

'Hope in their hearts' that 140-year-old St Michael's will live on

Looking back at the memory laden past, and forward to a less certain future, scores of church-goers and visitors attended a coffee morning and special exhibition at St Michael's church on Saturday. All were celebrating the kirk's 140 years this weekend, where the message was one of hope for the establishment's future survival.

Amid the doubt within the Church of Scotland community of ongoing presbytery reform plans, Reverend Andrea Price and her elders had decided to mark the 140th anniversary with a weekend-long showcase of the church's commitment to community and worship over the decades.

Regular members of the local congregation attended alongside others from the local community, browsing the 18 display boards in the church itself with photos, stories and memorabilia of 140 years of church history and community.

From behind a stand of home-baking on sale in the adjacent hall, St Michael's session clerk, Douglas Bannatyne, said: "I am delighted to see so many turn up. It has been an absolute

privilege to be part of the planning of the church's 140 years, which has served its congregation and local area. St Michael's is a place where there is a true sense of community."

The Slateford Road church is claimed to have Edinburgh's longest aisle which has made it popular for weddings over the years – one of the kirk's longest-serving current elders, Helen O'Brien, took her vows at St Michael's in 1960 and has been in the community ever since.



Elder, Helen O'Brien, 86, has attended St Michael's since 1960. *Credit: Jamie Smith.*

Mrs O'Brien, 86, said: "I've got so many happy memories. We've had a lot of outings with, more recently, one to Dunfermline abbey, St Andrews, and Linlithgow this year – it was so cold. We had a picnic, and we were all freezing sitting around Linlithgow Loch.

"I just love my church life. Because we're involved in so much, we're all friends. It's such a community. It's great because I like talking to folk – I just love coming."

And Mrs O'Brien's granddaughters, who were helping out on

stalls and serving coffee, said they had attended Sunday school and had pleasant memories of their time here when they were younger – they also said that their grandmother was always at the church, and are worried for her should it have to close.

Helen said: “The presbytery reform is very much a concern to me. St Michael’s is so much part of my life. If I’m not here on a Sunday, it’s because I’m ill in my bed or on holiday.

“I cannot bear the thought of not coming here.”

If St Michael’s closed, the elder, who has mobility issues and does not have a car, would be unable to walk to Polwarth church or take public transport to other nearby kirks for a Sunday service.

She added: “I just keep living with hope in my heart because I cannot bear the thought of not being here.”

A 2023 Church of Scotland report revealed that the faith has lost more than half of its members since 2000 and the average age of worship attendees today was 62.

St Michael’s musical director in post 31 years, Stuart Montgomery, said: “Congregations are falling; people are not going to church very much because they’re doing other things. The truth is churches wouldn’t need to unite or close if more people came on a Sunday. It’s as simple as that.”

He added: “For any church that closes, it’s not just about the church going: it’s about a community, a family, that loses each other. If St Michael’s, or Polwarth, or any churches in the group closed, some people that go to that church would never see each other again. It’s just unthinkable.”



Soup pots and coffee mornings have been a regular feature of community church life over the years. Credit: Jamie Smith.

Helen and Stuart commented on the evolving face of the congregation and how the local community had changed with attending families no longer necessarily staying in the area for long, moving out of the city for more space.

Stuart added: "But maybe now we have genuinely people who want to go to church, rather than people who thought they *should* go to church."

In a kirk that Stuart felt "had something special", he and Helen agreed it was the community ethos of the place that had kept its dwindling, but devoted, congregation returning in support of the church and of the many charitable causes it backed.

Presbytery reform continues into 2024 when the four local west Edinburgh churches, inclusive of St Michael's, will be united into one congregation spread over two or three buildings.

Helen said: "I always just keep saying to them: 'I've got keys to the church, so until they board it up, I'll just let myself in anyway and have a wee hymn to myself,'"

St Michael's continues its 140-year celebrations today with a special service at 11am, coinciding with advent, followed by lunch – the dedicated exhibition will remain open to all until 4pm for all.