

Faith Impact Forum Speech — General Assembly 2022

Very Rev Dr Susan Brown

“Follow me”, Jesus says.

And where Jesus is, is in the hungry, the homeless, in the poor and the misunderstood. Jesus is in the unshed tears of fleeing women. He is in the furrowed brows of families deeply worried about rising costs of living. Jesus is in the hurt felt by those whom others reject. He is in the fear of those who live amid violence: whether in their home or on the streets. He is in the despair of those caught in the cycle of addiction. He is in the numbness of those who have lost hope and in the anger of those who are victims of laws and practices which harm instead of protect.

“Follow me”, Jesus says, to dry tears, to smooth brows, to heal hurts, to calm fears, to set free from despair, to bring alive again, to offer fullness of life and to shout out. Follow me into a world that needs wholeness and healing.

As Christ-followers, these things are not optional extras for us: or something to be done after we have sorted out our internal priorities and politics. These are every day imperatives. These are how we:

- Proclaim the Gospel
- Reach out to new believers
- Respond to human need through loving service
- Transform unjust structures and challenge every violence
- And safeguard the integrity of all creation.

These are how we work with Christ in his mission of bringing healing and wholeness to all.

In another year of structural uncertainty and change, carrying a remit that is concerned with virtually every aspect of the world in which we live and the variety, depth and multiplicity of the relationships that go along with that involvement, the small but wonderfully formed Forum and Faith Action Plan staff group together, have tried to be faithful to Jesus’ call to follow in ways that pursue healing and wholeness for the Church, wider society, the world and the earth.

There has been a welcome growth in across church working on issues such as Net Zero and the Legacy of Slavery, leadership training, refugee work and all the issues around poverty, as well as the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda, (there are more!) enabling the Forum to draw on wider knowledge, insight and expertise.

There are regular updates on the work of the Forum on social media, on the Church's website 'news' and via the Forum's newsletter, to inform, tell stories and point to resources. Communication is essential in the work of the Forum.

There is work in progress which will come to future General Assemblies with regards to the likes of the Church's Net Zero target and the Legacy of Slavery and substance use. These incredibly important issues require time to research in order that the results can be useful and well-resourced and helpful to congregations.

The Forum continues to build on relationships with partner churches and organisations in Scotland, the United Kingdom, Europe and across the world; relationships that inform and inspire, as well as question and challenge and support.

The Forum celebrates the work of congregations everywhere, concerned for the communities and world in which they live and seeking to live with integrity through faith. Healing and wholeness seem of particular need in our current world – a world rocked by a pandemic that has disproportionately affected the poorest everywhere and that has seen some over-ordering vaccines, while others have too few. We pray for generous help and healing.

So many parts of society and the world are torn apart by violence and by conflict. We are particularly conscious of the situation in Ukraine right now – a supplementary report comes to this Assembly about the devastating war there. Sadly, Ukraine is not the only place where conflict is rife. The Korea Peace Appeal affords us all the opportunity to become signatories to peace on the Peninsula. The Ecumenical visit to South Sudan is an attempt to embody peace-building there. But peace is needed in so many parts of this often broken, world. We pray for healing, life-affirming peace throughout the world.

Many things in this world adversely affect those least resourced to deal with them. The impact of the war in Ukraine is a case in point. Not only are the people of that nation coping with the violence of their situation and the consequent difficulties of living without enough food, water, electricity and all the rest, there are people throughout the world coping with the violence of *poverty* who will see that poverty compounded by an increase in cost of living in terms of food prices and fuel bills, adding even greater strain to already drastically

overstretched budgets. Congregations of this Church have done a phenomenal job in setting up foodbanks and larders, clothes exchanges and lunch clubs, as well as offering financial advice, in response to the pandemic. These initiatives are going to be needed even more in the coming months as it is anticipated that an estimated 1.5million households across the UK alone*, will face bills that exceed their income. This work the local church is doing, is life-saving.

And the repercussions of the ever-increasing gap between those who have and those who do not, go wider still, impacting adversely on the lives and opportunities of children, and on the dignity and wellbeing of people of all ages. The Church of Scotland along with our Ecumenical partners has called on the Scottish, UK and Local governments to work together to tackle poverty as a priority. As the cost of living rises we pray *with* those in greatest need, looking to those with power and influence to listen to those who struggle daily against poverty, so all may live life in all its fullness.

Human identity feels like something fundamental, but past assumptions, scientific and technical advances, and new insights are challenging us to see ourselves and others differently and more kindly. Artificial Intelligence plays an enormous part in modern day living. How could and should this be developed? What ethical checks and balances, if any, are needed?

Then, how does society acknowledge diverse human sexualities in a way that respects the dignity of all? And what do we, as a Church, have to say that demonstrates Christ's compassion? People have hurt and harmed fellow human beings who express themselves in ways that lay them open to judgement from some – too often from people of faith. Even if people hold opposing views, there should be no room in conversation and debate for demeaning or demonising the other. The Forum is engaging with the Scottish government over the proposed bills on the Ban on Conversion Therapy and the Reform of the Gender Recognition Act, recognising that these bills, looking at both the societal and ethical issues involved for *individuals*, also go to the heart of questions of human identity and dignity.

The UK Government is proposing to reform the Human Rights Act. The Church contributed to discussions and consideration about this earlier in the year. Deep concern was expressed about the impact on rights, especially for people who live more precarious or vulnerable lives, such as foreign nationals, disabled people, asylum seekers, survivors of human trafficking and offenders. There are also serious *constitutional* implications for devolution. The Forum intends to continue, vigorously, to raise these concerns with the Government. The Forum and Church of England organised a series of webinars on Forced Conversion and Forced Marriage in Pakistan to develop resources to help members and congregations

engage with this issue and to support advocacy and work to mitigate this alarming phenomenon. The words of Charles Reed at one of the webinars, has stuck with me. He said: “Forced conversion amounts to a rape of the soul, while forced marriage constitutes rape of the body” We pray for the health-giving touch that dignity, and respect for all, offers.

In a society in which drugs-related deaths are too many, the Forum welcomes the opportunity to invite the Assembly to call for more work and research to be done in this area, in collaboration with others. Broken lives, through substance use and poor mental health, deserve the chance to be mended through the healing work of addiction recovery and mental health support. Our older people too, grown frailer, as well as the more vulnerable among us, also deserve the support and help they need to live well. Congregations play such an important role here, through the pastoral care you offer in all shapes and forms. Invaluable. The Forum, in tandem with CrossReach, will take part in conversations around the impending bill on a National Care Service. We pray for the courage to care deeply for those whose lives need a little more help to bring about the wholeness everyone needs.

It is not people alone who live with vulnerability. The earth does too. We are called to care for creation and the work of the Forum (and of much of the church) continues to pursue a faithful, healthful way of living that is kind to the planet. Recent research led by academics from the University of Bath and published in the Lancet shows the prevalence of climate anxiety and fears of inadequate responses by Government in a significant number of our young people. The well-being of all, is tied in with the well-being of the world we have been gifted to inhabit. And once more it is the poorest and least well-resourced who are bearing the brunt of the effects of our past climate clumsiness and selfishness. Time is of the essence. Future generations are depending on us. We pray for the earth’s restoration and healing. For the good of us all.

Healing our fractured relationship with the earth is important. And so is healing our fractured relationships with those who share this world with us. The Forum is glad to ask the Assembly to adopt, for internal use, the All Party Parliamentary Group’s definition of Islamophobia, and its guidelines. The Forum is also glad to be working with friends from the Jewish Community on a Jewish Christian Glossary. The words we each use come overlaid with stories that are not always shared or even known by those who hear them. The Glossary is looking at a number of words common to Jews and Christians which we approach from different perspectives, inviting people into conversations which help towards a greater understanding of the other, reducing the chances of causing offence and hurt. It was hoped the Glossary would be ready in full for this Assembly, but there are

further insights to be added. The Forum invites the Assembly to welcome this process of ongoing dialogue in which sometimes difficult conversations can be had. We pray for the remembering of humanity, that all may know their God-worth and likeness and live wholly as God's.

Moderator we have in the gallery Rabbi David Mason who co-led on the glossary project, I wonder if it is your will and the will of the Assembly to ask Rabbi Mason to speak

In presenting the report of the Faith Impact Forum I want to thank all the staff and Forum members – especially the members retiring. We have also lost a few members this year due to personal circumstances. I want to record my thanks to all – especially to the vice-convenor Alan Miller. The words in the report in respect of Alan are heartfelt and sincere.

“Follow me”, Jesus says.

Let's go with Christ, towards the least likely and the much loved.

I present the report and move the deliverances.

*Figure May 5th from National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR).