

Speech by Retiring Moderator Very Rev Dr Martin Fair

State of the Nation

For as long as I'm a part of the Church of Scotland and have a voice within it, I'll call on it to announce - and to be - 'good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind' - to be present with the downtrodden and the marginalised and the oppressed and, as scripture has it, 'the least of these.'

Why? Because that's what Jesus was about and I've no interest in being part of anything which isn't primarily focussed on making real today that which Jesus set in motion.

And what will all of that look like in practice?

It will be what we call the mission of the Church - and might I say, the much talked - about five marks of that mission?

Here are the last three of these marks:

And so...

Until the last food bank in Scotland is closed - because there is no longer any need - we've got work to do.

For as long as there are children growing up in Scotland whose life chances are at best 'compromised' and at worse 'ruined' because of their postcode - we've got work to do.

Until we can find more productive and humane and effective ways of dealing with those who break our laws - but who in truth are usually victims themselves - we've got work to do.

And it goes on.

For as long as there is planning for the retention of - even the increase in numbers of - nuclear warheads on OUR shores - there is work for us to do.

For as long as many of our impoverished communities continue to be awash with drugs - and we Scots continue to have the worst drugs deaths stats in Europe - there is work for us to do.

For as long as there are despairing people, struggling with poor mental health, having to wait months and years for suitable treatment - there is work for us to do.

And among them, for as long as there are ANY who sense that 'darkness is their only friend' - to quote the Psalmist - and who resort to ending their lives - there is work for us to do.

I know that both His Grace, the Lord High Commissioner, and the First Minister, are with me on that.

And for as long as we continue to pollute our rivers, poison our air and fill holes in the ground with our waste - there is work for us to do.

For as long as anti-Catholic, anti-Irish bile is spewed onto our streets by so-called football fans - there is work for us to do.

Until every person in Scotland - and in all those places where the Church of Scotland is present - is treated according to who they are and not by the colour of their skin and not by the place where they worship and not by the language they speak - there is work for us to do.

For as long as people - predominately young women - are trafficked into Scotland to work as sex slaves and in the off-the-books economy - there is work for us to do.

And for as long as women - of any age and from anywhere - don't feel safe walking home at night - there's work for us to do.

For as long as it's possible for someone seeking asylum - someone like Mercy Baguma - to die while supposedly in our care - there is work for us to do.

For as long as there are lost souls sleeping rough in shop doorways or families in damp, substandard bread & breakfast style accommodation - there is work for us to do.

And yes, though it be far-off and 'over there,' for as long as the skies over the Holy Lands are ripped open by another barrage of rockets and mortars and the overwhelming superiority of attacks from the air - in some small way, there is work for us to do.

That's what it will look like - all of that and more - for us to give ourselves to the ways of the Kingdom as set out by Jesus in his 'here's why I'm here' manifesto.

And so it's for us too.

But here's the problem. Unless we get our act together - and rapidly! - there's hardly going to be any church left to do it!

I've heard it so many times that, for the Church, it's not about numbers. It absolutely will be about numbers if the numbers are so low that the Church can no longer run Crossreach or local caring services because the local church isn't there any more!

So I long for the Church to be about that Kingdom work but, oh boy, how we need the Church to be refreshed, renewed, revitalised, remade and, yes, reformed that it might do it more effectively.

I long for an alive, vibrant church - a Church that has traded in the lukewarm... and instead is passionate in its love of Jesus in such a way that others will want a piece of that action.

I long for a Church empowered as it worships - a Church shaped by the Word, alive in the Spirit - a Church that knows itself called AND sent - a Church that is confident in the Gospel in the face of both hostility and indifference - a Church that teaches and baptises and nurtures new believers in Christ.

In other words, ALL of the five marks of mission - we better see to 1 and 2 if we're going to be any good at 3,4 and 5!! It's all got to hang together.

So even as we let go of some of what, sadly, has passed its sell-by date, let's commit ourselves to planting new Christian communities - that are low on maintenance, high on impact. And let's be better at identifying, equipping and commissioning pioneers - ordinary folk working on the margins.

And let's commit to every part of Scotland but at the same time, crack on with well-equipped spaces in the right places and so deal once and for all with an over-dependence on abundance of buildings.

And, yes, mission to the whole of Scotland, as per the Third Article, but maybe in new and creative ways - ecumenically, for sure, and with an emphasis on Christian community and

evangelical endeavour in every place rather than, necessarily, all of what we used to mean by the 'ordinances of religion...' and everything that went with that.

And let's get on with the reorganisation that we've started out on - that the sooner we sort the structures, the sooner we can get to what really matters... proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom!

Tomorrow is Pentecost. A day of fire. I believe the Holy Spirit is still in the business of starting fires; it's time for the Church to start fanning those flames and to put away those fire extinguishers.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is not subject to a health and safety committee! Let the fire burn.

That kind of Church - signed up to ALL that is meant by mission.

I'm absolutely up for that.