



A Question of Identity

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It is often observed that Moderators of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland are given a particularly comprehensive view of the church, with the expectation that their reflections on that experience might be of value. Wide, it certainly was, in my case; from the funeral of the Pope to a hillside service to commemorate the Chinook helicopter crash; from celebrating the jubilee of a church-extension charge in Dundee to addressing a packed congregation in St Andrew's Cathedral in Glasgow; from being guest of the Secretary of State in Dover House in London to supping "moderator's soup" at Camus on Mull; from seeing the church at work with homeless people in Paisley to visiting the chaplain at Sandhurst Military Academy. The reach of the church is extensive and the variety of its expression is considerable.

However, there are times when this variety leads to tension: tension about the Moderator's role, revealed in questions over how a programme is to be designed, or who is to make a particular decision, or what authority a statement carries. Moderators tend to navigate these questions satisfactorily and, in themselves, these are minor difficulties. Yet some of them have their roots in more important tensions over the identity of the Church of Scotland itself, whose principal representative the Moderator is supposed to be. The tensions may be creative ones, but, at a time when religion is so much under the public microscope, they are ones that are worth examining.

For example, the Moderator is a key part of the apparatus of national church; is there still mileage in that designation at a time of increasing ecumenical co-operation and public suspicion of religion? The Moderator represents a broad church; is this breadth something the Church takes seriously and celebrates, or is it regarded as a failure of nerve? The Moderator is given a high profile; is the Church prepared for the task of communicating with a society that speaks the language of spirituality but seldom of Presbyterianism? Focusing on these

questions about an authentic identity and purpose for the Church is more interesting than asking who the Moderator should be or what their role is and will ultimately be more help in that process than ticking boxes of gender, ordination, age and theological persuasion.



A national church

The Church of Scotland as national church has two principal manifestations. Firstly, there is the commitment of the Church to minister to people across the land, having a care for each local community, through the parish system. The other kind of national church is on show at the opening of the General Assembly, when that very civilised drama about power is played out between Church and State and where the special constitutional position of the Church of Scotland is recognised.

Both aspects of national church derive from the third Declaratory Article, which states that, *as a national church, representative of the Christian faith of the Scottish people, it acknowledges its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people of every parish in Scotland through a territorial ministry* (Weatherhead, 1997, p. 159). Today, if not in the past, such a claim is heard as exclusive and rings hollow to people of other denominations or faiths. However sensitively the Church of Scotland may think it handles this situation, this clause in a legal document is a source of embarrassment and should be amended, as Fergusson (2004) argues. But for now it remains.

The Moderator straddles both aspects of this designation. During the year, the Moderator spends ten days in each of four Presbyteries and gets a fascinating flavour of church and community life in different parts of Scotland. Through ministers who are chaplains to a particular institution, the Moderator visits schools and hospitals, homes for the elderly and special needs units, but also factories, power stations, jewellery studios, prisons, newspaper offices, tourist attractions, universities and the local councils. Sometimes, the visit can open new doors and expand the pastoral role of the church in the community.

This commitment to the needs of the wider community is one of the more attractive features of the Church of Scotland. In its history, its institutions and its better instincts, it takes seriously and willingly the injunction to seek the peace of the city and to live for the sake of those who are not its members. Of course this is recognised by other churches as well, without the spur of national church responsibilities, and the stance of having a care for the wider community can be made in ways that are heard as arrogant or insensitive. Ecumenical co-operation at local level is growing and joint projects in the community are becoming more common.

Given the pervasive presence of the Church across the country, it would be surprising if the Church did try to distance itself from the life of the local community. Although there are those who would wish to do so and although, in the past, the Church has tried to absorb the local community into its own orbit, it is common today to consider the Church as part of civil society, committed along with other organisations to the health and welfare of the community (Fergusson, 2004). This perspective has been particularly prevalent in the last fifteen years in Scotland because of the involvement of the Church in the movement for political devolution, where the role of civil society was prominent and much analysed (Brown, McCrone and Paterson, 1996).

Civil society can take various forms. Keane (2003) identifies the descriptive, strategic and normative uses of the term, whereby civil society can offer a network of organisations that may form alliances to work towards common goals. However, pinning down even its description, far less what goals it may adopt, is no easy matter. As the term is used and put into operation by churches, civil society refers mainly to bodies within the voluntary sector, at local and national level, which both serve the community and campaign for its improvement. Throughout the country, the Church sees itself as part of that process.

Notice that there are two aspects to the process. There is the relatively benign but important process of building social cohesion, generating social capital and delivering social services, something which is

being encouraged by the Government. But civil society also has to take seriously its role of being among the “positive deviants” (Mulgan, 2006) who have a responsibility to challenge and shape the community. Flint and Kearns (2004) find that churches are better at building cohesion than they are at social transformation. There are concerns that the critical edge of the church’s prophetic witness, as well as the independence of other voluntary bodies, will be blunted if they concentrate only on social cohesion or come too close to public funding bodies.

There has been a spate of reports recently that examine the contribution that churches make to the life of their local community (Northwest Development Agency, 2003; Flint and Kearns, 2004; Furbey et al., 2006; Baker and Skinner, 2006; Archbishop’s Council, 2006). They manage to assemble an impressive array of activities undertaken by churches and other faith communities, that generate social capital. Flint and Kearns (2004) offer a detailed analysis of the Church of Scotland in this respect – an analysis that shows congregations, on average, engaging in just under half of the activities targeted by the study. Reports to the General Assembly of the Committee on the Parish Development Fund demonstrate a more imaginative range of congregational commitments (*Reports to the General Assembly*, 2004, 2005, 2006).

The churches tread a delicate tightrope of suspicion in undertaking this community work. On the one hand, public bodies can be jittery when religious bodies venture outside the role of fostering what they consider to be private faith. On the other, there are those within the church who dismiss community outreach as “mere social work” that is not the business of the church. In this context, the question arises of what the church does contribute to civil society that is distinctive.

Baker and Skinner (2006) have explored this question by extending the idea of social capital to religious and spiritual capital. Religious capital refers to the particular kinds of connections and relationships established by religious communities, while “spiritual capital energises religious capital by providing a theological identity and worshipping

tradition, but also a value system, moral vision and basis of faith” (Baker and Skinner, 2006, p. 4). For them, spiritual capital speaks of hope and transformation, values personal stories, believes implicitly or explicitly that God is at work within regeneration and civil society and works with those who have been rejected elsewhere.

Many of these are characteristic of other initiatives that do not have a Christian base, but this analysis offers a starting point for debate on the community engagement of the church. If the Church of Scotland wants its claim to be a national church to be taken seriously, it must engage with this debate. Keeping the balance between this outreach and the congregation as worshipping community is important and this needs to be well supported, both from within congregations and by the wider church. But it is within this commitment to the wider community and in partnership with other churches and faith communities that the understanding of national church needs to be developed.

However, the more ceremonial, constitutional understanding of national church is also a pervasive part of the Moderator’s experience and a large part of the year is spent in the generous and enjoyable company of representatives of the establishment. In many ways, the Moderator’s least ambiguous role is that of representing the national church. What is more controversial is the purpose of the legal and constitutional status to which this refers.

MacLean (2004) argues strongly for the importance of maintaining and updating the legal and constitutional status of the Church of Scotland, as encapsulated in the Church of Scotland Act of 1921. She warns against assuming that human rights legislation can give the protection to the Church, and, by extension, to other faith communities, that it enjoys under the present arrangements. She also reports from interviews with key commentators that the “apparently entirely ceremonial elements of the crown-church relationship might express something of substance to the church”.

Yet many people find this emphasis, both on the special relationship with the crown and on the formal constitutional status, difficult to

reconcile with a pilgrim church. Richard Holloway's observation is likely to touch a chord that it is "ironic that Jesus, who refused to protect himself, has given his name to institutions that are strikingly self-protecting" (MacLean, 2004). In practice, rather than freeing the church from interference by the state, the 1921 Act tends to breed a culture of threat, whereby the provisions of the Act need to be continually defended by an assiduous Church Law Department and specialist Assembly Committee. If human rights legislation is deficient in guaranteeing basic religious freedom, then a more generous approach would be to try to ensure that the legislation is strengthened so that other churches and faith communities can benefit directly.

But, even with this more generous attitude, Holloway's observation does not go away. However you dress it up, securing special rights for religious communities tempts the church into flexing its muscles on its own behalf and expecting its special rights to be protected. At the very least, it seems to be a defeatist position for any organisation, and particularly the church, to resort to legislation to secure respect and appropriate independence rather than earning them through example and argument.

The context has changed radically since 1921 and Fergusson (2004) outlines contemporary arguments for not rushing towards disestablishment of the national churches. One of the roots of the Church of Scotland Act, from within the Free Church, was a historical anxiety about State interference in the affairs of the Church. Today, there is more concern more about a secularism that bases public life on an impoverished view of human nature that takes no account of spiritual reality. In 1921, the idea of an independent national church was a way of protecting the Church. Today, it is argued that church establishment may be more valuable in protecting the State, by having a symbol of a spiritually enriched understanding of human nature at its heart. Quite apart from the dishonesty of this symbol being tied to a particular tradition, given the ecumenical, inter-faith spirit of today, the device of securing this through legislation, particularly legislation from a different time, is hard to support. Rowan Williams observes that the Church of England needs to "answer the question of how to

reintroduce the rumour of God in its environment” (Williams, 2006, p. 219). This is a perceptive assessment of today’s reality. Protecting the Church’s legal status is the answer to a different, and dated, question.



A broad church

Early in my year as Moderator, I was told off for suggesting that certainty was not an unalloyed Christian virtue, my accuser complaining that it would be bad for young people to hear such a thing from a person with responsibility in the Church. It was then that I realised how protected my liberal experience of the church had been!

The Church of Scotland sees itself as a broad church, as is appropriate for a church that aspires to national status. Macdonald (2004) regards this as a characteristic that should be maintained, although MacLean (2004) reports that some significant commentators consider the pluralism of views within it as a weakness. It holds within its membership people who disagree radically about sexuality, liturgical practice, the nature of ministry and the composition of the new hymnbook, for example. In principle, this allows the Church to nurture a properly open Christian hospitality that affirms and learns from all its members, as well as from strangers. This ethos is in contrast to the perception of our history, as well as the expectations of many current commentators, who see the Church as a fairly monolithic institution sure of its opinions, ready to give clear answers to complex questions and confident about right and wrong. In practice, the General Assembly regularly sweeps aside the variety of opinion within the Church in majority votes on contentious issues. Moreover, our internal structure, as a hierarchy of courts, legitimises a judgmentalism and a litigiousness that fight for the soul of the organisation. In this context, it is easy to see breadth as a backward step, capitulation to the weak tolerance of today’s dominant culture, which reflects a lack of concern for other people, rather than a positive affirmation of the comprehensiveness of God’s love.

Having the right to liberty of opinion is a cornerstone of this breadth and it is an important element in one of the strands of Presbyterian culture which was incorporated into the united Church of Scotland

in 1929. In the Preamble to services of ordination or commissioning, the Westminster Confession is recognised as the Church’s principal subordinate standard, “allowing for liberty of opinion on such points of doctrine as do not enter into the substance of the faith.” To allow this freedom on such an occasion makes liberty of opinion, or of pastoral conscience, a hallmark of our Presbyterian identity. Paradoxically, of course, it is precisely that freedom that allows others to affirm the less tolerant aspects of the Confession.

For many, the default view of the church is, frankly, that of a club with strict membership criteria. A Christian is someone who ticks certain boxes of belief, of practice and of opinion. The more specialised the Christian (Protestant, Reformed, Presbyterian, Church of Scotland), the more boxes need to be ticked. Moreover, the last box on the list tends to be the one most jealously guarded, as maximally indicative of identity, so that conflict is often greatest between people of churches with the greatest overlapping history. This gives full rein to a controlling mentality that concentrates resources on erecting boundaries between people and policing them.

This analysis brings to mind a debate that was central to the research I did many years ago on the development of language in children. The question was how one should represent the meaning of words or the concepts and categories underlying them. One approach was to list the properties that characterise any example of the category under investigation and then use the word to describe anything that had these properties – the club membership approach of the last paragraph. Contrasted with this was the view that the meanings of words were often better characterised by a core example, surrounded by a periphery of other, more vague, illustrations of it (Rosch, 1973). Natural categories are particularly well suited to this analysis.

Many people will recognise their own congregational experience in this latter approach, with a core group who take on specific commitments supported by a much vaguer periphery. The danger of this approach is that it encourages the view that those at the core are the “real” church members. Yet, we should not be surprised that it is often the person

on the periphery who brings fresh thinking or a telling challenge that reinvigorates the community. This has led many denominations to reconsider their understanding of membership, so as to recognise the contribution and the needs of those who seem to be uneasy with undertaking the responsibilities of full membership (*Reports to the General Assembly*, 2004, Panel on Doctrine). Our theological ideas are similarly kept alive by insights from neighbouring disciplines and the moral certitudes of yesterday are often seen to be deficient in the light of the unexpected pastoral needs of today.

This fluidity in the life of the church and its priorities sits more easily with the understanding of faith as a journey, rather than that which sees faith as a set of fixed views and beliefs that are resistant to change. For a journey, you need a map. Our history has left us a map of the wider church that is like a political map, with each country (or church) coloured in contrasting but homogeneous colours and with clear boundaries between them. As ecumenical developments make these boundaries between churches more permeable, and we invite each other to explore different territories, the perspective shifts to something more like a relief map, where the salient features are more evident, but where hills and valleys merge into each other. Moreover, we find that there are similarities of landscape in different churches – each will have rivers that need to be bridged and mountains that dominate, to different degrees. A relief map of the Christian landscape is more useful for the journey of faith than a political map, whose main value is in reminding you of the need to pack your passport, with your identity specified in a list of properties and signed with your assent before you set out.

This perspective is familiar in ecumenical discussion, where there is a concern with the nature of the ecumenical space in which churches come together. There, too, there is a wish to hold together very disparate views, practices and traditions. It may be that this ecumenical experience could be explored as a way of helping the Church of Scotland to reflect better in its structures and practices the breadth that it claims as one of its characteristics and that allows it to extend its reach as far as it does. There has always been diversity in the church.

How could it be otherwise? We affirm a faith that is personal, shaped by our separate experiences and belief that is articulated in a language that has to communicate with a changing and a complex world. Yet the tendency to force a sterile uniformity on this faith is strong. To celebrate the breadth of the church, we need positive models that allow that breadth to live.



An engaging church

The Church of Scotland engages with the wider community in many ways. It is a worshipping presence in each parish, inviting people to share in that worship each Sunday. Weddings and funerals are taken by the minister at the request of members of the community. The minister and members of the congregation carry their Christian identity with them through the rest of the week and exercise a variety of ministries, some specialised and acknowledged, others the fruit of informal contact. There is the ministry of presence, recognised by the work of chaplains, in the workplace, in schools, hospitals, the armed forces and prisons. There is the ministry of hospitality, exercised through the many lunch clubs or other activities that take place in church halls around the country, as well as through the welcome afforded to strangers who come into the church building, as visitors, tourists, concert-goers or people seeking spiritual renewal. There is the ministry of solidarity, when congregations lend their support to parts of the community in special need, such as those who are homeless or seeking asylum. There is the ministry of transformation, seen in the campaigning church that lobbies the Parliament on political issues. There is ample opportunity for the church to engage with the wider community, to share its perspective and to feed that into the texture of Scottish public life.

Yet there is an awkwardness about how the Church engages at the national level. Partly, this is an awkwardness that has been shared by other civic institutions in Scotland since the advent of the Parliament. These representatives of old civil society used to be confident in their influence on public opinion but they have been wrong-footed by a Parliament that, to begin with, was suspicious of bodies that were used

to aggregating opinion and was anxious to extend participation in the political process to more than the usual suspects (Ascherson, 2004).

In time, this has settled down and the Church has developed various channels of communication with the Parliament, mainly through the excellent work of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office. It continues to submit its own responses to consultations as well as combining forces with other churches on occasion. It is discovering new ways of engaging with the Parliament. When I was Moderator, the Church of Scotland's HIV/AIDS Project was instrumental in setting up a joint meeting of the Parliament's Inter-Party Groups on International Development and on Sexual Health to mark the issue of Women and AIDS, highlighted on World AIDS Day. The Moderator makes a visit to the Parliament and this led on to an Executive Debate on Women Offenders in my year and I was invited to give evidence to the Committee that was considering the Family Law Bill.

However, the Parliament is only one of the markers of change in the Church's environment that are relevant to its national engagement. There has been a dramatic change in the background knowledge of many of the journalists reporting church matters, once newspapers chose to concentrate their efforts on covering the Parliament, rather than taking comment from other civic voices, as they had tended to do before 1999. By and large, the media seem to be more interested in churches as a source of bizarre ideas, rather than a particular sample of public opinion, as when Church and Nation debates were regarded as the Parliament the country didn't have.

This ought to free the Church to exercise one of its principal national roles, that of offering considered moral and ethical comment on the issues of the day. And comment it does. However, the effectiveness of this is often compromised by two factors. One is the strong media profile of the Cardinal, supported by his energetic press corps who make the most of his clear views and straightforward authority. When the churches are agreed on issues, such as trade justice or Trident, the Moderator and Cardinal can share platforms and maximise the impact of a church position. However, when the views diverge, as they did on

the sexual health strategy or on Family Law, the churches are faced with the dilemma of satisfying the media's wish for confrontation, with all its sectarian overtones, or presenting a very muted voice. In the case of the Family Law Bill, a joint press release was crafted between the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland that emphasised the areas of common concern as well as the places of disagreement. This device could and should be used more often and extended to include other churches.

But the other compromising factor is more internal and relates to the earlier matter of what it means to be a broad church. The Church hangs on to the idea that there is a Church of Scotland position on most matters of public interest, namely, the relevant decision of the General Assembly. Sometimes, such a position is strong and uncontested. On poverty, peace and social justice, there are few discordant voices in the Kirk or any other church. However, on other matters, the church is split and the nature of the split is often between a liberal and a conservative view. What then happens is either that a vote is taken between two opposing views, which does nothing to lessen the convictions of those on the losing side, or a compromise position is agreed, which again fails to represent the essential nature of the issue. Very seldom is debate allowed without a divisive vote being taken at the end. It did happen in 1994 in a debate about sexuality but that has been regarded as a device for avoiding a difficult issue, rather than being seen as a legitimate way of respecting the diversity of opinion in the church. In recent years, conference sessions have been held, mainly to showcase parts of the Church's work, but again they are regarded as time out from the Assembly's real business, rather than a valid part of it (Macdonald, 2004).

Yet this opportunity to listen to each other and to develop the experiences and wisdom within our community is something that could be taken more seriously. As a broad church, we ought to have better procedures for presenting the divergent views within the body and for enabling people to learn from each other. As a church committed to working ecumenically, we should be able to find ways of presenting the essential arguments that do not hinge on attaching separate positions

to different churches, on issues where the disagreements run within churches rather than between them, as they often do on matters of personal morality.

There are other roles the Church could play on the national stage, which are more in keeping with a broad church as a place of open and courteous exchange of views, albeit views that are passionately held. One is the role of honest broker, offering to host debate on contentious issues that is fair to the parties involved. At local level, this already happens. During election campaigns, churches organise hustings that are well appreciated by candidates. In the past, the Church and Nation Committee has encouraged presbyteries to hold open meetings on issues such as changes in the NHS or local authority reform which have been successful in bringing people together to air sensitive issues on what is seen as neutral ground. When done well, this can be a valuable contribution to the harmony and peace of the wider community.

When it comes to debate, the Church of Scotland is in its element. But it may be that what the nation is asking of its Church today is not moral guidance but spiritual leadership. In the past, this has been given at times of national mourning. Lockerbie and Dunblane come to mind immediately and the Church was able then to offer words and space for healing. But in recent years, grief has become democratised and it cannot be taken for granted that the Church will be able to reach a hurting community unless it finds ways to meet people's spiritual needs at other times. Chaplains in hospitals and prisons and universities are at the leading edge of these developments and the Church would do well to learn more from their experiences.

Neither “spirituality” nor “leadership” is something that our tradition does comfortably. Of course, each emerges within the Church despite its practices, but not because of them. And as long as the nation understands the Church culture that has these reservations about spirituality and leadership, the Church can offer comfort and support and vision to the people of Scotland. But as the cultures diverge and new needs are articulated that call for the consolations of faith, the Church must look at these needs freshly and respond out of the riches

of a tradition that stretches back further than 1560, that has always been enriched by the insights of other cultures and that is drawn forward into futures that are alive with new possibilities.



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