

Presbytery Planning 20/20 Vision

A report presented by Reverend Euan Glen at the December meeting of Presbytery about a November conference on the financial position of the Church of Scotland and how we are to make plans for the future.

Moderator

Along with around 100 delegates from each of the presbyteries of the Church I spent two days last week with representatives of the Ministries Council at a conference entitled Presbytery Planning 20/20 vision. This as it turned out will be the first of two such conferences, the next one to be held in February just after our Presbytery meeting.

The reason was for the ministries council to consult with Presbyteries was to encourage and debate the roll of Presbytery planning to help the church out of a financial mess that it has got itself in.

It may surprise you it may not but it surprised me that the Convener of the Ministries Council admitted that until the last 2 years no one in the ministries council or its predecessors had any idea exactly how much money the Council had in way of reserves and other resources. Indeed we were told that they are still not sure of what proportion of their reserves are actually restricted and which are unrestricted funds. This situation developed over years and it has taken some time to untangle the mess and the General treasurer's department is busy working on it just now. The matter was brought to light under OSCR regulations.

Because of that the Council are to report at this coming Assembly a deficit in the region of 6.1 million pounds. This is made up of an operating deficit of and a contribution to the pension fund which is scheduled to continue for some years as agreed at a previous General Assembly.

One fact was front and central to our meeting and that was that Presbytery Planning was not about shifting resources and encouraging new ways of being church it is now about shifting resources yes but also how to plan to reduce them. Front and central to this work is the financial crisis we have got ourselves in.

Presbytery Planning was established in 2003 by an Act of the General Assembly and it was conducted almost on a basis of this is how many posts you merit based on geography and population and it is up to presbytery to decide how best to use these posts. Many of the larger Presbyteries have had to reduce their number of posts one of the Presbytery reps said his Presbytery was having to cut the number of posts by 12, cant remember if this was Hamilton Glasgow or Edinburgh and most of the cuts came about through retirement and readjustment. We had an increase given to us and our Plan reflected this increase through area group additional ministries and the like.

For us this was great and indeed the Presbytery Planning allowed across Scotland for a further 230 or so posts to be funded centrally. The problem is that at no time did the Council work out how such funding was to be met. They gave assurances that these posts would be centrally funded and yet while making these assurances they did not know exactly how many posts would be created and how they would be funded. The plans are now all in and it has become clear that the Church cannot afford these posts.

The General Secretary of the ministries council said that to balance the books that the church would have to reduce its wage bill by just over 100 posts on top of the 230 promised in the Presbytery plan agreements this would reduce the number of paid posts from the approved around 1230 to nearer 900 posts. Presbytery planning will be required to make difficult decisions in light of this grim fact.

If the church carries on as it is today and does nothing to address this situation then in 5 years time the reserves will be down to cover 6 months costs and in 7 years time will be exhausted that's by 2017.

If income increases by 1.5% above inflation it gives us another 2 years. If we reduce stipend by 1% per annum for the next 5 years it gives us a further year and if we reduce the number of charges and ministry posts by 1.5% per year it gives us another 3 years meaning that by the time I retire at 65 the church will be bust - at least paying for ministries . While you take that it let me say this is not the worst case scenario, this allows for giving to remain at level comparable to what they are today, and with a little rise in inflation over the next 10 years. We were told that much of the income of the church is based on giving's from retired people and that those who are retired now are the ones on better pensions than those who may retire in the next 10 years. It really is

that serious. Let me also state however that the church is not going to close. The Ministries Council and the consultation with presbyteries are trying to find ways of addressing this situation

So how is the church to respond to such news. This is what part two of the conference will be asked to approve and comment on before the report is sent to the General Assembly. There were suggestions as to a change in structure of the church of Scotland and this will be tied in with the Review and Reform of presbyteries which I was quite dismissive of some months ago.

There were a number of suggestions which we discussed and which the Ministries Council will take on board and reflect upon before we meet again in February.

The Future Shape of the Local Church

As part of the Planning process of the church we were asked to look at the future shape of the church. This will be different than it is today. The roll of Parish ministers was discussed at some length and it was suggested that this traditional model will have to change. There may be wider range of ministry models which will serve the church and allow the church to carry on serving the people of Scotland but not in the one church one minister one manse model we have all grown up with. Various suggestions were raised

Non stipendiary ministry in a number of forms

Bi vocational ministry which really means part time minister part time something else

Ordained local ministers which can be full or part time paid or unpaid Readers

We had one example of the range of those suggested ministries, working together serving six parishes all of the ministries being supervised by the full time paid Parish Minister.

Training would have to be changed to enable these different forms of ministries and many of those who felt called to full time ministry as we understood it today felt if they carried on in this structure they would become managers and not what God called them to be.

We also talked about finances and the debate about how congregations expect full time ministers but can't pay for them. As we know 300 congregations in the church support the other 600 congregations and at Presbytery level it was suggested that many presbyteries do not put in to the pot what they take out. It was hoped that in time each presbytery as part of planning would try to balance the income of the Presbytery to the expenditure. In one group work example given to stimulate this financial awareness we were asked to think about the possibility of a congregation not be allowed to call a minister unless they had conducted a stewardship campaign.

The presbytery of Edinburgh had taken time to make a year of mission under the banner "Unless the Lord Builds a house". This was a gathering of huge amount of information from each congregation and parish which on an average Sunday in March 2009 there were 11,000 people in church out of a city population of 450,000.

Folks the church is nearing a point of crisis, some would say we have passed it. What can be said from this conference is that it's not too late but it is unlikely that the current model of the church as we all know it will continue. But take comfort that we are addressing it now, some may think we should have done this years ago but now is the time for hard decision, now is the time for prayer and for guidance by the Holy Spirit. I for one believe that change is frightening and unsettling but is required over the next ten years. We have to open our hearts and minds to the prompting of the Spirit to listen to the consultations from presbyteries, to hear the stories from congregations and together plan for the future.

One aside when I asked if there was any point in planning for the future in light of the uncertainty of funding, I was told that Plans are necessary but they should not be cast in stone. What was agreed 5 years ago has changed because of changed circumstances and future plans should be seen in the same way.

We need to begin to send the message of change to our people now that they can prepare for change in their lifetime.

I will bring a further report to the March presbytery and I will have time to circulate it before hand as.

Moderator while I will be happy to answer any questions I do not have all the answers and neither I think at this time does the church.