

Retiring Moderator Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rt Rev Dr Iain Greenshields

Let me begin by thanking the General Assembly for the opportunity to serve both this esteemed church and our Lord in what has been a year like no other. Throughout I will be saying thank you often and that is because there is so much to be grateful for.

My sincere thanks to everyone who has supported me in this year – especially to my wife, Linda, who has been almost always at my side – the photographer and narrator of all of the many, many visits. Linda has been a constant support and encouragement, always ready to give good advice and guidance and helping me to reflect on visits and events – having her with me has enriched this whole experience.

Thank you to my family – they have given so much support and encouragement and made it so much easier to undertake this demanding role and although they have all played their role, a very special thanks to Siona and Susi our youngest two who have had to reorganise so much of their lives around the last year.

My chaplains, Monika and Allan – your support and most important of all, my sure knowledge of your prayerful support, has been like a rock to me – you will both never know how deeply I value your support.

All of the places I visited – the grace with which I was received was an inspiration and all of over 140 visits to different churches, projects and of course CrossReach will long live in the memory – it has also impressed upon me how important the role of the Moderator is as an ambassador and source of representative encouragement to the Church.

Of course, it was an extraordinary year in other respects too with the death of her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth and the wonderful way both Scotland and the Church of Scotland honoured her memory – to have been part of that in St. Giles and Westminster Abbey will never be forgotten. Neither, too, of course, will the Coronation of King Charles III. It was an honour to represent the church at the coronation and to present the King with the Bible upon which he then swore his oath of allegiance.

To have represented you at the signing of the St. Margaret's Declaration in Dunfermline was such a proud and significant ecumenical moment as was the time spent in South Sudan, along with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope – what an historic visit and moment for our church! Thank you to everyone who made that visit possible and for the incredible support I received.

To have visited churches living in areas that are on the “edge” and such congregations in these areas also living on the “edge” – yet making a difference – and what a difference – imaginative food projects, warm spaces, working with other innovative and supportive Christian agencies, running and supporting mental health projects, addiction recovery services, family support services – where would many of our communities be without the support of the Church – thank you for welcoming us into your spaces, into your lives – your places of hope, inspiration and healing.

We all aware of the drug and alcohol dependency crisis in our nation. I think it can be said without contradiction, that the work of CrossReach is remarkable in the area of recovery as are many of the innovative projects and hard work been done by churches and projects attached to churches from the Hebrides to the Borders.

Speaking again of support – thank you so much to Catherine McIntosh. Catherine I knew I could leave so much in your hands and you were always there, faithfully, thoughtfully and conscientiously supporting everything that was being done. I and the church owe you a great debt.

Comms – you are stars. Such help, wisdom and good sense – always at hand to give the right kind of support and advice, especially around the death of the Queen, South Sudan – but much more beside. Thank you.

To other members of staff, and of course the Clerk, given the quadruple whammy of being the first woman to hold this esteemed office, having to make that pastoral break with her church in Inverness, in her first year of office, and having to work with me – you will not be forgotten.

To the Presbyteries of Glasgow and Clyde where I visited – these were such remarkably interesting and stimulating occasions and it was obvious that a great deal of thought and hard work was put into the formation of the time spent in both these large and resourceful presbyteries. Our sincere thanks for looking after us so well and making the two visits such special occasions.

This year, nationally and internationally, has given me considerable insight.

The Church is still held in high esteem both nationally and internationally – in Holyrood and Westminster, at the very top of all our armed forces. We are valued for the fact that we will speak the mind of Christ, and are unapologetic for that. Generally speaking, I have been received as the Church’s ambassador with thoughtful respect – glad that the Church has seen fit to give of its time.

There are two visits that I want to comment on, simply to give a flavour of the reach of the church.

One was in Ferguslie Park in Clyde Presbytery which we had the privilege of visiting during our visit to the Presbytery. A pioneering ministry working out of a community centre, we sat round a table with a dozen people and were amazed at the positive faith stories we heard from people struggling deeply with life yet deeply connected to the church and one another. This, though, was not the exception as all over Scotland we witnessed innovation and creative faith.

The other was to Epilepsy Scotland – they have never received a visit from a Moderator, nor have a chaplain. Why did I go there? Simple really, I have lived with Grand Mal for the last 62 years of my life and wanted to touch base with people there. They were thrilled, as was I, to spend fruitful time together. I will now take this further, but I wonder how many small third sector organisations in our presbyteries simply need that knock on the door and declaration of interest?

Like every report card, there are matters of concern I have picked up.

The first is the concern I have heard from so many – ministers and elders alike is that in their opinion “Mission Planning” is a misnomer. The feeling by so many who I met was that this was a desperate act in trying to save the institution rather than a mission plan. I simply reflect this back to the General Assembly because I promised, given the prevalence and concern of those commenting, that I would. I would imagine that a great deal more will be said about this during the GA.

However, I do feel that there has to be a balance struck given the difficult task Presbyteries, the General Trustees and the Trustees has. Let me explain what I mean:

I have received many personal letters from well-meaning people arguing their case for the continuance of their places of worship and their having a minister of their own. Here is a statement I have heard again and again: “we wipe our face every year”. Now I think I know what they mean by that. They pay their dues in terms of what is asked of them for M&M, but in terms of paying for a minister, which in 2021 meant remitting £45k a year, they are not wiping their face. None of the people who, in good faith, contacted me, represented congregations that achieved this.

Now I don't say that to in any way try to undermine the churches and I do recognise that there needs to be collective responsibility when it comes to churches in some of our socially most challenging areas and in many of our most remote areas but logic tells you this cannot go on. We surely cannot have entitlement without responsibility and commitment.

We cannot continue in tired old buildings that will attract no-one; we cannot continue to be minimalistic in our giving generally.

We need new church buildings – more of them. There is no doubt there is a vibrancy about these new buildings or buildings that are being constantly refurbished. Generally that is the responsibility of the local congregation.

And if this cannot be achieved at an individual level – then it needs corporate working to achieve a future – working together – a new way of being and a new way of ministering.

I believe we need a decade of evangelism with people who are skilled at evangelism working in Presbyteries. I believe we need to recover our confidence in God, in Jesus, in the great things He has done for us, and in sharing and proclaiming these things rather than hiding behind our walls hoping in vain things will get better.

Let me suggest that we need to take wise, calculated risks of faith.

Nor can we blame 121, Trustees, General Trustees, presbyteries. Every congregation needs to take a long, honest, prayerful look at who they are, and what they are not – mine included.

Finally, allow me also to suggest that where there is excellence and growth, we need to support and encourage and invest in such churches – they will be the growth spots that will supply future ministries. As has been most recently shared with me, we still need to see this as Jesus' Church and He will grow His Church – perhaps not to our way of thinking and in our image but in His way.

There is an element of lament in the Church. Here in the General Assembly, as we lament the influence and status we once had in Scotland but which is no longer ours. At presbytery level as we seek to find ways of coming together out of necessity and losing local identity. At congregational level too where there is a profound sense of loss in many places.

But out of lament and grief must come a new life – a new identity. What is it that Jesus is saying to us and calling us to? How are we as a Reforming [notice I did not use Reformed] Church, to see this other that through the Sovereignty of God as He takes us down a different path and to travel in faith and expectation with Him?

Am I pessimistic? No, never, not at all. This year has convinced me otherwise. But there is work to be done with the Spirit of God if our Church is to have a future – which I believe it has – so turn that finger that is pointing outward, and turn it inward, then turn it upward and seek from Him who can uniquely do what humanly speaking seems impossible.