

Faith Nurture Forum speech—General Assembly 2022

Rev Rosie Frew

Moderator,

The Presbytery Mission Plan Act was the big-ticket item at last year's General Assembly, and it has been front and centre ever since. Reflecting on my Assembly experience with the Faith Nurture Forum early last June, I made 3 points:

Firstly, we have promised much and now we must deliver.

Secondly, it's a Mission Plan. Mission is at the heart of it. The 5 Marks of Mission underpin it.

Thirdly, every area of the work of the Forum is a part of this, everything we do supports and enables it.

Last year we heard that we need:

- Inspiring leaders to take the church forward - both lay and ordained
- Well-resourced Presbyteries and congregations
- Support for the local from the centre
- Integrity in the planning process
- Imagination and creativity
- A phrase used then was, 'It's all about resourcing resourcefulness....'

As a Forum we provide:

A focus on discipleship, and we're working on an integrated learning programme.

We oversee discernment, assessment, and training for those who will be called to minister in ways that are changing and challenging and innovative.

We give support and encouragement to those in ministry in these changing and challenging times – all the resources of Ascend, of pastoral support. And I know that support is pragmatic, personal, specific and helpful in real and meaningful ways.

We help resource for mission and worship, new ways of being church, pioneering, intergenerational work, the under 40s programme.

We provide specialist resources – Priority Areas, Interim and Transition Ministry, specialist chaplaincies, and the particular skills of the Diaconate and Ministries Development Staff, MDS.

We give assistance with Presbytery Planning... I'll come to that in a moment...

In all this we do not work alone in a silo.... We work with the Principal Clerk, the Law Department, the Treasurer's Department, the Assembly Trustees, the General Trustees, the Faith Impact Forum, other committees of the church, the Presbyteries, those in ministry, and congregations. We work with all these different folk, listen to them, and what we hear helps shape our thinking.

So, the Presbytery Mission Plan Act. An Act that puts mission at the heart and is predicated on the affordability and availability of ministry resource.

Last year I shared some figures with the Assembly and went on to say that we are at breaking point, that we are draining the resources of the church – people, morale, finance. Here's this year's update. As at the April payroll we have:

- 653 parish ministers in a charge which includes 2 deaf ministry posts and 13 transition or interim ministers
- 3 Pioneer ministry posts
- 131 Ministries Development Staff (102 FTE)
- 331 vacant charges including 38 guardianships and therefore the need for 331 Interim Moderators
- 163 locums
- 45% of ministers are or will be over 65 in the next 5 years

This is why we need Presbytery Mission Planning.

Conveners and Forums don't often get fan mail but last May we received so much support and affirmation that we knew that although what lay ahead of us was hard, it was right. There was gratitude that we were finally addressing the elephant in the room. There was an excitement about doing a new thing, doing church and mission in a new way...

We promised much and we knew we had to deliver. Soon after last year's Assembly we reformed the Presbytery Planning Task Group into the Presbytery Mission Plan Implementation Group – affectionately known as P(I)MPIG. Karen Campbell our Vice Convener took on the Convenership. We wanted to make a statement that we were taking this seriously, giving it the highest priority. 6 members of the Forum sit on PMPIG and we invited 6 co-opted members to support us in this key piece of work until Dec 2022. 6 respected, innovative people with wide experience. Angus Mathieson is the senior staff member.

We owe the most enormous debt of gratitude to this team of people who have undertaken to work with every Presbytery to facilitate the work on Mission Planning. I've asked some of them to share their experience....

It's good to hear such positivity because, let's be honest, it has not been an easy 12 months. We've often talked about the perfect storm of pandemic, Presbytery restructuring and Presbytery Mission Planning. There has been great uncertainty, there has been hurt, there are still some very big and painful decisions to be made. We have made mistakes. These are detailed in our Supplementary Report.

Last year we apologised for a mix up over posts in England. That was rectified following the General Assembly but because we're dealing with either full-time or half-time posts the rounding of figures resulted in our ministries total going to 601.5. Later in the year we were alerted to an inconsistency in the way weightings were applied to the new Presbytery of Aberdeen and Shetland, urban and island. That resulted in 4 additional posts being allocated to that Presbytery. We did not think it fair to completely recalculate and take posts away from other Presbyteries.

These are not numbers cast in stone. Firstly, the overall ministries number is reviewed annually by the Assembly Trustees (the affordability and availability). Our Forum responsibility is for the distribution. In our report we have committed to doing work on weightings and how they relate to what will be our new Presbytery structure.

We have also discovered that we have to apologise for an oversight that has recently come to light... the failure to officially inform the General Assembly and the Presbyteries of Gordon, Jedburgh, and Lothian of a change in weightings when work was being done by the Ministries Council on Advisory Figures in 2017. Gordon and Jedburgh changing from 2 down to 1.5 and Lothian rising from 1 to 1.25. We used these amended weightings in good faith last year unaware that they had not been approved.

The sheer enormity of what we are doing struck home the day I looked at the vacancy list and there were only 3... That was when it all felt very real and, being honest, very scary!

I have used the metaphor of the butterfly throughout my time as Convener. We're currently living in an in-between world – in between an old system and a new system. It's like being in a chrysalis, a dark and difficult place of transformation before the beauty of the butterfly emerges.

This time of transition has been especially tough for our probationers and those on familiarisation placements as they seek to discern where God is calling them to serve. Since January we have been working alongside them and their Presbyteries to ensure there are creative opportunities for service at the end of the probation period and that none are disadvantaged financially.

I appreciate that this is also an unsettling time for those feeling called to move on... However, as plans are approved in the coming months and exceptional calls granted more and more vacancies will be advertised.

Let me say a bit about recruitment. There is a perception that we have too many ministers when nothing could be further from the truth. That we're cutting back when in fact we are forward planning. As I mentioned earlier, we are aware of the number of ministers who will be considering retirement in the next few years. We will need more ministers. So, if you have been putting feelings of call to the back of your mind, if believing you are not needed has put the brakes on taking time to think, to pray, to consider putting yourself forward for discernment, please... we need inspiring leaders, folk with a heart for ministry and mission, to take the church forward.

The church you may feel you are being called to serve will be in a far better place... We are currently going through the inevitable pain of surgery before good health can be restored.

We are also aware of other impediments that deter people from putting themselves forward – the length of time it takes to train, and the financial burden placed on the family who journey alongside. We are looking at new options that include fast track training and different pathways, as detailed in the report of the Assembly Trustees.

Since the Faith Nurture Forum came into being on 1 January 2020 we have met only once in person, and once in person with the Assembly Trustees and the Faith Impact Forum. Our second meeting was on the day the church offices were closed by Covid and we were sent home. Meeting online has enabled us to work in a new way. I've spoken before about being

able to be nimble and fleet of foot. I am very grateful to members of the Forum and to all the staff who support us. For hard work and good humour, for creativity and understanding, for putting mission at the heart of all we do. I am very grateful to all who support and enable our wide range of work across Scotland and beyond. I am particularly indebted to Karen, my Vice Convener. We've made good use of Teams over the past 2 and a bit years. She has been a wonderful support and a good friend.

Moderator, I present the Report and Supplementary Report of the Faith Nurture Forum, and since I am not a Commissioner, I ask the Principal Clerk to move the deliverances.