

Presbytery of Edinburgh Deployment of Resources Presentation

Moderator,

I am grateful for this opportunity to share with Presbytery some of the thinking within the Deployment of Resources Committee as we address current challenges, plan for the future and manage change. It is said that change happens at four inter-related levels:

Intellectual level – presented with facts and figures our understanding changes;

Attitudinal level – as a result of information and experience we change our views;

Behavioural level – as a result of the above we change the way the way we live;

And finally at the **Structural level** - when systems and structures reinforce that change so that it becomes the norm.

Moderator, one of the main responsibilities of the Committee in recent years has been the implementation and review of the Presbytery Plan. This came to us as an instruction of the General Assembly and proved problematic, taking up much of the time of the Committee and Presbytery and straining relations with the National Committee. The Committee now believes that the Plan is in need of radical review and we need to do so because the Plan was, in a sense, imposed on us at a structural level without the necessary intellectual and theological reflection, and the vital attitudinal and behavioural change which would enable Presbytery and our congregations to understand and 'own' the Plan and the process it sets in motion.

The Committee believes in the need to plan, not to commit ourselves to some fixed future rationalisation of our congregations and our resources, but to establish principles and strategies through which we may, with the grace of God, reshape and renew the local church.

Two years ago the General Assembly adopted a vision statement for the Church, and this is it:

The vision of the Church of Scotland is: To be a Church which seeks to inspire the people of Scotland and beyond with the Good News of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic, worshipping, witnessing, nurturing and serving communities.

This vision places the congregation, the local Christian community, in the forefront of the Church's witness because it is one of the places, perhaps the most significant place, where the Church engages with the world. The primary role, therefore of Presbytery, and certainly of the Deployment of Resources Committee, is to ensure the health and vitality of congregations so that they are fit for purpose. The Vision Statement identifies key characteristics of the local church- enthusiastic, worshipping, witnessing, nurturing, serving, communities.

A quotation for you to consider:

God's truth is credible to the world only when it sees a community shaped by the truth. If the Gospel is to be heard it must also be seen. (Hauerwas)

This quotation reinforces the insight contained in the Church's Vision Statement about the inseparability of the local church and mission.

We believe in the God of Community and that our relationships should reflect the love of the God of the Trinity. We believe that Jesus placed a new emphasis on the family-like nature of the relationship between God and the people, gathering around himself disciples and followers, women and men, a new community of believers in which the bonds of faith were stronger than blood relations. We know that this new community gathered together for fellowship, teaching, prayer and for the breaking of bread. (*Acts 2: 46-47*)

We know that the Apostle Paul spoke of the Church as family (Galatians 3:26-28), that believers were as interconnected as parts of the human body (1 Corinthians 12:12-13) and shared an intimacy that enabled them to truly care for and minister to one another (1 Timothy 5:1-2). We know that this radical common life was such a powerful witness that it transformed lives and the known world.

Two more quotations to ponder:

There is church because there is mission not vice versa. (Bosch, 1991)

Our 21st C context, in the midst of an increasingly aggressive secular culture, means that we have to ask those two fundamental questions: What is the Church and what is the Church for? There are many complex ways of answering these simple questions. In this presentation I am focusing on the Church as the local community of believers and the understanding that the central task of the Church is expressed in mission.

It is not the church that has a mission in the world but the God of mission who has a church in the world. (Dearborn, 1998)

Both Church and Mission are called into being by the love of God. It is God's desire for relationship that gathers together the community of believers and that lies behind God's activity in the world: creating, sustaining, healing, forgiving, blessing, reconciling, comforting, challenging, saving, liberating – and we are called as the Church to be part of that transforming activity, we are called to join God's mission in the world, we do not ask God to join ours. Therefore it can be said that:

The Church is both an instrument and a sign, it is not just a means to a missionary end. It is an end in itself but not for itself. It is an end for others. (R & J Banks, 1998)

I have served as convener for 18 months and during this time I have gained an overview of the health of congregations within Presbytery. There are many faithful folk worshipping, witnessing, nurturing and serving together in their communities but I have also been surprised and saddened by the number of congregations struggling to survive. They are on the frontline of decline and decay.

Presbytery statistics reveal the extent of that decline – Edinburgh 48%. They also reveal that no congregation and no area of our city is experiencing growth in membership, nowhere are numbers even stable. During this same period the average size of a congregation has decreased by 42% which means that congregations are dependent on an increasingly smaller and ageing pool of members to draw upon for leadership. Thus many congregations lack the 'critical mass' of younger members with the energy, time and talents not just to keep the show on the road but 'to witness to the activity of God in the world'. The people who were the driving forces in our congregations 20, 30, 40 years ago still are and the strain is telling. The consolation that 'it will see me out' is not an option nor indeed will it hold true.

Demographics also impact on our finances. The chart shows church giving relative to the age profile within an average congregation. Note the peak of Christian liberality in the 60-75 age group. This is a blessed generation who have given so much of their time, talents and money to the work of the Church. They have benefitted from the economic and property boom of the last 20 years. Now take a look at the next generation, the 35-50 age group, far fewer in number with a corresponding decline in giving and who now face the prospect of recession, negative equity and the threat of unemployment.

If a national institution like the Bank of Scotland can have the life squeezed out of it by financial pressures, what makes any of us believe that this is not also crunch time for the Church?

Disquiet has already been expressed on the floor of Presbytery about the vast sums being spent on our buildings. Over recent years we have committed tens of millions of pounds on the upkeep and maintenance of our churches few of which are full or were ever full, some, like my own, occupied by a decimated remnant of a once large congregation. Some of our smaller, supposedly weaker congregations may inhabit the most necessary buildings, far from other places of worship and vital community resources. Other congregations may thrive if the burden of the upkeep of a building was removed. Fewer and fewer people cannot indefinitely maintain the current number of buildings; doing so drains finances, dominates congregational meetings and diverts the gifts of Christian people from sharing the Gospel into property management. Theologically, economically, morally this cannot go on and deep in our hearts we know it.

Moderator, I wondered if there was a biblical narrative, a story of faith which would speak to our context today and from which we might draw inspiration.

Those of us who follow the lectionary have, in recent weeks journeyed with Moses and the People of Israel from slavery in Egypt to stand on the borders of the Promised Land. There is a part of this epic tale told in Numbers 13 and 14 which I would suggest speaks to our situation and from which we can draw lessons.

The People of Israel had finally reached the borders of the Promised Land but the land of Canaan was already occupied so Moses sent out a small band of spies on a reconnaissance mission. What was the Promised Land like, was the land fertile? Were the towns un-walled or fortified? Were the inhabitants weak or strong? Forty days later the spies returned and only one, Caleb, was up for it, only he believed the land was there for the taking. The other spies caused alarm among the People of Israel saying, 'The land is a broken promised land that devours its people... and its people are bigger than us!' The Israelites became fearful and anxious and up went that now familiar cry, 'We would be better off back in Egypt'. But the Lord would not let them go back instead for a generation the People of Israel wandered in the wilderness within touching distance of the Promised Land.

And why did the Lord do this? Was it to allow time to build up their strength and courage? Was it to build up a sense of expectation and hope? Was it to increase their faith and conviction? No – it was to let that generation of faint-hearts die off so that a new generation could make a new beginning in a new land.

Moderator, the landscape before us today is like nothing we have ever seen, our maps are outdated and of little use, familiar landmarks by which we could navigate have been torn down or fallen into disrepair. For a generation or more we have consoled ourselves with nostalgic tales of the good old days, as numbers have dwindled, as influence has waned, as elements within secular society have become more arrogant and ignorant, as the world has continued to change around us.

As a national Church Representative of the Christian Faith of the Scottish People The Church of Scotland Acknowledges its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry' (Third Article Declaratory, 1929)

The Third Article Declaratory belongs to another time and another Scotland. Our nation has changed, in many regards for the better, with tolerance, pluralism and accountability today's watchwords. The Church of Scotland can no longer claim special rights and privileges, We have to earn respect, we have to forge alliances and partnerships with other Christians, with other faiths and with other interest groups.

There is no going back to Egypt. Christ continues to invite us: 'Follow me!' Christ calls us not to be map readers, there is no holy satnav that will show us the way. We are called to be disciples and adventurers for Christ with Christ for the sake of the world.

The key resource which my committee dearly wishes to deploy or to re-deploy is not ministers, nor finance, nor buildings, but the People of God who gather in our congregations. As Presbytery we cannot ask congregations to work together, to form partnerships, to collaborate and co-ordinate their activities, if we as Presbytery and its committees are not also doing so, working to the same agenda rather than functioning like regional branches of parent boards in 121. The agenda of Presbytery and of all its committees should be directed towards building up the People of God and resourcing our front-line, our network of mission-shaped, sustainable congregations.

Time will not stand still while we undertake our review of the Presbytery Plan decisions will need to be made, hard decisions and we will make them. We do not have a blueprint but I hope this presentation gives some indication of the Committee's approach over the coming year and of our determination to act sensitively but decisively.

No one among us tonight should be content to manage decline when we have the faith and the vision to be change-makers. As elders, parish workers and ministers, in Presbytery and in our Kirk Sessions we must lead our congregations to a new beginning, and then equip and resource them to be adventurers so that we can be more meaningfully the Church and more effectively witness to the activity of God in the world.

Peter Macdonald

Convener, Deployment of Resources. (4 November 2008)