The Moderator's Closing Reflection — General Assembly 2021

This has been a unique General Assembly. Over five days we have harnessed the wonders of digital technology through the skills of some remarkable technicians to enable more than 750 Commissioners, Delegates, Representatives and Staff to meet, worship and conduct the business of our Church. Yes, there have been glitches; but I am in awe of the IT support teams who strived to resolve them so quickly. I had the privilege, before the Assembly started, to go through the room at the back of the Hall to witness the operation. Memories of what was the coffee room when I was an MSP have now been totally eclipsed by the view a mind-boggling array of monitors, wires, and screens.

The heartfelt thanks of the General Assembly must surely go to John Williams and Neil Maclennan and their respective team for meeting the technical challenge.

And thanks to all the Assembly staff, who have worked so hard and so innovatively to enable us to hold this General Assembly. And thanks to those on either side of me, who have been so diligent in supporting me.

And going forward, whilst undoubtedly, we long for an 'in person' Assembly again, I hope we shall not lose sight of some of the positive aspects of our online meeting. For example, when I met many of the Youth Representatives last night, courtesy of Zoom, I was struck by the comment from one, who said she would never have come to a microphone in the Assembly Hall but felt more confident about speaking up online.

Although only a handful of us have been in the Hall, I hope that from wherever you have joined in, you will each have memories to cherish of this General Assembly.

One of my most poignant memories did not happen in the Assembly building. It was reported by my granddaughters' other set of grandparents. They had the live feed of the opening session on, whilst looking after our grandchildren. They thought three-year-old Catriona was totally absorbed with her Duplo bricks; but when I mentioned her name in my acceptance speech, she piped up, "I'm here," followed by "What is Grandpa Jim saying?" She may not have been the only person to have had a similar thought this week.

In commentary and conversation during the run up to the General Assembly, and in many of the contributions during the past week, the word 'challenge' has featured frequently. The challenges are very real, and five days of debate, deliberation and deliverances does not make them disappear. But our prayers and hope must be that as we emerge from this Assembly, we are better equipped and prepared to deal with them.

In Martin Fair's powerful retiring Moderator's address, he said,

"I long for the Church to be about the Kingdom's work but, oh boy, how we need the Church to be refreshed, renewed, revitalised, remade and, yes, reformed that it might do it more effectively."

My strong sense is that that view was well and truly shared by the Assembly.

There was significant progress towards reducing the number of Presbyteries.

The Assembly Trustees proposal for Presbytery Plans based around 600 fulltime equivalent ministries and a target of no more than 60 further charges vacant at any one time, was readily accepted.

The Faith Nurture Forum's proposed Presbytery Mission Plan Act was passed.

None of these were easy decisions. But whilst we had well-argued debates around important details, numbers, timings, I did not detect anyone suggesting that we simply carry on as before.

The writer, David Reynolds, once wrote,

"The most accurate thing that can be said about any of us is that we are 'changeable.' ..We cannot help but change."

And the apostle Paul knew in is heart that he was a changeable character. That is why he admitted learning to adapt himself to any kind of circumstance, even prison.

Constructive living often involves this kind of flexibility.

This week, I believe, the Assembly has demonstrated an awareness of the need for flexibility, a 'can do' rather than an 'it's never been done this way before' attitude which must surely augur well. We now have in place structures that can allow us to move forward more freely and more imaginatively than before. And I get a sense that this has been about the Assembly responding to a grass roots movement in congregations and worshipping communities that has been saying, "we are changeable, so help us to change. "

Or to borrow Martin's words again:

"the sooner we sort the structures, the sooner we can get to what really matters… proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom!"

And of course, the reports coming before us revealed the work of Kingdom which has been going on.

To listen to our debates is to appreciate the vast range of the Kirk's activities, and the reservoir of ability, experience, and expertise over so many areas – all focused on and deployed in the service of Jesus in Scotland and beyond.

Social Care Council

But after a year of real challenge and real anxiety, I was particularly moved by the report of the Social Care Council.

In the early days, those in social care and health knew they were dealing with a major problem, but it was one still surrounded by uncertainty. Contingency planning, sourcing PPE, distributing equipment to 52 different geographical sites from Shetland to Ayrshire all posed challenges for CrossReach to which they responded magnificently. As Thom Riddell said in his Convener's video, the team showed courage, compassion and creativity and sought to be there every step of the way for the vulnerable.

The Council's report itself says*, "It has demanded extraordinary dedication from those working on the front line. They have offered face to face support in residential care homes and supported living settings where there has also been most risk to their own health and wellbeing, and to that of their families. They are due our admiration, thanks and a huge debt of gratitude.*"

For such a faithful and compassionate response, in the knowledge of risk, we do, indeed, express our admiration and thanks.

And as we rightly acknowledge the work of CrossReach in relation to the pandemic, let us also thank them for the important work they do, for example, in reaching out to the lonely and isolated, in helping those struggling with drug addiction and also in striving to keep 'The Promise' made to children who have experience of the care system; 'that every child grows up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential'.

Faith Impact Forum

The Faith Impact Forum also gave us a powerful reminder of our mission to proclaim, “good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and sight to the blind.”

The Faith Impact Forum deliverance both urged the UK Government to do all that it can to ensure Covid-19 vaccines are available throughout the world, particularly in resource-poor countries, based on clinical need to preserve human life; and urged all parts of the Church of Scotland to continue to support Christian Aid as an expression of the Church of Scotland’s solidarity and commitment to eradicating poverty worldwide.

The Assembly, yesterday, listened to a very powerful and poignant contribution from Joel Hafvenstein, who described the plight of people in Nepal as yet another wave of Covid sweeps across the country.

In response and in the spirit of the deliverance exhortation, on behalf of the Church of Scotland, in partnership with Christian Aid, I am launching today an opportunity for each one of us to support people across the world who do not have access to a COVID-19 vaccine. As well as advocating for a just vaccine rollout, we wish to support Christian Aid’s work with vulnerable communities, helping to limit the impact of the virus on health, livelihoods, and personal safety. By providing basics such as soap, water, and food, we can ensure that vulnerable communities stay safer as they wait for vaccination.

This is an opportunity to give thanks in a very tangible way. In a quest for global justice, here is a practical opportunity to give real expression in 2021 to loving our global neighbours.

I sincerely hope that you will join with me and together we will respond generously, as a mark of our gratitude for what we have received.

The work of CrossReach during the pandemic; the drive to protect those abroad who still wait longingly for vaccine protection – just two examples of the Church’s commitment to the poor and the vulnerable – at home and abroad.

In her recorded video as Convener of the Faith Impact Forum, Susan Brown described the challenge of creating a future which is just and green as ‘daunting’, but went on to say, “..but it is exciting too that we, as a Church, have a chance to play our part in seeking fullness of life for all, locally, nationally, and internationally.”

Listening to the video, that immediately struck a chord. For me, personally, to play my part in seeking fullness of life -locally, nationally, and internationally - for all has been one of my

principal motivations in my life-journey. It will continue to motivate me in the year ahead as I seek to fulfil the trust and responsibility placed in me by this General Assembly.