

General Trustees Speech – General Assembly 2020

Moderator

It's been a long day and there's still more to come. I'll try to be as short as possible and restrict myself to a few key points.

But first, I do want to take this opportunity to thank congregational and presbytery fabric teams for their dedication, and in many cases perseverance, for looking after church buildings and land particularly over the last 6 months during the coronavirus pandemic and then the not inconsiderable challenge of undertaking the risk assessments required before churches could be opened up for worship. (Slide 1) A majority of places of worship are either open (albeit in a strange way - if someone had told you that you would have to book your Sunday seat...) or are about to be open. Some will not ever open. So I hope the General Assembly will join me in thanking them for this quiet, sometimes frustrating, but important ministry. I would also like to thank the working group, which includes several Trustees and an advisory member, for providing the guidance for opening up churches. And to thank our colleagues at CoSIS for their support and Presbyteries for the hard work in identifying which buildings are open/reopening/closed. The data will have wide benefits including for the Faith Action Plan. (Stop slide 1)

It is normal for me at this point to thank retiring Trustees and welcome new ones but that was included in the Commission of Assembly earlier. However, I do want to thank the staff of the Trustees who, like others, have taken over their kitchen table or their spare bedroom to keep business going and indeed to develop our policy work. It's not been easy, but they have risen to the challenge.

There have been changes in our staff with more to come. We were shocked and saddened by the untimely death of one of our Safe Buildings team - Andy Barnett. I know that many people across the church will want to join the Trustees in wishing Keith Mason a long and happy retirement after 11 years as Deputy Secretary. And many of you will have noticed that yesterday was the closing date for applications for our new Chief Executive. David Robertson, our current Secretary, is retiring next year and we will have the opportunity to thank him at next year's Assembly. We are also improving our own governance as the Trustees move into our centenary year. Thus numbers 4 & 5 of our deliverance.

Moderator

I want to turn to the major part of our report. Last year the Assembly agreed that we should consult on our plan for 'Well equipped spaces in the right places'. (Slide 2) We were very pleased with the response and wish to thank all those that took part. It has given us a strong base upon which to develop the plan. The deliverances today were prepared for May, and we thought that we should continue to develop the plan in the hope that the Assembly might still back us! Maybe we are asking for forgiveness as well as affirmation. (Stop slide 2)

I would like to make three points which are the core of our report and deliverances. All are about the growth of the church as an instrument of God's kingdom. Our land and buildings are important tools to be used, although sometimes it feels that they can get in the way of building that kingdom!

Moderator, you are on record for saying that the last 6 months have challenged our approach to buildings. You have suggested that the Kirk's 'dependency on church buildings could be permanently broken by the Covid 19 lockdown'. Online worship has changed the future. As you have articulated so clearly - 'our primary concern is for living breathing Christian Communities of today and how these communities are operating in the real world'. The General Trustees response is - what kind of physical resources does the Kirk need to achieve that?

I have 3 points - good Presbyterian - and they all start with the letter P

1. The first is actually two Ps together - **Pruning and Planting**. You've heard me say this before and I will continue to say it. Jesus talks about pruning the vine to bear more fruit. Gardeners know it. We know that it has to happen. We have too many buildings, and they are not necessarily in the right place or are the most welcoming. There are some that we all know that are within a stone's throw from each other - and none of them full. Is that a sensible use of resources? We spend too much money and time on keeping the estate going. In many cases our buildings are locked in the past - as relevant to the needs of tomorrow's Christian Communities as the surgery of Dr Finlay's Casebook is to the modern NHS. But pruning alone is not enough. We need to plant new seeds - but they will not necessarily be the same as the old plants. The new bases for living, breathing Christian communities might be a house, or a shop or effectively a community centre like St Madoes in Perthshire. Or maybe that our Christian community shares or rents space with others - another denomination or another community group.

But let me deal with an issue that's concerning many people - what we do with the

buildings that the Kirk no longer needs. As an architect I understand why people are emotionally attached to buildings - particularly church buildings. These are places where rites of passage - baptisms, weddings, funerals, remembrance take place. Many of our buildings are of significance not only to congregations but to the wider community. They may be listed - the Kirk owns more listed buildings than any other organisation in Scotland. So we can't just ignore the significance - individually or collectively - of these buildings. While we need to reduce the size of the estate, we have a duty to ensure that these buildings are dealt with sensitively. Some have deteriorated to the point that they have to be demolished and the land used for redevelopment - perhaps for social housing. Many small buildings can be converted to good homes. But many, both small and large, can make good community facilities like the B listed church in Glasgow - now the Pyramid in Anderston - being reborn as a community centre. And we have to discern a future for some of our main historic churches, like Brechin Cathedral, where the presbytery plan is to dissolve the congregation at which point the responsibility for management passes to the the General Trustees. We are are developing a long-term plan for the Cathedral with the Presbytery, Historic Environment Scotland and other authorities to ensure that the building can still meet the interests of the wider community, while allowing the new Brechin congregation to concentrate on developing as a living, breathing Christian Community. We will be helped in this process by the integration with the Trustees of the functions of what was CARTA.

2. My second P is for **Planning**. We help living, breathing Christian communities by working with and supporting Presbyteries. Presbyteries are responsible for pruning and planting and making the hard decisions about buildings. Not the General Trustees. What we can do is to support Presbyteries as they make these decisions. Primarily we believe that without strong and properly professionally resourced Presbyteries, any proposals for change cannot be achieved. So while we welcome Presbytery reform, it needs to ensure that each Presbytery has the professional skills and expertise available to it. But for Covid, the Presbyteries in the North East and ourselves would have appointed a full-time Buildings Officer who would support both the planning process and local congregations with the management of their buildings. That pilot is still planned.

So what are we doing to support Presbyteries in their Planning? We've been testing out ideas with a number of Presbyteries including the new Aberdeen and Shetland presbytery as it prepared its new Plan. The lessons from this are helping to produce a 'toolkit' for Presbyteries along with Faith Nurture Forum (and with advice from some Presbytery clerks) to use when Presbyteries are making their assessment about land

and buildings in relation to the Presbytery's mission plan, sitting alongside the human, financial and digital resources to deliver that mission plan. The first edition of the Toolkit will be available in early November, including advice on minimum standards, location and managing surplus buildings. More guidance will follow next year.

We also want to ensure that future building development is tied to the Presbytery's clear missional plan. And thus, we are tightening up the approval process and our grant and loan schemes. We are asking Presbyteries to seriously assess the need for the building work.

3. The third P is for **Partnering**. I've already mentioned partnering with other denominations and Community groups. But how much partnering can we do within the Kirk? We are a Presbyterian church, not a collection of Congregational churches. We believe in supporting one another. Some of us have accumulated more wealth than others. Much of it has been inherited from previous pruning and selling off surplus churches and manses - not something we have created ourselves. The opportunity exists for sharing our good fortune with other congregations with less resources.

Can I finish with one example? St Rollox is one of the Kirk's most recent buildings. It had to be relocated to make way for a new road. It was therefore funded through a Compulsory Purchase Order. But that didn't pay for the furnishings. The congregation is a vital one in its locality - perhaps one of the most mixed, living, breathing Christian Communities in the city. But when most of your congregation is made up of asylum seekers you don't have much cash. An appeal within Glasgow Presbytery produced the funds. Thank you to these congregations who were willing to share their good fortune. An inspiration for the future?

As I am not a commissioner, I ask the Principal Clerk to move the report and deliverance.