Moderator, for many years the Church of Scotland – and perhaps particularly the Panel on Review & Reform – has been desperately trying to discover the things we can do to fix the problems we have in the church. To discover the magic formula that will change everything

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or the way through the maze of difficulties we face until we somehow reach the solution. If only it were that simple.

Increasingly though the recognition has been that there is no quick fix, nor any single solution that will turn the ship around, or whatever other metaphor you would like to use for the church. Instead there is a need for a fundamental rethink about what it means to be church in 21st Century Scotland. This lies at the heart of our report this year and you’ll find this reflected in other reports, not just our own. A need to return to the core of who we are and who we are called to be – to explore that further. And a return to God in the midst of this. A recognition that this is not simply a logistical or a practical problem to be solved but a deeply spiritual issue through which we are being driven towards a deeper reliance upon God.

That’s why we are pleased to support the call to prayer prompted by the Council of Assembly and issued by the General Assembly on Saturday.

What the Panel have detected over the last few years though is a change in the nature of the debate. A shift from asking

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Do we really need to change?” to “How do we go about changing?” & “What can we actually do?”

Even in this though there are a whole lot of things that have been written in reports over the last 15 or 20 years – in fact even before then. In many ways we haven’t lacked ideas in the church – what we have lacked is the will to implement them. Perhaps because we have been unconvinced about the changes - but more often because we are aware of the losses some people will experience if the change is made. Yet we cannot avoid that and the truth is that this is a painful time and change is a painful process.

The time has come though when we must move on [ Slide 3]

We need to start hitting the green button. And you’ll find this noted in our report – along with a mention of our own determination not to simply produce lots more words saying the same thing but a move towards providing practical help for churches to enable them to move through the kind of changes which need to be made.

The most significant part of the Panel’s work in this has been with

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the Path of Renewal and supporting 40 congregations as they seek to move towards the vision of becoming Missional Churches – moving through the key transitions that you’ll find in the appendix to our report on page 11/13. That has been an exciting process and we have been encouraged by what we have seen developing. Better though that you hear about that from those involved.

Video

In looking ahead we hope to add another group of congregations later this year, potentially up to 40 new congregations, although being able to support them through a 3 year term will be dependent on funding being extended for a further two years from 2018 into 2020 and a review of future funding for Path of Renewal is planned for the Autumn. That is reported on by the Ministries Council with funding for Path of Renewal coming through their budget.

Alongside this work though one of the big questions that the Panel have been grappling with is the question of

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leadership and the kind of leadership needed in local congregations to develop missional churches. And here, at least in terms of ministers, the Panel met what seemed to us like an intractable problem. On the one hand people telling us that the Church of Scotland should

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not shape the number of congregations round the declining number of Parish ministers.

So more unions and links was not the way forward. However on the other hand we discovered that

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almost every charge is anxious to have their own minister.

It felt like we were facing this

[slide 8 – picture, on one hand ..]

Well , not quite.

Now Hub ministry may be one way of resolving the issue around ministry but the Panel are of the view that no matter what model is developed we

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should aim to have a minister of Word and Sacrament in every charge.

However, the Panel are equally clear that

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ministry of word & sacrament should not = stipendiary ministry.

Nor ministry as currently or traditionally exercised. This is not about finding ways to maintain the status quo so that we can all settle back into a comfortable way of doing things. Instead it’s about recognising the importance of having someone in each charge who takes on leadership responsibility for helping God’s people move on in new ways into the plans and purposes God has for us as his people. That during a time of major change this needs to become part of the primary role of ministers – which has huge implications for our training and all kinds of other things

Now that is not to detract in any way from the role of eldership. We do not want to encourage a minister focussed approach and take away from the sense of team that should be there in every local context. Instead it is to recognise the importance of having someone who takes prime responsibility for encouraging and developing the gifts of all God’s people. Drawing people together and releasing all into their calling. Centring them in God’s Word and nourishing them through the sacraments. Someone committed to building the local team – which is, in fact the whole people of God and seeing them engaged in the mission of God. As Eugene Peterson translates Ephesians 4 v’s 12&13:

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*He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ’s followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ’s body, the church, until we’re all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God’s Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.*

So a different kind of role – but also a widening of the scope of what we understand by the term minister of word & sacrament. That it should

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fully include Ordained Local Ministers and perhaps even a new breed of

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Commissioned Local Ministers. Something Dr Doug Gay spoke about during the Chalmers lectures. I’ll say a bit more about where this concept has come from later, but these would be people serving in their own congregations given some theological training, both before they start and when in post, and allowed to serve as ministers of word and sacrament in a time limited way in a specific context. There is certainly growing evidence that congregations and Presbyteries would be open to something like this.

Without this broadening of Ministry of Word & Sacrament it will be impossible to have a minister in every charge. In fact the truth is that even if we could recruit another 200 people for stipendiary ministry we cannot afford to pay them!

The Panel intend to do further work on this, taking forward the instruction given in 2015

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*to consider the shape of new local church leadership roles which might be developed to sustain and build the Church in the future.*

With regard to this the Panel report on Ordained Local Ministry and Readership sets a direction towards paying OLM’s and to allowing them to train and serve in their own congregation. If instructed to do so we will work with Ministries Council to bring final proposals on this next year. The Panel are of the view that these changes will make OLM more accessible to a larger number of people and may encourage a much wider group of people to consider Ordained local Ministry.

However, it is more than likely that this will only part of the answer – we need also to look towards developing Pioneer Ministry and as mentioned explore the possibility of developing Commissioned Local Ministers.

These are wide reaching issues and in all of these discussions the Panel will work closely with Ministries Council and others before bringing any final proposals.

Finally the report and the supplementary report deal with

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enabling sacramental ministries – and open out some of the possibilities that have been presented to the Panel

We were specifically instructed to look at this in connection with Fresh Expressions of church but we were also aware that it is a growing issue in rural areas and so sought to deal with the issue more widely. We were also instructed to consult with the Theological Forum and have done so even in our preliminary work. They have been clear that their preference and guidance would be towards the sacraments only being administered by ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament, largely in order that we maintain our position within the wider church.

However theirs is not the only voice and as I mentioned, in the Chalmers lectures presented by Dr Gay he suggested that the Church of Scotland might consider a new position of Commissioned Local Ministers. This is something which has been developed and widely used mainly in the rural areas in the Presbyterian Church in the USA. And interestingly it was rural Presbyteries who petitioned their General Assembly to have them introduced. From conversations with some ministers from PCUSA it would seem that it has worked well in those areas. We believe that this is something worth exploring further and this is specifically mentioned in deliverance 4 of our main report.

More recently though others have encouraged the Panel to push the boat out even further and have suggested that some elders might be authorised to administer the sacraments as elders. Without becoming Commissioned Local Ministers. Such a move can be found in our own practice in the 19th century, when some elders in the Free Church were authorised to administer the sacraments. And if not some elders then why not all elders? Going even further than that some people are of the view that we should just go the full hog and say that every Christian is authorised by God to administer the sacraments and that the church should acknowledge this.

The Panel are not coming with a recommendation about which approach to take and through its supplementary report are seeking to give an opportunity to the General Assembly to discuss the issue and to set parameters for the next stage of discussions. As I said, the deliverance in our main report would give us scope to include consideration of Commissioned Local Ministers, which is option 4 in the supplementary report. The inclusion of the deliverance in our supplementary report opens things out further and would instruct the Panel to consider all options.

If the Assembly is of the view that some of these options should not be explored then our hope is that amendments might be made to the deliverance to reflect this. Our preference as a Panel would be to keep them all on the table, but if they would ultimately not find acceptance at the General Assembly it is perhaps better that they be ruled out now.

As I said earlier though in relation to local leadership, it is absolutely crucial that debates about these kinds of issues takes place within the context of exploring the shape of the future church. Not around what needs done simply to shore things up for the present - or doing things just as a matter of expediency. There is more to it than that and more at stake.

Something about understanding that things will not remain as they are and seeking God’s leading and guiding as we step into what it means to be church in what has been termed a post Christian age. And a theological underpinning of that which is important. It was this that lay behind us inviting

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Professor Stefan Paas to address this issue in lectures earlier this year, along with an exploration of Pioneer Ministry. And for those who missed those lectures they are online on the Church of Scotland video page. They are worth listening to! And that’s not the end nor the definitive statement, instead we believe it is important to continue these discussions and explorations throughout the church.

Moderator there is much in our report that we believe gives hints of possibilities for the future – and much of that in our work through the Path of Renewal. The danger of course is that these ideas get hijacked just to keep the show on the road and little more.

Yet survival is not what we should be aiming for. It is much more. It is instead about being caught up in the mission of God in our time and in our generation. Asking questions around what we believe our calling is and how we express it or exercise it in different ways in different contexts across Scotland and beyond. We all need to be involved in this but we hope that our report and work helps not only in the debate but in future action.

Moderator, with these comments I present the report and supplementary report of the Panel and move the deliverances.