



A View from the Parish

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Will an *Outside Verdict* on the state of the Church of Scotland be any more welcome than the many other verdicts that have been handed down over the years? Clearly some people are enthusiastic about what he has to say, and Harry Reid has fulfilled his remit with both vigour and enthusiasm. That he was able to pack so much research into a short time frame is tribute to his commitment to the task he was invited to undertake, and the resulting book is certainly thought provoking. I believe it is particularly helpful that Harry has summarised his conclusion in 'The Twenty-one Proposals', and am certain that they ring bells for many in the Church – even if several of them have already been tried or at the least thoroughly investigated.

Take his proposal on the sale of manses. The guarantee of *accommodation for ministers* has, over the years, been both an attraction and a drawback to the management of the body of ministers the Church seeks to deploy. The eighties saw the question of manses being discussed with vigour and, in the late eighties and early nineties, I was involved with the Board of Ministry in detailed discussions on the possible sale of manses. But time and again, we were faced with the problem of how this would affect the mobility of ministers – given the variation in property prices and availability across Scotland. The idea was put on hold then, but on at least two further occasions that I know of, the matter was investigated and subsequently departed from. Rightly or wrongly, who can tell? Yet, if we were to adopt the idea that there should be more direction of ministers to places of need (another point made in the text, though not included in the 'Proposals') the situation with regard to accommodation would be even more complex – and expensive! That said, a significant number of ministers like myself have always seen the provision of a tied house as one of the less attractive aspects of ministry. Had I started paying a mortgage at the beginning of my ministry, I would by now have paid it off in its entirety! I am sure the issue of manses will not go away.



One other suggestion in the book simply reflects the practice of many congregations who have promoted 'invite a friend' Sundays, which would seem to be what Harry describes as 'Super Sundays'. Of course these are seldom done on an area-wide basis – and that might indeed be something that Presbyteries could consider. However, the fact that this idea makes it to the 'Twenty-one Proposals' brings me to a general point I feel is worth making about the book. Throughout, the emphasis is on the Church of Scotland as an organisation, about revamping its bureaucracy and systems, and about that organisation pulling the strings of local congregations. This seems to me to miss a point that, to quote one of those 'banal' choruses that are dismissed by those seeking only musical excellence in our worship, "the church is a people". We can move things around all we like, but, unless the whole people of God begin again to take seriously their calling to follow Christ in their everyday lives, that will be window-dressing.

The balance has become skewed. Many ministers and elders – not forgetting committed members of congregations throughout the land – spend an inordinate amount of time in meetings. That is, meetings to do with the Church organisation, to discuss the 'crisis' in the Kirk, to debate matters sent down from the Presbytery and the General Assembly, so much so that *that* becomes their chief involvement with the Church of Jesus Christ. Here I am particularly concerned with elders and members. Most of them have family and work commitments, and if they are to find time to be involved in community activities, and to 'be' the *Church Without Walls*, we need to demand far less of their time inside those walls. I have always believed that the primary 'activity' of any congregation is public worship – that is, a worship that inspires encourages and renews people on their faith journey. If the church could re-discover that focus I suggest that many of our 'problems' would be dealt with in a single blow.

But who will be responsible for the preparation of such worship? Now there's a current crunch question on which the book returns an open verdict! The number of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament is declining. That's a fact. And many of those who are ordained are employed in other areas than *our* parish churches. A significant number

are Hospital Chaplains; some Army, Prison and University Chaplains as well as full-time Industrial Chaplains, those who work overseas, and those who work in Church Administration. There are, therefore, a diminishing number of ministers available for parish ministry. Some people view this as God's sign that the Church needs to rediscover the 'ministry of the whole people of God' (a subject to which I shall return with enthusiasm later). Others, that it is not surprising that more people are not coming forward for the ordained ministry given the confusion which currently reigns as to the precise role of that ministry in today's church. Whichever position you take, some would also argue that the constant re-iteration of the message that the Church of Scotland is in crisis does nothing to encourage folk to hear a call of God to ordained ministry. People are more inclined to want to be part of a success story than to risk their lives on what everyone tells them is a failure! You might even argue that the shortage of ordained ministers is but a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When I entered ministry some thirty years ago, I was quite clear as to what I was letting myself in for. My calling, as I understood it, was to be a preacher (minister of Word and Sacrament) and pastor. Yes, there would be administrative duties involving Sessions and Boards, and I made a commitment to serve when called upon in Presbytery and General Assembly Boards, but my chief responsibilities were as preacher and pastor. Shortly after I was accepted as a candidate for the ministry of the Church of Scotland, I was invited to meet with the Rev D.P. Howie, the minister (by then retired) who had seen me grow up to mature Christian faith. The main thrust of his advice was that I would have a choice to make as a parish minister. I could *either* be a preacher *or* a pastor! For 'DP' as he was affectionately known, preparation of a worthy service of worship of Almighty God week by week took a great deal of time spent in reading, meditation, writing and re-writing, which meant that there was little space left for pastoral work. Yes, 'DP' conducted funerals, weddings and baptisms, and yes, he was involved pastorally whenever the need arose, but the lion's share of his week was taken up with preparation of worship. The crafting of the sermon, the prayers and the often equally time-consuming task of choosing hymns appropriate to the theme on a



particular day demand that those who prepare worship spend many hours each week in preparation (I would suggest something like fifteen to twenty hours in total). All these years on, then, I can reflect on the wisdom of 'DP's advice – although, with the arrogance of youth, I did not take it! For I have always found that my pastoral work informs my preaching, and so have sought to hold these two in creative tension throughout. Harry Reid's analysis would seem to support this view of ministry to a large extent (viz. his oft repeated statement that the Kirk's ministers are its elite troops) though he does admit that this position was received with surprise, and even irritation by those with whom he discussed it. Am I surprised by this reaction? Not a bit of it, for the current position in 'the Church' seems to be that, while ordained ministers will have some input into worship and pastoral care, the minister's chief role in the future should be to *enable other church members to fulfil these functions.*

Which brings me to the current 'in' phrase in the Church – 'the ministry of the whole people of God'. As I understand it, this phrase has come to mean that every congregation in the land should have preachers, worship leaders and pastors, as well as administrators, coffee makers and servers, flower arrangers, magazine editors, children's ministry leaders and others, ready for service. The 'minister's' role would then be to train these people for their tasks. Perhaps naively, I have a different understanding of the phrase 'the ministry of the whole people of God' – that is that every Christian is called to 'minister' according to his or her gifts. I derive that interpretation from Paul's letter to the Romans and the Corinthians – in both letters, as it happens, in the twelfth chapters. Turn to 1 Corinthians 12 and from verse 4, Paul writes: "There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service." Thus, I have always believed that one of my tasks as a minister of Word and Sacrament was to prepare worship worthy of the God who gave Jesus Christ to the world, and so to encourage people in their daily walk with Christ. Thus strengthened, the various parts of the body are equipped to take the gospel into their homes, their work places and

their leisure pursuits – that is *their* ordination. No minister of Word and Sacrament could possibly hope to reach all those places that the rest of the church reaches day in and day out in Scotland and throughout the world. Why would we then want to take up more of these people's time and energy training and preparing to do what 'the minister' has been trained (and, dare I say, gifted) to do, when that 'minister' is provided with a stipend to enable him or her to give the work their undivided attention? I realise that this position leaves me open to a charge of 'clericalism' but would argue simply that a body made up entirely of hands, feet, eyes or ears would be a contradiction in terms. Certainly, those who feel gifted to participate more directly in the leadership of worship and in pastoral care, and who have the time to do so, should be and are being encouraged through worship and pastoral care groups in many congregations. But it would surely be a pity if such involvement diverted the majority of our members from the primary task of ministry beyond the congregation. Indeed, as I have already indicated, I believe that such an understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God is the best example there is of a *Church Without Walls*. However, if we are to understand the 'ministry of the whole people of God' as meaning that every gifted member should be trained to preach and pastor, the logical step would be to make all full-time ministers redundant! They would then return to ordinary working life and serve their local congregations as committed members! The stipend and manse monies released would fund any amount of full-time youth workers, administrators, trainers and pastors as well as paying elders and others a 'mini-stipend'. Perhaps that was what Harry had in mind when he suggests that Protestantism implies the eventual redundancy of ministers? However, given that that solution would appear to be a long way down the line, in the meantime I suggest that most ministers would not have any problem with workload if they felt that what they were doing was valued as a distinctive contribution to the life of the whole people of God.

Two further areas of Harry Reid's investigation of the Church of Scotland from the 'outside' prompted my interest. The first was his dealing with the (relatively new in Church history terms) acceptance of women as eligible to serve the church as ordained elders and



ministers. The second was his plea for a 'principal official media spokesperson'. I have a particular, personal interest in both of these subject – as an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament who happens to be a woman, and as the Convener of the Church of Scotland's Board of Communication.

I was twenty-two years of age when the General Assembly of 1968 agreed to accept women into the ordained ministry on the same terms and conditions as men. At that time I was studying in Glasgow University, and had had the opportunity to take some classes in the Faculty of Divinity while completing my Arts degree. Surprising myself, and everyone else who knew me, I subsequently made application to be considered as a candidate for the full-time ordained ministry, and was accepted. When, at the end of my course, I was called to my first charge I went with the determination that I would never assume my gender to be the cause of any difficulties I encountered. And throughout the ensuing years I have found that to be a very helpful attitude. Yes, there are still some people in the Church who believe that women's ordination is anathema. They are entitled to their opinion. But by far the greater majority have accepted my call – and got on with it. Involvement in Presbytery and General Assembly Committees has been a feature of my ministry throughout. I accept that I may even have been the 'token' woman on some Committees in the early days, but as time went on, I believe my gender was irrelevant. In 1987 I became Vice-Convener of the then Department of Ministry, becoming Convener in 1988 and subsequently taking over as the Convener of the Board of Ministry when it was re-established as a separate entity in 1990. I was Moderator of the Presbytery of Aberdeen during my time there, and have served on various *ad hoc* and standing committees of the General Assembly over the years. In addition, as Harry notes in his book, I currently convene the Board of Communication. Many ministers of the opposite gender have had the same varied involvement, and many, both male and female have not had, or taken, such opportunities. And, no, there has not been a 'woman' Moderator of the General Assembly – yet. The Rev Mary Levison, the chief protagonist for the ordination of women to the ministry, was, in many people's eyes, the obvious candidate. But

on the one occasion of which I am aware that her name was proposed she was not the preferred choice of the group charged with bringing forward a nomination to the General Assembly. C'est la vie? Nevertheless, as night follows day, there is nothing surer than that, when a woman with the required experience and gifts emerges, there will be a female incumbent in the role of Moderator of the General Assembly – and why not, as Harry suggests, a female elder? Only let us pray that, when that day comes, there is no hint of the tokenism. For I am inclined to agree with Harry Reid that this is an issue that diverts the Kirk from more serious ones – such as the question of who speaks for the Church!

It is perhaps understandable that Harry, a respected journalist, sees this as one of his great professional frustrations with the Kirk. It must be an annoyance to those involved in the quest for sound bite or extended quote on a matter they believe will interest their readers, listeners and viewers. Instead our Media Relations Unit, under the skilled direction of Pat Holdgate, will direct all media enquiries to the Convener or Secretary/ Director of the appropriate Board. This may appear to be cumbersome to those who want an instant response, but I truly doubt that any one spokesperson could have a handle on every last detail of the work of the Church nationwide. If, as Harry suggests, the Kirk should occasionally conduct plebiscites when important decisions are to be taken, this might become even more problematic – at least at the moment our Media Relations Unit has access to decisions of Presbyteries, the general Assembly and its constituent boards!

Outside Verdict has admirably addressed the remit that Harry Reid was handed by The Very Rev Andrew McLellan. He has looked at the Church and has boldly offered some conclusions – although I am inclined still to believe that these are too heavily weighted in the direction of the organisation rather than on 'the church' as a people. He has ranged over a whole variety of topics affecting the Kirk, its effectiveness and its image in the New Scotland of the twenty-first century, and has done so in an eminently readable and positive manner.

Will *Outside Verdict* be, together with the *Church Without Walls* report,



the catalyst to a new, relevant Church of Scotland? I wonder, for my feeling is that the Kirk currently suffers from analysis paralysis. We spend so much time debating the problems that we do not leave time to *be* the Church of Jesus Christ, offering fitting worship to God, taking the gospel to his world, in word and action. I do not deny that the Kirk is experiencing difficult times and decisions, and that the great hope is that we will find some sovereign remedy. Yet I suspect that, through these difficult times, the Lord may simply be recalling his church to a renewal of faithful discipleship. For, were the Church to discover afresh the cost of discipleship it would also find renewed confidence to be a force in the land!