**Council of Assembly Report**

**Dr Sally Bonnar, Convener**

**Saturday 20 May 2017**

**Moderator,** I have pleasure in presenting the report and supplementary report of the Council of Assembly which can be found in Section 6 of the Blue book and in the additional papers.

“Let us pray” - we need to pray; help us to pray; we must pray. The Council has focussed the early part of its proposed deliverance on prayer because this is what people are telling us is important. As part of the strategic planning work given to us by the General Assembly last year, we undertook 16 roadshows across the country to listen to what people in local congregations were saying about the church as they experience it and how they wanted to see the future. We presented the statistics that you see on page 4 of our report and had conversations about the future. Most of our attendees found these statistics shocking; and indeed they are. They tell in stark numbers a story of a shrinking church; an ageing ministry; and difficulty filling leadership roles. However the reaction to these numbers was not depression and despair but rather of challenge and a determination to take action.

When the results from all these roadshows were analysed, it was clear that the one issue which had surfaced at every event was the call to pray. This was a timely reminder that, whatever we might *like* to do in the future, what really matters is what *God* is calling us to do and to be.

As we considered the responses from the Roadshows, the Council recognised this pervasive theme of the desire to pray in an intentional way that God would work in our church to refresh and renew our vision. So that is where the Council’s proposed Deliverance begins today. We ask the whole church to affirm this message from its own people: ‘Let us pray’. We are asking that Presbyteries and Congregations take up the call for God to do a new work amongst us; to guide us into the future that He is calling us to. We also commit the Council to preparing prayer resources in collaboration with others so that these can be specifically used to support the implementation of the new strategic plan when it is presented to the General Assembly in 2018. By focussing on prayer early in this report our hope is that it will underpin all the future work that I am going on to speak about and will include all our folks locally in the work of God across the church.

In a short presentation such as this it is impossible to mention all the work that the Council of Assembly has been engaged in over the past year so I will focus on three aspects of our work; the strategic planning; working in partnership with others, specifically the ecumenical and interfaith work; and the financial position of the church. I will not be dealing with the matter of church properties today as outlined in Section 11 of the main report and in more detail in section 3 of the Supplementary report. These will be the subject of a separate discussion on Monday afternoon.

The Council decided early on in the strategic planning process that anything we produced to assist the church in making decisions about priorities had to make sense to local congregations; hence the undertaking of the Roadshows to start by consulting as widely as possible with folks at a local level. Around 1000 people attended 16 roadshows held from Shetland to London and Dumfries to Dundee. The overwhelming impression was of energy and a recognition of the need to change. People did not shy away from the difficult questions and conversations. There was a recognition that hard choices would have to be made.

There were of course as many answers as there were people attending but nevertheless a number of key themes emerged. The analysis of this material is available on the Roadshow pages of the church website and if you are attending Heart and Soul tomorrow they will be on display in the Council of Assembly tent. Using the overarching theme of “Love God; Love your neighbour” with the focus on building a mission orientated church with mission orientated congregations, we have taken forward our discussions under the banners of “worship”; “making disciples” and “engaging Community”.

Thus far we have concentrated on consultation; first with local people and among the Council of Assembly members themselves and now in the month ahead with the other 5 Councils of the national church and departments within the national offices. Although many members of Presbyteries were involved in the Roadshows, in the autumn we plan more directly to engage with representatives of Presbyteries in a conference setting. Alongside this consultation we are developing a financial strategy and a workforce plan to inform and underpin the work and next year will present the completed strategy with proposed budgetary priorities to the General Assembly of 2018.

Moving on to look at partnership working, last year the Assembly affirmed the undertaking of a review of the work, staffing and positioning of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations. A joint working group from the Council and the Ecumenical Committee undertook this task and the detailed outcomes can be found at section 3 of our report. Consultation with partners inside and out with the church showed the strength of the ecumenical work of the Church of Scotland and how much it is appreciated by our partner churches. However a number of challenges were uncovered and it was also clear that the ecumenical landscape had changed significantly since the previous ecumenical policy was approved. The joint working group has therefore proposed a number of further pieces of work and some changes which form part of our proposed deliverance. A revised remit for the ecumenical committee is set out in the report at appendix 3 and it is proposed that a more detailed revision the ecumenical policy will follow. There is also a proposal to change how the committee relates to the councils of the church in a way which we hope will make ecumenical engagement more effective. Up until now, a model of attending Council meetings whist helpful has perhaps not encouraged ecumenical thinking to be as embedded in the work of the Councils as it could be. We are therefore proposing a move to a more meaningful accompanying model which we hope will help to drive the ecumenical agenda. In the current climate, working together with our brother and sister Christian churches is increasingly important. I would like to thank the members of the joint working group for their commitment to this work and also thank our ecumenical partners for their willing cooperation with the consultation.

Continuing this theme of working together, we also present to you a report on the future of interfaith relations which can be found at Section 10 of the report. The challenges in this area in our current social context are great and it is important that the church is able to participate in meaningful dialogue with our neighbours of different faiths particularly in the context of an increasingly secularised society. The Council has therefore approved the appointment of a permanent Interfaith officer to work within the department of the General Assembly and to assist the church both locally and nationally to develop this area of work. This decision follows a period of research and assessment which identified the need for a dedicated focus on interfaith work at this time.

Turning now to finances; you will find these detailed in Section 4 of the main report and Section1 of the supplementary report. Further detail can be found in the Annual Report of the Trustees. This document describes many of the positive pieces of work undertaken by the church in the past year and it is full of encouraging stories. I urge you to read it. It also details the accounts of the church showing our financial position. Those of you who were at our lunchtime event will already have had a chance to interrogate these. We also see congregational statistics which show a steeply falling pattern and early indications are that this is now having an effect on income; for the first time we are seeing a fall in congregational giving. . This is not unexpected; in fact we have often said that we are surprised that giving has held up so well. However it seems we have now reached a tipping point and if current membership trends continue, then the decrease in income is likely to become a repeated feature of these reports. This emphasises the need for the strategic planning process that we are currently undertaking. The church has a very complex budget and we spend our money across a wide range of activities. A quick glance at the chart on page 41 of the annual report shows just how diverse these activities are. If we are to bring our budget into balance then it is crucially important that we examine these activities with a critical eye and decide what our priorities really are. We cannot continue taking on new work without stopping some things that we are currently doing. Hence we need to decide- what new things will we do, what needs to be kept and what do we stop? Looking to the future, as a national church we will be doing less with fewer resources. These are some of the questions we asked participants in the Roadshows – they are straightforward and obvious: they are, nevertheless, critical to good decision making as we move forward in the service of Christ’s Kingdom. Over the next year, the Council of Assembly and its Strategy Group together with our Councils, Presbyteries and local congregations will be giving deep consideration to these issues. Next year we will bring to the General Assembly a prioritised strategic plan with budgetary recommendations based on the input from these sources and founded on our aim as a church to love God and love our neighbour.

I have outlined some of the challenges we face and you can read them in greater detail in our report. These are serious and significant challenges. So what are we to do about it? Clearly as already stated, we must as a church pray for the renewal of our vision and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We must also use all the tools at our disposal.

And above all we must do it together. I was very struck by the message from Archbishop Justin Welby at his presentation last year when he spoke about Christian unity. As Christ said “a house divided against itself will not stand”. So let us set aside our differences and go forward together in the building of Christ’s Kingdom.

Moderator as I am not a Commissioner, I ask the Principal Clerk to move the Deliverance.