

**REPORT OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMITTEE  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008**

**INTRODUCTION**

At the first meeting of the Church and Society Committee discussion took place on:  
*Could and should the committee go about its business in a different way?*

The ability to focus on papers circulated in advance of the meetings was discussed and considered to be helpful in arriving at the issues influencing decisions. The suggestion was welcomed on the understanding that there would be no loss of oversight of the knowledge and know-how of those outside groups on which the denomination is represented.

Accordingly, the Church and Society Committee herewith offer its deliberations on the issues identified as significant, namely :

- The Future of Scottish Devolution within the Union – the Calman Commission.
- Alcohol Abuse.
- End of Life Choices.
- Global Financial Crisis.
- Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group
- Denominational Appeal - The Maxie Richard's Foundation
- Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office.

Members of the committee have all contributed towards the preparation of the different sections of this report.

**THE FUTURE OF SCOTTISH DEVOLUTION WITHIN THE UNION**

The remit of the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution is :  
*"To review the provision of the Scotland Act 1998 in the light of experience and to recommend any changes to the present constitutional arrangements that would enable the Scottish Parliament to serve the people of Scotland better, improve the financial accountability of the Scottish Parliament and continue to secure the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom."*

The issues raised in the consultation papers from the Commission on Scottish Devolution and considered by the Church and Society Committee of the United Free Church of Scotland relate to:

- The powers and functions of the Scottish Parliament and the Government.

In particular to :

Electoral System	Broadcasting
Charities	Health and Safety
Energy	Health
Firearms	Drug misuse
Marine Environment	Education
Social Security	

- Financial accountability.

In particular to :

Funding Principles	Funding Mechanisms
Taxes	Borrowing

- Relationships between Parliaments and Governments.

In particular to :

Formal Relations between Westminster and Holyrood  
Scottish Interests at the Europe Parliament

The Commission Consultative Publications on Devolution are available from the website : [www.commissiononscottishdevolution.org.uk](http://www.commissiononscottishdevolution.org.uk)

From the deliberations of the committee, available papers and publications, prepared responses to the documents received so far were forwarded to the Commission - these are to be found in the letters in appendix 1 and appendix 2 .

## ALCOHOL ABUSE

The General Assembly of last year requested the Church and Society Committee to investigate the continuing increase in alcohol related crimes and the subsequent impact on society as a whole. Much has been investigated and discussed by the committee and heed taken of information from other sources.

More information on alcohol misuse and links to other appropriate websites can be had from the website : [www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk](http://www.alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk)

From a sifting of the researched information brought before the Committee, the salient points on alcohol abuse and its effects are to be found in the paper in appendix 3.

## END OF LIFE CHOICES BILL

The following quotes from the consultative document for The Proposed End of Life Choices (Scotland) Bill by Margo MacDonald MSP establishes the background to what is expressed in more detail in the paper.

*"The proposal that persons who wish to decide when to end their lives should be able to do so, legally, with the assistance of a registered physician has come about because of the experience of people with degenerative conditions, terminal illnesses, and those who become entirely dependent on others following a trauma."*

*"For some people the question is irrelevant because they believe God determines when life ends, and nothing that is proposed will compromise their belief. But our society embraces many people who do not share this belief...."*

*"The Bill would propose that, on the request of the patient, and conditional on legal requirements being adhered to, a physician assisting a "patient" to die will not be guilty of an illegal act."*

The Committee considered the arguments with supporting case studies given in favour in the consultative document. However, after having explored thoroughly the issues confronting doctors, those terminally ill, the family, the law and in particular the church, the committee forwarded the letter to be found in appendix 4 declaring the affirmation of our faith: **The United Free Church of Scotland does not support legislation that would legalise the termination of life.**

## **THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS**

Out of initial discussions on the subject of the Global Financial Crisis, an undertaking to investigate the topic further and report back to the Committee was remitted. From the draft paper presented and deliberations, came the article published in the February / March 2009 edition of *Stedfast* in which issues were identified and assertions made that were very apt to the present financial position. Further thoughts on this controversial topic of concern to all are to be found in the synopsis in appendix 5 - *A World in Recession*.

## **SCOTTISH CHURCHES RACIAL JUSTICE GROUP**

Since 2003 the Scottish Churches have supported the Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group and the employment of a 0.5 FTE (full time equivalent) Racial Justice Officer. During 2008 the Group decided that before going to the Scottish Churches to seek funding for a continuation of their work from 2009 to 2012 there should be an evaluation of the Group's work by external evaluators.

The evaluation report highlighted that the Group's work had had a significant impact in a number of areas but it also emphasised the many tasks that remained to be tackled and suggested a number of new areas for work, namely ;

- Develop training and education for churches on racial justice issues.
- Provide information.
- Continue the development and promotion of racial justice more vigourously in Scotland.
- Contact with and, where appropriate, contribution to the work of government agencies.
- Continue the work with and develop new links with black and ethnic minority churches.
- Track and coordinate Churches' activity on racial justice.
- Continue to work with ecumenical bodies in Scotland and Britain to promote racial justice.
- Seek to find ways to encourage churches and church bodies to embody equality policies within their practices and structures.

There was also a proposal that not only should the Churches continue to fund the Group but also employ the Officer at a level of 0.8 FTE. The Church and Society Committee of the United Free Church of Scotland considered the proposals and after evaluation of the evidence to hand agreed to support the proposals and increase our support.

## **SCOTTISH CHURCHES PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE**

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office continues to inform and update the Church and Society Committee of the programme of bills under and to be consideration at Holyrood and Westminster. These updates are indeed invaluable in identifying what the Committee needs to be aware of to keep abreast of current affairs.

Included with the December programme update, which was the last one from the Rev Dr Graham Blount, the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer, was a personal reflection on his time at Holyrood . The Rev Dr Graham Blount has now taken up a research post at the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Edinburgh. The Church hereby extends ever good wishes and success in his research and look forward to the publication of his findings and conclusions.

As a tribute to the Rev Dr Graham Blount for his much appreciated contributions to the Church and Assemblies and to give him the "last" word his engaging article on his reflections as Parliamentary Officer can be found in appendix 6.

## MAXIE RICHARDS' DENOMINATIONAL APPEAL

Lifted from one of Maxie Richard's website and hereby quoted -  
*"Drugs are a very real part of Life in our society today, but this doesn't mean that it has to stay that way. Drug dealers and barons do not care who becomes an addict - their concern is to make as much money as they can, any way that they can, even at the expense of young people's lives. Is this the kind of society you want? - NO. Is it the kind of society God wants? - NO."*

**The Maxie Richard's Foundation** is about addressing the issues raised within this quote through the education of people in the misuse of illicit and prescribed drugs, alcohol and tobacco, and to relieve the suffering and stress of people addicted to such drugs.

**The Maxie Richard's Denominational Appeal** of the United Free Church of Scotland is not only about fund raising for the Maxi Richard's Foundation but also about praying for Maxie and her work. It is indeed a privilege to be able to support the work of the Foundation for those addicted and those seeking to help them.

Alas the Appeal now comes to an end with the closing of this General Assembly. However the sum raised through the generous giving of the congregations is **£10,773**. Any future donations received at Church Office will continue to be passed on.

## CONTRIBUTION TO ORGANISATIONS

The following contributions were made in 2008.

Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office	£ 1,650
Scottish Churches Housing Action	£ 1,350
Scottish Churches Racial Justice Officer	£ 800
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£ 3,800</b>

## CONCLUSION

This report has been mainly about those issues of concern to all, It does not take in all of the papers tabled at meetings from other sources - these appertain to keeping abreast of developments elsewhere.

The Committee acknowledges the contribution made by the Rev John O. Fulton to the Church and Society Committee not only in secretarial responsibilities but also as an invaluable source of information from within the Church and from various organisation outwith and at the same time a valued contributor to the business under discussion. The Committee is also grateful and indebted to Mrs Helena Jarvis for the work done on their behalf and wish to record their appreciation.

In the name of the Committee

IAIN S. SMITH	Convener
DONALD J. MACDONALD	Vice Convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary

Appendix 1

**First submission to Calman Commission**

3 November 2008

The Commission on Scottish Devolution

Dear Sirs

**Submission from the The Church and Society Committee  
of the United Free Church of Scotland**

The committee is pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the invitation to comment on possible changes to the powers of the Scottish Government. In responding we are conscious of the long period of discussion and debate that took place before the enactment of the present legislation. Accordingly while we accept that it may now be time to examine the way in which the Scottish Parliament has functioned and where necessary fine-tune it we would urge that the original principles which were agreed should be retained.

The founding principles included:

OPENNESS – By this we understand that Parliament should conduct its business both in Committee and in Plenary in public with as little recourse to private debate as is possible.

ACCESSIBILITY – Individual members of the public and groups should have easy access to the Parliament both directly and by petition.

PARTICIPATION – The public should be informed about all new legislation and given the opportunity and time to comment upon before it goes into law.

ACCOUNTABILITY – The Executive should be accountable to Parliament at all times.

**We recommend that whatever proposals the Commission makes should be designed that these principles are maintained or strengthened.**

A suggestion from the Scottish Constitutional Convention that was not taken up in the original legislation was that the powers of the new Scottish Parliament be ENTRENCHED in some way. Although power to amend the legislation remains with the Westminster Government it was felt that this power should only be exercised with the support and consent of the Scottish Parliament and that this would be in accord with the principle of SUBSIDIARTY which has been accepted within the European Union.

**We recommend that this practice should apply for the current review and should be written in to any new legislation.**

Finally we take up the question of the financing of the Scottish Parliament. The present arrangement whereby the funds available are by block grant according to formula has worked well so far. However it has inevitably led to complaints of unfairness arising from both sides of the border. There have also been suggestions that power to spend without the equivalent power to raise money inevitably leads to irresponsibility. For these reasons we feel that it is important that power to levy taxes either in part or in whole be given to the Scottish Parliament. We recognise that it will not be easy to arrive at an equitable system but feel it is essential that there be movement in this direction.

**We recommend that the Scottish Parliament be given tax-raising powers sufficient to satisfactorily fulfil its remit in the government of Scotland.**

**We further recommend that in assessing the total amount of revenue raised in Scotland all the various sources be considered including those from oil to avoid miscomprehensions and accusations of unfairness.**

Yours sincerely

Appendix 2

**Second submission to Calman Commission**

12 February 2009

The Commission on Scottish Devolution

Dear Sirs

**Second submission from the The Church and Society Committee of the United Free Church of Scotland**

The Church and Society Committee of the United Free Church of Scotland welcomes this second opportunity to comment on the business before the Calman Commission on the future of the Scottish Government.

In our original submission we recommended that the general principles adopted by the Scottish Constitutional Convention of OPENNESS, ACCESSIBILITY, PARTICIPATION and ACCOUNTABILITY were of value and **"should be maintained or strengthened."**

We suggested further that following the initial experience it was important that the powers of the new Scottish Parliament be ENTRENCHED in some way. We felt also that although power to amend the legislation would remain with the Westminster Government that this power should only be exercised with the support and consent of the Scottish Parliament and that this would be in accord with the principle of SUBSIDIARITY, which has been accepted within the European Union. So our recommendation was **"that this practice should apply for the current review and should be written in to any new legislation."**

Finally we suggested that although the present method of funding the Scottish Parliament by means of a block grant determined by the Barnett formula has worked well so far it has inevitably led to complaints of unfairness arising from both sides of the border. It could also be argued that power to spend without the equivalent power to raise money inevitably leads to irresponsibility. For these reasons we felt that it was important that power to levy taxes either in part or in whole be given to the Scottish Parliament. We recognised that it would not be easy to arrive at an equitable system but felt it was essential that there be movement in this direction. So we recommended, **"that the Scottish Parliament be given tax-raising powers sufficient to satisfactorily fulfill its remit in the government of Scotland."**

**We further recommend that in assessing the total amount of revenue raised in Scotland all the various sources be considered including those from oil to avoid miscomprehensions and accusations of unfairness."**

In this response to the Commission's first report we continue to adhere to our previous recommendations but reinforce and amplify our views concerning the fiscal responsibilities of the Scottish Government.

The remit of the Commission (Paragraph 1 of the First Report) sets out the aims of the review as **"to enable the Scottish Parliament to serve the people of Scotland better, to improve the financial accountability of the Scottish Parliament, and continue to secure the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom."** The impression is given in the report that the third aim, i.e. "to secure the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom", has been given priority over the earlier two. Our view is that attempts to limit the powers of the Parliament to serve the people better and to restrict its financial accountability

are likely to cause a continuing sense of resentment and weaken the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom.

Dealing specifically with the financial accountability of the Parliament the Commission has taken the view that there is an existing state of **shared social citizenship** in the United Kingdom and that this would be harmed by **tax devolution**. (Paragraph 20 of the First Report) We agree that a state of **shared social citizenship** in the United Kingdom, and indeed in the European Union or the wider world is highly desirable but suggest that it is most likely to be nurtured and encouraged when the population feels that it is being fairly treated. So **tax devolution** which gives the Scottish Government sufficient fiscal freedom to fulfill its duties in a responsible manner is surely more likely to encourage wider social citizenship than a situation in which its freedom to act is controlled and restricted from above.

The current situation whereby the Scottish Government receives the bulk of its revenue from the block grant limits its accountability. Also it fails to provide much incentive to come up with innovative ideas to boost economic growth because there is little linkage between the performance of the economy and the income to the Scottish Government.

We do not feel qualified to prescribe how tax-raising powers should be divided between Westminster and Holyrood other than to say that the division should be such that both Governments have sufficient flexibility to meet their spending needs. If both were free to modify the elements of taxes under their control they would be properly accountable to their electorates for the financial decisions taken.

With regard to the question of **borrowing powers** for the Scottish Parliament (Paragraph 19 of the First Report) we believe that such powers have already been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and can see no valid reason to deny similar powers to Holyrood. Such powers would allow the Scottish Government to embark on large-scale public projects in a responsible manner.

Although it may not be strictly within the remit of the Commission we note that our observations on the funding of the devolved Governments would apply equally to the funding of local government. The present position whereby local Councils have discretion over only some 9% to 10% of their income stream is surely undesirable. It would appear desirable to move to a position where councils had control over a wider range of taxes. The replacement of the Council Tax with a more progressive Local Income Tax might be a useful first step.

Yours sincerely

### **Appendix 3**

#### **ALCOHOL ABUSE**

Down through the years, humans have used alcohol as a means of relaxation, pleasure and to relieve their misery. We read in Psalm 104 v 15 "wine gladdens the heart of man," yet although alcohol is a gift from God, humans have a problem in using alcohol in such a way that there is a minimum of harm. To date it would seem that no society which has permitted the free use of alcohol has been able to regulate its use in such a way as to allow the individual maximum freedom to drink alcohol yet limit the ill effects of alcohol abuse and Scotland is no exception.

The misuse of alcohol in the UK is highest in Scotland. On the seventh of August 2008, the BBC reported that in 2007 there was a total of 455 drug-related deaths in Scotland. Although these deaths are tragic for the families concerned; yet in 2007 there were 1800 deaths from alcoholic cirrhosis.

Here are some other examples of alcohol related harm in Scotland as published by the Scottish Government (1) (2):

- Nearly half of those who commit murder in Scotland were drunk at the time of the offence.
- Alcohol is the greatest single contributory factor in deaths caused by house fire in Scotland.
- A third of adult pedestrians killed on the roads in Scotland had been drinking.
- It is estimated that alcohol misuse costs Scotland's economy around £2.25 billion in 2006/7.
- The cost to the NHS in Scotland is estimated at around £400 million.
- The police response to alcohol misuse has been estimated at around £288 million.

It has been shown that when there is a reduction in the population consumption of alcohol there is also a reduction in alcohol-related harm. In France alcohol consumption has fallen over the last 20 to 30 years as has chronic liver disease and deaths from cirrhosis. This is believed to be due to a fall in wine drinking, the introduction of tougher drink driving laws and stricter control of alcohol advertising. There has also been widespread engagement in sport at national and local level providing positive alternative leisure and recreation choices. In Italy a fall in the average population alcohol consumption led to a reduction in alcohol related mortality. What is clear from these studies and what other international studies show is that when alcohol consumption falls there is a reduction in short term harm such as accidents and injuries and also long-term harm such as liver cirrhosis.

Over the last 50 years consumption of alcohol has more than doubled in Scotland and so has alcohol related harm. The question we have to answer is: why has the consumption of alcohol increased in Scotland over the last 50 years? Very simply, in real terms alcohol is 62% more affordable today than it was in 1980. It is clear that the increase in consumption is directly related to the reduction in price and this has been due to an increase in off-sales activity in shops and supermarkets.

Can anything be done about this gigantic problem in our nation? The Scottish Government have recently published a document entitled: Changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol: a discussion paper on our strategic approach (2).



Some of the proposals in the document are as follows:

- End the promotion of loss leading alcoholic drinks in licensed premises for example "happy hour".
- End irresponsible promotions and below cost selling in off-licence premises, for example "buy two get one free".
- Introduction of a minimal retail price directly related to the units of alcohol being sold.
- Introduce legislation that requires licensed premises to offer 125 ml measures of wine and 25 ml measures of spirits instead of the larger "standard" measures that are currently available.
- A fee should be applied to some alcohol retailers to help offset the costs of dealing with the adverse consequences of alcohol.
- Call for a reduction in the drink drive limit from 80 mg to 50 mg per 100 ml of blood and the introduction of random breath testing.
- Improve the delivery of substance and alcohol misuse education in schools.
- Restrict the use of promotional materials within licensed premises.

It is evident that a free choice in the area of alcohol supply has brought us to the present state of affairs in Scotland and that fiscal measures are required to limit alcohol supply through pricing, availability and the time during which alcohol can be purchased. The people of Scotland need to honestly confront the issue of alcohol in our society and be prepared to support legislation that seeks to minimise its adverse effects.

If people have a problem with alcohol then they need as much support as their family and friends can give them. People who can be of help in this situation are the Minister, the family Doctor and the local meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.

#### References

1. [www.drug-aware.com/alcohol-abuse-facts-statistics.htm](http://www.drug-aware.com/alcohol-abuse-facts-statistics.htm)
2. Changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol: a discussion paper on our strategic approach. [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/06/16084348/3](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/06/16084348/3)

## **Appendix 4**

### **Response to 'Proposed End of Life Choices Bill'**

4 March 2009

Margo MacDonald MSP  
Room M3.14  
Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

Dear Ms MacDonald

#### **Proposed End of Life Choices Bill**

Thank you for giving the United Free Church of Scotland the opportunity to comment on your Proposed End of Life Choices Bill. We are sympathetic to your own personal circumstances; however, we cannot agree with the proposals that are made in your document. This response represents the views of the Church & Society Committee of the United Free Church.

We in the Church have a great interest in these issues and feel we have a valid contribution to make to this discussion. This comes particularly from our Ministers who have considerable experience in being alongside people who are dying, being involved in the pastoral care of patients who are terminally ill and providing support and comfort to the family and friends of the dying both before and after the death of the individual.

The proposals in the Bill are about giving the individual the autonomy to choose when to die. Although being able to choose is one of the characteristics that make us human, just as important if not more important is our ability to have relationships with others. It is misleading to suggest that 'autonomy' is the most important and only feature that makes us truly human.

As Christians we believe that our relationship with God and others is fundamental to being a Christian. The governing principle of these relationships is found in Jesus' answer to the question: what is the greatest commandment? It is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself" [1]. We cannot "love our neighbour as yourself" and be involved in the demise of either our neighbour or ourselves; they are mutually exclusive. Therefore, our position must be to oppose the Proposed End of Life Choices Bill.

You invoke the results of public opinion polls that public attitudes are supportive of your proposals. The proposals suggested in your bill raises complex medical ethical issues for medical and nursing professionals. These issues have been examined in great detail in the Report of the Select Committee on the Bill for Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill which was published in April 2005 by the House of Lords. As physicians will be required to prescribe the drug that ends the patient's life; it is interesting to note the view of Doctors on this matter as revealed by recent polls. A poll in 2006 by the Royal College of Physicians showed that 73% of its members are opposed to physician assisted suicide or euthanasia [2]. A survey of Welsh GPs showed that 67.4% of responders to the poll were against legal change for physician-assisted suicides and/or voluntary euthanasia [3]. These two polls provide evidence that in the main doctors are against what your Bill is proposing and that it is

incompatible for those directly involved in the care of the dying to also be involved in either assisted suicide or euthanasia.

The case studies that you quote in your document can fuel the fear of dying badly. However, we believe that the vast majority of calls from the public for euthanasia are really calls for good end of life medical care. Our experience is that when the emotional and spiritual needs as well as the physical needs of the patient are met, requests for euthanasia and assisted suicide are extremely rare. It is our considered view that what the Scottish Government needs to do, is not to introduce a Bill that permits euthanasia or assisted suicide but to ensure that there is good palliative and end of life care available to all and your document indicates that the Government intends to do this as described in their publication:- Living and Dying Well: National Action Plan for Palliative and End of Life Care (Sept 2008) [4].

In conclusion we would oppose the introduction of the Proposed End of Life Choices Bill for the reasons given above.

#### References

1. Gospel of Matthew Chapter 22 Verses 37-39.
2. [www.carenotkilling.org.uk](http://www.carenotkilling.org.uk)
3. Pasterfield D, Finlay IG and Neal RD. GP's views on changing the law on physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, and willingness to prescribe or inject lethal drugs: a survey from Wales. *British Journal of General Practice* 2006; 56(527): 450-452.
4. [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/10/01091608/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/10/01091608/0)

Yours sincerely,

## **Appendix 5**

### **A World in Recession**

A year ago the world, or at least our part of it, enjoyed a time of comfort and prosperity. There were few voices warning of harder times to come and if we had heard them it is unlikely we would have paid them much heed. The assumption was that the good times would last if not for ever at least for our lifetimes.

Yet see what has happened within the last twelve-months. Banks have collapsed, our nation has gone into recession, many of our citizens face loss of jobs and loss of homes. Worst of all the crisis seems to be world-wide and the cure is as a result more difficult than earlier recessions. Those economists who believe in a completely free market tell us that boom followed by bust is the natural course and that we will emerge from the bust stronger than before. On this view we must expect casualties for the long term good.

But a Christian Community cannot accept this position. In God's eyes all of His children have value and so the weak must not be sacrificed to benefit those who are already strong. So a more stable system is required in which downturns are less severe even if this means a slower rate of growth. But what exactly can the Church do in the present situation? It is clear that it has no special expertise in national or global economics. But what it can do and should do is to set out certain principles to govern future actions by those with civil authority.

It seems certain that the trigger for the current crisis was unwise behaviour by many of the world's banks who chose to ignore long established rules of good practice. Following the push towards free global trading in the 1980's various restrictive regulations on the way in which banks conducted their business were abolished. This allowed certain elements within the banking fraternity to indulge in speculative dealing in the more esoteric regions of the stock market. They were gambling on the continued growth of a bubble and for a time made vast profits. But as is the way with bubbles the bubble burst and the credit crunch was upon us. Of course it would be unfair to put all the blame on those erring bankers for during the time of prosperity were we not all guilty of uncritically enjoying the good times?

So we conclude, firstly, that the present crisis is unacceptable and regulations should be put in place to prevent a recurrence, and, secondly, in recognition of the global nature of the crisis these regulations should be set and administered by some international authority. Thirdly the system arrived at should be ethically motivated giving priority to justice and fairness to all, and fourthly it is important that a voice be given to the poorer nations which have little economic power but also suffer when recession strikes.

## **Appendix 6**

### **Saving the World**

(some very personal departing reflections by Rev Dr Graham K Blount)

*(First published in SCPO Update, December 2008  
and reprinted with permission)*

A claim to be saving the world may be an unfortunate slip of the tongue for a prime minister but it is a dangerous delusion for ministers of any kind.

As nostalgia starts to infect my last few days as the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer, I think back to the heady early days of a Parliament the Kirk had spent fifty years calling for, and which the churches had worked together to help shape and bring to birth. Several people have recalled hearing me describe my (then) new job in terms of a wee boy let loose in the sweetie shop, and asked what it felt like now. There are several possible funny answers: from the tummy-ache the morning after, to the soor ploods, nippy sweeties, odd fellows and fudges I've encountered. But there are some more serious reflections too.

Even if we didn't actually believe the advent of the Parliament was going to save the world, or even Scotland, we did have high hopes for what Donald Dewar famously called the "new voice in the land". Like the season of Advent, it was a time of great promise.

Now we have a Government that talks of "outcomes" as what really matters. Has our Parliament delivered positive outcomes? I *want* to answer yes, partly because it has – most of the time – been a Parliament I've felt a real stake in. And I think there is good evidence for that, from the abolition of warrant sales to substantial land reform, from free personal care for the elderly to genuine efforts to tackle poverty and homelessness which have made a difference; one of the early ambitions was about building "a Scotland where everyone matters", and – while we certainly are not there yet – we have taken significant steps down that road. Everyone in Scotland has far more opportunity to have their say, and to help make a difference, than ever before; and many people have done so.

What about distinctively Christian outcomes? Do the achievements I've mentioned fit that bill? They are all things for which churches have campaigned, and some were brought in by Christian politicians living out their calling (a part of the churches' contribution that is too often forgotten); yet you could also point – as I heard one distinguished churchman do recently – to a raft of "immoral legislation" which many churches have resisted (some of which was also strongly supported by Christian politicians). What should we be looking for from our Parliament?

Given a chance to lead Time for Reflection in Parliament just before I move on to more academic, theological reflection in my new post, I suggested we look to the Advent "outcome": a wean in a manger. Vulnerable, totally lacking in political clout, or so it seems; born in the wrong place and maybe to the wrong people, and with no prospects. I love the cartoon of the nativity play, where the wise guy in the audience leans over his neighbour and says, "He gets killed in the end, you know." That is the outcome, but it is not the end. In the Christmas outcome, faith and hope and love are bundled together in a manger, and that is quite an outcome.

How (or where) do you look for that in the world of Scottish politics? I recently had the chance to hear a lecture by Muhammad Yunus – "banker to the poor", founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and Nobel Peace Prize winner. He spoke simply and powerfully about a project to help a handful of families escape the clutches of loan sharks and build sustainable lives for themselves in what was the poorest country in the world; that project can now speak realistically about consigning Bangladeshi poverty to a museum; and

Grameen has a branch in New York. What I – and many others – found really impressive was the mixture of genius and simplicity, of huge achievement and real humility.

I encountered that mixture once before, in another small man (I fear I may have a sizeist prejudice here). Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian theologian of liberation, whose writing has inspired many but who was much more inspirational to meet, in his powerful humility. When I heard one of the servant songs from Isaiah read recently during Advent, I thought of these two men as I heard of one who "will not shout or raise his voice or make loud speeches in the streets".

The idea that making a difference and making a lot of noise are not by any means the same thing is quite counter-cultural in the context of our media-dominated political world where banging desks is a highlight of the political week in the ritual combat known as FMQs (First Minister's Questions). I offer it, hoping it doesn't sound unduly preachy, as a response to those who see the past ten years as marking the rapid decline, not to say demise, of the churches' public role.

Of course, there's a lot of shouting in Isaiah too, and Jesus raged against injustice and hypocrisy; there is a time for making a noise, and there have been times when SCPO's role has been to help the churches do just that – with varying degrees of success, I'd have to admit. Speaking truth to power sometimes may mean capturing headlines in order to get heard; but being "crucified" in a headline – while not making us the saviours of the world – may not be the end of the world, or the church, either.

If churches are being gently eased away from formerly comfortable positions within an establishment, and seem increasingly marginalised, we must learn to speak from the margins because that is where the Advent outcome happens. (And if all this still sounds a bit confused after ten years, I've now got two years to reflect on it and think it through more clearly, with the huge benefit of hindsight!).

In the early part of the story of Samuel, the writer laments how infrequently the Lord's voice was heard in those days, not unlike some descriptions of today. I never read that without recalling a colleague in ministry who told a cautionary tale of encouraging lay people to read the Biblical passages in services: "it was *rare*, in those days, for the Lord to speak ..." (1 Samuel 3.1), read to his congregation in a broad Glasgow accent, seemed to convey heady excitement rather than infrequency!

There have been plenty of frustrations over the past ten years, and some of them will figure in the book I hope to write; there have been moments when the Lord's voice, and its echo through the voices of the churches, have seemed much too rarely heard. But there have been many more moments when I knew that the Lord was in this place, and that His kingdom is taking shape amidst all our failings.

I will leave with my last official word in the Parliament being the blessing that finishes the Parliamentary Carol Service, and that feels very right. I will leave with a very high opinion of the commitment and dedication to making a difference that our politicians bring, alongside an awareness that they are a bunch of miserable sinners (like you and me), whose commitment can somehow get twisted into the pettiness and partisanship which are not entirely unknown in churches. If, with a decent degree of humility, we could work with them to help avoid that, we'd really be sharing a blessing.

For SCPO, something new and different lies ahead. For me too. Looking back ... well, it's been rare (something like a Clyde win, only more so)!

So, many, many thanks to all who've been part of the adventure.