



## An Elder's Reflections

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When Andrew McLellan conceived this book he sought a shrewd analysis by a disinterested - but interested - outsider. Harry Reid's interest is apparent. He wishes the Church well and engaged enthusiastically in his task. He is not disinterested, however, and what has emerged is a series of impressions and reflections which series is both partial and patchy. We learn a lot about Harry Reid in this book. This does not make his ideas and suggestions redundant but it does mean that the analysis has been subjective rather than objective, as are my reactions to the book.

Harry Reid, among many others I suspect, appears to believe or assume that the Church of Scotland began at the Reformation. Communities which worshipped before the Reformation did not become different communities simply by adopting a presbyterian system of church government. We are part of the Christian church which in Scotland began and has its roots long before the Reformation. If we do not recognise this continuity, we are limiting not only our traditions and our history but also our vision for the future. We are not a sect founded at or by the Reformation. We are part of the one Holy Catholic Apostolic Church.

The view of the Church as beginning with the Reformation colours what many Scottish people expect from the Church of Scotland. Our system of presbyteries has served us through the changing years. As Harry Reid has pointed out, society has changed and the change continues at an ever quickening rate. Postmodernism has probably as many definitions as people trying to define it but it is suggested that one of the symptoms of the postmodern era is the reluctance of individuals to join organisations or to make a commitment to a larger group or body. When this is added to increasing geographical mobility and a trend for individuals to concern themselves with rights and wants of self and family rather than needs of and duties to community, the

Church of Scotland finds itself ministering to a people vastly altered from, say, thirty or fifty years ago.

I do believe that there should be Christian worship offered up in every part of Scotland and I think that this should be the vision of the Church of Scotland. I do not think, however, that the Christian worship in each parish *must* be carried out in every case by the Church of Scotland. I wish that, instead of damning Russell Barr with faint praise for his children's address, Harry Reid had drawn attention to Russell Barr's contribution to "The Realm of Reform," where he explores the issue of the parish thoughtfully and clearly. The idea of "maxi-parishes" is interesting, but can we not go further? What about having the clergy from different churches working together and holding services in different traditions in the same building, at different times, with joint worship taking place as well, so that members and adherents can be exposed to and be encouraged to join in a greater range of worship? I do think, however, that any ventures of this sort will be worth little unless and until the Roman Catholic Church is also involved.

Congregationalists have traditionally held that "The Church of Jesus Christ is the local Church - and it is nothing else". That view was not popular with others forty years ago, and is perhaps even less so now. Is there not now a case for Christian people to think in terms of practising their faith globally and universally but worshipping together locally?

Ministers should serve the whole Community. For this reason I think it is important that ministers continue to live with the parish or area which they serve. They can also be useful in protecting the people on the fringes of the church from those who see themselves as its centre. Churches must not become "holy clubs" for the like-minded. The thought that people might not know the names of the people who live near them, while rushing off in their cars to engage in gleeful Christian fellowship with their ecclesiastical cronies should make us uncomfortable. Is it not more important than knowing the people next to us in church that we find the worship stimulating, and know the people we actually live near and work with? A laity busy concentrating

their attention on the church can be a danger to the church and not always a help to a minister. Should the main practice of our Christian conviction not be in every day life - in the way we treat our neighbours, our employees our employers and our families? There is a lot to be said in my view for allowing ministers greater freedom to direct the running of the churches in a way that equips the people better to run and take part in their communities - local and global. Our Christian faith must inform our behaviour, our voting, the way we require our elected representatives to govern. These are the ways in which Christian people might make a difference – more so than in running church-based social activities.

One of the most impressive (to me) parts of the book was when Harry Reid dealt with West of Scotland sectarianism. He has great insight and his suggestions here deserve further attention. He suggests that the Church of Scotland should be instrumental in setting up a major investigation into relations between Protestants and Catholics in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. If a similar initiative has been tried before, the problems are still with us. We cannot give up. I think also that Harry Reid himself, if he is willing, should be involved and, in particular, we should work with the Catholic Church in looking at the social, political and economic conditions and provisions in areas of our country where sectarianism is rife. Harry Reid's suggestions about tackling Rangers Football Club may cause a few smiles, but the subject is not funny, nor is the problem confined to people who cannot be expected to know better.

Set against his obvious and passionate distaste for sectarianism, I found Harry Reid's suggestion that ministers should wear clerical collars more often and that elders should identify themselves with badges of office somewhat contradictory.

I found the parts of the book which reported the feelings and reactions of ministers to their working conditions sad but entirely believable. I suppose that we should not be surprised that the kind of critical and demanding consumerism which has spread through our society in the last thirty years or so has also affected the way we treat ministers.



Harry Reid is sympathetic about the workload but I would suggest that the strain, responsibility and intensity of workload is probably comparable with those of people in many other professions, such as law and medicine. The big difference is of course in income. We need ministers of high intellect and good education and I have always thought that we should not compromise by dropping educational standards. Should we, however, expect these men and women to work for less than half or a third of the salary that they might expect to command in a career outside the church? The fact that many ministers now rely on their spouses to provide income to maintain the family and save for retirement must surely have its effect on the potential mobility of the clergy.

At least ministers can surely still take comfort in the fact that, unlike many other professions, at least no-one is going to sue them for failing to quote enough R S Thomas or Edwin Muir in sermons.

Harry Reid does suggest that the Church should celebrate Easter and should celebrate it more publicly. It would be hard to disagree with this. I wonder, however, how much research Harry Reid carried out in his period of study about Holy Week and the celebration of Easter. He does not mention any studies or special times of reflection during the period of Lent and makes no mention of Holy Week services. This brings me round to my main difficulty with this book and that is how much Harry Reid's past experience, personality and personal style may have got in the way of his task.

I said at the beginning that I felt we learned a fair amount about the author from his book. Around his tour of different church services, Harry Reid trailed his coat of emotional and stylistic preference. Not much wrong with that, perhaps, but it did seem to impede objectivity. Numbers are numbers, I thought, until I looked more carefully at some of the descriptions. One hall was "packed;..... just over 170 souls crammed into the cramped space" including "representatives of the uniformed organisations, swelling the numbers..." Another service had "a reasonable number of worshippers – over 100 - .....not a poor attendance, considering it was the third service of the day." Yet a



congregation of between 250 and 300 at one of three morning services in St Giles is described apparently without irony, as “..smallish..” Harry Reid mentions the words “passion” and “joy” often in his book, but does not seem able to acknowledge that one person’s outpouring of passion and joy may seem to someone of a different (dare I say east coast?) temperament as an embarrassing display of overwhelming glee, and a quiet humility just might contain joy and not sullenness.

Harry Reid expresses his preference and desire for evangelical certainties. At the heart of creation lies the most glorious of mysteries. There is always a risk that by trying to define God we necessarily limit Him to the confines of our imagination. Churches and ministers aid us to be inspired, provoked, challenged to respond to that mystery. The Church of Scotland is not and must not be an end in itself. Rather, the Christian Church in Scotland, (loosely defined of course) is called to serve the wholeness of life, by seeking its evolving advent, or witnessing to its continuing, if hidden, presence.

