

Chalmers Lectures 2017

Lecture Three

In tonight's lecture, I turn to broader questions of institutional reform, though still looking those questions through the lens of holistic mission. I will take a wide angle look at the federal structure of the church as a whole and the ways in which we try to keep our institutional balance across different levels of governance and organisation.

As with other issues that I have addressed in the lectures, the questions here are not new and nor are many of the proposals. So, much of what I will be doing is reflecting on why I think the questions still matter and why this might now be the right time for the proposed reforms.

I want to recognise from the outset that it may seem like hubris for anyone to presume to redraw the shape of the church as a whole. I am very aware of that - so the title for tonight's lecture '*Grand Designs*' is both a joke at my own expense and a signal to you that I know how this may look.

That said, I also want to go on to make a serious point about the kind of questions we are dealing with here, a point which I think also helps to explain why previous attempts at introducing major reforms have not - in that time honoured phrase - commended themselves to the mind of the church.

In the first lecture we looked at Presbyterianism as a polity, a form of government, order, organisation for the church, which has a federal character. Federalism is sometimes seen within British political culture as a fancy European idea, which those rebel Americans took up with, but which we lucky Brits blessed with an unwritten constitution have no need for. At the root of federalism, is the idea of a covenant - which is of course a rich theological and theo-political idea. We often stress that theologically it means something more than a contract - but when we use it in political terms or in polity terms, its meaning is not so different - it describes a relationship between different elements of a polity, a federal system is a social and political contract about how to divide power and where to locate functions within a system. In particular, it lays out the relationship between the local, the regional and the national.

To spell it out then, in the Church of Scotland our kirk sessions are local courts, overseen by presbytery, which is a regional court, overseen by General Assembly which is the highest court of the national church. We have rules which govern their relationships, which include checks and balances - a session or an individual may appeal to the General Assembly against the decision of a Presbytery - a General Assembly ruling may need a majority of Presbyteries to vote in favour of it under the Barrier Act. We also have rules which govern the composition of the courts, both presbytery and General Assembly have to be representative of the church geographically and they have to balance representation of ministers and elders.

For many centuries there was another tier within the system - the synod - but the 12 synods were abolished in Scotland 25 years ago this year. So we have these three tiers or levels of governance within the Kirk. We also have our central councils, as they have been known since 2004 - there are 6 of these - the Council of Assembly which has a co-ordinating function, then Ministries Council, Mission & Discipleship Council, Church & Society Council, the World Mission Council and the Social Care Council, known as Crossreach. Alongside these we have 27 additional committees, departments and agencies.

The first thing I want to say tonight, is that if we imagined all those who serve on those 6 councils and who work on their staffs, all those who oversee and service those 27 other bodies - if they were gathered in one place, I think we would want to say, we in the church are in your debt - you are muscles and sinews within the body, you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world - your work and commitment and care are precious to the church and we believe, precious to God.

If I worry about proposals for reform seeming presumptuous, I also worry about them seeming ungrateful. I have many friends who work at 121 - whose work and witness, whose dedication, gifts and vision I admire greatly.

When we talk about reforming a system, we are not disrespecting those who work within it as it stands and nor are we forgetting about them. What I will present tonight are only my thoughts, although they owe many debts to the work of others, in this context they have no other weight or backing - but even so, none of us should even argue for reform without

realising that our thought experiment is someone else's life, job, salary, home-base, ministry and vocation.

Having said that, I am going to open up some radical options tonight. I wanted to make it clear that I do realise this is about real people and real lives, but it is also the case that in any major institutional reform of a university or a government department, of the NHS or a major charity or a private company - some things will have to be done, which will prove to be very difficult for some of the individuals affected, but which are done in the hope that they will be for the good of the institution as a whole.

Effective institutional reform, refocuses an institution on its core mission and its core values.

It reorders work and spend and time according to the priorities which flow from that mission.

It does not know the price of everything and the value of nothing, it seeks to know the value of everything and to relate the price of things to their value.

It is brave without being callous, bold without being reckless.

Ethical institutional reform, consults and cares for those affected by its actions.

Ecclesial institutional reform, understands reform is a spiritual task, is prayerful; seeks to be guided and animated by the Holy Spirit, has a theology of mission and ministry at its heart.

It is neither institutionally 'pelagian' - believing that it can do God's work in its own strength, through its own effort, by depending on its own strategies; nor is it institutionally 'docetic', forgetting that God works through ordinary human processes, methods, structures and strategies. It cares about the peace and unity of the church - it values the church as a community of discernment and decision:

Its great motto comes from Acts 15: "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"

And it should always be haunted by 1Corinthians 13 - the concern that if we do this without love - then we are nothing and we gain nothing.

So why do we need reform? Why does our federal identity need to be rebalanced?

- For the sake of mission
- To support and empower congregations
- To develop and enhance presbyteries
- To refocus and renew central bodies

For the sake of mission

Remembering all that was said in lecture 1 about the *missio dei*, about the church being the object of mission before it is a subject - about the church receiving mission before it is recruited to be part of it, we may go on to say this:

In mission, the church stands before the world on behalf of God - not to build up its own status or position, but believing that God wants the world to know fullness of life.

In mission, the church stands before the world in the way of Jesus Christ, believing that in Jesus, the Word made Flesh, we see and know God more clearly and truly than anywhere else, that in his life and death and resurrection the world was reconciled to God and that God is making an appeal to us and then to the world through us, to be reconciled to God

In mission the church stands before the world in the power of the Holy Spirit - believing that the Spirit's life is renewing our life and is the power of God's life and love at work in the world.

As women and men are called to be reconciled to God, to find fullness of life in God, we believe they are called into that same rhythm which is the heartbeat of the church's life - being called together in worship and sent in mission - in worship where Jesus is named as Lord and in mission where Jesus is proclaimed as Saviour, as Liberator, as Friend - in both word and in deed.

We want our churches to grow, not out of vanity or insecurity, but because we want to see as many people as possible, find meaning and hope through their faith in God and find a community and family of faith which can be home to them.

We recognise the mystery of God's sovereignty, but we also recognise our calling to be witnesses, witnesses to what we know of God's truth,

to what we can show of God's love. Witnesses to the mercy, to the grace, to the justice, to the beauty of God.

So we want our churches, in those poignant words of John Bell's hymn, to be places where "Christ makes with his friends a touching place". Where people can be in touch with the love and mercy of God.

Bill Hybels has said powerfully, that the local church is the hope of the world - this is a vision for Aberfeldy and Uist, Kirkwall and Castle Douglas, Bearsden and Whitfield, Renfrew and the Raploch - that congregations of the Kirk, for all of their limitations and faults, can be touching places, can be places of hope.

And, yes, why would we not say this - a vision that they can be that for as many people as possible. And be that in spiritual and ecumenical partnership with everyone else in those places who shows the true face of the Kirk.

I know there are Christians in Scotland, who believe God is finished with the Church of Scotland. Or at least is finished blessing it and blessing Scotland through it. But I don't believe that. At least not yet...

What comes first is the integrity of our witness - because we understand throughout history there have been successful churches that were not faithful and faithful churches that were not successful.

But as we try by the grace of God to bear witness faithfully, a second faithful and heartfelt concern may be that we long to see our congregations grow and as they grow, be salt and light, be communities which bless and enrich the parishes they are called to serve.

Reform is for the sake of mission - and it is a demanding task. There are no books out there on how to undertake the successful reform of a presbyterian church. What examples there are come from other contexts, where the choices made may have been right for them, but might not be right for us.

What makes this a demanding task is that it has to help us to do five things. In the years between now and 2030, we will have to:

- close unsustainable churches
- manage declining churches
- enable declining churches to grow again
- support growing churches in their development
- plant new churches and replant some we have had to close

The work of doing those five things simultaneously presents a huge challenge for us over the next 13 years. With this challenge comes the question of whether our institutional structures are ordered as well as they can be, to support this work.

There are no definite answers to that question. It is a judgment call, a strategic judgment for us to make together as a church - we don't get to test it in advance in the lab and we won't get to see the counterfactual scenario afterwards. But that's true of most things in life.

Why do I think we should consider radical change? There is one overriding reason:

- **we need to offer more effective support to the witness of local congregations**

For me, that is the decisive concern of reform. It was, of course, the key concern behind the 2001 Church Without Walls report. So we need to ask if a programme of reform could help us to do this?

When that is put into a wider institutional context, I think it points to one other conclusion:

- **the key level at which this support has to be delivered is the presbytery**

So the question about supporting local congregations, is also a question about making presbyteries work.

It is intrinsic to a federal structure that it works as a system - which is why, although it might seem like hubris to talk of reforming the system as a whole, in fact it is the only way to do it. If you don't adjust both central councils and regional presbyteries simultaneously, you almost by definition end up making it impossible to properly reform them separately.

I think it is hard to draw any other conclusion from the 2001 Church Without Walls Report, the 2001 Tomorrow's Presbyteries Report, the 2006 Structure and Change Commission, the 2011 Review and Reform Report - if you sit down and read them together, this point is made in every one of them.

Since 1975, we have had 46/3¹ Scottish presbyteries, which vary in size from well over 100 to less than 10 charges. It's not uniform, its not at the same level in all cases, but there is a high level of dissatisfaction across the church with how presbyteries work. Because many of them don't work particularly well at the moment, its hard to imagine giving them more power or more functions and many of them are too small to cope with that.

One significant change since 2011, is that the presbytery planning process has further exposed the pressures on congregations and has strained the bonds between some local congregations and their presbyteries.

If we approach the question from the other end, we need to consider how effectively our current system of Councils works. I am completely sincere in saying that within them as they stand, there are many outstanding individuals who do creative, effective and invaluable work - but I have spent the last ten years deeply unconvinced by the current division between Ministries and M & D in particular - I don't think it makes theological or missional sense in terms of where the church should be heading. Nor am I convinced about the articulation of the relationship between Church and Society and Mission and Discipleship, in terms of developing and enabling holistic models of witness.

I can therefore see convincing, perhaps even compelling reasons to introduce reform, for both the regional and the central church and to rebalance the federal identity and organisation of the church.

- we need stronger missional leadership at regional level
- we need more effective training and support at local level
- Too much power, resource and initiative is held centrally, not enough regionally and locally.

¹ 3 presbyteries merged into 1, so the list still goes to 46 with two numbers vacant.

- The church is too bureaucratic, *it asks too much of too many to too little effect* -
it has been observed by a number of commentators, including former Principal Clerk Finlay MacDonald in his 2004 book on 'a changing church' that the Church of Scotland consumes too much of its members and ministers time and energy in keeping the system going. Our processes and procedures are too expansive, too exhausting and too expensive. We have too many meetings, which consume too many people hours. We pay too many sets of travel expenses and employ too many administrators to clerk and service committees.
In 2016, the Church's Nominations Committee reported that they had been busy preparing to fill 127 vacancies on central committees and councils, to replace those who had moved on in that year, out of a total of some 493 members who comprised those bodies. That is before we add in the hours spent locally in kirk sessions and their sub-committees and the hours spent attending presbytery committees and working groups and it's before our elders and ministers have ventured out to take part in ecumenical forums or community councils or be active within political parties and voluntary organisations.
- The current division of councils, alongwith their relative autonomy in finance and governance, perpetuates a silo mentality, which includes both competition for resources and defence of council prerogatives, with no adequate management mechanism, other than the GA itself, for integrating the work of different councils. The Council of Assembly has improved co-ordination, but it has never been given a true management role, and probably cannot be given it within the system as it stands.

So what should we do?

I believe that there are five key structural reforms which if enacted, could help the church to respond more effectively in fulfilling its missional calling to the people of Scotland and, crucially, to support the witness of local congregations.

1. Presbytery Reform

The currently existing 43 Scottish presbyteries should be reduced to **12 regional presbyteries**, each of which should have a stipendiary elected Moderator holding office for a five year term and

a salaried appointed Clerk. The new presbyteries would be given substantial devolved financial responsibility for deploying and resourcing ministry within their bounds. They would be governed by a Council and would meet in full presbytery (on a Saturday) 2-4 times a year.

2. Council Reform

The four main central councils should be merged into one single **Church of Scotland Mission Agency**, which would work with internal ministry divisions, but under a single management structure. There would be a distinctive arrangement for Crossreach.² The numbers working for central councils and bodies would be reduced by around a third and new congregational support posts would be created within the new presbyteries.

3. Central Governance Reform

The work of the new central agency should be governed by a properly **federal Council of Assembly**, comprised of elder and minister representatives from each presbytery, [which could include the Presbytery Moderators]. A **Mission Agency Secretary** would lead a team of senior managers.

I want to pause here and reflect on how this rebalances our federal identity.

We have traditionally been allergic to the idea of a strong central management - this suggestion would create one, but it would offset it by devolving substantial power from the centre to the presbyteries.

It envisages a leaner, tighter central spine to the institution, and balances this with fewer, stronger presbyteries.

For the first time, it imagines a properly federal central council, made up of presbytery representatives from across Scotland.

4. General Assembly

The model I am describing, imagines many fewer members sitting on central councils and committees. The danger with that is of a

² I have nothing invested in this particular name, for convenience I am following the example of the PCUSA here, who have a single central Presbyterian Mission Agency. CrossReach has a distinctive status and should be treated separately, still under the Assembly and Agency overall, but with its own distinctive pattern of governance suited to its operational needs.

loss of connection and participation. What offsets that, I suggest, is a continuing annual General Assembly, which, of course, remains the highest court of the church. This is how we bring in a wider perspective, while easing the burden of populating councils and committees. We embrace the GA as an asset, both in governance terms and as a symbolic witness which projects the identity of the church; we build on the success of Heart & Soul - which is the Kirk in festival mode.

5. Congregations

In line with the case made during the first lecture, the legal rights and functions of congregations and congregational meetings in relation to kirk sessions, should be clarified and strengthened.

You may be wondering if I have worked out in detail all of the anomalies, difficulties and tensions which would be created by such a system - and the answer is of course I haven't. For example, I have nothing invested in there being 12 presbyteries rather than 9, 11 or 14.

I want to add a few more notes to this grand design and then consider one final question.

1. One thing to stress is that the full time Presbytery Moderators would emphatically *not* be bishops - read my lips....[*not bishops*]. What draws me to the idea, though, is seeing how effectively some dioceses within the Church of England have begun to mobilise and reform themselves for mission. The Mods would work alongside ...the Rockers/new generation presbytery clerks, most of whom would not be ordained, who would focus on the managerial, financial, legal and administrative spheres. The key charge to the Mods would be to support mission and support ministers. The big question for Scots presbyterians is could we bear to, and dare we try, to incorporate stronger personal ministries of initiative and support within presbyterian governance, while maintaining a clear emphasis on corporate *episkope*?
2. Another point to recognise is that larger presbyteries could of course still feel remote - like the Panel on Review and Reform, my sense is that churches would still want to meet in more local settings, but that these would try to recover the original functions of presbyteries in promoting mutual encouragement and support. Business and governance would be done at the regional level, by local representatives. Three or four local meetings each year could focus on

training, consultation, worship and fellowship, without the burden of a business agenda. And we would still have met on fewer occasions per year than many presbyteries do.

3. My hope for the new Mod posts and for the stronger presbyteries is that they would help us to be more strategic and creative about mission and they would help us to get much better at resourcing and supporting ministers, deacons, readers, elders and members - to equip them for the work of ministry.
4. If there were to be a single new Mission Agency, one priority for me would be to not simply turn the existing four council domains into new ministry divisions, but to think creatively about new ways to assign work.
5. It feels to me that we are overdue a moment of refocusing, of streamlining, of simplifying - there is a kind of Victorian gothic quality to our institutional architecture - its time to knock some solid walls down, take out some pews, put up some new glass partitions, and create some cleaner, clearer, fit for purpose spaces.
6. Talking of spaces - the key symbolic focus of some of what we need to move on from - is the building at 121 George Street itself. If we can ever make it work in terms of stewardship, we should treat ourselves to a new beginning somewhere else - the ideal would be a building which could be built or converted to somehow be an architectural statement of the kind of holistic witness we want to offer to 21st Century Scotland.

I am nearly done. I may have done enough already to send you running back to George Street, to embrace the old pillars and say all is forgiven - we took a look at an alternative future and it was horrible...

In my defence, I have tried to do what I hope the church might want its academics to do - to think aloud in public, to think theologically about church practice and to speak the truth in love.

I have tried to be provocative without being annoying, to be bold without being naïve, to be cautious without being timid. As I said in the first lecture and I meant it, if these lectures have any gifts to give to the church, among them will be the gift of being wrong; hopefully in ways that can help others to be less wrong in future.

The Final Question - and I have tried tonight to be briefer and to leave more time for your questions and comments - but my final question is: would it be worth it?

On the best case scenario, it's a lot of work, a lot of hassle, a lot of upheaval - could it ever be worth the time, the energy and the angst it would take to deliver?

Some people I have interviewed for these lectures and the coming book, including some who dreamed of reform in the past, are now worried that it would not be, that it could instead be a dangerous distraction.

The only way I can think to answer that is it depends. I can think of three tests:

- could it better enable the mission of the church?
- does it commend itself to the mind of the Church?
- could it be done in a way which maintained the peace and unity of the Church?

The Kirk, as we know, is pretty good at 'departing from matters' which it is not convinced by.

It is far more important that we love one another, than we improve our institutional architecture. Love covers a multitude of presbyterian sins.

We have enough that is divisive to contend with, so if we still could not find a convincing measure of agreement, that would I think be clear enough guidance to leave it alone and work well with what we have.

I said at the outset there were four great tasks in front of the Kirk. Spiritual renewal, liturgical renewal, missional refocusing and institutional reform. If there is no way to progress the fourth, the other three can still be transformative.

The management guru Peter Drucker famously said that culture eats strategy. No amount of structural change, even when well conceived, will overcome a culture that does not embrace or endorse it - that does not itself commit to grow and change.

But culture also *floats* strategy. Culture is, as Geertz said, the set of stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves - and it's the life those stories reflect and sustain.

I want to thank you for being so generous and patient with my story telling over these three weeks.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.