

Theological Forum – General Assembly 2019

Moderator,

Discipleship has been at the heart of this General Assembly: hearing the call of Jesus in our life, belonging to his community, and following him wherever he leads. For the past two years, in response to a request from the floor of the Assembly, the Theological Forum has been exploring a central aspect of following Jesus – reconciliation. The instruction came to us in the context of divisions within the Church of Scotland, Scottish churches and Scottish society concerning same-sex marriage. But as we reflected on reconciliation, it seemed increasingly to us to be the hallmark of Christian faith and discipleship much more widely. Our reflections are found in “He is our Peace”: Reconciliation in the Church Today, found as the appendix to section 19 in the Blue Book. Let me summarise our approach.

We live in a world marked at almost every level by competition, division, anger and conflict, which leads to violence in many places. In these different areas – personal, family, community, church, national and international, human beings sense keenly the need for reconciliation in place of strife. But in exploring reconciliation as a phenomenon between people, we first recognise that reconciliation is one of the scriptural expressions for the changed relationship between God and creation, including humankind, found in the cross. This is profoundly related to our human relationships: reconciliation is an image for divine restoration of friendship particularly applicable to human relationships with others. We draw particularly on the thought of the theologian Miroslav Volf, originally from Croatia, who reflected deeply on questions of conflict, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation arising from the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. He developed a persuasive account of reconciliation and justice through reflecting on the meaning of the cross. The heart of his argument is this: as God has embraced hostile humanity in reconciling love, so we are called to embrace each other in a communion deeper even than long-lasting and ongoing differences.

We recognise that conflict within the Church can seem insignificant compared to the appalling effects of hatred, vengeance and war we see in the news. Nevertheless, disagreement between Christians over theology, ethics, sexual identities, allocation of resources and decision-making within the church can become significant conflicts, church-dividing conflicts, and the Assembly’s instruction to the Forum is a sign of that. We explore some of the many reasons for the persistence of conflict within the Church, before outlining many ways in which churches including the Church of Scotland have fostered good disagreement, healthy discussion and a reconciling spirit in the midst of pain, difference in belief and practice, and discord.

We know that reconciliation may not always be achieved, even among Christians who stay in the same fellowship. Yet we are continually being invited by God to pray for reconciliation, and shape our lives around this invitation. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. We don't stop praying it because it's hard – it is because it is hard that it is a prayer.

Let me conclude with the closing words of He is our Peace:

Reconciliation is the basic nature of our relationship to the gracious God who entered creation in Jesus Christ and who, by the Spirit, enables us to embody reconciliation in the church. We are in the midst of debate on same sex marriage in the Church; future generations may well find themselves divided on issues we cannot anticipate. But then, as now, we are called, when we disagree, to do so within the unity offered in Jesus Christ, who is our peace.

Moderator, it is my pleasure to present the Report of the Theological Forum, and as I am not a Commissioner, I would ask the Clerk to move the Deliverance.

Revd Dr Donald MacEwan
Convener
Theological Forum