



University
of Glasgow

DISCERNING SCOTLAND'S FUTURE

**Ecumenical conversations in Scottish churches about
Scotland's constitutional future.**

A report by

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Executive Summary

This research project funded by The Paristamen Charity and conducted by a team from the University of Glasgow between September 2023 and April 2024, sponsored and reflected upon a series of ecumenical conversations among people attending Christian churches in Scotland.

Presentations by Christian public figures involved in Scottish politics (Kate Forbes, Murdo Fraser, Maggie McTernan and Stephen Noon) two of whom were pro-union and two pro-independence were videoed at an initial gathering and then used to generate discussion in local meetings at 12 locations across the length and breadth of Scotland.

The conversations were based on Discernment in Common methods, which aim to promote better dialogue through respectful listening and questioning and consideration of the values and virtues of views we may disagree with.

Participants were then invited to take part in an online follow-up survey which gleaned more information about their backgrounds, political views and views on Scotland's constitutional future.

Although the sample was self-selecting and was not weighted, of the just over a third of participants who completed the online survey, there was a roughly equal split between male and female respondents and those supporting pro-independence and pro-union political parties. Most participants were over 60, reflecting the demographic other research has shown to be most likely to favour Scotland remaining within the UK. 74% were not members of any political party. 88% had voted in the 2014 independence referendum and 49% had voted YES, 40% NO. 41% of respondents were in favour of a further independence referendum within five years with 49% opposed and others expressing no opinion. 41% were supportive of independence and 39% supportive of some form of devolution. These figures only describe the positions of respondents and are NOT a guide to wider patterns of opinion among churchgoers in Scotland, which our research was not designed to assess.

This report describes the range of topics which were raised in conversation, demonstrating that location played a noticeable part in determining which issues surfaced. It illustrates the hopes and fears which participants volunteered when prompted about a range of issues from economic thriving to defence and the environment in relation to Scotland's constitutional future.

Analysis of the responses showed little sign of shared faith based narratives in relation to constitutional preferences, however 90% of respondents said their faith was important or very important to them and 67% said it had influenced how they voted in the 2014 referendum. 85% of those who responded online said their Christian faith would continue to influence their views on Scotland's constitutional future.

Introduction

Ten years after the referendum on whether Scotland should be an independent country, is it possible to have civic debates about Scotland's constitutional future which generate more light than heat? There are many areas of Scottish society in which this question could be explored, but the funding body of this research, 'The Paristamen Charity' wanted to explore what such conversations would look like if they were held between people who identified as Christians. How might such people make connections between their faith identity and their views on Scotland's constitutional future?

The funders are a small, independent Scottish grant making charity which has a track record of funding original and topical research projects. The total budget for the project was £25,000, meaning that both the duration and the scope of the project were necessarily limited. The funding criteria specified that the research project should be:

- *Ecumenical in scope across the mainstream Christian Churches (Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic Church, Scottish Episcopal Church, United Reformed Church, Methodist Church, United Free Church, Free Church, Baptist Union of Scotland, Quakers in Scotland) and open to participation from other independent churches*
- *Politically non-aligned with either unionism or independence*
- *Staffed by a Project Worker who would maintain a stance of neutrality on constitutional questions for the duration of the research project*

The research team were Rev Dr Doug Gay, Professor Walton and Rev Matthew Ross the Project Worker. Matthew was a former General Secretary of the Scottish ecumenical body ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland) and had just returned from working as Programme Executive for the World Council of Churches in Geneva. His ecumenical knowledge, awareness and connections were an asset to the project.



The funders wanted conversations to be geographically diverse as well as ecumenically inclusive and so meetings were planned in a wide range of locations including the Northern Isles and the Hebrides. The project team and the funders were keen to make the events as lively and engaging as possible and so rather than simply providing discussion materials it was felt that hearing the views of speakers from across the ecumenical spectrum, who had been politically

active in various areas of public life, was a better option. It would, however, be impossible to replicate this on an 'in person' basis at numerous events across Scotland. Instead it was decided to hold an initial in person event in Glasgow, film the contributions from the speakers and edit these to be shown within the regional meetings.

We were delighted that four speakers with different church affiliations accepted our invitation to participate: Kate Forbes MSP (Free Church of Scotland) and Stephen Noon (Roman Catholic Church) spoke from a pro-independence position and Murdo Fraser MSP (Church of Scotland) Rev Dr Maggie McTernan (Scottish Episcopal Church) spoke from a pro-union position. Kate Forbes had an overseas commitment on the date of the conference but recorded her contribution soon after. Edited versions of the talks were shown at each of the regional meetings.

The team and funders also considered how to encourage good public/civic conversation. The history of Christianity in Scotland and of relations between churches have not always been civil and gracious. We decided that the conversational/dialogical model of ‘Discernment in Common’, developed by the Jesuit community in recent decades, offered a promising way to frame the local conversations. This model was introduced at each of the events and is described more fully below.

Drawing in participants to engage in non-aligned conversations on constitutional issues was a significant challenge. We recognise that a polarised debate would be one in which people with strong opinions might be more motivated to attend. However, this was not the purpose of this project. We sent publicity material to all local churches and worked closely with hosting congregations in each setting; encouraging them to promote the event to neighbouring churches. We also used social media and produced press releases about the project and the events. In the end 347 people attended the 13 events we hosted.

The debates which took place were informed by the video presentations and also strongly reflected local issues. We decided not to film or record these conversations as this might have discouraged people from contributing freely or even attending. Instead we opted to employ ‘post-it’ notes on which people recorded their hopes and fears for Scotland’s constitutional future. Participants were also invited to fill in an online survey after the event. The response rate to this was exceptionally high, 120 people completed the survey. This allowed us to profile their attitude to faith, how this related to their views on the constitutional question and the impact of listening to others and discerning in common.

This report presents the narrative of this Project, detailing both what took place and what we learned about the impact of faith on people’s visions for the future of Scotland. The story we tell here is a rich and valuable one. It is of interest not just to folk in Scotland’s church communities, but to political parties, public bodies and all those interested in promoting and developing better conversations about Scotland’s future. Of course, every research project is a learning journey for the research team and there are some things we would do differently if we undertook an exercise like this again. We reflect on those in the conclusion and share some suggestions for how further research could be conducted. We also look to the future and how these conversations might be extended further using a new Discernment in Common resource.

Throughout this report we have used quotations from post-it notes written by participants and from the online survey. They are shown in *blue italic font*. Quotations from speakers are similarly shown in *green*.

Chapter 1 : How to have Better Conversations; Introducing the ‘Discernment in Common’ Method

The method of ‘Discernment in Common’ has its roots in the Ignatian spirituality of the Jesuit tradition within the Roman Catholic Church. It is in some respects as much an ‘ethos’ as a method and is capable of different iterations in different settings. As its use develops Jesuit writers are increasingly noting examples of its employment in secular contexts.

Our own ‘working’ version of the method incorporated the following elements:

1. Prayerful Gathering

The term discernment is rooted in the common ‘ecumenical’ Christian practice of seeking, through prayer and discussion, to align decision making in churches, organisations, groups and individuals with the will of God. Since this research was explicitly focused within churches on people who identified as Christians, it was entirely appropriate to begin and end each event with prayer. A mature and pastorally sensitive practice of prayerful discernment does not assume there is one definite answer to complex questions which will be divinely revealed. However, it does assume that political conversation is more than a contest of wills in which one person seeks to overpower their neighbour and ‘win’ the argument. It demands a posture of humility, fallibility and finitude and acknowledgment that no participant knows it all or always gets it right, Prayerful discernment means that all parties seek to hold themselves accountable to ‘a higher power’ and a higher standard than their own needs, interests or opinions or those of their group/people/ party.



2. Inclusive Listening

‘Discernment in Common’ also begins from the assumption that all parties, all people, within a conversation are valuable human beings. In this faith-based context it was also appropriate to affirm further that all present were made in the image of God and called to be part of the work and witness of the Church in the service of the common good. The process of discernment is informed by the witness of Scripture that those who may seem weak, vulnerable or marginal, including those who have been silenced by others, may contribute the most valuable insights. This makes it vital to listen attentively to all voices in the room and not just to the loudest or most strident. It also means that there will often be ‘circle conversations’ in small groups as opposed to large plenary discussions where only the strongest voices can be heard.

3. Active Listening

Discernment presumes a choice of options and therefore will often happen in contexts where there is disagreement. ‘Discernment in Common’ means that we approach a conversation with a willingness to listen to those who take a different position, hold different values or vote in a different way from us. It does not rule out the possibility that people may still disagree strongly after listening carefully, but it asks that a fair hearing is given to all opinions. Exercises which can enable this include being explicitly encouraged to consider possible strengths in a case which we disagree with and possible weaknesses in our own position.

4. Clarification of Issues

Taking time to clarify key questions, issues and dilemmas is an important part of this discernment method. This will often involve listening to experts and to people with lived experience, as well as paying attention to trusted sources of information and considering relevant examples.

5. Respectful Questioning

Asking questions, of subject experts, of those with relevant life experience and of neighbours alongside us in the conversation, is central to the method, including questions of clarification.

6. Speaking in Good Faith

Nobody should be compelled to speak, but as far as possible, participants are encouraged to speak as well as listen. This is an affirmation that their voice and view matters, that their questions are worth asking, that their response to the issue will be significant and that their words may help someone else to discern something crucial, which they might not otherwise have considered.

Chapter 2 : The Speakers' Contributions

We videoed three of our speakers at our opening conference day in Glasgow and recorded a fourth interview with Kate Forbes via Zoom. These were very lightly edited and the final videos, all around 15 minutes long, were shown at each of the regional meetings. The summaries below give a flavour of what was covered in each speaker video.

The Reverend Dr Maggie McTernan

Pro-Union

Maggie McTernan is a priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church, holds a PhD from the University of Glasgow and is a member of the Labour Party. She is a former Glasgow city councillor.



In her presentation, Maggie emphasised her background with a London-born mother of Irish parents and a Scottish father. *“The Labour Party is not just a political affiliation for me, it is part of my family story”*. For her, the independence debate has been antagonistic and struck at her sense of identity. Given this background, she explained *“As Christians, in a society that is too often divided by the identities we hold, we are called to be countercultural”*.

She focused on the Biblical image of the Good Samaritan as representing encounters with strangers and the call to love neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22). This implied for her that argument to stay in the UK is more than just an economic one, it is also rooted in values of love of neighbour and stranger. *“We share a belief in a common humanity that all people are created in the image of God”*. While *“There is no Biblical blueprint on how to organise society ...God gives us stories like these”*, Maggie argued, *“to help us to see what is important in our political and social life.”*

In considering the particular case of Scotland Maggie noted that there has been a fluidity of borders in the British Isles since Roman times. This creates both strong identification with place but also helps us to realise that our territories are politically constructed rather than naturally ordained. *“Personally”, she reflected “I’m convinced that the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament meets the balance between the benefit of sharing resources across our shred island and offering differentiation to meet the distinct cultural context of Scotland”*.

Murdo Fraser MSP

Pro-Union

Murdo Fraser is a Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party politician. He has been a Member of the Scottish Parliament since 2001, representing Mid Scotland and Fife. He is a member of the Church of Scotland.



In his presentation, Murdo outlined a case for the Union but stated *“above all ... I want to talk about how we move forward in this debate”*.

He described the roadshow that he had held together with John Mason MSP (SNP) prior to the 2014 referendum. Both were concerned, as Christians in politics, to respect the deep feelings constitutional issues provoke. *“We have to be conscious on both sides [of the independence debate] that there will be those who will overstep the mark and others who will feel threatened by the conversations taking place.”*

He argued that it is difficult to find common ground in the case of a binary referendum and in the context of a rise in identity politics. He also stressed the economic value to Scotland of belonging to the UK, in terms of being part of the UK's internal market and also having access to UK resources for both investment and welfare purposes.

The fact that levels of support for the Union and independence are both very close is problematic; trying to create a new state following a very narrow pro-Independence victory in a future referendum would be immensely difficult – unlike the overwhelming vote for devolution in 1997. Murdo expressed his hopes greater devolution within Scotland and cited the example of regional mayors in England. *“I’ve always been interested in looking for a federal structure for the UK”* he said *‘and the House of Lords needs to go, replaced by a Senate.’*



Stephen Noon

Pro-Independence

Stephen Noon is a specialist in public affairs; he was Chief Strategist for “Yes Scotland” in the 2014 referendum. He is a member of the Roman Catholic Church and was a Jesuit in formation for seven years. He is also a Research associate at the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Glasgow and is currently a research student at Edinburgh University .

In his presentation, Stephen introduced the idea of a politics of love based on the understanding that God is loving relationship ... God is a dance of love in the three persons of the Trinity ... which flows out into the world. In relation to this he argued we must ask *“What is a loving political process?”* How might a politics of love offer a response to a politics of fear?

Stephen affirmed that politics needs openness to change and willingness to compromise. He emphasised a desire for partnership as well as a desire for autonomy (preferring to use these phrases rather than the more ‘divisive’ words union and independence).

He noted that even in the event of the end of the parliamentary union, Scotland would remain in other unions – such as the Crown, economic, defence (NATO). Its future lies not in separation, but cooperative independence. A conversation in depth and over time is needed for a consensus on the settled will of the Scottish people to be discerned. This will entail envisioning new structures that reflect both creative autonomy and interdependence.



Kate Forbes MSP

Pro-Independence

Kate Forbes has been a Member of the Scottish Parliament for Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch since 2016. She is a member of the Scottish National Party and became Deputy First Minister of Scotland in May 2024. She attends the Free Church of Scotland.

In her presentation, Kate emphasised her support for independence – noting that the Bible does not prescribe any one constitutional model for the United Kingdom. She emphasized that there was, however, a scriptural precedent for the liberty Christians possess. *“We have huge freedom as people of faith. ... If we are not commanded not do so something, then we are free to act ...”* This emphasis upon freedom was something central to her own faith and vision for good government.

In the context of Paul's Letter to Timothy, she emphasised that *"If God cares about good government then I should care about good government."* Through good government liberties are safeguarded including freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion in a liberal democracy under the rule of law. *"All Christians must be free to choose whether or not they support independence"* Kate affirmed but argued that *"The Union has had its chance; it's had its day... I believe that we can thrive and prosper best as an independent nation"*.

Despite her strong convictions concerning independence Kate recognised that other Christians may see things very differently. *'My faith makes me want to uphold freedoms ... and build bridges to people who disagree with me'* she concluded.

Chapter 3 : The Discernment Meetings

The Glasgow Conference

“The common ground which emerged during the group discussions was a revelation! I hadn’t expected such areas of agreement and put this down to the deep knowledge and understanding of issues held by the presenters, and trust and respect present between them.” – A participant at the Glasgow conference.



The project was launched at a day conference in Glasgow on the 7th of October 2023 at Partick Trinity Church. The event was chaired by Professor Heather Walton and included presentations by the Revd Dr Maggie McTernan, Murdo Fraser MSP and Stephen Noon. The weather that day was atrocious, with a storm preventing a number who had registered from travelling to the event; but this appeared to contribute to the sense of commitment to the day – people had needed to make a real effort to attend! There was a lively and engaged atmosphere as participants listened to the speakers, asked questions and continued their debates over lunch and coffee. It was clear that those

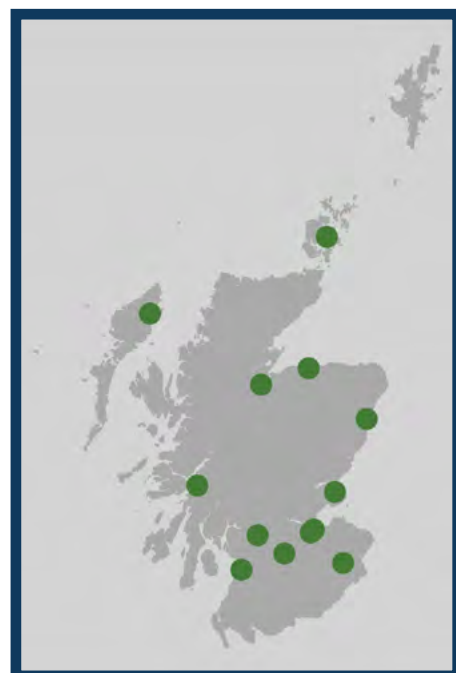
attending were strongly and seriously invested in attempting to relate constitutional configurations to their wider vision of a good and fair society. By the end of the day the Church Hall was decorated with bright post-it notes reflecting on the following themes:

1. *Relations with the rest of the UK, Europe and the World*
2. *Currency, economy and prosperity*
3. *Fair and inclusive society*
4. *Defence and security*
5. *Environment and climate change*
6. *Values, cultures and traditions*

The Regional Conversations

The videos of the presentations and the six themes above formed the structure for the regional conversations that followed this launch meeting. However, these meetings did not merely ‘replicate’ the Glasgow event. Conversations in each location reflected local concerns and local characteristics.

The map on the right illustrates the location of the regional conversations. We give a brief description of each event below.



Inverness

The first regional event took place at the Kenneth Street Halls of Inverness Cathedral (Scottish Episcopal Church) on 27th November 2023 and was opened by the Very Reverend Sarah Murray, Provost of the Cathedral. Those attending came from the city itself and outlying towns and villages. It was evident from the start that participants had strong and divergent views that they were keen to share! However, the evening was marked by a spirit of respectful dialogue, discernment in common and agreement to disagree in a cordial atmosphere. Inverness has grown substantially in recent years and now houses the headquarters of several public sector bodies (notably The Highland Council, NatureScot and NHS Highland). This has raised concerns in places such as Caithness as to whether centralisation in Inverness was resulting in a loss of employment locally. The participants at this event attempted to draw the connections between these local developments and wider constitutional questions. Comments from participants included:

“I hope Scotland can regain independence so that we can put into practice Christian values and make our society fairer and compassionate”,

contrasting with the view that

“Relations with the rest of the UK will deteriorate. Our standing ...is reflected by what is seen happening in Holyrood. Dreadful politicians across the board with little or no respect shown.”

Aberdeen

On an exceptionally cold late November Wednesday evening (29th November 2023), people gathered for conversation at the impressive, modern Cults Kirk Centre on the outskirts of Aberdeen. The weather may have depressed the attendance but not the atmosphere of the meeting. Warm and good conversations took place in which the particular perspective of the North East was highlighted – notably the economic impact of the downturn of the North Sea Oil industry, the need to create alternative employment and recognition of the environmental impact of fossil fuels. In consideration of the constitutional question, one participant commented:

“Should the Churches take a position on independence? The right to Independence is a matter of justice; the decision is for the people, but the lesson of Brexit is that limited and selfish values may preclude everything else if we do not highlight Gospel values.”

Galashiels

A well-attended meeting, hosted by Galashiels Church of Scotland, took place on Monday 15th January 2024. The event was held in the halls of the Trinity Church building in the town centre, close to home of the Great Tapestry of Scotland. As well drawing people from Galashiels itself, participants came from neighbouring Borders towns such as Selkirk. Perhaps expectedly, as this event was the nearest held to the border with England, the importance of easy cross-border traffic (a corresponding fear of a “hard” border) was often raised in the group discussions. Farming was also a significant local concern. A theme raised several times was a plea for greater consensus in politics, with one participant lamenting:

“Divisive politics forced on us by a party-political system which encourages division rather than cooperation.”

Edinburgh Southwest

The first of two events to take place in Scotland’s Capital was held at Colinton Parish Church on Friday 19th January. The participants mostly came from Colinton and nearby. A large majority of those present were worried about the economic consequences of independence. This is a community with a high level of prosperity, compared with the Scottish average – the area has correspondingly high house prices. Nevertheless, many of the concerns articulated elsewhere in Scotland were also expressed here. Justice and the need to care for others were highlighted in conversations about the potential economic consequences of constitutional change.

Also noted were the potential effects on employment and the affordability of public services. One participant expressed the hope:

“That we have more say in currency, economic and prosperity strategies.”

St Andrews

The event for Fife and Dundee was held in the Chaplaincy Centre of the University of St Andrews, on the evening of Monday 29th January 2024. The project team had hoped for participation by students. However, despite extensive publicity few attended. The participants were mainly older people – many with strong university connections. The overall quality of discussion and discernment was high. The future of the higher education sector in the event of constitutional change was a particular issue raised, as was the possibility of federalism within the UK as an alternative constitutional model. A hope expressed by one participant was:

“That we remain in friendly, cooperative and economically fair relations with the rest of the UK, rest of Europe and rest of the world. We will be interdependent whatever our constitution.”

Elgin

With Aberdeen and Inverness being the two principal centres of population in the North of Scotland, it can be tempting to overlook the area in between them. To counter this problem a meeting was held in the Williamson Hall, Elgin on Saturday 10th February 2024. A key issue for participants was the importance for local employment of the local defence bases – RAF Lossiemouth and the Army base at Kinloss. Moray was the only local authority area in Scotland to record an almost equal number of votes for and against Brexit in the 2016 referendum (with a majority for Remain of only 122). An example of local concerns was:

“Adverse impact locally on the NHS, economy and public services if defence bases in Moray were too close.”

Prestwick

The event for Ayrshire was held at St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick on Wednesday 21st February 2024. Prestwick is within the Scottish Parliamentary constituency of Ayr – one of the most marginal constituencies in the Scottish Parliament – with an SNP MSP who was elected with a majority of only 170 over the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party candidate at the 2021 election. Both pro-Independence and pro-Union stances were strongly articulated at the Prestwick event; local discussion centred upon economic and fiscal concerns, along with concerns about post-Brexit relations with the EU and fears expressed about far-right politics:

“I wasn’t sure about the premise of an evening of religion and politics’ stated one participant ‘but [it]was pleasantly thoughtful and thought provoking. Thank you!”

Lanark

The Lanark event was held at Greyfriars Church. It was a small gathering but perhaps for that very reason the intensity of reflection and the quality of the discussion was high. This meeting was notable for the number of questions about the economics and fiscal implications of independence, with some very searching questions being posed. One participant expressed a common anxiety about wellbeing and prosperity:

“I do not wish to see a separate currency; it would be very weak. We will only prosper if we engage with our nearest and largest trading partner. Higher taxation will prevent us from hiring the best talent from outwith Scotland. Our own local talent will move abroad to better themselves. We have witnessed 14 years of partial independence, and it has failed on all counts.”

Oban

The Oban meeting took place the Parish Church Centre during the evening of Thursday 29th February 2024. The issue of the importance of local participation in decision making featured prominently in Oban. It was recognised that that the old Strathclyde Regional Council model enabled economies of scale that could help places such as Argyll but also a sense that the remoteness of the centre of decision-making was problematic. One participant said:

“It may be worth noting that I wasn’t a person of faith at the time of the referendum, I converted to Catholicism in the following years. The event was very stimulating and has given me so much to consider. The focus of the discussion on hopes and fears has encouraged me to try and find out more to be hopeful about.”

Kirkwall

The Orkney meeting was held at Kirkwall East Church on Saturday 9th March 2024. There were good levels of participation; the event was covered by BBC Radio Orkney, including a feature in the morning news programme “Around Orkney”. Local issues which arose included the desirability of further autonomy for Orkney. Whilst there was clear recognition of the benefits of local decision-making fears were also voiced about the dangers of becoming a tax haven. An interesting comment in the feedback from Kirkwall was:

“Remember that God is neutral in the independence debate”.

Stornoway

The meeting in Stornoway was held on Tuesday 12th March 2024 in Martin’s Memorial Church. The Western Isles are notable for considerably higher levels of church attendance than in mainland Scotland, mainly various Presbyterian denominations with a notable Catholic majority in South Uist and Barra dating back to before the Reformation. The meeting included powerful Gaelic psalmody as part of the proceedings. The place of God in the constitutional debate featured more prominently in Stornoway than any other location, along with local concerns over the cost of living, transport links to/from mainland Scotland. A particular comment in the feedback from Stornoway echoed well the mood of the meeting:

“Where is God in this debate?”

Edinburgh Central

The final regional event took place at Morningside United Church (a local ecumenical partnership of the United Reformed Church and the Church of Scotland) in Edinburgh on 18th March 2024. Participants mainly came from the Bruntsfield and Morningside districts of Edinburgh, although some came from further afield – including Portobello and Leith. Two small groups held lively and intensive discussions and comments in the feedback included:

“The Church should be neutral on taking sides in a binary issue but should not be neutral on questions of acting justly and loving mercy”, along with the fear “That discussion of any, or all, issues now becomes a discussion of the constitutional issue.”

Chapter 4 : Who Came to Talk?

In a conversational project like this in which participants were self-selecting through interest in the subject matter, any articulation of key themes or outcomes cannot be viewed as being an accurate reflection of wider views within the churches or broader society. In other words any 'data' that emerges from this project will be qualitative rather than quantitative. It will generate valuable insights; pointers towards greater understanding but not factual conclusions.

The opening conference and the 12 regional meetings were primarily aimed at active members of Christian churches of all denominations. As such, participants chiefly came through publicity shared with local churches, through social media and by word of mouth within congregations.

A large majority of church members of all denominations in Scotland are increasingly of a higher age profile and this was reflected in the participation.

A total of 347 participants came to the 13 events (i.e., the Glasgow conference and 12 regional events). Of the 347 participants, 120 completed a follow-up online survey which was sent to each participant by email. This represents 34.6% of participants.

From these 120 surveys, 45% of these participants were male and 55% female. Approximately two-thirds were from the Church of Scotland, one-eighth from the Scottish Episcopal Church, one-twentieth from the Roman Catholic Church and the remainder from other churches, apart from three who did not attend any church. No participant stated that they were of a different religion.

Gender	Number (%)	Church Attended	Number (%)
Female	65 (55%)	Church of Scotland	78 (65%)
Male	54 (45%)	Scottish Episcopal Church	15 (12%)
		Roman Catholic	6 (5%)
		Others	18 (15%)
		None	3 (2.5%)

A wide variety of political allegiances were also notable, with approximately three-quarters describing themselves as voters for political parties currently represented in the Scottish Parliament. The survey also showed that 44 out the 120 (i.e. just over one-third) wished to see a further independence referendum within the next five years, with others either against or of no opinion. 47 of the 120 described themselves as voters for pro-Independence parties (8 for the Alba Party, 1 for the Scottish Green Party and 38 for the Scottish National Party). 40 of the 120 described themselves as voters for pro-Union parties (19 for the Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party, 9 for the Scottish Labour Party and 12 for the Scottish Liberal Democrats). 22 described themselves as not supporting any political party.

Some participants had lived and worked outside the UK; this was mentioned by them in some of the discussion groups. This may be reflected in some comments about international comparisons.

Stance	Number (%)	Party	Number (%)
Pro Independence	47 (39%)	Alba Party	8 (7%)
		Scottish Green Party	1 (1%)
		Scottish National Party	38 (32%)
Pro Union	40 (33%)	Scottish Conservative and Unionist	19 (16%)
		Scottish Labour Party	9 (8%)
		Scottish Liberal Democrats	12 (10%)
None	22 (18%)		

Chapter 5 : Participants’ Hopes and Fears

About This Research

As previously stated we are not going to make statistical claims about the balance of opinion on particular contentious questions. Research which was able to work with a structured sample of those attending Scotland’s churches and measure their opinions on a range of topics would be fascinating, but would require a different project, with a different methodology and a different budget to this one. In this chapter we do something more modest. We offer insights into the kinds of issues which people raised when they were prompted about their Hopes and Fears in relation to six dimensions of Scotland’s future:

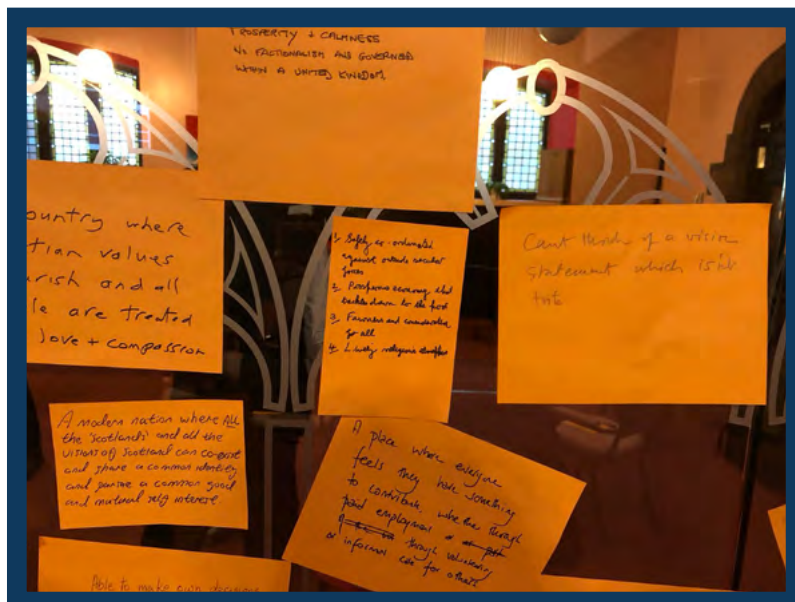
- Relations with the rest of the UK, Europe and the World
- Currency, Economy and Prosperity
- A Fair and Inclusive Society
- Defence and Security
- Environment and Climate Change
- Values, Cultures and Traditions

Participants were simply asked to reflect on these areas of Scotland’s Future without being asked to separate their responses into ‘if independent’ or ‘if in the UK’ scenarios, but the nature and focus of the event meant that responses often factored one of these scenarios in, linked to a hope or a fear.

Below we set out some cautious observations about what this exercise revealed based on topics and statements which were most and least common or were (significantly) absent.

The previous chapter revealed that those who attended were overwhelmingly from an older age cohort reflecting the rapidly ageing demographic of those who are attending Scotland’s Churches. We did not ask about income, wealth or class identity, but our working assumption would be that most of those who attended were middle class and few of them were poor. We know that most were associated with Protestant denominations. We know that the attendees were roughly split 50:50 on the question of independence. When working with a ‘hopes and fears’ framing of Scotland’s future, at an event with a clear focus on constitutional questions, it was always going to be the case that some people’s hopes map onto other people’s fears and this was the case here.

What kind of hopes were mentioned?



A few of those commenting offered barbed or idiosyncratic responses to the question about their hopes. One Glasgow based wag expressed the hope that “the SNP would disappear” while simultaneously hoping for “the eradication of bigotry inherent in a large proportion of SNP supporters”. Another person hoped that “normal people wouldn’t be punished for climate change” and another for “less emphasis on Gaelic”.

Those addressing the question more reflectively and positively produced a wide ranging and often moving set of examples of their hopes for the future of Scotland in both pro Union and pro Independence modes: *'A future for young Scots', 'a new politics of love based on the common good', 'a hope we can take our place in the world giving as much as we can to developing countries especially those worst affected by climate change', 'safe, warm and affordable housing', 'belonging for all faiths, sexual orientations and ethnic origins', 'an honest learning of Scottish history by our children', 'a better Scottish national anthem' (!), 'a Scottish government based on sound economic and social principles'*.

A good number of responses cited their hopes for the complete removal of Trident missiles but multiple responses, both pro and anti-Trident, stressed a desire to remain within NATO. Several respondents hoped to keep Scottish Water in public hands, multiple responses hoped for a greater focus on renewable energy, while others wanted to retain the global influence which came with being part of the UK, including in relation to international climate negotiations. There were positive hopes for *'more emphasis on Gaelic'*, for *'more plurality of ownership in Scotland's press and media'* and for the retention of the Union. One person hoped that *'the culture of welcoming New Scots continues'* and multiple responses referred to the need for a more welcoming and positive attitude towards immigrants and asylum seekers. One Glasgow supporter of independence expressed their hope that a path to Scottish independence *'could be amicable, like the "velvet divorce" between the Czech Republic and Slovakia'*, while one in St Andrews hoped that *'If Scotland becomes independent it may re-join the EU. Also that Scotland may have a friendlier relationship with the rest of the world than shown with some elements of current UK foreign policy.'* One advocate for the Union longed to see *'A drastic narrowing of the gap between rich and poor in all parts of the UK'* and a number of others were convinced of the need for Scotland to stay part of the UK for reasons of defence and security. An advocate of independence wanted to live in *'a country that is open and welcoming to all and which is not afraid to say "I exist and I have a right to exist"'* and insisted *'such a statement is not synonymous with aggressiveness'*. A supporter of the union wanted to be *'part of a reformed UK in which there was devolution of power and sharing of resources'*. One person expressed a hope that an independent Scotland would adopt the Euro, while multiple others both hoped Scotland would have its own currency and hoped Scotland whether independent or in the union would stick with the pound.

What kind of fears were mentioned?

Overall it was true to say that in the balance of responses, pro independence voices were more fulsome about their hopes and pro union voices were more vocal about their fears. While this might appear to echo the 'Project Fear' charge, levelled at Better Together by the YES campaign in 2014, the understandable concerns about the unpredictable nature and unforeseen consequences of historic constitutional change must be recognised and respected.

Respondents had specific concerns about the divisive character of nationalism

I'm against all nationalisms – maybe partly from my Christian faith which is so deeply universal in its reach', 'nasty nationalism', 'naked nationalism'. and about the divisive nature of a second referendum 'endless re-discussion – 'neverendum', 'division and polarisation', 'unrest, civil disobedience and hate of neighbours', 'divisive discussions leading to arguments', 'a stale, unproductive constitutional standoff in Scottish society'.

There were fears about how independence would affect relationships with the rest of the UK

'Independence would result in a hard border with the rest of the UK', 'border controls, 'negative attitudes towards England from some Scots', 'relationships with other Brits will become more hostile... tensions over border crossings and imports/exports... relationships with other British family members will be made difficult', 'the UK will Balkanise', 'we don't know how much Scotland is being helped by London', 'we will only prosper if we engage with our nearest and largest trading partner'.

There were signs that some supporters of independence also feared a backlash from the rest of the UK against an independent Scotland *'worried about borders... the rest of the UK might enforce these negatively on Scotland'*. There were also concerns about competence, capacity and governance outcomes

'We won't prosper because of our small size, the poor will be poorer, the rich richer', 'bankruptcy for public services, education, health and social care', 'economic downturn', 'financial crash', 'we end up as a Banana Republic', 'higher taxation... local talent will move abroad', 'fewer working people to pay taxes', 'economic prosperity will plummet', 'downward spiral, without levers to influence', 'the financial and economic sacrifice would be too great', 'Independence will impoverish us for 20 years', 'economy nosedives and living standards fall creating civil unrest'. Specifically the issue of currency was raised across different local centres 'what currency?', 'could we survive with our own currency?', 'a separate currency would be very weak', 'we will lose the British pound and so be unable to prosper', 'the Scottish government will waste money and make poor decisions re tax', 'mass redundancies as companies move headquarters to England, Wales or Northern Ireland', 'high inflation'.

- Respondents also cited concerns about Scotland's place in the world *'Scotland will be marginalised', 'we will become isolated, uncaring, introverted and have no voice in the world.'*
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- There were some indications of backlash against, resistance to green policies *'Standards of living will fall at the expense of climate activism', 'decline of the oil industry, jobs in North East Scotland', 'we have created a climate of fear amongst the young', 'we can only tackle climate change as a larger unit'.*
-
- Commenting on culture and society, responses included *'Independence will lead to a poorer society with greater unfairness and more poverty', 'more division, more poverty', 'further descent into political and cultural tribalism', 'if Scotland becomes independent, we move further into a parochialism in our cultural and artistic lives', 'loss of UK wide values', 'too much Tartan and Gaelic'.*
-
- There were numerous examples of fears around defence and security in the event of independence: *'Scotland is left vulnerable', 'Scotland's borders and seas are left defenceless', 'we would have little defence capability', 'separate Scottish defence makes no sense', 'Scotland cannot defend itself, we cannot afford the cost or the manpower', 'splitting the UK's defence capabilities and command structures would seriously weaken it in an increasingly dangerous world'.*
-
- It is important to note there were also fears associated with not gaining independence: *'Scotland gets overruled, such as on Brexit', 'Home Office will impose policies and decisions which are hostile and cause social exclusion and suffering among migrants in Scotland', 'Westminster dominates and tries to negate the idea of Scotland and its plans', 'Scotland continues to be a dumping ground for nuclear weapons', 'we become a target for nuclear war if we don't get rid of nuclear weapons in time', 'action will be too slow on a just transition away from fossil fuels'. Culturally there were fears about *'losing our Scottish identity', 'Gaelic being treated as a dead/dying language'.**

What surprised us or raised questions for us?

The cautious observations below indicate some areas in which the project team felt unexpected insights were emerging.

Given the relatively low salience which foreign policy and international affairs often have in opinion polls about what matters to UK and Scottish public opinion, we were surprised at the positive levels of ‘internationalism’ and ‘international awareness and concern’ among our respondents. In all conversations these featured and sometimes strongly. This was indicated in two specific mentions of international treaties and organisations (UN, NATO, EU, OSCE, ECHR), obligations towards refugees and asylum seekers and aid to developing countries. Given the demographic of these church goers, we speculate as to whether, as a population, they have been affected by participation in campaigns organised by Christian Aid Scotland, Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF) or Tearfund in a way which might have raised their awareness of international concerns?

On the other hand, we were surprised that there was not more mention of and attention to environmental issues and concerns throughout the six dimensions. These were mentioned by a few participants with passion but were not a major factor in responses overall. When we take the demographic of participants into consideration, this may be more understandable. A younger cohort of participants might, we suggest, have produced a more visceral and pervasive sense of concern about ‘green issues’ and the imperative of tackling climate change.

We were surprised by the explicitness with which some respondents raised questions about ‘the far Right’. In a number of cases this was linked to concern about current and future UK policy on immigration and attitudes towards ethnic minorities, racial equality and the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. It was also a concern linked to the ethos of ‘nationalism’ which remained a threatening term for some in our conversations.

Given that we had expected economic issues like pensions to be raised more directly and frequently, we were surprised by how many responses from different centres and conversations raised the issue of currency. These were sometimes linked to positive aspirations to use the Euro or a new Scottish currency. However, they were also expressed in relation to a desire to keep the UK Pound. This being seen a reason to remain in the union or negotiate a currency agreement in the context of independence.

Where conversations happened was significant

There were clear signs that where conversations happened was significant and that wider concerns about the future, the constitutional settlement and the six dimensions mentioned above were focused in distinctive ways by local needs, concerns and circumstances.

In Orkney, Scapa Flow was mentioned in concerns about new industries displacing traditional ones and in worries about future nuclear defence strategies. Folk attending the Elgin meeting raised concerns about the future of MOD bases at Lossiemouth and Kinloss and the severe economic consequences locally if they were to close, but also mentioned preservation of wilderness landscapes and controversy over wind farms. In Prestwick, the future of the airport was raised as were the implications of living relatively close to the Faslane nuclear submarine base and what the future would be for Faslane in an independent Scotland. The event in Glasgow saw concerns raised about sectarianism and an integrated public transport system for the city. In Aberdeen, concerns about the decline of the oil industry and loss of jobs and the need for a just transition towards industries linked to renewable energy was raised alongside the deteriorating state of the City Centre. In Oban, the memory of what were perceived to be older and more effective systems of local government for Argyll & Bute was raised in relation to the need for more effective devolution of power within Scotland. In Oban, Stornoway and Kirkwall, the crucial and contentious issue of ferry services was raised in discussion groups and plenary sessions.

We will return in our conclusions to some of the challenges raised by organising local meetings across the length and breadth of the country, but there were enough examples to make clear that local issues were crucial to those who participated in the conversations we facilitated.

What other 'voices' could be heard in the responses?

As we read through hundreds of post-it notes and survey responses, there were points at which some other 'voices' could be heard quite clearly. The work of Lesley Riddoch was mentioned directly by two people and there were a number of references alluding to the 'Nordic Horizons' project which she is associated with or explicitly citing Norway, Finland, Iceland, Denmark and the Faroe Islands as positive examples of how small independent nations can flourish and endorsing the idea of 'high tax, high welfare' societies.

A reference to the Scots having a 'crisis of confidence' clearly invoked the influential work of Carol Craig and her book by the same name. Another reference to 'the Scottish cringe' refers back to an idea first coined in Beveridge & Turnbull's 1989 book, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh, Polygon) and subsequently widely discussed within Scottish cultural and literary studies and cited by former First Minister Jack McConnell. A reference prompted very directly by our own event speaker Stephen Noon was to the prospect of 'a politics of love' emerging within Scotland. The work of Tim Rideout advocating for a separate Scottish currency was mentioned directly, along with the observation 'Lithuania, Latvia, etc, did it!'

There were also snatches in several centres of a more strident strain of unionist rhetoric widely present in Scottish social media, which was hostile to the promotion of Gaelic by the Scottish Government and Local Authorities. One comment was openly racist, deploring *'the exclusion of white people in favour of so-called minorities'* while a couple of others made more coded allusions to *'the rights of minorities being shut down'* in favour of promoting *'transgenderism'* [sic]. In contrast, there was also a more progressive sounding reference to *'the othering of queer identity'*.

In terms of spirituality and piety, some participants worried about Scotland and the UK no longer being 'a Christian nation' about the erosion of Biblical Ethics under a progressive nationalist government and about *'moving away from Christian values'*, *'Christians not being respected and pushed out in favour of other religions'*. There were concerns to see *'God at the centre' of Scotland's future, with people 'following the teachings of the Bible'* and complaints that *'all parties have departed from God's way'*. There were references to being 'God's stewards', to damage to 'God's world' and the need to care for 'God's Creation' as well as to the need for 'Godly Values' and to being mindful of 'God's Constitution' and that 'we don't have independence from God'. One comment made the point that 'God is neutral in the independence debate' while another suggested 'Churches would find it difficult not to be political in another independence referendum'. One apparently pro-independence respondent cautioned *'I don't want a theocracy, nor do I want a top-down Stalinist secular Holyrood'*.

Chapter 6 : Themes and Issues, Our Reflections

In this chapter, we reflect on the initiative as a whole. The project was ambitious in its determination to host conversations as widely as possible throughout Scotland and scrupulous in its concern to host these in a way which was seen and felt to be fair, respectful, non-partisan and non-aligned with any position on Scotland's Constitutional Future. We knew we were entering a sensitive area and we wanted if possible to draw into our 2024 conversations, people who might not have had a positive experience of conversations in 2014 or in the immediate aftermath of the referendum result.

Mixing Religion and Politics

Despite the well-worn social caveat about never mixing religion and politics, such mixing was the explicit interest of those commissioning and funding the research and the team also believed it was a cliché which deserved to be challenged. All of the mainstream churches in Scotland have a long history of concern about political issues and all have standing committees or councils which look at political questions within a broad 'Church and Society' remit. Scotland's Churches have therefore never accepted that these two areas of life should be kept separate. In fact, the opposite is true: all mainstream churches encourage their members to apply their faith to the whole of life, including their political opinions, allegiances and actions. We also think it is significant that during election campaigns in Scotland and throughout the UK, election 'hustings' where candidates can be questioned by the public, are often held in local churches and often chaired by local clergy. While the influence of churches is undoubtedly much diminished in the past sixty years and is still waning in a secularising Scotland, in the highly contested and contentious area of political debate, churches do appear to still have some currency as institutions which can 'hold' relatively well trusted spaces in which political debate can take place among a range of political parties and positions.

The Hustings Model as a Precedent for Local Meetings

One of the main occasions in which such debates take place is in ecclesially hosted hustings during election periods. The model of hustings offers a helpful precedent for meetings like those associated with this project. Many local churches in Scotland have for decades been used to holding a space in which contentious political debates could take place. These are also very often 'ecumenical' events which may be held in a particular Roman Catholic or Church of Scotland parish building, but are being formally hosted by a local council or grouping of churches.

What is much less common, however, is for churches in Scotland to host ecumenical meetings which are designed to encourage their members to work together at having better conversations about political issues and topics, particularly where (as in this case) these involve active, contentious and divisive questions. In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 referendum, a senior minister in the Scottish government complained to a member of our research team about the Church of Scotland's initiative in promoting an act of reconciliation within Sunday Worship. She felt it was unnecessary given the peaceful and civic character of the campaign and commented "We've not been at each other with tomahawks in the streets"! However, in our judgement many clergy and pastoral workers across Scotland would have testified to how raw relationships within their congregations (and within some families in their congregation) had become during the months leading up to the poll and in our experience as researchers, those simple, brief rituals of reconciliation held in September/October 2014 did feel valuable and meaningful.

How The Meetings Were Chaired and Introduced

We were fortunate in having a measured and highly experienced ecumenical 'diplomat' to lead the local meetings and while there were certainly times when individuals made robust and passionate contributions within the meetings, these were never intemperate or angry.

The explicit goal of holding a space for ‘discernment’ prevailed over the alternative model of staging a ‘debate’ in which one side was trying to best the other. Based on this experience, we are convinced that the Jesuit model of discernment in common proved useful in these ecumenical church settings and we think that it could also offer a useful model for adaptation in both faith and non-faith environments.

Speakers Who Modelled Friendly and Gracious Styles of Engagement

It was also notable that we had speakers who modelled a mode of friendly and civil engagement with one another; three of them did this in person at the initial Glasgow meeting, in ways which were still perceptible in the videos of this which were used in local meetings. Their contributions ‘set the tone’ for the local conversations because folk ‘on either side’ of the debate were able to see from the outset someone whose position they identified with, engaging thoughtfully and graciously with their political opponents.

The State of the Conversation (About The State)

While we did not do research which was able or intended to weight the salience of different issues and topics within the debate about Scotland’s constitutional future, we were able to gain significant insights into the kinds of issues which people wanted to raise and how they felt about those issues.

While some participants had clearly been relieved and even delighted about the outcome of the referendum, there was still a clear sense that even for them the question of Scotland’s constitutional future has not been ‘finally’ settled and that it has not gone away. This is to be expected given that pro-independence parties have been elected to government in Scotland for the whole of the decade since 2014 and opinion polls regularly show that public opinion remains almost evenly split between those who favour remaining in the Union and those who favour Scotland becoming an Independent country. Over a third of those attending who responded to the online survey wished to see a further referendum within the next five years. Given the demographic of those attending and completing the survey (older) and the evidence within current 2023/24 opinion polling of higher support for independence among younger groups within Scottish society, this suggests that the question of Scotland’s constitutional future remains active and open for many people.

There were also indications that while the 2016 Brexit referendum and the UK’s subsequent exit from the European Union had complicated debates around independence, the effects of Brexit were still contentious and unsettling. Just as the 2014 referendum did not clearly lead to remaining within the UK becoming in Donald Dewar’s much quoted phrase, ‘the settled will’ of a large majority of Scottish people, so the 2016 referendum has not led to Brexit becoming the settled will of a large majority of the Scottish people (and given how Scotland voted in 2016, Brexit perhaps never having been the settled will of a majority of the Scottish people at all!).

In terms of the particular issues which were surfaced by respondents, questions of economic security, risks to prosperity and opportunities to build a fairer and more socially and economically just Scotland were still very current within our 2024 conversations. Those who favour independence might be encouraged by the mentions of how other small European nations manage to govern themselves effectively as independent states. Those who favour remaining within the UK might be encouraged by the mentions of independence as representing a risk and threat. The issue of a border with England was clearly still a concern to some and the use of the phrase ‘hard border’ was clearly an echo of the troubled negotiations about the post-Brexit status of Northern Ireland, relative to the rest of the UK. Questions about currency were also still very present in the minds of some of our respondents, both those seeking to propose new options for an independence scenario and those seeking to preserve and defend the status quo.

There were also signs that Brexit had impacted on these conversations, with the question of ‘being forced to adopt the Euro’ which had loomed large in the 2014 campaign, now being joined by some more elaborated ideas about a separate Scottish currency, reflecting ways in which these questions have been addressed now that the UK is outwith the European Union.

There were also signs that while defence in general and Trident in particular remained concerns for our respondents, our 2024 conversations were taking place against the background of Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine and the eruption of a new phase of violent conflict in Israel/Palestine. The world in 2024 is arguably a more dangerous and volatile place than it was in 2014 and it would not be surprising that concerns over defence and security could loom larger today than they did a decade ago.

The Role of Faith

An interesting question and an important one for this research is what indications there are of folk within Scotland’s Christian communities applying their faith to constitutional questions. It was a concern of this project to prompt, stimulate and observe this. Our sense here is that this remains an area where much more work remains to be done. Our four keynote speakers were all very publicly and openly identified as Christians and active church members, but there was no clear common framework in their presentations for how faith might frame engagement with constitutional questions. We gave them a fairly open brief: ‘how does your faith shape your engagement with questions around Scotland’s constitutional future?’, and they each responded to this differently. There was, however, commonality around the way in which Christian faith should influence how we have these conversations: graciously, respectfully. Ideas of neighbour love and solidarity also shaped their inputs. Stephen Noon’s presentation offered the most theologically explicit and developed framework with his proposal for “a politics of love”. Kate Forbes’ presentation was notable for its interest in making space for a distinctively Christian contribution within a classic vision of political liberalism, in which Christians were open about how faith had shaped their perspectives and their desire to contribute their beliefs and values within a pluralist political discourse in the secular sphere. It is worth noting here, that another prominent elected Christian politician in Scotland, Ross Greer of the Scottish Green Party, could be seen to hold a similar position to that of Kate Forbes in this respect, although he articulates the public implications of his Christian faith in ways which are markedly different from hers in some key respects.

In an ecumenical research project, although we were disappointed overall at the level of participation from Roman Catholic congregations, it is worth noting that there were no signs from either speakers or participants of divergence on political or constitutional questions along confessional or ‘sectarian’ lines. For those respondents who were most explicit about mentioning or even ‘invoking’ God directly in their responses and whose discourse suggested they held conservative or fundamentalist faith positions, it seemed that their concerns about ignoring or abandoning God were closely related to concerns about issues of personal morality: same sex marriage; gender identity and abortion rights rather than broader questions of economic justice or social inclusion.

Research Note: Theological Reflection on Scotland's Constitutional Future

None of Scotland's mainstream churches took an official position either for or against independence in the 2014 referendum, although most of them held public events where members were encouraged to reflect and pray together on the issues from the perspective of their faith*. A number of figures from within the Scottish Christian world, as well as academic observers of that world, have produced books or resources on the issue of independence: Baptist Theologian Stuart Blythe wrote a piece for the Baptist Times in Nov 2013 on Engaging With Scottish Independence. Kirk Minister and University of Glasgow lecturer Doug Gay wrote a pro-independence academic work, *Honey From The Lion - Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism* (SCM Press 2014). Donald Smith wrote a more popular introduction *Freedom and Faith - a question of Scottish identity* (St Andrew Press 2013).

Oxford based Scot Nigel Biggar published a pro-union study based on his Didsbury Lectures *Beyond Kin and Cosmopolis - An Ethic of the Nation* (James Clarke & Co, 2014) St Andrews academic Ian Bradley had previously published *Believing in Britain - The Spiritual Identity of Britishness* (SPCK 2008) and produced media articles based on that analysis in 2013-14. Sociologist Paul Gilfillan wrote an article in 2015 on Catholics and the 2014 Referendum (Open House July/August 2015). Practical Theologian Eric Stoddart published an article in *Practical Theology* journal in 2015 *Clouding or Clarifying? Using the Bible to Explore the Scottish Independence Referendum Question*. Historian Graham Walker wrote a piece on *Religion, Referendum and Resentment: Labour's new place in the Scottish Political Wilderness* published online in May 2016 on the Queens University Belfast website. More recently, the journal of the Scottish Episcopal Church published a themed issue on 'Scottish Independence' (Autumn 2023:Vol 7.3) featuring articles by Biggar, Gay, former SNP President Michael Russell and Professor Gerard Carruthers.**

*The 2014 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland held a 'Respectful Dialogue' featuring contributions from "the twa' dug's" Doug Gay and Douglas Alexander. The 2014 General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church included structured theological reflection on the question.

**One concern we have about this brief survey of relevant literature is that all of it is written by men!

Conclusion : Reflections and Prospects

Lessons Learned

As with any research project, there are lessons for the researchers. Given the budget and scale of the project and in line with the brief from our funders, we opted for a methodology which prioritised a geographical spread of local conversations. We are convinced this was a valuable approach and we received many expressions of appreciation about the conversations being taken to where people were. Even within a small country, many people easily feel that their place, their part of the world is often forgotten or not listened to.

We had set hopeful targets for reach which we did not meet, despite valiant efforts at publicising the events in each location and online. We could speculate about post COVID turnout levels and we wonder whether a process which emphasises respectful listening and dialogue as opposed to sparky confrontation, while it may be more productive, will always be less compelling than a more dramatic 'debate' format in attracting higher turnouts. We also suspect it is the case that 'ecumenical' events generally are struggling to attract interest and note there are few ecumenical events which attract significant numbers of young people in today's Scotland. There may also be a continuing hangover from the 2014 referendum amongst those who had not welcomed it and found it to be unhelpfully divisive, meaning that they prefer to avoid getting directly involved in conversations on this topic in 2024.

Our researcher had unrivalled ecumenical experience and knowledge in Scotland and yet still often struggled to get publicity through local gatekeepers. The format and our approach to publicising events struggled to attract younger participants, although this also reflects the rapidly ageing demographic of Scotland's Christian community overall.

The remote organisation of events in all corners of Scotland also brought its own challenges.

Positively, conversations were overwhelmingly friendly, generative and respectful which was encouraging given we were dealing with a topic which arouses strong passions and has a strongly binary character. We believe the examples of friendly and respectful input from our four main 'presenters' influenced the tone and temper of the conversations.

We did not prompt our presenters to engage with specific theological topics and questions, opting to see how they would address the topic within a relatively open brief about the role of their faith in influencing their thinking about constitutional questions. Another approach would have been to give them more direct prompts about how they related particular beliefs or teachings within mainstream Christian faith to the issues raised by independence and union. This might have offered additional insights into how the prism of faith shapes this kind of political deliberation.

We also had dilemmas about how long to make the events, believing that staging longer events would be likely to reduce participation levels. While we still think this is valid, we believe that the discernment in common approach would benefit from people having more time to engage with one another and develop their conversations, as well as bringing questions back to facilitators for further input.

The influence of faith on how people approach Scotland's constitutional future remains a fascinating and important topic and we hope that there will be opportunities for further research and exploration. Our recommendations for how this could be developed include the following learning points from this research project:

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- It would be valuable to commission a Scotland wide baseline quantitative survey using an opinion research company to establish correlations between members of different Christian traditions and attitudes towards union or independence.
 - It is extremely valuable to host events in venues which reflect the geographical diversity of Scotland and allow local concerns to inform national conversations.
 - Events specifically targeted at younger church members/adherents will be valuable and will require distinctive modes of publicity and hospitality to achieve greater engagement with this declining and harder to reach group.
 - Discernment in Common materials specifically focused on applying faith to constitutional questions should be developed and used in events or series of events which allow more time for the potential of the method to be explored.

For members of Scotland's Christian churches, constitutional questions continue to provoke strong feelings and reactions ten years after the 2014 independence referendum. Those who participated in this research were clear that they see their faith as influential in how they make political decisions. Their beliefs shape their values and concerns and these inform their hopes and fears for a future in which Scotland remains part of the UK or chooses to become an independent country.

These conversations reinforced the sense that for most people independence or union (whether the union option is based on the current devolution settlement or some enhanced devo-max version) does not stand alone as an absolute goal or prize, but is related to the kind of society which each of these futures might enable.

As researchers, our experience of the conversations and the presentations from the speakers also suggested that there is further theological reflection to be done, both by theologians and 'from the ground up' in churches and ecumenical spaces, on how to relate and apply theological ideas to constitutional choices. We saw glimpses of this from our speakers: Maggie McTernan and Murdo Fraser's appeal to the commandment to love our neighbours, Kate Forbes' robust defence of a Christian vision of political liberalism and Stephen Noon's intriguing and inviting vision of 'a politics of love'.

The promise of applying faith to considerations of Scotland's constitutional future is that people who share a rich vision of the common good and who feel a sense of accountability to a set of norms and values which transcend politics may be able to model ways of thinking and talking about highly contested issues, which can offset the polarisation and division which many fear and dread when these questions about Scotland's future are posed.

Although that sense of 'discernment in common' has its roots in one Christian tradition, it offers great promise ecumenically and we believe it also offers a model which can be adapted to secular contexts, in the hope that whatever Scotland's constitutional future holds, we can have better conversations as we journey together into that shared future.

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Further information about The Paristamen Charity can be found at their website: www.paristamen.org.uk

