

‘THIS IS NOT AN EASY ASK’

- Church told that progress so far will be for nothing unless reforms continue
- Cut to 600 charges, plus 60 vacancies, by 2025.
- Deficit budget of £11m agreed but losses ‘not sustainable in foreseeable future’.
- Three presbytery mergers agreed
- Disinvestment from fossil fuels companies welcomed
- Same-sex weddings in Church of Scotland a step closer
- Joint declaration with Scottish Episcopal Church



Baron Wallace of Tankerness, Moderator of the General Assembly

THE Church of Scotland must keep up its current pace of change or the sacrifices made so far will be for nothing, the 2021 General Assembly was repeatedly told.

Only the Moderator, conveners and officials were in the hall in Edinburgh for the Church's first full General Assembly in two years, while commissioners spoke and voted remotely.

They heard multiple stark warnings about the current state of the church and the urgent need for reform.

The Convener of the Assembly Trustees, the Very Rev Dr John Chalmers admitted that the reforms would cause pain throughout the Church. He said: "We are well aware

that this is not an easy ask. Every one of us is a member or minister serving in parishes that will be affected by this. We know reshaping the Church around this will involve painful decisions. But in the goodness and grace of God we trust."

The Rev Rosie Frew, Convener of the Faith Nurture Forum, said: "We are draining the resources of the Church - people, morale, finance - just to keep this broken system going. Without a radical treatment plan the Church of Scotland will not survive."

And the outgoing Moderator, the Very Rev Dr Martin Fair, spoke powerfully about there being 'work for [the Church] to do' while there were still issues such as poverty,

sectarianism, refugees, mental health problems, nuclear weapons and violence in the Holy Land, but warned that 'there will be hardly any Church left to do all of that' if it doesn't make the necessary reforms and reverse its decline in numbers.

Yet, by the end of the Assembly, the new Moderator, Baron Wallace of Tankerness, was able to say that 'significant progress' had been made. "The challenges are very real and five days of debate, deliberation and deliverances do not make them disappear," he said. "But our prayers and our hopes must be that as we emerge from this Assembly we are better equipped and better prepared to deal with them." ■

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2021: KEY DEBATES AND DECISIONS

CHURCH REFORMS

In a debate which stretched over three days, the Assembly passed a new Presbyterian Mission Plan Act which will see the number of ministry posts in the Church cut to 600, plus 60 vacancies, by 2025 – a number the Assembly was told was both financially affordable and also reflected projections for the near future, with over 35% of ministers reaching retirement age within five years.

A motion calling on the Faith Nurture Forum to bring alternative proposals, with a breakdown of predicted financial impacts, to a Commission of Assembly later this year was defeated by 374 votes to 163.

Until new Presbyterian Plans have been approved, churches will only be given permission to call a minister with the approval of both the Presbytery and the Faith Nurture Forum, and where both parties deem this to be a strategic priority. Churches already given permission to call have until December 31 for a nominee to preach, after which the Forum must be consulted before the process is allowed to continue. All new calls during this period will be on the basis of reviewable rather than unrestricted tenure.

Presbyterian reform continued with the General Assembly agreeing to three mergers, combining Edinburgh with West Lothian, Hamilton with Lanark, and six presbyteries in south west Scotland. It rejected an Overture from the Presbytery of Lewis which would have put a year's pause on the process of Presbyterian reform.

Disquiet was expressed over the proposal to delay a decision on the future of the Church's administrative offices in Edinburgh for another two years, although the Convener of the Assembly Trustees, the Very Rev Dr Chalmers, committed that no more than £100,000 would be spent on maintaining the buildings before the end of 2022. He said that nothing pained him more than the lack of progress on this issue.

FINANCE

Dr Chalmers told the Assembly that progress had been made, including reducing the costs of central administration by 30 per cent, but that it would be for nothing unless the work of reforming presbyteries and 'radical reshaping of local church' is completed.

The Assembly passed a budget with a deficit of £11m, and approved a new scheme to replace the system of Mission and Ministries allocations.

It also agreed to the establishment of a new Pioneer Mission Fund to support local church growth, with a particular emphasis on church planting and the establishment of new worshipping communities. Proposed by the Rev Christopher Rowe, this is intended to partly fill the gap created by the suspension of the Growth Fund following the pandemic. While Mr Rowe suggested the fund would be supported by 'individuals, businesses and outside bodies', Dr Chalmers announced that the Church was likely to be able to use some money from unrestricted legacies as 'seed' funding.

The Trustees' proposal for a National Giving Day during harvest season this year was supported, although some commissioners were concerned that it might clash with local harvest appeals, or that it might not coincide with harvest locally. Dr Chalmers said that it had never been the intention to fix a specific date.

A section of deliverance encouraging Presbyteries to use their discretionary funds to help struggling churches meet their Mission and Ministry contributions was resisted by some commissioners, who argued that the central church should not be seeking to influence decisions on that money, and that it could mean money being taken away from other projects. However, Dr Chalmers said: "If you don't have some urgent and imaginative ongoing project that needs to be supported, remember that your national Church and congregations across the Church need to be supported as well."

FOSSIL FUELS DISINVESTMENT

The General Assembly welcomed the fact that the Church no longer holds investments in oil and gas companies.

During the debate on the report into the Faith Impact Forum, the Assembly also gave thanks for the 'passion of the young people' in the Church who have campaigned for disinvestment from fossil fuels, and welcomed the agreement that 'in principle' no future investments would be held in fossil fuels companies unless those companies'

strategies align with efforts to keep global heating below 1.5 degC.

A number of proposed amendments from David Laing, an elder from the Presbytery of Kincardine and Deeside, to remove elements celebrating the disinvestment in principle were all defeated, although each attracted over 100 votes. Mr Laing pointed out that the disinvestment had been made, according to the Investors' Trust, for financial reasons, that it was contrary to decisions of previous General Assemblies which had voted against disinvestment, and that welcoming the move was divisive.

He also said that in disinvesting from fossil fuels companies the Church had lost leverage as a shareholder in those companies. However, Faith Impact Convener the Very Rev Dr Susan Brown said that that leverage had 'failed miserably' in the past.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

The solemnisation of same-sex marriages by Church of Scotland ministers is a step closer after the General Assembly voted to send draft legislation brought by the Legal Questions Committee to Presbyteries for consideration.

The proposal defeated a countermotion, which would have delayed the legislation while it was considered by the Theological Forum, by 320 votes to 211. The legislation will now be considered by Presbyteries later this year and, if a majority agree, by next year's General Assembly for final approval.

The legislation, brought in response to an instruction of a previous General Assembly, will require ministers and deacons who wish to preside over same-sex weddings to apply for approval to do so, without compelling anyone who does not wish to. Proposing that it be approved, the Rev John Purves said it was 'not a threat to anyone's strongly-held beliefs' and showed the church's 'willingness to allow our theology to grow and evolve, and to recognise and respect our differences'.

Arguing for the countermotion, Eric Smith, an elder from Falkirk, said that the legislation represented a '*de facto* change in the church's position on the definition of marriage' and that it therefore needed further thought and consideration. However, the

convener of the Theological Forum, the Rev Dr Donald MacEwan, pointed out that the Forum produced a report on the theology of same-sex relationships in 2017.

In response to concerns about the possibility of ministers facing legal action for refusing to conduct same-sex weddings, the Procurator, Laura Dunlop QC, said that the legislation had been carefully drawn up to prevent that. She added that the work had gone on for many years and 'we are all discussed out'.

SAINT ANDREW DECLARATION

During the report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, the Assembly agreed the Saint Andrew Declaration, in which the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church recognise each other as sharing the same faith and being 'true churches of the Gospel'. The two churches also acknowledge each other's ordained ministries and commit to respond together to 'our common calling to proclaim the reign of God to all the people of Scotland by strengthening our partnership in ministry and mission', welcoming each other's members to worship and committing to work together 'in practical and prophetic ways'.

If the Declaration is also approved by the Episcopal Church's General Synod, it will be signed later this year.

The Assembly also approved the Church of Scotland's participation in the Scottish Christian Forum, the national ecumenical body which is to replace Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS).

MORE KEY DEBATES AND DECISIONS

- Kirk Sessions were urged to take part in the training offered through the Faith Impact Forum on violence against women.
- The UK Government was urged to help ensure Covid-19 vaccines are available all over the world, and to restore the commitment



The Rev Rosie Frew, Convener of the Faith Nurture Forum

to spend 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid.

- The Convener of the Social Care Council (CrossReach), the Rev Thom Riddle, paid tribute to the 'amazing' CrossReach staff who had worked throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to support some of the people most challenged by it, 'and most importantly to make them feel loved'. He warned that the pandemic had 'exposed the cracks in a social care system where neither supported people nor the people who support them' are properly valued.
- Mabel Wallace, the National Convener of the Guild, reported that the money raised for its six partner projects for 2018-2021 had risen to £551,434, and with UN match funding for the Malawi Fruits project to £638,000.
- In paying tribute to the work of the Military Chaplains, Air Marshal Richard Knighton, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff, said that despite technological changes, people would remain vital to the UK's military capability. He said: "I cannot over-emphasise enough the role of chaplaincy... in over 30 years' experience, I have seen at any moment of need soldiers, sailors and airmen turn to their

chaplains to provide morale, camaraderie and spiritual wellbeing."

- A section was added to the Faith Nurture Forum deliverance instructing the Forum to explore the possibilities of developing a three-year Gaelic Language Plan, including a particular emphasis on Gaelic ministry and mission to young people.
- The chairman of the Pension Trustees, Graeme Caughey, said he was 'delighted' to announce that all the church's pension schemes are in surplus. "This is the gold standard... It's the news we have been waiting for and a significant milestone," he said. "The positive impacts will endure for decades."
- Following the Theological Forum's report into the place of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Church's subordinate standard, Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions are to be asked to discuss the options presented by the end of the year. The Forum will bring firm proposals to the 2022 Assembly, but has said its preferred option would be an approved book of confessions, to include the Westminster Confession alongside other confessions and creeds. ■

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN QUOTES

"I stand before you humbled and honoured and with feelings of excitement and trepidation... I am conscious of the trust you have placed in me as an elder of the Kirk to hold this office. I pray that I will be worthy of your trust."

"This week, I believe, the Assembly has demonstrated an awareness of the need for flexibility, a 'can do' rather than an 'it's never been done this way before' attitude which must surely augur well."

Baron Wallace of Tankerness, Moderator of the General Assembly (opening and closing ceremonies)

"We know there is no easy or painless way forward. But we can choose our pain: the short, sharp pain of surgery, with the prospect of recovery; or long, debilitating decline with no hope of getting better."

The Rev Rosie Frew, Convener of the Faith Nurture Forum

"The key thing is not to do with our structures but to do with our attitude. Until we get our culture right and our attitude right at every level, then tinkering with the structures will not affect very much."

The Very Rev Dr Derek Browning, Convener of the Special Commission on the Effectiveness of Presbyterian Government

"Until the last food bank in Scotland is closed... For as long as there are children growing up in Scotland whose life chances are at best 'compromised' and at worse 'ruined' because of their postcode... Until we can find more productive and humane and effective ways of dealing with those who break our laws... For as long as many of our impoverished communities continue to be awash with drugs... For as long as there are despairing people, struggling with poor mental health, having to wait months and years for suitable treatment... for as long as we continue to pollute our rivers, poison our air and fill holes in the ground with our waste - there is work for us to do..."

"But here's the problem. Unless we get our act together - and rapidly! - there's hardly going to be any church left to do it."

"I've heard it so many times that, for the



For the first time, one of the Queen's grandchildren served as Lord High Commissioner of the General Assembly. Prince William, the Earl of Strathearn (pictured with the Moderator Lord Wallace and their wives, Catherine and Rosie), told the Assembly of his affection for Scotland, the setting of happy memories including family holidays, training as a pilot in Inverness, and studying and meeting Catherine in St Andrews; but also his saddest, as he was staying at Balmoral in 1997 when he was informed that his mother had died. "Still in shock, I found sanctuary at the service in Crathie Kirk that morning, and in the dark days of grief that followed I found comfort and solace in the Scottish outdoors. As a result, the connection I feel to Scotland will always run deep."

In his closing speech, he thanked the Church for its witness and service during the Covid-19 pandemic. He said: "Over this past year local communities across the entirety of the UK have experienced a period of profound loss, challenge and change. They have found support in the values of community life that perhaps we may have previously taken for granted. These values provide us with the strength and ingenuity to adapt and meet the challenges we face, now and ahead."

Church, it's not about numbers. It absolutely will be about numbers if the numbers are so low that the Church can no longer run Crossreach or local caring services because the local church isn't there any more."

The Very Rev Dr Martin Fair, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly

"I would suggest that it is in engagement in just such Jesus-manifesto issues that discipleship blooms. It is when we get out from behind closed doors, when we are propelled out of what is safe to engage with those who are the same as us but different, and when we face too the challenges the planet faces that we are reinvigorated and discover others wanting to catch that vision."

The Very Rev Dr Susan Brown, Convener

of the Faith Impact Forum

"The Saint Andrew Declaration doesn't ignore the things that seem to make us different from each other. Some of those differences will need to be worked through or, dare I say it, simply accepted as differences we will always have..."

"What I believe we're trying to do is to encapsulate the working together that we have already achieved while also informing the communities we serve that we aren't here to compete for your loyalty, we are here to share with you our vision of a Scotland still served by the Church, with all its breadth, history and prayers for the future."

The Most Rev Mark Strange, Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church