

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON GORDON PRESBYTERY MAY 2023

Proposed Deliverance

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Record appreciation of the full and generous assistance given in addressing the matter referred to the Special Committee.
3. Acknowledge that communication of information from the (former) Ministries Council could have been handled more effectively, for which the Convener of the Faith Nurture Forum has apologised, and acknowledge the consequent difficulties borne by the Presbytery of Gordon in respect of decision making and staff redundancies.
4. Agree that any future changes in the basis of on which ministries weightings are determined should be reported to the General Assembly and clearly communicated to any Presbyteries for whom specific changes are envisaged.
5. Thank and discharge the Special Committee.

Report

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The General Assembly of 2022 approved the following section of deliverance under consideration of the Report from the Faith Nurture Forum:

“Notwithstanding any past errors, instruct the Selection Committee to appoint three persons, to mediate a meeting with Gordon Presbytery, Faith Nurture Forum and the Assembly Trustees to:

- (i) Verify, according to the principles applied across all other Presbyteries, the appropriate weighting and allocation of ministries to Gordon Presbytery;
 - (ii) In the light of the outcome of section (i) above assist (if required) the Presbytery of Gordon to complete their Presbytery Mission Plan; and
 - (iii) Advise, where appropriate, on opportunities that might exist in:
 - (a) Local ecumenical collaboration,
 - (b) The shape of ministry allocation within the proposed new Presbytery, and
 - (c) Initiatives that might qualify for funding under the newly create Seeds for Growth Fund;
- and report the outcome of their work to the General Assembly of 2023.”

1.2 Rev Richard Baxter, David Watt and Sheena MacFarlane were appointed and co-opted Jennifer Boag to provide specialist statistical experience. Key issues related to the change in category for the purposes of ministry allocation as it related to the Presbytery of Gordon (“the Presbytery”), whether those changes were appropriate, and the communication of those changes.

1.3 The Special Committee gathered detailed documentation and correspondence from all parties, met with representatives of the Presbytery and with members and staff from the Faith Nurture Forum (as successor to the Ministries Council.) The Assembly Trustees confirmed that they did not hold documentation relevant to our enquiry. All parties were helpful and fully co-operative throughout.

2. REPORT

2.1 In earlier versions of ministries allocation (2004-5, 2010-11), the Presbytery was treated as a Rural-Urban presbytery with a weighting of 2.0, and from 2017-18 it was treated as Urban-Rural, with a weighting of 1.5. This difference or revision was based on statistical analysis of population densities. For the Presbytery, this meant a difference of around five posts in their ministries allocation.

2.2 This change in 2017/18 was not directly communicated to the Presbytery, or the other two Presbyteries whose weightings changed at that time, Jedburgh and Lothian. The Presbytery first recognised the implications in connection with the 2022 allocation of posts, and the need to create the Presbytery’s Mission Plan. The Presbytery explained to us that it felt it had been deprived of the opportunity to question, challenge or appeal this change in weighting.

2.3 Detailed work was carried out to check the statistical basis on which the Presbytery was categorised as Urban-Rural in 2017. The Special Committee concluded that the calculations were correct, and that the Presbytery had been properly categorised as Urban-Rural. Neither its population density nor any of the possible alternative factors which could have been considered pointed towards a Rural-Urban designation. The Special Committee did not have access to materials showing the reasons behind the original weighting basis prior to 2017. However, by 2017, and subsequently, the Special Committee concluded the only appropriate weighting was Urban-Rural. The Presbytery was not a statistical outlier and fell squarely in the middle of the Urban-Rural range when presbyteries were listed by population density. The Special Committee were not satisfied that there were other factors specific to the Presbytery and absent elsewhere which gave any reasonable grounds to adopt a weighting other than 1.5 for Urban-Rural presbyteries.

2.4 In 2017 three presbyteries saw their categorisations altered – Jedburgh and Gordon reduced to a 1.5 weighting and Lothian which was a statistical outlier moved to a new weighting of 1.25 (applied to them alone).

2.5 Information on the potential ministries allocations for presbyteries was set out in the Ministries Council's report to the General Assembly of 2018, accompanied by a link to the underlying methodology. The General Assembly noted these numbers as 'advisory'. While the information and the associated methodology was publicly available, and it is understood that the Ministries Council was seeking to support and assist presbyteries through conferences, the consequences of the weighting change do not appear to have been directly communicated to the Presbytery (or, as far as we are aware, to the other affected presbyteries).

2.6 At the time when the weightings changed (October 2017), the key issue occupying the minds of Ministries Council members and staff was likely to have been not the changes in weightings, but the broader question of whether weightings were advisory or mandatory. The statistical calculations were presented to the Ministries Council and its various planning fora. The changes to the weightings of Gordon, Jedburgh and Lothian Presbyteries were clearly flagged up in the reports but there is no evidence of any discussion about the impact on the presbyteries whose weightings were altered, or recognition of the potential effect on posts.

2.7 In consequence there was no direct communication with these presbyteries to alert them to the impact of the change. The Faith Nurture Forum have recognised that direct discussion should have taken place and the Convener apologised at the General Assembly of 2022 for that communication failure. At the time, the pressure on staff and Council members was such that this was a matter of oversight, not error. The Special Committee is satisfied that no individual or individuals bear direct responsibility for the communication failures and that this was an institutional failure at a time of intense pressure and change.

2.8 The Principal Clerk has confirmed that where the original basis of calculating weightings had been presented to and agreed by a General Assembly, alterations to that basis should have been similarly treated. The Ministries Council should have taken that step.

2.9 Despite coming late to the awareness of their lower allocation of posts, the Presbytery has managed to successfully complete its Presbytery Mission Plan in a timely and effective manner, in line with the number allocated on an Urban-Rural weighting. Nevertheless, better communication at an earlier stage would have assisted their processes and removed uncertainties. The Presbytery did not require further support to complete their plan and had fully considered the range of options referred to in the remit.

2.10 Much of the work carried out by the Special Committee is essentially historical, given the structural changes in the Church over the last few years. In the context of fewer, larger presbyteries differences in weightings may be of reduced importance in future. However, we recommend that in future all changes in weightings should be directly reported to General Assembly and clearly communicated to any presbyteries for whom specific changes are envisaged.

In the name of the Committee

RICHARD BAXTER, *Convener*