

World Mission Council – General Assembly 2019

I have a friend who was the Associate Minister of a large congregation in Washington DC and at one time she took a career break to raise her young children. Her husband was a lobbyist on Capitol Hill and she was/is a very bright woman; through church and other connections she and her husband continued to be invited to attend many meetings, receptions and parties – and, of course, at these gatherings she was thrown into the situation where she had to make small talk. And that small talk usually starts with the question, “What do you”. When followed by the answer “I’m a stay at home mum, raising three children under the age of five”, she found that people drifted away – off in search of more interesting or influential strangers.

So, my friend developed a new strategy “What do you do?” came the question……. “About what?” came the answer:

- the plight of refugees crossing the Mediterranean
- the effect of climate change on the world’s poorest people
- the expansion of settlements on the West Bank
- the blasphemy laws in Pakistan
- or the persecution of Christians in Egypt and Syria?

Unfortunately this response also sent party goes scuttling off for easier small talk.

However, if you are ever asked whether the Church of Scotland practises what it preaches, and if you are ever asked what you are doing about those affected by the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, or how you are contributing to the enrichment of the lives of the Dalit people in Nepal or South India, or what difference you are making to the prospect of peace in South Sudan – you have your answer here in the report of the World Mission Council.

I sometimes despair of the populist message and mindset which is influencing so many nations to focus inwards on themselves believing that greatness or success go hand in hand with closing your doors to the migrant and the stranger - have you any idea of the scale of the surge of displaced humanity across the world? People who are fleeing from:

- famine caused by climate change,
- wars forgotten by the rest of the world,
- natural disasters which seem to have force greater than ever before,
- religious extremism which many of us thought was a thing of the past

- and people are fleeing because there is international indifference to their situations.

In such a prosperous world, which has the resources and the capacity to feed the hungry, forge paths towards peace, and foster opportunity for all of God's children – there is no excuse for so many billions of the world's population to be left behind in the human race. We should remember that through our partnership with Christian Aid we are, as a church, not only involved in helping to alleviate poverty and hunger where it is palpably evident, but, we are directly involved in doing something about the systemic causes of economic exploitation, gender discrimination, the violation of human rights and the abuse of world's most vulnerable and marginalised people.

A Radical Plan for our Church cannot be one which has us turn in on ourselves or become defensive of our own resources, because we are among those “to whom much has given and from whom much is demanded; we have been entrusted with much, so, much more is asked of us.”¹ Our report is, more than anything else, a narrative which promotes the virtue that “it is in giving that we receive”². And that part of our Radical Plan must be the transformation of individuals and congregations through friendships, partnerships, twinnings, visits and service to those - who nowadays have much more to teach us about Hoping in the Gospel – than we have to teach them.

I want to highlight three areas of our work.

There will be no one in this Assembly Hall who will not remember this image of Alan Kurdi, the three year old Syrian boy, whose lifeless body was washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean on the 2nd September 2015.

2015 was the year we recognised that there was a humanitarian refugee catastrophe playing out in front of our eyes. It was not a new thing, but perhaps these images shamed us into action. Then the Church of Scotland became instrumental in initiating a project which has become - Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees. What I can hardly believe is that, for all the public outrage there was at that time, men, women and children are still drowning in their hundreds and one estimate says that one third of those who board these boats never make to safety – how desperate would you have to be to put your life and the life of your family in the hands of a one in three chance of survival?

What is even more incredible to me is that in the interval since 2015, there has been such a populist backlash against migration that it is more difficult now than it was then to find safe

¹ Luke 12: 48

² Francis of Assisi

passage and a safe destination. A pernicious xenophobia has crept into the culture in too many of our developed nations and here, it seems to me, that there has to be some clarity of voice from the Churches – who else will speak for the poor and the persecuted if we do not.

The week before last, I visited, with the Moderator, one of our Mission Partners, Fiona Kendall; she is a lawyer, who works as the European and Legal Advisor for Mediterranean Hope. Her job title alone tells you just how much the role of a Mission Partner has changed, but it is a vital role in the creating of Humanitarian Corridors for the safe passage of migrants who would otherwise find themselves in rubber boats, playing Russian Roulette with their lives and the lives of their families.

Mediterranean Hope is the creation of our partners, The Waldensian Church and The Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, and it is now working on the creation of Europe-wide Humanitarian Corridors from Libya. This Council, on behalf of the Church of Scotland, will continue to support this vital work and it will redouble its advocacy work – to extend these life saving corridors. We are a very small Church when we work on our own, but when we play our part in the worldwide movement of God's people we can share in the experience of answering our Lord's Prayer for the Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

In Nepal the United Mission to Nepal is a remarkable, highly professional and hugely respected agency which works in Nepal under a General and Project Agreement with the Social Welfare Council of the Government of Nepal. Nepal is not a country where Christian evangelism allowed; but, Christian service with a bias to working for and with the poor is welcomed.

Our report quotes St Francis of Assisi, who said, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words", UMN is one of the best examples in the world of an agency which does just that.

In the southern province of Nawalparasi a small grant of around £5,000, together with the inspiration of the villagers of Koilifedi, built an Irrigation Channel and now, in this fertile valley this farmer, Tak Bahadur Phal, crops 4000 kilograms of cucumbers. But because UMN works on projects that have measurable outcomes which make a difference to poor and remote communities - the project includes ensuring that the crop gets to market and the well-being of 53 families in the village is transformed. Jesus parable of the mustard seed comes to mind. Plant a little encouragement and a little bit of resource and a whole village enjoys the shelter of the tree that blossoms.

Nepal, as you all know, was hit in 2015 by a devastating earthquake – read in our report about the group of 18 Church of Scotland members who will never forget and who will be forever changed by the experience of visiting Nepal and seeing for themselves some of the results of the Let us Build a House initiative. This is the stuff that breathes new life in our Christian faith and which, in turn, can breathe new life into our congregations.

We should be proud of this connection and proud that UNM's Executive Director, Joel Hafvenstein is another of our quite excellent modern day Mission Partners.

Finally, because it all I have time for - another remarkable World Mission story is that of the Council's involvement with the church leaders of South Sudan. It began as an act of solidarity for Peter Gai, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, who shared his story with us at the General Assembly in 2014. This relationship has led to a training programme in the Healing of Trauma and in the work of Mediation, Peace Building and Reconciliation. In this work the World Mission Council has done what it says on the tin – through Attentive Accompaniment – PRESENCE, PROCLAMATION and PRACTICAL ACTION, this modest church of ours, on the edge of Northern Europe has made a difference to the prospect of peace in this war-torn and troubled part of equatorial Africa.

In an early conversation about making a difference in South Sudan we noted two things – that the churches had to work together and show a united front or the tribes never would. And we dreamt that one day church leaders in South Sudan would be the direct influencers of the political leaders of South Sudan. Across the denominational and tribal divides and within the South Sudan Council of Churches we prayed that Church Leaders and Political Leaders would one day work together to broker peace.

Then at the beginning of April, just six weeks ago, under the convening power of Pope Francis and the Vatican Nation State, Church leaders and political leaders were finally brought together in the same room.

- History was made.
- Promises were made between former opposing rebel commanders, who are now political leaders.
- Pope Francis, in an unprecedented gesture, kissed the feet of the political leaders and begged them to make peace not war.

- A Pope, an Archbishop and an old ex-Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland conducted worship together and prayed that these leaders could go make their way home, bring warring factions together and make peace.

There is a long way to go and a lot could go wrong, but here we are all involved – week on week in our churches and in our private prayers we pray for the Prince of Peace to reign; so, “pray without ceasing.”

I commend to you all the transformational stories that are contained in the Council’s Report and I encourage you, when you return home, to consider how you might be able to write more stories of transformation and renewal as part of your Radical Plan for the life of your congregation.

Moderator, I submit the Report and move the Deliverance.