

The Church of Scotland - Assembly Trustees
Assembly Trustees Report to the General Assembly
Webinar at 1730-1830, 10 May 2023, via Zoom
Presentation from Dave Kendall, Chief Officer

Hello everyone. My name is Dave Kendall and I welcome you all to this webinar and thank you for both your interest and coming along. Firstly, our apologies about the short notice of the event. It has been organised in response to feedback on the Assembly Trustees updates and the issuing of the Reports to the General Assembly. We are recording the session and will issue the transcript of the presentations so that anyone who misses it can still watch online or read later. Please could we encourage you to ask questions through the Q and A panel rather than the chat function – it makes managing the question bank easier for the folk behind the scenes. You can put something in the Q&A at any time – don't worry that you cannot see it, they will be coming through to us. It may well be the case that there are too many questions from the webinar this evening to answer them all in the time that we have – so you have our commitment that we will respond to them as a block as soon as we can following the meeting.

I would now like to invite David Cameron to open proceedings with a word of prayer.

As I noted at the start my name is Dave Kendall and I joined the Church of Scotland as Chief Officer in late 2019. Since then it has been a fairly turbulent period for the Church - and the world. As Chief Officer I have overall responsibility for the employees of the Central Services Committee, which is a national office employing body, and the budgets that are overseen by the Assembly Trustees. I am also responsible for implementing the General Assembly's vision and strategy for a more streamlined, efficient church. My duties include facilitation of the development and enhancement of joint working between and among the agencies, strategic oversight of the administration of the work of the agencies and working collaboratively with the likes of the Principal Clerk, the General Trustees and CrossReach.

As General Assembly 2023 approaches we thought that it would be helpful to organise this webinar to present some of the background information and respond to your questions to help inform the debate when we gather at the Assembly.

Whilst there is no doubt that we are navigating difficult, challenging times we have cause for real optimism as followers of Christ Jesus. Our intention is to set some context for what is going on at present and look to the better place that our actions can take us in future.

A good place to start is to think about why our current changes are being seen as essential. The last Assembly Trustee Update, in April 2023, noted that the situation the Church of Scotland finds itself in is "stark". We have had some feedback asking for clarification of what this means. Some of the figures had already been set out in the Assembly Trustee Update in November 2022, including the significant deficit in the budget and I have to stress that the characterisation as "stark" is not scaremongering or exaggeration. The updated detailed facts can be found in the Trustees' Report to the General Assembly. A few points stand out.

Firstly, our ministry numbers are continuing to fall – at a higher rate than predicted. This makes the goal of maintaining 600 plus 60 vacancies ever more challenging. The feedback that I am receiving points to the fact that the developing future role of the minister will not suit everyone and isn't what some felt called to do. There is no doubt that fewer ministers adds to the stress and uncertainty of the situation and also impacts at a personal level. We each really need to care for and be kind to one other in this difficult phase of our reform journey.

Secondly, the annual fall in membership continues with Church attendance numbers reducing by around 4% of the total number each year.

This aligns with the predictions of our 2020 model and is closely linked to the age demographic in the Church of Scotland. Our diminishing Church population is broadly in the age bracket of 60 and above with an average age of around 65. The smaller Church that was forecast in the 2019 Special Commission Report is very much on the horizon and our actions over the years have not impacted on this long-term trend.

Finally, the vast majority of our congregations don't contribute enough to pay for their minister.

Our Presbyterian polity has managed to support this last fact over the years – but from around 2026/2027, if nothing changes, the projected total congregational contributions will not be enough to pay for all the basic costs of providing ministry across Scotland let alone anything else.

This emphasises the point that the majority of the money collected from congregations is distributed straight back to pay for local ministry – it is a myth that the congregational contribution is all spent nationally. The income not matching the expenditure going forward will leave us in a permanent deficit situation if not addressed – something I'm sure you will appreciate is neither tenable or sustainable.

Whilst the Assembly Trustees' Report goes into lots of detail of our situation the one thing that is clear, after years of procrastination and a pandemic that have only worsened our position, is that "Now is the time" when we have to act. Realistically, we have at most 5-10 years to fully resize and adjust but we have to make significant progress in the meantime and deliver the initial major changes over the next 3-5 years.

Mission Planning will inevitably have an impact of its own, as all change does, but we have a situation that is not sustainable **as it is** and is only getting worse. Looking at our overall position, the Church cannot continue to support the number of buildings that we are currently holding, a situation which belongs to the past, and with the constant worry of continuing to pay for them, maintain them and ensure that they are safe places for both worship and missional service to the community. The condition of some manses also demands action.

You have asked: Do Dave Kendall and those within the national team know anything about how this feels locally? Yes, we do. I and a large number of colleagues, are actively engaged personally in presbytery mission planning. We are involved in our own congregations, in considerations for the communities in which we live, at presbytery level and in thinking about the implications across Scotland. So please don't think that the national level doesn't understand what this is like and how hard it all is – I know from my own experiences as well as hearing about it from my colleagues and the many of you who contact me.

I also hear comments that it is alright for those working at a national level and all of the suffering is local. Perhaps I can give a perspective of this from 'the national'. In late 2019 the annual national expenditure was around £24m – this level of budget was driven by ambitious work programmes that were agreed at the General Assembly and we are now having to cut our cloth to adapt to our new situation. As a result we have subsequently managed to reduce the expenditure to £16m (hitting the top level of the Special Commission target of 20-30% savings) and staffing levels have also reduced. However, the savings specified back in 2019 have not proven enough and we are now working on a plan to introduce further efficiencies and reduce expenditure by an additional £6m over the next three years which will leave an expenditure of £10m to cover all the programmes, services, national expenditure and grants, other than parish staffing which is budgeted separately. This will lead to an overall reduction of £14m, whilst also incorporating £1.5m of the new budgetary requirements of our new presbyteries. I can assure you that a saving of this amount cannot be achieved without significant impact, pain and anguish.

It will involve having to leave behind some of the things which we have valued and even championed in our Church as we focus on what we need NOW to create new growth and support our core, mission-focused, activities.

We have to act now on both a practical and theological level. I genuinely believe that we can look to a new future with real optimism – and that we have good reason to do so as we focus our attention on a new era of evangelism that, with God’s will, will enable us to continue to take God’s word out across Scotland and beyond driven by the Holy Spirit. Like you, I pray for this every day.

Thinking to the future at a national level in support of this we need to focus our attention on:

- Supporting the local with the best, most cost effective and efficient services that we can provide.
- Enabling highly effective, well-resourced presbyteries that are equipped to lead the way.
- Recruitment to ministry – our shortfall in this area is one of the most concerning of all our trends and has to be a key focus area.
- Delivering and supporting new forms of income generation at every level of our Church to enable our missional work to continue – we are really gearing up in this area and starting work on the creation of new income streams.
- Investing in our future – we cannot stand still during these challenging times and have to do all that we can to achieve new growth. The Seeds for Growth Fund is an exciting development with £25m available over the next seven years for investment at a local level.
- Doing all that we can to become a simpler, more streamlined, permission-giving organisation that is willing to take some risks in the word of the Lord and is able to move much quicker than the old constrained ways of the past.

In summary, we have allowed ourselves to drift into a precarious position which now requires urgent action. As a member of the Church of Scotland I want our Church to thrive – and I genuinely believe that we will in the future if we can adjust our position from the shape and ways of the past. Working together, listening to each other and facing up to the task that is before us, I’m sure that much better times are ahead. One thing we cannot do is stall or procrastinate our reforms further – “Now is **indeed** the time” for us to act while we still have the chance to do so and remain, at least in some part, on the front foot.

We have a great national team who are responding positively to everything asked of them in terms of moving our focus ever closer towards supporting our local congregations and presbyteries as our priority. There is still much to do but there is a real commitment to make it happen. The contribution made at national level by all our committees is also of real note – we have been blessed by the work of the Forums and all our other committees where ministers and Church members play such a major role alongside our staff and give of themselves so much. In this area we also look forward to the greater representation from the new presbyteries within the proposed new single Faith Action Programme Leadership Team arrangements.

I also have the good fortune through my job to see the wonderful work across so many of our congregations which is where our missional activities have to be based and also within the almost hidden treasure that is CrossReach our social care provider – it is a fact that our people are the greatest asset of all. Together we can achieve so much more in the name of Christ Jesus than we will separately, through closer working and collaboration as we address our various challenges and grasp the opportunities that will present themselves to us. A huge thank you to you all for everything that you do in working for and supporting our Church.

I am looking forward to catching up with as many of you as possible at the General Assembly – we have much to discuss and think about as we step forward in faith.

Finally, remember that we want to hear your questions, please add them onto the Q and A panel and we will pick them up shortly.

I will now hand over to David Cameron to expand on our view that a growing, flourishing Church is within our reach.