace House)	B	English	Pentecostal
Torry, The Sacred Heart, Polish Service	C	Polish	Catholic
Winner's Chapel Aberdeen	B	English	Pentecostal
Woodside, St Joseph's, Polish Service	C	Polish	Catholic