

## A SHORT THEOLOGICAL NOTE ON CHURCH AND MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND TODAY

*4.1 ‘But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.’ —Ephesians 4:15-16*

*‘Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ.’*  
—Galatians 6:2

*4.1.1 The language of the Bible, our confessions, and derived theological traditions is the church’s primary language. It supplies our most basic vocabulary and grammar, allowing us to tell our story and to reflect upon it faithfully. We always aim to understand ourselves better as the Church of Jesus Christ and so to be able to (re-)orientate our life and work together well. The need to undertake practical reforms of church order and practice offer valuable occasions for just such reflection, i.e., they give us an opportunity to ‘remember who we are’. Of course, practical pressures can tempt us to analyse, reflect and decide such matters non-theologically and so to ‘forget who we are’. The difference between faithful reform and faithless change lies here.*

4.1.2 The Church of Scotland continues to undertake changes to patterns of congregational ministry including wide-ranging reconsideration of its disposition and financing. As it does so, it is good and useful to recall some of the fundamental features of our doctrines of church and ministry. For these doctrines can and should supply the most basic substance and shape to our thinking and speaking about these important matters. At the present juncture, as we work together to discern and to pursue a faithful and practical path in these affairs, we do well in particular to recollect and keep in mind certain elements of our teaching which bear most directly upon the matter. What follows offers an all-too-brief sketch of some of what we might take to be the most relevant aspects of our doctrine of the church in this regard.

*4.2 The church is a fruit of the gracious outworking of the triune God by Word and Spirit who gathers, upholds, and sends us out into the world. The body of the church are thus sanctified sinners, disciples, ambassadors, witnesses, and ministers of the gospel all. The church is fundamentally a fellowship, an ordered body, a covenanted community, a living congregation, a commonwealth, an embassy. The church exists for the sake of worship, witness, and service of the God of the gospel. The structures and offices of the church exist in service of it being just this and doing these things.*

4.2.1 The church is the body of those graciously gathered into fellowship with God and with one another under the headship of Christ in and by the power of the Spirit. Those so gathered are further graciously upheld and sustained by the living Word in both proclamation and the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which is to say, by sharing in the gifts of divine grace. Gathered and built up in this way, the church is a covenanted community of sisters and brothers graciously sent to the world as disciples with a ministry of gospel witness and selfless service. So gathered, upheld and sent, the church is the living community of the living Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, by the Spirit it is a ‘communion, a kind of Christian commonwealth’ (*Bohemian Confession* (1609), §8).

4.2.2 As an embassy of the gospel, the church’s worship and ministry aim to testify truthfully, publicly, and joyfully to the Lord Jesus Christ from whose salvation and direction it lives. Crucially, the church’s ministry is entrusted and enjoined upon the community as a whole: it is the work of the whole people of God, the exercise of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, the shared vocation and service of all the saints.

4.2.3 The church discharges its ministry by word and deed, in worship and witness; but it also does so by way of the ordering of its community life as such. The church's ordered ministers are in the congregation as its teaching and ruling elders for the sake of the exercise of this its common ministry. Deacons, teaching elders, and ruling elders are ordained and covenanted to this service by Presbyteries and in congregations that their common life and witness may flourish and bear fruit, not least in virtue of their good order and discipline. The structures and offices of the wider church further facilitate, resource, and support congregational life and ministry, extending that good order and discipline that makes for flourishing across the Church of Scotland as a whole. In this way our structures are expressions of the unique quality of that fellowship into which Christ draws and holds us, the 'ligaments' of our communion, as it were. In short, our very ways of organizing ourselves should, in their own way, testify that we are a Church that belongs to Christ, and should clearly serve the essential Christian life and ministry of our congregations.

4.2.4 All this is concisely expressed in the language of the 1935 *Restatement of the Church's Faith* when it characterised the church as a *fellowship* constituted by God sharing one common ministry, namely: '*joyfully to bear witness to its Lord in faith and righteousness and the spirit of unity, to proclaim His gospel to the ends of the earth, to give loving service to humankind for His sake, and to watch and pray from the coming of the Kingdom*' (article IX).

*4.3 The Church of Scotland is a national church which finds itself today in an increasingly pluralistic and secular nation, established de jure and disestablished de facto. This humbling of the Kirk while painful is also gift and opportunity. Reforms in ministry provision and ministry finance invite us to ask how these can be good and/or better expressions of what the church is and what the church is for today. Our moment invites us to fresh theological reflection upon our freedom and responsibility as we envisage, pursue, and communicate these practical changes.*

4.3.1 The ordering and disposition of ministry within the Church of Scotland has and continues to take the basic form of a geographically comprehensive parochial ministry. In this way it owns the charge expressed in its Articles Declaratory, 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 in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry' (III).

4.3.2 Yet, even as it does so, the Church of Scotland recognizes that today it is a national church less by privileged status than by duty, calling, and increasingly by missionary aspiration. This recognition is no bad thing, as it provides an occasion to recollect that the church is ever and always rightly a free servant of God's own mission, and so a church for others, a church for the world, even and especially as it finds itself increasingly to be a church without social and political privileges. The Church stands free and open to the civic life of the nation while no longer serving as its privileged chaplain to its public life.

4.3.3 Such circumstances drive us to think afresh about what is most essential to our identity and vocation as the church, and so also to recover the distinctive qualities of our church-community. Doing so will rightly require that we reconsider our ecclesiastical structures and forms afresh. We must look for them to become what they can and must be for us today: namely, the explicit outworkings and invaluable expressions of the covenanted bonds of love, solidarity, service, and support that knit us and our congregations together in shared worship and our common ministry of witness and service in this place.

4.3.4 As we continue to work to reform of the ways we organise, dispose, and finance congregational ministry in the Church of Scotland, we would do well to keep such theological

considerations firmly in mind, continually asking ourselves whether and how the changes we envisage and pursue will help:

- to express rather than obscure the reality of the church's existence as 'a communion, a kind of Christian commonwealth', the one body of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- to strengthen and build up rather than weaken the congregational worship, witness, and service that constitutes the fundamental life and ministry of the whole people of God.
- to make our institutional order—both as a whole and in its parts—more rather than less transparent and serviceable to our shared apostolic calling and mission.
- to uphold and support rather than constrain the covenant bonds into which congregations enter with their ministers, both teaching elders and ruling elders alike.
- to heighten both our joy in giving and our responsibility to honour the generosity of others in our stewardship of the church's resources in relation to ministry.
- to acknowledge our place in and contributions to the work and witness of the whole ecumenical church in this land and beyond.

#### 4.4 Some Questions

1. What elements of this brief theological account of the church strike you as most relevant as we confront the challenges of our moment?
2. What might it look like for the Church's structures and polities to be clear expressions of our 'covenanted bonds as a Christian commonwealth'?
3. How might we each, in our own particular role, post, or situation, help to reflect and inhabit this theological vision of the church?
4. How do we best communicate such an understanding of the church to all parts of the Church?
5. How are God's 'gathering, upholding, and sending' experienced in your congregation? How could they better be acknowledged and celebrated?
6. How does your congregational life give expression to the gospel by its 'worship, witness, and service'? How might do so better and more joyfully?
7. How might the theological ideas presented here help us to move faithfully as we pursue pressing practical questions about how, given who we are as church, we should best be organised and manage our resources in face of our current reality?

#### 4.5 Some Further Questions particularly for Kirk Sessions

1. What forms does the (1) worship, (2) witness, and (3) service of the Church take in your own parish? How have these changed in recent years?
2. How do you understand your responsibilities as a parish to support the life and work of the wider Church? What motivates you in doing so? What limits you in doing so?
3. What might you look to change in your own local practice in order better to reflect or express the reality of God's gracious 'gathering, upholding, and sending' where you are?
4. What would you welcome in support of your parish life and work from the wider 'commonwealth' of the Church of Scotland?