

Faith Impact Forum Speech—General Assembly 2023

Rev Karen Hendry

Moderator,

The Faith Impact Forum has a wide-ranging remit to report on. Its predecessors embodied in their titles words like Nation, Society and World to give some sense of the extent of their reach, and while the name no longer does that, the content has become ever more all-embracing in its nature.

The deliverances we present today are a select few, while the report read in its entirety offers a more substantial reflection of work undertaken. However even that is only a part, and because the pace of change in our society and in our world is so rapid, so the church's response is always, of necessity, developing.

These are mightily challenging times for all of us. How we respond to these times is a witness to who we are as followers of Jesus.

Global conflicts, food and fuel poverty, the emerging reality of climate crisis, overstretched public services, continuing tension over migration, along with the treatment of refugees and those seeking asylum, ethical questions at the cutting edge of science and technology, including artificial intelligence, conflicting views around gender and end of life care are just some of the things that shape our current context, are often live issues in the lives of congregations and the communities in which they serve, and which call for our prayerful response. We can all benefit in these tumultuous times from taking a breath, pausing, to inform ourselves of the facts, before we then act or speak.

We are part of a world-wide church, our prayers, and our actions, are thus informed by the shared, lived experience of people in many places, including some represented in our midst at this Assembly, for which we are more than grateful.

These wider partnerships, as well as bringing opportunities for mutual support and co-operation, also afford us the possibility of informed reflection, and the acknowledgement that there are aspects of our past, as a church, that we look on now with deep regret. The Legacies of Slavery report gives substance to such a part of our history. And we seek to humbly acknowledge this and think about how we apologise. This requires further work and preparation, and this is what the Forum is asking this Assembly to agree to. The report helps us to understand better the historic relationship between chattel slavery and the Church of Scotland, and the continuing legacy of that abominable practice. We offer this report on the

clear understanding that the Assembly will want to affirm that we are members of a church that is actively anti-racist.

We note with sadness that the illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine is still a cause of devastation primarily for the Ukrainian people but also for Russian families whose loved ones have been lost in war. It's estimated that over 8 million Ukrainians have become refugees since the conflict began in February of 2022.

We pay tribute to Ukrainians, and all those seeking sanctuary in Scotland, who have come to live among us as they work to integrate in communities far from their homeland. We give thanks for the compassion of so many who have opened their homes or have worked in their communities to offer hospitality and welcome. The Forum has worked with local churches to support Ukrainians through the work of Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees.

Also, through the generosity of Church members, we have been able to send over £400,000 to support the Reformed Church in Transcarpathian Ukraine, to help local congregations who have been supporting displaced people from eastern Ukraine, to the Reformed Church in Hungary and St. Columba's Church in Budapest in support of those fleeing in war.

With powerful voices using the plight of refugees and asylum seekers to sow seeds of division, we are called to remember who we are in our responses. We remember that compassion can't be rationed in the face of urgent need. Welcome, when offered sincerely, cannot be bound by caveats or limited by hostile processes. Moderator, who we are is revealed by how we treat the refugee and asylum seeker.

The Ecumenical Pilgrimage for Peace to South Sudan was an important witness of our shared concern and prayers for that region. The report was written before the situation in neighbouring Sudan deteriorated, potentially effecting the fragile peace in South Sudan. It's a reminder that there will always be people seeking refuge and asylum in our world, and it will continue to fall to us to create humane and positive ways of engaging with people who are on the move – people seeking a new home: it is in our own ancient faith tradition, a part of who we are. We are grateful to not only our mission partner based in Rome who helped co-ordinate our response to meet the needs of those affected by this situation, but to all our mission partners who represent us internationally.

An increasing factor in migration is climate change and we have witnessed the devastation droughts and floods can cause. With the most recent news of tropical storms destroying refugee camps in Bangladesh weighing heavily upon our hearts and in our prayers.

Part of the church's response to climate change has been through the work of the Net Zero Strategy Group. With representation from across the Kirk's decision-making bodies, this

group has been working to coordinate our response. While this challenging piece of work has been slower to progress than we would have hoped, tools are now being made available to assist congregations and the whole church to better analyse energy use and environmental footprint.

We recognise that trying to reach Net Zero by 2030 is going to require effort from us all and hard choices about how we use energy, what efforts we take to reduce energy use, how often and with what means we travel, what policies we put in place to embed Net Zero thinking in our planning, and how we can offset carbon emissions.

Project Eve, a project designed to work with congregations to install electrical vehicle charging points, while well intentioned, has floundered with the complexity and slow timescales that often arise within the Kirk - an example of how we must do better if we are to remember who we are as shared inhabitants of this one earth.

What it is to be human is a question that is at the heart of much of the present debate around artificial intelligence.

There is no doubt that there is astonishing creativity on display through computer scientists working on AI, artificial intelligence. I did ponder asking ChatGPT to write this speech!

The increased exposure through press coverage of these kinds of systems are revealing how massive amounts of data are being manipulated by algorithms. Some of it is fun, some of it is serious as systems in healthcare help doctors with diagnosis or treatment options, and some of it is deeply troubling as we learn how AI is being used in surveillance systems. The SRT Project has resources to help us engage at a congregational level with these issues.

Earlier I said that the church's work is continually developing. This week the Faith Action staff have a new initiative, as the catering in the Rainy Hall is a collaboration between the Grassmarket Project and HIVE Cornwall. With every lunch you buy we can distribute meals to people in Edinburgh struggling with food insecurity. Your feedback can help shape the possible future of this new work.

Finally, Moderator, the work of the Faith Impact Forum has been a great example of team effort, with staff and members giving sacrificially of their time and talents. I want to take this opportunity to thank them all for their work and support. In all that they have done they have been a witness to who we are as a church in society and the world.

Moderator, I present the report of the Faith Impact Forum, and as I am not a commissioner, I invite the Principal Clerk to move the Deliverances.