

Council of Assembly – Radical Action Plan

General Assembly 2019

Moderator

I will now present the Section of the Council of Assembly Report that relates to the Radical Action Plan, principally found in Section 3 of the main report and Section 6 of the Supplementary Report.

“Follow Me” - the call of Jesus to commitment and discipleship is the theme of this Assembly. Throughout the Gospels we see people from all sorts of backgrounds responding to this call with excitement, enthusiasm, wonder and no small degree of trepidation. At times they saw miracles; at others it was persecution. Sometimes everything seemed stunningly obvious, at other times they were filled with confusion. However what we see is that when His followers kept their eyes fixed upon Him, Jesus blessed their lives in extraordinary ways, enabling them to become so much more than they ever dreamed. They became changed people - radically changed if you will, and we are the inheritors of their commitment and willingness to be transformed. Throughout its history, the church of God had changed and reformed to meet the needs of the times in which it lived and we are living through such a time of change again. In following Jesus we need to think about how we can bring the message of the Gospels effectively to the generation in which we live and what shape the church should take in order to do this. In all this we must be guided by the Holy Spirit and rooted in prayer and in seeking to make changes, we must be careful to try not to do more harm than good to the Kingdom building in which, along with God, we are engaged.

Last year the General Assembly called for a Radical Action Plan for the next three years to address the pressing issues facing the church today. What the Council offers to the General Assembly is presented in a spirit of humility. It is not the “finished article”. We are keen to have an open debate here today and if the Assembly can improve on the work presented here, we will be delighted. This has been and has to be a collaborative process. None of us has the monopoly on the right answers and only God is perfect. We are the church together and one thing that has been repeated by all who have been involved in the process of developing this action plan is the need to trust one another as we seek the way forward and try with God’s help to implement some of the actions that our changed church needs to free up resources of time and talent and finance with which to enable local congregations to fulfil their mission.

The seventeen actions that you have before you today form a part of the Radical Action Plan alongside the Report of the Special Commission and the report of the General Trustees which will be presented later in this week. These actions are not exhaustive and will not include all that some of us will believe to be necessary. When we began this work, the list was much longer but given the time we had the Council had to decide which issues could make a deliverable difference in the short-term, were the highest priority and needed to be tackled early on.

It is also important to say that this plan is not a strategy. That may develop over time but this is very deliberately a series of actions which we believe can begin to address some of the very real and pressing challenges that we face.

Rather than go into all the details of the plan which I am sure that you have read, I want to say something about how the plan was developed to give you a sense of the wider ownership of it and then I would say something about the values that underpin the work. Before I do that however, I would like to offer the sincere thanks of the Council to two groups of people who have been fundamental to this work and without whose input it could not have been completed. We owe a debt of gratitude to the representatives from Presbyteries who formed the Reference Group that worked with us over the six months of preparation. Thank you for your time in attending meetings, making email comments and reading and commenting on some eleven iterations of this report, refining it so that the Council when we examined it, could be confident that the input of a wider audience was represented.

Secondly thanks goes to the staff who worked on this action plan. To those from across Councils and Departments who lead work streams and formed the Project Team, those who did the research and those who responded to questions, we are extremely grateful. This was a piece of work done in a collaborative way with the staff team bringing it together under a framework proposed by the Council and supported by the Reference Group.

Development of this action plan began with what we have to confess was a difficult meeting with Presbytery Representatives back in October last year when it became clear that what we had prepared did not hit the mark with those attending. However that meeting gave essential impetus to the work and was important in the developing a successful collaboration. What followed was a process of ongoing consultation with a Reference Group selected from that group of representatives who met on four occasions and sent comments on successive drafts before they were discussed by the Council. This group was drawn from across the country and age groups within the church. Three members of Council attended

these meetings as liaison between the Council and the Reference Group which assisted in the joining up of two conversations. A second meeting with the larger group of Presbytery reps in February was a more positive experience. Feedback was that this was a useful document which could be worked with and addressed the correct priorities. These comments, and the spirit in which they were offered, further informed the plan. The final report is of course the responsibility of the Council who have had extensive discussions on different versions of the plan at council meetings but we could not have fulfilled our Deliverance from last year without the help of those mentioned.

In terms of the values which underpin this plan, first and foremost it is intended to be about equipping, supporting and resourcing the local church. That has to be the core outcome of whatever we decide. Despite the fact that 80% plus of our financial income returns to the local church there is still a perception that the centre holds on to too much when it should be the servant of the local. We must do all we can to ensure that all of us in our local churches are supported to share the gospel and encouraged in our discipleship to follow Jesus. So throughout the action plan there is an emphasis on devolving where possible, both resources and responsibility to a local or regional level. This change cannot happen overnight but we can and should make a start. There is a recurring advert on television at the moment which says that the best way to get a task done is to begin. Hopefully the action plan gives a direction of travel for that beginning. One or two specifics from within the actions will illustrate this theme.

The Growth Fund will allow substantial funding to be made available locally to enable congregations and Presbyteries to take forward some of their ambitions in mission, community engagement, church planting and working with young people. What we have learned from Go For It can be expanded upon and the impact spread across many more areas. The proposed regulations support other parts of the Radical Action Plan specifically in relation to planting new worshipping communities and focusing on the under 40s.

Proposed changes to the vacancy allowance are intended to more closely align decisions on how best to support vacant charges with local knowledge and devolve to Presbyteries the decisions about how to support these congregations in their area in whatever ways seem best to them. Presbytery is the place where greater knowledge about congregational needs is held and it seems appropriate that they have the means and responsibility to make these decisions.

Equipping new models of church is about being flexible to local circumstances, needs and opportunities. The church's ministry in Scotland and beyond takes place against a background of challenging geography and demographics. Time and again we have been told

that there is no “one size fits all”. This determination to promote new ways of being church alongside the opportunity for Kirk Sessions to change the way that they operate will give increased flexibility to local congregations to make decisions about what will work for them in their environment within the context of Presbyteries with enhanced human and financial resources.

To achieve what we hope to achieve, we will need to work together so collaboration is a key value; but collaboration in a spirit of humility. Listening carefully to one another and learning from one another - the respectful dialogue in which we have been encouraged to engage around other issues - will be helpful here in planning for the future.

Trust will be of foundational importance. We are not them and us ...only us together. Even together we don't have all, or even many of the solutions and that only by listening to God and trusting our brothers and sisters will we have any hope of success.

And finally a total reliance on the living God. When Jesus said “Follow Me”, those who responded did not know to what they were being called. They were called to leave behind the familiar and give up their way of life to follow a man whom they scarcely knew into a new and different future. It took them to a place of sacrifice but also of love and forgiveness. That is why within the plan we call once again for the church to pray, for a season of prayer which will be a time of reflection and preparation across the church.

There are seventeen actions within this section of the Radical Action Plan. Some of them are new, some building on work already being done and some based around issues that have been discussed before at length. Some are financial, some operational and some about responsibility and planning. In the course of this discussion and debate, it would be good to hear about what we should take forward and what we will need to sacrificially give up. The church of the future will not look like the church of past generations. What it will look like, we do not yet know but this General Assembly has the opportunity to begin to shape that church in a way that will enable all of us to fulfil our calling to “Follow Jesus”

Moderator I present the Radical Action Plan and move the associated Deliverance.