

Retiring Moderator Rt Hon Lord Wallace speech — General Assembly 2022

Moderator,

I firstly want to thank the General Assembly for the honour and privilege given to me a year ago to serve Jesus Christ, the Church and the General Assembly as your Moderator. To be an ambassador for the Church of Scotland and to have the opportunity to meet people from both church and community life in many airts and pairts of Scotland, and occasionally beyond, has been truly energising.

I should like to express very real gratitude that throughout the last year, I have been sustained by the knowledge that I was being supported by the prayers of many people. And I am also appreciative of those, during the year, who have expressed or sent me messages of encouragement.

At this point there is the real possibility of letting further expressions of thanks make this sound like an Oscar ceremony, with the ever-present danger of missing someone out. I shall therefore confine myself to expressing special thanks to Rosie for all the loving support and encouragement she has given me over the last twelve months, indeed over the last thirty-nine years. I should want to thank my chaplains, Fraser and Marjory for their support, guidance, and sage advice, not least for guarding me against any theological blunders. In thanking staff, some of whom I have now actually met in person, it would be invidious to name individuals except for the Moderator's PA, the indefatigable Catherine McIntosh, and I know Rosie would wish to join me in mentioning Nancy Lamont, who has been a real source of help for successive Moderators in 2, Rothesay Terrace.

And just as I would inevitably offend by omission in thanks, so too I shall refrain from embarking on a Cook's Tour of Scotland, mentioning all the places we've visited, in case I miss out somewhere. Suffice to say that wherever we've gone, Rosie and I have been so very appreciative of the warmth of welcome we have received.

So let me reflect on some key events and recurring themes.

Last year's General Assembly passed the Presbytery Mission Plan Act. I did think at the time that that was the easy bit. The difficult bit is its implementation across the presbyteries. I am not going to disguise the fact that in many parts of the country, I have found the kind of angst, disappointment and disillusionment which can so often accompany change and

uncertainty. This must surely be a time when those of us in leadership show awareness and sensitivity, and colleagues exercise pastoral care for each other, not least to those tasked with delivering messages which may be unpalatable to some.

But I found it particularly troubling to be told that some places do not always feel loved by the centre. And I dare say that there are those in the centre who do not always feel appreciated by those they try to serve and support. Maybe we all need to strive harder to love one another and in the words which Paul addressed to the church in Thessalonica, to *“Encourage one another and build each other up...”*

In going forward, it is evident that there will be increasing demands on the eldership. Already - and in some cases for some time - elders have been stepping up to assist with worship and pastoral work. As I have visited congregations, and especially at elders' gatherings in Irvine & Kilmarnock and Angus, and a lively Elders' conference organised by Glasgow Presbytery, I have found elders, in the words of Peter in his first epistle “eager to serve.” I have learned of first-class examples of training for elders which hopefully can be accessed on an ever-wider basis.

Both on Presbytery visits and other occasions, I have been so impressed by the valuable work of service to God and those in need by chaplains in a range of settings – in hospitals, prisons, universities, schools, in ports, at an airport, and in diverse places of work. Many of them bore the brunt of ministering on the front line during COVID.

I was also privileged to see at close quarters the work of the armed forces chaplains when I spent two days with the Royal Navy – chaplains getting alongside those with whom they serve, often in challenging circumstances. Next week, General Assembly will properly recognise the armed forces chaplains; but without detracting from that, may I suggest that thought be given at future General Assemblies to recognise the service given by many others engaged in chaplaincy, getting alongside those they serve in the name of Jesus.

At one meeting, discussing chaplaincy, I was asked what kind of pastoral chaplaincy support, I received when I was an MP or MSP. Frankly, the answer was nothing. But it got me thinking, and I raised the question as to who ministers to the ministers? In some places, I have been reassured that a good network of pastoral support does exist, but all too often, the response I receive suggests that clearly there are places where there is a need to be addressed.

“Encourage one another and build each other up...”

I have also been conscious that whilst the shorthand 'Presbytery Plan' is used the correct term is 'Presbytery Mission Plan.' And over the last year, I have witnessed countless examples of mission.

I wonder sometimes whether members can be a bit put off by the term, conjuring up the kind of mission which, as a student, I engaged in with fellow students, knocking on doors in Immingham on Humberside. That can all sound scary or daunting.

I was given a proper perspective on mission last week in Forfar, when being shown the congregation's pop-up school uniform shop. The person showing me round described how uniforms, including sweaters and shirts, were handed in and duly washed and ironed before being displayed for re-use. She said, *"We have ninety-year-old members who do washing and ironing. It's their contribution to mission"*

We need to reassure members that mission is not just for those and such as those but can include their contribution in a multitude of diverse ways.

Mission calls us to *"Respond to human need by loving service."*

Whatever the downsides of lockdown and pandemic, it did lead to what Pope Francis described as *"an eruption of humanity"* – simple acts of kindness, a phone call to someone who was lonely or isolated, help or contribution to a food bank, delivering groceries to a neighbour. Our challenge now is to harness that *"eruption of humanity"* and not let it dissipate or slip through our fingers like sand, as we return to what some would describe as 'normality.' That is surely a missionary challenge for our church.

I should particularly like to highlight the work of CrossReach in their response to human need through loving service. The different CrossReach services which I have been privileged to visit have displayed two consistent features: the quality of the service provided and the commitment, by staff, to recognise and honour the dignity and personality of each person who receives CrossReach services, regardless of the circumstances in which they have been brought into contact with CrossReach. That commitment reflects the leadership given from the very top.

I readily confess that I had not fully appreciated the extent and quality of CrossReach's work before my engagement with them during the past year, and I suspect the same goes for many Kirk members. *"So let their light shine before others, so that they may see their good works and give glory to our Father in heaven."*

In the last twelve weeks, we have been both shocked and called to respond in love by events in Ukraine.

Within hours of Russia's brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, individuals and congregations were calling to ask how they might help, both to welcome refugees arriving here in Scotland, and to aid those fleeing from their homes in Ukraine.

It is a reflection of the relationships built up with our partner churches in the area, over many years, that we were able to obtain prompt advice from them, and very soon an appeal was launched for funds to support the work of the Reformed Church in Transcarthapia, their Diaconal work and the Reformed Church in Hungary in meeting the huge pressures of helping refugees who were arriving, literally on their doorsteps. I should want to commend the remarkable response of individuals and congregations. To date, over £360,000 has been raised. It has been very much appreciated by our partners.

Earlier this week, I had the privilege of travelling to Hungary and Ukraine with Susan Brown and Ian Alexander to meet our brothers and sisters in these churches, both to express our solidarity with them and to see at first hand some of the remarkable work being undertaken. We also learned more about some of the refugee experiences. Among the activities we saw were a bakery where one baker makes over 750 loaves a day for distribution to refugees, a church college where accommodation has been provided for those fleeing from conflict. We heard about the food bank established by our colleagues in St Columba's Church of Scotland in Budapest to help meet the needs of refugees arriving in the city.

And in Transcarpathia, we saw projects such as after-school and kindergarten provision for Roma children, established well before the war – loving service to those in need in their community, continuing, despite all the increased pressures they are facing.

And we learned that they also want us to continue in prayer: not only prayers in support of their humanitarian efforts, but especially prayers for peace - a peace that will endure rooted in justice, reconciliation, and love.

Addressing needs following on from the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine readily links into one of the other marks of mission: *To transform unjust structures of society, challenge violence and pursue peace and reconciliation.*

Throughout the past year, I have joined with other church leaders in calling for action from both governments to address poverty, especially child poverty. As a Church we must surely

continue to make our voice heard, speaking up for the most vulnerable as the increasing cost of living inevitably impacts on those most in need.

In recent months, at several points during the passage of the Nationality & Borders Bill I made representations to MPs and peers to support amendments which improved the Bill by bringing it in line with our international convention obligations, and which underlined our compassion and care for our common humanity, including amendments made to expand and protect family reunion rights.

And I readily spoke out against the government's proposal to transport asylum seekers to Rwanda. And I would also defend the Archbishop of Canterbury for his robust comments on the issue.

Having had a political role in my past, I do not buy in, in any way, to the argument that the Church should stay clear of politics. In many situations, silence can be deafening.

What can be more political than a call to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to care for the sick, to clothe the naked and visit those in prison? What I believe is not acceptable is to claim that God is on the side of one political party or another.

Abraham Lincoln is reported as saying that we should not invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for all our policies and practices - saying, in effect, that God is on our side. *"Rather,"* he said, *"we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God's side."*

Increasingly the issue as to how we treat strangers and those seeking our help is to the fore. Let our prayer be that those in government, those making decisions will pray and worry earnestly whether what they are proposing is on God side, on the side of Jesus, who as an infant had to flee to escape violence and oppression. On the side of Jesus, who says, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

We also have a mission to strive to protect the integrity of creation. COP 26 in Glasgow provided an opportunity to proclaim our commitment to nurture and protect a creation which God saw was good, and to seek climate justice for those countries and communities - almost invariably among the world's poorest - who have already experienced destructive severe weather events and need practical and financial support to build the infrastructure to protect them from future ones. Care for creation and loving and helping our global neighbours in need are faith issues, and if the march for climate justice on the middle

Saturday of COP was the wettest I got during the last year, it was also uplifting to join so many from other denominations and across the inter-faith community making our voices heard.

The outcome of the COP, predictably, fell short of what we wanted and what is needed. Conferences may involve negotiations, but the science on climate change is not negotiable; so the alliances made must continue to hold to account world leaders for the promises which they did make and to keep pressing for further necessary action if our children and grandchildren are to enjoy a sustainable future.

Although there is no hierarchy among the marks of mission, the mission 'to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom' and 'teach, baptise, and nurture new believers' are obviously of crucial importance.

In proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom in our land of Scotland, I was encouraged during the year by the strength of fellowship and common purpose among the members of the Scottish Church Leaders' Forum. I was pleased to sign on the Assembly's behalf, the St Andrew Declaration with the Scottish Episcopal Church and humbled to play some part in taking forward the Declaration of Friendship with the Scottish Catholic Bishops' Conference which Assembly will be invited to endorse on Monday. Unity is not uniformity, but whenever we can love one another, be seen to love one another and speak with one voice – that surely must strengthen our witness to message of the Gospel in our land.

Let us recall what my predecessor, Martin Fair said when he stood here a year ago,

"The sooner we sort the structures, the sooner we can get to what really matters – proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom."

Sorting the structures is not pain free. We need to acknowledge the hurt and seek to heal. But during the year, I have not only been encouraged by witnessing many examples of congregations embracing mission, looking outwards into their communities, but I have also found inspiration in a book referenced by John Chalmers at a Staff Open Forum meeting, *"Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World"* by an American pastor, Alan J Roxburgh.

Although writing from a North American perspective, Roxburgh takes as his starting point what he describes as the 'unravelling of the Euro-tribal churches' – a familiar story of declining numbers, ageing congregations and strategy plans which never quite succeed in reversing the trend.

But far from downbeat, he believes that *“The Spirit is disrupting and calling our churches into a new imagination about what it means to follow the way of Jesus.”*

The day after I became Moderator was Pentecost, when we recall the disciples were all gathered ‘in one place’, when the Spirit descended with wind and flame. But they didn’t stay in the one place, waiting for people to come in. They went out proclaiming the good news of the Risen Jesus.

Today we must be ready to go out from our buildings, and get alongside people, as Roxburgh puts it, “in our towns and cities, in homes, around tables, in the fields at work, in the meeting places of the everyday life of ordinary people.”

At all levels, and not least in our upper echelons, we should be ready to take risks to do what is right. We must be eager to discern the new imagination into which the Spirit is calling us, and in our neighbourhoods to proclaim the Good News of God’s Kingdom of justice and love.