

## General Trustees speech – General Assembly 2019

Radical Action Plan, part three. We have spent the last two days agreeing radical change in this church and we all know that there is similar need for radical change in how we deal with our buildings to free up the local church. The General Trustees. It's been a bit of a rollercoaster of a year - of sharing highs and lows of land and buildings with congregations and Presbyteries across Scotland. And that is not going to change!

We continue to support local congregations with advice, grants and loans and have met with Presbyteries, Kirk Sessions, and Fabric Committees. We continue to be humbled by their commitment to the gospel and to having a Christian presence in their communities. This was typified by the 520 people who came to our 7 property seminars to be updated and to discuss the changes that are needed in the management, maintenance and development of the Church's estate. So I want to start by thanking those who look after our land and buildings - theirs is a quiet, unglamorous but important ministry and deserves the thanks of this Assembly. They also include my colleague Trustees and Advisory members and our hard working committed Staff.

I particularly want to thank a number of our own Trustees who are retiring this year. Amongst those leaving us this year are two previous Chairmen, our current vice chairman, a former Moderator, and a number of other long standing Trustees. Between them, they have given more than 100 years of service to this Church in their time with the Trustees, and I know that many congregations and I hope the Assembly would join me in thanking them for their support, guidance and encouragement over the years.

For the future, we are determined to achieve a better balance of age, geography, skills and gender to meet the challenges ahead! And I am pleased to recommend the appointment of Manliffe Goodbody, John Maddock, Fiona Mathieson and Ken Wright as new Trustees and of Ian Townsend as vice chairman.

Buildings are a major issue for this and other denominations. Our land and buildings are but a resource for worship and mission. My main message today is that we need to 'get real' about our buildings. As one person told us 'we were brought up to worship our ministers, and keeping the church building going as an act of devotion.' That attitude needs to change.

There are some really good spaces in the church, but we have too many, and many are not fit for purpose. Nor is the Church a building preservation organisation. Church buildings

should be managed, changed and developed in such a way as that they are not a distraction from the call to 'Follow me'.

Two years ago we launched our Red Book on Safe Buildings. It has been well received, some 600 congregations now having Safe building advisers. Providing a safe space is essential and two recent events have highlighted the risk of fires - at Notre Dame and at the Glasgow School of Art - which may well lead to stricter requirements for public buildings - including churches. We have appointed two new members of the team to augment the support and training we provide to congregations. Andrew Barnett and Robert Speedie are both specialists – Andrew in health and safety and Robert in fire prevention. We cannot have safeguarded people in unsafe buildings. We need to get real.

Planning for growth.

Over the years my predecessors have talked about the fact that this Church has far more buildings than it needs. And each Assembly has nodded in agreement that we must reduce the size of the estate. And yet at the start of this year, Presbyteries have said that 86% of all church buildings are expected to remain in use beyond the lifetime of the Presbytery's plan. Only 6% - about 180 church buildings are expected to go. Really?

Some Presbyteries are 'getting real'. For example, St Andrews Presbytery has been reviewing its building requirements for the next 10-15 years ahead. It started with a conference to agree the criteria for what would be the minimum requirements for a 21st century church - such as - access for all through the front door (we do want to be an inclusive church?), dementia friendly, comfort, heating, a welcoming space, kitchen for hospitality, proper toilets. And all this to ensure that the congregation is worship and mission focused?

The Presbytery asked the General Trustees to meet with them and clusters of congregations to visit every church building in that cluster. And we asked people what should happen to the buildings we visited. Seeing their buildings through others' eyes was very important. People faced up to the reality that some buildings were incapable of being adapted for the future. In some cases the congregational age profile was such that unless something dramatic was to happen there would be nobody left in 10 years' time - and the quality of the building was not going to attract new people. In one small rural church, I turned to ask a lady who was a long standing member of the congregation what she thought should happen to the building she had worshipped in for years and which she loved. Her reply: 'it's done. Close it - we should worship elsewhere'. It's now on sale. And another congregation voted

unanimously to close all four churches in their parish and to look at new ways of being church in their communities.

As I hope you saw at Heart and Soul, we've been working with the Presbytery of Shetland as to find ways in which the proposed single congregation of Shetland can reduce the size of its estate and manage and develop the remaining buildings to focus on the congregation's primary task of worship, mission and discipleship.

New Christian Communities.

But change is not just about contraction. What about new churches - or should I say - new congregations? We are going to have to experiment more, be more flexible, test out new ways of providing spaces for local Christian groups. With Perth Presbytery we are looking at how to plant a new Church presence in a large developing new community at Bertha Park - and it might not involve a traditional church building. We need to be fleeter of foot, not encumbered with buildings that take up the energy that should be used for worship and mission.

Partnerships

And new ways have to be found of sharing the responsibility for looking after what in many cases are community assets and landmarks or of disposing of buildings we do not need. This will involve partnership with other people. And so we are working closely with Historic Environment Scotland on how we can deal with the largest collection of listed buildings owned by any one organisation in Scotland. And we are developing relationships with other bodies who can bring their expertise to the planning process. Partnership working has to be the way forward - much of what the Church owns are not just congregational bases, but civic buildings and an important part of the infrastructure of our communities.

Pulling all this together.

Last year the Assembly agreed that we should produce for the 2020 Assembly an overall plan for the Church's estate - congregational land and buildings. We're on track for that. Even although we have discussed with many people what might be included in such a plan, we want to give as many people as possible the opportunity to contribute through a consultation process. So this year we are asking the Assembly to support our consultation document which is appendix 1 in our report. It is about 'Well equipped spaces in the right places'. For many of you the themes will be familiar. The document builds on our direct experience of working with Presbyteries and congregations. We've brought in an

independent organisation to facilitate and analyse the consultation phase including an online opportunity for anyone to respond to the consultation document.

The Consultation Paper sets out 3 key areas which we believe need to be tackled so that the Church can have 'Well equipped spaces in the right places'.

1. Supporting Presbyteries - we are suggesting ways in which Presbyteries can be helped towards better planning and congregational support. A better data base, more useful building surveys, more objective criteria for both location and spaces, better integration between Local Church Review and planning, Presbytery wide investment priorities that reflect a clear mission strategy and development support. And the need for Presbyteries to be properly professional resourced.
2. Unburdening the local congregation - we are proposing ways in which the local congregation might spend less time managing buildings and more on worship, mission and discipleship growth. New models of maintenance management, new ways of looking after manses, of relieving congregations of looking after redundant buildings
3. Sharing resources and responsibilities - we are asking about ways in which the whole Church can support each other, of sharing our responsibilities for looking after land and buildings with external partners including other denominations. Although our accounts would show that we are looking after £717million, £517million represents the notional value of land and property held in Trust for local congregations. Less than £8 million is directly controlled by the General Trustees.

This an important time for the church to 'get real' about the future of its land and buildings. This is not about managing decline. It is about equipping ourselves for the future, for growth. As Jesus said, it's about pruning the vine so that it can provide better fruit. I hope that you will support our consultation approach, and will encourage others to get involved in the process.

Let me finish with a reminder of what can be - no Is being - achieved.

A young farmer gets the opportunity to start a new life in agriculture by taking on a glebe

The island community of Millport gets a new church more suited to their needs which says 'welcome - we belong to the Lord of today and tomorrow'

The inner city community of Govan - struggling through years of regeneration gets a new vibrant space within an historic building which talks of continuity of sharing the journey of change

The newest church is at St Rollox in Glasgow which has welcomed many new Scots. Here they are waving goodbye to their old church which has been demolished to make way for a new road. The new church will soon be handed over to them and then this wall of crosses will be raised up reflecting the welcome, the sanctuary and the traditions from which this congregation has come and which proclaims the good news to a growing community.

Moderator, I move the report and an amendment to add a new section 13 - appoint Mr Ian Townsend as Vice Chairman of the General Trustees.