



A people in exile, on the Way of the Cross: Ministry deployment and ongoing decline in the Church of Scotland

David Denniston



Introduction

The current ongoing review of Presbytery Plans in the Church of Scotland in order to reduce the number of ministers deployed, introduce new forms of ministry, and reshape the church around mission is being undertaken against a background of diminishing financial resources. While there are several reasons offered for undertaking this review, it is acknowledged in the reports of the Ministries Council that cutting costs is one of the factors, and it may be reasonably inferred that the need to reduce the number of full-time equivalent ministries in order to reduce expenditure and so preserve financial reserves is the primary driver of the present process.

There are several reasons for the present financial pressures and the reduction of reserves, but the reduction of financial resources goes hand in hand with the ongoing reduction in membership. And so it is necessary to set the present ‘crisis’ within the wider context of the continual decline in the membership, influence and societal relevance of the church in Scotland, as in most Western societies. This is generally and understandably regarded by most in the church as ‘a bad thing’. It is hoped by many and assumed by some that to reshape the church around a mission priority will reverse the decline. That this is also the view of the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland is strongly suggested in its reports where the phrase ‘pruning for growth’ is applied to the need for the current reshaping process. But what are the theological grounds for such a hope or expectation? Aside from



‘pruning’, are there other biblical pictures which might suggest a different view of and future for the church and its mission? Are we (consciously or unconsciously) still living with a ‘Christendom’ model of the church’s presence and mission which prevents us from embracing a different future? As people who seek to follow Jesus on the Way, and specifically on the Way of the Cross, we may need to learn to embrace fragility, seeming irrelevance and apparent failure if we are to have a future part in the purpose and mission of God.



20:20 Vision – the process of review of ministry deployment within the Church of Scotland

The report of the Ministries Council to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 2010¹ made for grim reading for many. Arising out of a deliverance of the General Assembly of 2009, the Ministries Council had been asked to ‘bring forward a report with recommendations on future policy with regard to stipends, salaries and numbers’.² The 2010 report further outlined the considerable deficit in the Ministries Council budget. While noting this and describing a scenario in which the Council’s reserves may be exhausted in a few years, the report went on to claim that the driving force behind the need to consider new patterns of ministry and deployment was not cost, but ‘an opportunity for growth in new ways’.³ It was made clear that the process of reconsidering the deployment of ministries within the Church of Scotland through a review of Presbytery planning will require a significant reduction in the number of full-time equivalent ministries deployed by the Kirk across Scotland. While the current Presbytery Plans account for 1,234 posts to be funded, the report states that ‘[a] sustainable, balanced budget figure is 1,000 full-time equivalent posts’.⁴

All of which may suggest that in spite of the assertions of the Ministries Council, the driving impetus behind the current review is in fact finance. However, in its report to the 2010 General Assembly, the Ministries Council said that this was not merely a cost-cutting exercise, but that the need to see new patterns of ministry emerge, and a church shaped around mission were key factors in the current review of plans.

Both in the report of 2010 and in the Ministries Council publication “Planning with Purpose”, it is emphasized that the current process has, as a key purpose, the reshaping of the church around the priority of mission: ‘Mission is at the heart of who we are and why we exist. Planning is a tool that can assist us with this.’⁵

All of which may find wide agreement within the church, even if for some there may remain anxieties regarding resources, uncertainties regarding the offered solutions and a suspicion that for all the brave and visionary talk, the reality is that the current process is resource driven.

However, I would argue that there are two fundamental concerns that need to be addressed (even by those who may be broadly supportive of the Ministries Council’s vision for the future shape of the Church of Scotland). The first of these is that there appears to have been little offered by way of theological ‘undergirding’ of a process which has the potential to radically alter the shape and mission of the Church of Scotland. There remains a need for a theological and biblical understanding of ‘ministry’ and ‘ordination’ from within a Reformed tradition and an exploration of how proposed new forms of ministry fit in with such an understanding along with an articulation of what we mean by ‘mission’ (although it should be noted that “Planning with Purpose” does offer a helpful but brief ‘missiological perspective’ on John 20:19–23 with questions for exploration offered around the themes of “The Way of Incarnation”, “The Way of Cross and Resurrection”, “The Way of the Spirit”, “The Way of Forgiveness” and “The Way of Life”).⁶

No matter how well presented, justified and worthy the current process and proposals may be, without a sound theological foundation the resulting edifice will be in danger of collapse.



Growth or decline?

The further disquiet does not concern only the reports of the Ministries Council, nor the current planning process, nor even the Church of Scotland. It is with regard to the failure of the church in the West to face up to and theologically engage with the decline of the church in terms of numbers, influence and social standing. The continual

reference to ‘growth’ betrays an unwillingness to accept the reality of decline.

Both the 2010 Ministries Council report to the General Assembly and the Council’s “Planning with Purpose” document speak about ‘growth’. Whether or not the intention in these documents is to suggest that numerical growth will be an outcome of the current review process is not made clear. However, the implication does seem to be that if we can reduce the number of full-time ministries deployed, introduce new patterns of ministry and reshape the church around the priority of mission then we will begin to grow. This perception is reinforced by the apparent utilisation of the biblical picture of ‘the vine’ as a descriptor of this process (assuming that the use of the phrase ‘we need to prune in order to grow’⁷ is intended as an allusion to John 15). While arguably having some appropriateness as a meaningful horticultural metaphor for the current process, the use of ‘the vine’ in John’s Gospel seems a somewhat flawed application of biblical imagery not least because in Jesus’ teaching the one who does the pruning is the vinedresser – God – and not Presbyteries or the Ministries Council!

For centuries the church in the West has been used to being powerful, respected and influential in society. It is in fact a picture of church without New Testament parallel. However, it is the reality with which most present Scottish church-goers grew up. Within the church the experience of decline is so recent and its progress so rapid that we are still struggling to come to terms with the new reality in which we are operating. For the Church of Scotland, decline is an experience that has lasted barely over fifty years. That means that the picture of a strong and dominant Church of Scotland, active in missions abroad, confident in action at home, listened to by the nation, committed to ‘Church Extension’, and engaged in widespread telling out of the Good News (e.g., the “Tell Scotland” campaign) is still part of the actual memory of the majority of our present membership.

No wonder then that it is so difficult to grasp, accept and come to terms with the story of decline that has dominated the last half-century and which now threatens to entirely marginalise the Kirk. There is the inevitable fear that to recognise the present situation and accept it would be to embrace despair or admit defeat.

However, if we acknowledge the true situation in which we find ourselves, namely that of a small and increasingly marginalised people in a post-Christendom world and post-Christian society, then we may come to accept that the church's existence is a fragile thing, and that this fragility, while new in our own nation's history, is the ongoing experience of the church in many nations throughout the world, and was the experience of the Christian community in our own lands in the time of the early mission to the peoples who would come to make up the nation of Scotland.

The church needs the courage to accept the unpleasant, unwelcome and unlooked-for truth that we are living out, holding onto and sharing our faith in a period of ongoing decline. Acknowledging this, accepting it and even embracing it may be an important first step in becoming the church that God wants and needs us to be.



Alternative biblical images

The use by the Ministries Council of the phrase 'pruning for growth' and its apparent allusion to the vine teaching in John 15 not only confuses God's action as vinedresser with the Kirk's attempts to reshape the church in a time of resource crisis; it also suggests that after the current 'pruning' we might expect growth to follow. But is this so or are we simply in denial?

If decline and 'weakness' are realities that we will have to live with, we might look to the Bible for images that may more appropriately apply to our current situation. And indeed, Scripture bears witness to the struggles, faithfulness and lack of faithfulness of God's people through times of threat and vulnerability.

In a paper delivered to a conference at Trinity College, Glasgow,⁸ Neil Glover argued that the New Testament offered us little that speaks to our current situation of decline and only a few images 'to resonate with these disconsolate times'.⁹ Therefore, having considered a few rather uncomfortable possible New Testament pictures he turns to the Old Testament and offers a helpful outline of the 'exile' metaphor. Although while he states that '[t]he metaphor of exile remains probably the most fertile biblical image for the contemporary Western church' he goes on to acknowledge that 'it is not without its problems

[...] our exile might still await us. Now is not exile, but the painful spasm of a slow decline.⁷¹⁰

However, it was the ‘exile’ metaphor that proved particularly striking in further papers and discussion at that conference. Doug Gay presented a sermon that had first been preached on 4 October 2010¹¹ and which was effectively applying to our current experience the exile experience of Israel in Babylon and Jeremiah’s word to the exiles to settle there (Jer 29:4–7).

Based on this, the word to us in our present decline would be that we need to accept that things are not as they were, and get used to it. We are no longer living out the faith in a society which bolsters our religion, but in a culture that does not understand it. Yet it is here we need to learn to live and settle and put down roots.

These insights from Gay and Glover provide a challenge to us accept our new position of seeming weakness and apparent irrelevance however unwelcome and unfamiliar it may be.

However, I take issue with Glover’s assessment that the New Testament does not offer much that speaks to our current situation. While it is surely correct that the New Testament church was a growing church (and we are in a declining situation), the early church was still a very fragile community, facing on the one hand virtual annihilation through persecution, and on the other hand possible implosion due to internal tensions, divisions and disagreements.

It is in this context of fragility, rather than as some kind of triumphalistic motto for Christendom, that we can read Jesus’ words about the ‘gates of hell’ not prevailing against the Church. Equally, dense and difficult although the language and message of Revelation might be, the picture of the ultimate victory of God as described in that book is offered to a church under persecution and with a precarious existence through the vision and writings of one who was himself exiled for his faith – alone and restricted.

And we might consider if there is instead something in Jesus’ teaching about the mustard seed which would provide us with a biblical picture to inspire helpful and hopeful theological reflection on our present crisis.

A mustard seed is a small thing indeed; an apparently insignificant thing; a fragile thing. And yet it is destined to become ‘the greatest

of all shrubs' and in its shade 'the birds of the air can make nests' (Mark 4:30–32). The 'mustard seed' is both a powerful and a hopeful image. That which is small and insignificant will yet give birth to something greater and bigger. The parable is a parable of the Church and a parable of mission.

However, in applying this parable to the current situation faced by the church there remains the danger that we will be too quick to emphasise the size of the shrub, interpreting that as 'success' in mission, while glossing over the fragility and apparent insignificance represented by the mustard seed.

Another Gospel image that provides a picture which is, in some ways, similar to that of the mustard seed, is the lamp on the lampstand. Leaving aside the potentially disastrous implications for the basket, the flame of an oil lamp would be protected and sheltered under a basket; safe – but unseen and effectively useless. On the lampstand the light shines out, but it is then vulnerable and may be extinguished by the breeze. But light exists to be seen and to illuminate, not to be hidden and protected.

And so a 'weak' and vulnerable church needs still to take its part in the mission of God. Our light must still shine. Mission involves risk, and risk implies the possibility of failure. This can be as difficult to accept as is the reality of current decline. And yet avoiding the risk of failure will inevitably lead to complete paralysis of action.

Or again, if we consider the parable of the Sower (which, like many of the parables, has several possible layers of meaning) then we discover another striking metaphor for risk-taking in mission. The sower's primary concern is the broadcasting of the seed. If the 'success' of his enterprise were measured in terms of the percentage of seed that had ultimately borne grain, then there is a fairly poor return. But if instead the measure is the quality of the final crop, then the apparent failure is put into perspective and the risk may be considered justified and the 'failure' outweighed by the success.



Considering the Way of the Cross

It is when we turn to the Cross that we can see many of the themes we have already identified most clearly demonstrated. The Cross speaks

of fragility, vulnerability, ‘insignificance’ and apparent failure.

While we can only view the Cross from beyond the resurrection, nonetheless we must be ready to consider the Cross on its own terms and dwell on its meaning. From the post-resurrection perspective we can readily (and rightly) consider the salvific meaning of the Cross, and speak of it in terms of accomplishment and victory.

However, the Crucifixion was – when it occurred – representative of the apparent failure of God’s mission. Marginalised, rejected, and forced out of the city, Jesus is put to death. He accepts failure and embraces defeat.

Defeat and failure are never easy to contemplate or consider. This may be why as a church we are finding it so difficult to view our present decline other than with language that refers to growth. (It is notable that in a church tradition in which Holy Week and Good Friday are rarely observed by the same numbers as attend Sunday worship, the majority of our congregations can move directly from the ‘Hosannas’ of Palm Sunday to the ‘Hallelujahs’ of Easter Sunday, without pausing at Gethsemane or Golgotha.)

Jesus ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a slave [...] he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death [...]’ (Phil 2:7–8). What are the implications of this for we who follow Jesus on the Way of the Cross? How does this speak to the church in an age of decline? Do we seek to continue to deny the decline or predict an imminent ‘turn around’? Or is there still a journey to be undertaken under the shadow of the Cross? Can we acknowledge, accept and even embrace decline, marginalisation and apparent irrelevance and failure?

In a passage in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* in which Moltmann addresses the danger of the church being conformed to the ‘political religion’ of society (and which has much to say to us in Scotland as we move from a Christendom model of church) he states, ‘[a]s the community of the crucified Jesus, the church is drawn into his self-surrender, into his solidarity with the lost, and into his public suffering.’¹²

The way of seeming irrelevance, apparent failure, rejection and marginalisation is not where we might wish to be, but it may be where God calls us to be. It is certainly where God himself has been in Christ. A church on the Way of the Cross may be a church that is more truly

missional.

Perhaps what we need to be about is not so much managing decline while at the same time attempting to deny its reality, minimise its consequences and manoeuvre towards growth. Instead we may choose to see the present situation in which we find ourselves as an opportunity to enter into a redeeming transformation from the church of Christendom towards a servant church, a missional church – a Cross-centred church in a post-Christian society in which we may have little political sway and no longer have the right to command a hearing, but where we do, from a position of powerlessness, speak a prophetic word to this society, live out the love of Christ the crucified, and bear witness to the humble Suffering Servant.



The God of resurrection

A call to follow in the Way of the Cross is most certainly not a call to despair or hopelessness. In the passage already quoted from Philippians, Paul continues, '[t]herefore God also highly exalted him [...]' (2:9).

We journey on the Way of the Cross as those who have hope in the God of resurrection. But hope is not the same as denial! And resurrection is not effected by us, nor manipulated by our plans and processes. It is an act of God.

There is the inevitable fear that to recognise the reality of decline and accept it would be to embrace despair or admit defeat. There remain those who insist (as they have done now for the past several decades) that revival is just around the corner, or but a 'prayer meeting' away, or only a 'season of fasting' distant, or only awaiting our 'heartfelt repentance'. This is not to suggest a cynicism regarding true spiritual practice, nor that prayerlessness and spiritual poverty do not adversely affect the life and health of the church. However, a Reformed understanding of God's dealings with humanity must include a sense that 'revival' is an act of God's sovereign grace and not something that can be brought about by human efforts – even ones of piety and devotion – still less, engineered by the church.

Meanwhile we may have to continue for some time yet on the way of increasing irrelevance, marginalisation and decline, recognising

in this something of the way in which Jesus has already walked, something of the Cross, and something which we must accept. Like those exiled in Babylon, we may need to settle in this strange land and realise that we may be around here for a while. But it is not as those who are living without hope. We walk in this way as those who trust in a God who will act in his way and in his time. This is the resurrection hope which those who journey on the Way of the Cross continue to joyfully affirm, even if we must first experience something of death. ‘God deals with bodies that die and are raised to new life’.¹³



Walking in the Way

As we grapple with issues of resource depletion, deployment of ministries, new forms of ministry and a mission-shaped church we do so as people on the Way of the Cross and with the humility of those who can offer no guarantee of ‘success’. But we do so also with the passion of those who believe that inspired risks are worth taking and that such risk is inherent in any mission experiment, and with the hope that the God of resurrection will yet bring new life.

We may be called to accept that we are presently in a strange land where we would rather not live, but where we will need to settle for a while. We may be people on the Way of the Cross, but we are also those who place our hope in a God of resurrection and we are still called to pray, hope, wait and to keep worshipping, witnessing and working.

Declining numbers, fewer full-time ministers, smaller congregations, financial constraints, reducing national influence are not reasons for abandoning our mission, bowing to despair, or submitting to hopelessness.

We might apply to the church in the West the statement of Peter Macdonald, Leader of the Iona Community, who said of the congregation of which he was formerly minister, ‘St George’s West is a dying church. Thank God we believe in resurrection.’¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 2010. http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdffile/0019/3457/ga10_reports_ministries.pdf
- 2 Ibid., 3/7.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 3/8.
- 5 “Planning with Purpose” (Church of Scotland Ministries Council; 20:20 Vision), 1. http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/4157/planning_with_purpose.pdf
- 6 Ibid., 4.
- 7 Reports to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 2010, 3/7.
- 8 “Pruning for Growth?”, 9 October 2010.
- 9 Neil Glover, “Biblical Models for Decline”, 1. <http://trinityadmin.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/biblicalmodelsfordecline.pdf>
- 10 Ibid., 3.
- 11 Available as download at <http://trinitycollegeglasgow.org/page/2/>
- 12 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 92.
- 13 John L. Bell, *Wrestle and Fight and Pray: Thoughts on Christianity and Conflict* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993), 44.
- 14 Peter MacDonald, “Adapting for the City Centre”, in *The Church at the Centre of the City* (ed. Paul Ballard; Peterborough: Epworth, 2008), 125.