

**Free Church of Scotland  
General Assembly 2006**

**Moderator's Address**

**THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND SEEN FROM AFAR:  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CHANGE**

**Rev. Donald Smith  
Rector  
Lima Evangelical Seminary**

**Tuesday 23<sup>nd</sup> May 2006**

## **The Free Church of Scotland Seen from Afar: Opportunities for Constructive Change**

### **1. Change and the Need for Change.**

The Free Church of Scotland is a small organization with a long history. We have recently survived a determined challenge to our existence and find ourselves in a new situation. What opportunities are there for constructive change in our present situation?

I will attempt to answer this question from the point of view of one who has belonged to the Free Church all his life and worked for it for almost three decades. Most of this time has been spent working in a Latin-American context, and in a culture and circumstances different from those of Scotland. From this perspective we may view the Free Church from within and from afar at the same time. My aim is to help us to clarify our shared vision for our church, to encourage us to act more boldly and to challenge us to be more creative in our efforts to extend Christ's kingdom.

The prospect of change in familiar things makes us uncomfortable and even afraid. Our minds quickly fill with questions. Will we like it? What happens if it goes wrong? Do we have to do it now? What will it cost? These and similar questions make us wary of change. We dislike change and consider it dangerous. We scrutinize proposals for change very carefully before daring to admit that they may be useful. Even then we are often not keen to implement the changes. Before we can change we must convince ourselves that the benefits

will be worth having in spite of the costs. Change must be constructive in order to be worth the risks involved.

There is no improvement without change. This basic principle of administration is a matter of simple logic and common sense. If we wish to improve our part of the church the question is not whether we have to change it but only what we have to change, and how and when to change it. We must change our church if we are to improve it and to do this we must find out what has to be changed. The society in which we live is constantly changing and if we wish the Free Church to survive and flourish we must change what we do in an appropriate manner to remain relevant. If we cannot adapt to changing circumstances our church may become a curious fossil or an elegant ruin, but it will no longer be a living growing part of the church of Christ.

What is constructive change? Constructive change will improve our church. Constructive change will strengthen and not weaken our organization. Constructive change will help us to do more with the resources we have and make it easier for us to agree together about what we are trying to achieve. Constructive change will help us to find new solutions to old problems and remove obstacles which prevent us from achieving our aims.

Our past actions have constructed for us a path along which we are travelling towards the future. If we follow this path without reflection we will inevitably experience the future to which it leads. However, the future we desire to experience may be considerably different from the future we are creating for ourselves. What can we do to help get us to the future we desire? Constructive

change will help us to direct our church towards the future that we desire to experience.

How can we identify opportunities for making constructive changes in our church? In search of answers let us look briefly at our roots, at the way we do things, at the society of which we are a part and at the future for which we are heading.

## **2. A Look Back at Our Origins and Roots.**

It is unhealthy to look back if the motivation is only a desire to return to the past or conserve the past. Remember Lot's wife who became a pillar of salt because she stayed too long in a dangerous place looking back on the home she had left in Sodom. At the heart of Christian worship, in the Lord's Supper, there is a healthy looking back to remember His sacrifice on the cross, as well as a joyful looking forward to His return. Looking back to the fundamental events on which Christian faith rests helps us reaffirm our basic commitments, order our priorities and clarify our vision of the future. We may look back with great benefit if it helps us to see more clearly the way we have come and evaluate the direction which we have taken towards the future.

When we look back without reflection our minds tend to rest on some comfortable scene in our personal experience. Such scenes are usually remote from present realities and devoid of defects. Such remembering may amount to nothing more than pleasant self-indulgent fantasizing. The Lord's Supper encourages a different kind of looking back which involves reflection about the

roots and reasons of our faith. Such looking back involves connecting our present realities with the foundation events of Christianity.

In the Free Church are we able to look back beyond the favourite ideas and phrases of our own immediate teachers? Can we look back to the origins and roots of our church? Do we locate these origins in the controversies of a century ago or do we look further back to the different circumstances of the time of Chalmers and the Disruption? Can we look even further back to the times of the puritans, covenanters and reformers? Are we able to see that our branch of the church, like other branches, sprang from the great trunk of medieval Christianity with its beginnings in the church of the Roman Empire? Are we conscious of the deep roots which nourish both branches and trunk, and connect us to the church of the apostles and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?

When we look back we tend to see the things in which we are most interested, and we may see only these things. Have we taught ourselves in the Free Church to see only the differences between ourselves and other branches of the church? Are we interested also in what we have in common with them? Perhaps we knew but have forgotten that all of the branches of the church belong equally to our Lord. Have we forgotten that we are not the church but only a very small part of it?

Do we remember that Christians who differ from us are worthy of our respect and friendship because the Lord died for them also? Have we forgotten the great causes for which missionaries, covenanters, reformers, martyrs, apostles and prophets died? What great Christian causes do we fight for today?

Do we merely fight for our own organization, our liturgies, our local traditions, our funds and our buildings? Do we pray and thank God for the thousands of millions of Christians who make up the worldwide church or do we pray and thank Him only for ourselves?

What is our attitude to the past? Do we try to conserve our own immediate past, or even recreate it? What does the history of the church mean for us? Is it only the history of our own organization or does it include also the history of other Christian organizations? Do we feel that the history of other Christian organizations is also our history? Or do we reserve such words for those who say and do only the same things as we do? We are a church that belongs to the reformed tradition. Do we remember that the reformers thought of the church as continually reforming itself?

In the Free Church we employ ministers with theological training and maintain a theological college. For us a church is a building with a pulpit where a theologically trained minister directs public worship. Is this all that the church is? In many parts of the world the Christian church does not possess buildings and in Lima, Peru seventy percent of the ministers have no formal theological training. There is little mention of buildings, public worship, pulpits and formal theological training in the New Testament.

We are proud of our theology but what does this mean? The word *theology* can refer to many things. Let us take it for the moment as referring to *our knowledge of God, and the way we think and speak about Him*. With this

definition in mind we may ask if there is a distinctive Free Church knowledge of God. How do we come to know God, and think and speak about Him?

It should be clear that our knowledge of God cannot depend in any major way on the organization called the Free Church of Scotland, or on any other church organization. Our knowledge of God must surely come from our experience of Him and our relationship with Him. But even if our knowledge of God does not depend on the part of the church to which we belong our thinking and speaking about God may do so. Thinking and speaking are closely related and we cannot think clearly unless we are able to express our thoughts in words. The words we use to express our thoughts are learned, or made from other words we learned. Who taught us how to speak about God? From where do the words we use to think and talk about God come from? Does the Free Church have a distinctive way of speaking and thinking about God? Should we have?

We may admit that our knowledge of God does not depend on the Free Church and at the same time that our speaking and thinking about God may do so, as we have learned to speak and think about God from our church. We are therefore not the only people who have a relationship with God, but we may speak and think of Him in a distinctive way. Has the Free Church developed a distinctive way of speaking and thinking about God? Do we have a distinctive theology? Whether we answer yes or no, what does this imply for our activities?

Our public speech about God is conditioned by our subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>1</sup> It is the confession of our faith and we have

---

<sup>1</sup> Available from the Free Church Bookshop.

promised to assert, maintain and defend its teaching.<sup>2</sup> We must ask ourselves if we are really doing this. If we find we are not we must change the way we speak and think about God to bring them into line with what we promised.

Reflection on our subscription to the Westminster Confession suggests many questions. Do we remember that the confession was an agreed consensus of opinion, and a consensus arrived at only after years of study and debate? Do we remember that the church has continued to think and speak about God in new ways for more than three and a half centuries after the confession was written? Do we remember that the confession is only one of many that the church made through the years in different regions and circumstances? Do we remember that our confession, like all others, is only a subordinate doctrinal standard, agreed on by the church and subordinate not to the church but to the scriptures? Have we thought about confessing our faith in today's language for today's church and society? What would such a confession look like and what would we need to do to produce one?

Looking back at our origins can be a healthy exercise if it helps to connect us with our roots in the historic Christian church, correct our theology, and rethink how we use the scriptures. Looking back may also help us to see how our small part of the church fits into God's plans and actions, and to evaluate what we are attempting to achieve. Would we be interested in working towards the production of a contemporary confession of faith that included all evangelical opinions in the country as the Westminster theologians did?

---

<sup>2</sup> Part of the ordination vows for ministers.

### **3. A Look Inwards at What We Are and Do.**

Why bother to look inwards? Is it worth the effort? Self inspection is a familiar theme to many in the Free Church. In preparation for the Lord's Supper we have often examined ourselves. We must examine ourselves because it is part of our responsibility before God. Sometimes however we have done this in a way that has produced a mood of morbid introspection. But such a mood diverts our attention from our Lord to ourselves and makes it difficult to remember meaningfully His death and look forward joyfully to His coming. In understandable reaction to this kind of emphasis we may become oversensitive and disposed to avoid any kind of self evaluation.

In a General Assembly our main interest is in where we stand and how well we are doing as a church. There is a well known set of simple questions that we may use to help us focus on this. What do we see when we look into the Free Church? What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? What threatens our wellbeing? What opportunities are there for advancing our cause?

To these basic questions we may add many more. What are our secret fears? What image do we have of ourselves and how healthy is it? What are our priorities? If we are a conservative church organization what are we conserving? How good is our theology? What is our theology in practice based on? How well do we communicate with one another? How well do we work together? How efficiently do we use our resources? What roles do our ministers and other employees fulfil? Are they producing what we expect them to produce? What do

we expect from the members who volunteer their services? Are our expectations realistic and are they being fulfilled?

If the Free Church is to be improved we must know where we are and how we are doing. With this knowledge we can establish realistic goals towards which we may try to work together. We must examine not only ourselves as individuals but also our entire organization. We claim to be a part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do we know where we are in relation to His plans and priorities? Seen from afar the Free Church of Scotland has some obvious strengths and weaknesses. It also faces some serious threats and has undoubted opportunities to extend the kingdom of Christ.

Let us review some strengths of our church. Our General Assembly receives visits from important representatives of the State and some attention in the media. Our camps and conferences are attractive and successful. Our singing can be enjoyable and inspiring and our festivals of praise are unique and widely admired. We have recently produced an excellent contemporary psalm book. Our preaching and theology is centred on the scriptures. Our best preachers have acquired international reputations. We stand in a great tradition that includes men like Thomas Chalmers, Andrew Melville and John Knox who strongly influenced our nation. We have attractive and effective publications. We maintain international missions and a prestigious theological college. We maintain ministers and attractive buildings in many parts of the country. Several of our congregations are growing and provide a positive environment for new

Christians and families with children. Seen from afar these are strengths of the Free Church.

Our weaknesses include having complex laws and procedures that few people understand, and which are virtually unknown to many of our members. Our present realities seem uninspiring by comparison with past achievements. Many of our buildings are too old or too large, or unsuitable in other ways. Many of our congregations do not attract visitors and are declining in numbers. Some of our public services are inspiring but many are not. We engage in little or no cooperation with other church organizations in the common cause of Christ's kingdom. Our singing of psalms only and our exclusion of musical instruments from public worship seems odd and even bizarre to many visitors and onlookers. Most of our members are women but we have few public roles for women and in some places, none at all. Our preaching and publications often seem to be addressed only to ourselves and our own small interests. We invest most of our resources in apparently sterile causes. We seem unable or unwilling to change things that we have been grumbling about for decades. Seen from afar these are obvious weaknesses of our church.

While we remain grateful for recent relief from a serious threat to our existence, we should not be blind to the fact that there are other threats to the future of our church. Observing from a distance it seems incredible that a church organization as small as ours can maintain so many paid ministers. Many church organizations of comparable size around the world function typically with one tenth of the number of ministers we employ. We struggle to meet our financial

obligations to our ministers and have very little left to finance anything else. We seem more concerned with the quantity of ministers than with the quality of ministry.

Should the top priority for the use of the offerings of God's people be the provision of jobs for ministers? At this point we are seriously out of step with the world church and also with current administrative common sense. We may be guilty of misusing the funds that the Lord's people have trusted us with. Are we exempt from the common obligation of deploying resources in such a way as to produce measurable results? If we resist change at this point we will certainly endanger our viability. Seen from afar this poor use of resources represents a major threat we dare not ignore.

What opportunities do we have in the Free Church to further our cause? We have succeeded in organizing congregations that are attracting rather than losing people. Could we learn from them to improve the congregations that are in decline? Do we know why these are in decline? If not can we find out? Our more successful operations may point to opportunities for improving the less successful ones. Common sense points to giving higher priority and dedicating more resources to our more successful operations.

We affirm publicly that the gospel and the scriptures in general were designed to meet the needs of men and women. Are we not surrounded by people? Do we not have the God-given resources that they need? Why have we identified so few opportunities for matching the resources to the needs of the people? We have something important to say but why do we seem to say it only

in pulpits to small groups of people who have heard it often? Are there other ways and places to share our message? We do not lack opportunities. Common wisdom tells us that the opportunities are already there. The challenge is to identify them and take advantage of them. Are we afraid of applying common wisdom to our Christian testimony? Jesus was not.

#### **4. A Look Around at the Society to Which We Belong.**

The Free Church is a small organization which belongs to the Christian church. This simple description tells us, among other things, that we are an organization and that we are also part of the church. We may ask how well our organization works and how it relates to the rest of society. We may also ask how well our church relates to the rest of the church.

If we consider our church as an organization it is clear that it has many things in common with other organizations. One of the most useful things to understand about any organization is how it interacts with its environment. Some questions may help us to focus on this point. How well do we communicate with people outside our church? How well equipped are we to cope with the challenges of the society which surrounds us and to which we belong? How are we responding to the changes that are occurring in our society? How much effort are we making to adapt to these changes? What effect do they have on our church? How do we interact with the society of which we are a part and how well do we understand it? How and what are we learning from the society to which we belong? How well do our exegesis, theology and preaching take into account the context in which our members live? Can we prepare more people to speak for us

in the media, in local and national government circles and in the academic world? Does our Christian duty to our society end once we have organized services of public worship?

If we consider our church as a part of the church of Christ, a similar set of questions may be asked. How do we relate to the rest of the church? How well do we coordinate with other Christian organizations? How well do we communicate with Christians outside our church? How much effort do we make to work together with other Christian organizations in the common cause of the church? How interested are we in what goes on in other parts of the church? How well do we know and cooperate with other churches in our area? Do we attempt to present a united testimony to our society along with other churches? Do we engage with them in efforts to improve our society?

The way that organizations work has been deeply and carefully studied. We can learn a great deal from such studies. According to Peter Senge,<sup>3</sup> successful organizations learn well. There are five disciplines that must be mastered by the members of an effective learning organization. The practice of these disciplines must become normal and must be learned by each new member.

Four of the disciplines are not unfamiliar to Christians. They are: developing a shared vision, the practice of self control, the ability to work well in teams, and the ability to change mental models. Anyone who has experienced the transforming power of the gospel can readily identify with these four disciplines and many Christians are adept in their practice. The fifth discipline described by

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990.

Senge is the key to the success of any learning organization. It is the ability to visualize how the organization and its parts interact with each other and with the surrounding environment. This fifth discipline is not intuitive and does not develop naturally. It has to be learned and practiced deliberately. The five disciplines described by Senge have little to do with Christian doctrine or religion and are practiced in all successful learning organizations. They belong in the category that we often call common sense or common wisdom. How well is our church doing as a learning organization? Are we learning or have we become so rigid that we do not learn anymore? Do we provide constructive learning experiences for our new members, for our children and young people, for our married couples and for our ministers and other leaders?

If our church does not grow and is not successful in some of its activities or in some places, the causes may be spiritual and beyond our doing much about them. However, the causes of lack of success are often much more mundane. When we fail, perhaps it is because we do not do simple things well. Do we share a clear vision? Do we practice self control? Do we work well as a team? Can we change our mental models when they do not work? Do we understand the way we relate to our society and to other parts of the church?

If we are interested only in ourselves we may not be able to see when and where we are going wrong. If we maintain our connection to the historic Christian church and our respect for the authority of the scriptures we will be able to correct many errors and will have much to contribute to the society of which we are a part.

## **5. A Look at the Future: More of the Same or More of What We Really Want?**

Looking forward to the Lord's coming and to the full benefits of resurrection and eternal life is a central part of the Christian hope. We should not be averse to looking at the future. Others may close their eyes because they see nothing good ahead but a glorious future is in store for Christian believers. Planning ahead comes easily to Christians who trust in God's providence and should be an integral part of our Christian organizations.

If we do not plan for the future we will inevitably get more of what we are used to getting. The familiar present trends will continue. If we do not steer our own course we will be driven by forces external to our church, and we will end up wherever the pressures of our society take us. Is there not a better way? Can we change things now so that our future will not be just the result of trends and pressures? To get more of the same we only have to do nothing.

For Bible believing Christians there is little doubt about the mission of the church as it is clearly stated in the Great Commission and other parts of the scriptures. We have a mission and most of our members can articulate it. However, contemporary wisdom tells us that it is not enough for an organization to have a mission for it to function effectively. It must also possess an agreed vision which is shared by its people. The shared vision is what everyone is attempting to achieve. How are we doing in this department? What is our vision for the future of our church? How clearly defined is it? How well does our vision square with Christ's vision for His church? Do we possess a common vision,

shared by us all? What can we do to better clarify our vision? How can we have it shared by more of our members?

If we change nothing we will continue to operate many declining congregations and a few successful ones. If we change nothing we will continue to be unknown to most of the population of our country. If we change nothing we will continue to be thought of as quaint or eccentric by many Christians who do know us. If we change nothing we will continue to lose many of our people and will continue in virtual isolation from other Christian organizations. The future we will inevitably experience if we change nothing is hardly inspiring and may even discourage us altogether.

Can we not agree together to try to achieve something better? What would that something better look like? We have recently collected much information and had some discussion about strategy. This commendable start must be followed up until we can reach agreement about the future we wish for our church. The collection of information and the expression of opinion is not an agreed strategy. How do we get from where we are to having agreed goals that we can achieve with the resources available? What do we have to change to achieve such agreements?

## **6. Opportunities for Constructive Change**

The process of change that must occur for an organization to improve its performance has been often described. There is no longer much mystery about this. Abundant help is available to organizations that wish to improve their performance and much can be accomplished by any organization that makes

constructive changes to itself. What opportunities do we have for constructive change in our church? Many such opportunities are available, especially in the following eight areas:

(i) We have recently produced an excellent contemporary psalm book. We have made what we sing more understandable for ourselves and our visitors. We have also learned to use contemporary versions of the scriptures with similar benefits. What else can we change to improve our public worship? Are we willing to reconsider the ban on the use of musical instruments our General Assembly agreed many years ago? There is no such ban in the scriptures, and what one General Assembly agreed for good reasons a later General Assembly can modify.

(ii) The best of our preaching is very good and widely recognized. Our preaching attempts to communicate an eternal message to contemporary people. The message does not change but the way people perceive it does. Our society, our culture and our language are always changing. Is our preaching adapting to these changes and are we communicating well with our hearers? What do we need to change to preach better? If we changed the way we preach would we gain new hearers or get a better response?

(iii) We have produced contemporary newsletters, websites, magazines and DVDs. The reformers were great communicators and not only used the media well but created new ones. Can we do more creative communicating? Can we invest more personnel and funds in it? What can we change in order to communicate better? How can we communicate to new and wider audiences?

(iv) Our church is one of many churches. How well do we relate to the others? What new efforts can we make to cooperate with other churches? How much more time and effort can we invest in working together with other Christian organizations? What can we change in the way we relate to other Christian organizations that will help to extend Christ's kingdom?

(v) Our church is one of thousands of organizations that make up our society. What do we contribute to our society and how could we contribute more? What new efforts can we make to join with others to promote the common good? Which community activities can we get involved in to improve relations with our neighbours? What can we change so that we may become more helpful to others?

(vi) Our small church employs a remarkably large number of people. Do we use our personnel in the best way? Are we employing the right kinds of people? Do we train our employees effectively? Could we redesign some jobs or invent new ones to reach more people and provide more for them? Could we employ less people and still get the job done? What can we change in the way we use our personnel that would make us more effective in extending Christ's kingdom?

(vii) We own many buildings. We have houses, places of worship and other buildings, owned locally or centrally. Do we have buildings which we do not need? Are we making the best use of all the buildings we own? Are all our properties being used to advance our mission? What could we change to improve the way we use our buildings?

(viii) Our people are generous and we collect remarkably large sums of money from our members and other supporters. Do we spend this money wisely? Do we spend it in ways that the donors agree with? Do our priorities for spending the funds entrusted to us reflect the priorities of Christ for His church? What can we change to be able to use our funds more effectively?

These reflections are intended to make us think about what we may change in our church to improve our performance. There is no improvement without change, and the last question must be whether we are willing to count the cost and courageously plan for constructive change.

Thank-you for your attention.