

Committee on Ecumenical Relations Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rev Ross Blackman

Relationship and Isolationism

Moderator,

“No man is an island”

Those words, penned 400 years ago, remind us as humans beings, made in the image and likeness of God, that we were made for companionship with each other and with God. We best reflect our Triune God in our expressions of community, unity and, all-importantly, love. So often we see this in spades, when people are given the opportunity to be themselves and express unity even in the midst of their diversity. I am pleased to also inform the General Assembly that your Committee on Ecumenical Relations sees this in practice, as we bring together a wide diversity of expressions of the Christian faith and seek greater understanding. Counter to the maxim that religion divides, it is clear that it need not be so.

Yet, sadly, our age is marked by disunity, broken relationships and devastated communities. These long years of pandemic, thankfully now concluded, exacerbated the cultural trajectory towards isolationism between countries, homes, and even within the home. Have we ever seen such a movement of discontent, expressed in people changing job, house, and/or relationships, as we have recently seen - arguably as a consequence of the forced incarceration experienced during 2020 and again at the end of 2021 and the ripples beyond? Or have we ever seen such an uptake in technologies that permit individuals to have food, drink, entertainment and other commodities delivered to the doorstep? It's possible to spend our days barely seeing a soul, and though accompanied by the ache of absent companionship, some people grew to like it!

Have we grown to love our isolationism? And is this seen not just in changes in church attendance but even in our wider church life? After centuries of schism and disunity, of doing our own thing in congregation and denomination, I wonder, can we countenance rejecting the black and white tones of binary thinking of who is right and who is wrong, to embrace the greys and colour tones of each other? Can we thole one another, in all our diversity, or are we sensitised to what we want and the way we want things done?

Or have there been green shoots of life?

Consolidation

This past year has been one of consolidating so much progress. As a church, we have acknowledged that we are not journeying alone, after the centuries of walking in different directions. In 2016 we noted what we held in common with the Church of England, in the Columba Declaration. More recently, our past Moderator visited Sudan with the Archbishop of Canterbury and Pope Francis. In 2021, we dared to bring that affinity with the Anglican Communion much closer to home, with the St. Andrew Declaration, with our partners the Scottish Episcopal Church. Last year, we crossed the rubric of sectarian division with the St. Margaret Declaration of Friendship with the Catholic Church in Scotland. Consequently, only last week a joint petition to the Scottish Government was signed between the Catholic Church and Crossreach, in support of the living wage for all frontline social care workers. Each declaration and each piece of work are meaningful in their own way, but holding one thing in common – that of relationship and community and a focus on all that unites us, rather than division and discord. Not ignoring the pains of mutual history - acknowledging them - yet refusing to be bound to them any longer.

In some areas we have made strides and in others we have made faltering steps. We continue to learn, in every generation. We have a long way to go. We're still so vulnerable – still so insecure – and yet this reveals itself most deeply in our relationships with those whom we are most alike.

So, we find ourselves in the tension of being steeped in the history of John Knox, who prayed “give me Scotland, or I die!”, but also in the reality that despite our aspirations of the various Articles Declaratory, we cannot hope to reach the whole of Scotland alone. But, why should we go it alone, when we're not alone?

We are surrounded by a great cloud of those who testify that they similarly want to live out their faith in Christ and the gospel. Our body language speaks of warmth and invitation. Then we falter for a moment, as our historic words retain something of a sense of distance. Words like “communion”. Are we in communion with each other? We negotiate our concerns more quickly on the ground, then jostle with our structures and church laws to legitimise and consolidate that which is naturally developing between children of God.

Progress

This year, we attempt to close some of these gaps a little further. You will note that we are offered the liturgy for the St. Margaret Declaration, first used in Dunfermline last year, for congregational use.

We also invite commissioners to pass an act amending our existing Sacraments Act to make plain our willingness for ordained members of other denominations such as the Scottish Episcopal Church to administer the Sacraments in a Church of Scotland context. I don't wish to steal too much thunder from a sister denomination, but we are delighted to see strong steps and incredible progress being taken towards reciprocation. A simultaneous and mutual meeting of minds.

The refreshed Remit for this committee seeks to continue this trajectory, to explore further opportunities to work alongside and with each other across the family of Christ that we are.

Risks

But, with the steps forward, we have also risked steps backwards. With trepidation, I would also seek to touch briefly on the very live issue of Presbytery Planning. We cannot fail to recall that two years ago the General Assembly (of which we are all a part) approved a new Presbytery Mission Plan Act. The ecumenical dimension was included in the principles, in recognition that we cannot go it alone. It's unfortunate that we have to admit that in our rush to meet the incredibly challenging obligations to the primary instruction, some of the helpful details of partnership working have likely been overlooked or have been found difficult to consult upon due to prioritisation under such tight deadlines. This has not gone un-noticed by the wider family of churches, though there is an understanding of the contributory factors; and, in fairness, each denomination in turn has faced similar issues in recent years. Have we missed the boat?

Ameliorating Risk

How do we snatch up the goodwill and opportunities so recently attained, to recover a track that capitalises on that will, as well as the spirit of the Articles Declaratory in reaching all of Scotland with the ordinances of Christian religion?

After consultation with Faith Nurture Forum, it would be our hope that we might do this during the process of implementation and rigorous annual review. To that end, later this week I will be proposing a new section in the Faith Nurture Forum deliverance. While it is implicit in the guidance, this can be strengthened, and there is an urgency to this task.

If we are to respect our fellow travellers on this road – who are also of the family of God - I honestly don't think we can do anything less.

Conclusion

Our report concludes, as I started, with John Donne's assertion that 'no man is an island'. Indeed, no human is. He, she, we, they - need company on the journey. It should come as

no surprise to find that others realise this, too, and are still willing to accompany us. So let us keep up this momentum together, and commit it to prayer, to the glory of God in Christ our King.

Final Remarks

Finally, I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the members of the Ecumenical Relations Committee; and particularly Rev Eileen Miller, who stands down as Vice Convener this year.

So, Moderator, with these comments, I present the report and move the deliverance.