

The Guild Speech—General Assembly 2023

Mrs Helen Eckford

Moderator, Commissioners and Guild friends, as National Convener of the Church of Scotland Guild, I am delighted to present the Guild Report for 2022/2023 to the General Assembly.

In October last year I took the Guild oath of office in this hall and became National Convener, an honour, and a privilege to be given the opportunity to lead our wonderful movement.

The Guild theme for 2022 – 2023 is “Wee seeds, big trees”, the second year in our strategy of “Look Forward in Faith”. Faith has always been at the core of the Guild through worship, prayer, action, and fellowship and defines who we are.

It is 136 years since one of our former Moderator’s, the Very Reverend Professor Archibald Charteris, had the drive and determination to push the General Assembly to set up Life and Work and the Diaconate, and help them to see the potential for women to do more for the church. A man of ambition, a man of vision, he planted those first seeds that established the then Woman’s Guild. Those wee seeds have been nurtured by Guild members past and present, helping us to develop strong roots, always acknowledging God’s hand in our growth.

This could not be better summed up than in Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians (3:6): I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

The Guild, like the church, is going through a time of change. How appropriate, then, is our theme of “Wee seeds, big trees”, showing that as we grow spiritually and physically, we acknowledge and value the past, nurture the present and plant for the future. We plant seeds in faith and with the confidence that God will grow them; that the Guild like the church has a future in God’s hands.

1997 was a significant year for the Guild. It was the year when membership was opened to men as well as women. Whilst men are still a small percentage of our overall membership, they are increasingly more involved at all levels. We would ask congregations who have a Guild to support them prayerfully and practically and actively encourage new people, including men, to join and play their part in the growth of the Guild.

The last few years have been difficult, but the Guild has always been a source of support for our members. The Guild is a safe place to be; a welcoming place; a place to meet friends and chat. The Guild is all these things but much more.

The Guild has been described as “Sunday School for grannies” (and grandpa’s), perhaps rather tongue in cheek, but it is not a bad description. For many of you it was in Sunday School, week by week, that those first seeds of faith were planted. Where you went with school friends, learning about God’s love for you.

Some of you here today may not know much about the Guild but I would be surprised if most, if not all, don’t remember your days in Sunday School and what an important part that played in the faith which you now have.

The Guild, like Sunday School, is a way of welcoming people in, a way of introducing people to God and the church, or for some, a way of re-introducing, a way of bringing back adults whose connection with the church may have stopped. Adults whose wee seeds of faith may have been planted in Sunday School and which have just taken a little bit longer to grow. The Guild is a way of returning to something in the church which is perhaps less daunting than walking through the front door on a Sunday morning.

The Guild is an opportunity for mission, an opportunity to support spiritual growth in our churches and in our communities and we want the church to see us as a partner in that wider mission planning in congregations and presbyteries.

Physically, the Guild continues to see green shoots of growth too. We see these new green shoots in new Guilds which have been established in Ellon, Newport-on-Tay and Newmilns. We pray that these new branches will establish strong roots as they are grown prayerfully.

Changes in our churches and Presbyteries will not be easy, but the Guild is adapting and meeting change head on. Merging churches may have caused a drop in the number of Guild branches; however, merging congregations have brought new members, especially where one congregation who had no Guild joins a congregation with a Guild. The existing Guild is strengthened and encouraged by new members.

The closure of a church building though should not necessarily lead to the closure of a Guild and we have been heartened, particularly in rural areas by Kirk Sessions who have seen the missional role of the Guild and have encouraged their Guild to continue by meeting in other places in the community such as village halls, hotels or in some cases in people’s homes. These new ways of being Guild are welcome and help to provide the fellowship that people value and a continued Christian witness in a community.

Thinking of our theme of “Wee seeds, Big trees”, the gardeners among us will know that growth depends on careful pruning. A pruned tree may look a little sad for a while, but we wait for the improved growth. We have faith that it will blossom again. Guilds in Largs, Prestwick and Lanark have found new ways of working together and are experiencing new growth as a result. These Guilds are not just surviving but thriving in God’s hands.

And that change is happening at a Presbytery level too. For those of you who are not familiar with the Guild, Guilds Together groups are exactly what the name says: Guilds in an area, traditionally within a Presbytery, who meet together and share fellowship. The increase in size of the new Presbyteries, means that for many Guild branches it is proving more difficult to get together because of distance and availability of transport. These changes to Presbyteries have required the Guild to think in new ways.

Guilds Together groups have already been strengthened by finding different ways of working in Forth Valley and Clydesdale, in Aberdeenshire, in Moray and in Moray Firth and others will follow. We look forward in faith to what the future holds for these groups.

However, in some areas the size of a Presbytery means that simply mirroring the boundary of a new Presbytery is unrealistic and so as a Guild we are looking for opportunities to make life easier for Guilds to come together. There may be more than one Guilds Together Group in a Presbytery, if that is what works best for the Guild. In some areas there may be Guilds Together Groups that cross presbytery boundaries, if this makes it easier for Guilds to come together.

New Guilds Together groups may differ geographically from new Presbyteries but those important connections with each other will not be lost. The key thing for the Guild is that the opportunity to meet with other Guild members from nearby areas remains and we want to put in place the right structure that enables that to happen.

The perception for some in this hall and in the wider church is that the Guild is simply the chance for a chat and a cup of tea, but how wrong could you be. The Guild is and has brought radical and sometimes controversial issues right to the heart of the church, often before others. The Guild has tackled difficult issues at home and abroad; homelessness, addiction, HIV, prostitution, female genital mutilation, fleeing refugees, young farmers affected by climate change, young teenage mothers written off by society, the list goes on.

Through our project partners we have been planting wee seeds that have grown and developed into big trees. Tonight, we will be holding our Big Sing in this hall and we will be hearing from organisations like Dr Graham’s Homes, Mission Aviation Fellowship, Christian Aid, Livingstonia Synod Aids Project and CrossReach on how wee seeds planted and

nurtured by the Guild have grown. There is still time to be part of this amazing evening and if you would like a ticket speak to us later.

Being able to have these Big Sing events has been such an encouragement. We were in Lanarkshire for our Christmas Big Sing and then in March we were at Queen's Cross Church, in Aberdeen. Both churches were packed and saw Guild members near and far taking part. Moving these events around the country makes them accessible to more people and is a great way to connect with each other.

Our Annual Gathering will again be held here in the Assembly Hall in September, and we look forward to welcoming you, Moderator, along with the Govan songsters and our other guest speaker Professor Jason Leitch. It is the highlight of our year when we can share and celebrate the work of the Guild.

The sad death of HM Queen Elizabeth saw our 2022 event moved to October as a mark of respect.

As a lasting tribute to the life and reign of Queen Elizabeth, the Guild will be helping establish a green canopy in Malawi, the country where we have strong links with Guilds in the Synod of Livingstonia and I am delighted that the General Secretary of the Synod Rev William Tembo is with us, as a Commissioner, welcome my friend. It is also where we have twinnings between Guilds Together groups and Presbyterial Guilds.

Malawi is a country where the impact of climate change is felt deeply, and deforestation has added to the problems people face. Working with Gary Brough, one of the churches Mission Partners and the Synod we are establishing a tree nursery in Mzuzu and wood lots in each of our twinned areas. This green canopy will see trees planted that will provide commercial timbering, fruit trees to generate income for local Guilds involved in outreach and social care and fast-growing trees to help with soil retention. We have already raised almost £10,000, three times the original target of £3500 that we had hoped to raise. Once again, the Guild showing God's love in action!

As I have already said Moderator, we have been planting seeds of love through our Project Partnership Scheme for over 50 years.

Our current Projects are planting new seeds and we are already seeing growth. In Tanzania, working alongside the Vine Trust, where in the Kazunzu Village of Hope, 25 orphaned children have already been found supportive caring families and a newly built home to stay in; The Sunflower Sanctuary, opened just last month in Uganda, is enabling children with additional needs to receive an education like their peers and tackling the stigma these children face; all over Scotland, BEAT is providing much needed advice and support to

people with eating disorders and their families ; working with Home for Good, we are encouraging Christians to consider fostering and adoption as a choice for them and supporting congregations as they think about how they can support vulnerable children in their communities.

Just as Archibald Charteris helped the women in Scotland find their voice in the life of the Church of Scotland, UNIDA is transforming the lives of young Brazilian women through theological education and enabling them to find their voice in the church in Brazil; and in South East Asia, the project with The Pioneers is helping farmers to get a fair price for the cocoa beans they produce. All these projects planting seeds of encouragement and hope. All showing God's love in action.

Seeds of hope much nearer home comes from the newly established Young Adults Guild. The inspiration for this came from the young people themselves who feeling a gap since the demise of the National Youth Assembly, approached the Guild to help them find a new way to be a voice in the church. For years now the Guild and the young people of the church have sought to encourage and support each other and this request was met with the same response – of course we can help you! Come and join us. And so the Young Adult Guild for people between the ages of 18 and 30 in the Church of Scotland and beyond was established. It is a forum where young people can explore their faith, learn more about the work of project partners, support each other and grow as young Christians. It is their space, their place, their programme but they also know there are 10,000 Guild members there in the background, willing them to succeed and encouraging them every step of the way.

At the moment they are meeting online with membership that stretches from the North East to the South West, rural and urban together. In time we all hope they will meet as smaller groups in person in particular localities but for now online is way to go and it is working well.

Moderator, Commissioners and Guild friends, I can think of no more positive note on which to end this report, than with this bright hope for the future of the Guild and of the Church of Scotland.

Moderator, I present the report and move the deliverance.