

Committee on Ecumenical Relations Speech — General Assembly 2022

Rev Alexander Horsburgh

Moderator,

Anyone who has made profession of faith, or been ordained, or got married – in fact, anyone who has uttered the words, “I love you,” to another person knows something of the transformative effect of saying certain things out loud. It is not that the faith, or the commitment to serve, or the love begins at that moment. These will already have been there, but saying them takes you on to the next stage, be that church membership, or ministry, or married life, or to a new and deeper relationship.

This year, led by the Ecumenical Relations Committee, the Church of Scotland has been saying things out loud. On St Andrew’s Day last November, the then Moderator of the General Assembly and the Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, along with members from both churches and representatives from others too, gathered in St Mary’s Cathedral in Edinburgh to make public profession of our commitment to one another, as expressed in the Saint Andrew Declaration. We expressed out loud our acknowledgement of one another as churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, holding a common faith, authentically preaching the Word of God, and faithfully administering the sacraments; and we declared our commitment to deepen our existing relationship and develop our ministry and mission together in new ways. Of course, we have long believed the things we acknowledged, and we have been working together for decades, but now we have said it out loud. There is no going back.

This year, we are saying something else out loud, something which has also been true for a long time. The Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland are friends.

Why friendship? Is that not a bit unambitious? Absolutely not. Friendship is a key biblical concept. Jesus said: I do not call you servants any longer . . . I have called you friends.

Friendship is a very deep relationship, a relationship of conscious and deliberate choice, in which individuality is respected and there is room for disagreement, but a relationship in which we stand alongside one another, support one another, rejoice together and weep together, pray for and with each other, and do things together.

We regret that our two churches have not always been friends, that we have not always recognised one another as children of God in Christ, because we should have done. We recognise our need for repentance and forgiveness for the hurts and harms we have caused one another. In making this Declaration of Friendship, we are decisively and deliberately putting these things behind us. We are declaring the truth that we share in the one faith, and that our shared faith is rooted in the faith of the Apostles, as revealed in Scripture and developed and deepened over many centuries. We are declaring a friendship which already exists, which has existed for a long time, and we want everyone to know about it and understand it. By saying out loud that the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church in Scotland are friends, we contribute to changing, not only the narrative of our churches, but the narrative of our country too. There is no going back.

We can and do say these transformative things out loud because of a gift, expressive of God's relationship of love and grace with all creation, which we receive from God. That is the gift of *koinonia*, a biblical concept which encompasses fellowship, communion, and partnership, which the Committee's report explores in some depth, drawing on the report of the International Reformed-Anglican Dialogue, sponsored by the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Anglican Consultative Council. *Koinonia* is a gift which calls us to recognise the fact that, in Christ, we are already One. Receiving it helps us to see that good ecumenical relations are not merely an option for churches, but that unity is the God-given starting point from which we have diverged. Unity in Christ is the given, fundamentally expressed in our common baptism. Properly and openly receiving the gift of *koinonia* enables us to see all Christians as friends and siblings, and all churches as different forms of the One Church. We commend this insight to the whole Church, and especially to our congregations because, when we embrace the gift of *koinonia* and answer its call to bear witness together to something larger than ourselves, the questions become not, what might we be able to do together, but more, why on earth are we doing things apart? Thereafter, sharing ministry, mission and our resources becomes the natural thing to do.

Our membership of ecumenical bodies, in Scotland and Britain, in Europe and across the world, is a further, tangible expression of the unity into which Christ calls us, and our participation in them is both effective and highly valued. Our active membership means we can access theological and liturgical resources and better address common concerns and challenges. For example, our membership of the World Council of Churches enabled Lord Wallace to gain unprecedented access to the COP26 Conference. The rapid development of the Scottish Church Leaders' Forum, a group with a steadily growing number of participant churches, has provided a valuable forum for addressing the challenges of the pandemic. It has only been by working together with other churches in Scotland that we have been able to engage with government in the way we have. Ecumenical engagement has become the

default. We have more credibility when we act and speak in unity, and that is true at every level, from the international and national, right up to the local.

We live in changed times, and the flexible, responsive, and relatively informal way in which the Scottish Church Leaders' Forum works and expresses the *koinonia* given to the Scottish churches is leading us to a greater appreciation of this emerging form of ecumenism. Along with the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office and the Ecumenical Officers' Forum, a growing network of complementary and effective ecumenical bodies, each with a coherent purpose, is emerging, and the Committee is inviting the General Assembly to welcome and encourage this development.

I said we live in changed times, referring to challenges which face us as a Church. But in another sense, we live in profoundly altered times. A year ago, we could scarcely have imagined that we would be witnessing a full-scale war in Europe, such as has unfolded since Putin's regime launched its invasion of Ukraine. While it would be unwise to oversimplify, we cannot, as Christians, ignore the fact that this war has roots deep in the religious history of Russia and Ukraine. It is so important, therefore, that we seek to understand some of the history of the Orthodox churches and learn of the divisions within that church family. And equally, this is a conflict in which churches of all kinds may have a decisive role to play in advocating for peace. In partnership with others, we have sought to engage with the Russian Orthodox community and, at an international level, through the World Council of Churches, we are engaging with the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate in Moscow. Together, we are standing with clergy and congregations who are bravely stating their opposition to this war while, at the same time, pleading with the Church hierarchy to repudiate violence. In these dangerous times, we seek to embrace the gift of God's *koinonia*, in the belief that it has the power to lead us in the ways of peace.

Moderator, our report demonstrates that the Ecumenical Relations Committee, in the words of the Church of Scotland's Ecumenical Policy, is working "to remove any obstacles which hinder our cooperation with our sisters and brothers in Christ." It demonstrates too that, in concert with others, we are working for the realisation of God's reign of justice, love and unity. I commend it to the General Assembly and, as I am not a commissioner, I ask the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.