

Moderator,

What in the world... is the Church of Scotland doing? ...

Sorry, let me rephrase that..."What is the Church of Scotland doing in the world?"

A hundred years ago that was a fairly easy question to answer.

What did we do? We sent missionaries abroad to preach the gospel, to set up schools and hospitals and maybe to translate the Bible.

Of course, it wasn't *quite* as simple as that in reality but the general principle was easy to grasp. It was about sending people from here to ...wherever... and usually for long periods of time.

But what about now? What are we doing in the world today?

Well *what* we do now is certainly *different*.

That's because, as everyone here knows, the world is a very different place now ...and so is the Church around the world.

In many of the countries into which we once sent missionaries the Christian Church is now very well established and self-sustaining, doing its own work of evangelism and mission and in many places is alive and vibrant and growing.

The kinds of Mission Partners that are needed today are people with quite different skills, because they're called upon to do quite different things than were done in the past.

So what we do is *different*.

But does this mean that the Church of Scotland no longer has a role to play in the wider world? Far from it!

At one time we perhaps thought of ourselves as a big church in a small country which nevertheless had a heart and a vision for the wider world: now we realise that in global terms we are really a very small church in a big world. Yet we *can* still have that heart and vision for the wider world and we *can* still make (and already *do* make) a significant and valuable contribution in our partnerships with others.

The truth of the matter is that the Church of Scotland does a *huge* amount in the world relative to its size. But I believe we have the capacity to do even more, much more as we work in partnership with others.

The World Mission Council believes that now more than ever we need to be globally aware and internationally engaged.

And that's because actually the question I started with is not really the most important one. There is another more fundamental question. And one we have to keep on asking.

It's this: "What in the world is *God* doing?"

Because what matters is not our mission, or the church's mission, but God's... So we need to ask, "what is *God* doing and how can we join in?"

Of course that question ("What is God up to in the world?") may be one that most often comes into our minds when we are

confronted with situations of gross injustice, terrible poverty, violent conflict or the abuse and exploitation of vulnerable people; or when natural catastrophe strikes, as it has done so recently in Nepal.

We ask, "Where is God in all of this? What is God doing?"

As Christians, who know the story of the innocent suffering of Jesus, we are often quick to claim that God is right there beside those who suffer, alongside them in that suffering ...but if that is so ...if we really mean that... then surely these are the very places where *God's people* also ought to be.

Always the mission of God is one of love for the world, so those who want to participate in *God's* mission are called to exercise love at its most practical and most radical. That means actually believing St Paul when he says that God, having reconciled us to himself, has now entrusted *to us* a ministry of reconciliation so that God can make his appeal *through us*.

I know that can mean a lot of things at many different levels but it surely must *include* working for justice, peace, healing and life in all its fullness.

It surely must mean not allowing ourselves to become comfortable or complacent in a self-indulgent isolation while others suffer.

The hugely generous response of people in these islands to the emergency appeal for Nepal and the outpouring of humanity

that this demonstrates is for me a sign of the kingdom of God at work well beyond the confines of the Christian Church.

But as it happens the Church of Scotland has had a commitment to the people of Nepal long before this particular tragedy. It is one of those countries where we *do* have people on the ground.

Joel Githinjii was not in Nepal when the earthquake struck, but Malcolm and Cati Ramsay were ...and still are.

Naturally we were relieved to hear that they were safe.

However, I wasn't surprised to discover that their first instinct was not to dwell upon the effect of the disaster upon themselves but to begin immediately reaching out to help others, especially those with young families, who had been traumatised by the disaster.

That's what God's people do. Because that's what God does.

Walking beside others—especially those most in need—is what our Mission Partners do: but it is also something that can be done at many different levels and in all sorts of ways by *all* of us.

As it says in report, "Relationship-building is not something that the World Mission Council does *for* the church, but rather it is what the *whole Church of Scotland does* as part of God's church in the world."

So this year our focus is on how we can all become more fully engaged with what God is doing around the world. And our theme for the year is the same as the theme for this year's General Assembly. LIVING STONES.

It is a concept that we've long made use of when encouraging people to visit Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. For several years we've been saying don't just go and see the famous places—the stones of Church buildings and so on—but go and meet the *living* stones, that ever decreasing Christian community in that sometimes not-very-holy land.

But of course there are living stones throughout the world. We know already from our Twinning and Faithshare Visitor programmes how energising and empowering and spiritually renewing it can be for individuals, congregations and even Presbyteries to make real connections and build real relationships with the living stones around the world, including those who are fragile or struggling or persecuted.

So we want to encourage more and more people in the Church of Scotland (both here in Scotland and in our congregations beyond Scotland) to become even more engaged and more connected with what God is doing around the world ...*in* the Church, *beyond* the Church and sometimes *in spite of* the Church.

When my children were small and we were on holiday walking along a stony beach they would always want to take one or two of the stones home with them—a guess a bit like memories of the good time they'd had.

Well, our report is full of *living* stones to take home with you— Actually these are just a few examples among so many.

They are illustrative of a whole network of relationships around the world each teaching us something different about what God is doing in the world and each challenging us to join in wherever we can.

We want you all to gather some of your own 'living stones' in the year ahead. But let me just share with you a few of the stones I've gathered in recent times.

It is a huge privilege to visit other places as a representative of our Church of Scotland, which is still held in the highest regard by many people around the world. It is often an inspiration and a challenge to meet people who are the living stones, to hear their stories, and to see where God is at work in and through them.

Let me take you first of all to the northern part of Sri Lanka, to Kilinochchi, which was at the centre of the killing fields at the end of the Sri Lankan civil war. Let me introduce you to Father S. K. Daniel, the Anglican priest of St. Paul's, Church of Ceylon.

During the last months of the civil war, with death and destruction all around him, he and his young family were forcibly displaced 14 times—14 times—a sort of serial refugee. Listening to him quietly recounting what must have been truly horrific and terrifying experiences I found his resilience and his determination to remain faithful to God and to his community quite inspirational.

Without any drama in his voice he told us that within an hour of our leaving him he would receive another visit— this time from the Security Services wanting to know who we were, what we had said and what he had told us.

I left Sri Lanka at the end of October feeling pretty pessimistic about the future for that island and especially for the Tamils in the north.

But after the visit of Pope Francis and the surprise election of a new president in January there are a few signs of hope. We believe the Church will want us to continue our commitment to supporting the programme of reconciliation and healing of memories run by the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka.

The second living stone is a person I never even spoke to.

I don't know her name. I know very little about her but as she walked past I quickly took her photograph.

I was in Northern Ghana a few years ago in a small village called Fushugu. We had just shared in a joyful time of worship and the

congregation was spilling out into the dusty ground around the church. And then this mother with two children and another on the way walked past proudly carrying in front of her a Bible.

To me it is a moving image of Christian nurture, a reminder of the strength and significance of women around the world and the joy of the precious gift of children.

The kind of environment in which a child grows up is so important in helping to shape what that child becomes.

If you ever have the privilege of meeting this third 'living stone' (a young man called Jamal Shehade, in the Israeli city of Haifa) you'll learn that he "grew up playing with thieves and former drug addicts" and that his "first babysitter was a murderer."

And you might want to ask, "What kind of parents did *he* have?" I'll tell you—Christ like parents.

Inspired by the gospel of Jesus, Kamil and Agnes Shehade set up a unique and extraordinary ministry called "The House of Grace."

Just two weeks after they were married, they opened up their home and welcomed in two recently released prisoners—and so began one of the most successful programmes for the rehabilitation of offenders that you'll find anywhere in the world.



Muslims, Jews, Christians, or Druze... all are welcomed into a family and community built on the love of Christ, and through being accepted many have their lives turned around.

Jamal's father died of cancer at the age of 46, when Jamal was only 16. But the family have continued and developed this astonishing commitment.

I don't have time to tell you any more: you'll have to find out about it yourself online. "The House of Grace."

In a world of walls and barriers the House of Grace builds bridges by opening its doors to otherwise unwanted strangers so demonstrating the amazing, transforming power of the love of Christ.

Finally, let me take you very quickly to Hebron in the West Bank, right into the heart of the old city and to the rooftop of a house where a couple live with *their* four children, one of whom is this 13 year old girl.

There is an Israeli army post next to the house. It does have its own separate access but the soldiers prefer to use the family's roof and the internal staircase of the home as a shortcut.

Every day. Several times a day.

What does this every day reality of armed soldiers going through your home *uninvited* do to the mind and self-understanding of a young teenage girl? What is it saying to her? 'Your life *doesn't* matter! You are nothing.'

And then ask yourself, ‘what do you think *God* would say to her?’

What do you think God is saying to us *through* her, and many like her around the world?

What might God be calling any of us to do in any of these situations like this?

Because he loves the world God chooses not just to *speak* to people from afar but also to come alongside and express that love in personal presence—sharing the journey with us.

The ministry of Jesus demonstrated that.

Not afraid to stand up to the powerful or the privileged, not embarrassed to make friends with the rich as well as the poor but always reaching out first to the weakest, the most vulnerable and the most broken—that was the ministry of Jesus. And he says to us, “As I have done so you must do.”

So this is what in the world we should be doing.

**Seeing Christ in others: being Christ for others.**

Recently we’ve been delighted to look back with joy and to celebrate special anniversaries of some of Scotland’s most influential ambassadors for the faith—people like David Livingstone, Jane Haining and most recently Mary Slessor.

These days I believe we honour the legacy of people like David Livingstone when we make connections with the *living stones* around the world, and walking alongside them, we share in

what the WCC has called a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

So what in the world is the Church of Scotland doing?

Together with our partners a huge amount! ...and I haven't even had time to mention our HIV Programme or Christian Aid. But there is even more we could still do for there are still many individuals and congregations that have not yet become globally aware far less internationally engaged.

The excellent staff of the World Mission Department would like to help you to explore these different possibilities and at the end of our report we offer links to resources and ideas for action.

Among the resources we'd like to offer the church this year are the words of a new song, set to a traditional Gaelic tune.

It is a song that speaks of the pilgrimage of justice and peace and to let you hear what it sounds like we invited Emily Smith, voted 2014 Scots Singer of the Year, to record it for us.

### **SONG: Beside Us**

Moderator,

As more and more congregations and individuals make all kinds of connections with living stones around the world, sharing their journeys with each other, we start to weave a kind of multi dimensional and multi directional pilgrimage of justice and peace around the world.

And as we join the pilgrimage we discover like the disciples on the road to Emmaus that the risen Christ himself draws alongside to walk beside us and to bring us hope.

Moderator,

I submit the report and, as I am not a Commissioner, would ask the Principal Clerk to move the Deliverance.