

Institution: University of Glasgow (UofG)		
Unit of Assessment: 28 History		
Title of case study: Research-led Reform of the Church of Scotland		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010–2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Rev Doug Gay	Lecturer in Practical Theology	2005–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018–31 st December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Dr Doug Gay's research into ecclesiastical history directly led to the May 2019 adoption by the governing court of the Church of Scotland of a 'three-year Radical Action Plan'. The plan's measures, based on Gay's research recommendations, amount to a comprehensive reform aimed at halting the declining membership and influence of the Church. Change encompassed structures, training, strategy, finances and mission, in what constitutes the most substantial re-organisation of Scotland's largest Church since 1929, fundamentally reshaping an institution with GBP120 million turnover and 330,000 members across 1,341 congregations, in Scotland and abroad.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Dr Doug Gay has been a lecturer in Practical Theology in Theology and Religious Studies, and Principal of Trinity College (the Church of Scotland ministerial training college) at University of Glasgow since 2005. Throughout his career Gay has been researching, presenting and writing about radical change in church, mission and social theology in the Presbyterian tradition. This broader body of work is represented by his publications [3.1 and 3.2], and led to a focused but substantial piece of research reviewing the problems facing the modern Church and their historical origins, disseminated in a Chalmers Lecture Series and a monograph [3.3].</p> <p>Gay's analysis showed that since the 1970s, as the pace of secularisation increased in Scotland, the Church of Scotland (known as 'the Kirk') has experienced steady and rapid decline, with its influence and domination of Scottish public life and institutions peaking in 1956. At various times the Kirk has responded, for example by removing a layer of synodical governance, or advancing a programme of union and readjustment of parishes in response to a shortage of ministers (Church of Scotland clergy). His research showed that the Kirk has also periodically considered more radical reforms to its institutional structures, but either deferred these or only partially enacted them. Gay showed that the Kirk of the 2010s was in crisis, its membership having reduced from 1.32 million members in 1956 to 0.33 million. Gay's research revealed the federal nature of the Church's historic governance system and presented alternative forms of Presbyterianism from a broader global context, allowing him to suggest radical reform to address this crisis, simultaneously appealing to tradition and offering examples of alternatives.</p> <p>Gay adopted a holistic approach to researching the history of Church structures, management and theology since the 1560 Reformation, reviewing the inherited compromises and structures resulting from its schism in 1733–1843 followed by the Presbyterian reunion in 1900 and 1929. When the old Kirk, which had evolved slowly over time, merged with a church that had been newly created in the 19th century, this created a highly centralised and bureaucratic organisation, and Gay identified that these qualities increasingly affected the reunited church from 1929.</p>		

Between 1960–2017 this structure came to constrain managerial agility, innovation and change, and the Kirk's financial systems tended towards centralisation, hindering effective use of funds. Gay's analysis included a strategic overview of how central Kirk structures in Edinburgh related to district-level management in the presbyteries, including previous unsuccessful attempts at reform. Part of his original contribution was to emphasise, based on this historical analysis, that the reform of a federal structure must happen both centrally and peripherally, and that if the centre is reduced, the edges must simultaneously be strengthened. As an illustration of this logic, Gay argued that centralising training provision would maximise quality by allowing subject specialism, whilst devolving decision-making about mission activities could empower individual faith communities.

Gay argued that the decade from 2020–2030 would be crucial for the Kirk, and that continuous and rapid decline since 1958 had already brought it near to the point where its work became unsustainable. Based on his analysis, showing that the then-present degree of bureaucratic and economic centralisation as well as the number of presbyteries resulted from a nineteenth-century contextual response, Gay advocated for a partial and flexible redesign of what he termed the systems architecture of the Kirk. A key reform needed, Gay argued, was presbytery reform: by reshaping and meaningfully devolving power to the presbyteries, the other necessary reforms would then be made possible. He went on to propose a package of reforms that quickly proved highly influential with the Kirk.

3. References to the research

3.1. [Gay, D.C.](#) (2011) *Remixing the Church: The Five Moves of Emerging Ecclesiology*. SCM Press: London, UK. ISBN 9780334043966 [Available from HEI]

3.2 [Gay, D.](#) (2013) *Uncommon order? Possible futures of worship in the Church of Scotland*. In: Stewart, J. (ed.) *A Useable Past: Belief, Worship and Song in Reformation Context*. Scottish Church Service Society: Edinburgh. ISBN 9780992772505 [Available from HEI]

3.3 [Gay, D.](#) (2017) *Reforming The Kirk: the Future of the Church of Scotland*. Saint Andrew Press: London/Edinburgh. ISBN 9780861539017 [Available from HEI]

Quality: 3.3, the key publication in the body of work, was graded according to rigour, originality and significance, by UofG's History Scoring Committee, and scored at above 2*, and as this is representative of the body of work more widely it is expected to meet or exceed the threshold.

4. Details of the impact

By 2017 the Church of Scotland ('the Kirk') was facing serious and long-standing challenges, including weighty bureaucracy, over-centralisation, declining income, and lack of agility to respond to social and cultural change. These challenges were accompanied by [declining membership](#) and influence: membership has declined by 80% since the 1950s, and attendance by c.4% per year [5.1]. Despite awareness of this, radical systemic change was not considered until Gay's lecture series and the publication of *Reforming the Kirk* in 2017 [3.3].

As a result, the 2018 Church of Scotland [General Assembly](#) (an annual event which brings together the councils and committees that govern the Kirk) rejected the Kirk's own official 10-year strategic plan by 439 to 130 votes, with one member explaining the action [5.2]: '*What we need is urgent, radical action. We have had 60 years of decline and it will be worse in 10 years.*' The General Assembly agreed instead to instruct the Council of Assembly (the body with administrative authority over resources, finances and staffing between General Assemblies): '*to work collaboratively with other Councils, Committees and Presbyteries to bring proposals to the*

General Assembly of 2019 for structural change, consulting with the Rev Dr Doug Gay about the ideas contained in the recent Chalmers lectures' [5.2].

Gay was then formally consulted by senior managers and by a Special Commission on Structural Reform. The latter was established following the 2018 General Assembly to propose changes to the implementation of Assembly decisions and the distribution of Church funds [5.3]. The Commission's report and plan were drafted in 2018–2019. The Convenor of this Special Commission stated: *'the most significant single resource for our work was Dr Doug Gay's Reforming the Kirk ... At the outset of our work, each member of the commission was provided with a copy of his book, and during ... our deliberations we met privately with Dr Gay' [5.3].*

The Special Commission report and its [Radical Action Plan](#) were presented to and overwhelmingly approved by the 2019 General Assembly [5.4]. Its proposals aligned closely with Gay's recommendations. The Radical Action Plan was subsequently incorporated into the Kirk's Faith Action Plan, principles of which included:

- consolidation of presbyteries and other organisational reforms
- creation of a new trustee body
- centralisation and modernisation in the training of clergy [5.5, 5.2].

The Convenor of the Special Commission stated that:

'In several respects, our final proposals reflected the recommendations of his [Gay's] book – the shift in power and resource from the central to the regional and local church, a strong trustee body able to curb expenditure and eliminate annual deficits, the reduction in the number of presbyteries, the overhaul of the General Assembly and Kirk Sessions with a view to producing smaller bodies more able to enact change, and the need for the whole Presbyterian system collectively and simultaneously to embrace reform' [5.3].

Gay's recommended reduction of the number of presbyteries from 46 to 12 is well underway [5.3, 5.2], with four new merged presbyteries formed in 2020 [5.4, 5.5] in Fife, Inverclyde, Aberdeen and Shetland [5.2]. *Reforming the Kirk* also recommended the merging of its four Councils, part of its hierarchical governance structure – Church and Society, World Mission, Ministries, and Mission and Discipleship – into one. In response, the Commission merged them into two: the Faith Impact Forum and the Faith Nurture Forum [5.3]. With this, the *'cost of central administration'* was expected *'to be cut by up to 30%'* [5.6]. The Convenor of the Special Commission commented in November 2020 that *'there is now active discussion of reducing to one agency'*, even closer to the original research recommendation [5.3].

Decision-making has also been devolved, from central administration to regional and local levels [5.7]. The former Council of Assembly was replaced by a newly created and [more powerful](#) 12-person body, the [Assembly Trustees, created May 2019](#) [5.3, 5.2]. This body is responsible for articulating the strategic priorities of the Kirk, has oversight of budgets and staff and manages the work of the General Assembly's standing committees. It has an annual turnover of GBP120 million, and according to the Convenor of the Special Commission in November 2020: *'is now in the second year of its work. Tighter budgets and staff cuts have been implemented, while a more strategic approach to core functions, buildings and improved governance has been adopted. ... Success has already been achieved with mergers taking place in Fife, Inverclyde, Aberdeen and Shetland, while talks are progressing in other parts of the country with a view to further rationalisation in 2021. If anything, the current pandemic has generated increased recognition of the need quickly to implement a raft of changes.'*

The Kirk also adopted the research recommendations to establish a new growth fund of up to GBP25 million to encourage church planting, the generation and development of new faith communities and regeneration of existing congregations [5.4]. However, this aspect of the programme has had to be suspended due to the impacts of Covid-19 during 2020 [5.8]. The General Assembly also agreed to centralise their five training centres, implementing another recommendation from *Reforming the Kirk*. Five centres, with relatively small cohorts, made it challenging to build training capacity and make effective use of specialists, and centralising resources is therefore intended to improve training quality. Tendering began in 2020, but was interrupted because of Covid-19, which led to a shift to remote learning and the next steps in this process will be clarified in 2021 [5.9].

These fundamental changes will affect all Kirk members, totalling, at the end of 2018, [325,000 members in 1,341 congregations](#) across Scotland, and 18 additional international congregations. Census data indicate that around 1 million adults, c.18% of Scotland's population, identify with the Kirk as their religious tradition, making it one of Scotland's largest membership organisations and the largest single identifiable social grouping. As the Convenor of the Special Commission put it [5.2], Gay's '*findings and recommendations have made a significant impact in the long overdue changes that are now sweeping the Church of Scotland, the largest charitable body in the country*'. Though its size and influence are declining, a programme of reform with so major an impact on the Kirk still has significant reach into Scotland's civic society and social fabric.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Herald: Church of Scotland loses millions in a year' 15th May 2019 [PDF]. Also available at <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/17639525.church-of-scotland-loses-millions-in-a-year/>
- 5.2 Church of Scotland news: General Assembly calls for more "radical" strategic plan [PDF]. Also available at: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2018/general-assembly-calls-for-more-radical-strategic-plan>
- 5.3 Testimonial letter, Convenor of the Church of Scotland Special Commission on Structural Reform (2019-19). Dated 18th November 2020 [PDF of email].
- 5.4 Church of Scotland news: Major reforms approved by General Assembly 20th May 2019 [PDF]. Also available at <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news-and-events/news/2019/major-reforms-approved-by-general-assembly>
- 5.5 Church of Scotland, Report of the Council of Assembly May 2019, including Radical Action Plan [PDF]. Also available at: https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/58399/Report_of_the_Council_of_Assembly_2019_including_Radical_Action_Plan.pdf
- 5.6 Church of Scotland General Assembly Order of Proceedings (2–3 October 2020) [PDF]. Also available at: https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/69810/General-Assembly-Order-of-Proceedings-2020.pdf
- 5.7 Church of Scotland, About Us: Radical Action Plan [PDF]. Also available at: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/radical-action-plan>
- 5.8 Church of Scotland update, May 2020 [PDF]. Also available at: <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-structure/assembly-trustees/may-2020-update-report-and-webinar>
- 5.9 GA Report to the General Assembly [PDF]. Also available at https://churchofscotland.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/70111/3601-GA-Reports-to-the-General-Assembly-2020-V6.2.pdf