

AGM Report

Date: 24/6/18

I think that if today I was to stand here and tell you all about the life of Westwood Church I would just be telling you what you already know. What I need to do, I think, is begin in a less obvious place – The General Assembly that met just last month in Edinburgh.

The General Assembly does not attract the media coverage it once did, church generally is less news worthy than it used to be and even if you have the facility to follow the reports and debates online through live video feed you probably have to have an awful lot of spare time on your hands to even want to do that. You could probably think on a hundred others things you would rather be doing!

Some would say that this year's General Assembly was rather grumpy. I would say it smacked of desperation. A body of Charity Trustees known as the Council of Assembly brought forward a strategic plan to help guide the church through the next ten years. To bring a plan to the floor of Assembly is a pretty radical thing to do. However the plan was not accepted because it was not a radical enough plan. So the Council of Assembly got a pretty rough ride and were told to come back next year with a suitably radical plan. The fact is we are getting pretty close to the end of the road.

On 31st December 1959 the membership of the Church of Scotland peaked at 1.3 million members. 59 years later we still have the .3. one million members have disappeared from our communion rolls in the last 6 decades. In any organisation the rule of *thirds* applies. 1/3 do the work while the other 2/3 are conspicuous by their absence. The church is no different. 1/3 of our members are in church on a Sunday morning the other 2/3 are not. Roughly speaking 120,000 Church of Scotland members go to church on a Sunday morning while another 240,000 are not in church.

Our own church here in Westwood mirrors that scenario quite well. 380 members and about 120 in church on Sunday morning.

The Church has changed considerably in the last 60 years but our expectations have not. We still expect to have our church building to go to, we still expect to have our own minister in the pulpit even though that congregation does not have the wherewithal to raise the funds to pay a minister's stipend or have the money to heat, light and maintain their church building and manse. But the beauty of the Church of Scotland is that we help each other out. Wealthier congregations contribute more to the central funds in order to support those congregations that are less well off. As the Church has declined the balance of that equation has become critical and is at breaking point. The Church of Scotland is a national church committed to providing Christian ministry throughout Scotland but we know we can no longer do that, we simply do not have the resources of buildings, people, ministers or money to go on doing what we have always done. The Church of Scotland ran at a deficit of £2.2 million in 2017. Funding gaps like that are normally covered by using financial reserves but

year on year deficits along with poor returns on investments means that financial reserves have run dry.

Two years ago Westwood Church took part in the Church Census and it told us that 75% of the people in our pews were female and aged between 75 & 84 years. That statistic mirrors what we see across the Church of Scotland. Not wishing to be too pointed, I think we would all agree that another ten years will make a big difference to the number and ability of the majority of church members.

So we are running out of money and we are running out of people. There's something else we are running out of... Ministers. There are around 800 Ministers in the Church of Scotland 600 of whom are due to retire in 10 years time – I'm one of them – and despite efforts to attract people into the Ministry little impression has been made. Perhaps that's just as well as we don't have the money to pay them!

If you are thinking the future looks grim that's because it is. The general expectation is that the Church of Scotland will have all but disappeared in 10 years time. Or I might say on a more optimistic note – The Church of Scotland, as we know it.

If we are going to be hitting the buffers in ten years time then the next five years are critical. If we haven't got the seeds of something new in place within five years then planting those seeds in the five that follow will be even more challenging. We are going to find it hard and it will test our faith and our understanding of what it means to be a church. This is a time for starting afresh, starting from scratch, not rebranding, not repackaging, not reinventing ourselves, not talking about church but talking about faith, building relationships. A Genesis.