

SPECIAL GENERAL
ASSEMBLY 2019
SUPPLEMENT

LIFE AND WORK

THE MAGAZINE OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

A RADICAL ASSEMBLY

- Up to £25m to be spent on projects aimed at church growth, with particular emphasis on church planting
- 100 new worshipping communities to be established
- Focus on engaging with people under 40
- Cost of central administration to be cut by up to 30%: four councils to be merged into two
- Number of Scottish presbyteries to be reduced from 43 to about 12, focused on supporting local congregations in their ministry and mission
- Networks, hubs and other new local church structures to be developed
- Kirk Sessions to be reduced in size and focused on 'leadership and strategic decision-making'
- Decision-making and resources to be devolved from the central administration to regional and local levels
- No congregation to pay more to the centre after next year until new arrangements are agreed
- Land and buildings plan to focus on 'well equipped spaces in the right places'. Money from sale of redundant buildings to be shared between congregations
- Improved training and support for all ministry and leadership roles
- General Assembly to be made smaller
- Encouragement of a season of 'prayer and preparation' across the Church from September to December 2019



Photo credits: Derek Fett Photography

The 2019 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland opened with a reminder from the Convener of the Council of Assembly that its decisions could ‘shape the future of the Church for years to come’; and closed with the Lord High Commissioner, the Duke of Buccleuch, saying someone had described it as the most significant Assembly since the Union in 1929.

Only time will tell whether either of those statements proves true, but what can be said is that the Assembly accepted three reports that between them have the potential to radically reshape the Church of Scotland, at every level from the local to the national and the General Assembly itself. The overall thrust of the plans is devolution of decision-making and resources from the centre to reorganised and re-energised regional and local structures, with an emphasis on equipping churches for mission in their local context.

RADICAL ACTION PLAN

The Radical Action Plan was drawn up by the Council of Assembly in response to the General Assembly of 2018. It includes:

- An investment of £20-25m over seven years in a ‘Growth Fund’, supporting projects which will ‘encourage greater faith-sharing, innovation and creativity at local and regional levels’. Paid for from reserves, it will continue and expand the work of the Go For It Fund, with a particular focus on plans to reach young people and families, on work in Priority Areas, and on church planting (the Plan envisages 100 new worshipping communities).
- A reduction in the number of presbyteries in Scotland to around 12 (from the current 43, not including the English and overseas presbyteries). The plan is that the new bodies will be better able to fulfil the formal functions of presbyteries than the current small ones, but also to ‘provide leadership and focus alongside practical support for local congregations, freeing them for mission and ministry’. The process is expected to be complete by 2025, but several of the Presbyteries have already started negotiations.

- A review of the size and role of Kirk Sessions, with the hope that smaller Sessions will reduce the length of time spent in meetings and promote, ‘a meeting dynamic more suited to leadership and strategic decision-making’, and ‘a clearer understanding of trustee responsibility’ (the Assembly agreed new rules allowing elders to be appointed to membership of Kirk Sessions for a fixed period, instead of for life).
- A deliberate focus on engaging with young people, ‘through combining current good practice and encouraging increased innovation and experimentation’.
- New networks, hub ministries and other forms of local church structure will be developed, building on existing work in Pioneer Ministries and Hub-Style Ministries. This is a response to problems sustaining smaller congregations and the shortage of ministers, but will also allow churches the flexibility to ‘explore and expand their horizons in a mission-based context’, in ways that best respond to their local circumstances.
- Increased co-operation with other denominations and organisations, helping the Church maintain its commitment to a presence in every part of Scotland.
- A flexible training and support programme for all ministerial and leadership roles, paid or voluntary, in the Church. Ministers are to be trained to support and help members and elders ‘identify, release, and develop their gifts’.
- The Action Plan also calls for a ‘season of prayer and preparation’ across the Church from September to December this year. The report states that the plan ‘should be thought of, first and foremost, as an act of faith... we are a people of faith, rooted in prayer’.

Another section of the plan proposed a reconfiguration of ministries and mission contributions (the money paid by local churches to the centre), but this was replaced at the Assembly by one instructing that no church should have its contributions increased after next year (for which budgets are already set), until alternative arrangements have been agreed.

Introducing the plan, Council of Assembly

convener Dr Sally Bonnar told the Assembly: “We need to think about how we can bring the message of the Gospels effectively to the generation in which we live, and what shape the church should take in order to do this.”

STRUCTURAL REFORM

The Special Commission on Structural Reform, convened by the Rev Professor David Fergusson, was established last autumn, to suggest ways in which the central structures of the Church could better fulfil their legal duties, support the local churches and become more financially sustainable.

The proposals included:

- The setting up of a new body of trustees, replacing the Council of Assembly, with responsibility for overseeing the work of the central charity and its finances, and ensuring all parts of the organisation are working in accordance with the strategic priorities of the Church.
- A reduction in the cost of the central organisation of about 20-30% over the next 1-2 years.
- The merging of four Councils into two, with the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils combined into one ‘inward-facing’ body, while the World Mission and Church and Society Councils will merge into an ‘outward-facing’ group. This is expected to take effect on January 1 2020.
- Discussions on how CrossReach (the Church’s Social Care operation) can become a more financially viable organisation.
- The appointment of a new Chief Officer.
- The establishment of a new research facility ‘to inform the development of policy across the Church’.

Professor Fergusson told the Assembly that the changes were necessary to create ‘organisational structures capable of responding with sufficient speed and flexibility to the enormous challenges we face’ – declining membership and income, a shortage of ministers, and an operating deficit of £4.5m this year.

He emphasised that not all the savings would come from staff costs, but he did note



that staffing levels have 'risen steadily in recent years', even while Church membership has fallen.

While detailed discussion took place on the make-up and constitution of the new trustees body, and its relationship with existing structures, the reforms as a whole were overwhelmingly approved. Later in the week there was some dismay about there being only three women among the 12 new Trustees, but a motion urging that the Trustee body should have an equal gender split from next year was narrowly defeated. The Trustees take legal responsibility for the charity from June 1, and meet for the first time on June 3.

'WELL EQUIPPED SPACES IN THE RIGHT PLACES'

The final part of the reform jigsaw was the General Trustees' report on the Church's land and buildings.

Introducing a consultation on the Trustees' 'Well Equipped Spaces in the Right Places' strategy, which will be finalised next year, chairman Raymond Young told the Assembly it was time for the Church to 'get real': "There are some very good spaces in the Church, but we have too many, and many are not fit for purpose. Neither is the Church a building preservation organisation.

"Church buildings should be managed, changed and developed in such a way that they are not a distraction from the call 'follow me'.

"For years the Assembly has nodded in sympathy when my predecessors have said that we must reduce the size of this estate, yet at the start of this year Presbyteries have

said 86 per cent of these church buildings are expected to remain in use beyond the life of the Presbytery Plan. Only six per cent are expected to go. Really?"

He said that progress in the Presbyteries of Shetland and St Andrews, and new churches including St Rollox in Glasgow, showed what could be achieved. A church plant on a new housing estate in Perth might not have a traditional building. There was also a need to develop partnerships to support buildings which are not just church but community assets.

Mr Young concluded: "We need to be fletcher of foot, not encumbered with buildings that take up energy that should be used for worship and mission."

Separately, the future of the Church of Scotland's administrative offices in Edinburgh is still being discussed, with options of basic repair and refurbishment, a major reconfiguration which would allow staff to be concentrated across two floors and the rest of the building to be leased out, or simply selling and moving out. As the future staffing requirements at the centre are uncertain due to the other ongoing reforms, the Council of Assembly reported this year that it was 'not appropriate... to reach a definitive position at this stage'.

OTHER REFORMS

The demand for radical reform also pervaded other debates during the week:

- The Ministries Council will consider building into new vacancy rules a principle that, in future, no minister should be called on unrestricted tenure.
- The Assembly Arrangements Committee

said its successor body, the Assembly Business Committee, would look at reducing the number of commissioners to future Assemblies. Convener, the Rev Fiona Smith, said it was not just about cutting costs but making the Assembly more fit for purpose.

- A special commission is to be formed to explore the effectiveness of the Church's Presbyterian form of government.
- A working group is to be formed to 'develop proposals... for ordination to a form of Word and Sacrament shaped by the context of the emerging Church'.

At the end of the week the Moderator, the Rt Rev Colin Sinclair, urged Commissioners to 'work tirelessly' to make the reforms agreed during the week a reality. He cautioned that 'deciding the change is not the same as making the change', and warned that the changes will be painful.

"We need Commissioners of the General Assembly, as we go back to the parishes to be advocates and change makers. We need to be willing to make the sacrifices ourselves, to set an example."

And he warned that all the changes agreed will not bring about the revival of the church without people responding to Jesus' call 'follow me', which had been the Assembly's theme.

THE ASSEMBLY TRUSTEES

- The Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, Convener (serving for three years)
- Norma Rolls, Vice Convener (two years)
- James McNeill QC, Administrative Trustee (three years)
- Alan Campbell CBE (two years)
- Jamie Lockhart (three years)
- The Rev Anikó Schüetz Bradwell (three years)
- The Rev George Cowie (two years)
- Dr Gary MacFarlane MBE (one year)
- David Watt (one year)
- Sandra Carter (one year)
- The Very Rev Professor Iain Torrance (one year)
- Professor Brian Ashcroft (two years)

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DIVESTMENT

For the second year in a row, a call for the Church's Investors Trust to withdraw its holdings in oil and gas companies was narrowly rejected. This was despite the Assembly also passing a motion recognising 'that we are experiencing a climate and ecological emergency'.

Anger over the decision rumbled on into the next day, when a group of youth representatives and their supporters held a silent protest on the Assembly Hall steps, and there was another brief protest at the beginning of the report of the Investors Trust. By the end of the week, 78 Commissioners had registered their dissent against the decision.

YOUTH ASSEMBLY

The Assembly confirmed the changes to the church's engagement with young people, which will see a series of smaller regional events replace the National Youth Assembly. There was considerable disquiet in the hall about the loss of the NYA, but Mission and Discipleship Convener the Rev Norman Smith said there was 'a huge body of evidence' behind the proposals. He admitted that there was no funding identified for the NYA, but said: "It's not just the Church trying to do things for less. We are trying to do things better."

ISRAEL/PALESTINE

The Church of Scotland's presence in Israel and Palestine was reaffirmed by the Assembly, which approved the conclusions of a strategic review by the World Mission Council. This included investment in the St Andrew's Guest House in Jerusalem and support for the continued operation of the Scots Hotel in Tiberias.

FIRST MINISTER

The high-profile speech of the week came from the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola

Sturgeon, who praised the Church's engagement in 'the great national and international issues of the day'.

Mrs Sturgeon said that the Kirk could remind politicians of their responsibility to air differences 'in a civil and respectful way, while seeking common ground and consensus'.

SOLIDARITY WITH PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

During the World Mission report, Commissioners stood for a minute's silence in remembrance and solidarity with persecuted Christians around the world. On the first day of the Assembly the retiring Moderator, the Very Rev Susan Brown, criticised the UK Government for its refusal to grant asylum to the Bakhsh family, Pakistani Christians living in Glasgow who say they would be in danger if they were sent back to Pakistan.

MINISTER TRAINING

The number of academic partners for initial ministerial training is to be reduced from the current five to 'one or two'. Convener of the Ministries Council, the Rev Neil Glover, said that inclusiveness and provision of distance learning would be key elements in the selection process for the training providers; and that the Council would accept collaborative applications from two or more of the providers working together.

ANTISEMITISM

The Assembly agreed to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism and its guidelines. A countermotion arguing that the Church should develop its own definition was defeated.

ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

It was reported that Action of Churches Together in Scotland is to be replaced with a

looser Scottish Christian Forum. The convener of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, the Rev Sandy Horsburgh, said it was hoped the less formal organisation would allow more churches to take part.

BIG SING

The Guild's Big Sing on the Tuesday evening of the Assembly raised £3437.05, which will be used to help replace a church roof in Malawi.

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