

Moderator

I begin by saying thank you.

Thank you to all commissioners here at the General Assembly.

Thank you to all ministers, deacons, Ministry Development Staff workers and our staff across the Church.

Thank you for working relentlessly for the good of the Church and your communities with patience, perseverance and endurance.

For honouring your calling to care for the souls of your congregations and parishes.

Thank you to elders for supporting your ministers and kirk sessions through unions, dissolutions and all the work you do diligently for God's kingdom, as the landscape of our Church in Scotland changes locally and regionally.

Thank you to our many committees for the sterling and increasingly innovative work, for finding different ways of releasing funds to support the core work of the Church and helping create a vision of the future for our Kirk that we can all aspire to.

You know how the day-to-day work of the church extends far beyond Sunday worship.

It takes a variety of forms: pastoral care, supporting the sick and bereaved.

Raising money for worthwhile charitable causes;

providing fellowship for the lonely and vulnerable;

running youth groups and lunch clubs;

recovery cafes, food banks,

maintaining links with Christians in other countries.

And social care through Crossreach , their incredible work, done quietly and often unnoticed.

Above all bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ,
the core functions of ministry and mission.

The Church of Scotland demonstrates a wonderful example of caring for people. Often that has been and is with limited resources available.

A challenge we face is an ageing and diminishing membership.

This intensifies the burden on those who serve, and results in decreasing income streams to support our Church's endeavours - and the sense of crisis that confronts many of us today.

Our report makes sombre, yet, I hope, uplifting reading.

As a Church we are making progress. The majority of the actions from the 2019 Special Commission and Radical action plan have been closed out.

New Presbyteries are in place, congregations are coming together and finding new life beyond the tensions and demands.

Initial savings targets have been met in and through the National Office.

Work continues to make better use of the Church's assets.

We have a way to go, because the hard truth is that limited resources are becoming even scarcer.

Many congregations long to have *younger* people among their number.

Many long to have *more* people among their number.

With the responsibility we have been given as Assembly Trustees we are working hard to see our finances improved. They are a challenge.

So what are we doing about all this? What is our role in 'building together'?

Growth of the Church is at the core of our plans.

We seek to do all we can to create the conditions for renewal of the Church.

We sincerely believe that what successive General Assemblies have said is right – the Church of Scotland needs to decentralise.

The needs, demands, issues and solutions are best known to those who are experiencing them on the ground.

Now is the time to action this further, we need to move on it. Releasing resources – and responsibility - to presbyteries.

Alongside this, and relevant to it, is the priorities project at the national office. Reviewing what is done and why and making decisions accordingly.

You will have seen in our report the latest information about who pays for parish ministry. As commissioners you all know that congregations 'pay into the centre' through Giving to Grow so that the cost of ministries across the Church are met.

You may have been surprised at the figures.

71% of the charges in the Church of Scotland do not contribute enough to 'the centre' to cover what their ministry costs actually are.

As we put it in our report only 29% of charges currently meet the full cost of the ministry they receive.

This is a key illustration of the challenge we face as a Church; costs outstrip income.

Even on something as important to the Church of Scotland as parish ministers.

Looking at this another way, 89% of congregational contributions to Giving to Grow are spent on parish ministries.

This *may* be said to reflect parish ministry's importance, but it does not leave much over for other areas of expenditure.

Congregational contributions on the income side, and ministry costs, on the expenditure side, are by far the largest elements of the national church's budget that we manage.

Because costs continue to outstrip income, readily accessible reserves are dwindling.

As your charity trustees, the Assembly Trustees cannot allow the reserves to run out.

You know this with your *local* charity trustee responsibilities.

It is one of the reasons why we are looking at so many aspects of the current operating model of the Church that need review and - likely - reform.

The General Assembly has given the Assembly Trustees a solemn and unenviable task. We are committed and working towards bringing the Church's forward budgets back into balance.

At the same time we seek to prioritise investing in mission and evangelism with a vision for revitalised existing congregations and forming new worshipping communities.

Society is always changing.

As a Church, we must adapt to meet people where they are now

- experiment with doing things differently

We must all be Congregations who are eager to bring the gospel to young - and old- alike in our communities.

Our reformed heritage gives us the freedom to change how we organise ourselves within our Presbyterian polity in pursuit of Christ's mission through His church.

What is difficult, and yet what we need to do, is discern the direction of travel while holding close the five marks of mission and look out for unexpected consequences.

Earlier I said that I hoped that our report, while sombre, also makes uplifting reading.

Are we starting to see the potential for a different – hope-filled - future for the Church of Scotland?

Seeds for Growth has started well providing financial support to those that are embarking on new church plants, experimental new communities of faith, and new models of ministry formation.

Encouragement is required to both new initiatives *and* innovation within our traditional models, promoting good examples of life, creativity, and adaptation. These are emerging across the Church.

Other encouragement comes.

The trustees and the General Trustees are now working closely together with shared goals. The General Trustees are increasing flexibility in use of the consolidated fabric fund.

The Housing and Loan Fund is releasing surplus funds for which we are grateful.

In encouragement of us all in local congregations, the Stewardship Team remind us Living Generously is at the heart of our faith. God's generosity towards us gives rise to thankfulness which is expressed through our generosity towards others.

There are signs of encouragement.
There is more to do.

The trustees' priorities that were affirmed by the General Assembly in 2023 remain central as we emphasise the need for growth, leadership development at all levels of the Church, and governance modernisation.

The path ahead demands accelerated action, streamlining our central organisation and empowering local leadership by decentralising decision making wherever possible.

Capacity, capability, responsibility and accountability are key themes.

What this will look like will be determined through every level working together and collaborating to find appropriate solutions.

The heart of this Church beats within our congregations as they – you – we - carry the mantle of mission, forging a path forward in unity and purpose.

Our collective mission and proclamation are the responsibility of all believers, in every place and at every level.

In setting out our report, what do we ask of you, here as commissioners to the General Assembly?

We ask that you hear the seriousness of the Church's financial position.

We ask that you respond to the call to 'live generously'.

We ask that you respect our earnest desire to do what the Church has asked of us - responsibility for the development of vision, strategy and overarching policy as guided by General Assembly decisions.

We ask that you recognise our understanding that the heart of the matter is about seeing the Good News of Jesus Christ shared and changing lives and communities for the better.

We ask that you play a part in the collaborative working that is needed.

The solutions to the challenges that we face lie primarily where you worship and serve.

As we navigate a fundamental shift in the Church's place in society, may we heed the disruptive spirit of God, working in unity on a shared journey among the people of our parishes.

The Book of Acts describes this as an exciting and dynamic process of experimentation, discerning and discovery.

We must return to the simple call of living out the gospel, presenting a different perspective to the world through enthusiastic worshipping, witnessing, nurturing and serving communities.

Acknowledging the blessings God has given.

Responding by using these gifts and resources to live out the Good News and bring glory to God.

Moderator I lay the Annual Report and Accounts on the table, and present the Report of the Assembly Trustees and move the deliverance.