

Church and Society Council – General Assembly 2019

This week we have started to tell a different story about ourselves.

Many of us have known that the Church's story, our story, cannot be contained in our annual statistical returns about numbers and the trends towards decline. The story we live, but don't often tell, is about being the salt of the earth, building community, tackling injustice, helping people to belong.

That is what the work of the Church and Society Council and its wonderful staff team have been engaged in over the last year, celebrating, enabling and resourcing the grassroots work of the church.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth". The Church flourishes when it is adding saltiness to the mix. Being the heart, as well as the soul of a community, Moderator, you suggested we use Google this week. If you look the Anglican Cathedral in Kolkata you'll see what looks like an imperial palace, a reminder of Empire. John V. Taylor, the great Anglican Bishop of Winchester once described the place as an irrelevance, a throw-back to an Imperial past. That is, until it became a sanctuary for refugees pouring over the border from the war in Bangladesh in the early 1970s. The worshipping congregation was never healthier than when it had to weave its way past bags of rice and tents stacked to its ornate ceiling.

When today, a Glasgow minister is approached by two members of her congregation and told, "you can't use the vestry for the next while, we've commandeered it as a home for a refugee family who've been evicted and are facing deportation", you know the church is being the salt and light.

But how much salt do we actually need? It is a question that we rarely ask. Too much salt and the dish could be ruined.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before his execution by the Nazis, thought of Jesus, pushed out of the world on the cross, powerless and without institutional clout, but he knew Christ was changing the world. Not a survival strategy for the Church but the Strategy of the Cross. It is time to tell a different story about ourselves.

For though we may be getting smaller, we shouldn't underestimate the impact of the church in our communities. From north to south, east to west it has probably never been

greater. The mission of the Church is not to itself, but to the world. A world that is so beautiful but also so fragile.

What other organisation can offer hospitality to their communities in 1300 different places across Scotland, as well as in England, Europe and other places around the world.

What other organisation can mobilise 50,000 volunteers who are PVG checked and active in their communities? Many of them ready to do more. 90,000 Guild members and 55,000 elders, committed to serve. That's far more personnel than the police!

And, that doesn't include those who support the church's work even if they are not church members, as well as congregations that make their spaces available to others. Like salt, so much of this impact is often unseen and we only notice it when it is not there.

Jesus said, "Do not be anxious". And, who would want to join an anxious institution? But who wouldn't want to be aligned with an organisation that is standing for the values that help local communities flourish?

That is the different story we are telling about ourselves.

Under the theme of Building Global Friendships, we await an Autumn statement from the UK Government to give clarity to its priorities regarding the re-settlement of refugees. The current policy comes to an end next year and so far we have heard very little. Scotland has done more than its fair share and we applaud the Scottish Government's resettlement strategy that recognises the gifts of the strangers who come, empty handed to our shores as "New Scots".

Scottish Faith Action for Refugees, works across faith communities. We mustn't lose the relationships and expertise that has been developed. Our partners, faith communities, the Government and the Scottish Refugee Council want to continue to offer sanctuary and hospitality, so, we call on the UK Government to be generous and take its place alongside the international community in offering hope to displaced people from around the world.

Last year the case of Asia Bibi was discussed and it highlighted calls for freedom of religion across the world. This is so important in the light of the increase of xenophobic rhetoric. We are working hard to be a constructive partner with the Home Office as they test the legitimacy of people's conversion experiences and assess claims for asylum and resettlement. Stories of the "Hostile environment" are an appalling indictment.

Whilst the Church of Scotland has not always had a good record on this, we have for many years deplored all forms of religious bigotry. This year, we bring a Notice of Motion inviting the Assembly to affirm its support for the internationally agreed definition of antisemitism that has been drafted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

We lament ongoing injustice in Pakistan, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, China, as well as the tragic conflict in Israel/Palestine. We weep for the loss of life in Mosques in Christchurch, in churches in Sri Lanka, and in synagogues in the United States. No religious community is immune from this scourge of hatred and we must overcome it together. We should strive to hear people's stories and not dehumanise anyone. There should be no neutrality where injustice erupts.

The resort to brutality by those seeking to cling to power, and their efforts to radicalise the most vulnerable must be opposed wherever it arises. As Christians, we know we are called to make enemies of no-one and to engage in the costly work of peace-making.

The Church of Scotland pioneered universal education, and health care for all. In times of huge pressure, we are currently in discussion with the Scottish Government and other partners regarding the establishment of a Health and Wellbeing Commission. How can we sustain and re-imagine this vital work for the health and wellbeing of all?

We work for an economy driven by equality and we have deep reservations about the roll out of Universal Credit and the impact that it is having on the poorest in our communities. Moves to ensure that people in abusive relationships are afforded the best protection, the initiative to make payments twice monthly rather than once a month, and the idea of being able to pay landlords directly, all Scottish initiatives, are to be commended, but more can and should be done.

Faith consistent finance continues to be a subject we are active in promoting and this sphere of concern goes hand in hand with our concerns about the Climate Emergency and the need we all have to use our resources in ways that both promote justice and sustain the planet.

Since the last Assembly, and indeed, since the drafting of our report, an increased momentum has focussed our minds and lead us to propose ways in which we can ensure the Church is not left behind.

We applaud efforts to install an ethical screen the default Church of Scotland Pension and the efforts of the Church Investors Trust address the issue of putting our money where our

values are. We also invite congregations to join in a journey towards becoming carbon neutral through a just transition to a low carbon economy.

We recognise that we cannot expect our government to have more care for God's creation than the Church.

This is not going to be an easy journey. It will be painful for many. But our children are telling us, venerable broadcasters are telling us, leading bankers and the scientific consensus are telling us, that this earth is fragile, that loss of habitat and species is accelerating and that we must take action.

As the 19th Century campaigner against slavery, William Wilberforce declared, "You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know." If our children find that we have so plundered the planet that the nature we depend on can no longer sustain us, we will not be able to say that we did not know what we were doing. Caring for Creation, then, is a significant part of what it means for us to be "Investing in Young People". The new cross-council working group has established itself under the leadership of Robin Hill and we are grateful to him as we are to those who have served on the Education Committee that it replaces. Our report highlights priorities for this new group in supporting families, serving schools and enabling mentors for young people. The negative impact of adverse, early year's experiences on life outcomes is one way in which people in our churches are making a positive difference.

We also recommend, alongside Crossreach, support for pending legislation to change the age of criminal responsibility, which is currently 8 in Scotland and we suggest it should be 14. And, we continue to urge the Scottish Government that a top up of £5 in Child benefit would go some considerable way to lifting at least 30,000 children out of poverty.

Making difficult decisions is a challenge for us all, but it helps us to move to a new place? We have embraced radical change in our church structures, we must do the same in the world for our children.

In many of our 1300 places, we are playing host to conversations about how create a fair and more just future for all, doing politics differently. We can be salt and light, encouraging respectful dialogue, talking about the kind of future we want, hosting participatory budgeting events that bring diverse communities together, and enabling people to meet their MPs and MSPs and talk openly and constructively about the issues that matter. But, in addition, we need to ensure that we create an authentic place for those with lived,

contemporary experience of poverty to participate with integrity in debates and decisions the church and society take forward.

The United Kingdom is in the process of writing a different story about itself. Tomorrow, we will hold elections for the European Parliament and we would always urge people to exercise their vote. In this unprecedented period of uncertainty over our future relationship with Europe, we have consistently urged that the rights of EU citizens should be protected and that the most vulnerable in our communities should not carry the greatest burden. In writing a new story, the pioneering work we have been doing around gender justice demonstrates we are on the move, embracing a new reality. Our report speaks about spiritual abuse and the way in which, sometimes, our messages have made people feel obliged to remain in abusive and violent relationships. Comprehensive resources are available in the Martin Hall.

We may no longer have the loudest voice, but we still have so much to say and are doing so much, even in fragile places.

Moderator, at the heart of the Christian message is a call to live sustainably and Jesus speaks about having concern for the “least of these”. Caring for the outcast and the stranger, is like caring for God. And, St Paul writes to the Corinthian Church, “we have wronged no one, ruined no one, we have not taken more than our fair share”. (II Corinthians 7:2) Written into the DNA of our faith is a message about avoiding over-living, lest we deprive others their right to dignity and the planet of its capacity to flourish.

In telling a different story about ourselves, a story about justice and sufficiency, about flourishing local communities and re-imagining the church, we are taking our part in healing the world and engaging in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation with one another and with this beautiful, fragile planet.