

HMB – speech 2011

## **Introduction**

Report: pages 31-46; Deliverance: pages 46-53

The church is under stress. Our ministers feel it, our elders and deacons feel it, our congregations feel it. Two pressures operating on the Church. Pulling in opposite directions.

First, we have the pressure of the Great Commission, the command of Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations – that includes this nation of Scotland.

Second, we have the weakness of our resources – two areas – the lack of manpower and the lack of resources even to support the manpower we have. But underlying these is a greater weakness – the weakness of our spiritual life.

Which pressure will win the day?

The first pressure is telling us to believe, to obey, to launch out into the deep, to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God.

But the second pressure is telling us we live in a day of small things, we are too weak to attempt great things, our numbers are depleted, our heartlands depopulated. And the task is too great - our society too materialistic, our communities too secularised, the people too ungodly.

If we are weak, what of it? God chose the weak and the foolish things of this world to confound the mighty. The problem lies not in our weakness, but in our refusal to do what the weak must do - “Are we are weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care? Precious Saviour, still our refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.”

But are we as weak as we make out? No doubt we are facing challenging times and there are the vulnerable people who are finding the going particularly rough. But are we personally struggling in poverty? Are our people generally on the breadline? Are not our homes filled with the latest gadgets, our bookshelves full of books, our wardrobes full of clothes?

Is it possible that we are like the ancient Israel of Haggai's time to whom God said: "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?" In many ways the Church in Scotland is in ruins. It is going to require a determined effort in prayer, in work, in commitment and in the use of our resources to rebuild, and to build the kingdom of God where it does not exist at present. But is that not the very least that we can do in response to the magnificent, extravagant grace of God in Christ Jesus who gave himself totally and utterly for us?

Our people, our congregations need to be inspired and encouraged again to believe – to believe in the gospel grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to transform lives, to believe in the Church as God's appointed instrument of bringing the good news to a lost world, to believe in themselves as witnesses to that grace, and to believe that all things are possible through Christ who strengthens us!

You will see in the Report (C.3, page 33) that we have 12 vacancies in congregations authorised to call a minister, but there are only 3 students finishing their studies. There is a lack of candidates for the ministry with a zeal for frontline mission – are we ministers partly responsible? Always complaining about the stress and the pressure and how busy we are, and not speaking of the marvellous privilege of devoting ourselves fulltime to the work of the ministry of the Word? And not enthusing people, by our preaching and example, with the whole idea of mission

We have an amazing Saviour, who gave himself for the sins of the world and has told us to go into the world and to be his witnesses.

## **Report**

I am spoiled for choice when it comes to people able to speak to the Report. We have an unprecedented number of members of the Board as commissioners, we have several men from Church Extension and Redevelopment churches, and reps of presbyteries with whom we have been working – and I have asked most of them to speak about some aspect of the work – So I could sit down now!

However, as this is the last time I will address you as Chairman of the HMB, I feel I should say something about various aspects of the Report and the work of the Board – and particularly the Assembly remits.

### **Team ministries**

Our Clerk, Angus Howat, will address this in more detail, but I will say something in more general terms. As you can see on page 32, the legislation sent down to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act received virtually unanimous approval from Presbyteries. This now needs to be approved by this Assembly.

This legislation is an attempt to help provide ministry to, and regenerate, congregations in particular localities where, for various reasons, the cause may have fallen on hard times. May be rural, but also urban.

The idea is that by setting up a team we make the provision of ministry cost effective in the long run, and provide support for ministers and smaller congregations who may feel isolated.

There is one application coming to this Assembly for Team Ministry – from the Northern Presbytery, who have really got their act together on this, and are to be commended. And there are another two in the pipeline – Glasgow and Argyll, and Skye and Wester Ross.

### **Centrally supported congregations**

We are under instructions from the GA to make savings in this area and to keep the situation under review – these are congregations or works that have authorised subsidies from the HMB – Church Extension, Redevelopment etc.

From the figures on page 32, you can see that savings have been made, and that we are seeking to reduce the number of congregations on Special Arrangements and ministers on terminable appointments – of which more later.

### **Strategy and Church Planting (Vice-Chairman)**

## **Buildings Maintenance**

It is important that we look after the assets we have in our buildings, so that they can be effectively used for the work of the gospel. We are asking the GA to approve a Code of Conduct in this connection (pages 40-42), and urge that Deacons Courts and Presbyteries take these matters seriously. I am convinced that we have lost millions of pounds in the past through neglect of our buildings. Our thanks are due to Mr Iain Gill for his diligence in drawing up this Code of Conduct.

## **Congregations not meeting their commitments (p.34)**

General improvement here (C.5 and 6). And the Board has taken action in line with the legislation. We are living in difficult economic times, and as I know from my own congregation, exceptional local expenditure in any one year may throw the best intentions off track. However, it is important that we make every effort to meet our commitments, so that we are not a burden to others.

## **Church Extension and Redevelopment (C.8 and 9, ps. 34,35)**

We receive regular annual reports from these ministers, and the feedback we get is encouraging. I want to stress the need for Presbyteries, in general, to take more seriously their commitments to support these congregations.

I want to comment on two congregations in particular – those that are vacant – South Uist & Benbecula and Gairloch & Kinlochewe.

S Uist – visited recently – spent 4 days – visited the School – congregational meeting (along with another member of the Board – Donald MacKenzie), had a concert in An Caladh, and preached on Sunday.

My impressions are very positive – a small, but very committed and open group from all sorts of backgrounds – great potential for outreach in the community and building up the congregation. Needs a minister with vision and sensitivity to the culture – but an exciting challenge!

Gairloch – we have had our hopes raised and dashed several times over these past 3 years, the HMB has been involved. But I am happy to report that the HMB have just made an appointment

and the Presbytery will be making arrangements for the induction. We have appointed Alasdair Macleod (ex- Lochs) who feels a great sense of calling to Gairloch and who the Board feels has the gifts to start the work of building up the congregation again. We are delighted both for Gairloch and for Alasdair and his wife Rosemary.

**Special Arrangements** (C.10 – page 35, also Petitions – Appendices 7 and 8, p44)

Two of these congregations – East Kilbride and Lochgilphead – are petitioning for renewal. The Presbytery are asking for 5 years and 3 years respectively. The Board however are asking the Assembly to renew for 1 year only in the case of East Kilbride – and Lochgilphead for 2 years – takes us up to the date of retirement of the present minister. In both these cases consideration must be given to the method of future ministry in these areas – team ministry? The limited periods are for a reason - concentrates the mind of all concerned!

**Asian Outreach** (C.11 – page 35)

Duncan Peters will tell us about this work in more detail. I want to comment on two things.

1. Cooperation with the IMB in setting up a Joint Asian Outreach Committee – the reason is that the workers are partly under both Boards – and there is obvious overlap of expertise for oversight
2. The setting up of the City of Peace services. A change of strategy. Instead of attempting to integrate people from an Asian background right away into a Free Church congregation, the idea is to develop a work tailor-made for Asians. This will be reviewed and proposals brought to next year's Assembly.

## **SOS**

The Church is indebted to the work Finlay and Christine Mackenzie have put in over the years. We also appreciate that Finlay is concerned about the future of the work once he retires from it, and the Board and Presbytery are in discussions concerning that.

## **Fundraising (D.1 – page 37)**

The Convener of this committee, Calum Ian Macleod, will speak to this, but I want to make a brief comment. I think the exercise has been useful in raising the profile of Mission both International and National, but it is not clear that this had a noticeable effect on donations to mission. It looks as if private donations to missions came close to the £300,000 required, but Deacons Courts did not meet their commitments to support mission work.

## **Christianity Explored – see fact sheet – Robin Turton**

CE has been widely used in the Free Church as an effective tool in the mission of congregations. There is a new edition - CE3. I had only two criticisms of CE – the course was too long and the DVD was becoming dated. Both of these have been met – now 7 sessions, and the trailer looks brilliant. But the essentials have been left unchanged – the emphasis on the basics of the gospel – sin and salvation. Robin Turton will be available to talk to about it.

## **Thanks**

To all those who by their prayers, activities and financial support have contributed to the national mission of the Church;

- To all ministers, especially those in Extension, Redevelopment, AO and SOS – some of whom will speak to the Report and tell us of their work;
- To Presbytery Strategy Committees who are working hard in planning for the effective mission of the church in their areas;
- Office Staff – particularly Rod and Sharon
- Clerks – Angus Howat and Evan Macdonald (best wishes for his recovery)
- Vice chairman and members of the Board

## **Development Officer (Appendix 1, p.40)**

I wish to pay tribute to the tireless work of Neil MacMillan. Many ministers and congregations can testify to the help and encouragement he has brought them. This past year my own congregation of Buccleuch has been benefiting from his Hub training programme and are now moving on to develop a strategy for mission in our particular community. So I have seen Neil's work

at first hand, as well as discussing his work with him in general terms from time to time as his line manager. He has the gift of being able to persuade people to say “With the grace of God, yes, we can!”

Now, you will notice that he says in his very clear and concise Report that his appointment is due to finish in June next year. I believe that the work that Neil is doing is essential to the wellbeing and development of the denomination. We need to have a Mission Development Officer. We need the inspiration and encouragement he can bring, as well as the training and coaching.

I hope that the HMB will discuss this in the coming year and come with a recommendation to next Assembly to continue the post for another term. And, if he is willing to reappoint Neil MacMillan to that post. There is no one better equipped or gifted for the task.

## **Conclusion**

This is my swansong as Chairman of the HMB. A large number of members were due to come off next year, which would have badly affected continuity. So I decided to retire a year early, and pass the chairmanship into the very capable hands of our Vice-Chairman, last year’s Moderator, David Meredith (if the Assembly accepts the recommendation of the Nom. Comm.!) This will also allow fresh blood to come on to the Board.

I must say I have enjoyed my time as Chairman, and although I will be glad to be relieved of the burden of extra work, I will miss it. I will miss the meetings which have been very harmonious as we have sought the best way forward in many challenging situations. But above all I will miss visiting congregations and ministers, and I am sorry I was not able to do more of it. I think this is something that we need to develop – not only the more formal visits, but also informal ones. People have been very appreciative of the visits we have made. They feel that they are being listened to, and that we get a better understanding of the situation that confronts them.

I pray for God’s richest blessing on the new Chairman and the Board.

And I have much pleasure in presenting the Report of the HMB to the Assembly.