**The Church of Scotland General Trustees**

**General Assembly 2017**

**Moderator,**

Good morning everybody. (Slide 1)

The General Trustees have had a busy year but I must be brief and restrict my report to a few topics.

Firstly I am obliged to tell you that our Accounts have been tabled and are available for inspection.

**So - Who are we and what do we do?** (Slide 2)

We are a group of 31 Ministers and Elders appointed by The General Assembly, supported by about 19 Advisory Members. We have a Staff (Slide 3) of 15 managed by our Secretary David Robertson. (Slide 4)

At this Assembly we are pleased to be welcoming three new GTs, two of whom are women, (Slide 5) but we are predominantly a male group and we wish to encourage women with appropriate skills and experience to join us and contribute to our work.

We hold title to most of the Churches, Halls, Manses and Glebes around the country and on behalf of the church we hold funds which allowed us in 2016 to support congregations with (Slide 6)

* Loans to congregations £4.5M
* Standard Grants £900K
* Priority Grants £1M
* Total investment of about **£6.5M**

**Presbyteries.**

Remember that it is Presbyteries, not General Trustees, who decide which church buildings are required. The General Trustees need to work more closely with Presbyteries so that we shall have greater awareness of decisions being taken relating to buildings.

When faced (Slide 7) with the need to select buildings it is important that Building Surveys of the properties are undertaken by the same professional, so that proper comparison can be made and decisions taken on an informed basis. Such decisions are emotional as well as logical challenges and there are many factors to be taken into consideration, but building condition and potential development value have a place in the debate.

As an example of promoting closer relations with Presbyteries, regular meetings take place with Glasgow Presbytery. We have also established a “Cluster Pilot Scheme” with the five Tayside Presbyteries to discuss building issues. Both of these initiatives are leading to closer relationships and better understanding between GTs and the Presbyteries concerned.

When disposing of church buildings we seek appropriate new uses, including continued use by the local community. (Slide 8) The “Community Right to Buy” legislation is welcomed in this respect. You may have read in the press that Portobello Old has recently been acquired by the community and is to continue to serve local people.

**So how do we work?**

The General Trustees support presbyteries and congregations in response to a wide variety of buildings issues. We consider all applications carefully and often send a delegation to visit applicant congregations so that we have an opportunity to discuss proposals face to face with those most closely involved.

**GT working practices.**

The GTs have embarked on a major re-assessment of our own working practices through a “Way Forward Group”. (Slide 9) Most of the Trustees and Advisory Members are involved with working groups which are reviewing our working practices and we expect to report outcomes to the General Assembly of 2018.

**Glebes.**

The GTs are responsible for about 12,500 acres of Glebeland and we have a dedicated group including Solicitors, Land Surveyors, Agents and Farmers who review and monitor the management of glebes. A “Factor Member” acts for a designated geographical area and gets to know individual glebes and tenants.

The Glebes Convener has asked me to stress (Slide 10) that in some cases the rental income from glebes is perhaps only 1% of the capital value, and in these cases it may be worth considering selling the glebe - because the invested capital may bring a higher return on the congregation’s Stipend Fund. *If this applies to you do contact us to discuss the situation.*

**Buildings.**

All Board and/or Kirk Session members have charity trustee responsibility for their church buildings, halls, manses and glebes and they have a responsibility to keep the property in good repair.

The General Trustees, however, hold legal Title to the majority of church property and have an over-arching responsibility in respect of these assets. We publish guidance to try to ensure that congregations are advised about changes in the Law which affect our buildings.

Only yesterday (Slide 11) we launched our Health and Safety Toolkit produced by Brian Auld, our Safe Buildings Consultant. Over the next month all congregations and presbyteries will receive their own copy. I hope this will give confidence to office bearers who have to produce H&S documentation for their own congregation’s buildings.

Maintenance of church properties is (Slide 12) a challenge to some congregations. If there is nobody with a building background it can be difficult to know exactly what needs to be done and to prioritise, manage and fund necessary work.

Professional Quinquennial Building Surveys, (Slide 13) organised by presbyteries, are a key element in this. In some cases these surveys are not being undertaken on time, or are of poor quality. It is critical that presbyteries ensure that follow up action is being taken to address reported defects.

It may be worth considering whether we routinely require Professionals to personally present their findings to Kirk Sessions so that there is a fuller and wider understanding of the information provided and hopefully a commitment to address the issues raised.

*My plea is that congregations will ensure that Quinquennial Surveys of all properties are done on time and action taken to address the issues identified.*

**Sharing Talents and Resources.**

The Trustees would share the concern (Slide 14) of the Panel on Review and Reform that many congregations lack members with appropriate practical skills to enable them with confidence to tackle technical issues. I wonder whether there is more scope for congregations to share personnel resources. *Might your congregation be able to offer support to another congregation?*

The sharing of finances is more controversial. Some congregations have Fabric Reserves which are far beyond their reasonable needs*.*  *Might it be that congregations are willing to share these resources too? The regulations already permit this.*

**Adaptation and Development.**

Many of our buildings are much too big and expensive to maintain. Sometimes outreach to the local community is being hampered because congregations are over-burdened with the cost of maintenance of buildings which no longer serve them well.

Although many buildings are used throughout the week - many of our sanctuaries lie empty six days each week. *Are we prepared to address this by creating more appropriate buildings - or do we love our buildings more than we love our Mission?*

Neither the General Trustees nor the Church as a whole is a building preservation body. We have a great built heritage much of which should be protected - however the Church should not be held responsible for the maintenance of buildings which do not serve our mission. We receive support from various agencies for building repair and we are grateful for that - but the balance of the demands of Planning Law and our obligations under Charity Law needs review. *Those who value particular buildings need to step up to the plate and take a much greater share of the liabilities related to maintaining them. Money held by the Church was not given for us to spend on buildings which we do not need*.

**New Church Buildings.**

Imagine non-church members walking along the pavement outside a typical church building. They often see a very austere, dark place. Doors may be firmly shut. Windows are often small and there is no visibility to the inside. To people not familiar with church worship these buildings present a very unwelcoming prospect. *Do you think the image which our typical church buildings present is welcoming?*

Imaginative design can greatly improve many buildings but in other cases buildings have come to the end of their useful life and new build is appropriate.

It is always exciting to think what might be achieved with improved and appropriate facilities. But when contemplating new building works it is important to be realistic about costs. There are many factors which may influence cost but £2,000 per square metre is a useful benchmark. *Please consider costs before proceeding with design - failure to do this leads to disappointment and disillusionment!*

Surely a modern church building has to have characteristics which suit needs? Let me suggest a few characteristics which seem me to be important in a new church building:

* (Slide 15) The building should be located where people are to be found.
* There must be a welcoming entrance – perhaps staffed.
* Windows must allow daylight and vision into the building.
* (Slide 16) The layout has to be flexible to accommodate a range of activities.
* The building must be capable of being maintained and operated at reasonable cost.
* (Slide 17) Above all the building must offer a warm, bright, safe and comfortable environment and perhaps be equipped with Wi-Fi!

Of course I am not advocating the indiscriminate disposal of church buildings - but in certain instances it is appropriate and bold decisions need to be taken. There have been many church projects which show us a way ahead.

Since its inception our Church has always developed to meet the needs of the people in parishes across the country. We, the members of our church, need worship space because worship is vital to our lives, but our buildings need to reflect that congregations are supporting the needs of local communities in so many other practical ways. Our church halls are heavily used for a wide variety of purposes. One of the major problems in our communities is loneliness - and church organisations make a huge contribution to addressing that. We offer safe spaces for so many people, many of whom may not be church members, to meet and engage in a wide variety of activities. Sometimes the importance of what we do in this respect is not recognised - but it is real community outreach.

*Our buildings need to reflect our duty to serve people rather than being a burden which deflects us from our mission. We are challenged to serve our neighbours and in doing so we show the example of Jesus.*

Thank you.

**Conclusion.**

As I am not a Commissioner I ask the Principal Clerk to propose this Report.

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