

Assembly Trustees Speech — General Assembly 2022

Very Rev John Chalmers

This year's report of the Assembly Trustees covers an immense span of work, but it all boils down to this: as a Church we need to invest in the core business of local ministry as we emerge from the long overdue process of Presbytery Mission Planning and we urgently need to focus our energies on new and emerging forms of **Church Life, Church Plants and Pioneering Mission** which lead to numerical and spiritual growth in the Church of Scotland. This report represents a series of interlinked parts whose movements must be synchronised.

The statistics presented as a part of our report do not lie: in my lifetime we have gone from a Church of 1.3 million members to fewer than 300,000. Our contact with children and our reach to millennials and generation Z are marginal. However, from the contact we do have, we know that while they agree with many of our aims, the present shape of Church, and the concept of membership itself, means very little to them.

These missing generations are our children and our children's children. They are not without a desire for spiritual nourishment, they are still in search of meaning and they share so many of our values:

- They care about the climate
- They want to see something done about the unequal divide of the world's resources
- They are outraged by dishonesty in public life and
- They are scandalised by ageism, racism, sexism and every other "ism" that shouts exclusion

BUT all evidence suggests that the ways in which these generations will pursue their search for meaning and their expression of faith will not be through a top-heavy religious institution. It will not be through experiencing Church sometime between 9am and 12 noon on a Sunday morning. And it will not be through a reinvention of what went down well in the post-war and baby boomer years. Our ministers and ministry teams, *of which I have been a part*, have worked hard, but in a format which is not now reaching its target. Instead, it will take a well-formed, well-trained and well-supported generation of ministers, deacons, elders, and members to form the frontline of new ways of being the Church in Scotland. This is why our report features renewed principles for the formation of our ministries and suggests a process where we, as a Church, take responsibility to provide and

fund those elements of **ministry formation** best delivered ‘in house’ rather than in a university setting. This, however, is but one part of an **integrated training programme** which provides for anyone from the newest disciple, to those who have been in ministry for many years but who need a new injection of skill, understanding, motivation, and even a renewal of their faith.

If the millennials and those in generation Z are not going to embrace Church as it is now – then what kind of Christian community is going to be accessible, relevant and real for them? We believe that the answer lies in patterns of Church life that are still to be fully explored and developed. There is much, here, to be learned from other denominations – not least from a number of Diocese in the Church of England. But whatever else is endeavoured, we must invest seriously in new ventures, pioneer ministry and Church planting.

So, despite the extraordinary financial pressure which is highlighted in this Report (with forecast, if unmitigated, annual deficits across all of the Unincorporated Entities of £7.5m per year over the next 5 years) we believe that it is time to lift the moratorium on what the 2019 Assembly called the **Growth Fund**. We simply have to begin to make resources available to those who want to break new ground in mission both online and in person. There is no future for a Church which is asset rich and people poor, and so, with the minimum possible delay we must open up what we are now calling the **Seeds for Growth Fund**, making available between £20-25m over the next seven years to fund projects aimed at growing the local church both spiritually and numerically, with especial emphasis on evangelism, and the creation and planting of new congregations.

There is no escaping the extent of the responsibility that the Assembly Trustees have for the assets of the Church of Scotland, Charity No SC011353. So, the sections of our report on the **accounts for last year and for future budgets** are of particular importance.

In 2019 one of the first instructions to the Trustees was the elimination of deficit budgeting. At the national level, we had to become a leaner, fitter and better managed Church. This target was achieved though not without placing constraints on spending and staffing and so not without pain.

Now, however new financial challenges confront us in the form of:

- The massive impact of the pandemic
- The need, over the last 2 years to reduce the level of congregational contributions to central funds
- The need to establish a Transition Fund **while we introduce *Giving to Grow***

- The introduction of a new funding model for the new Presbyteries and
- The cost of living increases which will have an impact on almost everything

These are among many reasons why we are unavoidably having to present and predict deficits which are likely to extend into the next five years.

We are aware, therefore, that there are big challenges still to be faced. A Church which has shrunk by 30% in the last ten years and which is painfully involved in reducing the number of buildings and ministries it requires, must acknowledge that proportionate cuts and savings have to be made across the board. However, no one should think that this is cutting for the sake of saving *as such*. **It is pruning in order to grow.** The task is and remains redesigning the architecture of the whole system in order to build a Church of Scotland which is relevant and fit for purpose. There is no other reason for pulling all these levers of change at the same time and there is no other way of reforming our life than taking these long overdue steps which we pray will lead to renewal.

Charity Trustees we may be, but we are not Charity Trustees who see our role as guardians of the family silver. Instead we see ourselves exercising responsibility for making faithful and disciplined use of our treasured wealth for the extension and growth in that part of God's kingdom for which we are responsible. *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Remember this, we do not have as much disposable reserve as some people think. Most of our assets (which add up to big numbers) are held in small parcels for designated use to cover ministry stipends and fabric costs by individual congregations. Some of our reserves are severely restricted and not easily accessed, BUT, while **retaining what we need as a reasonable operating reserve**, the time has come for us to *"Cast our bread upon the waters"*, before the last of us finds it is time to switch off the lights and redistributes what is left to other charities with similar aims.

Continuing on the matter of assets and reserves: for as long as I can remember, people in congregations across the country have been asking for greater flexibility in the use of their own local reserves which have been accrued from long established **stipend endowments or from fabric funds** established by the sale of surplus or redundant properties. Our report outlines a piece of work which was instructed in 2019 and it describes the specific circumstances in which monies can be moved between the Consolidated Fabric Fund and the Consolidated Stipend Fund. At the time of writing the report we anticipated welcoming Commissioners' views on whether more work should be done in this area.

However, early warning of a Notice of Motion and an impending Overture has prompted the Trustees to include a section of Deliverance proposing the establishment of a **Joint Committee** from the General Trustees, the Assembly Trustees, the Legal Questions Committee and the Faith Nurture Forum, to review current law and practice with a view to proposing legislation that would allow greater flexibility in relation the sale of surplus properties and to provide a transparent process by which decisions on the use of such funds are made.

Let no one think that this will be an easy assignment. Accidents of history have left us with internal complexities and with formal, often legal constitutions which sometimes speak at cross purposes. The introduction of greater flexibility would certainly mean changes in Church law and regulation and could even mean changes to the Acts of Parliament which underpin our legal identity. However, there is nothing that this General Assembly has done in the past that it cannot undo and the need to invest in mission and growth is so urgent that we can leave no stone unturned.

Finally, while there will be much more information on the **Faith Action Programme** in our session on Tuesday morning, let me say a word now about the importance of its place in the creation, at national level, of effective and efficient support for the Church's work at home and abroad. We are no longer a Church driven by big Boards and Councils -- these belonged to a different time and place. As a part of the journey towards a leaner and fitter structure, three years ago we created two slimmed down Forums out of four Councils. These Forums have done a sterling job in difficult circumstances. But, as we contemplate a future in which there is a workable number of Presbyteries driving the mission of the local Church – it is time for central structures in which the voice of these new Presbyteries is heard.

Gone are the days when the centre might dictate and shape our priorities. Now as never before the centre has to do only that which the local cannot and provide only that for which the local mission of the church truly calls. That is why, under the management of the Chief Officer and the Head of the Faith Action Programme, we have brought together the staff of the Forums - to work in a single Programme, to eliminate duplication, to bring about real focus, and to maximise the use of scarce resources.

The D10 Group has worked tirelessly to deliver an extensive report which recommends the establishment of a single **Active Faith Leadership Team** which will be accountable to the General Assembly for the work of the Faith Action Programme. Policy and strategy would be developed under four Programme Groups: Mission, People and Training, Public Life and Global Justice and, Resource and Presence.

These are not the old Councils revisited. This signals the end of Church dominated by endless committee meetings and the beginning of a Church freed to get on with engaging in the Mission of God. Don't get hung up about the titles allocated to these groups and don't get anxious about how these will relate to this Assembly. Instead get excited about the idea of a Church which is lighter on its feet and more focussed on how it communicates the gospel to and engages with the missing generations.

A Strategic Planning Team, including representatives from the Faith Impact and Faith Nurture Forums, the Assembly Trustees, the Ecumenical Relations Committee, and the Theological Forum will work out the details, and the Assembly Trustees will bring a full report and overview to next year's Assembly. This development work is one of the important interlinked elements in the remaking of the Church of Scotland. And the success of the whole - depends on the implementation of each individual part.

Moderator, this is my final report as Convener of the Assembly Trustees. If I have spoken with particular frankness and urgency today it is because the demands of the moment require it. I present the Report in its entirety and move the Deliverance.