

The Guild speech – General Assembly 2019

Moderator,

For 132 years now, the Guild has been a hugely important part of the life of the Church of Scotland, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Those 132 years have been a long, exciting and challenging journey for us.

Today, I want to tell the General Assembly about the latest stages on our journey and how we are planning the next steps.

In 2015, we presented an Action Plan, (you might even say a Radical Action Plan!) aimed at addressing the challenges and making the most of the opportunities that we faced. Central to that plan was a recognition that the Guild was about change, about being flexible and forward-looking enough to adapt to new circumstances and to make use of new resources.

Indeed, the report began with this quotation from the General Secretary:

“Change is about the acknowledgement of the present and the anticipation of the future, not about criticism of the past.” Taking the metaphor of the journey, we are currently working with a three year strategy, “One journey, many roads”, which intends to encourage us to see that, whilst we share an aim, that aim can be achieved in many different ways. Much of what we set out in our Action Plan has been achieved and today I want, not just to talk about these things and to look backwards, but to celebrate the Guild of today and tomorrow.

To help do that, you will have noticed that we have written our report to the General Assembly in a new way, setting it out as a year in the life of the Guild, with the intention that this will give Commissioners a sense of the life, energy, variety and vitality of the Guild. Central to all that we are doing are three things:

- The practical, but essential, importance of communicating not just with ourselves but with the wider church and the communities we serve
- The nurturing of confidence in Guild members
- The development of new models of Guild, both in terms of structures and of practice

Much of what we have done over the year combines all three.

One focus has been on events that bring Guild folk together and allow for us to share in our four tenets of worship, prayer, action and fellowship.

The National Leadership Team has led a series of regional Roadshows and Gatherings Over the past two years, these have taken place in Argyll, Lochaber, Lochcarron and Skye, Lewis, Orkney, Shetland, Caithness, , Buchan, Kincardine and Deeside, Angus, Tayside, Fife and Nithsdale, with more planned in the coming years.

These events focus on resources, discussions and worship. They are also an opportunity to meet and encourage and support each other.

We have held conferences for office bearers to inform, encourage, network and thank them.

We have shared in the Convener's Challenge, a competition that encouraged Guilds regionally to design a cushion cover that showed technical and artistic skills, but also reflected the distinguishing characteristics of different places.

Congratulations to the Guilds of Lewis, this year's winners!

We have celebrated on the grand scale at the Annual Gathering in Dundee, including for the first time a moving sharing of bread and wine both in the hall and with the 1000 people watching the live stream around the country.

We have raised the roof of several churches and this Assembly Hall with our "Big Sings"...the latest of which will take place this evening.

A second focus has been on partnerships.

Here in Scotland, we have worked closely with other departments of the Church of Scotland and with other denominations and other faiths and issue-based organisations, a list of which you can see in our report. We value these connections enormously and hope that we bring as much to our partners as we gain from them.

We also have connections with groups internationally.

I was privileged to represent the Guild at the conference of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women in Soko Grad in Serbia and at Tumekutana “We have come together”, a conference looking at the place of women in the church which took place in Johannesburg.

Rev Tom Macintyre of Shetland Guilds Together went to the Pan-African Presbyterian Men’s Conference in the same venue.

These events, which were different in many ways, but shared much as well, allowed the Guild to take its place in discussions and reflections on issues that affect women and men all over the world. They have also encouraged us to think about developing more ecumenical partnerships at a local level and we are keen to see how they will develop.

We have also been building on our relationship with the Men’s and Women’s Guilds of the Synod of Livingstonia in Malawi and a number of Guild people look forward to meeting with them at their conferences in August, at which we will be taking forward plans to form twinning relationships between Guilds there and here at a regional level.

We recently were privileged to receive a legacy from former National Convener, Moira Alexander. This legacy will enable 2 folk in Malawi, either men or women, to undertake their nurse training. They will be folk who otherwise would not be able to train as a nurse. We hope that this is a fitting legacy to Moira who was herself a senior nurse tutor. Of course, our best known partnerships are with our project partners and here is a short presentation about the current partners.

As you can see, the range of places, work and people that these Christian projects cover is vast and that again clearly reflects the strategy “One journey, many roads”. To date, the Guild has already raised £195 000 for these, which comes after a total of over £763 000 went to the previous projects, meaning that we have now raised the staggering sum of £5.2 million since the scheme began, which can be added to another million raised by the previous “one project per year” scheme. But just as important as the money raised are the complex and challenging issues that these projects have brought to the heart of the church over the years, prostitution, FGM, homelessness, the plight of refugees, HIV/Aids, support for those living with dementia. It is a long and varied list but we are proud of the ways in which we have helped shape and change peoples’ attitudes and perceptions. Of course, neither partnerships nor events would be possible without our amazing membership.

It is a huge privilege to have been elected National Convener for this year, but it is also important to encourage continued strength in that membership by welcoming new people. To that end, we have offered a real bargain to new members of a year free of capitation fees so that they can find out more about what the Guild really does and, just as importantly, how they can contribute to the life of the Guild.

Moderator, I am delighted to go against the negative statistics that can discourage to offer the encouragement that we have welcomed over 500 new members. These are a few of them.

Travelling the country during the year, I have been really impressed by the ways in which Guilds are adapting how they work, not only to refresh the existing membership, but also to encourage and welcome new people.

I want to take the chance here to thank the staff in Guild Office and the National Leadership Team for their support during this year... it's been a real team effort!

We now look ahead to the next year and to building on the positives, to making the most of our opportunities.

It is my hope that the whole church might share in our work, including those places where there is no Guild...why not think about supporting our projects, using our resources, attending our events or forming a Guild in your church?

Moderator, we are constantly looking at new ways of working and new ways of thinking that will help us celebrate the Guild and, as I have said earlier, encourage and refresh ourselves and those with whom we work.

As part of that we are today asking that the General Assembly approve a revised version of our Constitution, which takes account of a number of changes we have made that, whilst they may seem technical and administrative, we feel reflect our desire to continue to be a movement that has a sense of purpose and a positive mind-set.

I would draw the attention of the Assembly to three things.

Firstly, we have decided to stop having standing committees of the National Council, instead using task-based groups to do jobs that the Council wants to have done. We are already seeing this work out in the way that National Council meetings work and what

people get from them, as well as seeing much more efficient and purposeful use of the time of busy individuals.

Secondly, the move from having one National Vice-Convener to having four, with each leading on one of our core areas of work:

- Communications
- Outreach
- Resources
- Events

Thirdly, the change from the regional name “Presbyterial Council” to “Guilds Together”. Presbyterial Council was very much a church name and often confused people as to what it was actually about. One member recalled a story of when she had gone to speak to a Guild about her role as the Council Convener, and did so in some depth, only to be asked at the end ‘so you’re from the Council – well the light in my stair has been out for ages so can you get it fixed?’

Guilds Together more clearly describe what these regional groups are for....bringing guilds together for worship, prayer, action and fellowship. Alongside this change, many have chosen to alter the geographical part of their name to better reflect the reality of where Guilds are. Examples of this are mentioned in the report.

Moderator, we realise that changing a constitution or a name will not of themselves fix our problems. Rather, we offer these changes as part of a wider picture of the Guild as an organisation that travels its journey with a smile on its face!

Moderator, I present the report and move the deliverance.