

## PANEL ON REVIEW AND REFORM

May 2015

### PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

#### The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Note the desire expressed by Presbyteries to see local leadership developed to sustain congregations without an inducted parish minister as an alternative to instituting a further programme of unions and readjustments and
  - (a) affirm this as an approach to be developed further;
  - (b) affirm the previous instruction of the General Assembly to the Panel on Review and Reform to work in collaboration with Councils, Committees and Presbyteries, to consider the shape of new local church leadership roles which might be developed to sustain and build the Church in the future;
  - (c) instruct the Panel on Review and Reform to consider further the implications and sustainability of such an approach.
3. Instruct the Panel on Review and Reform, in consultation with other Councils and Committees as appropriate, to consider how strategic leadership can best be developed within local congregations, including the role which Kirk Sessions play in this regard.
4. Instruct the Panel on Review and Reform, working in collaboration with the Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils and the Council of Assembly, to secure adequate resources to support the pilot congregations in their development, as proposed in Section 1.9 of the report.
5. Instruct the Panel on Review and Reform to conduct appropriate research on the work undertaken within the pilot congregations proposed in Section 1.9 of the report and report its findings to the General Assembly of 2018 with an interim report in 2017.
6. Note the difficulty of creating a simple vision statement for the Church of Scotland, and
  - (a) affirm the current vision statement; and
  - (b) instruct the Panel to find ways of stimulating conversations about the vision of the Church at local, Presbytery and national level.
7. Instruct the Legal Questions Committee, in consultation with the General Trustees and the Central Properties Department, to review the processes used in arbitration in light of this report and particularly with reference to sections 3.2.2 (Procedural justice) and 3.4.5.1 (Arbitration).

### REPORT

#### 1. Building for the future

1.1 Twenty years ago Loren Mead of the Alban Institute wrote:

*I contend that the storm buffeting the churches is very serious indeed. Much more serious than we have admitted to ourselves, and much more serious than our leaders have*

*yet comprehended. The problems are not minor, calling for adjustments or corrections. They are problems that go to the roots of our institutions themselves.*<sup>1</sup>

Recent work which the Panel has undertaken shows a growing awareness within the Church of Scotland that Mead's assessment was correct and that we are indeed facing a serious storm which necessitates change. All of the indicators available to us make this clear: declining membership, an ageing leadership, a shortage of ministers and a disengagement from church by younger generations.

Significantly though, the Panel has also found a growing willingness to address this, with the debate within the Church shifting from whether change is necessary or not, to what kind of change is required.

This is part of the process within any organisation:

*As with the coming of a new season, the weather of everyday activity may slip back and forth for a while, and you may be unsure whether the new season is really at hand. But in a little while the early signals turn into unmistakable signs, and everyone can recognise that change is at hand.*<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 Rooted and shaped locally

In recognising the need for change, it is clear to the Panel that the majority of people want change to be shaped at the local level rather than the centre. One of the most frequent comments made to the Panel is that we should be aware that 'one size doesn't fit all'. This view was also expressed by the Special Commission anent Ministerial Tenure and the Leadership of the Local Congregation:

*each local congregation embodies the church universal but gives expression to the Gospel in ways that are distinctive to their location and their time.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mead, Loren B, *Transforming congregations for the future*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1994, introduction

<sup>2</sup> Bridges, William, *Managing transitions*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2009, p. 92

Despite the fact that it was difficult to find a form of words for a vision statement (as reported in Section 2 of this report), this gives us a hint of a shared vision: for local churches across Scotland which are re-invigorated and relevant, not all looking the same or shaped in the same way but caught and focussed, as the Commission said *willingly and joyfully in the mission of Jesus Christ.*<sup>4</sup>

### 1.3 Developing new local leadership

Over the last 25 years, the Church of Scotland has largely followed a policy of unions and readjustments to maintain a situation where each parish is served by a full-time minister of Word and Sacrament. However, with the projected fall in the number of ministers (around 25% to 30% within the next five years), continuing to match the number of parishes to the number of available ministers would require most churches to enter into a union or multiple link. In 2014, the Panel reported that those in rural Presbyteries wanted to move away from such an approach and the General Assembly approved a motion to:

*Affirm the desire of rural congregations to see local leadership developed in new ways which maintain and develop the work of congregations in rural communities.*<sup>5</sup>

Alongside this the Panel was instructed by the General Assembly:

*... to consider how to consult with congregations in urban and city areas about the pattern of ministry required to sustain and grow the Church in those areas and report to the General Assembly of 2015.*<sup>6</sup>

**1.3.1** To take this forward, the Panel held a series of six regional consultations in autumn 2014, with four representatives invited from each Presbytery. These

<sup>3</sup> Special Commission anent Ministerial Tenure and the Leadership of the Local Congregation report to the General Assembly of 2014, 23/3, section 2

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, section 3

<sup>5</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2014, Deliverance, section 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Deliverance, section 4

consultations revealed that the desire of rural Presbyteries is shared by others. The impression given at the consultations was that Presbyteries in city and urban areas would prefer to keep roughly the number of congregations currently in Presbytery plans, albeit it with a little readjustment where local parties agree, with new leadership positions created at a local level in order to sustain and build local congregations.

Recognising the need to look at leadership in the local church, the 2014 General Assembly instructed the Panel:

*... working in collaboration with Ministries and Mission and Discipleship Councils, the Joint Emerging Church Group, Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions, to consider the shape of new local church leadership roles which might be developed to sustain and build the Church in the future.<sup>7</sup>*

Although this work has begun, more is required before a comprehensive report can be brought before the General Assembly. Nonetheless, at this point, the Panel is aware of two distinct needs:

#### **1.3.1.1 Leaders to maintain the existing patterns of church life**

There is a growing need to involve others in sharing the responsibilities carried by ministers as the number of ministers declines. The two areas highlighted most frequently in this respect are leading worship and conducting funerals.

During consultations with Presbyteries, it was clear that people could discern elders or others who might share these responsibilities provided appropriate training was given which would be accessible and relevant.

#### **1.3.1.2 Leaders to develop new patterns**

It was recognised that there was a necessity for leaders who would foster different patterns of church life or new initiatives within congregations.

Here, the problem was not just one of training but that many people struggled to see who might take work forward in innovative ways. This being so, the recruitment, training, resourcing and encouraging of those who will take the work and witness of the Church of Scotland in new directions needs to be addressed.

#### **1.4 Building from the ground up**

The Panel recognises the importance of encouraging congregations to develop local leadership within their own settings. Unless people are nurtured and developed as leaders in their congregations, there is little that Presbyteries or the national church can do. Many people simply learn by 'doing ministry', only looking for training once they have been involved for some time and recognise the need for it. To address this, the Panel proposes working with a small number of congregations to facilitate the growth and development of leadership within congregations (see section 1.6).

#### **1.5 Kirk Sessions/Eldership**

**1.5.1** At all the consultations, participants were of the view that most Kirk Sessions are not well placed to provide the kind of leadership required to carry congregations through a period of change. This is also noted in the Panel's work on issues of consensus and communication within the Church (see Section 3.4.3.1):

*One persistent theme was the unsuitability of existing structures for the demands of contemporary life.*

**1.5.2** The Special Commission anent Ministerial Tenure and the Leadership of the Local Congregation encouraged training 'so that the vocation and training of the elder is shaped for time and place'.<sup>8</sup> While we value those who serve in a traditional eldership roles, the fact is that many Kirk Sessions struggle to encourage and recruit younger people to serve as elders when a traditional approach to eldership is taken.

<sup>7</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2014, Deliverance, section 5

<sup>8</sup> Special Commission anent Ministerial Tenure and the Leadership of the Local Congregation report to the General Assembly of 2014, 23/6, section 4, Elder Training

## 1.6 Developing work in local congregations

1.6.1 In 2013, the Church of England carried out a major research project which highlighted seven key factors which are linked to growing churches:

- Good leadership
- A clear mission and purpose
- Willingness to self-reflect, to change and adapt according to context
- Involvement of lay members
- Being intentional in prioritising growth
- Being intentional in chosen style of worship
- Being intentional in nurturing disciples<sup>9</sup>

1.6.2 It is worth noting that their research reveals that no single factor is identified as responsible for such growth. This is mirrored in research completed by Christian Schwarz which looked at over 1,000 growing churches in five continents.<sup>10</sup> He discovered eight key factors:

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented lay ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship services
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships

His findings are closely aligned to those identified in the Church of England's report but include the foundational elements of loving relationships and passionate spirituality. It should be no surprise to us that growing churches are characterised by their love for God and love for one another!

<sup>9</sup> *From Anecdote to Evidence: Findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013*, © The Church Commissioners for England, p.8

<sup>10</sup> Schwarz, Christian, *Natural Church Development: a practical guide to the new approach*, British Church Growth Association, 1996, pp. 22-37

## 1.7 Pilot projects

1.7.1 These pieces of research have underscored for the Panel the importance of enabling local congregations to adapt and developing in appropriate ways. Although many congregations have been effective in achieving this, most have found it difficult. Consequently, the Panel believes that supporting congregations and ministers in making the kind of changes needed to move from a maintenance model to a mission orientated one is crucial.

1.7.2 While the Future Focus material will be helpful with this, nonetheless the Panel believes that a holistic approach is required, with training given to ministers in managing transition, together with ongoing coaching/mentoring support for ministers and local leadership teams.

1.7.3 The Panel is working with other Councils to develop this through a proposed pilot project with 20 congregations committed to developing the characteristics outlined in the Church of England's and Schwarz's research, thereby moving from a maintenance model to a mission orientated one. Those involved in the pilots would be drawn from a range of backgrounds, and would be the 'ground breakers' whom others would follow and from whom we would learn. This would allow suitable training and support structures to be developed which could be rolled out to other congregations.

A rigorous assessment and discernment process for ministers and Kirk Sessions would be used to choose the 20 pilot congregations, followed by a two to three year period when input would be provided to help the congregations and ministers develop a missional approach. It is envisaged that this might be achieved by appointing part-time pastoral assistants, thereby creating space and time for the minister to focus on developing and equipping local leaders to reshape the congregation's work according to its locality.

## 1.8 Desired outcomes

- Ministers equipped to lead congregations through transition.

- The building of vibrant, growing congregations with a missional focus and team approach to ministry.
- The development of new local leadership.
- The development of approaches to transitioning churches from which others will benefit.
- Although not the primary focus, it is envisaged that at least some of those who become involved as leaders at a local congregational level would subsequently sense a call to one of the formal ministries within the national church.

More information on the pilot project is available on the Panel's pages on the Church of Scotland website: ([http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about\\_us/general\\_assembly/general-assembly-2015/reports-and-minutes](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/general_assembly/general-assembly-2015/reports-and-minutes))

## 2. Vision statement for the Church

*Instruct the Panel to present a clear vision which articulates the continuing commitment of the Church of Scotland to be a national church with a distinctive evangelical and pastoral concern for the people of Scotland in terms of geography and generations and report to the General Assembly of 2015.<sup>11</sup>*

2.1 During the Panel's autumn consultations, participants were asked to consider wording for a new vision statement for the Church. Responses ranged from ambivalence to questioning whether there was any need for a Church-wide vision statement.

The current statement, developed by the Panel and brought to the General Assembly in 2006, reads,

*The vision of the Church of Scotland is to be a church which seeks to inspire the people of Scotland and beyond with the Good News of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic, worshipping, witnessing, nurturing and serving communities.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Deliverances of the General Assembly 2014, Panel on Review and Reform, section 2

Although it had been helpfully used by an interim minister working with congregations and by one Presbytery as a benchmark for review of congregations before Local Church Review was developed, it was apparent that the current vision statement is largely overlooked.

2.2 At the consultations, although participants agreed that the Church should invest more time and resources than it currently does to shape its future, no agreement emerged about what that future would look like.

The vision is BIGGER than words. (*Participant in Edinburgh*)

There was nonetheless some general consensus about what should form the foundation of the Church's vision:

1. It should be based in scripture. Here, some points of reference noted were Matthew 22:34-40 (NIV), the great commandment, Matthew 28:16-20 (NIV), the great commission, and Micah 6:8 (NIV), 'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'
2. It should be challenged and measured by scripture. An example used was 1 John 3:16ff (NIV), 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.'
3. It should be for the Church in Scotland and beyond.
4. The wording should embody an aspiration for the renewal and growth of the Church.

Although consultation participants agreed on the general principles that a vision statement should embody, there

<sup>12</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the 2006 General Assembly, section 5.2.8

was no agreement when it came to a particular form of wording, the meaning and order of them and the amount of detail that should be included.

**2.3** Part of the difficulty is the sheer breadth, diversity and autonomy we enjoy within the Church. Even though we may be able to agree general principles, we are unable to decide on a clear set of words for a new vision statement that is acceptable to all. We can, however, acknowledge the values we share, and then ask ourselves those questions which would help us all catch God's vision for our Church.

The Panel recommends no change to the current vision statement. However, aware that creating a new vision statement will not in itself help us find new ways forward, the Panel believes there is merit in clarifying the Church's underlying values and approach and so recommends ongoing conversations about this.

### **3. Consensus and communication**

**3.1** In 2012 the General Assembly instructed the Panel on Review and Reform to explore issues of consensus and communication. The Panel's report referred to conflict, asserting 'methods of coming to a decision within the courts of the Church can leave sections of the Christian community feeling hurt and disenfranchised'.<sup>13</sup> It spoke favourably of consensus-based methods of decision-making in use in other denominations and the wider society, while stressing that it had not yet come to a view on their applicability in the Church of Scotland.<sup>14</sup> It described the findings of a small-scale research project into decision-making in the Church. These included a strong sense that, while complete consensus is neither achievable nor necessarily desirable, poor communication does contribute to conflict. Perhaps unsurprisingly it found almost unanimous support for the statement that

'the decision-making process across the Church could be improved'.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside this report, the Panel sought and received funding for further research into the subject, involving 'a larger number and wider range of potential respondents' with the goal of 'empower[ing] the Church in its communication and decision-making, at all levels, by providing accurate information which reflects the opinions of those within the Church of Scotland in a format which is accessible to all'.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014, the Panel engaged the services of Professor Charlie Irvine, Visiting Professor at Strathclyde Law School and Adjunct Professor at John Marshall Law School (Chicago) who, with the Panel's Consensus and Communication Group, has engaged in a more in-depth research exercise. In its remit to Professor Irvine, the Panel stressed its desire for an approach that modelled consensus-based decision-making. It asked him to facilitate local meetings of Church stakeholders alongside members of the Panel. The purpose of these facilitated meetings was not only to 'gather information about people's interaction in current decision-making structures (eg, Kirk Session, Presbytery, General Assembly, committees and councils) and their views on how to build good government'<sup>17</sup> but also to encourage ownership of and participation in proposals for change.

What follows is drawn from Professor Irvine's final report.

#### **3.2 Background**

The challenge of ensuring that decisions are both principled and supported is not unique to the Church of Scotland. Any group requires a measure of agreement among members if it is to pursue a common purpose. Whole societies face similar problems: John Locke famously declared, 'No government can have a right to

<sup>13</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2013: Full Report on Consensus and Communication, p. 1, available from [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0014/14405/communication\\_and\\_Consensus.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/14405/communication_and_Consensus.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9

<sup>17</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2013, Consensus and Communication Proposal: Bringing the Convocation into the 21st Century (on file with the author).

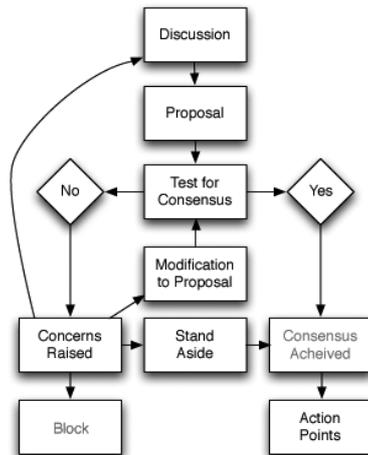
obedience from a people who have not freely consented to it.<sup>18</sup> Summarised below are two ideas that shed light on the question of ensuring that decisions are considered legitimate.

**3.2.1 Consensus-based decision-making**

Consensus-based decision-making describes a range of approaches to decision-making that go beyond the use of majority voting. To attain full consensus, 100% of participants would need to agree to a proposal. If consensus is not reached, no decision could be made. In practice further discussion usually takes place with a view to securing that unanimity.

Many models of consensus decision-making, however, accept less than unanimity. They range from unanimity minus one vote, unanimity minus two votes to super-majorities of 80%, 70% or fewer. These voting structures are generally used in tandem with discussion, as illustrated in the diagram below:

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<sup>18</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, s. 192, 1690, available from <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/locke1689a.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Grant Horwood, *Flowchart of Consensus Decision-making*, available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Consensus-flowchart.png>

The Panel’s report on Consensus and Communication for the 2013 General Assembly<sup>20</sup> described the use by other denominations of consensus decision-making (CDM). Panel members had observed two examples. In each case coloured cards provided a visible manifestation of the mood of the meeting, as part of a wider effort to achieve consensus, as described below:

*Raising an orange card indicates that a commissioner is positive towards a proposal (they warm to it). Raising a blue card indicates that a commissioner is negative towards a proposal (they don’t warm to it). Raising blue and orange overlapping together indicates that a commissioner thinks it is time to move a debate on (eg, if they feel points are being repeated and there are no new contributions being made to a discussion).*<sup>21</sup>

This practical device was used in tandem with a set of principles designed to ensure that the debate took place in a spirit of constructive courtesy.<sup>22</sup> However, Panel members were not convinced that the model could be used satisfactorily in the General Assembly without other significant adaptations.

<sup>20</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the 2013 General Assembly, 2/ 18, s. 4

<sup>21</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2013: Full Report on Consensus and Communication, p. 2

<sup>22</sup> I will listen carefully before responding, checking out what I am hearing.

I will express myself with courtesy and respect to every sister/brother who participates in these conversations, especially towards those with whom I disagree.

I will express my disagreements and critical engagement with others without insulting, making fun of or slandering anyone personally.

I will not exaggerate others’ convictions or perspectives, nor make unfounded prejudicial assumptions based on labels, categories or stereotypes.

I will always work towards extending the benefit of the doubt in the spirit of generosity.

I will honour my own discomfort at things said or done on our conversations.

I will allow myself and others to change as a result of our conversations.

We will hold each other accountable for not keeping to the above principles based not on what ideas are expressed but on how they are expressed.

Consensus-based decision-making has not been without its critics. Writing of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), John Adams caricatured it as 'having a running commentary until everyone agreed – whether because of weariness or peer pressure'; 'striving toward a goal of "can't we all get along together"'; and being 'painstakingly slow'.<sup>23</sup> At its worst it could 'use group pressure to dominate the minority'.<sup>24</sup> Another American Presbyterian, writing in 2012, disputed the claim of those advocating CDM that it was more conducive to spiritual discernment than traditional parliamentary procedures.<sup>25</sup>

One of the aims of the current research was to explore the appetite for CDM among Scottish congregations.

### 3.2.2 Procedural justice

Governments also require legitimacy if they are to function effectively. Consumers naturally attach a great deal of importance to the fairness of legal processes. One of the core goals of the law must be to deliver decisions that are regarded as just. Research into the matter has revealed a surprising phenomenon: achieving their desired outcome was less important in people's evaluations of encounters with the justice system than the way they were treated.<sup>26</sup> In simple terms, what you get (substantive justice) matters less than expected and how you get there (procedural justice) matters more.

The literature on procedural justice is vast and growing.<sup>27</sup> Some key findings are relevant to the current research. It is intuitively sensible to suggest that if citizens regard the government and laws as legitimate they are more likely to comply, even if they disagree with a particular rule. Tyler

calls this the 'cushion of support'.<sup>28</sup> Might there be a similar 'cushion of support' within a faith community such as the Church of Scotland? What are its sources and limitations?

Another set of ideas concerns the characteristics of processes that are regarded as procedurally fair. Scholars have identified four main elements:

- a) Voice: the opportunity to present views, concerns and evidence to a third party
- b) Being heard: the perception that 'third party considered their views, concerns and evidence'<sup>29</sup>
- c) Treatment: being treated in 'a dignified, respectful manner'
- d) Neutrality: even-handed, unbiased treatment by the authorities.

As noted above, procedural considerations are a better predictor of satisfaction than substantive ones. In other words, even where people have 'lost' in an adjudicative setting they are more likely to rate themselves satisfied (and to respect the whole system) when they believe they have been fairly treated.<sup>30</sup> This finding holds good in other contexts such as the treatment of employees and doctors' bedside manners.<sup>31</sup> Again the question could be asked: will the same phenomenon apply to decisions of the Church?

Procedural justice too has come in for criticism. Some suggest that its applicability depends heavily on context: where people have low expectations of the authorities they seem to be more affected by outcomes.<sup>32</sup> Others have

<sup>23</sup> John H Adams, 'PCUSA bodies adopt consensus model that denomination opposes' in *The Layman Online*, Thursday Oct, 2, 2003

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> As set out for the USA in Robert's Rules of Order, <http://www.robertsrules.com/>

<sup>26</sup> Tom R Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law*, Woodstock, Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2006

<sup>27</sup> For a review see MacCoun, R (2005) 'Voice, Control and Belonging: The Double-Edged Sword of Procedural Fairness' in *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* (1)171–201

<sup>28</sup> Tyler, 2006, p. 101: *fair procedures are a cushion of support against the potentially damaging effects of unfavourable outcomes*

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Welsh 'Making Deals in Court Connected Mediation: What's Justice Got to Do With It?' in *79 Washington University Law Quarterly* (2001) 788-858, p. 820

<sup>30</sup> Tyler, 2006, p. 107: *If unfavourable outcomes are delivered through procedures viewed as fair, the unfavourable outcomes do not harm the legitimacy of legal authorities*

<sup>31</sup> MacCoun, 2005, (see footnote 27) p. 179

raised a more disturbing concern that the authorities might:

*use the appearance of fair procedure (dignity, respect, voice) as an inexpensive way to co-opt citizens and distract them from outcomes that by normative criteria might be considered substantively unfair or biased.*<sup>33</sup>

In other words, there may be a risk that those in authority learn how to ape procedural fairness in order to dupe participants into accepting unfair decisions. In response to this critique, it could be noted that even highly sophisticated governments find it difficult to fool all of the people all of the time, and the current cultural climate seems weighted towards scepticism of those in authority rather than its opposite.

A further aim of the research was to apply the lens of procedural justice to decisions of the Church, from its highest court (the General Assembly) to its most local (Kirk Sessions).

### 3.3 Methodology

From the outset the Panel, was clear that it wished to employ qualitative rather than quantitative methods to answer its questions. While quantitative research measures that which can be counted (percentages, numbers, averages) and may claim a degree of objectivity, qualitative research provides insight into people's thinking. It necessarily involves an act of interpretation. It is particularly important for the researcher to minimise the risks of finding only what he or she seeks.<sup>34</sup> While conscious that consensus-based decision-making was one of the Panel's concerns, this research was designed with the goal of approaching the question of Church decision-making as openly as possible. The aim was to find a method that enabled participants to provide their own

themes and to develop them in conversation with the researcher.

The research was supported by a project group comprising two academics, two ministers and a mediator.

Participants were chosen by local hosts: parish ministers with extensive networks of contacts in an area. The hosts were asked to invite a mix of members, adherents, elders, session clerks and ministers. Forty-six people attended the dialogues in five locations. Twenty-one were female and 25 male.

Full details of the methodology employed can be found at [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about\\_us/general\\_assembly/general-assembly-2015/reports-and-minutes](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/general_assembly/general-assembly-2015/reports-and-minutes)

### 3.4 Results

**3.4.1** The conversations were rich and varied affairs. They ranged through topics as diverse as flowers, stained glass windows, Messy Church, building projects and human sexuality. They considered decision-making in the General Assembly, at Presbyteries, in Kirk Sessions and by arbiters. Participants were largely church insiders: 11 ministers, 9 Session Clerks, 8 elders, 5 OLMs or church employees, 11 members and 2 adherents. These were generally highly committed individuals. They were prepared to voice their support and affection for the institution; on occasion they were also prepared to express criticism. It is hoped that these statements will be taken in the spirit in which they were offered, as part of rich and well-intentioned conversations about a church which participants hold dear.

The findings have been organised according to the most frequently occurring.

#### 3.4.2 Problems and issues with decision-making

A key question that formed in the mind of the researcher was, 'What enables you to live with decisions that you don't agree with?' This was put to every group. While the answers appear under various headings, a number here speak of an approach that relies more on their inner

<sup>32</sup> Naomi Creutzfeldt, How Important is Procedural Justice for Consumer Dispute Resolution? A Case Study of an Ombudsman Model for European Consumers in *Journal of Consumer Policy* (2014) 37:527–546

<sup>33</sup> MacCoun, 2005, (see footnote 27) p. 189

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Grix, *The Foundations of Research* (2nd edition), Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, Hants, 2010, pp. 120-122

reserves and character than a particular decision-making model. For example:

*[You] might need to acknowledge a time of grieving and anger before you then decide whether you're going to wire in and find a future beyond the one you had imagined you had before that decision was made.*

*You have got to forgive everybody and yourself for feeling. You've got to, haven't you? Because otherwise, you're stuck.*

*I suppose it's about, just because you've been working on it for a long time doesn't necessarily mean that you have to hang on to it for dear life.*

Interestingly a similar comment was offered by an individual involved in implementing decisions with which he agreed:

*Well, I mean, if I could show you the scars on my back I would but it doesn't do any of us ... because there's always a price to pay; but it's a heavy price for those who are involved in change.*

Others were less positive:

*I put my head above the parapet not long after I became an elder and I was shot down in flames, seriously shot down in flames. And after the meeting, as many elders came up to me and said, I totally agreed with everything you said.*

*... But they didn't open their mouth at the meeting and that didn't help me at all; that only made me even more angry and bitter.*

Such sentiments were not confined to individual Kirk Sessions:

*It's a lack of trust with 121... and all the way down the line. You don't trust the decisions because you think they've got to be motivated one way or the other.*

Another thread under this heading was the tension felt by ministers between their role as leaders and decision-makers and their equally important role as pastor. For example:

*And the challenge for us as ministers is you have to support everybody, even the ones that you don't agree with.*

*As the chair of the discussion, how are you able to argue strongly for your point?*

This reflects an underlying difficulty for the Church of Scotland. Some of the most positive stories in the dialogues depicted leaders forging and sharing a clear vision before dynamically acting on it. How does this sit alongside the desire for consensus, accountability and to have all voices heard? This theme is explored in more detail below, under 'Issues of power and leadership' (see section 3.4.8 below).

A useful practical suggestion emerged under this heading:

*I would like to know how the Church of Scotland ... I know within the Kirk Session we very rarely reflect upon what we've done but how the Presbytery reflects, how 121 and all the committees actually reflect upon what they've done and how successful it's been? ...*

*where it's not been successful, what are you going to change from it?*

This suggests that the simple practice of building in time for review and reflection on decisions could be a neglected source of wisdom. It is strongly echoed in the organisational literature on quality improvement.<sup>35</sup>

On the subject of consensus-based decision-making, the feedback was lukewarm:

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<sup>35</sup> See for example W Edwards Deming's PDSA Cycle (Plan, Do, Study, Act), in which the 'Study' step involves monitoring what has been done to test the validity of the plan for signs of progress and success, or problems and areas for improvement. See <https://www.deming.org/theman/theories/pdsacycle> (last accessed 23/1/15)

*That's my experience too, that mechanics take over. It's like 'This is the way we make the decision' as opposed to 'What's happening, what are the spiritual priorities here?'*

### 3.4.3 Positive aspects of decision-making

The individuals who attended the dialogues had many stories to tell. Some were angry; some distressed. Yet there were numerous tales of things working well, where both decisions and the manner of their making appeared to have deepened people's faith in human nature, in the institution and in God. The most profound moments seemed to arise from the greatest adversity.

One theme to emerge strongly was the importance of relationships and common courtesy in the midst of hard choices. For example:

*The first person who came and spoke to me afterwards was the person who was strongest against the decision to make sure the relationship was good.*

*That was carried through by a good deal of, thankfully, Christian grace if you like by all concerned that the minority was allowed to hold onto their sensibilities if you like at the expense of everyone else, including the minister.*

The idea of consensus came up frequently but, interestingly, without a formal model:

*The minister of the church was very good at that, consensus was often used.*

*Our Session probably very seldom has a vote.*

*When the Presbytery planning group came to the ... I stuck to my word and didn't question. However, then ... congregation had to decide how it felt. It was an interesting conversation, not one that was polarised in any way ..., a kind of series of expressions of regret ... basically they just said yes. So it was a decision that was pretty much a consensus decision ... it was a unanimous thing but the struggle wasn't between people but within people.*

This can clearly take time:

*a consensus process which I think is the church at its best, because there were several times when we felt we were ready to decide but there clearly wasn't a consensus and we didn't want to proceed on the basis that we had two thirds ... And that took us a year and a half, it took us a lot of tricky group meetings to bring the proposals back, to listen to what people were saying, and eventually we did.*

Another participant described a major and positive transformation over an extended period:

*Two years into our building project, folk were saying, I'm gonna die before this project is on the ground. (LAUGHTER) About 10 years later, we had completely transformed the church from the ground up but we still wouldn't have believed it possible.*

Other positive aspects of decision-making included an expression of great appreciation for guidance from the central Church to help congregations address issues of human sexuality:

*I felt that whole process was ..., it had been so well presented and it then enabled us to focus on our own Kirk Session, the needs of that group of people and how best to structure ourselves in engaging with each other.*

This Session Clerk explained that the approach taken over that issue set a positive precedent which the Church still follows for difficult questions.

Some participants expressed considerable faith in the structures of the Church and those who occupy them:

*The recommendation they bring is the right recommendation because they've done all the work, we trust them to go away and do the work. We don't feel that we've got to question them in detail about every aspect of what it is they've just done.*

This high view of office was mirrored by office-bearers themselves, suggesting a foundation for the trust expressed above:

*I feel very, very strongly about the honour connected with being asked to become an elder and the gravity concerned with being part of a group that does make such big decisions.*

Others, however, expressed the need to radically review the nature of the role:

*Accept in a changing world that eldership is changing as a role and what was eldership is not quite the same as it might have been 20 years ago. It's to actually look hard and search hard into people's hearts and find out what their gifts and talents are and utilise them maybe slightly earlier than we tend to.*

#### **3.4.3.1 Area of concern: dysfunctionally large groups**

One persistent theme was the unsuitability of existing structures for the demands of contemporary life. A striking story concerned a Kirk Session of 46 choosing to reduce its size to six.

*Well, we boiled it down to one thing. A definition of an elder is someone who is called to make decisions, live with decisions and implement decisions. And on that basis, everyone is entitled to be part of the Kirk Session. Only six chose to be part of the Kirk Session and nobody took the hump and nobody took the huff – nobody – 80% of them said, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me, I am released.*

Another speaker voiced a similar concern:

*The current Session that I'm involved in has maybe 50 members. How many actually contribute on a regular basis to that sort of thing? I think the Session have resisted the minister's desire to have a smaller group ... who could meet and actually manage the business aspect.*

The General Assembly itself was regarded as unwieldy for some types of decision-making:

*I cannot believe that the General Assembly is a great place in which to debate some of the business that goes on there, five hundred people in there debating an issue*

*which may be to do with the running of Crossreach or something of that nature.*

One participant developed a similar theme: that the Church employs the same structures for the management of significant organisations as for congregational governance.

*I question whether the structures of the Church are fit for purpose... they've been there for years and years ... they may be fit in a sense for the spiritual aspects but they're also running a church which has a multi-million pound tag on it in terms of its properties and in terms of its income and all the rest ... I think they were far too big. The ability for people to be able to input and, you know, feel their voices heard is very, very important but I think we've got to sharpen up on how we actually run what is an institution as well as a church.*

The transcript shows a facilitator response which included the words 'dysfunctionally large groups'. The challenge for the Church is how to address this concern without losing the benefits of its distinctive approach to participation.

#### **3.4.4 Tension between spiritual and other considerations**

The Church is not simply another 'not-for-profit' organisation. Its purpose is clearly a spiritual one, and this was reflected by many participants. At the same time it has much in common with other organisations: buildings, people, finances and meetings. It needs to decide what to do and how to present itself. Some clearly agonise over the place of God in these matters:

*... keeping the main thing the main thing. The main thing is to worship Christ.*

*It's so frustrating and when I hear all these stories and I'm sure you could go on and match this, I just think, I can't see where Jesus is in all this.*

*Ultimately they [Presbytery] look to Jesus. He gets you through cos he knows it all and gives the motivation.*

Some saw faith directly underpinning the legitimacy of decisions:

*If we convene meetings with prayer, asking for wisdom and guidance or whatever and then the meeting comes to a conclusion or a decision, how do we assume the decision was wrong?*

*I've noticed in our Kirk Session if we were making a big decision, we would spend a significant amount of time, not just in prayer at the beginning of the meeting but okay these are the ways we are going to pray better, going on retreat maybe and also in theological reflection on it.*

Another felt that spiritual discernment ought to trump majority rule:

*Well, ultimately, it's God who rules the church and we try and do what we think is his will. We may not always interpret it correctly but that in my book is what we're working for always. So it's not a democratic organisation.*

Others were more wary of the language used to describe spiritual matters:

*The whole 'we are all followers of Jesus let's all do that' needs to be broken down, whereas what you just said isn't about whether you follow Jesus or not it's about professionalism and it's about understanding human nature.*

*It occurred to me that prayer ... can be a hidden form of power talk, smothering people, that's not prayer.*

And some acknowledged the difficulty in attempting to resolve controversial issues by an appeal to faith:

*The problem is when I have difficulty in understanding what we think Jesus or God wants us to do and hence we have the sexuality thing. There is very, very, very strongly held differing opinions of what they think God or Jesus wants us to do and that's where you get the real conflict.*

The overall impression from the dialogues was that appeals to religious or spiritual principles seemed not to

have been effective when it came to resolving significant disagreements. This is not to say that these principles are unimportant: rather that they are often so deeply cherished that one person's interpretation is unlikely to dislodge another's.

### 3.4.5 Traditional forms of decision-making

The dialogues contained rich material about how things are currently done, some of it positive, much of it less so. Participants recounted votes that had gone against them as well as in their favour. One had found a way to put things in perspective:

*The actual decision-making process worked, it worked really well in the sense that it revealed something that I was mistaken about ... I didn't get what I wanted. That's not a failure of the decision-making process.*

Another minister revealed the human impact of traditional voting mechanisms:

*And my heart was really thumping as we said, now, we have to put this to a vote. If you're for it, yes, and if you're – a bit like the referendum but not quite – and if you're against it, no. And of those who stayed behind after the congregation voted, 98% or thereabouts voted for it. It was quite incredible.*

One participant spoke quite bitterly of a decision that appeared to have been imposed by Presbytery against the wishes of the local congregation:

*Within I think almost the first Session meeting after the minister retired somebody from Presbytery came and said this does not conform with church law and instructed the Kirk Session to stop having two services at the one time.*

Another comment throws up a fascinating question for the Church. While its structures seem designed to curb the excesses of charismatic leaders, the deeply-rooted preaching tradition with its emphasis on rhetoric can lead in the opposite direction:

*I was interested in your comment about the convener of that committee persuading Assembly to follow his way*

*because what struck me immediately from that is there's a model of that in the church ... in a sense we understand what that's about don't we, somebody's persuading often? And I know preaching's more than that but there's a part of that kind of, preaching the gospel, persuading of people.*

#### **3.4.5.1 Area of concern: arbitration**

Where arbitration featured in the discussions, the comments were exclusively negative. Given the small sample, too much significance should not be attached to this in itself: had some Kirk arbiters been present, they would no doubt have brought an alternative perspective. They are clearly being asked to render decisions on highly contentious matters which, by their nature, divide groups into 'winners' and 'losers'. Where two congregations are understandably attached to historically significant buildings they have an unenviable task. The views expressed below, however, appear to hold valuable lessons for those seeking to resolve difficult or intractable issues.

It is quite conceivable that an arbitration decision could be technically correct and yet disputed by congregations:

*So arbiters came in and read the reports, interviewed the other group, interviewed our group and came to a decision and I think the general consensus from both congregations would have been that they made the wrong decision but we were bound by it.*

There seems to be room for improvement in the transparency of both process and outcome:

*Well, the main thing ... would have made it easier for folk who found this decision, you know, sticking in their throat, would have been if they'd even explained what, why they had come to their conclusion ... For all we know, they tossed a coin.*

Another participant was equally scathing:

*I can't understand why the Church of Scotland still has arbitration as a means of dealing with disputes about buildings because the more you hear about it from*

*different people, the more you realise that it is not a good system ... when you read the report, you began to wonder if they'd actually got the two church buildings muddled up.*

As the section on Procedural Justice (section 3.2.2 above) highlights, it is important to people in general that decision-makers take their views, concerns and evidence into account. How can they know this has happened? Generally participants come to the conclusion that they have been heard because they see the decision-maker listening and asking questions or because the eventual decision shows familiarity with their reasoning. Decisions taken behind closed doors are not generally regarded as procedurally fair.

More research may be required to establish whether the critical views expressed in the dialogues reflect unhappiness with arbitration outcomes or with the manner in which they are arrived at.

If the Church continues to use arbitration for contentious matters, the Panel recommends that the arbitration process be reviewed to increase confidence in the process.

#### **3.4.6 Actions of the central Church**

The conversations often turned to '121'. It will hardly come as a surprise that decisions are not always viewed charitably. Some expressed affection; others reminded their colleagues of the commonality with those at the centre:

*Just remember that no-one here is evil, no-one here is bad, these are good people, I might disagree with them, I might disagree with them vehemently about something but they're not bad.*

*People that work in 121 do find it every frustrating that there is this 'them and us' attitude ... in fact they are often ordinary members of the church, they just happen to be working at the central level.*

Reservations concerned two main areas. One was communication. The other was more difficult to express:

the feeling of the Kirk turning its back on certain congregations or groups. There is an interesting tension here. On the one hand, people recognise that 121 is made up of diverse individuals like themselves; on the other hand those who perceived themselves on the wrong side of it tended to see it as a unified force.

*As an institution, the Church seemed to step back from us ... had we not been, I think, kind of quite strong in ourselves we would have felt we had really been cast adrift ... there was an issue about being excommunicated or a feeling of that at that point.*

*As I said, the wind blows quite cold from 121 on people who have had training; they say 'but they're not educated...' I wish they didn't pour so much cold water from 121 on people who come forward and are called to be ministers or readers within the Kirk because they're so well recognised by the local area.*

Beyond these particular complaints, those critical of the Church's strategic direction also tended to characterise it as a unified whole:

*I think the major decision that the Church of Scotland made that affected certainly us and I'm sure actually all of you in loads of ways is that for many, many years now they have been planning for decline ... What that does is it takes the energy of the people away from the spiritual growth and puts it into all that kind of thing that we've been talking about.*

On the question of communication, some complained that the language was often difficult for ordinary members to understand. Others went further:

*I'm not sure that they talk enough at all to the generality. Never mind the language, we'd like to hear the words.*

There was, however, realism about the size of the institution:

*We recognised I think in our minister's preamble saying 'Of course you realise what we are discussing here is going to*

*be discussed by every other Kirk Session in Scotland and the data that we send in will be like a drop in the bucket.'*

*I mean the website is actually very good now and there's now to be a General Assembly app believe it or not, so you know the Church has tried but I mean it's very challenging to communicate what happens at the Assembly to grassroots level.*

Communication is a two-way street and some members recognised the need to take responsibility for informing themselves:

*I think it's something that probably as just a congregation of members have to go and seek, it isn't passed down to those of us sat in the pews. We would probably have to go and say 'tell me a bit more.'*

There was also a note of encouragement. Reports can attract a kind of weary cynicism, and a cautionary note to the present writer was the use of the term *mammoth*. They take significant time and energy to prepare; they are published with a degree of fanfare; then they 'gather dust on the shelf.' One exception seems to be the *Church without Walls*<sup>36</sup> initiative:

*This is my perception not just from tonight but the Church without Walls initiative has come back. Now, I can remember that coming out and, you know, it was all – that was always being talked about, discussed, etc. Wheech. And then it just faded, you know. I've just been hearing about it – not tonight – outwith these walls – just recently and it's as if it's – it's almost like a resurrection actually ...*

*I think another part of the Church without Walls is the fact is it's primarily a relational exercise ... that's not just within the parish, I mean, I think that that's certainly my own understanding of say the next five to 10 years ... there'll be*

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<sup>36</sup> Special Commission anent Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2001. See [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/11787/CWW\\_REPORT\\_for\\_website\\_2Nov2012.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/11787/CWW_REPORT_for_website_2Nov2012.pdf) Last accessed 24/1/15

*a stronger emphasis on relationships between individual congregations.*

A minister attributed a major and radical reform process to the ideas in that report. It is a reminder that the centre can play an important leadership role. The problem these dialogues have highlighted for the Church is a kind of cognitive dissonance<sup>37</sup> created by holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time; in this case between the positive, energising vision of *Church without Walls* and the negative, enervating philosophy of 'planning for decline'.

### 3.4.7 Procedural justice in practice

The dialogues underlined some of the key elements of procedural justice. There were examples of 'voice':

*Each member of the Kirk Session who was involved in that discussion to feel that they had been able to openly express their own personal view without any fear of contradiction or other negatives and at the same time being listened to ... at the least the process that we have gone through has been regarded as fair and open and honest and positive.*

*Perhaps reflect and have the confidence that at least your view has been heard and considered. Although the majority is not of that opinion, perhaps you yourself should go away and reflect and reconsider, which has happened for me on one or two occasions.*

Their statements reflected the idea of 'being heard'.

*I think if folk feel that their opinion has been listened to and has been taken into account in the making of the decision it's easier to accept whatever decision is taken, if they go away feeling that decision has been taken without listening to what they're saying they find it more difficult.*

As the excerpt below illustrates, this idea begs the question: 'heard by whom?'

*[Facilitator] Is it important to be heard by everybody? Or is it important to be heard by the minister?*

*[Participant] My immediate reaction is actually the minister cos I feel the minister has the decision, but in practice it shouldn't be.*

The third element of procedural justice 'dignified and respectful treatment' shone through on occasion:

*I think feeling that you've been heard is really central ... Also the issue of respect for other people reaching a view that has as much right in the world to be there as it my view, it's being prepared to accept that and live with it.*

*... just appreciated the fact that we weren't just told it was changing or whatever but she talked to us and decided that we would appreciate having it more often.*

While the term 'even-handed' was not used, the notion of accountability may be similar in underpinning a belief that those making decisions are fair and well-intentioned:

*Where decisions are made in an accountable way that I think they're easier to accept if they go against you.*

While ideas like respect and fairness are tricky to define, it is certainly clear when they are absent:

*Up until this, there has not been a forum where my opinion was asked, at no point was I invited to talk about the work I was doing or about how it would affect me.*

*Where somebody has come in, I suppose particularly from outside, from Edinburgh, has made a decision about property that you feel was a bad decision, hasn't taken account any of the local ... and isn't there, and wouldn't make a better decision in the next ... because they didn't listen and they're not going to listen the next time either and nobody has learned anything from what was clearly a mistake, then that's really difficult.*

*A person from a national committee won with such bad grace and bullying really that victory couldn't stick ... the way they won meant that when it was appealed even*

<sup>37</sup> See <http://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html> Last accessed 24/1/15

*those who agreed with the decision were so embarrassed by how it had been reached [it was reversed].*

Just as the procedural justice research suggests a link between one positive experience of decision-making and respect for the whole system, the opposite seems to apply: a disillusioning encounter with one representative of the Church can undermine trust in the whole institution:

*Whether it had to finally go or not is not the issue, it was the manner in which it went ... what was said around these tables by people who claim to be of the church was really quite frightening, there was very, very clear untruths being told that really upset me.*

Much of this is applied common sense. We like the chance to have our say; to believe that it mattered; that we were treated respectfully; and that backroom deals didn't rob us of what is fair. The lessons for the Church are:

- Make time for people to speak, even (and especially) when you profoundly disagree.
- Listen well and show that what has been said is understood, even (and especially) when you profoundly disagree.
- Give reasons for decisions, even (and especially) when you think the recipients will profoundly disagree.
- Treat everyone with courtesy and respect, even (and especially) when you profoundly disagree.

The evidence of these dialogues and the wider literature is that this will be time well spent. MacCoun asserts, 'Those of a tough-minded bent usually find it almost impossible to believe that politeness could possibly approach the impact of the bottom line.'<sup>38</sup> Or as one elder put it:

*More than just doing the minimum ... It's one thing to get an email about something; it's very different to actually have someone take the bother to phone.*

<sup>38</sup> MacCoun, 2005 (see footnote 27) p. 182

### 3.4.8 Issues of power and leadership

In an organisation as large as the Church of Scotland there will always be different degrees of influence. In spite of the commitment to curbing individual power manifest in the Moderator's one-year term, the suspicion clearly remains that some are 'more equal than others'.<sup>39</sup>

*There were people who seemed to be powerful and you could pick them out.*

*I can remember a tearful convener of ... Committee saying he had been accosted on the train on the way to Edinburgh and told that his committee had to stop doing ... and he didn't know what to do, it was that little élite that was controlling and manipulating.*

The power of rhetoric described above (section 3.4.5) can play a part:

*The Committee was split down the middle but the Convener was also obviously very much in favour of one of the possible decisions and swayed the Assembly to not come to a decision, to fudge the issue so that there could be further delays and, I got the impression, so that his way could be adopted ...*

Some saw a straightforward will to power playing out in the structures of the Church:

*What you've got is people who have their little kingdom and it may actually not be God's kingdom but it's the one that matters to them and they're going to shoot for supremacy in that area, which is sad.*

It is difficult to know a) if this is a problem and b) what might be done about it. One person's 'little kingdom' is another's lifelong, selfless commitment. It is a cliché that the Church comprises human beings in all their richness and fallibility. From one perspective, the best decisions emerge when people are prepared to fight their corner:

<sup>39</sup> George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*, London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2000/1945, p. 90

*We had three brilliant people heading it up, absolutely brilliant ... hopeless delegators all of them because they were so competent themselves and that's the Committee I learned to fight on, I learned to fight because if you didn't fight what was the point in being there?*

It is probably also reasonable to observe that society has changed rapidly over the past twenty or thirty years. Authoritarian leader control appears to be less acceptable than it once was. There is a clear appetite for consultation and shared power. In the dialogues, it seemed useful to

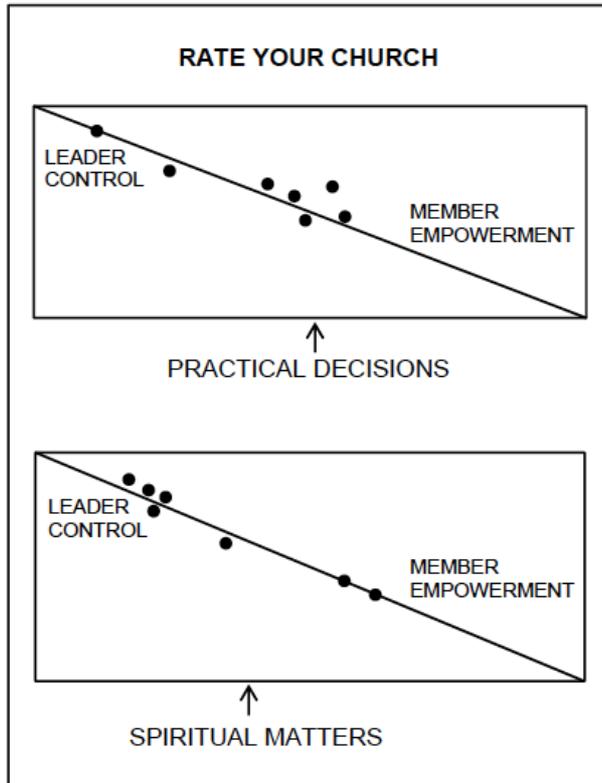
gauge the extent to which the Church is in or out of step with this shift.

One device used was a scale, set out below and attached in full in Professor Irvine's report,<sup>40</sup> to assess the degree of leader influence in congregations.

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about\\_us/general\\_assembly/general-assembly-2015/reports-and-minutes](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about_us/general_assembly/general-assembly-2015/reports-and-minutes) Adapted from materials provided by Kinharvie Institute - [www.kinharvie.org.uk](http://www.kinharvie.org.uk)

TELL	SELL	CONSULT	JOIN	DELEGATE
<i>Leader decides then informs members.</i>	<i>Leader decides then sells positive aspects of the decision.</i>	<i>Leader invites member input before deciding.</i>	<i>Leader invites members to make decision with them.</i>	<i>Leader turns decision over to members.</i>
Useful when communicating about safety issues and decisions by a higher authority.	Useful when member commitment is needed, but decision is not open to member influence.	Key to success is to inform members that their input is needed but that leader retains authority to make the final decision.	Key to success is when leader is willing to keep her influence equal to that of others.	Members are accountable and responsible. Key to success is to build a feedback loop and a timeline.

Participants rated their congregation on both spiritual and practical matters. In general, the degree of leader control was significantly greater on spiritual matters, as the two examples below illustrate:



One participant acknowledged that perceptions of empowerment could vary depending on one's place in the scheme of things:

*I mean you have to be a member to be part of that decision-making process but so often at grassroots it's not seen as member empowerment, it's seen as leadership control.*

Some saw leader control as built into Church law:

*I think actually it is the prerogative of the minister to determine the use of the church, so it is in fact his decision.*

However, some of the most striking stories featured leadership as a source of vision and inspiration:

*You have to just keep lifting people, give them their moment ... But say, OK, but however, this is what we're focused on.*

*There is only one thing that really counts and it's vision. Vision, vision, vision. You aim at nothing, you hit it every time. Biblically, you know, without a vision, people perish.*

*If you don't have strong leadership in your church, that's when it begins to crumble.*

One participant described a clear choice to delegate decision-making power to the minister, chiming with the view that leader control was more prevalent on spiritual matters:

*The Session we absolutely ripped lumps out of each other but with a tremendous respect from the very concerned through to the very liberal wings of Christian thought ... and the decision at the end was that from each end of that spectrum we would hand over the decision, perhaps hand over the conscience burden to the minister, we would respect the Minister's decision.*

### 3.4.9 Other themes

A number of other themes were discussed but space does not permit all the quotations to be listed. They include:

- Delay in decisions

*The decision-making of the Church of Scotland in appointing a new minister is so lengthy, it destroys congregations.*

*I sometimes feel the General Assembly talks and talks and puts off decision-making and puts off decision-making and it all comes back the next year and they go through the same thing again ... You sometimes feel, for*

*goodness sake, kick (LAUGHS). You think, would you make a decision? How can you guide the people if you can't make a decision at the top?*

- Localism

*I think that the vision comes locally. It will never come from 121 George Street or even Presbytery per se. I think it's very much a local thing, born in the hearts of the local people for their parish.*

- Genuine changes of heart following discussions

*I had a strong view on one issue and I went to the meeting thinking ... there is no way I'm going to change my mind. And I was talking to ... going in saying, there is just no way I'm going to change my mind. And I came out thinking, that was a most brilliant meeting, everybody agreed, wasn't it? And it was only when I got home, I thought, I have completely changed my mind.*

- Factionalism on committees of the Kirk

*In all fairness the Board of ... was very, very politically driven.*

A final theme which deserves mention was the importance of human qualities rather than structures:

*Our previous elder used to ring the doorbell when he delivered the diary and he'd come in for a chat and would quite often just sit down and have a wee bit of a blether or something, but we could talk to him.*

*I can't say I'm persuaded by the weaknesses of the model that we have in our Church or by the supposed strengths of alternative model; they're only ever as good or as bad as the people who occupy those places, the grace with which they handle that position.*

This could have a downside. One participant, commenting on the debates about human sexuality, said:

*You know, I've come more to the conclusion it's blooming personalities that are actually more at play in this than we would give credit to.*

### 3.4.10 Living with decisions

An alternative way of organising the data should be mentioned. One of the animating questions for the dialogues was 'What allows you to live with decisions with which you disagree?' This seemed important at a macro level (whole congregations departing) and at a micro level (general discontent with a church's direction). Here again there were positive and negative reports. Those who found decisions difficult to accept often spoke of things being done by powerful others: the Church's perceived hierarchy; a small backroom élite; and those with persuasive voices. Those in the opposite camp tended to speak of attention and respect being paid by those in authority. Some attributed success in this regard to a capacity to negotiate, including drawing out the perspective of those who may not naturally wish to voice their opinions:

*I think the minister or whoever should say, you must say something here because there are always some people afterwards that mutter and ... oh, I wasn't listened to. But actually, they didn't – so I think the negotiator is somebody who's got to almost force people out of their comfort zone.*

*... people who don't have the skill to talk or don't have the confidence to talk, who'll sit in a meeting and they'll fume away ... the chair person has got a great [responsibility] cos these people walk out feeling very frustrated, very upset and in some cases, they leave the Church.*

Here again we see the importance of leadership, but of a relatively novel kind; not so much taking the decision as leading the process by which the decision is taken. Participants consistently appreciated efforts to ensure their views were taken seriously. In this regard, consensus-based decision-making may have a place. While there seems little appetite at present for a formal process involving coloured cards<sup>41</sup>, members, elders, session clerks

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<sup>41</sup> Although this may be attributable to a lack of experience of the model working in practice

and ministers all spoke highly of situations when time was taken to achieve as broad a consensus as possible.

#### 3.4.11 Having courage to hold difficult conversations

With a reasonable amount of time and care, the Kirk has a 'cushion of support' from its members. It is not limitless, however, and if pushed too far, people may simply leave.

Where discussion of difficult matters is concerned, it is helpful for all involved to make time to speak face-to-face, courteously and in a way which allows all points of view to be heard. This is counterintuitive: the more divisive the issue and the angrier the people, the greater is the need for courage to hold difficult conversations. Voting is part of the mix. As the recent Presbytery voting on same-sex ministers illustrates, however, voting is not sufficient on its own. The interplay between democratic accountability and inspirational leadership has been aired in the dialogues, with no particular conclusion. It looks as if this is an example of 'both, and'.

#### 3.4.12 Conclusion

These dialogues could be viewed as the Church of Scotland holding up a mirror to itself. In a sense there are no surprises. The report is reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark: 'The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have known since long.'<sup>42</sup> The Kirk has a long history and clearly the 'cushion of support' is robust. On balance the dialogues contained as many positive stories as tales of concern or disillusionment.

There are, however, significant challenges: the content of decisions and the manner of their taking came in for criticism. While little can be done about the former, this report contends that there is much to play for in the way decision-making is conducted. It has particularly highlighted two areas of concern: dysfunctionally large groups for some purposes; and the perception of lack of voice in the current arbitration procedures. It suggests that some simple steps could address these: giving people a

chance to express contrary views directly to decision-makers may seem disagreeable, but in the long run could enhance the legitimacy and durability of those decisions. It appears that many ministers and Kirk Sessions already seek wider consensus than a simple majority: the Church may wish to consider more formal mechanisms of consensus-based decision-making.

Care has been taken to use participant's own words as much as possible: folk clearly thought carefully about what they wanted to say. This also allows the reader to see how the various themes have been arrived at. It is hoped that the information contained in the report will be received in the spirit in which it was offered, as part of courteous and frank conversations about an institution which they hold dear.

#### 3.4.13 Thanks

The Panel would like to express its gratitude to Professor Irvine for the skill and diligence he applied in carrying out and reporting on this piece of research. In addition, we thank the Rev Dr John Ferguson, the Convener of this group until May 2014 when his term on the Panel ended, for his willingness to continue his involvement with the consultations until their completion, and finally, the panel of Dr Cecilia Clegg, Mr Hugh Donald and Dr Michael Rosie who gave so willingly of their expertise in the earlier stages of the consultation.

## 4 Scenario Planning

**4.1** The Panel's Report to the General Assembly of 2014 detailed an initiative aimed to help the Church of Scotland understand the missional context within which it operates, particularly as it is shaped by the increasing use of technology in what has been termed the 'Digital Age': one which '... presents the Church at all levels with an opportunity to communicate clear, consistent and effective messages.'<sup>43</sup> This ever-changing technological age, however, also raises questions for society in general

<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell Publishing, 2009 (1953), s. 109

<sup>43</sup> Panel on Review and Reform report to the General Assembly of 2014, 2/8, section 4.4

about the use and impact of the technology and its applications.

4.2 To fulfil its aim to 'invite key stakeholders to discuss the implications of the scenarios'<sup>44</sup> that were developed through the Scenario Planning project reported upon last year, the Panel has continued to work with Professor George Burt of the University of Stirling and those who had been involved in the development of the scenarios in 2014. The profound and sometimes disturbing issues that surfaced throughout this project, particularly in regard to the need to recognise and respect human individuality and freedom alongside a respect for others and basic moral values drawn from the Judeo-Christian ethic, as well as the challenge of forming relationships in this ever developing digital age, has also challenged the Panel to find an appropriate format by which they can be presented to the wider Church in a clear and user-friendly way.

The Panel is in the process of exploring with those who have the appropriate expertise, the best means by which

this material can be presented to the Church, with the aim of encouraging discussions both within and beyond the Church on its own and society's engagement with the 'digital age'. It is proposed that these will be piloted in a few locations before refining them further for general release later this year. In this way, it is hoped to engender the sharing of views about the hopes, expectations and fears of those who may or may not welcome the changes brought about by increasing use of digital interaction in the world now and in the future, thereby leading to some discernment about how the Church might in turn learn from this change of age.

4.3 The Panel would at this stage like to acknowledge the particular contributions of Professor Burt, Sanctus Media, Mr Neil MacLennan, and the Revs Bryan Kerr, Jonathan Fleming, Russell McLarty and Sarah Ross, who have given willingly and significantly of their time to assist the Panel in its further exploration of the issues that have emerged.

*In the name of the Panel*

DONALD CAMPBELL, *Convener*  
DAVID C CAMERON, *Vice-convener*

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 2/7, section 3.4