

FAITH IMPACT FORUM MAY 2021

Proposed Deliverance

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the Report.
2. Give thanks for the life and witness of Mission Partners who have died, acknowledge with gratitude those who have completed their period of service overseas, and uphold in prayer all who continue to serve.
3. Recognise and give thanks for the critical role of the voices, concerns, and passion of young people involved in the life of the Church of Scotland who have campaigned for disinvestment from fossil fuels; and urge congregations to provide an opportunity to listen to young people in the congregation, or in the local community, to hear about their concerns. *(Section 2.2)*
4. Urge congregations to prepare for the COP26 UN Climate Summit due to take place in Glasgow in November 2021 by using the Climate Sunday prayer and worship resources (www.climatesunday.org); and consider how they can respond in prayer and action. *(Section 2.3)*
5.
 - (i) Instruct the Forum to work with the Assembly Trustees, the General Trustees, the Social Care Council, the Faith Nurture Forum, and others as appropriate, to use the "Net Zero by 2030" framework to develop plans and activities for the Church to work towards meeting this ambition, and to report annually to the General Assembly
 - (ii) Urge all congregations and Presbyteries to consider the implications of Net Zero for their own buildings, activities, procurement and finances, and to start long-term planning for the changes that will be required. *(Section 2.4)*
6. Welcome the agreement with the Church of Scotland Investors Trust that, as a matter of principle, the portfolios of investments managed should align with the UN Paris Agreement in pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, recognising that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change. *(Section 2.5)*
7. Welcome the fact that no oil and gas company shares are currently held; and note that any future investment in oil and gas would only follow agreement between the Church of Scotland Investors Trust and the Faith Impact Forum that there were good evidence that its strategy and implementation was aligned with the stringent targets set by the Paris Agreement. *(Section 2.5)*
8.
 - (i) Appoint a Special Committee of five persons to consult with the Faith Impact Forum, the Church of Scotland Investors Trust and the Assembly Trustees to consider the best framework for future recommendations about the ethics of investment practice being brought before the General Assembly, and report to the General Assembly in 2023.
 - (ii) Instruct the Selection Committee to consider carefully the range of skills and diversity of backgrounds required for this task and present the names for this Special Committee on ethical investment practice to a later session of this General Assembly. *(Section 2.5)*
9. Urge the UK Government to do all that it can to ensure Covid-19 vaccines are available throughout the world, particularly in resource-poor countries, on the basis of clinical need to preserve human life. *(Section 3.3)*
10. Invite Kirk Sessions to arrange a public meeting to consider themes and ideas for a just and green future following the Covid-19 pandemic, and identify the implications for their parish, the wider community, for Scotland and the world, and instruct the Forum to support Kirk Sessions in this. *(Section 3.4)*
11. Instruct the Forum to call for the development of safe and legal routes for people desperately seeking sanctuary so that they can travel, live, work and contribute to our society with respect and dignity. *(Section 4.1)*
12. Urge the UK Government to reverse its policies regarding migrants crossing the English Channel, the accommodation of asylum seekers in former army camps or other institutions rather than in the community, and the plans to increase the deportation of asylum seekers to other countries. *(Section 4.2)*
13. Call on the UK Government and Parliament to continue to provide a minimum of 0.7% of Gross National Income as Overseas Development Assistance in line with the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015 and all main parties' 2019 manifesto commitments. *(Section 4.3)*
14. Welcome the cross-Church work on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and of engaging with the experience of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people within the Church of Scotland; and instruct the Forum, the Faith Nurture Forum and the Assembly Trustees to consider how best to ensure the necessary resources are available to act on the outcomes. *(Section 4.7)*
15. Urge Kirk Sessions to take part in the basic training provided by Integrity – the Church of Scotland's Violence Against Women Task Group. *(Section 4.8)*
16. Instruct the Forum, in consultation with the Ecumenical Relations Committee, to renew and strengthen ecumenical dialogue, partnership and collaboration on public affairs with: (1) the Church of England; (2) through the new Scottish Christian Forum; and (3) within the Joint Public Issues Team. *(Section 6.1)*
17. Urge congregations to support the Reset the Debt campaign; instruct the Forum to promote the campaign, and to call on the UK Government to establish a Jubilee Fund to provide grants to pay off and cancel unavoidable debt accrued by households because of the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions. *(Section 6.2)*
18. Instruct the Forum to promote the Meet Your MSP resources and encourage congregations to approach their MSPs, especially those newly elected to the Scottish Parliament, in order to establish and strengthen relations with elected representatives. *(Section 6.3)*
19. Commend the report on Artificial Intelligence; urge the Church to engage with the issues raised, especially in relation to pastoral care, worship and mission; and instruct the Forum to provide resources to support this engagement. *(Section 7)*

20. Urge 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.
21. Urge congregations and Presbyteries to seek ways to listen and learn from partner churches around the world in relation to issues such as poverty, climate change, migration, HIV, recovery from Covid-19 and interfaith activities, and to develop partner and twinning relationships.

Report

1. SEEKING THE RIGHT PATH

Caring for God's creation, coping in a time of coronavirus, responding to racism, and pursuing inclusivity, diversity and justice for all have been key areas of witness, prayer and action for the Church in the past year. These are all brought together in the pursuit of a just and green future, and tie in with the Church's declared aim of practising the Five Marks of Mission:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

This is a broad agenda which needs involvement from all parts of the Church. God came in Christ for all the world, and demands the proclamation of the Good News for us all and for the earth and everything it contains, especially for those who struggle against poverty. Our mission is about sharing God's plans, about being actively involved in parish and nation and throughout the world to share God's love, seek transformation and justice for human beings, the whole created order and the world itself. We can only love God if we love our neighbour. As the Special Commission on Presbyterian Effectiveness reports elsewhere, the key to this is in the application of the Five Marks of Mission, "imaginatively, intentionally and decisively across the life and witness of our Church". Our response cannot only be about structures and finances. Underpinning our response must be a passion for justice in God's world. And it must speak to the whole person. There is growing recognition of the importance of kindness and relationships for societal wellbeing. Julia Unwin's report, *Kindness, emotions and human relationships: The blind spot in public policy*^[1], argues that the great public policy challenges of our time demand an approach that is more centred on relationships. This is very much part of our learning from our African partners who share with us their concept of Ubuntu: I am because you are; my success and my failures are bound up in yours. We are made for each other, part of one family, the human family, with one shared earth.^[2]

Relationships are central to the Church's international and political involvement. Nearly 75 years ago, the Church of Scotland was at the heart of the decolonisation process, recognising the independence of living branches of the church in other countries. Today it is predominantly through partnerships with indigenous churches and Christian organisations that the Church of Scotland continues its worldwide commitment. The basis for these relationships is a two-way sharing of human, material, and spiritual resources, from which all parties learn and develop. Since decolonisation, we have sought to walk side by side with the world church: it is about accompaniment, building and supporting connections with people, and conversations, and visits, and prayer, all celebrating our interconnectedness. This is also true of the involvement of the Church in the political life of Scotland and the UK – it is about building connections with politicians, civil servants, and civil society to support a just and bright future for our nation.

2. THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY: HOW DO WE RESPOND

2.1 Walking the walk

One of the five marks of mission, which the General Assembly agreed in 2020 should guide the Church, is to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth. In Matthew 7, Jesus warns us to look at

the plank in our own eye before passing judgement on others. The Church of Scotland is on a journey of understanding and reversing its own contribution to the climate crisis. We believe that a decision to divest from oil and gas is one step in this journey, but it is far from enough. The task facing the Church is, without further delay, to make a commitment aligned with our Christian obligation to care for creation. Environmental concern is God's mission, for it is a public proclamation of God's love for the world. The Church must start preparations now. We recognise the challenges this poses and that it will involve all congregations and all members. Campsie Parish Church is an example: The Church decided to look at energy saving measures when they had to install a new boiler. The sanctuary and entrance areas lost heat from large single glazed windows. The Windows Advisory Service supported them in getting the right solution, and they were able to obtain an energy saving grant to cover the costs through the Scottish Government's Community Climate Asset Fund. The congregation recycles, supports Christian Aid, sells fair trade goods and has recently registered for the eco-congregation programme.

At a time of significant change and reform in the Church, and the post Covid-19 world where we need to address the challenges of rebuilding our social and economic fabric in new and more sustainable ways for people and the planet, we believe that this is the right thing to do and the right time to do it. Alongside other UK, European and world churches, it is essential that we are part of a global witness, and hold the UK and Scottish governments to their commitments to net zero carbon emissions. And it is urgent, as President Biden emphasised in his inaugural address: "A cry for survival comes from the planet itself; a cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear." We want to support, encourage and enable the whole Church to pray, speak and act prophetically on environmental issues which threaten the flourishing of the whole of creation.

2.2 Respectful Dialogue – listening for the concerns of our young people

It is recommended that the General Assembly encourage congregations to listen to young people to learn about their concerns and aspirations. The largest **opinion poll** yet conducted (by United Nations Development Programme in conjunction with Oxford University, and reported in Feb 2021) on tackling global warming has found almost two thirds of people around the world now view climate change as a global emergency. More than a million people in 50 countries took part in the survey, with almost half the participants aged between 14 and 18. In a BBC Newsround survey, when asked about the action being taken by grown-ups to tackle the problem, two in five young people responded that they did not trust adults to tackle the challenges that climate change presents, and nearly two-thirds said leaders are not listening enough to young people's views. A recent Tearfund survey, **Burning Down the House**, highlighted the frustration and disaffection amongst young Christians when climate concerns were not spoken about in sermons or acted upon more widely by their church members and leaders. Churches provide a safe space in which the tradition of respectful dialogue is well established. Listening to young people's concerns about the climate emergency extends this practice across the generations, encouraging young people to speak out and have their concerns heard respectfully, and to encourage action by the whole community.

2.3 Conference of the Parties 26 (CoP26) comes to Glasgow

The 26th Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (CoP26), originally planned for 2020, was postponed until November 2021 in Glasgow. It will attract delegations from most nation states in the UN, lobbyists, and others, although it now seems unlikely that the normal twenty to thirty thousand participants will be

able to come, with Covid-19 still influencing our lives. The conference will discuss progress on the Paris climate agreement and will seek to press governments around the world to increase their commitment to carbon reduction and the transition to a low carbon economy. There would normally be a large faith presence, with churches and other faith groups from around the world well represented.

A Glasgow churches co-ordinating group was set up in 2019 by Glasgow Churches Together to examine how churches could get involved. At the outset the group identified three important and complementary priorities.

1. Liturgy – worship

Worship will be at the heart of the church's involvement. At the time of writing, it is hoped to have a major service in Glasgow Cathedral in the middle of the gathering.

2. Logistics - Hospitality and pastoral care

Delegates arriving from around the world will have a range of practical and spiritual needs. Can churches in Glasgow and beyond help care for visitors to the CoP?

3. Legacy - Transformational Change

The CoP is a once in a lifetime opportunity to promote awareness and action. To implement the Paris agreement and make a just transition to a low carbon economy requires not only technical or political change, it also requires a change of heart. The CoP offers a chance for churches to show vision and leadership.

With the Presbytery of Glasgow, Eco-Congregation Scotland, Interfaith Scotland, World Council of Churches, World Communion of Reformed Churches, representatives from different churches in Scotland, UK and around the world, Christian Aid and others, the Forum will be promoting opportunities for congregational involvement in the months leading up to the CoP. Every congregation can join in using the resources provided on the Climate Sunday website www.climatesunday.org to help organise a worship service on the theme of care for creation. Individuals and congregations can also through Eco-congregation Scotland, sign the Scottish Churches COP26 pledge (<https://www.ecocongregationscotland.org/scottishchurchespledge/>) to encourage urgent action in response to the climate crisis and to support a just and green recovery.

2.4 Net Zero by 2030

Net zero refers to achieving a balance between the amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere. There are two different routes to achieving net zero, which work in tandem: reducing existing emissions and actively removing greenhouse gases. The General Assembly 2020 wanted the church to play its part in achieving the Scottish Government's call for net-zero carbon emissions by 2045, and gave the instruction:

to work with others to develop a strategy for the Church to transition both locally and nationally to net zero carbon emissions by 2030, reporting an outline strategy to the General Assembly of 2021.

The Forum initiated a broad group to address this instruction with representatives from the Forum, local congregations, under 40s, the General Trustees, CrossReach, and the Assembly Trustees.

The Scottish Government aims to reduce net carbon emissions to 100% lower than 1990 levels by 2045. To achieve this, they have set the following targets nationally:

- By 2024 all new builds must have zero emission heating systems.
- By 2025 70% of all waste will be recycled, and food waste reduced by one third from the 2013 baseline.
- By 2024 18,000 ha of new woodlands will be created annually and 250,000 ha of peatland will be restored by 2032.

- By 2030 around half of all domestic and non-domestic buildings will have converted to a low carbon or zero carbon heating system. In 2020 a £1.6 billion Heat in Buildings Fund was announced to enable this.
- By 2030 car kilometres will have reduced by 20%
- By 2032 most passenger railways will be decarbonised.

Scotland is committed to national and international efforts to limit climate change, with a goal of restricting global warming to an increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The Church must rise to the challenge. The Church of Finland and the Church of England have already started out on this road, and the group sought to learn from both of these.

The Church of Finland examined the carbon footprint of the Church and its activities and concluded the largest emissions were from properties, travel, and procurement; they then worked to identify actions to reduce carbon footprint; and they then did detailed work with congregations to put these actions into effect.

In the UK, the Church of England has designed its own carbon baseline measurement tool to measure carbon footprint from energy use. As part of their annual return of statistics to the Church, congregations fill in an online form with their energy readings, and the size and age of their buildings, and it calculates the church's energy use and carbon footprint, per metre and per person, and gives each congregation a rating in comparison to similar sized churches. It also adjusts for weather changes from year to year. Overall, 84% of energy use goes on heating, 6% on lighting, and 10% on other uses. The Church of England is putting effort into changing heating systems from gas and oil to electricity. It is targeting its support and advice to help those churches with the biggest fossil fuel footprint to manage their transition.

Seeking to follow the instruction of the General Assembly, the group sought to "tartanise" the work of our friends in the Church of Finland and the Church of England who had concluded they needed to:

- Examine the carbon footprint of the Church and its activities.
- Carry out detailed work to identify actions to reduce carbon footprints.
- Work with all parts of the church to put these actions into effect.

An outline strategic direction for achieving Net Zero could then look like this, and would include both short-term and longer-term actions:

Goal 1: Reduction of CO2 emissions from buildings

Actions: Establish current baselines, monitor and reduce energy usage, green supply of electricity and gas, gradual switch to renewable heat sources.

Goal 2: Reduction of activities' carbon footprint

Actions: Sustainable procurement, reduction in food waste, low emission travel, EV charging at church property.

Goal 3: Compensate for emissions

Actions: Establish church carbon stock on lands, investigate off-setting unavoidable emissions.

Goal 4: The church plays an active role as a social actor and debater

Actions: Whole church engagement in climate justice and responsibilities, and witness to society and political processes.

Goal 5: Congregations, Presbyteries and the Church Offices commit to climate engagement

Actions: All parts of the church devote adequate resources to do the work necessary to implement changes to achieve the goals.

While the group has done initial work in populating possible directions and actions in each of these areas, it is not at the

stage to be rolled out, and further ground work and analysis will be necessary, especially with the General Trustees and CrossReach. It will also need broader congregational input and involvement to help develop an implementation plan involving the whole church and, most likely, in cooperation with other churches, as we are all part of the problem and all need to be part of the solution. Indeed, it may also be something which can be developed across multiple faith communities working together in seeking to safeguard God's world.

Developing the framework into a practical strategy will require significant additional input, and it is planned to continue the life of the cross agency working group to offer direction, while getting practical input from those best placed within the whole church to make things happen. The Forum believes that with ambition, energy and commitment, by 2030, our greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced by 80% from the current levels, while the remaining 20% could be offset – for example, through carbon stock of land.

The Church encourages and challenges its members, congregations, presbyteries - indeed all parts of society, and those in decision-making - in their efforts to achieve climate and carbon neutrality. The Church is a significant advocate for climate issues in Scotland, and worldwide as part of the global ecumenical community of churches. We have much to learn from the experience of the church in other parts of the world.

One practical, positive action is in Ghana. Both the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Ghana have joined an interfaith tree nursery project. Highlighting the challenges of land degradation and the threat of desertification, Christians and Muslims joined together to study current approaches to tree planting and growing in dry lands, and to develop nursery management skills. Tens of thousands of seedlings have been planted and many acres of vegetation cover restored, which helps mitigate the negative effects of climate change, especially in northern Ghana, where studies have clearly shown that climate variability contributes to poverty through food insecurity and seasonal migration. This project also challenges the threat of desertification from the southward drift of the Sahara Desert. In Scotland, a first step for congregations could be to count the trees on church land; this will allow each congregation to assess the amount of carbon being offset each year. And could also encourage the planting of more.

Achieving Net Zero will require broad cooperation and action. The Faith Impact Forum is committed to coordinating this work between General Assemblies and to making a space where all the necessary church actors can come together. It will also work in partnership with other bodies including Historic Environment Scotland, Energy Saving Church, Eco-Congregation Scotland, and the European Churches Environment Network, and government – local and national - and their agencies, to ensure that all we seek to do in God's name is 'just' and 'green'. It is right to seek to make these absolutely necessary changes, which soon will be mandatory in law.

2.5 The Church's investments and its commitment to protecting the earth

The General Assembly 2020 instructed, "the Forum to report to the General Assembly of 2021 on the ethical, scientific and theological arguments for and against urgent divestment from oil and gas companies." With the Theological Forum undertaking a theological and missiological exploration of the environment and our relationship with it, with a plan to report to the 2022 General Assembly, it was appropriate for the Faith Impact Forum not to duplicate this work. The Forum will cooperate with the Theological Forum, and especially welcomes the Theological Forum's intention that this not only be an academic exercise, but also that it will have practical applications which can help and serve the local church.

The report which was prepared for the 2020 General Assembly is attached in Appendix I, with some updates. A decision to disinvest from oil and gas companies should not be about how they perform financially, but must be made on ethical grounds. Universities in Scotland have been disinvesting. Many churches have already disinvested, including numerous international partners. In the UK, the Quakers in Britain, the United Reformed Church, and parts of the Church of England have disinvested. The Investors Trust already avoids investing in any companies with 15% or more of total turnover derived from "activities which are felt to harm society more than they benefit it".^[3] Fossil fuels are clearly harming our world. Sir David Attenborough has commented that the world knows what to do but does not do it. This cannot be the default position of the Church of Scotland.

The Forum was informed, just as this report was being finalised, that the COSIT had disinvested from oil and gas. The Forum welcomes this divestment and hopes the General Assembly will welcome and endorse the divestment from oil and gas companies, as a matter of principle. We must also look at other kinds of investments, and ones which will help our world. We echo Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "Divest from fossil fuels and invest in a clean energy future. Move your money out of the problem and into solutions."^[4] This is what our friends in the Evangelical Church of Westphalia (EKvW) are trying to do, through various actions in Germany. They have also created the **One Climate** Fund Southern Africa which invests in renewable energy products and projects that will help reduce carbon emissions world-wide. The fund focuses on investing in areas of energy poverty in Southern Africa and is interested in projects that help broad-based economic development and that generate employment.

For the future, there needs to be a mechanism whereby the ethics of investment practices can be discussed from a broader perspective than the purely financial. The Faith Impact Forum and COSIT have disagreed about oil and gas shareholdings, and so there may be benefit in exploring a fresh approach to agreeing policy on ethical investment. In discussion with the Assembly Trustees, it seems appropriate to seek to appoint a Special Committee of five persons to consult with the Faith Impact Forum, the Church of Scotland Investors Trust, and the Assembly Trustees to consider the best framework for future recommendations about the ethics of investment practice being applied in the church and being brought before the General Assembly. The Special Committee will take account of social and environmental impacts, as well as learning from other Churches and Christian agencies, the Church Investors Group, and bodies with experience of assessing the practical constraints of managing funds on behalf of investors. The Forum believes that this group must combine the expertise of those from a financial background, alongside those with a depth of understanding of the ethical issues which the church should consider when dealing with finance. It should draw from the broad range of church membership, and be inclusive and diverse.

3. WE ARE ALL IN THE SAME STORM – BUT NOT IN THE SAME BOAT...

Churches have been at the heart of many neighbourhoods around the country and the world supporting local communities seeking human flourishing in the midst of pandemic. As we recover and move forward, churches must be at the centre of seeking justice and wholeness for all. All of the areas in this report are part of the bigger picture – of the Church at the heart of seeking justice for people and creation, at home and internationally.

3.1 Covid-19 realities

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused human misery and economic and social disruption across the world. Our partners around the world have experienced the devastation of Covid-19. Rev W. Tembo, General Secretary, CCAP Synod

of Livingstonia, wrote in February 2021, "After being relatively spared by the first wave of Covid-19 in 2020, Malawi is now being swept by a new, fast-spreading wave of the disease that is quickly overwhelming the healthcare system. In the first few weeks of January the number of people confirmed with the disease has doubled every four to five days, and... access to vaccines is likely a few months away." Gary Brough, Mission Partner, added that the virus "is not the greatest threat to many people's wellbeing when employment is low, food is expensive and other diseases present a more imminent threat. Malawians are sadly all too used to hardships in life. It may be that they are better prepared for the long journey out of this pandemic than many of us are." This is a very real situation for so many places around the world.

In Nepal, our partner organisation, the **United Mission to Nepal**, struggled to continue their invaluable health care work as Covid-19 meant members of the community feared going to hospital for normal care needs, which meant no income for the hospitals and therefore an inability to pay staff. The Church of Scotland was able to give a small grant to help in this crisis, along with other global partners, and the hospitals at Tansen and Okhaldhunga were able to remain open.

It has been highlighted by the WHO that Covid-19 has set back gains in treatment and support for people living with and affected by HIV by 10 years, with much of the vaccine research for HIV on hold as the scientists worked on Covid-19 vaccines. For some 30 years the Church of Scotland has supported partner churches and organisations as they have addressed the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The Church of Scotland HIV Programme continues to support partner initiatives throughout the world and encourages all congregations to lend support by using the **Souper Sunday** online service materials.

The Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), with its office in Nairobi, recognised the need for sanitation measures in the urban poor areas of Nairobi, and installed hand washing points within the slums. Various community groups were tasked to keep the drums topped up with water, and to help community members understand the need to wash their hands frequently.

The work of the Faith Impact Forum has inevitably been affected by the pandemic. Staff were furloughed and staffing in the national office has been reduced. Forum members met only twice in person before going online. Many congregational visits to partners, or from partners to Scotland, had to be cancelled, as did a proposed pilgrimage to Jordan. It has not been possible for speakers to visit local congregations and Guilds. Yet, as local churches have done, the Forum has embraced the challenge and the opportunities of gathering virtually. Meetings with speakers have been held for Presbytery Conveners and/or Forum members, including by Fiona Kendall, Mission Partner in Italy, on the situation for refugees and migrants. We are continuing to develop plans for online events with mission partners for congregations and hope that more people will be able to join in. On St Andrew's Day, the annual service from St Andrew's Memorial Church Jerusalem went online, with contributions from a number of the Church's Israeli and Palestinian partners.

3.2 Israel Institutions

In July, Peter Hehle, the manager of the Scots Hotel in Tiberias for the last 10 years, was killed in a motorcycle accident. The Forum, and the Directors, would like to place on record their appreciation for the work that he did at the Hotel, and for his commitment to equality and ethical standards evident in his efforts to support the Church's partners. He will be greatly missed. Our thoughts are also with those dearest to him, and for the staff at the Hotel who worked so closely with him.

Because of the pandemic, 2020 was an extremely challenging year for the Israeli Institutions. The Hotel and Guesthouse both closed at the start of Israel's first lockdown in March. Whilst the Guesthouse has still not re-opened, as of February 2021, the Hotel was able to open in the summer months between the lockdowns, with a high demand from local Israelis keen for a vacation. With the second lockdown in September, all accommodation providers were again closed, and this was still the case in February 2021. The staff have been on furlough for the closed periods, with the exception of those vital to the maintenance and ongoing commitments. Financially, the Government has provided subsidies to the tourism industry, which have covered many of the fixed costs that have been incurred, ensuring that cash balances have remained positive. The Directors of the Hotel and Guesthouse have been working to ensure that both institutions are well-equipped to recommence full operations as soon as possible and to continue to support our objectives on peace and justice in the region.

Tabetha School has perhaps faced the toughest challenges, with the education system often being opened and closed with only a day's notice, and with government regulations frequently changing. There has been little forward planning by the Israeli government, which has meant staff and students have been constantly unsure of what they are able to do. The new Executive Director started the month before the first lockdown and has done a remarkable job, alongside the rest of the staff, in ensuring that the students have received the best possible education, whether that be online or in person.

John McCulloch, Minister at St Andrew's, Jerusalem, returned to Scotland in the early stages of the pandemic and was furloughed until September, when he managed to go back to Jerusalem, where he is providing an important presence on the ground for the congregation, our partners and friends. Kate McDonald, our Mission Partner in Tiberias, resigned in September. We thank her for her service to the Forum and to the Church, and for the hugely positive impression she made on the local community.

3.3 A Moral Imperative, and Safety in Numbers

Many in the global south fared much better than feared in the early part of the pandemic, but were hit harder later. With already struggling health systems, the South African variant which emerged in early 2021 has meant local health systems, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, are at capacity. And it is spreading through many of the countries neighbouring South Africa.

The fair distribution of vaccines, with a particular focus on making them available to those who are in the most at-risk situations, is essential.^[5] The virus disrupts every aspect of human life, but it hits those the worst who are already facing existing and often existential challenges. The Rev Christie Manisto, Pastor of St Andrew's, Cairo highlighted two concerns for people in Egypt: because distrust of authorities is very high amongst people who have few reasons to trust the government, the numbers wanting to take it will probably be low; and as the vaccine will not be free, the chance of much of the population being able to pay for it is slim. The Director of the World Health Organisation, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, noted it would be a "catastrophic moral failure" to see young, healthy people in high-income countries receiving their vaccines, while vulnerable and elderly people in low-income countries might need to wait years.^[6] The Forum encourages the General Assembly to urge all wealthy countries to ensure vaccines are available widely around the world and are given first to those for whom the WHO and medical authorities have agreed will make the biggest difference to save life and reduce the number of people needing hospital treatment. This would show moral leadership. It might also be enlightened self-interest, for to defeat Covid-19 anywhere, it will need to be defeated everywhere. Countries like the UK which have ordered vastly more doses than they need must share these with those in

need around the world as part of international solidarity in seeking to eradicate this virus.

3.4 Just and Green

A just and green agenda is our response to God's call to strive for a better future for all people and the whole of creation. It is time to ask what sort of economic activity we need for a just and green world. One of the contributors at the annual United Nations Human Development Index^[7], Belinda Reyers from the Stockholm Resilience Centre, highlights our modern reality: "...in our hyperconnected, rapidly changing world, environment and human development are no longer separate or separable... Human development from now on is about making choices that are good for people and planet." There is compelling evidence that a green recovery can be faster and fairer. Governments – including the UK – need to fast-track plans to create zero-carbon economies and societies. Any economic stimulus packages must be consistent with those plans. Richer countries and multilateral institutions must end all support for fossil fuels at home and overseas, and increase their investments in renewable energy instead. Given the UK's historic contribution to the climate crisis, it must, along with other richer countries, provide additional finance to support the climate emergency response of the world's poorest countries.

The Church of Scotland joined over 80 organisations calling for a focus on a just and green future. A **letter** sent to the First Minister set out a five-point plan for recovery, urging the Scottish Government to address both poverty and climate change to create a more just and responsive economy. The Scottish Government has responded positively to the letter (as has the UK government, to a certain extent, to similar concerns in England). How can the Church of Scotland through worship, witness, and service make a significant contribution to a more just and greener future? Where can we add true value to the efforts of others? We are a national Church with faith and civic partners with whom we can promote the common good. We are also an international Church - walking with many partners globally committed to witness to God's unlimited love for the world, by calling out injustice and giving a lead to new goals in practical ways. A just and green future needs an holistic approach.

One Church of Scotland partner in Palestine, the **Joint Advocacy Initiative** of the YMCA and YWCA, runs an olive tree campaign. This provides olive trees for Palestinian farmers whose land and property are at risk of confiscation by the Israeli authorities. Olive trees are particularly well suited to the local environment, requiring little or no watering once they are established. And trees provide oxygen and store carbon, making this project an excellent example of combining just and green.

Westray Parish Church in Orkney has a twinning with Thyolo Highlands Presbytery in Southern Malawi. Rev Iain MacDonald shared how having an international focus was important in helping them be local and global. "Eco congregation makes you look inwards at how you do things in buildings, spending resources locally, and so on, but it also important for you to look outwards too, and well beyond the local community, with a strong emphasis on what is happening beyond your area. Working with Christian Aid, or on global projects such as twinning, Fairtrade, addressing global warming etc., helped us focus on gaining our Gold Eco-congregation award, because we know that what we do here impacts our friends in Thyolo. Looking towards a just and green future for the whole world is an important part of all our ministries."

The whole Church needs to work together, and the Forum is committed to joining with other agencies of the church, and other parts of society, to promote a recovery that leads to a fairer, more equal and more just Scotland in a fairer, more equal and more just world. We would ask every Kirk Session, within the following 6 months, to discuss themes and ideas

for campaigning and practical action – and where possible to arrange a community meeting to include as many as possible - about what just and green means for the parish, the community and for Scotland, and for key results and messages to be sent back to the Forum. Relationships are what the church is about. Let's make sure they are at the heart of all we do.

3.5 Fullness of life

'The gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our life and society.'^[8] It may be rather easy to proclaim "build back better", but it is harder to put into practice. It will require tough decisions. It may require the sacrifice of a degree of wealth or privilege by some to raise up the many. Children in some areas of the richest city in the country have no winter shoes or warm coats to go to school. Homeless people were found rooms in B&Bs or hotels during the pandemic, which was welcome in providing shelter, but it was not a long-term solution to the complex issues that are the root cause of homelessness. The pandemic has hit the world in very different ways.

Rev Lydia Neshangwe, from the United Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) Presbytery of Zimbabwe, wrote in the Life and Work **Coronavirus diaries**: "For the majority of the world the situation of no jobs, no political stability, no insurances, no predictable measures, no certainty, no social safety nets, is a way of life. This is why the Coronavirus pandemic has been labelled the Great Revealer. It has simply revealed the already existing pandemics around us – the pandemic of poverty, the pandemic of racism, the pandemic of political disorder, and the pandemic of social decay."

Our aspirations for the world after the worst of the pandemic has passed must be different from what went before. All was not well in the world when Covid-19 struck. We acknowledge the climate emergency; we see the injustices faced by displaced people, the unequal impact on men and women, on young and old, in rich countries and poor ones; in the UK life expectancy is stalling and health inequality is growing. Children and young people have lost out on education and the poorest have suffered most. Many jobs have been protected by Government support schemes, but many others have been lost.

General Assemblies over the last decade received numerous reports which help us chart a course, including *A Right Relationship With Money*, the report of the Special Commission on the Purposes of Economic Activity; *Imagining Scotland's Future: Our Vision*, following community meetings and participatory democracy before the 2014 referendum; *10,000 Voices for Change* and *Speak Out* on social and political issues in Scotland, imagining a Scotland in 20 years' time that was a fairer, more equal, more just country in a fairer, more equal, more just world. We can recognise that Scotland is a wealthy country but that resources are not distributed equally. We need a 'wellbeing economy': one that has social justice and environmental health at its core. Beyond our borders, the Church of Scotland has a long tradition of walking in accompaniment and solidarity with others. As we move beyond the pandemic we must continue to cooperate with other churches and organisations here in Scotland and around the world, such as the British and Irish Churches development agency, Christian Aid, and other local and international bodies, to seek and support ways to make life in all its fullness possible for all.

4. JUSTICE FOR ALL

4.1 Migration

Climate is also an impulse for migration. Wild fires, drought, flooding, storms, sea level rises, competition and violence over scarce resources: the climate emergency has wide-reaching consequences for people's lives and livelihoods, and climate change-induced displacement is now an undeniable reality. It is said to be one of the biggest humanitarian challenges of the 21st century as an average of 25 million

people are displaced by climate disasters every year. And yet people who are forced to flee their homes due to climate emergencies have no right to seek asylum in a safe country under the 1951 UN Convention for Refugees.

The climate emergency is also a great multiplier as it influences social dynamics, raises tensions and potential for conflict, and exacerbates already existing unjust structures that cause poverty, gender inequality and racial injustice. With shame we observe that it is often the most vulnerable in these respects who suffer the effects of climate change first. As one of the world's lowest-lying countries, with rising sea levels and the melting of Himalayan glaciers, Bangladesh could see more than 20 million people displaced by 2050.^[9] Some may remember Bishop Michael Baroi, of the Church of Bangladesh, at our General Assembly over a decade ago, eloquently pleading for faster action on climate change to limit the rise in sea levels which were threatening the people of his country. Kiribati, with a population of over 100,000, faces the likelihood of being completely submerged by the end of the century if sea levels continue to rise at the current rate.^[10]

Desertification is also a problem: it is destroying fertile land in parts of Africa. And so, rightly, activists and campaigners insist that climate justice is migrant justice. We must redouble our commitment to care for those who have been forced on the road or the seas through changes in climate, to which many of us have contributed, and to working for the climate justice that would avoid such forced migration in the future.

The global Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation for refugees across the globe.^[11] Many governments used the opportunity to harden their borders, install restrictive immigration practices and prevent people from making use of their right to seek asylum. In Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees from Myanmar have been stigmatised as those spreading the virus, and at the end of 2020 the Bangladeshi Government started to move hundreds of Rohingya refugees to an unsafe, low-lying, remote island that is prone to flooding and cyclones, and only emerged from the sea 20 years ago.^[12] With little opportunity to maintain physical distancing, wash hands or use soap, and with face masks being unaffordable, Covid-19 has ravaged the lives of thousands in refugee camps across the world who have already had to leave all behind.

The doubling in the number of those displaced in the last decade – to over 80 million today – indicates vast failings of governments both to maintain and work towards peace, and to offer durable solutions, safe passage and sanctuary for those fleeing war, persecution and conflict. At the same time, refugee resettlement from areas of conflict to safe countries reached a 20-year low in 2020.^[13] It is evident that the UK Government, and much of the Global North, has turned a blind eye towards the suffering of millions of people. The pandemic is no excuse to close the door on refugees but rather an opportunity to demonstrate solidarity. Churches can very practically make a difference in this area by learning about the Government's Community Sponsorship Programme and exploring options to take this forward in their own areas.

The congregation of Strath and Sleat has been keeping in touch with their twinned congregation of St Paul's Episcopal Church in Amman, Jordan. Their minister, Rev Rory MacLeod, says "During the past year when we have been unable to have partners visit us, which was our plan, we have kept in touch virtually. Rev George al-Kopti, the minister, joins the Sunday morning service from time to time to share news, lead prayers and to preach. We hear that things are particularly challenging and are able to share our situation too, through this we have supported each other at this time. Like everyone, we have become convinced of the need to reduce our carbon footprint and only travel where and when necessary. Given the relational base of our twinning – building personal links and accompanying the congregation

in Amman as they take forward their work with refugees - we continue to see a place for physical exchanges. But only when the time is right. Meanwhile we have been participating in the New Scots Holidays, to support refugees in Scotland too.

4.2 Welcoming the stranger

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees is a multi-faith partnership, supported and hosted by the Church of Scotland, to co-ordinate work related to refugees and asylum seekers. The partnership has been renewed following the end of a fixed-term agreement in 2020. From October 2018 to December 2020, the Church was part of a formal project called *New Scots Integration Programme* with the Scottish Refugee Council, Bridges Programme and WEA Scotland. This work, part-funded by the European Union, included the delivery of a programme of awareness raising in local faith groups and the development of a pilot refugee holiday programme, where church hosts welcome refugee families living in other parts of Scotland. This project has now come to a successful conclusion.

Despite the warm welcome offered by faith groups to New Scots and the growing understanding of the contributions that migrants can make to our communities and society, the UK Government's policy approach has become harsher, disregarding respect for human life, dignity, or the traditions of hospitality and sanctuary that ought to be markers of a compassionate and tolerant society. Instead of supporting asylum seekers and other migrants to make safe and legal journeys from squalid and miserable conditions in France, the Home Office seeks to deter channel crossing through force and fear, as shown by the new appointment of a 'Clandestine Channel Threats Commander'. The Home Office has moved away from housing people seeking asylum in accommodation in the community and has started placing some people in former army barracks or on land adjacent to Immigration Removal Centres, where they are effectively warehoused, making access to community life, places of worship, language experience, or legal advice much harder.

The Church must speak out on what this is: the state-organised concentration of persons authorities choose to see as 'undesirable' so that they can be pressured, bullied or become resigned to easier deportation rather than taking full advantage of rights and entitlements which are inherent to them as human beings, and under International Law. The Home Office has also made its policy intention clear that, post-Brexit, it wants to establish bilateral ties with other nations to make deportations easier. As an island at the far end of Europe the only purpose for such an approach is to send away people who are seeking sanctuary. The United Kingdom, despite its wealth and experience of the benefits of migration and diversity, is now walking on the other side of the road when it comes to helping the neighbour. The Faith Impact Forum invites the General Assembly to express, on behalf of the Church, its fundamental disagreement with the current approach, which is antithetical to Christ's teaching and example.

Congregations which are partnered with Fiona Kendall, mission partner with the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy's Mediterranean Hope Programme, have been able to connect by video to know more about her work. Fiona highlighted the situation of migrants in Calabria, working hard as key workers in agricultural labour, but treated very badly in terms of human rights and dignity, and how Mediterranean Hope is supporting better living and working conditions. A groundbreaking project that Mediterranean Hope has developed is called *Humanitarian Corridors*. By working with the Italian Government, they have successfully been able to bring vulnerable refugees from conflict areas to Italy, where they are able to access rights and advice, and to be supported by local church congregations. In parts of Italy, as in parts of Scotland, depopulation is a growing challenge for authorities and communities. The arrival of new people who want to make the best of their lives, and contribute to

the society that has welcomed them, has the potential to be of great mutual benefit.

4.3 International Aid

In November 2020 the UK Chancellor announced that the UK Government would seek the power to cut the international aid budget. Currently there is primary legislation which insists that at least 0.7% of Gross National Income is spent on overseas development support. This aid spending target has been supported by the Church of Scotland for many years; indeed, it was the World Council of Churches General Assembly in 1958 which first proposed a global minimum target for rich countries to spend to support aid and development around the world. At the time of the announcement, the Convener of the Forum said: "Cutting this work is short-sighted and tarnishes the UK's international reputation. In times of global need, it is those with the broadest shoulders that need to support others. International development is not about charity; it is essential to the delivery of the vision of a Global Britain... Protecting public health, promoting human rights, tackling violence against women, mitigating against climate change. Helping to build stable economies and societies will have long-term benefits for international peace and security." At the time of writing, the Forum was coordinating with ecumenical partners to encourage the Government to reverse its proposal and return to its policy stated in the Conservative Party's 2019 General Election manifesto.

4.4 Syria

In January 2021, the civil war in Syria had been raging for 10 years. It is estimated that at least 400,000 people have died in those ten years of war, and over 5.6 million people have left the country as refugees. Whilst fighting is now sporadic, the suffering of the people continues to be great. We give thanks for our partners, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, who have, through their ministers and churches, continued to provide relief and support for so much of the population, often at great cost to themselves. The Moderator of the General Assembly was due to visit Syria in March 2021, and it was hoped that this would allow him to see the devastation caused, and to offer solidarity in presence and prayer with our Church and Christian partners. We must not lose sight of the grave injustices that continue to happen in our world, and the Syrian civil war is one which we must continue to urge the international community to work harder to come to a just and peaceful solution. And we can also offer support to the Synod to help those still very much in need.

4.5 Myanmar

Following the coup d'état on 1 February when the military seized control in Myanmar, our partner, the Presbyterian Church in Myanmar (PCM), issued its first ever public statement on a political issue. PCM called for the coup to be reversed, detained elected leaders to be released, the result of the General Election to be respected, and for no harm to be done to the participants in the peaceful Civil Disobedience Movement. Rev Ramthanga, General Secretary, commented that this marked a new era in church-state relations for PCM. This call has been backed by our own Moderator in letters to the Foreign Secretary (jointly with Presbyterian Church in Ireland) and later to the Myanmar ambassador in which he criticised "an unelected, illegitimate military government that uses lethal force against its own citizens." The World Council of Churches and Christian Conference of Asia released a joint statement on 4 March condemning the deteriorating law and order situation and violence in Myanmar, especially the killings by Myanmar security forces during protests against the military coup.

4.6 Disarmament

On 22 January 2021 the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons came into force, following its ratification by 50 countries around the world. The treaty prohibits nations from developing, testing, producing, manufacturing, transferring, possessing, stockpiling, using or threatening to

use nuclear weapons, or allowing nuclear weapons to be stationed on their territory. It also prohibits them from assisting, encouraging or inducing anyone to participate in any of these activities. It puts nuclear weapons in the same category as other weapons of mass destruction like chemical or biological weapons, as well as land mines and cluster munitions.

The General Assembly has supported unilateral nuclear disarmament by the United Kingdom since the 1980s and in 2018 it gave its explicit support to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and congratulated the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons on being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work towards establishing the Treaty.

One country that has ratified is Kiribati, where the UK conducted nine hydrogen bomb tests in the late 1950s. UK, French and US nuclear tests in the south Pacific have no doubt contributed to the enthusiasm of ratifications from the region, with the Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Tuvalu and Vanuatu having also joined the Treaty. Cuba, at the centre of the 1962 Missile Crisis, has also ratified the Treaty. The Faith Impact Forum will continue to work with disarmament campaigners to urge the UK Government to work constructively with the Treaty process.

4.7 Racial Justice; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

The Faith Impact Forum welcomes the whole-Church initiative to establish a permanent committee dedicated to furthering equality, diversity and inclusion in all areas of Church life. There is more information to be found about this initiative in the report of the Assembly Trustees.

Equality has been a key area of concern this past year, especially as highlighted by the Black Lives Matter Movement. The 2020 General Assembly instructed a wide-ranging consultation on the issue of racial justice and the legacy of slavery. A group has been set up to look at the experience of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people within the Church of Scotland. This group will carry out research to understand how many BAME people relate with the Church of Scotland and what their experience has been. Hearing the recent painful stories of racial abuse and discrimination has emphasised the need for such a group. If we are to be a church that stands up to injustice we must have the courage, and the backing of the wider church, to truly make a meaningful change and not just to talk about change. There is a lot of work to do to ensure that we live in a society which is just and fair for all.

4.8 Violence Against Women

In 2019 the General Assembly received a report that the Church of Scotland had become the first Christian denomination in Scotland to appoint a Gender Justice officer post. At that point it was noted that the post was funded until 2023. The recent structural changes within the central church have resulted in there no longer being a dedicated Gender Justice officer, with elements of that role now exercised under a wider Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion remit. The Church of Scotland's 'Violence Against Women Task Group', which was established by a previous General Assembly, remains, under the name 'Integrity'. Integrity remains committed to working within the Church to take forward the General Assembly's previous commitments towards fighting Gender Injustice.

4.8.1 Increase in domestic violence

Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown brought about what the UN has referred to as a 'shadow pandemic.' With over 4 billion people locked in their homes and communication limited, the opportunities to perpetrate abuse were multiplied. Women and children have been forced to spend extended periods at home with their abuser with very limited opportunities to seek help from supportive family or service providers. For women not living with their abuser, lockdown provided their abuser with the knowledge that they would

be home. This increased the opportunities for stalking, and continued online harassment. While there may have been increased opportunities and harm caused by the conditions of lockdown, it is worth noting that the stress caused by the pandemic did not directly cause the abuse or create new perpetrators, in the same way that Christmas, alcohol, poverty and sporting events, or frustrations around quarantine, are not the direct causes of domestic abuse. Abuse, in the form of patterns of behaviour to instil fear and maintain control remains a choice of the abuser.

The Church should be a place and a community in which those experiencing domestic violence are safe and supported to seek the help they need. The Church will never be a specialist or primary support service to those experiencing domestic violence, but disclosures of domestic violence are made within church communities: to friends; elders; pastoral workers; clergy. Church communities therefore need to ensure that they can be supportive.

In 2018 the results of academic research into the experiences of survivors of domestic violence who had connections with church communities gave valuable and harrowing insight into the extent of the need for churches to be better informed and trained in this area. This research was conducted across denominations in Cumbria and included a Church of Scotland congregation. The cited statistics come from the *In Churches Too* report which resulted from this research. The Church is clearly seen as a potential source of support: 42.9% of respondents said that they themselves would seek help from the church for domestic abuse, while 59.8% would signpost a friend to church.

However, the stories of those who had experience of seeking help for domestic abuse from the church are deeply concerning: 33.3% of people who had turned to the church for help reported that doing so did not make any difference to either the situation or to how they felt; 14.3% reported that turning to the church for help made things worse. The need for churches to be better equipped on issues of violence against women (in all forms, including domestic violence) is clear. For this reason, Integrity, the Church of Scotland's violence against women task group, is strengthening its efforts to provide meaningful training, resources and dialogue opportunities for congregations, office holders and pastoral care providers.

4.8.2 Training

Integrity has been working for several years to prepare training for congregations and local groups to become better informed and equipped to handle issues of violence against women. Its training covers the breadth of types of violence experienced by women, including domestic abuse and spiritual abuse. The training Integrity can now provide across the Church has been designed by Integrity group members with the invaluable help and oversight of a professional violence against women expert and trainer. A short introductory session has been prepared that covers the basic information needed by any person with any role in a congregation, in order to raise awareness, generate discussion and provide localised support service information. Further modules have also been designed to enable congregations to explore different aspects of the subject in greater depth. This training aims to help Kirk Sessions feel more confident in recognising the signs and cause of abuse, as well as safe and appropriate responses to disclosure, in order to establish congregations that are both preventing, recognising and responding to abuse within their respective communities. All congregations are urged to take advantage of this opportunity for awareness raising and training.

5. INTERFAITH

5.1 Jewish-Church of Scotland Glossary Project

Church of Scotland and Jewish community representatives were in a formal dialogue process from 2017-2019, with the objectives of furthering mutual understanding and learning.

The broader aim for this dialogue has been to find ways for the learning to be shared amongst both of our communities. This was the main subject of a meeting with the Chief Rabbi and the Convener of the Assembly Trustees along with participants of the dialogue and staff support in February 2020. The decision that was reached was for a smaller group to prepare a glossary of terms that are often used in relation to the theology and politics of land from both Jewish and Christian perspectives. The aim is for the theological significance from both traditions of the terms to sit alongside one another and shed light on how these terms are used and understood differently. The process of creating this resource will itself be an opportunity for deeper learning and dialogue and the product will be a useful and usable resource for the wider Church. The initial dialogue group, the Faith Impact Forum, and the Theological Forum are represented on this group.

6. SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

6.1 Ecumenical partnerships and collaboration on public affairs

During 2020 the Faith Impact Forum undertook a number of reviews and consultations with regard to projects and programmes that it inherited from the predecessor councils. From Church and Society in particular, a great deal of work relating to public affairs and campaigning was often done in partnership with other Churches. The Faith Impact Forum affirms its commitment to ecumenical working, and welcomes the advice and support of the Ecumenical Relations Committee; the Forum also encourages the Church to be better aware of these areas of cooperation. It is an imperative for the Church, as well as being more effective, to work with others, sharing resources and expertise. Presenting to decision-makers a united view carries more weight than acting unilaterally. In particular:

- Our relationship with the Church of England: as two of the UK's 'national' churches, where there is often an expectation of our voice being heard beyond our membership to our respective nations, and across the United Kingdom. Although there are differences in size, polity and ecclesiology, there is still much that we can and should do together to be a Christian witness in the public square. The Columba Declaration, agreed in 2016 between the two Churches, committed us to "work together on social, political and ethical issues that arise from our participation in public life and be prepared to allocate resources to joint initiatives for addressing them."
- The anticipated establishment of a new national ecumenical body in Scotland to replace Action of Churches Together in Scotland is a development that offers potential for more collaboration between Scottish Churches, to improve our relations, and create space for encounter, and the opportunities for joint work on a range of topics to emerge.
- The Forum has agreed to continue to participate in the Joint Public Issues Team. The core institutions working in partnership for mutual benefit are the Methodist Church in Britain, the United Reformed Church, and the Baptist Union of Great Britain (www.jointpublicissues.org.uk). The former Church and Society Council agreed to participate in JPIT in 2015. A principal advantage for the Church of Scotland is of avoiding duplicating work already being done, and in being able to share in a team with more policy expertise and knowledge, especially on reserved areas such as social security, defence, immigration and international affairs. As an Associate Partner of JPIT, the Church of Scotland is able to share its knowledge within the Scottish situation while leaning on the other churches when engaging with UK-wide policies.

- The Forum continues to be involved in discussions with the Vatican and Lambeth Palace on ways it can support the peace process in South Sudan.

6.2 Reset the Debt

In the Covid-19 lockdown in spring 2020, together with our partners in the Joint Public Issues Team, we undertook some research, asking people struggling against poverty what their biggest challenges were. One of the clear results was the increased level of debt that had been incurred as a direct result of the pandemic or the associated restrictions. The Church of Scotland has a tradition and history of campaigning against unjust and injurious levels of debt, perhaps most notably in the Jubilee Debt campaign work around international debt for developing countries. In the autumn the Forum supported a new JPIT report and campaign around Covid-19 debt and its impact on families in the UK, specifically calling for a new Government-supported Jubilee Debt Fund to help people deal with the impact of Covid-19 debt. The campaign, called *Reset the Debt* is also backed by Church Action on Poverty, the United Reformed Church, the Methodist Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain.^[14]

6.3 Scottish Parliament Elections 2021

Elections for the Scottish Parliament will take place on Thursday 6 May. By the time the General Assembly meets, Scotland will have voted for a new Parliament, the sixth election since the Parliament was re-established in 1999. The challenges facing lawmakers over the next few years will be significant: the recovery from the pandemic, the climate crisis, and the impact of Brexit are all complications added to the important everyday matters of education, health, business, taxation and all the other areas of public life that is the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament.

The Faith Impact Forum will seek to work constructively with MSPs of all parties on the issues and priority concerns expressed by the General Assembly. This work of the Church in its relationships with government, and concern for the common good, are matters for all of us. To support the whole church in this endeavour we plan to share and promote the Meet Your MSP resources from the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office so that congregations can build or strengthen a personal relationship with individual MSPs. The purpose is to ensure that representatives are aware of the activities and opinions of organisations within their constituency, but also to underline that MSPs, like Churches, should be there to serve everybody in their area, not only those who voted for a particular party or who attend Church.

Questions relating to Scottish independence, further devolution and wider constitutional reform look likely to play a part in the future deliberations of the Parliament. In the past the Church of Scotland has contributed to wider civic and community debate; from the support for the Constitutional Convention and devolution in the 1980s and 1990s to work around a vision for Scotland's future around the 2014 referendum. The Faith Impact Forum will continue to monitor and engage with such political directions and be ready to address issues that arise.

7. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI): OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE FOR THE CHURCH

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is at the heart of internet search engines, self-driving cars and speech and face recognition on mobile phones. AI algorithms underpin innovations in healthcare, assisting doctors to diagnose illness, discover new drugs, read medical images and use robots in surgical operations. The Church has many reasons to celebrate and embrace these technologies, but some difficult questions arise: is privacy adequately protected when personal data are collected by social media platforms (which, with analysis of a few hundred "likes", can demonstrate better knowledge of your personality than your spouse has of you)? How much

human supervision is required when life-changing decisions about our health or employment are based on outputs from AI algorithms? Who is held responsible when unfair or damaging decisions are made, or if self-driving cars or autonomous weapons go wrong? How do we respond to the use of sophisticated AI surveillance tools in policing, and the persecution of religious groups by governments?

The Society, Religion and Technology Group has produced a **report** which explores opportunities for the church in the use of AI technologies in areas such as pastoral care, counselling, worship, and evangelism. As we increasingly engage in our day to day life with robots and chatbots which can plausibly mimic humans in many ways, does this challenge us to reflect on what it means to be a person made in the image of God? The place of AI within a larger narrative of redemption and reconciliation, and of its role in the building of the Kingdom of God, must be of concern not just to academic theologians, but to ministers and to congregations, and the whole people of God.

8. CONCLUSION

We are a very small Church when we work on our own, but when we play our part in the worldwide movement of God's people we can share in the experience of answering our Lord's prayer for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. The Forum trusts that it will be blessed by listening, learning, sharing and walking with many people from across the Church and the world joining together to pursue, in Christ's name, the dream of a fairer, more equal and more just Scotland in a fairer, more equal and more just world.

We close with the inspiring words of Amanda Gorman:

"For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it."

In the name of the Forum

VERY REV DR SUSAN BROWN, *Convener*
REV ALAN MILLER, *Vice-Convener*
REV IAN W ALEXANDER, *Interim Head*

Appendix I

The Church's commitment to protecting the earth

Following a debate about Church financial investments in fossil fuel businesses, the 2018 General Assembly agreed to '*Instruct the Church and Society Council to engage with the oil and gas companies to continue to seek alignment with the Paris Climate Agreement rather than divest from the oil and gas industry*'. A subsequent debate at the 2019 General Assembly agreed to '*Note the engagement to date with oil and gas companies and instruct the Faith Impact Forum to report on the outcome to the Assembly of 2020*'. The full report was prepared for the 2020 General Assembly but, on the advice of the Principal Clerk and the Assembly Trustees, was not presented. The General Assembly 2020 instructed, '*the Forum to report to the General Assembly of 2021 on the ethical, scientific and theological arguments for and against urgent disinvestment from oil and gas companies*'.

1.1 What is the Climate Emergency?

In 2019 and 2020 the General Assembly recognised that the world is facing a climate and ecological emergency. Research by climate scientists over forty years has demonstrated the reality of climate change; that we are causing it, principally through our continuing use of oil, gas and coal; and that it has profound implications for life on earth, both now and for generations to come.

In 2020, a coroner ruled that the cause of death of a nine-year-old girl from Lewisham, Ella Kissi-Debrah, in February 2013 was acute respiratory failure, severe asthma and air pollution exposure caused by exposure to nitrogen dioxide

and particulate matter (PM) pollution in excess of World Health Organization guidelines, the principal source of which were traffic emissions on a major arterial route near her home. Fossil fuel use in vehicles was the major factor in her death. It is estimated there are seven million deaths each year from such pollution.

In Zambia, some parts of the country have experienced flooding, and others drought, leading to failed crops and the death of livestock; because of this, communities are facing hunger and the loss of livelihoods. The United Church of Zambia has responded with a food distribution programme providing food to over 4,000 households; without this intervention many would die.

In early 2021, the Guardian^[15] reported on new studies which modelled how the earth might recover more quickly than previously understood, and the importance of slowing down the speed of climate change to allow the earth and people to transition once emissions have been driven down, with one author highlighting that an extra degree in a few hundred years is far less damaging than that extra degree in a few decades. The timescale is important.

1.2 Children and young people will feel the worst impacts and are increasingly worried

In its 'Churches' Commitment to Children' study document, the World Council Churches worked with UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, to address the needs of children as an integral part of the ecumenical commitment to justice and peace. They found, 'Climate change is already taking a toll on children, but its consequences will be even greater in the lives of future generations, representing a threat to their very survival.' While the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss will undoubtedly impact the future of our children and young people, there is a great deal of evidence that this generation is already suffering.

Eco-anxiety is increasingly recognised as a concern, particularly as it affects children. Children born in this century will, in the years to come, feel the full impact of climate change. A survey of 8-16-year olds carried out for BBC Newsround reported that three quarters of children say they are worried about the state of the planet. One in five say it has kept them awake at night, and a similar number has had a nightmare about climate change.

After the 2019 discussion in the General Assembly, Seonaid Knox, then clerk to the National Youth Assembly, spoke out: 'It's deeply frustrating that we have yet again delayed acting on the climate emergency we face...the reality is that despite youth and international delegates stressing the urgency of the matter, our pleas fell on deaf ears. We will continue to push for divestment and for local congregations to reduce their carbon footprint.' Young people have been to the fore in raising concerns. Greta Thunberg addressed the United Nations in September 2019: 'You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words and yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.' She has inspired a new generation of activists, especially young people, to demand action. Twenty thousand marched in Edinburgh in September 2019; around the world the number was estimated to be four million, by far the biggest global climate protest ever seen. Church members from Christian Climate Action joined with others to make three demands of governments:

- governments must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change;
- governments must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025; and
- governments must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice.

A practical approach is evident in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana (EPCG). Although not responsible for the emissions causing climate change, they are suffering from it, as the Sahara Desert is encroaching on the arable lands. The EPCG is active with school children to act on environmental protection in Northern Ghana, where it helps the young people to understand that human actions are causing the climate to change and what they can do to reverse the trends. Some schools form Eco Clubs, and the members are trained in basic nursery management and raise tree seedlings for planting. Each year, every Eco Club plants more than 1000 seedlings to help reverse the trend of desertification and rejuvenate the environment. So far about 18 acres of land have been planted by the school children since 2015.

1.3 Government response

The Scottish Government response to the climate emergency has been positive. The Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Bill passed through the Scottish Parliament in 2019. It sets a legally binding net zero target for all greenhouse gases emissions by 2045. The Bill also creates a Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change to make recommendations to ministers on how the net-zero transition should be achieved.

The implications of the 2045 net zero greenhouse gas emissions target for Scotland are significant. For example, most homes in Scotland are now heated by gas but to meet the net zero target gas central heating will have to be replaced by low carbon sources of heating. The same will apply to non-domestic buildings, including churches. Diesel and petrol-powered motor vehicles will have to be replaced by electric or other low carbon sources of power. Forest planting is likely to increase to capture carbon from the atmosphere and the future for farming, particularly for farming with high methane emissions, is unclear.

The UK Government has agreed to adopt a target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It has also allowed the resumption of onshore wind power schemes across mainland UK, and announced a strategy for reaching its targets, many much earlier than previously imagined.

While not addressing how oil and gas production in the North Sea can be managed, reduced or phased out as part of a transition to a low carbon economy, the UK Government White Paper of Dec 2020, *Powering our Net Zero Future*, agreed with the Oil & Gas Authority that "the sector must go considerably faster in reducing its own carbon footprint or risk losing its social licence to operate."^[16]

1.4 Is this enough?

Some authorities and churches have argued that a 2050 target is inadequate to address the scale of the climate emergency and have pressed for the adoption of a 2030 target for net zero carbon emissions. Both Glasgow and Edinburgh City Councils have adopted this ambitious target. The Lutheran Church of Finland Church Council approved an energy and climate strategy in 2019 committing the Church to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. In February 2020 the Church of England's General Synod set new targets for all parts of the church to work to become carbon 'net zero' by 2030. The 2020 General Assembly also instructed a coalition within the Church of Scotland to come together 'to develop a strategy for the Church to transition both locally and nationally to net zero carbon emissions by 2030'.

1.5 Implications for the Church of Scotland:

1.5.1 Listening to young people

Responding at the time to the school climate strikes, the convener of the Church and Society Council, said 'Adults must listen to young people's concerns about climate change and try and understand why they are profoundly worried about the future. Listening and learning would help leaders respond more effectively to the climate emergency'. It is recommended that the General Assembly encourage

congregations to listen to young people to learn about their concerns and aspirations. In the BBC Newsround survey, when asked about the action being taken by grown-ups to tackle the problem, two in five responded that they do not trust adults to tackle the challenges that climate change presents, and nearly two-thirds said leaders are not listening enough to young people's views. Churches provide a safe space in which the tradition of respectful dialogue is well established. Listening to young people's concerns about the climate emergency extends this concept across the generations, encouraging young people to speak out and to be heard respectfully by all.

1.5.2 Investment in oil and gas companies

Previous reports to the General Assembly have expressed concern about the role of oil and gas companies in relation to the Paris agreement. There is growing evidence to suggest that oil and gas companies are continuing to promote exploration and extraction while claiming to be committed to the Paris agreement. There is also now clear evidence that the financial risks associated with investment in oil and gas companies are greater than was previously apparent. A report from financial analysts Carbon Tracker, *Breaking the Habit*, concludes that none of the large oil companies is "Paris-aligned". "Every oil major is betting heavily against a 1.5°C world and investing in projects that are contrary to the Paris goals." This includes the large European companies that are doing the most to reassure investors that they are responsive to climate concerns. In May 2021, the International Energy Agency will publish the first comprehensive road map for the entire global energy sector to reach net zero by 2050 by outlining the actions required for decarbonisation.

The Carbon Tracker report concludes that oil and gas projects already sanctioned will take the world past 1.5°C, unless carbon capture and storage can be brought into action at scale and very quickly. A further report from the UN Environment Programme confirms this finding. It concludes that current and planned exploration will "produce about 50% more fossil fuels by 2030 than would be consistent with a 2°C pathway and 120% more than would be consistent with a 1.5°C pathway".

Mark Carney, former Governor of the Bank of England, has warned of the risks associated with climate change and, interviewed by the BBC on 30 December 2019, said the financial sector had begun to curb investment in fossil fuels – but far too slowly. He said leading pension fund analysis "is that if you add up the policies of all of companies out there, they are consistent with warming of 3.7-3.8°C". Other finance companies are expressing similar concerns. Barclays Bank is facing increasing pressure over its environmental stance after one of its top investors, Jupiter Asset Management, supported a shareholder resolution urging the bank to stop lending to fossil fuel companies. HSBC, Europe's second-largest financier of fossil fuels after Barclays, is being urged by pension funds and individual shareholders to cut its exposure to fossil fuels. Larry Fink, CEO of Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager, in his 2021 open letter, said that he believed the world was seeing a fundamental reshaping of finance as it was now recognised that climate change was an investment risk. It is also important that he sees positive investment as useful, and that **the climate transition presents an historic investment opportunity.**

1.5.3 Engagement and Divestment

The Church of Scotland must respond to this rapidly changing context. It has previously debated investments in fossil fuel companies and has decided not to invest in companies substantially involved in tar sands and thermal coal. Engagement with oil and gas companies over many years may have made some impact at the margin but has not dented their core objectives of global exploration, extraction, and sale of oil and gas. Rather, the reverse has

been true, with major oil and gas companies continuing to expand their oil and gas operations, citing continued global demand. Oil and gas companies promote their green credentials by investing in renewable energy but at a scale that is dwarfed by their expenditure on oil and gas projects. Not one of the oil majors spends more than 5% of its capital expenditure on renewables. Iberdrola, owner of Scottish Power, is planning to spend more on low carbon renewable energy in the coming decade than the six biggest European oil companies combined.^[17]

Things may be changing. Demand for fossil fuels fell sharply with the downturn in economic activity and reduced travel around the world during the pandemic. This led to a fall in oil prices, with dramatic consequences for the share prices and asset values of oil and gas companies and a reduction in new investment. This has raised questions about the financial health of oil and gas companies alongside their environmental impact. Keith Anderson, Scottish Power Chief Executive, has said: 'The future of the world is...no longer about the future of oil and gas companies, it is about the future of renewables.'^[18] This is a timely opportunity for the Church not just to speak out but also to act on its principles.

1.5.4 Church of Scotland Investors Trust reduces its investments in oil and gas companies

The Church of Scotland Investors Trust (CoSIT) has long argued for engagement and has opposed divestment from oil and gas companies. This has led to vigorous debate at previous assemblies and much public comment. Forum representatives have met with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Investors Trust to discuss these issues, as well as this report and recommendations. It is important also to engage in further conversations on wider areas where there are ethical and theological issues to consider, such as modern slavery or finance for nuclear weapons, or investing positively for change.

Some financial analysts have suggested that oil and gas companies are uncertain long-term investments. Carbon Tracker has argued that oil and gas companies need to shrink their operations, not continually seek to grow, and that share prices could collapse if demand for oil and gas were to fall. This prediction came to pass during the pandemic.^[19] In a world increasingly concerned about the climate emergency and how to move to a low carbon economy, the business prospects for oil and gas companies are uncertain. CoSIT has noted this and, with the managers of the Growth Fund, Newton Investment Management, began "to reduce our exposure to the Oil and Gas sector" (CoSIT Annual Review 2019, p8). This is a welcome step. The CoSIT annual review makes clear that this is a financial decision and not a permanent divestment on ethical grounds.

A decision to divest from oil and gas companies, like companies involved in gambling, armaments or tobacco, is not just financial (although Newton has "long-term concerns about the sustainability of the energy industry as it exists today"^[20]) but involves important ethical considerations. In the debate at the General Assembly 2018 it was agreed that alignment with the Paris agreement was a key factor in helping us come to a view on whether to recommend continued investment in oil and gas companies; whether they are helping to reduce our dependence on oil and gas or whether they are continuing to promote oil and gas exploration. We have looked for evidence that major oil and gas companies are seeking to transform themselves into renewable energy companies but, while there is plenty of rhetoric, the evidence from the past two years is clear: oil and gas companies are still promoting exploration for oil and gas and in consequence increasing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Like Mark Carney, formerly at the Bank of England, we conclude that too little is happening; that it is time to make a break with the oil and gas economy; to commit to a low carbon future, and to align our investments accordingly. The

congregation of Dunscore has already done so. "As an Eco Congregation for many years, we have been working to ensure that we love our neighbours across the world in all we do through worship, outreach and in our lives. Our Board has recently decided that, as we were opposed to investing in fossil fuel, we have taken our funds away from the Church of Scotland (Investors Trust) Growth Fund because this currently has fossil fuel investments. We look forward to the considerable, but urgent and essential challenge, of cutting carbon use in Dunscore Church and, ultimately, reducing this to net zero."

We urge all church investing bodies to permanently exclude companies substantially involved in oil and gas exploration and development. In the Church of Scotland (Properties and Investments) Order 1994^[21], section 41 clarifies that 'It shall be lawful for the General Assembly from time to time to make byelaws and regulations to be observed by the Investors Trust in the discharge of its duties and functions.' It is therefore open to the General Assembly to offer an ethical investment policy for the Church's investments.

This does not mean an end to engagement. We have had fruitful dialogue with Oil and Gas UK and will continue to explore a just transition to a low carbon economy with them and others. We also acknowledge the continued work of CoSIT and its commitment to the Church Investors Group which engages with business on a wide range of issues. We commend this wider engagement and are ready to play our part in it. We would also welcome engagement on the possibility of being involved with impact investing – this is using money not just to make more money, but aiming to generate specific beneficial social or environmental effects in addition to financial gains. We do believe that investment in new and emerging low carbon technologies will bear fruit and urge the Assembly Trustees to review the Statement of Investment Policy of the Church to examine this possibility.

We also pay tribute to the work of the Oil and Gas Chaplain, Gordon Craig, and acknowledge the continued support of Oil and Gas UK that makes his work possible. It is essential in this transition to a low carbon economy that the Church offers support to men and women working in the industry. We question the business strategy of the major oil companies but we recognise those who are employed by them and work for a just transition on their behalf.

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