

Glen Funnel Kirk

You may not have heard of Glen Funnel, but it is a beautiful valley hidden on the west side of Loch Riddon, winding its way up into the hills of the Cowal Peninsular, these days, with only a few crofts dotted around. Where the Funnel Burn meets the loch is the village of Invercross, named after the large cross that used to adorn the ancient church. Most frequently reached by ferry or intrepid sailors, it is only in the last 10 years that a road has given access to the glen and to the village.



In the 19th century the village had come to prominence due to the large oyster beds discovered within the mouth of the Funnel Burn. The village became quite prosperous, with a population of about 800, until the oyster beds were over fished. And so, the village became a sleepy backwater, existing on a little fishing and free ranging sheep and Highland cattle up the glen. The villagers worshipped in their local church, built on the site of the pre-

Reformation church that had had connections with monks from Ireland.

When the road came, things began to change, and beyond everyone's belief, permission was granted to build 100 new houses around the edge of the village. This development came with fast fibre internet access, so it became an ideal place for people to enjoy the peace and tranquility but also work remotely. So, new families moved in, many with no church connections, so they did not find it easy to integrate into the traditional life of the village.

A quiet backwater it may have become, but it did not escape the Kirk's Presbytery Review; however, the outcome was quite unexpected. Due to the Glen Funnel church's inaccessibility, it was granted a 0.75 ministerial post for 5 years, only renewable if the active congregation grew significantly over that time. This caused considerable consternation for the 20 regular members in the village as they had absolutely no idea how to go about it, even the Interim Moderator felt it was a challenge to far, so obviously a task for the new minister, if anyone was prepared to take up the baton.

One elderly couple were up for the challenge and they suggested that they should invite all the villagers to a burger supper in the village hall, under the title "**Your local church – Your part in its future**". After some discussion this was agreed and a date was set; posters were put up on lamp posts where they would be seen. Of course, the catering team were concerned about how many burgers they would need, as it needed a special trip to McCaskie's in Wemyss Bay. They even went for Gourmet Angus Steak Burgers at £2.50 each; if this meeting was to start the revival of their church, they were well worth it!

They also called 3 prayer meetings in the time before the set date. To many people's surprise, but not to everyone's, as some members fully expected God to do his part, just over 100 people turned up,

mostly the incomers, as some long standing members weren't too enthusiastic. The burgers went down a treat and everyone chatted away in fine style. Logan, the Session Clerk had a list of questions the Session had thought relevant; however, things didn't quite go to plan.

I can only give you a brief outline of the Q&A session, as space doesn't permit a full account; you will get the gist though. There was one member of the audience, Alistair Smith, who seemed to take charge: "I've never been to church, so what do you do when you meet?" "Well, we sing and pray and listen to the Bible and get an explanation in the sermon." "Why, and what's a sermon?" came the reply; Logan looked hesitant, so one of the worship leaders, Eilidh, stood up. "Sorry that we have assumed that you know what goes on, you see we wanted to find out how you might join us. This is obviously not the case, so let's go back to square one."

Eilidh then began to explain about Jesus – that he is not a myth, but nowadays genuinely accepted and passionately believed by Christians, to have lived in the first century AD and the record in the Bible is accepted as very reliable. It explains that he, Jesus, is the Son of God who had come to earth to die for the sins of all humanity, to pay the price for the evil in the world. Then by believing in him and asking him to forgive our sins, we could have a life in the presence of God, after our deaths – in what is called eternity. She went to explain that once you know about Jesus, spending eternity away from God doesn't bear thinking about, "So that is why we are so thankful for the opportunity to say 'yes' to him and that's why we meet together each Sunday".

"That's very interesting," said Alistair, "but how could we join in when we don't know any of these things?" Sensing the openness of some of the people listening, Eilidh explained that there are courses, like Alpha or Christianity Explored that could be run to explain things. "So, what sort of things do you sing?" was the next question;

somewhat hesitantly Eilidh explained that there were many, many songs called hymns written over the last 400 years. “Isn’t there anything more modern?” Well, yes there is, but we have a rather decrepit pipe organ, that’s very difficult to play anything modern on.” was the reply. Alistair responded: “Some of us play instruments, and some of the kids; could they join in?” This response was beyond their wildest expectations, and having made this unexpected connection with the incomers, the Q&A session was drawn to a close and further arrangements were made to meet with some of these musicians, again to be in the village hall and not in the church.

Logan then explained that as they were in the process of looking for a new minister, things like the courses would need to wait until after that appointment. Everyone seemed very happy, the church members, because they had been uncertain about the response and outcome, and the audience, because they had begun to realise that the church members weren’t so stuck up as some had assumed, they were quite normal really, just having trouble explaining their faith and their love of their church.

After Logan had thanked everyone for attending, our friend in the audience, Alistair, responded, “Thank you so much for arranging this evening, by the way, the burgers were excellent! Without this we probably wouldn’t have come near the church as it is a mystery to so many of us. Speaking personally, I would certainly like to find out more about your church community, so would one of you meet my wife and me outside the church on Sunday?” A round of applause rippled around the hall.

Quandary at Glen Funnel

Word soon got round the village about the ‘Burger’ meeting as it became known. There were rumours and counter rumours within

the church community about what had happened, that Logan, the Session Clerk had sold out to the incomers, or that Eilidh, the worship leader, had been very critical of their traditional worship. Neither were of course true and there was even a rumour that a very amicable outcome had been the result.

Logan Campbell was the owner of the village store, so he knew a lot about village life and about the church, which was a tricky balance to keep, but he was respected for how he kept the two separate. He organised an informal meeting of the six Session members, to put them all in the picture and it was agreed that the rumour mongering was not very Christian or a good example to be setting to their new friends. They did agree that it would be sensible to have a meeting of the whole congregation and give a proper report on the Burger meeting and deal with any concerns.



Unusual for their church meetings, there was a really good turnout, because everyone wanted to have their say – it was their church after all and they would decide what happened, so it was poor Eilidh who was on the receiving end. Eilidh had grown up in the village,

gone to High School in Dunoon and then gone to Heriot Watt University to read Pharmacy. There she had met Derrick Chalmers who was studying Accounting and they had married not long after they had graduated.

After raising their family in Edinburgh and their children all leaving home, they had moved back to Invercross, into one of the new houses from where Derrick worked remotely and Eilidh was looking into opening a pharmacy next to the village shop. While living in Edinburgh, Eilidh had trained as a Reader, experienced many other forms of worship and the family had also been to Christian Holiday Conferences, where they had met people from very different worshipping traditions.

Logan gave a brief but accurate resumé of the Burger meeting, emphasising that the musical suggestions had come from Alistair Smith and that Eilidh had handled that part of the meeting very well. An elderly member, known to everyone only as Mr McLeod, kept going on about 'not losing the status quo'. Mrs McGarry, trying to keep the peace, said "I agree with Mr McLeod, there's nothing wrong with our worship, and shouldn't we just wait until we get our new minister?" "No minister will come if they think that we're happy with the status quo!" shouted someone.

Sensing things were going nowhere, an exasperated Eilidh got to her feet. "Do you really think we should sit back and do nothing until we hopefully get a new minister. I believe that God is at work, moving to help us fulfil our challenge, because, let's face it, we are not going to grow the congregation in our own strength." A shuffling of feet and muttering were heard, no one had ever suggested that God was at work in their church before, they'd always had the traditional worship that they had grown up with, and their last minister had been there for 40 years and hardly ever left the village.

Eilidh continued: “Have you ever considered the relevance of the worship we have here? Is it what church tradition provides, or is it what God expects from us? To be very honest, it is unfortunately the former. If there was time, I could explain the forms of worship found in the Old and New Testaments, and the ways worship is changing around the country. God is very much alive; the worldwide church is very much alive. The church is Christ’s body, it is a living body and therefore can’t stay still, it needs to adapt to the society we live in, at the same time as sticking to its Biblical roots, we are just stagnating, keeping the status quo. The reality is that young people are not going to come to something that we have got used to by habit and our hymn singing is nothing like the type of music that is popular these days. Think back to the type of music you used to listen to when you were young, do you think God doesn’t realise that music tastes change? The services I used to take around Edinburgh were nothing like our worship here, even though I have tried to make changes. There is room for traditional worship and a more exuberant form of worship, we can’t hold back a move of God. Alistair Smith’s offer to gather up some of the local musicians, including the youngsters is really amazing and we need to welcome

their offer with open arms. If through this we can get them to come to know Jesus, that will be amazing.”



The Village Hall

Mrs McGarry put her hand up to ask a question: "Doesn't it matter that they're not Christians and might play music in church?" "Not at all, everyone has to start somewhere. They're going to have to learn Christian songs and will doubtless ask questions about what the words mean, there's great theology in many hymns and songs, old and new. Not until then will we be able to involve them in a service." "I still think it's risky." said Mr McLeod.

The next day, when Logan explained this to the organist, she breathed a big sigh of relief, "I don't think anyone realises what strain I've been under for years." "But you never told anyone that you've been struggling." responded Logan, "It's about time folk were a little bit more honest with each other."

Before the next service, Eilidh played some quiet modern Christian songs in place of the pre-service organ music. "What was that nice music?" someone asked Eilidh after the service.

A couple of weeks later, Alistair brought 9 musicians along to the village hall, Eilidh had her lap top with her and they watched a few songs on YouTube, to give everyone an idea and then they started to look at the music she had brought with her. They soon began to get the hang of the rhythms and they all had an enjoyable evening.

Glen Funnel and all the characters are from my imagination, but the substance of the meetings is not, they are compiled from my own experiences and snippets I have seen or heard over the years. Apologies to anyone who happens to be blessed with the same name as any of my characters, it is pure coincidence.

If I hear any more news of what is happening, I will certainly let you know.

Blessings, Phil Theaker.