

Chief Officer's report

This is the third Chief Officer's report that I have pleasure in preparing for the General Assembly and follows a year marked by significant advancements as we continue to implement the transformational changes demanded of the Church following the Special Commission Report of 2019. I am conscious that this report is set against the context of challenging times across the breadth of the Church as the realities that we face, in respect of finances, people and Presbytery planning requirements are being increasingly felt. It is a difficult and unsettling time at all levels of the church but particularly so for our members, ministers, congregations and presbytery's. Having said that in the many conversations that I have I sense that there is a real recognition that reform is an absolute necessity. Our role in the National Office is to do everything we can to support the local Church through the changes leading to a brighter future where we see real growth building from the foundation of a sustainable Church that is truly fit for the future.

The National Church is at a notable stage in a journey that has stretched over 2 years. Our focus continues to be on both maintaining and in some areas significantly strengthening our support of the local needs of the Church at both Presbytery and Congregational level whilst ensuring that the vision of a leaner and fitter central administration is delivered. Central to the work has been an increasing refinement in understanding and stabilizing our financial situation alongside simplifying and strengthening our accountability and governance processes.

The Chief Officer post was created through the Special Commission report which noted that '*the primary role of the Chief Officer will thus be inward-facing in relation to organizational leadership and the management of staff and resources, rather than as a representative of the Church of Scotland in the wider public domain*' (GA 2019:46). Increasingly through my time in the role, the balance has needed to develop in terms of outreach, support to and understanding of the needs of the local whilst ensuring that the core services of the national administration are delivered to the Church in a cost effective and efficient manner. The sheer scale of the challenges facing local congregations and members cannot be underestimated as the Church moves into unchartered and uncertain times and I am clear that my work and that of my staff should be in the context of providing relevant and appropriate levels of support as we transition through into new beginnings.

As reported to GA 2021, the cost savings demanded by the Special Commission in 2019 were made by the end of 2020 and these savings continue to be embedded and increased wherever possible. Close scrutiny on budgets whilst ensuring that staffing establishment figures remain controlled have resulted in better than projected results with savings against most National Office Budget lines against the 2021 budget totaling £3.7m. Whilst such savings can be seen as a positive step, it must be reflected that £1.9m of this money is savings against the national stipend bill where we have experienced a higher than expected retirement of Ministers against lower than projected recruitment numbers. As the Church emerges from the two years of pandemic, this pattern of financial control and accountability will not lessen but instead become more focused as clarity continues to grow in respect of priorities.

Close partnership working with the newly established Presbyteries has been developing throughout the last year, with specialist support being provided through the Legal, Financial, Human Resources and now IT Departments as the new Presbyteries come into creation. The Presbytery Mission Planning work is proving to be as challenging a process as was expected and much focus is being placed on this area through the Faith Nurture Forum and Faith Action Programme Team. Support continues to be offered through the Congregational Task Force to congregations who are in financial

difficulties with specialist departments working in close co-ordination with presenting Congregations. Whilst this work has had a slower than anticipated start, learning is being taken from each of the cases presented as the task force works in partnership with the congregation and presbytery.

As Chief Officer, I have enjoyed the far closer relationship that is developing between this role and all areas of the Church and our partners beyond. The interface with Crossreach has developed as we have engaged with the staff and organisation who have all done such a marvelous job of managing their arrangements to maintain high standards of care through the pandemic. In line with the Special Commissions report, work in relation to looking at the self-sustainability of CrossReach has continued with the development of a Memorandum of Understanding nearing completion.

I and my staff continue to meet regularly with Presbyteries and Ministers in order that we can continue to integrate the activities of the national offices with the requirements of the local church.

I have been incredibly proud of the outstanding work shown by staff within the National Offices as we have worked within the constraints placed on us by the pandemic. Learning was quickly adopted in how to engage through technology whilst simultaneously making significant changes to every aspect of the work we undertake in order to transform the organisation into one that is fit for purpose to meet our future challenges. This has not been without its difficulties including the need to work remotely from each other and it is clear that within the restrictions still being presented by COVID and the changing nature of work/life balances seen across the land, that regular in person interactions and meetings need to recommence. However, we must use what we have learned during the pandemic to minimize our costs. Our safe return to the national office will be one of my major focus points in the coming year.

Within the National Offices, a Hybrid Working Policy has been introduced offering a deal of flexibility in terms of working arrangements for staff (where appropriate) between home and office. The building itself has been in a state of readiness for staff returning for some considerable time. A core group of staff (around 70) were cleared for part-time return to the office in October 2021 with the expectation being that all staff would be working under hybrid arrangements from early 2022. The arrival of Omicron significantly disrupted these plans and involved a further closure of the building to all but non-essential staff. At the time of writing, it is intended that all staff will be working under hybrid arrangements and be cleared to return to the office by April 2022 onwards or as soon as safely permitted under Government guidelines.

As Chief Officer, the Health and Safety of those that I hold responsibility for is my first stated priority. Whilst a report regarding the future of the George Street Offices will be presented to GA23 in the meantime, limited but necessary investment has had to be progressed in infrastructure and fabric to maintain safe working conditions. Emergency remedial work in relation to the building fabric to ensure the building remains wind and watertight and significant electrical work has occurred. The decision was also taken to refurbish one of the floors of the building. This has enabled staff, previously located across four areas in different departments, to be brought together as one in an open plan arrangement akin to the arrangements that we are likely to require in the future with a greatly decreased footprint. Whilst concern could be raised that monies are being spent on a building that the Church might soon decide to relocate from, all purchases in respect of equipment and furnishings have been made on the basis that they can be relocated to a different location. Further investment is also required to our IT infrastructure, including the use of portable IT equipment to enable both in person and on-screen hybrid meetings which will help us to maintain

the savings that have been made during the pandemic. Testing of this new technology commenced in March 2022.

Moving staff into a smaller footprint within the building, has allowed space to be rented, currently on a short-term basis to external tenants, therefore supporting the upkeep costs of an increasingly aging building. Looking at the building as a means to generate revenue is a practice that is intended to continue until the future of the building is decided.

One of the most significant changes to the structures of the National Administration has been the appointment of the Head of Faith Action Programme. As reported to GA 2021, this post was created in order to provide leadership in the roll out of the Faith Action Plan whilst optimizing the use of resources across the two Forums. Following a review, the Assembly Trustees approved the request for staff, then operating as two separate departments, to be brought together as one department to support the effective and efficient delivery of the Faith Action Plan. This new staffing structure relates solely to a revised operational configuration of staff and work within the current departmental Forum structures and in no way impinges on the responsibilities that the General Assembly currently remits to the Forums. The work is being run under a thematic and programmed approach with liaison across the different elements (Faith Action Staff, Principal Clerks Office and General Trustees) enabled through the Trustees Co-Ordination Group.

Two new groups, the Communications Strategy Group and the IT Programme Board have been established in the last year. The Communications Strategy Group is currently working in conjunction with the Head of Communications in the development of a strategy which supports requirements across the Church. Work has also commenced on a new intranet which will be launched for Church wide internal use. This is currently due to be launched as a pilot in quarter 2 2022. Following the retirement of the IT Manager a new role, the Head of IT, has been created which will be supported by the IT Programme Board to ensure focus and investment will be made within our IT infrastructure, one of the risk areas for any organisation. Work between the IT Department and the newly created Hamilton and Lanark Presbytery in supporting the IT needs centrally has commenced. The intention is to make this model available to all new Presbyteries should this be of assistance. The roll-out of Church of Scotland email addresses to all office holders has now commenced following a successful pilot and will be progressed alongside the aspiration of a Church wide Intranet which is now taking shape using almost exclusively internal resource. (more info needed)

In line with the recommendation of the Special Commission to review the staff pay grade scheme, a Job Evaluation Process, supported by an external consultant, commenced for all roles within the Central Services Committee in November 2021. As part of this process, all Job Descriptions will be reviewed and where necessary revised in a much-needed realignment of roles against the newly identified requirements of the Church. The scheme has been based on the principals of ensuring that a fair, consistent and transparent pay structure is in place within the CSC which is in line with best practice, legislation and future proofed. Each of the roles are being assessed by a panel of internally trained assessors. At the time of writing it is intended that the new pay and grading structure will be implemented in Summer 2022.

Significant work has been undertaken in conjunction with the Assembly Trustees in relation to Governance and Accountability, including looking at a more refined delegation of authority to and from the Chief Officer. Risk Management processes have been revised with Business Continuity plans updated as a result of learning from the pandemic experiences. Monthly management reporting in the form of numerical information is now being received from all areas within the Chief Officers remit and this is driving evidence-based decision making. A revised pack of this information

is also presented to the newly reconstituted Trustees Governance Group and over the next period, consolidation and expansion of information provided will be made where demonstrable value will be created. Whilst the advancement and growth of the missional work of the Church is our primary goal it is critical that this is progressed with the backdrop of a stable and sustainable financial situation.

The work of the Analysis and Research Unit continues to support evidence-based decision making. Further developments with the Congregational Statistical Returns will be made over the year in order to make this process more streamlined for Presbyteries and Congregations, as this data is increasingly playing a part in the data used for our modelling and forward planning purposes. The Grants Unit, formed at the start of 2020 has had an outstanding year in supporting local congregations, particularly around the application to the Scottish Governments Adapt and Thrive Fund, which resulted in over 60 congregations being awarded a total of c.£904k for a variety of projects including developing Audio Visual Facilities within a number of Churches. The Grants Unit also supports the Church of Scotland Small Grants Fund and the recently launched Pioneer Mission Fund as well as signposting to congregation's potential grant opportunities made available by third parties.

Investment in development of the staff group within the Central Services Committee is an area which has been historically overlooked. A Values Based Culture, introduced in 2020 and one in which we are committed to informing our attitude of working together in relation to *Grace, Integrity, Respect, Professionalism, Collaboration and Innovation* sets the tone of what we wish to achieve. The intention is to develop the ethos within the National Administration to one of working without silos and barriers, with one focus in an improved atmosphere, delivering on the key identified priorities of the General Assembly through the Assembly Trustees. A quality recruitment and training programme, the latter delayed due to the onset of the pandemic, has started with an increased focus on leadership and management skills. A Mental Health Awareness mandatory module for all staff has been made available to staff in February 2022 with initial training for an identified group of staff as Mental Health First Aiders scheduled for Spring 2022.

As we begin to emerge from the pandemic, I would like to place on record my thanks to the staff of the Central Services Committee in relation to the dedication, resilience and sheer hard work that has been evident through this time. Staff within each area throughout the pandemic have played their part in ensuring that not only have we remained operational and safe but we have been able to transform and thrive.

The safety of our working arrangements, be it at home or within the Office has been ably managed by the Estates Department, Health and Safety Manager and the General Trustees. The HR department have supported staff throughout this incredibly difficult time of remote working whilst the IT department enabled us to move almost overnight onto a stable platform of technology in order to keep us working. The Communications Department, have guided us through the difficulties of ensuring that the correct messages were communicated at the right time and the Law Department have always ensured that our methods of working in the digital world were safe. The Finance Department have transformed their operations whilst ensuring that we now have real control over our monies and have developed the '*Giving to Grow*' proposals. During this time, new departments have emerged, not least the Faith Action Programme Staff, the Analysis and Research Unit and the Grants Unit. All of these achievements have been during an extraordinary time in our lives and the life of the Church. It is from now we need to build on for the future.

As the focus turns to the coming year, the priorities for delivery are as follows:

- **Staff:** Maintain our focus on staff health, safety, welfare, communications and development.
- **Financial Stability:** Continue with our great work in this area, prepare for the implementation of Giving to Grow to replace the current Ministry and Mission system and develop the detail of a five year business plan/budget.
- **Congregational sustainability** – focus our resources on helping to address the local financial challenges, close working with Presbyteries who have responsibility, seeking alternative means of financial support for local areas
- **Continued focus of National Office staff in supporting the local need** – looking at ensuring the specialist services are aligned to and able to support the needs of the local
- **Local Income generation project** – Stewardship and income generation (particularly through the application of grants) to remain a top priority
- **Recruitment to Ministry posts** – continued focus to address demographics that is aligned with new target ministry numbers in 2025. Focus on provision of inspirational leadership and continuous development.
- **Learning and development strategy** – Deployment of an integrated training programme to ensure continued ministry across Scotland.
- **Presbytery reform** – Supporting work being undertaken by Presbyteries and the Principal Clerk's Office including the delivery of new structures, frameworks, arrangements and funding models which meet the needs of the local church.
- **Delivery of our overall plan**, the adoption of a strategic framework to ensure that all work including the approved work of the Forums, is delivered in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible.
- **Continued evolution of the Church's digital strategy** in order to support how Church communities flourish in the digital age.
- **Progression of our new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion programme.** When I joined the National church I was surprised at our lack of focus and activity in this very important area. My initial proposals to implement something in this area have now led to a strong EDI Group emerging.