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Scots consider 'virtual ministers'

by Trevor Gundy by Religion News Service

EDINBURGH, Scotland -- To stem a nationwide shortage of full-time clergy, the Church of Scotland is considering using "virtual ministers" who would preach over a live video link to congregations that do not have a permanent minister.

"Preaching by live video link to vacant congregations is one of many radical changes being proposed by the Ministries Council," Gordon Bell, media relations officer with the Church of Scotland, told Ecumenical News International.

He said the report to the Presbyterian church's May 21-27 General Assembly suggests the Kirk, as the Church of Scotland is known locally, should consider the use of video technology in churches which struggle to attract full-time ministers.

The Orkney presbytery, which has 21 congregations spread over more than 10 islands, will be used to test the program by linking four congregations in the archipelago with technology similar to video conferencing.

"The intention," said Bell, "is that this will allow the minister to be physically present in a different island each week and virtually present in other ones. We think this is not only a first for Scotland but also a first for the whole of the United Kingdom."

There are presently an estimated 190 full-time vacancies for clergy across Scotland, which has a population of 5.1 million.

If successful, church officials say a number of congregations in some of the most remote parts of Scotland would be able to take part in the same service.

The Rev. Trevor Hunt, a clerk of the Presbytery of Orkney, told The Scotsman newspaper that it is vital the congregations participate in services and not sit in their pews imagining they were watching a television program. "I think it has potential," said Hunt.

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