

Opening Speech of the Lord High Commissioner—General Assembly 2023

The Rt Hon Lord Hodge

Right Reverend and Right Honourable,

His Majesty The King has commanded me to assure you of His great sense of your steady and firm zeal for His service, and to assure you of His resolution to maintain Presbyterian Church Government in Scotland.

Pray be seated.

Right Reverend Moderator: It gives me great pleasure to offer you my warmest congratulations on your appointment as Moderator. I wish you a most happy and rewarding year in office. Appointment as Moderator is the highest honour that your colleagues can bestow. You have wide experience of service as a hospital chaplain in Falkirk and then in Larbert, as a parish minister at Camelon Irving Parish Church in Falkirk and then as a minister in the Presbyterian Church of the United States. Returning to Scotland, you served for 10 years as Associate Minister at Dunblane Cathedral before taking up the role as Head of Christian Aid Scotland in 2016. These posts stand you in very good stead for leadership of the Church. You undertake this important work with the loving support of your husband, Stuart, and the prayers and good wishes of the whole Church.

May you and your husband find both happiness and satisfaction this year in this special work of public service.

Moderator, I feel deeply the honour of being invited by His Majesty The King to represent His Majesty at this gathering. It was a signal honour to have represented Her late Majesty The Queen last year in what sadly turned out to be the final year of Her reign, a reign which was characterized by a deep sense of duty, unparalleled public service as monarch, and a steadfast Christian witness.

His Majesty has taken up those tasks. Last September, I had the privilege of attending the Accession Council, the meeting of the Privy Council to authorize the proclamation of His Majesty's accession to the throne. I was struck by the fact that one of His Majesty's first acts at that Council was to take an oath to preserve the practice of the Kirk in Scotland.

Some may ask: what is now the purpose of such an oath and the ceremonies that you have witnessed today? My answer is simple. The United Kingdom is not a secular state. The state

recognizes the Christian heritage and values of our country, the diversity of our modern culture notwithstanding.

There has always been a diversity of views on matters of religion in Scotland, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom; and immigration in the last seventy years has greatly enhanced that diversity. We are now a multicultural and pluralist society. The modern state does not discriminate between people of different faiths or people without religious belief. In contrast with the not-so-distant past, people are not barred from education or public office on the ground of their religious beliefs; and our public services are available to all. The state upholds freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief. But that does not mean that we live in a secular state. The Christian heritage at the heart of our state was evident at the Accession Council and in the Coronation. The nature of contemporary society has been reflected by the attendance at the Coronation of the leaders of other faith communities, but the service remains a fundamentally Christian service. So, I believe, will be the service in St Giles when The King receives the Honours of Scotland.

In my profession our living Christian heritage is evident each year at the start of the legal year when the Judges of the Court of Session and members of the legal profession attend a service in St Giles. Working as I now do in London, my colleagues and I in the judiciary, together with the Lord Chancellor, attend a service at the start of the legal year in Westminster Abbey, where church and state come together to recognize the importance of the Christian concept of justice in our society and seek God's blessing on the work of those who administer the justice system.

My role in representing His Majesty at your Assembly is another recognition by the state of the importance of the work and witness of the Kirk.

It is a great pleasure for me to see you again in the Assembly. I recognize, as I did last year, that the Church faces significant challenges in the light of social change, including the diversity of modern Scotland and changing social practices, not least the loss of Sunday as a special day in the lives of the majority. These developments and the pandemic have reduced the funds available for the Church's work, forcing the union of congregations and the spreading of the Kirk's resources more thinly. These changes in themselves can be disheartening; the pace at which change has to be implemented can demoralize; and I understand the feeling that the Church is beleaguered.

It is important to protect the Kirk as an institution. Institutions are needed to give focus, community, and continuity. The early Church Father, Tertullian, said that no Christian is a Christian alone. The Kirk has fewer resources than in the past. But change gives rise to new opportunities in the ways in which the church bears witness to the Gospel in the wider community. I hope that the radical organizational changes which are being and are to be

implemented will not cause the Kirk to lose sight of the ecumenical work discussed in the report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, and especially initiatives at a local level. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has observed, no one Christian community by itself possesses the entirety of the gospel.

Last year in my opening address I mentioned the value of cooperation with others who have shared values in the field of religious belief or in working to assist the disadvantaged in our society. I was behind the curve, for the Church was already active. In 2021 the St Andrew Declaration was signed between the Kirk and the Scottish Episcopal Church committing each church to develop their ministry and mission together in new ways. Last year, the Assembly approved the text of the historic St Margaret Declaration by the Kirk and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, and in November the Declaration was signed by the Moderator and Archbishop Leo Cushley in the presence of The Princess Royal. The Declaration declares the friendship which has developed between the two churches, while recognizing the divisions and hurt of the past. It acknowledges what the churches have in common, states that there is more that unites us than divides us, and seeks together to maintain a Christian voice in the land.

Such cooperation need not involve any abandonment of the insights and practices of each denomination or faith. A focus on what we have in common allows people to learn from the practices and insights of the other. The great rabbi, the late Jonathan Sachs, spoke of the dignity of difference. Adherence to one's own traditions and recognition of that difference does not, or should not, prevent respect for the otherness of the other.

In Scottish ecclesiastical history there has long been an emphasis on a democratic church polity. This emphasis has caused momentous events. The rising in 1638 against the attempt by Charles I to impose a form of church governance in Scotland without consent led indirectly to the civil war. Similarly, the Disruption of 1843, when about one-third of the ministers and members left the Church of Scotland to form the Free Church, was principally a result of a dispute over the democratic governance of the church, a dispute which was not resolved in large measure until 1929. The pursuit of a democratic church polity is a great tradition, which has contributed to the development of our political democracy.

We live in an age in which democracy is in recession globally, and in some democracies there has been a rise of autocratic populism. People are willing to invent and promulgate fake news; and demagogues dismiss, as "fake news", information which is truthful but inconvenient. The principled upholding of the truth in a so-called "post-truth" age is a task in which Christian denominations, people of other faiths, and people of no religious faith can cooperate. And the Christian denominations in cooperation can ensure that the Christian voice is heard in the market for ideas in Scotland and more widely.

I also hope that the Church will be able to find resources, of both personnel and finance, to continue the noble tradition of its commitment to social improvement so that it can work with like-minded people in the service of the community locally, as well as addressing important national issues. I read with great interest about the work of Crossreach in the report of the Faith Impact Forum.

While working in London for the last ten years I have become involved in a small way with the Westminster Abbey Institute, which promotes morality and spiritual values in public life. My connection with the Abbey caused me, when preparing to address you, to read, among others, the essays of Rowan Williams of the Way of St Benedict. That, in turn, caused me to look at the Rule of St Benedict. Many chapters of his Rule are concerned with the practicalities of communal life, but I was struck by chapter 4 which lists the instruments of good works. Benedict tellingly ended his list with the words “and never despair of the mercy of God”. I wish to give you that thought as you undertake your important tasks this week.

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: In the name of His Majesty I now invite you to proceed with the business for which you are assembled, and the guidance and blessing of Almighty God be with you.