

## National Youth Assembly Speech – General Assembly 2020

Thank you, moderator.

Well, I do not know about you, but I never thought I would be here today delivering the report of the National Youth Assembly 2019. Not only did I never think I would be an NYA moderator, but when the COVID-19 crisis hit it looked as if our report would never see the light of day. So I'm extremely grateful and honoured to be here delivering this report.

We start our NYA 2019 journey in Arbroath. About 25 of us met there in January to plan our journey ahead. It was hard work trying to discern the way forward, and which three topics to choose from the big long list sent to us from the church councils and committees. We wanted to do everything but knew we couldn't, otherwise we'd have been planning a month-long event! Throughout the weekend we had to trust that God would help lead us to the right decisions.

By the end of that weekend we had decided that our three main topics for discussion would be Hate speech, Missional Buildings, and Testimony and Confirmation. We had also worked out the schedule of when the topics would be discussed, the speakers for these topics and what workshops would be beneficial. We left Arbroath excited about what was to come, but with lots of work to do!

Fast forward several months to August and we get to the main event, the NYA 2019 weekend itself, which was held at Gartmore House. As delegates arrived, many attending for the first time, I felt overwhelmed with love – it was like my extended family getting together for a big Christmas party. Those who know me will know I love Christmas, so this weekend was made extra special to me by the thoughtfulness of those who went the extra mile by organising my room to be decorated with a Christmas tree, and arranging a Christmas jumper day. Ruth and Colin Sinclair even joined in some of the Christmas madness when they gamely took part in the moderator's challenge on our opening night.

There are many things that are special about coming together as a group of young adults from across the Church of Scotland for NYA, not least the times we gather together in worship. We have been blessed over the years to have an amazing worship team who create spaces that look quite different from what we are used to in our own congregations on Sunday mornings, but where we encounter God. We enjoy a wide variety of styles of worship, making use of the different spaces within Gartmore House, and our candle-lit communion service squashed into a board room was a particular highlight for me this year.

When we are at NYA, we always make our way down the road on the Sunday morning to share with the congregations of Gartmore and Buchlyvie. We have formed a great relationship with them over the last few years and it was great to worship with them again. Our heartfelt thanks go to the congregation and their minister Rev Scott Brown, for all the love they have shown us, the hospitality and welcome they offered us, and the encouragement they gave us.

This year we were delighted to be joined for the weekend by Peter and Heidi Gardiner, who brought with them their peace loom and listened expectantly as we shared our stories while weaving the loom. Set aside from the other goings on, it allowed us all a chance to experience some quiet amidst the busyness. The availability of Peter and Heidi to just listen was sometimes just what people needed after a long, hard or even great day; there was just something about being in the room that just made you feel different in a good way. A big thank you to Peter and Heidi for being with us.

There are many other aspects that go to make up the NYA weekend: workshops, free time and the CoSY Café where we eat home baking, drink lots of hot chocolate and just have a chat about things at NYA or in life in general. There is also a ceilidh so we can let our hair down after a hard day debating. We always end with a massive strip the willow, and say if you don't have bruises all over your arms then clearly you weren't dancing enough. This time, I decided it was a good idea to do a ceilidh in a woolly Santa dress - I would not recommend it!

Of course, the main point of the NYA weekend is our discussions. We discuss one topic a day and begin with an invited guest to give us a brief overview about the topic. After hearing from the speaker, we go into small groups and discuss our initial thoughts using some discussion pointers. We then all gather back together in the hall where we share our thoughts and discuss them more in depth, trying to see what we can do as NYA to help the issues, and what we can be encouraging the wider church to do.

The first topic we discussed at NYA 2019 was hate speech. Mirella Yandoli and people from the European Outside In project came and spoke to us and gave us an outline of what hate speech is. We looked at the pyramid of hate and how the circle of influence is involved too. We split into workshops looking at hate speech around the themes of race, sexual orientation, gender and religion. Once the small group discussions were over I was firmly in the moderator's chair and ready for action. It was daunting standing in front of the whole group, but they are so fantastic that discussion quickly got going.

One of the main things talked about was third-party reporting. We discussed congregations becoming third-party reporting places and how we can create safe spaces for people when they need. Delegates also spoke about making sure we have a good community presence and are willing to talk about the issue more especially from a young age, so more people are able to recognise hate speech and know what to do when they witness or are subject to it. Delegates shared openly and honestly and we all saw how pertinent a discussion it was when we found that 53% of the delegates stated they had personally experienced hate speech at least once, and 64% had witnessed hate speech towards another person at least once.

The second discussion was Missional Buildings, where we heard from Peter Gardiner about how we could use the church space more creatively, and David Robertson from the General Trustees who came to talk about their well-equipped spaces in the right place consultation. In small groups, delegates discussed how their churches tackled accessibility and why it was important, if churches should be open through the week for drop ins and the impact visual art could have on our faith. In the full-group discussion, we went through the general trustees' survey, which the youth reps later submitted on our behalf. We then went on to discuss in detail how we can make our buildings more accessible, and also how our church buildings can best serve our communities and explored the idea of sharing buildings ecumenically. In particular, we discussed the benefits of visual art and how we could better incorporate it into our worship spaces.

The third discussion was on Testimony and Confirmation. We had Sarah Lane Ritchie from the Theological Forum come and share the differences between testimony, confirmation and profession of faith. In their small groups, delegates explored these further and considered if there's an ideal age for confirmation. In our full-group discussion, there were a lot of opinions and different experiences to share. We started by taking a number of votes on questions such as how many delegates had always had a church connection and whether people had been baptised. We spoke about the importance of baptism and confirmation and got a range of different responses. Following this, many shared they only became members of their church as they felt it was expected of them, especially if they wanted to become more involved. On the other hand, some felt that when they became a member there was added pressure they hadn't expected. Delegates shared stories of their confirmation services and it was evident that personalisation was important to them.

The NYA doesn't finish when all the delegates have left Gartmore; the work continues throughout the year as delegates return home and share their stories, and through an elected group of youth reps. As in other years the youth reps worked extremely hard, in writing our reports and creating social media campaigns and resources for the church.

Unfortunately, much of this work came to a premature end when the COVID-19 crisis hit, so please speak to any youth reps you know and discover more of what they were involved in.

My journey as NYA moderator did not end there either, and I'd like to share some of my highlights:

I attended the Guild Gathering; they know how to party and worship God at the same time! Marian, congratulations on your year and a massive thanks to the Guild for supporting the NYA over the years: we've loved journeying and sharing together.

We had a service of celebration and thanksgiving in October to remember the last 25 years of the Youth Assembly. It was an opportunity for delegates and team to share their experiences and stories of NYA and to look forward in hope. In true NYA fashion we also had a dinner and ceilidh which was a great laugh. Thanks to Colin Sinclair for hosting, it was a really special night.

Along with some of the youth reps, I signed up to do Sleep in the Park to raise money and awareness of homelessness. In true Christmas fashion, we dressed up as the nativity scene and Mary and Joseph even appeared on the news!

I was asked by Colin to accompany him and Ruth to Glasgow University to speak to students about church in society and some issues we see as young people. It was great to see the students were getting really involved.

I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience travelling to Zambia with the Guild and another NYA member. We went to work with the Guild project "Journeying Together". The project works with single mums in Kanyama and helps empower them back into education or work. The girls at this project loved dancing and they were so welcoming. They taught us some of their songs and I even got my hair braided. The project does a lot with the girls, from learning basic skills to helping them at school. I learned a lot from my time over there and one of my highlights was being able to lead worship at the synod office for the United Church of Zambia, which was scary but exciting.

My final moderator duty was going to visit the navy in Plymouth. I got a tour from Chaplain Tim Wilkinson, who was based at Davenport base; then we made our way to Raleigh where I met another three chaplains and had an exciting few days. I got to see the navy in action in a simulated safety drill, learnt how they stock the boat up with supplies and got to see the submarine school. Unfortunately, due to COVID the trip was cut short, but I still learned so much about chaplaincy and the huge impact they have. I loved that chaplains are there for

all the family, not just the ones serving. The cadets loved the chaplains and said if it were not for them some would not be where they are today. My thanks go to all the chaplains and they're in my prayers.

It was both a busy and wonderful year. I can't thank the youth reps, my clerk and Suzi enough for all they have done for me and NYA. You are amazing humans; I love each of you and I am so proud of all you have achieved the last year. You are all an inspiration to me. To my NYA family, thanks for putting up with my Christmas crazy, it was such a privilege being your moderator and thanks for making it such a great year. To my friends, my church family, to everyone I met on my travels and to Colin and Ruth Sinclair, you really have made this an unforgettable year for me, one I will cherish always. A massive thank you to my family, especially Kristy, Finlay and my mum and dad for just being there for listening to my stories, for the help fundraising, for being my typist or my proofreader and just always encouraging me, love you all. Hannah, you have been an amazing clerk; thanks for being there for me through the year, for calming me down when I got stressed at NYA, for putting up with my late-night texts, for pulling together such great reports and for being such a great friend. You deserve a medal for putting up with me and I am so thankful I got to share this year with you, thank you.

Finally, it would be wrong not to mention the ending of NYA in this report. NYA has meant a lot to many people over the years and it has been difficult for us to understand the decision to bring it to an end. I would like to acknowledge and thank everyone that has been involved in NYA over the last 25 years, you are all so special and have really left such an imprint on people and their faith. A massive thanks to all the past staff organisers and to Suzi, to every team member, to all the former moderators and clerks, and to all the youth reps and delegates over the years. Also, thanks to all those of you who have supported the NYA and shaped it over the 25 years.

Although this chapter is closing, we look forward in hope to young people finding new ways to be involved in the decision-making of the Church of Scotland. Please keep faith in young people and continue supporting and encouraging us and enabling us to flourish.

Now in true Dana fashion,

Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.

God bless.