

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

5. Tuesday 21 May: morning

Following worship and announcements by the business convenor, the Very Revd Dr Russell Barr, convenor of the Selection Committee, invited commissioners to submit nominations for the new trustee body that will oversee the work of councils, superseding the current Council of Assembly. He said the committee will bear in mind gender balance, age profile and geographical spread – it wants to cast the net wide. Nominations are required by close of play today in order that commissioners have sight of all the names 24 hours before the committee presents them on Friday.

Yesterday, the Assembly agreed to a far-reaching shake-up of structures and governance within the Church of Scotland at all levels. Today, it was asked to consider the Radical Action Plan that last year's commissioners demanded from the Council of Assembly.

The Council of Assembly Convenor, Ms Sally Bonnar said that "in following Jesus we need to think about how we can bring the message of the Gospel effectively to the generation in which we live and what shape the Church should take in order to do this."

The plan being brought to the Assembly was not, she said, the "finished article", and the convenor said the Council would be delighted "if the Assembly can improve on the work". Its aim was to free up resources of time, talent and finance with which to enable local congregations to fulfil their mission. It was also a plan that should be seen alongside complementary proposals from yesterday's Special Commission and tomorrow's report from the General Trustees.

The making of the plan had been a collaborative process, involving groups of presbytery representatives and a specially formed Reference Group that worked with the Council over a period of six months. The result, said the convenor, is not a strategy but "very deliberately a series of 17 actions", which the council believes can begin to address some of the very real and pressing challenges the Church faces. They include a proposal to introduce new regional presbytery structures, reducing the number of presbyteries from 43 across Scotland to around 12.

Throughout the plan there is an emphasis on devolving, where possible, both resources and responsibility to a local or regional level. Ms Bonnar said that despite the fact that over 80 per cent of the Church's financial income returns to the local church, "there is still a perception that the centre holds on to too much when it should be the servant of the local."

The successful *Go For It* fund, which has supported many local projects since 2012, will be incorporated and expanded into a Growth Fund, designed to allow substantial funding to be made available locally for mission, community engagement, church planting and working with young people. Other proposed regulations focus on planting new worshipping communities and work with the under 40s.

Changes have been proposed to the vacancy allowance, which is paid over increasingly long periods of vacancy and which currently costs the Church around £3 million per year. The plan suggests that presbyteries will be given responsibility to coordinate the best ways to use the money, determining the most effective form of ministry in any given context.

The convenor said that the council had been told “time and again” that there is no “one size fits all” approach. New models of Church are about being flexible.

Alongside “flexibility”, the other key words in her speech were “collaboration” and “trust” – all of which will be required to achieve the plan’s goals. “Trust”, she said, “will be of foundational importance. We are not them and us. . . only us together”. All of which, she concluded, must be undergirded by prayer – and the Council calls on the Church to pray, and for a season of prayer that will focus on the outworking of the plan across the Church.

A Youth delegate asked how many people on the Reference Group were 40 and under? The convenor “guesstimated” that four out of a group of 12 would have been under 40. Mr Peter Kershaw asked about the costs involved in establishing a new presbytery structure. The convenor was not able to give any exact costs at this time.

A presbytery clerk asked if the new growth Fund was committed to supporting work equally across the country, including in rural areas. It is. A youth delegate asked if there are sufficient funds available to work with under-40s – and shouldn’t there be new targeted resources produced in what she called “this time of crisis”. The Convenor replied that the Church needs to establish what resources are already available – there is a lack of clarity, she said.

The Revd Dr James Jack asked where the money will come from for the Growth Fund. The convenor said some of it will come from funds that previously have been restricted for particular uses; she also said that over recent years, the reserves of the Church have grown considerably and should be used for mission, rather than continuing simply to build up the reserves.

Did the Council have a clear vision of what the Church would look like in a number of years’ time, asked one commissioner? Ms Bonnar replied that the Council had deliberately not engaged in a visioning exercise – partly through lack of time. She felt the words of Jesus, “Follow me”, is vision enough at present, and the council was keen to bring ideas for moving forward.

Turning to the deliverance, the Revd Michael Goss thanked the council for producing a plan which, he admitted, he didn't think there would be time to bring to this year's Assembly. Following a reassurance from the council that it would be learn from the successes of the Go For It fund when setting up the Growth Fund, commissioners then discussed the proposal for reducing the number of presbyteries in Scotland. (Nothing is proposed for the presbyteries firth of Scotland, the convenor confirmed.) The Revd James Stewart described a culture of mission and excitement in areas of the Church of England – "let's not keep doing what we're doing in presbytery", he pleaded, "but let's do something new and exciting that aims at change". Mr Peter Kershaw said that the Church shouldn't set a target of 12 presbyteries just yet – and proposed an amendment that asked for a "reduced number" instead. The Very Revd John Christie (another presbytery clerk – they were declaring their presence left, right, and centre) opposed the amendment, saying that the proposal for "around 12 presbyteries" offers enough "wiggle room" for those working on this initiative, and adding that the need for such a reduction has been on the agenda for a long time. Opposing the amendment, the convenor said "we need real targets if we're going to make real change". On a vote, the Assembly agreed.

The Revd Dr Martin Fair wanted the same sense of urgency that is in the air this week to be applied to the reduction in a number of presbyteries and, putting forward an amendment, asked for a deadline of 2024 for this process to be brought forward to 2021. The Principal Clerk advised that if presbyteries are to find a way to unite organically, given that they also have to bring their request for union to General Assembly, this would require more time. An elder with experience of managing change cited issues raised by the merging of police forces in Scotland, and suggested that an incremental approach of merger would be more fruitful, allowing "more space to learn". Speaking from experience in Fife, where three presbyteries have already been talking with each other, another commissioner warned against bypassing taking the time to build trust between presbyteries that wish to merge; but the Revd Gordon Strang, representing a small presbytery, which – he said – simply can't function, felt that the Church can't afford to move gently.

Closing the debate, the convenor reiterated the council's desire for a ground-up process rather than an imposed one, which – she said – takes time. On a vote, Dr Fair's amendment fell, but an amendment was later added to request changes by 2024 "or sooner", if possible.

Speaking for Ecumenical Relations, the Revd Sandy Horsburgh, asked the council to consider establishing new presbytery boundaries to align with the administrative boundaries of other Church denominations – from his experience, this can be a catalyst for mission. Other questions were asked about the impact of the presbyteral changes on the Barrier Act, and on comparable changes in the size of the Assembly. After a minister to the deaf community in some 17 presbyteries asked if a

reduction in the number of presbyteries would make her life easier, the Assembly broke for half an hour.

Returning, a commissioner asked if the question of tenure will be opened up to allow flexibility for ministry across areas when re-shaping the structures for mission. The convenor replied that this is a large piece of work that the council had recognised but not had time to consider. The issue will also come up in the Ministries Council. Turning to the size and responsibilities of Kirk Sessions, the Revd Thomas Macintyre said that in Shetland the churches there are moving towards having a single kirk session to cover the six congregations; they are planning to draw the money together and redistribute to the local communities in a ratio of 25 per cent for building maintenance and 75 per cent for mission. Mr Macintyre said this was their own “wee radical plan”; commissioners were glad to hear about it. The Revd Alisa McDonald brought an amendment asking the council to re-examine “what territorial ministry means within today’s context”. Is it still appropriate for modern day Scotland, she asked. Territorial boundaries, she said, can mean that parishes butt up against each other rather than working together, becoming inward looking. Now is the time to re-imagine a pastoral and missionary commitment to the people of Scotland. Another commissioner pointed out that in 2010, a special commission on the third Article Declaratory, which enshrines “territorial ministry” in the Kirk’s law and vision, had already re-defined territorial ministry in more missional terms. However, the convenor accepted the amendment and indicated that this work could be taken to the planned new research facility of the Church.

The Revd Stewart Cutler was worried that the only mention of ecumenism in the Radical Plan was so that the Church of Scotland could somehow fulfil its territorial ministry. The Church of Scotland is not the only player in the game, he said. Following this up, the Revd John Bremner, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Officer for the United Reformed Church in Scotland, spoke about Carlisle, where *real* working together is taking place; and he urged co-operation with ecumenical partners who, he said, stand ready to work with the Church of Scotland in proclaiming the gospel of Christ. The Moderator responded by apologising if any suggestion had been given that the Kirk doesn’t value what its ecumenical partners bring to the table.

Turning to the proposal to focus on engaging those aged 40 and under, one minister spoke of his ministry with a congregation, which includes many under-40s. The congregation grew out of a new charge development in Aberdeen, and he encouraged commissioners to embrace new, untried, different ways of creating Christian communities. “The green shoots are already there”, he said. Another minister said that if the Church hasn’t won children by the times they reach their teens, it’s too late. The Revd Doug Gay felt that the report of the Council was light on training youth workers.

Another commissioner said that young people didn't trust any organisations run by millennials and those older – and the Church is included in that.

An army chaplain said that all the people under his care are under 40 – the very people that the Church of Scotland wishes to draw into its congregations. But it's not all about getting them into the Church, said Dr Alison Elliot; we need to work with young people outwith congregations, for example those living with poverty and the effects of family breakdown. The Revd Lynn Brady said that she has never seen poverty like she has in the parish where she is currently working – but she spoke of thousands of meals given to children during a holiday club last year. She said: "I don't know whether we'll ever get those thirty children into church but I know they'll have seen the practical love of Jesus."

With much still to discuss on the Radical Plan, commissioners broke for lunch.