

FAPLT GA speech 2024

Introductory Remarks.

As new kids on the block allow me to share with you the remit of the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team.

FAPLT shall lead and deliver the faith action programme to enable the delivery of the church's identified priorities. It shall implement the strategic objectives of the General Assembly and the strategic priorities of the Assembly Trustees. FAPLT shall work with the Assembly Trustees, the General Trustees, Presbyteries, and other parts of the church with the purpose of nurturing the people of God in their worship, witness, and service.

Our heart as FAPLT is to make real, visible, tangible, and living the vision of the Church of Scotland - to inspire the people of Scotland and beyond with the good news of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic worshipping, witnessing, nurturing, and serving communities.

We will look to do this in accordance with the three priorities as agreed by the General Assembly that are in line with seeing the five marks of mission being lived out in our churches.

(i) the growth and development of the church through the new presbyteries working closely with the local congregations - and encouraging the forming of new worshipping communities

(ii) the work of the national on the local need with a particular emphasis on recruiting and equipping our future leaders in ministries of the church and

(iii) the modernisation and simplification of our governance structures

The moment we find ourselves in.

So with what we've been tasked with. What is our response?

It was Karl Barth who said "take your bible in one hand and take a newspaper in the other and read both. But always interpret your newspaper from what the bible says."

Allow me to make this statement more relevant. Here is an old copy of the Blue Book. Included in this are reports, statistics, projections, and challenges.

You have a digital version for this year and what it brings alive for you is the fact that whilst the Church of Scotland continues to do truly remarkable work, through truly remarkable people, we find ourselves in the midst of a deeply challenging and uncertain moment.

Allow me to hit the pause button here.

I've been a member of committees and councils over the years. I've always had an awareness of the sheer amount of work our central and national staff do. Now with being Convener of FAPLT I have a front row seat and my sense of admiration grows by the day. We as a church are served by remarkable people, who face the same challenges we as ministers face. Carrying on significant existing work, whilst having to adapt and change and take on lots of new work. More than my admiration and gratitude, they need our prayers and to hear the well done of God.

As I begin the Faith Action Programme Leadership Team report allow me to do two things. First of all appeal for grace and patience. We have four programme groups who undertake an amazing amount of work. Time doesn't allow me to speak specifically about such work, but if you'd like to know more, feel free to ask questions at the appropriate time. I'll simply be sharing an overview of our work in year 1. Then secondly, allow me to follow Karl Barth's advice and so appeal to scripture to find the moment we're in.

I believe we're in an Isaiah 6v1 moment. 'In the year king Uzziah died.'

We need to know how difficult and earth shattering a moment this was for Isaiah.

Uzziah was a righteous king. He may have been a relation of Isaiah. As Gods prophet, Isaiah had a listening ear and a receptive heart in Uzziah: a positive context for Isaiah to minister in.

With Uzziah gone, Isaiah could no longer take his present or future for granted. He had more questions than answers. He would be well aware that many of his prophetic friends in Israel's history had a very rough ride communicating God's heart to his people. As such Isaiah would shift from being confident about his present and his future to being concerned and fearful.

We as a church find ourselves in an Isaiah 6v1 moment. Covid, Presbytery Reform, and Mission Planning have left us hurting and struggling. All of you listening to me today can relate to this.

It's been a very long time since I preached a three-point sermon but allow me to revert to my old ways and frame my report around three points. The sad moment Isaiah found himself in; the suddenly encounter he had; the surprising request he heard.

We find ourselves in a sad moment. More pain than peace. More questions than answers. And more uncertainty than confidence. This is the world I stepped into last June when I took on the role of Convener of FAPLT. I knew our church was struggling, I simply didn't know the extent.

Towards the end of last year, I requested that I meet with and speak to our Faith Action Staff Team. I'm a pastor at heart, and I don't mind telling you, my heart was moved by what I saw and heard. Our central staff facing similar challenges as us on the ground in our parishes.

Less people being asked to do more work. Uncertainty about the future. Painful moments.

Gospel optimism made way for ecclesial realism.

FAPLT then had a Big Picture vision day in January to speak and dream about the future. I want to record our thanks to Rev Graham Duffin who was our excellent facilitator for this time. As a gospel optimist I was expectant and excited.

Such positive emotions were very quickly tempered when it became apparent that we were not ready to dream about shaping the future. We needed to stop and give time to reflect, lament, and repent. These are not my words. They were the initial words that came from the people in the room. FAPLT members and Faith Action Programme staff.

I must admit to being surprised by this, and yet as we found ourselves in an Isaiah 6v1 moment, I knew we needed to give time and space to this so we would encounter God's grace and healing. This would be crucial to prepare our hearts to dream about a new future.

We have taken that same concept on the road to our recent roadshows. Time to lament and wait on God. Starting off in Aberdeen, we were in Glasgow and Edinburgh two weeks ago. We look forward to visiting the remaining Presbyteries over the next few months.

In our hurt and pain, we need to know Christ as our healer and restorer if we are to have any hope of having a different future. My gospel optimism made way for ecclesial realism.

During the course of our first year, we knew an additional sadness in the loss of Richard Lloyd, one of our vice-convenors. We're indebted to Richard for his service and vision. He contributed so much to the first months of FAPLT's life.

A sad moment becomes a suddenly moment.

Returning to Isaiah, what is helpful and hopeful for us to note is that his sad moment quickly changed as he experienced a suddenly moment. He saw the Lord seated on a throne.

The word suddenly is one of my favourite words in the Bible.

When God comes in such suddenly moments, everything changes.

What Isaiah was about to discover was that before God began to move and effect change around him, he first effected change by moving within him.

I am convinced this is the need of the hour for all in our church. A fresh encounter with God. A fresh vision of who God is, where God is, and what his plans and purposes for us are. We're in a time of crisis, but God is not. What we're trying to navigate is no surprise to Him. This is why we need to turn to him and seek him afresh for strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

'Woe is me' to 'Here I am!'

Isaiah wasn't out of the woods yet. His sorrow at the death of Uzziah was exacerbated by his experience of the divine making him all too aware of his own sinfulness. His response to this glory encounter was 'Woe is me. I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips'.

His sad moment has developed into a moment of personal devastation.

'God, the challenges before me are bigger than I am so I'm going to disqualify myself from speaking for you and so shaping the future'. Sound familiar? I wonder how many of us today in our church can relate to Isaiah?

Isaiah hears the voice of God calling him afresh, recommissioning him, and he is surprised to hear that heaven is looking for some help. 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' The plural indicating that this was Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working in unity as they communicated their sense of need and their desire to work in partnership to effect change.

A moment ago, Isaiah was writing himself out of the story of God, now he's been called to put his life and his voice front and centre as he's encouraged to make himself fully available to God again. He does this wholeheartedly as he replies to God 'Here am I. Send me!'

This is the heart we have in FAPLT. It's what we've said as a team and it's what we want to invite you as our church to do. To encourage you in this, in January we moved from lamenting and repenting to form our Vivid Vision document. It's our sense as a team of what God is saying and what He wants us to see. A vision for our church for the near future. You'll find this on the About Us section of the website.

Isaiah 6v1 moment to an Isaiah 6v8 moment

Our world is having quite the time of it. Death and destruction, crisis, turmoil, fear, and anxiety are a daily reality for many in our world and are also many of the words we are wrestling with in the church. This is particularly the case if you live in Palestine, in Gaza or the West Bank, or in Israel. In Russia or the Ukraine. Daily life can be unbearable and fearful.

Our international partners, our friends from around the world, here with us at this GA could bear testimony to such pain and fear. A daily reality for some of them.

In conclusion, I believe God is calling us as His church, the Church of Scotland, and the Church in Scotland to shift from struggling with an Isaiah 6v1 moment to living out an Isaiah 6v8 moment.

So, our plea as FAPLT to you today is that we respond like Isaiah and say to God, 'Here am I, send me, equip me, fill me, envision me, use me!' If we do that, then like Isaiah we'll reveal Christ to our world. A revelation of love, hope, and a future. God's future for all.

Moderator, I present the report and move the deliverances.