

Retiring Moderator Susan Brown – General Assembly 2019

*Walking is good for you physically
It's good for your mental health too.
It's also a good and ancient spiritual exercise
And what's more, it's good for the environment.*

That's what I suggested last year – and I thought these might provide four areas that it might be useful to explore as I travelled round Scotland and beyond. They certainly did! They opened up all sorts of conversations and possibilities – some that I had expected but many more I had never imagined – all of which I am grateful for.

Those conversations were with individuals of every age and from all parts of the social strata... from politicians to school children, to prisoners... from lords and royalty, to those who live in UPA's, from churches to businesses to interfaith groups and to those of no faith...

A year that began with the celebration of 50 years since the ordination of women to word and sacrament and a walk up the Mound to this hall, led to Christian and Muslim women walking together in Glasgow... it led to a number of conversations and action around women and domestic abuse – particularly faith based domestic abuse and to visiting Cornton Vale where I was so privileged to meet both women prisoners and staff and where I was blown away, as I was in Guernsey's mixed prison, by the compassion of the staff and by the number of people in prison who are suffering with mental health issues...

I also had the opportunity to go further afield and to walk with the most amazing lady in the Church of North India – in what is a Dalit church, Aradhana, takes teams into the slums of Nagpur to work with Dalit women – the lowest of the low – she and her team offer training – but also dignity. One passionate, tireless, faithful, effective and impressive lady, living her calling!

In Scotland, the basic needs Aradhana is meeting, are sadly in evidence here too. The Presbyteries I visited were all involved in foodbanks and many congregations were also feeding children during the school holidays – children who would otherwise not have a hot meal.... This... in 21st century Scotland!

People are experiencing hardship because of changes to the benefit system with the introduction of universal credit. The delays in payments are hurting families. I had

conversations with each of the political leaders on this very subject and it's one we cannot, as a church, lose sight of. We are here to do as Jesus did and to protect and care for, the most vulnerable among us.

Then there are the lunch clubs and cafes in our congregations, providing meals for many, especially the elderly in the community – fulfilling both a physical need – and the need to combat isolation...

Mental health has been a huge area for discussion whether through Crossreach and their counselling, addiction, homelessness or support services, or through conversations again, in the Presbyteries I visited, as well as with individuals and organisations round tables. There is great concern about the rise in anxiety and depression among teens and young people and about the social isolation our young people feel in an age when communication has never been easier – but where it tends to be virtual rather than real...where clicks and likes are in greater supply than hugs or face to face encounters...

There is every bit as much concern too, in the worrying rise in suicide – especially among men. The issue is a complicated one and needs wider discussion with and among men, but the Men's Sheds movement is one attempt to counter the social isolation older men can feel and I love the Glenrothes state of the art shed which has painted in the midst of a mural, these words: "Women talk face to face... Men talk shoulder to shoulder".

However we do it – we all need to find someone we can talk to because it's then we discover we are not alone and that we're not the only ones thinking and feeling the way we do.

Then there's dementia. It's not easy to live with but I have so enjoyed meeting people working with those who are suffering and I have learned so much from both sufferers and carers. This is not something that is going to go away which means that we as a church, in all our congregations, need to find ways of looking after and creating space for, those who have dementia and we also need to care for those living with a partner or parent or friend who have it. What are we doing to adapt the things we do, including worship, to make sure all are included?

Walking is good for your physical health, your mental health and your spiritual health and often these three can't really be separated. They are interwoven. But environmental issues are right in there too. The way we have treated this world in the past, has led not only to the effects on climate we are witnessing, but to poverty and sickness. Walking with Christian Aid throughout this past year, I am acutely aware that this world is one world and

that what any of us does, has an impact for better or for worse, on the lives of others elsewhere. We need to keep walking together and together we need to keep caring for a creation that is magnificent and beautiful and oh so vulnerable.

I want to thank the Royal Navy for a wonderful visit to its bases in Scotland. The picture of the Depute Chaplain to the Fleet, our own convener of the Armed Forces Committee and me in the same, one-size-fits-no-one, rescue suit will be etched on my brain forever! I know we will thank our chaplains in person on Thursday, but I want to commend the work they do – they walk alongside a community which is both intense and intensely rewarding with great swathes of the very generation often missing from our churches – young women and men – and their families too of course.

There has been one very distinctive and unexpected thread throughout this past year with which I am going to finish, but before I do, I want to thank the Assembly, the Lord High Commissioner with whom I have managed to meet up a couple of times during the year which has been a great honour. Can I thank too all the congregations, guilds, BB and GB with whom I have talked and listened and laughed – a lot! Our congregations might be smaller in number, they might be worrying about the future – but they are doing the most amazing job when it comes to worshipping faithfully and to serving their local communities and engaging in wider, national and global issues. Incredibly impressive. A word for you (for us) all – (Luke 12:25) “who by worrying can add a single hour to your life?” Let’s live in this moment, doing all we can in Christ’s name and for his sake and trusting God to carry us into a future that is in his hands...

Personal thanks to the Principal Clerk – but even more importantly to Catherine McIntosh, the Moderator’s PA who is worth my weight in gold (because I’m heavier than she is) – one incredible lady for whom nothing is too much bother and who lives her faith through her calling to this role. George and Catherine, thank you. And one other incredibly special lady – Nancy. No Moderator could survive this week never mind the rest of the year, without Nancy’s help in the Moderator’s flat. Thank you Nancy for everything!

The Comms team and so many of the Councils of the church and their staff, have also gone above and beyond in their helpfulness. Thanks to them too and to the congregation of Dornoch Cathedral who have trained and shaped me over the last 20 plus years and Killearnan before them and who have thoroughly enjoyed the preachers who have guided them through the year.

Most thanks though, go to my better half Derek who has survived a lot of this year on his own and who, with the help of friends, has coped with Finn dog and with moving house on top of everything else.

That last thread.

It is walking with and welcoming, our neighbours.

From work in various parts of Scotland with refugees and asylum seekers, offering help, language classes, advice and so on, to seeing the work being done by our partner churches in Italy with the creation of humanitarian corridors, which they would like other nations across Europe to sign up to, I have been at times, moved, angered, inspired and exasperated by the way people treat others.

This became all the more personal since, at the very beginning of my year I met a young boy who had lost his mum and I met a family with two teenage boys. Both the boy and the family were being supported by their local churches and especially by their ministers. They needed to be. Because they are asylum seekers.

The young boy has been given leave to stay for a little longer. Sadly, the government has not yet made the same compassionate offer to the family. They are from Pakistan and Christians are under threat there. They have been in Scotland for 7 years and the boys are well integrated into their school and are much loved students. The whole family are very involved in their local church and dad, Maqsood is an elder – and a commissioner to this Assembly. I have been to Pakistan. Admittedly only one small corner of it, but every church we went to, there was an armed guard and any posters advertising my visit could only be put up on the day for fear of threat. Our government says Pakistan is a safe place for Christians.

Our world is not ours, but God's.

Created for the whole of humanity.

Together.

God's heart is big enough to hold everyone.

Ours needs to be too.