

Loretta Minghella's Remarks to the General Assembly May 2017

Moderator and members of the Assembly

It is a joy and an honour to have an opportunity to address the Assembly today and to have the chance to thank you in person for the Church of Scotland's vital support of the work of Christian Aid, not just in our Diamond Christian Aid Week, which has just ended, but throughout our 72 years of working together for God's Kingdom. We are your international development agency and it is your unflinching commitment that drives our work forward.

We share your belief that poverty is an avoidable scandal that robs people of their dignity and diminishes us all. We believe that each person is made in the image of God, gifted with life and created to flourish. Our firm faith statement, 'We believe in life *before* death' calls us into transformational partnerships, that let the changes begin in us.

My first overseas visit for Christian Aid to Kenya back in 2010 certainly changed me. In a Nairobi slum, I met children too weak with hunger to walk to school, their grandfather dying of cancer next to them for want of £12 a time for his cancer treatment and his daughter, an intelligent young woman who, realising his death was very imminent, was contemplating trading her virginity so that the family could afford to bury him. You cannot meet someone agonising over such a possibility and remain the same.

Seven years later, I'm just back from South Sudan. It is the world's newest country, born to great celebration in 2011, blessed with natural resources like gold and oil. But since 2013 all hope has been blighted by a bitter civil war.

In Nyal, in Unity State where famine has been declared, I met people who had waded through swamps for five days to flee the fighting, bearing their elderly and their children on their heads. The place they reached, where I met them, is desperately poor but local people are sharing what they have and pulling together with those who have arrived. And with your great generosity and the skills of Christian Aid staff and our partner Unido, those people are now able to feed themselves, using fishing equipment we've given them and new seeds and tools to grow vegetables they can eat or sell in the market. To thank us, one group sang and danced and gave us two chickens and an aubergine. Hungry as they are, they are still ready to give. You cannot return from a place like South Sudan and not be changed.

Millions of South Sudanese people have been displaced by the fighting, fleeing to other parts of the country, or to surrounding countries like Uganda. They swell the ranks of those people across the world who have no safe place to call home, over 65 million of them globally now. How do we respond?

Somehow a narrative has taken hold in our nations that we cannot afford to worry about these people, refugees and other displaced people, because they are not 'our own'. But we know that we can count on you to cling to the commandment to love our neighbour in the sense that Jesus meant it – people like us and not like us, those near and those we will never meet, neighbours because we are called to live side by side in the many rooms in our Father's house.

The Church of Scotland, through this Assembly, has yet again affirmed its commitment to being part of the changes it wants to see. Never has there been a more important time to connect the local, national and global pictures – to challenge the devastating myth of 'them and us'. That is why I was so heartened, Moderator, to learn about the project convened by the Church of Scotland – 'Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees'. It's a great witness to your willingness to work and act together across

the denominations and faith groups in Scotland to provide welcome and hospitality to the stranger and to bring alive the Truth that all our futures are bound up in each other.

Behind the growing numbers of refugees, there is so often a story of conflict and persecution. But these are not the only drivers of poverty and displacement. I want to highlight two others today.

To illustrate the first, I want to take you to the Philippines. Two years ago, I visited to see the recovery work we'd been doing in response to the massive Typhoon, Haiyan, which struck there at the end of 2013. In the coastal community of Tacloban, which was already a poor community, a huge body of water 6 metres high had swept in, wrecking homes on the way and carrying people caught at ground level upwards and inland at the same time. One woman told me it was a case of swimming along for what seemed like hours in this body of water, with her four children swimming along beside her saying, Mum, Mum, how long do we have to keep on swimming? And she said, just a bit longer. How long Mum? ,Just a bit longer. How? And she said to me, I don't know how I kept on swimming. And then came her killer question – what are you doing about climate change?

As her experience and last year's World Mission report made clear, climate change makes extreme weather events like typhoon Haiyan more likely and hits those who have least to do with it first and hardest. As Nazmul Chowdhury, one of our Indian partners has said, 'forget making poverty history; climate change is making poverty permanent.' That's why the biggest campaign we currently have is around climate change and it is the focus of many of our country projects. Here again, we've been so fortunate to have your accompaniment and encouragement.

I'm excited by the work we have done together in Malawi. Last summer, when the country was suffering its worst drought in a decade, your generous response to our Scotland/Malawi appeal, match funded by the Scottish Government, not only fed people through the worst of the drought, but fed the future as well by enabling communities to keep going with an innovative project using solar irrigation systems so that they can harvest all year round. That means that next time a long drought ravages Malawi, those communities have a chance of getting through it on their own. Ours is a transformational partnership.

This year, the Church of Scotland Guild has raised a magnificent £70,000 to fund a pilot project in Bolivia, 'Caring for Mother Earth', which uses solar ovens to help communities respond to climate change – making them less dependent on firewood. Last week, a Christian Aid team from Malawi visited Bolivia, learning from them about solar oven technology and taking those insights back to Malawi. Your work with us in one country is growing capacity in another, to help the world's poorest and to care for God's creation.

Moderator, climate change is a global challenge which needs concerted action locally, nationally and globally. Our 'big shift' campaign calls on individuals and groups here and elsewhere to demand of themselves and from governments and businesses an urgent move away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy. We commend the Kirk's on-going conversation round divestment from fossil fuels and look forward to the report the Church and Society Council and the Investors Trust will bring to next year's Assembly.

The other driver of poverty I want to highlight today is gender. Everywhere I go I see this stark truth, that women and girls are much more likely to be poor. Less likely to finish school, more likely to die young, more likely to be a victim of sexual violence, less likely to be given a job or political voice, or opportunities to lead. Empowering our women and men to speak up for gender justice is key to

changing a world which excludes women from the centre. Partnerships like the Side by Side initiative, movements like Thursdays in Black, resources like the 'Love one Another' Bible study – a Scottish collaboration with our partners in Brazil - all of these responses have benefited greatly from your commitment. We will not rest until the world reflects the words of Paul – there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave nor free, nor male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.

In everything we do, we seek to give glory to God. Worship and work cannot be separated out but are the hinges on the door to justice. I know the Balfour declaration has been much on your minds this week. Our partnership bringing prayers for peace in Israel and Palestine on the 24th of every month is a shared statement of solidarity with those whose lives – both Palestinian and Israeli - are dominated and diminished by continued conflict and continued occupation. More widely, through collaborations with your Mission and Discipleship Council and beyond, we endeavour to keep the voices of all our communities, the good news of transformational projects and the challenge of our joint campaigns and advocacy at the heart of Church of Scotland worship.

In these and in other ways, the divisions between you as Church and Christian Aid as development agency are not always clear. We may have a separate legal identity but we are of you, and it's your solidarity with us that helps us face the enormous challenges in our path. And we feel a sense of belonging with you and not just to you, an overwhelming sense of being part of the family of the Church. Ours is a transformational partnership. In a world of heart-breaking need and heart-stopping beauty, this is something precious that we will never take for granted. Thank you.

And God bless you