

Assembly Trustees Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rev David Cameron

Moderator,

There is recognition that the landscape of Church is changing.

It is true to say we live in anxious times.

A few brush strokes paint the background.

The structures that shape society show stress and fractures from top to bottom.

Institutions long taken for granted are subject to renegotiation.

The meanings behind basic social frameworks of mutual obligation governing society are hotly contested.

Hallowed assumptions about the most basic loyalties and allegiances in relation to one another are subject to the most radical new questions.

Innovative technologies are leading to an explosion of previously unimagined information sources, which are unsettling long-established spheres of authority and undermining long-respected official sources of reliable knowledge.

Reports of violence multiply around the globe, often driven by superstition and ignorance.

Radicalised forces within western culture itself pose a serious threat to internal stability.

It is a time of unprecedented anxiety.

These words summarise the characteristics of Europe in the years leading to the Reformation.

These words could also describe today.

Do we not need another Reformation?

Each year at the Christmas lights switch-on in Kilmarnock, in the heart of my own parish, I watch 5000 people disperse after the event.

My congregation hosts a variety of missional events from the grounds of our Church, complementing the town programme, where young and old take part.

Last Christmas, a wee boy, on entering our building to take part in our Christmas Escape Room Experience, asked,

‘What is this place mummy?’

‘I think it’s a church,’ was the reply.

‘What do they do here?’

‘Pray, I think.’

I could have wept.

Whilst it’s a good answer, it’s clear they were unsure – why are they unsure? Because no-one has modelled our Christian lifestyle nor explained it to them.

When people no longer hear the promise of the gospel, no wonder they have no idea that the big yellow building with beautiful stained glass windows is a place of worship, where people are nurtured in Christian living from the centre of my town and parish.

Reformation is even more essential today.

The report of the Assembly Trustees provides a realistic picture of where our Church finds itself.

This is a critical time as we make the essential changes needed to lay a sustainable foundation for the future.

The reforms we embark on together are to reconfigure and reshape the church for mission and service around fewer buildings and fewer charges:

- 600 ministries throughout Scotland, due to the retirement and recruitment differential
- By envisioning the building of the Church where communities of faith join together at the heart of new and shared priorities
- To lay down burdens which have been exhausting us all and concentrate not on our own survival but on reaching a population of society indifferent to the church, overly secular, and in need of what we all have already - the Gospel of Jesus Christ, providing us with an opportunity to thrive.

From personal experiences as a parish minister, I know how hard the last year has been for congregations and presbyteries. It has felt harsh and rigid and people have not been as kind and pastorally sensitive as they should have been. We are grateful to the ministers, elders, church members and staff who have been pulling together faithfully to solve the serious challenges we face and making some very difficult decisions for the future of our church.

We have much to be thankful for and much to commend in the work already done from the mandate of the Radical Action Plan and Special Commission of 2019.

It is significant that what was previously seen as different agendas for ministry and mission are now recognised as an opportunity for strong collaboration in appreciation of the fact that the national church faces a monumental crisis in ministry and resources, and this impacts all our congregations throughout Scotland.

To complement the existing deployment of ordained ministry and to engage with the challenges of an increasingly secular and fragmented society, we will develop new and more diverse patterns of ministry, the focus of which must be mission and evangelism and developing new worshipping communities, new models of church; in pioneering ways for renewal to flourish.

This will be one of the priorities of the team being established to lead our Faith Action Programme, with the key involvement of people from each of the Presbyteries.

£25 million has been released from reserves under the Seeds for Growth fund.

This is for Presbyteries to apply to, in support of local congregations, as they seek more than currently new and innovative ways of being church in order to connect with a much broader, secular sweep of society and largely disconnected communities.

The Church of Scotland needs experienced ministers of the gospel, as well as pioneers and church planters, both lay and ordained, and more diverse and experimental patterns of ministry.

Presbyteries are encouraged to participate and benefit; indeed, they have already been influential in shaping the criteria.

The hope is that there will be a transfusion of energy into the missional dynamics of the Church as a whole, a missional Church whose outward face and core constitution is gradually moulded to a form which will serve the nation in the coming decades, with approaches that more truly resonate with society and culture.

I want you to reimagine the church in Scotland for the next 10 years.

Come with me for a moment and IMAGINE.

IMAGINE church where members are enthusiastic about doing things differently.

IMAGINE listening to one another and dreaming bold dreams and having the energy and encouragement to experiment and learn in the process.

IMAGINE being able to move forward in positive ways, tackling serious issues of the day - responding to the real need in Scotland.

IMAGINE finding a creative way of getting different people with different views together to create a different future.

IMAGINE planting new church communities where they've always been needed, breaking out of our constrained systems to do so, sharing ministry for the pastoral care of the elderly in the aging congregations whilst recognising the need to be intergenerational, fully integrating our young people, shaping the life of the Church. The new alongside the old, energising and inspiring with the gospel imperative, 'go and make disciples.'

We all know how difficult it is to lead a church into a new space if that church has been built on the way things have always been, or where the prevailing voice is, 'it'll never work,' or simply, 'no!'

How do we imagine a new discipleship, fund a capacity for community amidst the disrupting changes around us and be the thriving Church of a new era?

You actually have the answer in your own localities.

You – we – all have the spiritual imagination to look at things differently, all of us who are grappling with the need to change in order to be more effective in mission, all of us who are willing to move forward, shaped by shared purpose and values and, crucially, with a vision of what the Church could be in Scotland: a visible light of hope with the Gospel.

This is a time that calls for prayer, for coming together with our brothers and sisters in other congregations and denominations, for cooperating to generate ideas and test them out, all so that we cultivate a thriving alternative future for the Church.

This is now our task; we must act with unity of purpose at every level of the church.

There are major roadworks in every town; they can, at times be a nightmare to navigate.

Three- and four-way operated traffic lights, road signs provide a warning ...

‘Altered Priorities Ahead.’

When I see that sign I know to be more observant as I change direction to find the redirected route.

The road hasn’t changed, just how I should approach the way ahead, altered as a result of road utility works.

For the Church of Scotland in Scotland, there are altered priorities, out of our comfort zones, new work ahead, just how we should approach the way ahead has changed.

Altering priorities as a church, with her distinctive ways of doing things that seem to have stood the test of time, was and is going to be difficult.

Yes, we want to hold onto our past and what we feel is sacred, yet we are no longer able to do so.

We have to make the changes. We have to sacrifice some of our established ways to make way for a vibrant church in all aspects of its life and worship and mission, one which connects with many folk across our communities, one whose impact is extended.

One aspect of our church is our social work arm, CrossReach. Anyone who has seen CrossReach in action knows what an influence for good it is. Yet, out there – even within the Church – people do not know that this is the Church at work. As a Church we must not be shy to say who we are, and whom we serve.

In everything we do we must ask, how does it help one another listen to God, connect with our communities, reshape church life round new priorities, encouraging shared and diverse experiences of worship, mission and discipleship and service?

The Book of Acts is a story of risk and reward.

Tremendous risks and remarkable rewards.

The young church was a church characterised by daring courage and bold risk, empowered by the Holy Spirit as the Gospel of Jesus Christ was taken by the disciples out into the world.

Over two thousand years the church has adapted, floundered, thrived, failed, succeeded, fallen, died and risen again and again.

We now need to be as bold to take risks, try new things.

Yes, we will make some mistakes. Not every new thing will work. But for the sake of Christ and the Kingdom we have to try!

If we return to the age of the Reformation, we will find among reformers like John Calvin a sense of adventure.

They imagined opportunities, developing new forms of ministry and a spirit of innovation.

It was entrepreneurial in the spread of new faith communities, the influence of which is felt to this day.

The reformation adventure in which we engage today is suffused with the presence of God.

God provides us with the time, talent and resources to think creatively so that we can prayerfully better understand what God is doing and what God requires of us to contribute for the good of our Church.

A minister was teaching young people about Pentecost Sunday. He said to them,

‘Do you boys and girls know what Pentecost is?’ They didn't.

He explained, ‘Pentecost was when the church was gathered in one place. Suddenly there was a rush of mighty wind. Tongues of fire came down from heaven and landed on their heads. They were all filled with power and spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world. And that day 3,000 people were added to the church.’

Most of the children took that news rather calmly, but one, her eyes big as saucers, said, ‘that’s amazing, but we must have been absent that Sunday!’

The thing about that is, not that she misunderstood, the beautiful thing is that she thought it could actually have happened in that church,

That God’s Spirit could have come to that little congregation and given a mission to live, a word to speak, courage beyond measure and a purpose that would transform the world.

I would welcome that as the plan for our much-needed reformation.

Moderator, I present the Report of the Assembly Trustees and move the deliverance.