

Joint Emerging Church Group – General Assembly 2019

On behalf of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils

Moderator,

Brian Porteous, Convenor of the Joint Emerging Church Group of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils.

Moderator as will be clear to all members of the Assembly from discussions earlier in the week, change is never easy – it makes us uncomfortable – it has costs- it means giving some things up which we may have cherished - it makes us hanker after retaining the status quo – whatever that might be – mythical though mythical though the status quo might be. And yet Moderator I know from many years working as a change management consultant with organisations large and small, that change is possible if a simple piece of arithmetic is fulfilled.

For change to happen it requires the sum of three things to be greater than the economic, emotional and political costs of changing.

The three things are:

- An honest appraisal of where we are now,
- A clear positive and inspiring vision of the future
- An indication of the journey we have to take to achieve that new future

The Joint Emerging Church Group is the committee charged by the two Councils to promote growth and renewal initiatives in the Church in a joined up way. In this strategy, which we were instructed to bring by last year's Assembly, we seek to provide an honest appraisal of where we are now, our positive (and indeed passionate) vision for the future and the key steps we need to take to understand better our continuing journey with Christ.

The First Part of the Arithmetic – Where are we now?

Hopefully I don't need to revisit the discussions of earlier in the week but I sense we are tempted to beat ourselves up a little too much. So let's recognise also that we have much that is positive on which to build. These positives are too often, eclipsed by the narrative of decline.

This strategy tries to face reality as it is, not as we would want it to be, not as it was 30 years ago but it is not a counsel of despair. It is a counsel of faith and hope, not least because there are already a range of initiatives at every level in the church that are addressing growth and renewal. I guess we might be described as being a bit like the Prodigal Son's older brother – we have been labouring faithfully in the vineyard and our efforts should certainly be recognised.

For example, we have:

- 3 Current new charge developments and 4 new charges which have achieved full status in the past 5 years
- 52 churches in 32 presbyteries engaged in Path of Renewal
- 49 congregations reporting projects which are or will be Fresh Expressions of Church
- 5 pioneer ministers in nationally funded posts and further initiatives in pioneering at Presbytery level including the Sanctuary First digital ministry
- 30% of Go For It projects indicating their intention to create a new ecclesial community.
- Add to these things, the amazing work being done in our Priority Areas reported on earlier today, the fact that many of us are engaged in Messy Church and projects large and small in your local areas.

These areas of progress should give us grounds for hope – and should be a springboard for future progress. We should also be encouraged by the fact that our brothers and sisters in Christ in other denominations in the UK and overseas have embarked on similar journeys and have seen growth.

However, and in the spirit of facing reality as it is, despite these areas of progress and the optimism of other denominations, I don't think we can dodge the conclusion that growth and renewal are some distance from being at the centre of what it means for us to be church today.

The JECG and the two Councils believe it is time fully to grasp the challenge of growth and renewal and bring that challenge to the core of what we do at local, regional and national levels.

Our thinking in the JECG in developing this strategy has been informed significantly by the major research study conducted by Rev Dr Sandy Forsyth into pioneering and church planting. That report is included in the Blue Book as an Appendix to this report. We thank Dr Forsyth for his work and insights and we commend his report to the Assembly.

And so, as we face reality as it is, we have much on which to build. We recognise though that, if we look around our congregations, our Kirk Sessions, our Presbyteries, this General Assembly and imagine adding 10 years to all our ages without any significant increase in growth and renewal to connect with those who are presently ‘unchurched’, then we will be in considerable difficulty.

The Second Part of the Arithmetic – What is our vision?

It is a relatively simple one: of growth and renewal becoming a core priorities of the Church of Scotland by us all supporting and enabling the processes of renewal and inspiring new worshipping communities throughout the land. In short we want to change the narrative from one of decline to one of growth.

The road ahead will certainly be challenging – not least as, like all pioneers we will find that the road map is not always complete or accurate, but just imagine what it will feel like when we begin to see progress towards creating 100 new worshipping communities. Imagine our joy as we celebrate that progress.

The next stage of our journey is outlined in the key goals of the strategy:

- Using the Going for Growth banner to provide joined up support and coordination of relevant initiatives to ensure that they can easily be accessed by presbyteries and congregations
- Continuing to support the expansion of the Path of Renewal
- Committing to building new worshipping communities – 100 in the next decade
- Creating and supporting local pathways for growth and renewal
- And finally evaluating progress at each stage and reporting that progress to you.

And Thirdly and Finally in our Arithmetic – What will the journey look like?

Developing the strategy – is the easy bit! I recall a dear friend in my own Kirk Session when we finished drafting our strategy for Torbain Parish Church saying that they had always been good at the strategy bit -it was making it happen that was the challenge. Wise words indeed. Yes making it happen is the hard part!

The implementation of this strategy will be a challenge and we need to be honest about that too. But if the choice is between trying to do our best to grow or of continuing to manage decline, then I know what bus I want to be on!

I had the joy of speaking to Messy Church founder Lucy Moore at the last Going for Growth Summer School and I asked her about the reason for the success of the Messy Church movement and she had a simple answer – “God is in it”.

What we are considering here is nothing less than participating God’s Mission and discerning our small part in it. We need to understand better, work more effectively and rediscover our passion if it is missing, for reaching out to the people of our communities and especially to those with no live connection with church. This we do remembering it is what God calls us to do and I pray that we will be able to say, like Lucy Moore, that God is in all that we seek to do because we are an increasingly enthusiastic part of His mission.

This will be a journey of partnership – a journey together into new and exciting territories and opportunities. – a journey where we consult carefully through the next year so that we can make the best of the resources available to us – a journey of faith and hope through which we will be led to rediscover our passion as a church. It will be an organic journey where we seek to encourage more pioneers (lay and ordained) with a heart for creating new worshipping communities and for renewal to flourish. It will be a journey that, if it is to be effective, will not be driven from the centre but one which is facilitated, owned and encouraged at every level of the Church.

It will be a journey which is about building momentum and which seeks to embrace a mixed economy of renewal and creating new worshipping communities where we build on our existing strengths and potential. It will also be a journey where we seek and give permission for new and innovative ways of being church that connect with a much broader, secular and largely unchurched community.

Conclusions

Moderator, I started these words looking at the arithmetic of change and how we can overcome the emotional, economic and political barriers to that change. I believe that this strategy goes some way to providing that arithmetic but I believe something else too which should be stating the obvious. We are all called to be agents of change – to reach out in the power of Christ to change lives. In the words of theologian Thomas Merton:

“The real meaning of our life is to develop people who really love God and radiate love, not in the sense that they feel a great deal of love but that they simply are a people full of love who keep the fires of love burning in the world.”

We are called to change lives, change our communities, change our country through the love of God.

Last month Moderator I renewed my passport and at my age, I have prayed that I will be given the opportunity to outlive it. Now we could all take the view that our church, a bit like my passport, will see us out - but I pray that when I come to renew my passport in 2029, I will find the Church of Scotland not just surviving but confident in the future, renewed and growing once more in its importance to our land and its people - A church that is truly living out Jesus' commission in Matthew 28 - A church that has prioritised and is committed to growth and renewal and is absolutely passionate about 'developing people who really love God and radiate that love'.

Moderator, the Joint Emerging Church Group commends its report to the General Assembly on behalf of the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils and as I am not a commissioner, I would ask the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.