

Address to the General Assembly 2017

Moderator,

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the General Assembly and, on behalf of the Iona Community, to join you in condemning last night's callous attack on Manchester Arena and in holding in prayer those injured and bereaved.

Moderator, I draw commissioners' attention to the leaflet outlining the Iona Community's position on Israel/Palestine distributed through the pigeon holes. In particular, I would invite commissioners to study the photograph on the cover. It depicts a young girl in a white party dress with flowers in her hair and she is cradling the Palestinian flag as if it were a baby. The photograph is shot against the background of Israel's Separation Barrier and around the young girl hang dolls, symbols of childhood, and those dolls are on fire.

This is one of a series of powerful images, each a meditation on the impact of conflict and violence on the children of Palestine and indeed the children of all areas of conflict around the world. Today our news bulletins carry even more graphic images of the physical and mental trauma of terrorism and religious extremism.

Moderator, in March I attended an international conference with the theme challenging religious extremism. As part of the programme we undertook a series of site visits to communities, projects and refugee camps in Israel, Palestine and occupied Syria. We met with representatives of the three faith groups – a rabbi and others spoke about challenging Jewish extremism, Muslim leaders explained the origins of Islamic extremism and sectarianism, and Christian leaders, such as Rev Naim Ateek, mentioned in yesterday's debate, analysed extremism within the Christian faith.

Naim spoke about Saul of Tarsus, our very own religious extremist, who fuelled by religious zeal, hunted down and persecuted the followers of Jesus like Stephen who was stoned to death. This is the same Saul, or rather a converted Paul, who would write:

If I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Paul, through Christ, realised that the antidote to religious extremism is love.

Moderator, all of the faith representatives we met, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, stressed the belief that unites us all – God is compassionate and merciful – and that those divine qualities should be lived out by believers in how we treat others. Love is our only hope, only through love will there be peace.

Moderator, when I wrote the introduction to the Board's report expressing concern for core Christian principles of hospitality and justice, I had a particular incident in mind. Last summer, an associate member of the Iona Community, a grandmother from Kenya, who wished to participate in the programme in Iona Abbey, was refused a visa. We understand the reasons were as follows:

- Money in her bank account to cover her expenses while in the UK seemed not to be genuine despite her explanation that as a farmer she had sold some crops and cows to meet her costs.

- Her application was not genuine and she could be planning not to return to Kenya, despite having a husband, children and grandchildren and a host of responsibilities back in Kenya.
- Finally, they could not allow her to travel because if they did, her farming business would suffer.

Moderator, I am aware that this General Assembly has experience of this disgraceful treatment of people who are our guests by the Home Office. I hope the Church pursues this matter and the policy behind it following this General Assembly as it has far reaching consequences for church and society, for asylum seekers and refugees, for EU nationals following Brexit and for Britain's reputation in the world.

Moderator, this is my last General Assembly as leader of the Iona Community though I hope to return in future as a parish minister. It's been eight years and I confess that I take a certain pride in the fact that my term in office coincided with that of Barack Obama as President of the United States. As president he was not perfect but he held that office in high esteem, he carried out his duties with dignity and integrity, he inspired millions around the world with his oratory and he will go on to make his mark on the world. A fine model of leadership for me and others. My successor is not so fortunate!

Moderator, please pray for Dr Michael Marten who takes over as Leader in July.

I have gifts for you, Moderator, a copy of the new Iona Abbey worship book and three olive wood pieces from Palestine. Each has words carved love, hope and peace.

They come with prayers best wishes for your moderatorial year from me and from the Iona Community. Thank you.