

Special Commission Report speech – General Assembly 2019

Moderator, last October the Special Commission was appointed by the Commission of Assembly. Our task has been to examine governance issues in the unincorporated councils and committees of the Church, and also to identify ways in which a leaner organisation can better support local congregations. This has proved a challenging remit with six months in which to reach our conclusions. The urgency of the task has been impressed upon us by the Commission of Assembly and also those with whom we have engaged, including a range of groups, office bearers and the wider membership of the church. We wish to record our thanks to all those who have responded both constructively and honestly. There has been a remarkable consistency in what we have been told in relation to the problems currently facing the Church of Scotland at every level and the types of response that are required.

One senior church figure said to me at the outset: ‘your job is tell us what we already know’. And in many ways this report confirms views that are widely held, while its recommendations continue a recognisable trajectory stretching back over many years. The trigger for the formation of the Special Commission was a series of intractable problems faced by the Council of Assembly in the discharge of its remit. These included the conflict of interest faced by Council conveners serving as trustees – a point readily acknowledged by conveners themselves – the frustration of the Council of Assembly in trying to control expenditure and ensuring robust fiscal management, and the difficulty of articulating the strategic priorities of the Church and securing adherence to these at the General Assembly. In meeting with the Council in January, we quickly became aware of these frustrations. Our further investigations have revealed that the difficulty in operating efficiently has not been confined to this one element of the organisation. There are challenges facing the whole Church at every level – national, regional and local. These concern strategy, governance and resource. In many ways, our report echoes the cry for radical reform heard at last year’s GA. Our recommendations respond to this growing sense of urgency, and attempt to kick start the process of radical reform. Doing nothing and continuing as we are is not an option.

It may be worth pondering these challenges in a wider perspective. As a national and Presbyterian church, we have a highly complex and organic structure that has evolved over several centuries. In many ways, this has served us well through times of relative stability with respect to numbers, finance and the wider societal context to which we belong. But in an era of rapid change, it is less clear that our organisational structures are capable of responding with sufficient speed and flexibility to the enormous challenges we face. These are documented in the report but they include the loss of 4% of our membership per

annum, the chronic shortage of ministers which is set to worsen with the anticipated number of retirements, the plateauing of our income and the annual deficits now being incurred. Our membership has halved since the beginning of this century; if current trends continue, it is likely to halve again within the next 12-15 years.

The way ahead seems clear. We need a trustee body that is liberated from conflicts of interest, which is able, without contradiction, to exercise the stewardship of finance which the General Assembly must entrust to its Charity Trustees. This trustee body must be able to articulate the strategic priorities of the Church and how these are to be enacted in accordance with the available resources. The relationship of the trustee body to the General Assembly will need to be recast. We have returned often to the thought that the Church will need to trust its trustees. If they are fenced in and restricted by too many measures and controls, and outflanked by other bodies, then they will be unable to exercise the leadership that we require. The same applies to staff who work in the central organisation. If they spend too much of their time, as we believe they currently do, serving committees, seeking approval for every decision, and briefing others on their work, then they will be hampered in their performance to the detriment of the whole church. A culture of trust, allied to transparency and cooperation, is needed as much, perhaps more, than any new set of structures.

Our remit referred to a 'leaner' organisation. With this in mind, we believe that a slimming down of the central organisation is necessary and overdue for the sake of cost savings and the gradual elimination of the financial deficit. These cost saving measures should include the General Assembly itself which absorbs a very significant amount of time and resource. The General Assembly must serve the Church, and not vice-versa. But this should also be seen in the context of a strategic decision to devolve power and resource to the regional level. And this can only happen if we have larger and fewer Presbyteries that are able to function effectively in supporting and facilitating local congregations. The exercise we are recommending is therefore both strategic and fiscal – these two elements should not be separated. The strategy is one of devolution – the empowering of the local church, support for its forms of ministry, stimulating mission in our parishes and beyond, planting new churches, and a regional reorganisation that will better facilitate these processes. But we make no apology for advocating tighter financial controls, curbs on expenditure and a rational distribution of resource in accordance with the declared priorities of the church. Since most of this money is raised locally, given in good faith, and perhaps already declining in real terms, we have a responsibility to exercise proper stewardship in accordance with our traditions.

Cost savings of 20-30% are proposed for the central organisation. This is an estimated figure; it is deliberately imprecise since the details still need to be worked out more fully. But we have reached this figure, following consultation with the Finance Group of the Council of Assembly. The deficit is running at around £4.5m. Congregational giving is about £47m in addition to which we have further income from sources such as investments, legacies, and donations. We will soon need to identify more resource to support larger Presbyteries. The staffing costs of the central organisation are just under £10m, these having risen steadily in recent years. We have increased staffing levels to the extent that we have returned to the numbers that were employed 20 years ago, when the membership of the Church of Scotland was more than double its present size.

Looking at this picture, we believe that a reduction of 10% is likely to be insufficient, whereas savings of 40% seem unrealistic and likely to damage the core business of the Church. Our mid-range figure of 20-30% is deliberately imprecise since it will have to be tested by the new trustee body, and we have deliberately not set any timetable on when this should be achieved. We are thinking in terms of 1-2 years at present. These savings need not all come from staff costs. There should be opportunities to make efficiency gains in other areas, including the running of the General Assembly, the committee structures of the central church, and perhaps also the sums that are given to other bodies as charitable donations.

We have been struck by the need for simultaneous reform of the church at every level, a point argued by Dr Doug Gay in his recent book. The task is that of adjusting several components parts in order to get the whole machine working more smoothly. This will involve changes to the way we do business at the General Assembly, to the size of the central organisation, to a council and committee structure that is labour intensive and often inefficient, to the number and function of Presbyteries, and also of the local congregation where we need to find ways of enabling Kirk Sessions to operate more efficiently and so to release the time and talents of our members for other work. Throughout the process, we have been aware of the parallel development of a Radical Action Plan. In several key respects our report is aligned with this – these include Presbytery reform, changes to Kirk Sessions, and the need for Crossreach to achieve a more autonomous and self-sustaining status, a process to which they themselves are fully committed.

The Commission has been left in no doubt about the importance of the core work of the central functions of the church. Employees undertaking this work deserve to be well-managed and led, with clear priorities and appropriate delegations of responsibility. We consider this need to be incontrovertible. No member of an organisation with an annual turnover of £100m and staff of 250 would expect management of their organisation to be in

the hands of a group of volunteers meeting infrequently. As we have said in the report, the creation of a proper management post to be held by someone with proven management expertise will release this part of our church properly to support the work of the local church. Within the central organisation, a chief officer should therefore be appointed with oversight of staff and budgets as set by the trustee body. We are also recommending a process of council mergers, reducing from 4 to 2 while moving Social Care/Crossreach towards becoming a more autonomous and self-sustaining body. Other measures involve a new Assembly Business Committee that will be tasked with identifying new ways of expediting the work of the GA, partly with a view to further efficiency gains. We have reached the conclusion somewhat reluctantly that the Panel on Review and Reform will be discharged but with the recommendation that a new research facility be established to inform the development of policy across the Church.

This has been received as a a hard hitting and sometimes shocking report. It has also been said that its focus is fiscal rather than visionary, and that it is severe in its stress on cost cutting measures. We disagree with these criticisms for the reasons already set out. Even so, there are several positive themes that have emerged from the work of the Special Commission. These are worth stressing this morning. First, our current challenges afford us an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the national, the regional and the local church. The ordering of our structures to serve the local was a guiding principle of Church Without Walls. Today we can further advance its implementation. A process of change must be embraced by the whole church in all its diverse elements. Second, our work has revealed that the Church continues to be blessed by the support, trust and commitment of able people serving it at every level. This is an invaluable resource that needs to be harnessed for leadership, vision and guidance as we move forward. I have been conscious of this in meeting with people over the last six months and in working with a team of gifted elders who have given generously of their time. And, finally, the work of many of our congregations offers an inspiring example of what can be achieved even at a time of reduced numbers and the indifference across much of our society. Lives continue to be transformed by Word and sacrament; people are gathered, taught and nurtured; congregations display imaginative and faithful forms of outreach and service that are no less effective because they are done without much fuss. All this attests the truth of the gospel and the persistence of faith in our midst.

In presenting the report, I should add several points for the clarification of commissioners. The amendments in my own name represent first a clarifying and tightening of the draft constitution, and I thank the clerks and the church solicitor for their assistance in this process. A more substantive proposal is the new Section 6 which advocates an accelerated timetable for council mergers. Since the publication of the report, it has become clear to us

that there is amongst the councils themselves a willingness to move ahead quickly with this process, rather than create an uncomfortable and prolonged hiatus. I appreciate the ways in which the conveners of each of the four councils have expressed support for this more rapid timetable and am happy to propose this amendment in the name of the Commission. We should accomplish council mergers by January 2020 via a convening of the Commission of Assembly before Christmas.

In relation to the two new bodies that are proposed – the Assembly Trustees and the Assembly Business Committee – we are seeking approval for these this morning. If this is given, then I hope that a process can be put in place that will enable a list of recommendations to be published by the Selection Committee in the daily papers and for approval of appointments at the end of the week.

The constitution for the new trustee body and the remit for the new Assembly Business Committee remain in the form of draft texts in Appendices 1 & 2. There are some minor typographical and other changes to be incorporated. If the Assembly is minded to approve the establishment of these bodies, then I would ask permission for us to publish a final version of the appendices in the daily papers for information.

I end by reiterating my thanks to all those across the church who have engaged so positively with this process, and especially to the hard-working members of staff at 121 George Street.

Moderator, I present the report, and, since I am not a commissioner, I ask that the Principal Clerk move the deliverance.