

General Assembly 2024



'A FRESH VISION'

The Convener of the Church of Scotland's Faith Action Programme Leadership Team (FAPLT) has told the General Assembly that the Church needs 'a fresh vision'.

The Rev Tommy MacNeil said that the Church continues to do 'truly remarkable work' but acknowledged that it was 'in the midst of a deeply challenging and uncertain moment' as it struggles with shortages of money and ministers, and falling membership.

He said: "In our hurt and pain, we need to know Christ as our healer and restorer if we are to have any hope of having a different future."

REFORMS AND FINANCE

The Assembly Trustees were told to bring proposals that will mean the Church is breaking even financially within four years.

The motion, introduced by the Rev Scott Rennie, urged the Trustees to bring proposals to next year's Assembly which will deliver the Church of Scotland Unincorporated Entities (the national charity which includes the church's central services, Faith Action programme and CrossReach) a balanced budget by the end of 2027.

The instruction followed a report from the

Assembly Trustees which warned that, on current trends, the Church's available reserves will be exhausted by 2032.

Mr Rennie said that although the Trustees had made 'remarkable progress' so far in delivering reform, he felt the wider Church still did not appreciate the urgency of balancing the budget.

Much discussion focused on the fact, revealed in the Trustees' report, that 71% of charges in the Church do not contribute enough to cover their ministry costs, and are supported by the other 29%. Convener of the Assembly Trustees, the Rev David Cameron, said that it was 'a key illustration of the challenge we face as a Church'.

Mr Cameron said that the majority of the reforms instructed from 2019 had now been delivered, with new presbyteries in place and initial savings targets met at the National Office. However, he said that 'we have a way to go, because the hard truth is that limited resources are becoming ever scarcer'.

The Rev Christopher Rowe, minister in a Priority Areas parish in Milton, Glasgow, said he feared that a review of Priority Areas (the church's mission to the most deprived 5% of areas in Scotland) was a euphemism for cuts, and called for people experiencing poverty 'to be at the root of any consultations taking place'.

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“Priority to the poorest feels as though it is part of our denominational DNA,” he said. “I want to thank the 29% who support the 71%, because that includes the bottom 5%.”

However, there were also calls for the 29% who do pay for their ministries to be protected. The Very Rev Prof David Fergusson said: “Support for the poorest and most remote congregations is necessary and desirable, but it was never envisaged that this number would include 71% of our charges. The 29% are crucial to our future.”

The Assembly passed an Overture from the Presbytery of Lothian and Borders which will reduce the national church’s influence over presbytery mission plans. The rules agreed in recent years had stated that the review and development of mission plans must be approved annually by FAPLT and the General Trustees. Under the Overture, those bodies must be consulted but approval will only be needed every five years.

Another Overture from the Presbytery of Glasgow, asking for churches to be given permission to call ministers even while the Presbytery was over its allocation (due to ministers in unrestricted tenure being reluctant to move), was defeated.

The Assembly passed an amendment to the rules of the Seeds for Growth fund which will allow it to be accessed for work in existing congregations, as well as new worshipping communities.

There were also calls for the reform of the General Assembly itself after it was revealed that the estimated cost to the Church of this year’s gathering is over £800,000 (including staff costs and Commissioners’ expenses). The Rev Dr Alan Hamilton said that it could be done ‘twice as effectively at half the cost’.

The convener of the Assembly Business Committee, the Rev Michael Mair, pledged that budgets would be looked at as part of conversations about the future of the Assembly.

There were several comments on behalf of the newly-qualified ministers who have been serving as assistant ministers under special arrangements while churches have not been allowed to call during the presbytery mission planning process. Those arrangements are expected to come to an end in 2027.

One of those affected, the Rev Douglas Reid, said: “There is a great deal of anger within the cohort... who feel they may have to look at options for employment outside the Church of Scotland.”



The CrossReach Makaton Choir.

The Rev Angus Mathieson, the Presbytery and Partnership Manager, said that with nearly all the mission plans now approved, there would be enough vacancies over the next few years to match the supply of candidates, including the assistant ministers.

MINISTRY TRAINING

Significant changes to the education of ministers were agreed which will allow new ministers to qualify through an Apprenticeship Route. The Rev Tommy MacNeil told the Assembly that the proposals would ‘ensure our ministers are better equipped and prepared for the challenges of 21st century secular Scotland’, providing more routes for people into the ministry and speeding up the process from first discernment to ordination.

Initial proposals had encountered resistance among the Church’s academic providers, but were changed following discussions. The Rev Professor Alison Jack, Principal of Edinburgh’s New College, said that the University of Edinburgh was ‘deeply committed’ to working with the church to meet its needs in the 21st century.

GAZA AND PALESTINE

A young Palestinian Christian told the General Assembly of her heartbreak that she is unlikely to see the land of her ancestors.

As the Assembly discussed the sections of the FAPLT report on the situation in Gaza, Joanne Billeh, of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East, who lives in Jordan, said that her family had been forced to leave Palestine in the 1948 war.

Ms Billeh said: “The chances of me going to see the land that I spent my whole childhood hearing about are slim, which obviously breaks my heart.

“I speak on behalf of Jordanians for whom

Palestine is a place we only know from photos and stories or our ancestors.”

The Assembly passed the sections of the FAPLT Deliverance calling for prayers for peace in Gaza, to share the voices of Palestinian Christians and for the UK Government to recognise the State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel.

It added sections calling on FAPLT to ‘publicly and explicitly’ call on the UK Government to call for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza, and to stop granting export licences for weapons to Israel; and one urging them to consider restoring Church of Scotland funding for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme (EAPPI), which was withdrawn this year.

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

The Assembly Trustees are to explore how the Church conducts its external affairs work, and were invited to consider proposals for a new committee to oversee such work.

The committee, if agreed, would have responsibility for the Church’s work on social justice, ecumenical and interfaith relations, and work with international partners.

Following the reforms since 2019, the work of the former World Mission and Church and Society Councils are now overseen by FAPLT. However the Rev Peter Johnston, who moved the motion, argued: “FAPLT’s remit is too big to be able to manage this vitally important work effectively.”

SOCIAL CARE

Members of the Church were urged to lobby their MSPs about the crisis in social care in Scotland.

Debating the report of the Social Care Council (CrossReach), the Assembly agreed to ‘express alarm about the cuts to vital care services being experienced by CrossReach

and other care providers in the social care sector and ask CrossReach, working with FAPLT, to raise awareness about the crisis in social care with Presbyteries and congregations and to make representations to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government’.

Convener, the Rev Thom Riddell, said: ‘If we don’t do something about (social care) the whole system is going to collapse’.

The Assembly also approved calls for further work on the issue of fair work in social care. The campaign highlights that average pay in the sector is considerably lower than equivalent positions in the NHS, which makes recruitment and retention of staff harder for organisations like CrossReach.

TRANSGENDER PEOPLE WELCOME

The General Assembly approved, and speakers mostly welcomed, the Theological Forum’s report on Transgender People in the Church of Scotland.

The convener of the Forum, the Rev Dr Liam Fraser, said: “Despite a wide range of theological and political views being present on the Forum, we are unanimous in reaching the following conclusions. First... we believe

that transgender people should be loved, and respected, and welcomed in our congregations. It is the foundation of Christian ethics that all people are made in the image of God, and are worthy of our respect and love, and this is true of transgender people also.

“Yet second, and based on our exploration of gender in the Bible, the Forum is also unanimous in believing that transgender people should not only be welcomed into our church, but allowed to serve in our Church...

“By focussing on the importance of welcome, and the ability every Christian to be used by God for service, we believe our report offers the Church a route through a debate that has, at times, become toxic, and allows us to model a better way of engaging with issues of gender.”

The following day, FAPLT accepted an instruction to consider the implications of the recently-released Cass Review into gender identity services for under 18s.

FORCES CHAPLAINS SHORTAGE

The Assembly was warned that the shortage of Church of Scotland ministers serving as military chaplains was ‘now a big issue’.

The convener of the committee on Chaplains to HM Forces, the Rev Scott Brown, said: “The issue, and we want to be clear with the Church, is that the Church of Scotland could more or less disappear from the chaplaincies of the three Services. That would, in our view, be a disaster.”

The Assembly was also addressed by Air Vice Marshal Tim Jones, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff, who spoke of his upbringing in the Boys’ Brigade at St John’s Church, Inverkeithing, without which he said ‘I would not have gone on to do what I have done in my career’.

He said that chaplains played a ‘vital role’ in the work of the services: “Let me assure you, friends, that it would simply not be possible to navigate Service life without the ability to talk, to confide, to reflect, to laugh, to cry, or to remember. And that’s what our Service chaplains help us to do.”

DUKE OF EDINBURGH THANKS

The Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Edward, this year’s Lord High Commissioner, thanked the people of Scotland and the chaplains of the Chapel Royal for their support following the death of his mother, the late Queen

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Above: Karen McKay, the Depute Assembly Officer, made history when she became the first woman in the history of the Assembly to lead the Moderator into the Hall.

Right: A presentation was made to John Williams, who has worked on the Assembly's audio visual systems for 50 years.



Elizabeth II.

He said: "The outpouring of emotions, the demonstrations of respect, love and grief was overwhelming, and a privilege to experience and behold.

"I think I can speak for my whole family when I say we will remain forever grateful for that support...

"I was really touched and comforted by the manner in which the chaplains made us all feel behind closed doors and away from public scrutiny."

KEY MOMENTS

- The Assembly closed with the Moderator, the Rt Rev Dr Shaw Paterson, encouraging the Church to 'keep moving forward'. He told the Assembly that it had been 'a wonderful experience' being Moderator, and told the Commissioners not to become despondent as they returned to their parishes. "Keep moving forward," he said. "We don't know where God's spirit will lead us. But let's step out in faith, following the example and commandment of our saviour Jesus Christ."
- Invited to speak on the final morning of the Assembly, the Archbishop of Canterbury celebrated the growing friendship between the Churches of Scotland and England. The Most Rev Justin Welby said that the two national churches 'must be the mortar that holds together the diverse stones that so beautifully make up the United Kingdom'.
- During the discussion on the interim Joint Report of the Theological Forum and FAPLT on Assisted Dying, the Assembly heard moving testimony from Susan Pym, who saw her sister die from a rare neurological

condition.

Mrs Pym said that her sister had asked three times for help to end her life, but that she couldn't do it. "In her final hours I considered what I might do (to ease her suffering)... I couldn't do it. The final words I barely heard her whisper were 'please help me' but I couldn't do it."

"If you have walked in my shoes I know you will support my plea for the Church to (support assisted dying). If you haven't walked in my shoes I pray you never will."

- Rae Lind, national convener of the Church of Scotland Guild, revealed that over £425,000 has been raised for the Guild's partner projects over the past three years, despite losing a year to Covid-19 disruption. Mrs Lind said: "This is a remarkable achievement for Guild members, bringing a lifeline and hope to many people and following in the tradition of 137 years of service at home and abroad."
- The Assembly was played a video produced by the steering group of the Young Adults Guild, which has been rebranded Love in Fellowship and Trust (LIFT), but is still working in partnership with the Guild.
- The General Trustees accepted motions instructing them to give urgent consideration to artworks and to pipe organs in churches scheduled for closure, and to work with congregations where redundant buildings may be bought by local communities.
- During the report of the Safeguarding Committee, the Assembly passed a motion from the Rev Lynn Brady inviting the committee to 'consider its processes as relate to people who have been found not

guilty in criminal proceedings but who are subject to Safeguarding procedures'.

- The Assembly passed a new 'support for survivors of historic abuse' policy. Safeguarding convener Adam Dillon said: "This marks the culmination of many years of work in drawing together a policy for survivors of non recent abuse, and with the General Assembly's approval, our commitment to ensure that survivors' voices are heard, and that we can start to become a trauma informed organisation so that no one will ever be met with indifference or silence, again." □

**Words by Thomas Baldwin
Pictures by Andrew O'Brien for the
Church of Scotland**

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