

Faith Impact Forum Speech – General Assembly 2020

There's the old story of the two Highland ministers, a century ago, taking the wee ferry across the Dornoch Firth. They were deep in debate about which was more important – was it faith? Or works? They were going at it good style before they realised they were never reaching the other shore... they both turned to the ferryman who was rowing: 'you see' the ferryman said to the ministers, 'if you use only one oar, you go round in circles... use both and you'll get to where you want to go. And the ministers were silenced.

At the very time the Church faces a dramatic restructuring, a pandemic comes along to add to the drama. The lack of face to face meetings, the cancellation of the "real" General Assembly, the Assembly Trustees instruction to cut budgets, the furlough scheme, and the voluntary exit scheme, came together with the ending of a number of external partner-funded projects and led to a drastic reduction in staffing levels in Faith Impact along with a pool of around 70 Council members, reduced to 15.

In such exceptional circumstances it is so tempting to concentrate on getting our own house in order before dealing with anything else. One oar in the water, however, leads to turning in circles.

This pandemic has widened the gap between rich and poor in our own nation as well as in every corner of the world and has affected Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities disproportionately. It has accentuated not only the inequalities in income, but in health care and housing and it has seen an escalation in domestic and racial violence and revealed a breath-taking disregard for the well-being of those seeking refuge in this country. That's only the very tip of the iceberg of the issues this pandemic continues to highlight and to which the Church must always be ready to respond.

The day to day work of the Forum has been challenging in this situation, but throughout the world we continue to engage through long-held connections to the churches in other countries and through our mission partners. Our international relief and development agency, Christian Aid, also continues its work and witness as together we seek to accompany partners within and beyond these nations, and pursue peace and justice.

We have kept contact with the Church in Lebanon and Syria and were able to send some financial support, which was doubled by the Assembly Trustees from the M&R funds, to support the Near East School of Theology and the relief ministry of the Synod as they dealt with the aftermath of the massive explosion in Beirut port.

As well as the excellent Corona-diaries series in Life and Work where friends from around the world church write about their situations and give us insight into their realities, we were able to send support to a number of churches to help with Covid-19 related challenges – such as:

- Purchase of PPE and oxygen concentrators which can work from solar energy at Mulanje Mission Hospital, Blantyre Synod, Malawi
- Support a programme to provide food to 300 vulnerable families in communities through the Church of Bangladesh Community Health work
- Help the Public health team to carry out education / awareness in the community and to have PPE to treat C-19 patients in hospital at the Ekwendeni CCAP Hospital, Malawi
- Support for the hospitals of the United Mission to Nepal

And we were delighted to receive support from the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan and the Evangelical Church in Westphalia to help Crossreach support its residents to communicate with their families and have additional PPE available.

We have worked in Scotland through speaking out on debt, safe and appropriate housing for migrants and asylum seekers, refugee integration, foodbanks, an increase in child benefit for the worst affected by Coronavirus, and Citizens Advice Bureau funding cuts, as well as marking the 75th anniversaries of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear attacks, to name a few. And we have celebrated the 50 years of achievements of the Society, Religion and Technology Programme – although not physically as had been hoped, but through articles in Life and World and prayers the whole church can use.

There have also been frustrations. So much time and energy of the staff and the Forum has had to be spent on working out our new Forum directions, how we merge the different areas of work into a coherent way forward from the historic predecessors, liaising with the Assembly Trustees as they sought to agree new remits, working to prepare for this mini Assembly. Added to that is the frustration caused because we have not been able (allowed?) to bring the report that the Assemblies of 2018 and 2019 asked for on Care for Creation, despite it being ready for the May General Assembly.

We are glad to have had an initial online planning meeting with Presbytery Reps to start thinking about how we do our work together. The restructuring of the central agencies will only work where there are effective Presbytery structures to engage with all the work which needs to be done locally. The Forum needs to engage with the church around the country – to hear what it is congregations need to support them to engage fully with the great work of walking in solidarity with the world church, of engaging with the social and political

issues that affect each of our communities – of loving our neighbours locally and globally and seeking life in fullness for all of us together.

To have the Assembly Trustees thinking of forming a single Forum before these measures are in place and working, feels risky, perhaps even unwise. Many of our Forum members already wonder in the current, pandemic-induced modus operandi, what their role is, since it seems that even with a General Assembly mandate, others have their ideas for the Forum – which are not always ideas the Forum shares. They worry too about the church forgetting the need for theological reflection every step of the way.

A Church can only ever really be healthy when it keeps its focus beyond itself and seeks to serve those who are the very least in our world. Our self-understanding is of us being first and foremost the Church of Jesus Christ in the world: which means that in even the most difficult of circumstances, there is a need to continue to keep a wider perspective and to follow the Gospel imperative to stand with our neighbour wherever in the world they are, which includes addressing many localised concerns here in Scotland. Such outward looking action in solidarity, is a good reminder of what is important and will be what makes a positive difference in the world.

It would be too easy, in the morass of priority setting and practicalities, to see this oar being lifted...

What excites the Forum members and staff is the idea of working towards, not a Just and Green Recovery, but a Just and Green Future. This we envisage could unite so many areas of the Church in an effort to ensure that not only Scotland, but the whole world, turns to face a future in which people are cared for, loved and respected and where the world itself, is valued and protected... a future in which communities and their churches, become places passionate about the well-being of all those who inhabit them and nations are challenged to seek peace and to pursue policies which support and empower all and leave no one behind, and are committed to ensuring that everyone is able to live lives that are full in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally.

Imagine getting everyone sitting down to talk about, think about, pray for, and then work for and live out a just and green future which shows our readiness to love one another as Christ loves us.

That's two oars in the water stuff. And the kind of stuff that turns the world upside down. As Jesus did.