

Faith Nurture Forum Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rev Rosie Frew

I presented the first report of the Faith Nurture Forum in 2020 to an empty room and a camera. Today I present our final report. The last four years have seen massive changes in life and work as a consequence of the pandemic, massive changes in church life and work as a consequence not just of the pandemic but of Presbytery restructuring and Presbytery Mission Planning.

From the beginning I've likened the journey the Forum has been on to that of a caterpillar transforming to a butterfly. It's a metaphor that is just as fitting for the church in these times. We're currently going through the chrysalis stage...

While some people think of the protective casing of a cocoon or a chrysalis as a resting place it's anything but! There's a lot of activity going on inside as the old caterpillar body is broken down into a kind of gloopy caterpillar soup before being turned into something new, transformed into a butterfly in all its beauty.

When I became Convener the issues that were being raised were – far too many vacancies, far too many unsuitable buildings, Presbyteries struggling to find Interim Moderators, not enough locums, ministers feeling overburdened. In my report to the General Assembly of 2021 I said that we were draining the resources of our Church – people, morale, finance – just to keep a broken system going.

It was that year that we brought the Presbytery Mission Plan Act to the Assembly. We asked much, and we promised much, and we did not fully appreciate at that time the impact this immense piece of work would have on the church, on every member and every minister of the church.

We asked much, we promised much, and we have delivered. Let me give a bit of context...

The Assembly Trustees have reported that 40-50% of our ministers will retire in the next 10 years. Through recruitment and admission we welcome between 20 and 30 new ministers per year. We currently have:

596 parish ministers in a charge which includes two deaf ministry posts and 7 transition or interim ministers (down 57 on last year). As at January 2023 there were 121 ministers over 65 and a further 168 over 60.

- 32 serving as Assistant ministers
- 117 Ministries Development Staff (89FTE)

Of the 41 Presbyteries listed at the beginning of the Mission Planning process in 2021:

- 30 Mission Plans have been agreed and are now being implemented
- Three Plans are being resubmitted, most likely in June
- Two Presbyteries are receiving assistance
- Three, who are now one Presbytery - their Plan is hopefully being submitted in August
- Three smaller Presbyteries had Plans voted down locally and these are being reconsidered.

We owe immense gratitude firstly to Karen Campbell and the Presbytery Mission Plan Implementation Group – a group comprised of ministers and members – not “them” but “us” – who, along with the General Trustees, have journeyed alongside all our Presbyteries over the past two years and who have considered each plan prayerfully and carefully before submitting to the Faith Nurture Forum for final approval. Immense gratitude to all those who have engaged prayerfully and realistically and imaginatively, accepting that the hardest of decisions have had to be made, that so much is changing, that so much is being asked of them, and that the future will be very different, but who have not hidden their heads in the sand.

Immense gratitude to those who have been in training for ministry and in familiarisation during this most unsettling time, and whose call to a charge has been put on hold as a consequence of the planning process, but who are serving the church in a host of different ways across our Presbyteries. Can I urge the presbyteries to continue to tend what has been planted and nurtured, and the green shoots of growth.

Already the church is changing and the future will be very different.

In 2019, the Forum was tasked with the development of 100 new worshipping communities. Congregations now report 400 new worshipping communities in some stage of development, including Messy Church, Café Church and online worship. The Pioneer Scotland network has grown to 300 members and last year the online ministry Sanctuary First was brought within the national Church.

We need to ensure that the church continues to be properly resourced. You heard yesterday of the financial support that will be available through the Seeds for Growth Fund. Those in our Mission Development team help train, encourage and resource congregations, in both English and Gaelic, for leading worship; for ministry and mission to children, families, young people and young adults; for intergenerational church; for pioneering and

new worshipping communities; for school chaplaincy; for supporting and learning from those working in our Priority Areas.

At this point, and on your behalf, can I commend the Priority Areas Team and the Priority Areas churches for their commitment, in the face of COVID and the cost of living crisis, to serving and speaking out for the poorest in our land.

Commend also a series of articles on intergenerational church in *Life and Work* over recent months.

Let me highlight one resource - Acorn seeks to connect Christians with the work God is doing in others through caring conversation. The acronym A-C-O-R-N describes the “how” – Ask, Call, Obey, Report, Notice. You can find out more about how your congregation could engage with Acorn this lunchtime in the Augustine Church, 41 George IV Bridge. Or this evening at 7.30pm in St Nicholas Parish Church, 124 Sighthill Loan.

We are delighted to welcome 2 new members of staff – Very Rev Dr Martin Fair and Rev Eleanor McMahon – who have been called to serve the church in a new way and who bring a wealth of experience to our People and Training Team headed up by Kay Cathcart. Their remit is:

- To envision, resource and support the development of local leadership
- To ensure our recruitment criteria, processes and experiences are fit for purpose for the church of tomorrow
- To develop a culture of lifelong learning within the church, positioning the required training, at the best time in the most helpful way.

Church of Scotland Learning will launch in August, offering a wide range of materials to be accessed by individuals, local congregations and Presbyteries in the areas of Sharing Faith, Theological Reflection, Discipleship, Violence Against Women, and Equality, Diversity & Inclusion. In response to last year’s deliverance, there will also be materials for congregations and those in ministry to learn more about the confessional position of the Church and the vows office holders make. A leadership course, modules for Elders and pastoral carers, further discipleship materials and equipping for funeral ministry are in the development stages, with many currently being piloted.

We have entered into a refreshed five-year partnership with Place for Hope, initiating a suite of training called “Living Peace”. This programme provides opportunities that will help a Presbytery, congregation or those in ministry appointments to proactively invest in healthy and honest relationships, aiming to prevent damaging conflict wherever possible. The Ascend website and your Presbytery will carry more information about the programme.

Following the approval of our Vision Statement at last year's General Assembly, the Forum identified as a priority the development of an apprenticeship training route. This could extend access to all our recognised ministries. An opportunity to work for the church, to utilise skills and life experience, alongside studying and being supported by training. Our academic providers are keen to explore possibilities.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in discernment and selection, in the training and formation of our Readers, Ministers and Deacons. Who give so much of themselves and their faith and their experience in these invaluable roles.

I am very conscious that we ask a lot of those in the recognised ministries. Ascend is the branding for the wide range of materials, courses and support options that are available to those in ministry. So, can I urge my colleagues to take the time to read the monthly e-mail or access the website, to keep up to date, and to engage. Lifelong learning is so important. Looking after ourselves and one another is imperative.

Alongside our Study Leave provision, Section 11 of our deliverance asks that you note the introduction from 1 January 2024 of an integrated support allowance of £250 per year for those in full-time ministry. There is also £250 per year available to fund a retreat.

Over these past 4 years, as Convener, I've observed the work done by our Support Team, and the pastoral care shown to those in ministry going through the hardest and most challenging of times. It's all confidential, so we don't speak of it, but before I go I want to blow the trumpet and show my appreciation. And ministers, please, look out the email we sent out just a few weeks ago, and if you haven't done it yet, make a will, fill in the expression of wish forms. I know none of us likes to think of these things but from my experience as a Death in Service Trustee they are so important.

I'm going to finish with a confession. In lockdown, when we were all binge-watching box sets, I got addicted to a series called New Amsterdam. Dr Max Goodwin, the new Medical Director of New Amsterdam Hospital, disrupts the status quo and proves he will stop at nothing to breathe new life into this understaffed, underfunded and underappreciated hospital. Five series later the final episode begins with Max talking to a staff meeting about what made him want to become a doctor, the spark of an early experience, his call, his vocation, his driving force and throughout the episode his colleagues reflect on their particular paths to medicine. Re-engaging with that passion, that ambition.

So much in that episode chimed with me about our church situation and our feelings. When we're feeling understaffed, underfunded, underappreciated... think back... remember that coming to faith, that call to Christian service, that call to ministry. What it was that engaged

us, opened our eyes and our hearts. Why we do what we do. The God we love, the Saviour we follow, the Spirit who infills and enables us.

Speaking personally, I remember and give thanks for a newspaper article written way back in 1976 about a married couple being licensed for ministry and realising for the first time, as a 14-year-old girl, that a woman could be a minister. I remember the thrill and the excitement of these first stirrings of call. Thrill and excitement that still fill me today...

If you are feeling the first stirrings of call by God and want to explore what it is that God is calling you to – look out for someone wearing one of these badges – “A coffee, a chat and a calling” – and take them up on that offer of coffee.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the Forum for their support, encouragement and friendship over the past four years. And, on their behalf, thank the amazing staff we have worked alongside at 121. Also, a big thank you to our families for their support and forbearance over these years which has been much valued.

I now, literally, pass on the baton I received from Neil Glover to Tommy McNeil, the new Convenor of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team, and all the members of it and the Programme Groups taking forward the work of the Forums.

I'll end with a bit of blatant advertising – you can keep up to date with the Faith Action Programme in the new stylised form of *Life and Work*.

Moderator, I present the report and move the deliverance.