

STUDY LEAVE 2016-17: REV ROBERT S.T. ALLAN

Outside Verdict

In the foreword to his book, “Outside Verdict” (published in 2002), Harry Reid says, “I never joined a church and I hardly ever attended worship; but I did regard myself as a Christian and I have been willing, publicly, to bear witness, if that is the right phrase.” (XI) In a sense that is the focus of this study leave – how do Christians and the Church connect, or rather more specifically, not connect?

Reid goes on to present 21 proposals for the institutional Church of Scotland to consider. The decline of the Church of Scotland is laid out for all to see in the statistics which cannot be denied – they were as obvious in 2002 as they are even more so now in 2016. Reid questions whether or not the Church is “distinctive” enough to attract members and probably concludes that it is not.

Reid mentions the “Church Without Walls” report to the General Assembly 2001. Of the debate he says, “This should have been a major moment for the Kirk; instead, it was flat, anticlimactic, uninspiring and wholly unmemorable.” (p5) Personally, the General Assembly is at its best when it is singing – there is a feeling quite beyond words when we sing together – sadly, it all goes wrong when we start to speak! How can the Assembly manage to stifle a great initiative in one easy session of business? Whilst attending the Assembly as a Commissioner you may be fooled into thinking that the business before this august body is exceedingly important, but we must ask the same question that Reid asks when he reflects in these words: (p9) – “I wondered, from time to time, what pertinence the Assembly had for the ordinary folk milling around on the sunny Edinburgh streets outside the hall.” In 2002, the answer was that the business of the Assembly had very little relevance to the people on the streets. In 2016, we can say the same with certainty. There is very little reported in newspapers now, nor much of relevance on the short programme on television aired around that time. The only matter that hits any kind of headline is when the Assembly turns its head to say something about same-sex relationships!

Reid visits various Churches in his quest for a taste of the Church of Scotland. He finds it quite varied indeed and, on the whole, a positive

experience. Decline in numbers is apparent in 2002, with the realisation that there are not enough ministers to fill the vacant Churches. The mix of worship experiences is good – where there are several Churches in one area then worshippers can choose what style suits them best – some worshippers will continue with a certain building because they have “always” been there – but what if the Church of Scotland is the only one within reasonable distance? – it seems then that you have to like it or lump it, or don’t go! There seems to be Churches where hundreds still attend, but Reid does not ask the question of other Churches: does it make any sense, where numbers are few, to have a full-time minister allocated to such a charge?

Reid comes face to face with the ministers at the coal face who are often overloaded and isolated. Funeral workload is highlighted – it can vary from an average of one per month to several per week. From worship preparation time to travelling around the parish, a minister’s workload can vary so much, depending obviously on location, but also on the gifts and perceived calling of the minister and what his or her priorities are. There is no “one-size fits all” and various attempts to classify what the basic tasks of the ordained ministry are supposed to be have never answered the question. It is obvious in the present time that ministers are still overloaded, sometimes feeling isolated, and are under severe pressure to keep “running the Church”, locally and nationally. But what does it mean to “be the Church” today? Is it possible to break out of the institutional shackles to find a place for the Church in today’s society or are we – ministers and members – so institutionalised that we cannot embrace the change that is needed? Reid paraphrases one minister (p47): “He said that people were clearly looking for spirituality, but not within the old institutional authority-structure.”

“If the Church of Scotland is to go through a great period of renewal, ministers will be the key personnel.” (p50) Through his research for his book, Reid gets a better glimpse of what life and work is like for a minister, a varied workload that few truly understand. Reid, in his own words, conveys the challenges facing ministry – workload, expectations, manses, and theological differences. Interestingly, Reid asks if our predecessors in ministry during the “fat and good period” for the Church in the 1950s did such a grand job anyway! I join him in asking the question, and wonder if the “good old days” when Churches were full(er), were in fact good days? Was the ministry and the Church in

general complacent? Was the Church actually being what the Church should be?

In his book Reid talks to various individuals who paint their own picture of ministry and the Church. Politics and personalities no doubt play their part, sadly within Church circles, and one person's visionary will be another person's obstacle. Reid mentions names as "up and coming" and time has had its say on his verdict. Time always tells, and the changes within ministry have not borne fruit. 14 years after publication of the book, the Church faces a drastic shortage of ministers. Have we a selection process that is a "sledgehammer to crack a nut"? Do we have administrative overload? Have we failed to sort out the basics before embarking on a recruitment drive for ministry? Have we failed as a Church to support our women and men in ministry? Have we failed as a Church to educate congregations to move forward in their thinking rather than simply do so with ministers? In my opinion, yes, on all counts!

Reid devotes a chapter of his book to communications and the need, in his opinion, to have a figurehead who speaks for the Church and interacts positively with the press to enable the Church of Scotland to be heard. The Press no longer pay much attention to the General Assembly; membership declines still and no one really pays attention to the Church. Since publication of this book the situation has gone steadily downhill and the Church rarely makes any headlines, unless it is talking about same-sex relationships! The Kirk could seek ways of speaking louder, but who would give it news space and who in the public domain is ready to listen? Is the Church largely out of touch? Are people looking for spirituality that is no longer found in a Church that has stopped reforming? Whatever you thought of writers such as Stewart Lamont or Ron Fergusson, at least they made news columns that were interesting to read! But the question remains: who would speak for the Kirk? It has been said often that we need more young people in the Church – whilst there are many approaches tried and being tried, the quote of David Lyall, onetime Principal of New College rings ever true: "I simply don't have any answers." In reality, the Kirk simply doesn't have a youth problem, it has a people problem – people of all ages are not connecting with the Church.

Reid talks at length about the chequered history of the Kirk and some of its leading lights, the problem of sectarianism, and the need for more cooperation between Christian denominations. There is no doubt that, in some particular areas, bigotry is still a problem, and that is a great sadness, particularly because, in my limited experience, those who perpetuate such a stance need to learn to be Christians first and then you solve the problem! Churches working together always depend on leadership and the willingness of Church members to break out of their own wee corner, but in practice this often fails, even between Churches of the same denomination. Perhaps here lies one of our central problems – congregations can be consumed with themselves, their own activities and their own building to the detriment of outreach. One description of Church which I noted many years ago remains a challenging description: “The church is a middle class club with a Christian veneer.” Is that an old description or is it still relevant? If still relevant, does it contribute to the decline of the Church and the growth of the invisible church?

On a more positive note, Reid’s plea for women to play a more prominent role within the Kirk has actually emerged over the years since his publication. His talk of “more prestigious charges” has also significantly waned. Once upon a time young ministers would not have considered applying for “prestigious charges” and certainly such charges would have sought someone, probably a male minister, of considerable experience to be their minister. Perhaps circumstances being as they are, with a severe shortage of ministers and dwindling congregations, a new era has emerged rather than been shaped. In seeking to connect with the people of Scotland, perhaps it was time the Kirk got “off its high horse” with such ridiculous practices? (And these were “the good old days”!) Has decline at least brought out this little chink of light?

Reid would like to see a re-energised Eldership! But has the institutional Church ground many of them down by its structures? A recent letter from 121 seeking nominations to Councils and Committees stated: “We also want to assure people that the work of the Standing Councils and Committees is fascinating and the experience of such service enjoyable.” Really? Some may say so. But when was your last Presbytery meeting described as “a great night out”? Do many within the Church wear blinkers as they keep the good ship afloat? (at least for a while longer).

When did we stop asking the questions, “Is this worthwhile?...Is there a better way?...Is there another way?...What is our core business?”

Reid makes a plea for a resurgence of good preaching. I agree, but it is very much hit and miss – including this writer! And good preaching only goes as far as its listeners, it doesn’t necessarily reach the growing invisible church of people who are interested in faith but not the institution.

Reid talks about money! He says (p167), “I have no hesitation whatsoever in saying that this foreign mission should be cut back in a swinging, even draconian, manner; the Kirk has plenty of urgent mission work at home. It is failing in Scotland, so I am afraid that sustaining work abroad must be regarded as a secondary priority.” Tithing gets a shout! Selling manse is a strong suggestion from Reid for many good reasons – all of which I wholeheartedly agree with and will rehearse elsewhere - but the reaction Reid is faced with perhaps sums up why the institution finds change almost impossible: one man takes Reid through the reasons why such an idea could not work whilst another “simply grinned” and also rehearsed the old arguments for the status quo. Sadly, in my opinion, the orchestra is playing louder whilst the ship is sinking! But then he turns to a more pressing question: does the Church set a good moral example for the people of Scotland? Life and society has changed, even more so in the years since the publication of Reid’s book: how does the Church relate to society and what is its message? And how do we make connections with people in the Christian faith?

P178 begins with these words: “This chapter deals with the Kirk’s greatest mess – its bureaucracy.” And Reid goes on to state that the General Assembly “is hardly noticed by most people outside the Kirk.” I would venture even further to say that many within the Kirk don’t really notice it either! This is something Reid affirms in his interviews with ministers at that time. He goes to say “The Assembly needs to be reformed drastically, and soon.” Some 15 years since publication it cannot be said that the General Assembly has changed. In 2016 the report on possible changes to the GA (Assembly Arrangements Committee) ended with the argument that no one really wanted any great changes, though the moving of Assembly perhaps to June might be contemplated! Who says the Church has stopped reforming!!! One other deliverance was worth a quote: “All Councils, Committees and other

bodies reporting to the General Assembly are instructed to present concise reports and deliverances in accessible language.” One can but hope!

Coupled with the “monster” that is the GA, Reid also perceives the attitude towards 121 as being less than warm and the perception that there is too much centralised bureaucracy. It seems that many individuals carry out good and diligent work however, despite opinions to support it, change seems out of the capability of the Kirk when it comes to deal with bureaucracy and reforming outdated structures. Reid states (p189): “The unfortunate truth is that, when the surgery for this great, bloated, obese and costive creature comes, as sooner or later it will, it is going to be all the more painful.” Could it be that too many with the institution are institutionalised and are unable to see the urgent need for reform? Do we need a chief executive? What alternatives are before us?

Reid’s visits to Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions were, on the whole, unenlightening. When was the last time Presbyters said, “Oh good, Presbytery meeting tonight!”?

Reid turns to the glaring fact of Church decline in Scotland. People will have their own reasons as to why decline has been so rapid. Some continue to see value in a national Church that cares for everyone in their parish, but how long can such a view be sustained when ministerial numbers are low and Churches are struggling to survive? Reid uses a quote on p209 that leaves you wondering: “I’m not sure who takes the strategic view in the Church of Scotland, the view of where it is going and what it is trying to do in the wider world.” It seems, because of the outdated structures, more centralised bureaucracy, and the widespread decline of the Church in Scotland, that the emphasis is on the local Church and it doing what it can in its local situation, and that itself varies from innovative ideas to settling blindly for the status quo which is a terminal condition.

Confidence in the Gospel, less dreary in our affairs, more money, more vibrant congregations, rediscover leadership, effective communication strategy...some of Reid’s hopes that will renew the Church of Scotland.

Reid's 21 proposals, detailed near the start of his book, largely remain proposals, probably only considered by someone who happens to pick up the book or someone crazy enough to put it on their reading list for study leave!

Inside Verdict

In the preface to this book, it is stated that Reid's book "Outside verdict" has "chimed with the times and has initiated a welcome and timely debate about what's wrong and what's right with the Church of Scotland." "Inside verdict" is a contribution to that debate. Lucky I'm resurrecting this debate for study leave, for in truth I'm not sure what hole this debate went down. My impression is that the institution is facing forward resolutely whilst not attempting to reform. "Be transformed! Be encouraged!" ends the preface. Let's see, shall we? We will go beyond Mallon's terrible cliché at the start: "One thing the Church of Scotland is not, is dying. It is alive." The book is a series of contributions on various topics, mainly to back the author's verdict in that last sentence. Hard for me to say, as a lifelong member of the Church of Scotland, it is dying in much of its present form. Perhaps "showing new life" in some ways is more accurate. Decline, however, speaks for itself.

- (1) Peter Neilson on Church Without Walls. Talking about 121, he says "There are still walls to come down and doors to open, but the Church at the centre is changing." Peter, I wish that were true! Peter Neilson invites us to choose one of two options: stand in the way of change or consent to a new Church for a new culture."
- (2) David Lacy and Marjory MacLean on General Assembly: an excellent defence of the court that is the General Assembly. The voice of each person present able to be heard – but even when it is it is often subsumed into the dark hole. More trust in Councils and staff is the plea! If only it were that simple. How are Council Conveners elected and how are staff appointed? Instead of insider appointments and job descriptions that lend themselves far more to the way of the world than the way of the Church, perhaps we could publicly hear from candidates about how they would take things forward in the Church and we can elect accordingly. The

General Assembly has the potential to make society “nervous” and “interested” ...mmm!

- (3) Alison Twaddle on The Guild: good work has been done through The Guild, especially in highlighting certain causes. True. But even Alison highlights the need to circumnavigate obstacles that seem immovable. The picture emerging of the Kirk is that good things are happening in the midst of the institutional machine. The unfortunate reality is that the machine is taking up time, money and effort, for little result.
- (4) Hearing the evangelical voice – Peter White – one perspective within the broad Church of Scotland.
- (5) The last taboo – Jane Denniston. A plea to listen to differing views on human sexuality. Largely overtaken by more recent decisions of the General Assembly though it will remain a hot topic for the foreseeable future. How do Churchless Christians view such a debate?
- (6) Creating confidence – Iain Whyte. The writer makes a good case for creating confidence, building on the positives already happening; we need to reform as we catch the spirit of the age...worship in different ways and manage our affairs in more business-like ways...but we don't. Recognising new opportunities in IT and life-long learning, but it is painfully slow. Changing structures to meet our visions, it's not happening! Focusing on great achievements – good – but to neglect what's not working and not addressing it drags the Church down. This chapter is a fine example of good rhetoric that somehow fails to penetrate the static institution. On pages 52 & 53 we are faced with a set of positive statistics which if used appropriately can equip the Church well for mission. Then what has stopped it and what continues to stop it? Revising those statistics 14 years later bring only further questions to the debating chamber!
- (7) (a) Local Church, local people – Susan Brown. Where does the ordained minister fit it? A leader who brings order and unity to the ministry of all God's people? Listen to Eugene Peterson's plea in his book “The Contemplative Pastor”: “Pastor...we want you to be responsible for saying and acting among us what we believe about God and kingdom and gospel...we believe God's Spirit is within us and within the wreckage of the world...we believe in the Ezekiel story...the resurrection body of Christ. We need help in keeping our beliefs sharp and accurate and intact...we want you

to give us help. Be our pastor, a minister of Word and Sacrament in the middle of this world's life...this isn't the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks, This is yours: Word and Sacrament...There will be times when we don't want to listen and you don't want to say, but do it...you are vowed to do it. Your task is to keep telling the basic story, representing the presence of the Spirit, insisting on the priority of God, speaking the Biblical words of command and promise and invitation." Again a wholeheartedly positive contribution by Susan Brown, but the Church Without Walls Report has a formal name – The Report of the Special Commission anent Review and Reform of the Church – the title says it all! 7(b): Unlimited potential – Maureen Leitch. The future lies in the potential of the local Church that focuses on what it can do in its given place and time. I think this is true and the Church has the potential to flourish in the local situation. However, this chapter gives rise to challenges: how can the negative image of the Church be changed by highlighting the positives without addressing the negatives? How can more power be given to the local when centralised power still holds sway? If most in the local see the central as an irrelevance, why has it remained unchanged? How can ministers be free to encourage the local when they are called to meet outdated expectations, to conduct all requested parish funerals, to be Interim Moderators, to attend Presbytery and be part of its Committees, to attend General Assembly and perhaps serve on national Committees? Something has to give, but nothing seems to. And so the centralised institution continues because we can't seem to let it go or change it, and decline continues. What if we all concentrated on the local and didn't volunteer to serve on the national Councils and Committees? Answers on a postcard!

(8) Children first – Doug Swanney. Positive involvement for and with children in the Church. Much will depend on the local situation – are children made to feel welcome, part of the Church, etc.?

(9) (a) A cool Kirk? – Chris Docherty. Involving young people in various ways can only be a positive thing. Youth Assembly is a good example. Youth delegates at General Assembly is also welcome but it is also sad to see that they are being “fitted into” an already outdated system. 9 (b) Asking questions, finding answers – Steve Mallon. Ah, the editor finally speaks, and speaks

well of positive youth work. Sadly, at the end, Mallon describes Harry Reid as one of the doom and gloom merchants, especially where youth work in the Kirk is concerned. For me, this once again brings into sharp focus the crux of the matter – yes, whether talking about youth work or other aspects of the work of the Kirk, there are good and positive things happening; but we cannot therefore simply neglect the statistics of decline nor the possible causes of decline. Surely addressing the latter can only assist in accentuating the positives?

- (10) (a) Reawakening the spiritual journey for adults – Fiona Fidgin. At last! Fiona Fidgin invites what seems to me an honest contribution – no offence to other contributors! There is a need to offer ways of helping adults in their spiritual journey – perhaps this is something that was missing for Christians who have left the Church but seek to maintain their faith? The telling sentence is on p94: “The Church Without Walls Report urged the Church to explore new ways of being – and even now, after three years, we still hear the excuses: we can’t do this overnight, it will take time. Nonsense! The Church is being offered its own wake-up call, and still it hesitates to take it.” I’m tempted at this point to say it, so I will – “I rest my case”! 10 (b) The Emperor’s new Church – Stewart Cutler. Cutler strikes the heart of the problem with a number of thought-provoking questions, emanating from his bold first words: “This isn’t working!” He goes on to challenge the reader to make things happen. I suspect this chapter is one many in the Church don’t want to hear, but it seems to hit the nail on the head!
- (11) Outside-in priorities – George Gammack. The writer talks of priorities of the Kirk which should be centred in helping those greatest in need, a subject which he takes Harry Reid to task over due to neglect of UPAs in “Outside Verdict”. I cannot disagree with what is written. I only ask who is it that enabled the writer to minister in UPAs for 12 years – was it the institutional Church? One winning characteristic of the Kirk is that it has enabled ministry in places where it might not otherwise have happened. To enable this to continue then perhaps ministers need to be part-time etc. and power given back to local situations to enable ministry, in its widest sense, to take place where it is needed most? Begs another question – are those in affluent areas not also in desperate need of the Gospel?

- (12) Chaplaincy – Alison Elliot. Chaplaincy is a key area for growth and being where people are. Chaplains who are paid employees, eg NHS, is one thing, but who pays for the chaplain where there is no employer? For example, along with some local Churches, we would like to employ a youth worker in a local High School, but it won't happen without the funding from the "bums on seats" in Churches! A dilemma?
- (13) John Miller, in his afterword, does not see a Church that is dying, rather a Church in transition from one role to another. He perceives Reid's book as too centred on structures. Miller says, "No local congregation can accomplish this task (of securing a future for Christianity in our culture), however, if it is isolated from the rest of the Church. It is the task of central structures to secure the unity of the Church and the stability of the shared enterprise." Interestingly, Miller sees ministers and appropriate buildings as central to the task, something that Churchless Christians may disagree with? A three-year Moderator? How about elections for such a post with people advocating their stances and let the wider Church choose? Or shall we let a little Committee get on with it?

The Invisible Church

Aisthorpe sets out his research in chapter one – learning from the experiences of Churchless Christians. He says we have lessons to learn for the common thought is that people who drift from Church also drift from the Christian faith - Aisthorpe suggests that his research findings show that some two thirds of those who drift from Church still maintain an active faith.

As I commence this book I admit a few reservations: one, Aisthorpe works for the Church of Scotland's Mission and Discipleship Council; two, the General Assembly has recommended the book be read; and three, St. Andrew's Press has published it. However, let's see what emerges from this book.

Aisthorpe addresses a number of myths and makes conclusions:

- There is growth in Christianity in the world, so it's not all about decline
- Decline does not mean secularization, rather a mood for change

- Christendom is passing but Christianity is not; this is a call “to rediscover the challenging and hazardous message of Jesus” (p29)
- Decline in Church attendance does not equal decline in Christianity as many who leave Church maintain the faith, according to research findings
- There are Christians who are active in faith but not members of Church because they found faith in a “lively, interactive, and hospitable setting” but this contrasted their experience of local congregations
- Non-Church Christians are happy to be free of “institutional ties” (p35) to live out their Christian vocation in the world, and are not waiting to join a “brilliant” Church.

Myths, if embraced, perhaps contrive to safeguard the institution. Aisthorpe quotes Solomon (p36): “The intelligent man is always open to new ideas. In fact, he looks for them...Any story sounds true until someone tells the other side and sets the record straight.”

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Change equals degree of discontent with vision of preferred future; clarity about first steps required and sufficient energy; believe benefits are greater than cost involved.

Aisthorpe addresses “stereotypes, generalisations and prejudice”, for example, the loner, the backslider, the petty-minded, the uncommitted, the incomer, the Christian in name only, inviting the reader to accept research and, like myths, open their minds to question such stereotypes. Aisthorpe (p46) cites one married couple leaving the Church, leading to a deepening of their relationship with one another and a deepening of their devotional life. Commendable, but Aisthorpe does not continue this story to show how such faith is lived out in everyday life in the world. At first reading, this may seem like privatising faith.

Aisthorpe examines exit routes from Church, citing 5 phases:

- 1) asking questions and exploring doubts
- 2) cumulative disaffection
- 3) investigating, experimenting and evaluating
- 4) tipping points, “final straws” and opportunities
- 5) detox, grief and moving on

Although there are phases on the exit route, he sees the exit in very personal ways, each unique.

Re (1) above: Aisthorpe finds that Churchless Christians have been disaffected by the Church's inability to deal with questions and doubts. I remember in my own training, some 26 years ago, a former Moderator addressed ministers in training saying "share your certainties with congregations, not your doubts". I remember questioning such a stance then as doubts and questions help us grow. Is this not something that often depends on the minister concerned and, to an extent, his or her Kirk Session?

Re (2) above: Aisthorpe points to a "snowball effect" leading to someone leaving Church. At this point, Aisthorpe does not really address whether a person's dissatisfaction is "legitimate" – as Aisthorpe quotes, there are two sides to a story and it may be that a person is alienated not simply by the actions of others but by the action of him or her self.

Re (3) above: God is not confined to Church. Is this not common knowledge?

Re (4) above: So much in Churches depends upon good communication, but what system can be found where people don't feel "let down" by the Church? There are still Churches – and expectations of congregations – that the minister will attend to certain things but this is totally unrealistic. Aisthorpe does not address at this point what a person brings to the body of the Church – are they there simply to receive or are they there to give (in the widest sense)?

Re (5) above: Aisthorpe states that "even the healthiest Churches have potential to hurt and harm" (p74). He goes on to use Churches that are "rigid" which require "conformity" as particular places from which some leavers need to recover. Some may also need to recover from the pre-packaged Christian message found in some Churches. He does not address the fact that people will still meet others "out in the world" who also have potential to hurt and harm. What does a Christian need to conform to?

Aisthorpe turns to the sense of belonging. We should celebrate diversity in Churches even though we are called as one together. Fresh Expressions seems often to gather people in "sub-culture" together and

witness growth. Various examples are given as to why some do not feel a sense of belonging in Church, all possibilities. Did the same people try other Churches? From my experience, people “try” different Churches to find one where they do find a sense of belonging. Are there some who expect to be known by others without making an effort to be known?

Aisthorpe goes on to discuss ways in which we differ as human beings, everything from gender to personality types. Surely Churches can only ever seek to embrace such differences and encourage all to find their own place within the body of the Church?

Aisthorpe addresses a vital point: (p102) “How puzzling that an institution rooted in a faith that calls for profound personal transformation, from the inside out, should be perceived as impervious to change.” The Reformed Church which should always be reforming is not. This is a source of exasperation to leavers; another cited reason for leaving Church is not necessarily that change was implemented but that it was implemented badly.

On p107 Aisthorpe states that half of Fresh Expressions of Church are run by lay people, most of whom have no formal training. Some say that the fact that worship format has not changed or developed is a reason to leave the Church behind, including sermons – why listen to just one person? Aisthorpe does not develop thinking at this stage, however worship and the role of clergy in this is now under the microscope. He states that the Church must keep its focus on Jesus and his Kingdom rather than get bogged down with “Church” stuff. P113 – “The fact that Christianity sometimes becomes Church-centred and Church-focused, rather than Jesus-centred and Kingdom-focused is a tragic reality. Rotas, keeping things going, need to be replaced by re-shaping and reform. Bland and boring needs to be replaced by exciting, innovation and edgy.”

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard: “Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.”

Aisthorpe takes up the well-known and perhaps over-used phrase, “Life is a journey”. This can apply to us all, but of course he looks to “Churchless Christians”. Drifting from Church may bring various scenarios where what is happening in personal lives may not connect

with what is happening at Church, and what is happening in the community or wider world may not connect with what is happening at Church. Creating the “ideal Church”, whatever that may look like, may not be the answer for Churchless Christians. Although some do seek reconnection with a Church that hits the right note for them, 41% in Aisthorpe’s study (p138) agreed with the statement: “I want to follow my own spiritual quest without religious institutions.” Even a “healthy Church” may have to let people go their own way.

Aisthorpe does not take up other related questions at this stage:

- 1) Can Church help someone to “love themselves” where they find this hard?
- 2) Can Church raise the questions of faith where a person has become “complacent”?
- 3) Is our faith journey better found in the company of others?
- 4) The Bible can be a complex book to understand, is there not value in listening to different perspectives to inform your own faith journey?

In p138 Aisthorpe talks about “minding the gap” where some perceive that Church does not speak to their everyday (working) lives. A sad reflection, but so also are Church Christians who revel in the Sunday format, but who do not live out that faith in action during their everyday (working) lives. The key is love. Nothing new, but always a timely reminder. Love must be found within the Church – it is made up of imperfect people – but love must be evident, and Church needs to help people grow in love and discipleship.

Aisthorpe indicates from his research that the concern to be effective in mission was instrumental in deciding to move out, or remain out, of congregational life (p167). In chapters 8 & 9, Aisthorpe, though adhering generally to his research, does his best to give perhaps a “sermon-like” view of the place of love and mission in the Christian faith. I enjoyed reading these words, though not exactly findings of research.

Research aims of Aisthorpe throw up some interesting responses – not only from those who were perhaps excited at this type of research, but also from Church people who saw this as “legitimizing” non-Church Christians, as if they were somehow undermining or lessening the work of the Church. In his research, 82% agreed with the statement: “The world needs to hear the teaching of Jesus Christ.” (p175)

Aisthorpe quotes one response at length on p176-177 from another research study. The quote includes a mention that people do all sorts of things on Saturdays and particularly on Sundays, but the interviewee had been “clueless” to that as he was so full of “the Sunday pantomime”. He then used the “Church time” to allow himself to follow up conversations in his area, significant conversations where people did not obviously take their own questions or concerns to Church. Controversially described as “the Sunday pantomime”, is the hour of worship not worthwhile? And can significant conversations not be had at Church as well?

There are dangers in the research. Though the research speaks for itself and bursts some myths regarding “Church leavers”, this tends to lump Churches into one boat – the impression sometimes left that Churches, of the institutional variety, cannot meet the aims of the Christian faith effectively. That may be true but cannot be universally applied.

Churches exist in various forms, and these multiply as groups within Churches become disaffected for whatever reason and set up an alternative version of Church! In my limited experience there are some Churches that have emerged, branding themselves as non-institutional yet still emerging with some form of structure.

In his final chapter, Aisthorpe suggests the evidence points to “a reshaping, rebalancing or reconfiguration of the Church”. (p194) He says the difference between the traditional and emerging alternatives is immense: “the difference between when to meet next and a whole legal and administrative framework...contrast between who brings cakes the next time and layers of bylaws and policies, often couched in archaic language”. (p195)

Some Churches within institutional frameworks manage to buck the trend and find the space to prosper, however research tends to see this more of an exception. It is perhaps beyond the capacity of most denominational Churches to make the transition to something significantly different from that which they have inherited. (p198)

How does the Church embrace transition? How do we deal with the decline of institutional Church? “Denial or unrealistic optimism only exacerbates the situation. “ (p198) Should the institutional Church

radically change or should it be left alone to decline and for fresh expressions to emerge and create a new sense of Church for the future?

Interestingly, Aishtorpe states (p204): “The Church of Scotland’s Church Without Walls Report challenged congregations to “turn again to be people with Jesus at the centre, travelling where Jesus takes us.” Such an exhortation, captivating in its simplicity and rousing in its immense implications, eclipses all considerations of denomination or Church government.”

(p205) “Church...occurs when people are touched by the living Christ and share the journey of faith with others. Whether that occurs in an historic building or...wherever, is unimportant.”

Church Without Walls Report (2001)

In this study time, I do not propose to write a summary of this Report, rather extract some salient points. The report does say at the beginning that “this is only the start of a journey we will travel together for some years to come.” The hope is that we will all “respond afresh to Jesus’ call to “Follow me””. The remit included, “re-examine in depth the primary purposes of the Church and the shape of the Church of Scotland as we enter into the next Millennium; to formulate proposals for a process of continuing reform.”

Re-affirming the primary purposes of the Church:
to follow Jesus Christ as Lord;
to worship God and to share in Christ’s mission in the world;
to turn back to God and neighbour.

1. Vision for the Church is achieved best by allowing congregations the space and opportunity to develop their own patterns of ministry, mission, worship and leadership that suits the people and situations where they are. Congregations are encouraged to review and reflect on issues, changes and missionary opportunities in the community. Patterns of ministry need to change.
2. Structures need to be flexible, not rigid. Let the local dictate the way forward rather than central Church. Presbyteries are places

where people do their Presbyterian duty, but gain little inspiration or support. Local congregations with the desire for vision and change sense a culture of inhibition that limits initiative for all except the boldest...time to destroy, overthrow, plant and build. Presbyterianism has become a form of institutional distrust. The plea for changes in structures must be accompanied by changing mindsets. Much of the frustration of Presbytery lies in its style of operating. It has been suggested that it move from “courtroom” to “courtyard” – a pattern of dialogue rather than debate.

3. In times past, faith has been passed from one generation to another. Today that “chain of memory” has been broken. We need to move from our arrogant position – “Nothing will happen to us, we are the national Church” – to a place of humility; humility in the presence of a loving God and a willingness to be involved in the process of renewal.
4. The Kirk Session must review worship and assess potential for development; review style of meetings and process of communication.
5. Heart of local Church is relationships and friendship with one another, of all ages, and there is a need to offer ways for people to develop their relationship with God.
6. What leadership structure and ministry team are required? Identify gifts that can be encouraged rather than find people to support existing Church structures.
7. The shape of the regional and central Church, and a review of the culture and timing of the General Assembly, were passed to the Board of Practice and Procedure.
8. The heart of reform is the reform of the heart. We are all called to a life of prayer. Congregations are encouraged to take risks and try new ways so that faith may grow. Two barriers to change lie deep in our nature: the twins of fear and power. Change will not be the result of following a long list of recommendations, it will come where people take the time to discover the one area that might make a difference for them and then they do it, working in partnership with God’s Spirit.

A Healthy Church

Integrity

means:

Jesus is at the core.

He is the beginning, middle and end of our story.

We remember our Church's experience covers thousands of years.

What we say is consistent with what we do.

Body and Soul

means:

We strive for a lasting face-to-face encounter with God.

We involve the whole person and the whole people of God.

The quality of our worship and devotion are vital.

The whole of life is our concern.

Open House

means:

We welcome all with open doors and open arms.

We go out to find the uninvited.

We make our home among need.

We listen and we speak.

Growth

means:

We are trainees learning skills.

We are followers on the road.

Seeds have to be nurtured before they will bear fruit.

God adds to our number.

Local

means:

The global good news needs to be spoken in a local accent.

We choose to be real rather than virtual.

We value every locality.

Love and care

means:

Our community will only be satisfied with Christ-like relationships.

We put our hands to work.

Notes from other sources

In June 1953, Tom Allan wrote in the preface to his book, “The Face of my Parish”, “I have tried to analyse the causes of our failure in the institutional Church to meet the challenge of secular society, and to set down, as honestly as I am able, the major problems which confronted us as we sought to become a “missionary parish”...We make no kind of claim to finding a blue-print for a solution...We have made some tentative and stumbling steps along a road which has been discovered mainly by the Churches on the Continent and in Asia, and which appears to hold the promise of new life for a Church courageous enough to set out upon it. Increasingly in our own country this road is being followed.”

The books I have reviewed in my study leave are not new endeavours. Tom Allan’s book points to similar challenges of his day and that was well over 60 years ago!

Let’s note a few statistics: in 2005, the number of communicants was 535,834 – in 2015 it was 352,912 – a ten-year loss of 182,922. In the last three years, full-time ministry candidates beginning their formation process were 12, 15 and 16 respectively; number completing training was 24, 15 and 14 respectively. The number of charges in 2010 was 1134 with 939 serving ministers; in 2015, we had 1040 charges with 786 serving ministers. (Source: General Assembly Blue Book 2016)

Fresh Expressions is a movement which is growing, from England to north of the border, however from a recent article in Life and Work, it seems that this movement often impacts on those with no previous Church connection – rather than the Churchless Christians referred to in Aisthorpe’s research. People gather in all sorts of ways that look nothing like traditional worship but are still Church. The Church of Scotland, through the General Assembly, has invited every parish to explore the possibilities of establishing a new expression of Church by 2020. God is working beyond the institution! Whilst this movement is not minister-centred, the input of minister and collective vision is no doubt important. Perhaps as this movement unfolds the realisation that ministers do not have to lead will be welcome – one, because there are fewer clergy anyway, and two, because there will be less Church finance behind such a movement to enable clergy to be paid – they might have to work and minister at the same time – a novel idea!

Rev Dr Doug Gay, Principal of Trinity College, Glasgow, wrote a series of interesting articles in 2014/15 in Life and Work about “Reforming the Kirk” with many helpful suggestions – about de-centralising funding and power to a small number of Presbyteries – about training more ministers, training them appropriately and with proper funding – specialised ministries – supporting our present ministers better – and entrusting sacraments and other duties to trained Elders. Dr Gay’s words include: “My hopes for a new conversation about reform are hopes for a period of listening and reflection across the Church...taking time to reflect and weigh the questions is likely to deepen our sense of the scale of the challenges facing us.” As I write, Dr. Gay is embarking on a series of three lectures (The Chalmers Lectures) on this very subject during February 2017 with the headline: “a candid, forthright and bold analysis of the state of the Church of Scotland and the choices facing it.” Whilst it is certainly good to take time to consider what the future may hold – Tom Allan did it 60 years ago – Outside Verdict sought to give an opinion 15 years ago – Church Without Walls Report sought to radically change the Church 16 years ago – my question is this: how long does it actually take to effect change in the Kirk? The recent Kirk Roadshows on the “Future of the Kirk” were open to hear views being expressed, but sadly ended on a note of trying to sell the Ministries Council idea (not terribly new nor innovative) of hub-style ministries. Will the Kirk listen to Dr. Gay’s candid, forthright and bold analysis or shall it fall on the institutional deaf ears that sadly seem wholly unable to change? I served as Presbytery Clerk of Falkirk for the last five years, now retired from that position. During that time I tried my utmost to make the system serve the Church rather than the Church serve the system, but it is frustratingly painful hitting brick walls.

Study leave

Books/publications reviewed during study leave:

- 1) The Invisible Church (Steve Aisthorpe)
- 2) Outside Verdict (by Harry Reid 2001)
- 3) Inside Verdict (by Steve Mallon 2003)
- 4) Church Without Walls Report (2001)

Objectives during study leave:

- Examine the research relating to Church decline

- Examine possible ways to develop Church and congregation in the future
- Examine different ways to connect with people in the local community in terms of the Christian faith
- All four publications have been mentioned nationally – the first book at the General Assembly of 2016 with encouragement to the Church to read it – and also encouragement from the same GA 2016 to re-read the Church Without Walls Report. Together with the other two older publications, I wish to give the future direction of the Church due consideration which will inform my ministry locally and reflect on its position nationally. I believe this time of study will enhance my ministry within my local Church setting, within Presbytery, and assist in understanding the national picture. With this study and understanding, I would hope that this would help with new mission initiatives in my local setting and inform our action as a Church.

Summary

Let's deal with the negatives first:

1. Mallon says: "One thing the Church of Scotland is not, is dying. It is alive." Incorrect. The Church as we know it is dying and the statistics are plain to see. It is alive in the sense that the institution still remains but for how long in its present form? It is alive in the sense that there are a number of positive initiatives happening throughout the country but that same thing could be said at any point throughout the years of the Church's decline. The present structure is not working.
2. The General Assembly and Presbyteries are stale structures that speak little, if anything, to the remaining membership of the Church, far less those not connected with the Church and it is seems outwith the Church's capability to reform these in any meaningful way. Why then do we insist that ministers and Elders must waste their time at meaningless meetings without the prospect of meaningful reform? General Assembly has the potential to make society "nervous" and "interested"...potential maybe, but only with radical change and there is no sign that that is coming any time soon.
3. Centralised bureaucracy remains and, even though there are many nice people who work at 121, it is also incapable of change.

Why on earth does the Church pay inflated salaries to people doing no more work than your average minister? Why do we insist on business terms of employment that are alien to the work of the Church? Why can't the Church offices move to a cheaper location? Suggested change is quickly swept under the carpet! One small example of bureaucracy – why do ministers have to apply in quadruplicate for study leave, have it agreed by a small centralised committee, and produce a report, all for the sake of two weeks and a few hundred pounds per year when ministers get paid an annual salary of over £32,000 without having to justify any work in support of that? This could easily be a devolved power to local Presbyteries.

4. What was the point of "Outside Verdict"? A book to engender debate for a short while and then back into the old routines? None of the proposals from outside have managed to weave their way inside!
5. We have a recruitment initiative for ministers yet it is obvious that many present ministers are struggling and no longer feel supported by its Ministry Council. We have a recruitment drive but failed dismally to reform the education system and working conditions for ministers before launching such a campaign.
6. How can ministers be key to change and at the same time not be central to fresh expressions of Church? Where people are employed full-time in pioneer ministries and new initiatives, we have to remember that it is the offerings of the "bums on seats" that often enable new directions to be taken. How do we hold it all together with integrity?
7. People of all ages are not connecting with the Kirk. Church exceptions apply but that is the broad scenario.
8. Local Churches are the place for change. This can happen when minister and Elders and congregation grasp a vision. Sadly, there are many Churches that see nothing beyond their own walls far less a Church Without Walls. Often pillars of the Church are to be found blocking any kind of vision, and such Churches will simply die in time.
9. "The Church Without Walls Report urged the Church to explore new ways of being – and even now, after three years, we still hear the excuses: we can't do this overnight, it will take time. Nonsense! The Church is being offered its own wake-up call, and

still it hesitates to take it.” (Fiona Fidgin) Ah, Fiona hits the nail on the head when it comes to Church reform!

10. Aisthorpe addresses a vital point: “How puzzling that an institution rooted in a faith that calls for profound personal transformation, from the inside out, should be perceived as impervious to change.”
11. It is perhaps beyond the capacity of most denominational Churches to make the transition to something significantly different from that which they have inherited.
12. Structures need to be flexible, not rigid. Let the local dictate the way forward rather than central Church. Presbyteries are places where people do their Presbyterian duty, but gain little inspiration or support. Local congregations with the desire for vision and change sense a culture of inhibition that limits initiative for all except the boldest...time to destroy, overthrow, plant and build. Presbyterianism has become a form of institutional distrust. The plea for changes in structures must be accompanied by changing mindsets. Sadly, the Church Without Walls report offloaded change in Presbyteries and General Assembly to the Board of Practice and Procedure (where it seems to have got lost in the long grass) when perhaps another little group of radicals should have come up with some sweeping changes?
13. Aisthorpe focuses on Churchless Christians, however there are many in society who are not connected with either the Church or the Christian faith and our mission is to them and the wider world. The Church seeks to be relevant and meaningful whilst at the same time being true to the demands of the Gospel and what it means for people to “follow Jesus”. And despite research, there are many who drift from the Church and from the Christian faith.

And now the positives:

1. Peter Neilson invites us to choose one of two options: “Stand in the way of change or consent to a new Church for a new culture.” Let’s go for the latter!
2. The local Church has the potential to change and the potential to be relevant and meaningful.
3. Ministers and Elders can be key to change but only if they can break out of the old mould and re-interpret what it means to be a minister and Elder today.

4. Keep talking about the positives but don't stick your head in the sand when faced with the statistics and reality of Church decline. Denial or unrealistic optimism only exacerbates the situation.
5. There is a need to offer ways of helping adults and children in their spiritual journey.
6. A number of people in secular society are interested in spirituality. And research has shown that many people who drift from institutional Church maintain their Christian faith. Time for the Church to re-connect?
7. There is growth in Christianity in the world, so it's not all about decline.
8. Share your questions and doubts as well as your certainties. It helps us all grow in faith.
9. God is not confined to Church. He is at work in the world!
10. The fact that Christianity sometimes becomes Church-centred and Church-focused, rather than Jesus-centred and Kingdom-focused is a tragic reality. Rotas, keeping things going, need to be replaced by re-shaping and reform. Bland and boring needs to be replaced by exciting, innovation and edgy.
11. There will never be a perfect Church, only those seeking perfection. There will always be Churchless Christians who would not want to join even the "healthiest Church", but that does not stop the Church seeking to change to be meaningful and relevant and to connect with Christians and all people within their communities. A healthy Church as described above is a good point of reference.
12. In Aisthorpe's research, 82% agreed with the statement: "The world needs to hear the teaching of Jesus Christ."
13. Aishtorpe states: "The Church of Scotland's Church Without Walls Report challenged congregations to "turn again to be people with Jesus at the centre, travelling where Jesus takes us." Such an exhortation, captivating in its simplicity and rousing in its immense implications, eclipses all considerations of denomination or Church government."
14. The Kirk Session must review worship and assess potential for development; review style of meetings and process of communication.
15. The heart of reform is the reform of the heart. We are all called to a life of prayer. Congregations are encouraged to take risks and try new ways so that faith may grow. Two barriers to change lie

deep in our nature: the twins of fear and power. Change will not be the result of following a long list of recommendations, it will come where people take the time to discover the one area that might make a difference for them and then they do it, working in partnership with God's Spirit.

16. Vision for the Church is achieved best by allowing congregations the space and opportunity to develop their own patterns of ministry, mission, worship and leadership that suits the people and situations where they are. Congregations are encouraged to review and reflect on issues, changes and missionary opportunities in the community. Patterns of ministry need to change.

Structures will only change if there is enough momentum of will to make it happen, but years pass with little or no change, so the future looks bleak for the institution as we know it. Does it have to come to a grinding halt, even death itself, before being forced to find new life? Do too many love the Church as it presently exists and operates to bear the thought of radical change? Are there people wielding power within the system to maintain the status quo? The local Church where minister, Elders and members embrace change, seek to reform, and strive to be a healthy Church, stands a chance of handing the baton of Good News to the next generation. This avenue I will continue to pursue within Falkirk Trinity Church – our aim being “Trinity Transforming Lives”.

We end on a positive note from Aisthorpe: “Church...occurs when people are touched by the living Christ and share the journey of faith with others. Whether that occurs in an historic building or...wherever, is unimportant.”

Rev Robert S.T. Allan
Minister
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January 2017