

Joint Report on Sacramental Ministry – General Assembly 2019

Joint Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, the Theological Forum, Ecumenical Relations Committee, and the Legal Questions Committee.

Moderator...

On the first Easter Sunday, two people were walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus. They were walking and talking, when a stranger joined them. He listened to their sorrow and confusion as they described all that had happened to Jesus of Nazareth. Then, having listened, this stranger taught them a different way of looking at the events, in the light of the scriptures. As they walked and talked, as God's Word was opened up for them, the two companions felt their hearts burning within them – a powerful experience, transforming their understanding.

Yet it was only when the three of them sat at a table together, when bread was blessed, broken and shared, that Cleopas and his companion fully encountered the living Christ.

The living Word brought burning hearts.

The sacramental moment led to an encounter with the living Christ.

Word and Sacrament combine to open minds and hearts to the living Christ.

A few days before, Jesus had shared the Passover meal with his friends. While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take: this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many."

The living Word taught his friends as they shared a meal.

The sacramental moment has been handed down generations to help us all to encounter the living Christ.

Word and Sacrament combine to open minds and hearts to the living Christ.

Yet in 2019, we are aware that there are fewer opportunities offered in the Church of Scotland to encounter Christ in this way. This issue is coming to the General Assembly because as the Panel and others have listened to the church, we have heard that there are contexts where sacramental ministry is not available to all those who might benefit from encountering the living Christ.

The Working Group established by the 2017 Assembly is not content that this can be reduced to a supply and demand question, that could be resolved through an ongoing decline in demand for sacraments. We are not content with that because this is about encountering Jesus; we recognise the missional, spiritual and pastoral value of the sacraments; and we believe that Word and Sacrament together are essential for the life and growth of the Church as the people of God. Jesus commissioned us, as the church emerged from that group of confused and fearful disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

That commission came to the early church, as they were exploring what it meant to follow Jesus in a fast-changing and sometimes unsupportive context. The sacraments were passed down as they were wrestling with questions of identity and boundaries, amongst a diversity of background, wealth and understanding, notably in the church at Corinth, urged to come together as one body around the table, in remembrance of their one Lord, Jesus.

That was then, this is now. We are in our fast-changing and sometimes unsupportive context, wrestling with questions of identity and boundaries as a church, considering how we can build up the body of Christ through new worshipping communities for those with a diversity of background, wealth and understanding. And the working group believes that within worshipping communities of any kind, the sacraments of baptism and communion offer an opportunity to encounter the living Christ.

So, then we reach questions of how that might be enabled. There is diversity of theology, experience and practice of the sacraments across the Church of Scotland, represented in a diversity within the working group, which included representation of four committees and two councils. Theologies of sacraments, ecclesiology, vocation, ministry and ordination have all been explored over 18 months. Ultimately what we offer is a report that comes out of the breadth of the Kirk, in a period when the structures to speak into are in a state of flux. So the working group offers principles to shape further work, which should feed in to related work from the action plan and the proposed strategy of the Joint Emerging Church Group.

The working group affirms that the sacraments confirm God’s promises found in the preaching of God’s Word, therefore the sacraments cannot be separated from the Word.

Sacramental ministry is also always in the context of the Church, as one body, across our differences, in the diversity of the many gifts given by Christ “to equip the saints for the

work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” The context is the Church, which is called into being by the creative Word of God, revealed in Jesus, known as the good news is preached. And that understanding of the Church has been passed on to us within the Reformed Church, another emerging church trying to express what it meant to be church in a fast-changing and sometimes unsupportive context, wrestling with questions of identity and boundaries. In that emerging church, how were they to do the work of ministry and build up the body of Christ? What gifts had the living Christ given?

Key to answering those questions was discernment of gifts and calling, within the necessary order of the body, followed by prayer and the laying on of hands. This led to the practice and theology of ordination for those callings concerned with keeping the whole Church faithful to its character, always within the wider context of the Church catholic. The working group reaffirms the importance of Word and Sacrament to the character of the Church, therefore affirms ordination as necessary for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament – as one particular ministry within the body of Christ, and as part of the universal Church.

However, in our fast-changing and sometimes unsupportive contexts, as we try to do the work of ministry in our time and place, amongst our differences in background, wealth and understanding, we are revisiting the questions of identity and boundaries, we are revisiting how we are Church, we are an emerging church again – as the early church was, as the Reformed Church was. While we affirm ordination to the Ministry of Word & Sacrament as necessary, all that leads to it needs to be re-examined. How discernment, calling, selection and training may be done, particularly for new worshipping communities, must be explored - led once more by the creative living Word that calls the Church into being in and for every time and place.

So, we offer these principles – that Word & Sacrament together are given by Jesus and are essential for the life & growth of the Church as the people of God. That within the diversity of gifts given by Jesus to equip all the saints for the work of ministry, there is a particular calling to preach the Word and celebrate the sacraments. That within the order of the Church of Scotland, as part of the wider Church, that calling is recognised and affirmed in the act of ordination. And that the Church of Scotland, in exercising its calling to serve the people of Scotland here and now, must explore new ways of enabling the ministry of Word and Sacrament, so that more people can encounter the living Christ in every way possible.

We offer these principles and ask the General Assembly to establish a new working group to develop firm proposals for ordination to a form of the ministry of Word and Sacrament shaped by the emerging Church. That working group will clearly overlap with areas of work in education, ecumenical partnership, and the proposed strategy of the Joint Emerging

Church Group. This instruction would keep this need visible, to those engaged in that work and to future General Assemblies.

And, Moderator, we believe this need is great, as we seek new ways to make and shape disciples of Jesus in our time & place. For the living Word can bring burning hearts. The Sacrament shared can lead to an encounter with the living Christ. Word and Sacrament combine to open minds and hearts to the living Christ.

Moderator, as I am not a Commissioner, I invite the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.