

Panel on Review and Reform – General Assembly 2019

Moderator,

Jesus says “Follow me.”

That call, and our response to it, leads to a lifelong transformation. God transformed the lives of Simon and Andrew, Mary, Joanna and Susanna, Paul and Lydia, and countless others, as they responded to Jesus’ call. God invites us to be transformed, as we follow Jesus.

God’s transformation of us is sought and described in the letter to the Ephesians:

“I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, the Father may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Ephesians 3:16-19

Lifelong transformation of disciples of Jesus begins and ends with God. It begins and ends in the community of God, Father, Son & Spirit, inviting us to love and be loved. It begins and ends with the infinite love of God.

That’s the witness of the New Testament. And that, hopefully unsurprisingly, is the core learning from the first three years of the Path of Renewal movement.

If God’s church is to be renewed, through disciples of Jesus being transformed, then central to that renewal and transformation is creating time and space for people to listen to God. A rediscovery of spiritual practices has helped ground those in leadership in God’s love, and whole congregations have found Christ dwelling deeper in their hearts through faith.

That is the first major learning point from the research carried out into the three year pilot of the Path of Renewal movement. From the pilot’s beginnings in the summer of 2015 opportunities to gather information on the process were built in. At this point I’d like to say thank you, on behalf of the Panel, to Suzanne Ebel our researcher, to Graham Duffin and Liz Crumlish for so much work developing Path of Renewal, and to all those involved who engaged with the research so that we might all learn more.

The Panel report contains a summary of the research, with the full report available online. Whether you are part of Path of Renewal, or want to be, or not, we hope that there is something for every part of the Church to learn from, through the lived experience of these 52 congregations across the Kirk.

These congregations were intentionally spread geographically, encompassing urban, rural, island and city parishes, and have involved people across the theological breadth of the Church of Scotland.

The “Path of Renewal” title comes from the work of William Bridges, who describes a stage in the lifecycle of an organisation where a choice must be made. Will the organisation close in on itself and die, or will it choose a “Path of Renewal”, a path of regeneration?

The aim of our home-grown Path of Renewal movement has been to create space to let God lead congregations to regeneration as missional churches. We’ve identified missional churches as having three key characteristics:

- vibrant, attractive worshipping communities
- who are forming people in faith
- connected with their wider communities.

In terms of outcome these are designed to go for growth:

- a growth in numbers
- a deepening commitment to Christ
- a growing impact on the community.

Through conferences, mentoring and building learning communities, Path of Renewal has worked towards these outcomes, always evolving as it goes, learning and being regenerated through the 3 years so far. And some significant changes have been reported by those involved:

With the wonders of technology, this is the data from sections 3.3.6 and 3.3.7 in more accessible colour! This shows that big steps along that path of regeneration have been seen in nearly every outcome, though we recognise that intergenerational progress has not really resulted so far. There is more commentary on each of these in section 3.3.9 onwards. Key to this transformation has, as I said, been the focus on spiritual practices. Ministers have been held accountable for developing a “Rule of Life”, and each year the Path of Renewal has dwelt with God’s Word. One of the passages used was Ephesians 3:14-4:13, which we’ve already heard some of.

In Ephesians 4 we then find a pointer to other key areas of learning.

“But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” *Ephesians 4:7, 11-13*

The renewal of God’s Church occurs when we allow God to renew the whole body of Christ, all the saints with all their gifts from Christ. This is something received as a whole body, with others, together. So collegial working has been key at all levels.

Amongst the Ministers taking part, learning communities were formed geographically, facilitated by mentors. These have built up supportive relationships where ideas could be freely expressed and developed, and participants have also recognised the value of supportive accountability to colleagues and mentors.

Within congregations, teams have grown and evolved in many different ways, and have offered space for people to explore and express their faith. As part of that process, another key learning point has been the value of intentional investment in a few people at any time.

Those who grow through such focus are then enabled to offer similar time, energy and support to others in their faith journeys.

While the first tranche in particular had a major focus on the training and development of ordained ministers, it has been hugely encouraging to see two congregations, whose ministers moved on, continue on their paths of renewal within the movement.

And that demonstrates yet again that local leadership is crucial. But we are aware that often we are still not enabling the gifts of all generations within the body of Christ. So the Panel (as its parting gift to the Church) has commissioned research on what factors are at work in communities within the Kirk and beyond, where leadership of those aged 40 and under is being enabled.

But research, reports, even General Assembly deliverances, are not what will bring transformation, renewal and regeneration to the Church, locally or nationally. What the Panel on Review & Reform has said repeatedly since its formation in 2004 is that ongoing reformation is needed in this Reformed Kirk, and that comes with a change in culture. We need to have a culture that supports innovators, that encourages experimentation, that

gives permission to venture on new paths for which there is no map. Plenty of others are saying that this week too.

And ultimately, such experimentation needs a culture of trust. We need to trust each other, working together within and beyond congregations, with support and accountability – surely not beyond a Presbyterian church?

And we need to trust God – who calls us to follow. God, the breadth and length and height and depth of whose love we glimpse and are asked to share. God, whose liberating Spirit gives gifts to build up the body of Christ.

None of this has ever just been the remit of the Panel on Review & Reform – and responding to the call to listen to God and to follow Jesus will do more than any Assembly committee, report or deliverance ever can. We know there's lots bubbling up out in the Kirk, there are stories to share, lessons to learn, and God is at work. We've already heard that and will continue to hear that all this week.

One route for you to consider is a proposed third tranche of Path of Renewal, to be overseen by the Joint Emerging Church Group alongside other growth and renewal activity – recruiting from now, it might be a path for your congregation.

But however we do it, now it's over to each of us to create time & space to listen to God, to follow Jesus, and to let the Holy Spirit guide us onto new paths.

Moderator, as I am not a Commissioner, I invite the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.