

Moderator,

In the New Testament St Paul described himself as the least and last of the apostles — the last to witness the risen Christ and the least deserving of the title ‘apostle,’ principally because he had set out to *destroy* the good news rather than to proclaim it.

Who, then, was the first, and perhaps *foremost*, apostle?

If you’ve read the gospels — or even just our World Mission Council report — you’ll realise that the person with the best claim to that title was, of course, a woman — Mary Magdalene.

The first to see the risen Christ and the first to be sent by Christ to tell others!

Of course those others didn’t believe her.

Was that because what she was saying was so incredible?

Or just because she was a women?

Who can tell?

This year in our World Mission report we are focusing on Women in the World Church and trying to listen to the female voices among our many overseas partners. We are delighted that many of our overseas delegates this year *are* women — so they can speak for themselves — and I hope they will.

But to begin with we want to CELEBRATE the contribution of women to the mission of God in the world — beginning with

the many women among the original group of followers of Jesus — of whom *several* were called “Mary” (not just Mary of Magdala.)

It is quite clear from the Scriptures that Jesus welcomed women as disciples — and though none of them was elected as one of the Twelve, some did hold positions of leadership in the Early Church, as deacons, priests, bishops, apostles, teachers and prophets.

As the former US President, Jimmy Carter, has recently stated having just left the Southern Baptist Church over this issue:

*“It wasn't until the fourth century that dominant Christian leaders, all men, twisted and distorted Holy Scriptures to perpetuate their ascendant positions within the religious hierarchy.”*

It's a story that has kept repeating itself through the years ever since.

Take another Mary — Marie Dentière, a contemporary of John Calvin and the first woman theologian of the Genevan Reformation.

I don't imagine there are many people in this hall who haven't heard of John Calvin — but how many of you had heard of Marie Dentière?

Me neither ...until recently.

At the time, men (including Calvin) tried to push her to the side and silence her: but she made her voice heard, powerfully, profoundly and prophetically and with a great deal of wit.

But then ... later generations contrived to forget her.

The same old story!

Yet despite all the obstacles, and the opposition, the contribution of women towards the mission of God across the world has been huge and fruitful.

Take another Mary — one of our own this time — Mary Slessor — one of the first women to be recognised recently as a Scottish heroine by The National Wallace Monument in Stirling.

Mary Slessor of Calabar (The Queen of Okoyong) may be one of the best known of female Scottish missionaries but she was only one of hundreds of courageous pioneers who responded to a call from God— a call that they were not allowed to answer here in Scotland. As it says in our report, quoting William Taylor, *'Scottish women had the chance to do overseas what their home church would not **allow** them to do in Scotland.'*

And what a job they did of it!

Bringing the WORD OF LIFE to countless people in so many far off places.

So we have cause to CELEBRATE.

And because of other pioneers, such as yet another Mary, Mary Levison, we can celebrate that for nearly half a century now women *can* at last answer the call to ordained ministry here in their own home country.

Beyond Scotland the Council were absolutely delighted to hear the news that the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon had agreed to ordain *its* first two women pastors in February and March of this year. The Rev Rula Slieman and Rev Najla Kassab have both been preachers in the denomination and we are so pleased that their dedicated ministries have now been fully recognised.

*[We are particularly delighted that Rula Slieman is with us in this Assembly.]*

But while there *is* a lot to CELEBRATE there are still enormous CHALLENGES both here, and around the world.

Our report contains many stories that illustrate these challenges.

Unfortunately, gender discrimination and gender injustice, together with gender-based violence of all forms, are all still

endemic and engrained within human society as a whole and, sadly, also still within the global *Christian* community.

This is not a small issue for the Church: it is not a trivial issue: it is not a side issue... it is a scandal to the gospel that we profess and which declares that "*in Christ there is no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, male and female.*"

There can be *no* justification, certainly not within Christian theology, for gender injustice. So in the Deliverance that we present we're calling on the whole Church, including Councils, Presbyteries, Kirk Sessions and congregations, to continue to challenge any theology that is used to persecute or simply to discriminate against women.

But reacting negatively to any injustice is only halfway towards a solution. We also have to work *positively* to change ways of thinking and to change ways of behaving.

So, along with organisations like the Guild, the Church & Society Council, Christian Aid, and the Violence against Women Task Group, and together with our overseas partners across the world, we are COMMITTED to the positive empowerment of women and girls.

The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is, of course, one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

And it is in *everybody's* interest.

As our own report states, "*gender equality (also) makes good economic sense.*"

When women are empowered *everyone* benefits.

So empowering women is one of the most powerful ways of addressing and eradicating poverty.

This is not just a nice theory: it has been shown to be true in reality. And I've been privileged to see it for myself in a number of situations; to see the difference that empowering women can make, not just to the women themselves but also to their families and to their whole communities, and to the wider economy.

A few years ago, for example, in a visit to Malawi, I saw some of the work being done by the Ekwendeni Hospital AIDS Programme. It is one of the initiatives supported by our Church's HIV Programme.

Out there in one of the very poorest rural areas of Northern Malawi I met some women who had received help and training to set up a self-organised micro-finance savings group. This enabled the women to save and to borrow (a bit

like a credit union) and then to set up their own small income generating schemes.

The women told us that the difference it had made to their lives was enormous — and not just financially.

Empowerment and Equality are **words of life**.

Another way in which the World Mission Council shows our positive commitment to empowering women is through our use of the ST COLM'S FUND.

A large proportion of the money realised through the sale of the former St Colm's College was invested to generate an income that is used to provide grants for programmes run by our partner churches and partner organisations.

Applications to the fund are required to *“reflect the ethos and legacy of St Colm's in promoting practical and community training with ecumenical, experiential, inter-faith and international emphases, especially involving and supporting women.”*

Last year, following on from our Assembly report on Care for Creation we organised a successful 'Care for Creation Conference.' It brought together church members from our own church and a number of speakers and contributors from among our worldwide partners. This year we intend to do

something similar and, together with the Church and Society Council, The Guild, Christian Aid and international partners, we will be holding a “Women in the World Church” Conference on September 16<sup>th</sup>.

We encourage all congregations to send a representative.

Earlier I spoke about the work of women like Mary Slessor who responded to the call to serve God as missionaries.

The pattern then was for individuals to offer their service and for the Church to test that call and then send the individuals to what was thought were appropriate mission fields.

In recent years we have worked with a quite different model, relying on our international church partners to identify work that needs to be done and to request people with particular skills who might serve as Mission Partners for that work. The task for the World Mission Council was then to try and recruit suitable applicants for these posts.

That has not always been successful and a number of those who *have* responded to the advertisements for particular posts have come — not from the Church of Scotland— but from other parts of the World Church.

That in *itself* is not a problem but the lack of people from our own Church feeling called to serve overseas *has* been more of a concern.



However, at a number of recent Vocations Conferences some individuals, exploring a sense of being called by God, have enquired of us how they might serve overseas.

So as a Council we have decided that it may be useful no longer to restrict ourselves to a single model of recruitment (namely *beginning* with the request of our partners) but instead to be a little bit more flexible.

If someone expresses a sense of vocation for working overseas we'd like to explore this with them; and, still working together with our partners, see if that sense of calling might match any expression of need from our partners.

It is also worth reminding people that as well as serving full time as Mission Partners there are many other ways, including short-term volunteering, twinning visits and so on, in which people may contribute to our Church's engagement with the wider world and with the world church.

Moderator,

the WORD OF LIFE is not only spoken: it has to be lived.

Just as the Word became flesh and blood in Christ, so that Word has to be lived out now by Christ's followers, who in many ways, including challenging injustice and thus changing lives, demonstrate the Love of God in action.

The WORD OF LIFE is also seen and heard in the interconnectedness of all the parts of the Body of Christ that we call the Church worldwide.

Compassionate action and the building of relationships across cultures and countries are things that enliven and invigorate all those who are engaged in those relationships. Whether it is through twinings between congregations or Presbyteries, or through the sharing of stories, or through informed prayer, or through the dedicated service of Mission Partners... always... we 'say it with people.'

Let me finish with some words of Mary Slessor.

She was told on one occasion by an African chief that it was foolish and dangerous for her, a *woman*, to travel inland and try to intervene between warring tribes.

...to which Mary Slessor replied:

*When you think of the woman's power, you forget the power of the woman's God. I shall go on.*

(But) Moderator, (I shall *not* go on...as my time is up)

I present the report, and, as I am not a Commissioner, I ask that the Principal Clerk move the Deliverance.

