

## First Minister – General Assembly 2019

### Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP

Your grace,

Lord High Commissioner, Moderator.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the very Reverend Susan Brown, former Moderator, who fulfilled her duties with style, humour, humility, compassion and distinction.

I also of course want to congratulate you, Moderator, on your very well-deserved appointment and wish you well in the year ahead.

And, lastly, my warm thanks go to all of you for the honour, the deep honour, of this invitation to address the General Assembly this morning.

It is always a pleasure to return to this magnificent chamber.

As you can imagine, I have many happy memories – as well as some stressful memories – of the five year period when the Scottish Parliament sat here.

In fact by coincidence - for me a very poignant coincidence - it is exactly 20 years ago that in this chamber, I made my first speech as an MSP.

On the Wednesday of this week in May 1999, I spoke of the importance of free access to university education - an issue that remains very close to my heart today.

So to be back speaking here today is very special indeed.

Also – and more importantly - whenever I attend the opening of the General Assembly, as I was privileged to do again on Saturday, I am struck by the extent to which the Church is at the centre – not just of people’s spiritual lives – but of Scottish public life.

That of course has been the case for generations. For a long time after the Act of Union, the General Assembly was the most prominent forum in existence in Scotland for bringing people together from across the country to discuss the important issues of the day. It is

therefore served – in the words of Professor Tom Devine – as “a kind of surrogate parliament”.

The Church of Scotland also helped to re-establish the modern Scottish Parliament. The 1989 Assembly endorsed the Claim of Right for Scotland – indeed, it was one of the first major civic institutions to do so – and passed a resolution calling for the creation of a democratically elected assembly. And of course the Church of Scotland went on to play an important and very active part in the Scottish Constitutional Convention in the years after that.

So the Scottish Parliament undeniably owes a major debt to the Church of Scotland, and to previous general assemblies.

That said, it is maybe worth highlighting that the General Assembly - in one respect at least - also owes an important debt to the Scottish Parliament.

It is, after all, only because of us that the wooden benches here were replaced by padded seats.

I suspect that some of you are already feeling very grateful for that by this point in the week.

Of course, while our new Parliament was finding its feet here in 1999, the General Assembly of that year – for the first time I think since the 1920s – was taking place elsewhere, at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre. The moderator that year was the Right Reverend John Cairns. He said then that, despite devolution, the Church, I’m quoting him now, “should not think... that we in the Kirk are demobilised from playing an active part in addressing the great national issues of the day.”

A look at today’s Church and Society report would I think have reassured him. It shows a Kirk which is passionately engaged in the great national and the great international issues of the day – for example investment in young people, social security and gender justice.

The Church in recent years has also been deeply concerned with tackling climate change. And of course through its World Mission, the Church builds connections with communities in countries right across the world. It is, for example, a key member of the Scotland-Malawi partnership.

I also want to take the opportunity to applaud your invaluable support for and encouragement of interfaith co-operation. I know for example that the Muslim community in Scotland greatly appreciated the expression of solidarity that the Church issued - together with other Christian churches – in the aftermath of the Christchurch shootings.

At a time when intolerance and bigotry appear to be on the rise in parts of the world, it is vitally important – and hugely appreciated – that the major faiths in Scotland stand so strongly together in solidarity.

So it is because of all of this - and indeed much, much more - that my main message this morning is a simple, but very heartfelt one. Thank you.

Thank you for the enormous and highly valued contribution that the Church of Scotland makes to communities across our country, and indeed around the world. Everyone in Scotland – Christians, and those of other faiths and none – benefits from the work that you do.

It follows that the Scottish Government welcomes and indeed cherishes the role of the Church of Scotland in our national life.

And it is important, I think, to emphasise that we appreciate your role even when – or perhaps particularly when – you are saying things that are uncomfortable for governments to hear.

Indeed, that is often when your voice is most valuable and most important.

Today, I want to take this opportunity to add the Scottish Government's perspective to your ongoing debates and deliberations.

You will be relieved to hear, I'm sure, I don't intend to go into the detail of the specific policies of the Scottish government. Unless you really, really want me to!

Rather than talk about what we are doing, I want to say something instead about why and how we do what we do.

In particular, I will touch on two trends or themes in our politics that I think will be of increasing importance in the years ahead, and which I think are directly relevant to this assembly.

The first is the importance, the increasing importance, for all governments to promote a sense of wellbeing in our societies.

When the government I lead first took office in 2007, we created for the first time a national performance framework.

As part of that, we set out a clear purpose for the country.

We said that our national objective was to create opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, by increasing the rate of sustainable economic growth.

Last year we revised that framework. And in doing so, we changed our purpose.

We broadened our approach to focus on wellbeing, alongside economic growth. That reflects the fact that economic growth – even when it is sustainable and inclusive – is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end.

It is one of the means by which we help people to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives.

We made one other change to the performance framework which I think is worth highlighting.

We added to it, a new statement of values. It sets out our expectation that what we do in Scotland will be defined by the values of kindness, dignity and compassion.

It can sometimes be easy to lose sight of these values in the day to day whirl of government.

To be frank, I am not sure they will be the first words you think of, if you were to catch any of First Minister's Questions later this afternoon!

But actually, these values should define the role of Government ministers as surely as they define the role of parish ministers.

One example of how we are seeking to put these values of kindness, dignity and compassion into practice is the establishment of our new Social Security Agency for Scotland – I know that the Church and Society Council discusses that in today's report.

Setting up a new agency – especially one which will deliver vital payments to millions of people – is a hugely complex task. It requires a major focus on IT capabilities, finance, logistics and many other things.

However we have tried to ensure that all of that work is underpinned by a statement of values – by a deep respect for human rights and human dignity. Again, it's a way in which we seek to ensure we don't lose sight of what really, really matters.

And what we are finding – although I don't want to seem complacent about such a major project – is that those values don't hinder project delivery, they actually help with it. They provide the sense of common purpose that can inspire and unite a large team as they build something new, and focus on improving the lives of the people they serve.

I also think – and this is the second area I want to touch upon – that we would do well to think more about these values of kindness and compassion when it comes to how we conduct politics – how we discuss and debate the great issues of the day.

I mentioned earlier the General Assembly's role in helping to bring about the Scottish Parliament.

During that process, the Church facilitated and encouraged dialogue on potentially difficult and divisive issues. Indeed, the Church played a similarly valuable role in the run up to the independence referendum in 2014.

You provided a space where people could debate and discuss the issues of Scotland's future in a respectful and constructive way.

And of course the manner in which this assembly conducts itself is a model of how big issues can be debated in a way that builds consensus rather than deepening division.

I am well aware that the issues that Scotland confronts at present – including of course how the UK responds to Brexit, how Scotland can influence that, and what the constitutional future of Scotland should look like – are ones which arouse strong passions. And rightly so.

But I am also aware that the current political climate – exacerbated no doubt by the way in which some forms of social media work – can be polarising and divisive. Convictions and firmly held beliefs should not be derided - but perhaps these days we can be too quick to retreat into political tribes, with a focus on areas of conflict rather than agreement.

So all of us - and political leaders especially - have a responsibility to resist the momentum for division and polarisation.

That does not mean avoiding robust debate. This is Scotland after all.

But it does mean that we should work harder to air honest and strongly-held differences in a civil and respectful way, while seeking common ground and consensus.

And when politicians forget or fall short of that responsibility - as all of us sometimes do - the Church is, I think, well placed to remind us of it.

Indeed, it is with an eye to that responsibility that I recently announced the establishment of a Citizens' Assembly on Scotland's future.

It will bring together a representative cross section of Scotland, with an independent chair, to consider what sort of country we are seeking to build here, how we best equip the Scottish Parliament for the future, and how we enable people to make informed choices about the future of our country.

It's maybe worth stressing that a Citizens' Assembly will be different to the constitutional convention of the late 80s and early 90s. It will be made up of individuals – of many faiths and none – rather than representatives of institutions.

However the spirit in which the Citizens' Assembly is being convened – as part of a genuine attempt to find as much common ground as we can on potentially divisive issues – is one which I hope will strike a chord here.

Moderator, I began by quoting the remarks that one of your predecessors - John Cairns – made in the very early days of devolution. I want to end by quoting something your most recent predecessor said at around the same time.

The Scottish Parliament, as you know, has a regular “Time for Reflection” slot and Susan Brown delivered one of the very first of these, in this chamber.

And she reflected on the fact that MSPs, by being involved in a completely new parliament, were in effect making a leap into the unknown.

With her characteristic straight talking, she actually compared MSPs to her dog, which had leapt over a harbour wall and into the sea the week before! I will let you judge the accuracy of that comparison!

However Susan closed with a message – a call to service, if you will – which I think is common to this assembly here, and to the parliament down the road. She said:

Above all, remember the people whom you serve - their needs, their skills, their shared responsibility for this land. It was in their name that you leapt and it is for their sake that you now swim.

After 20 years of devolution, the Scottish Parliament continues to make new leaps and to face new challenges. In adapting to those, we will inevitably make mistakes – all parliaments do. All people do.

But by always remembering the people we serve – by remaining true to the values of kindness, dignity and compassion – we can ensure that we don't simply keep afloat; that instead we make progress on behalf of those we serve.

We can make progress towards a fairer and a more prosperous Scotland. And we can, I believe, improve – not just the wealth, but the well-being – of people and communities across the country.

And as we strive to do that, I know that I - and indeed MSPs from all parties - draw great strength from the support, and also the challenge, offered by the General Assembly.

Just as we take great inspiration from the example of service shown by so many in the Church of Scotland, and from across Scotland's faith communities.

For all of these reasons, it is a pleasure and a profound honour to speak here today.

I wish this Assembly well as you continue your deliberations. I wish you well, Moderator, for the rest of your year in office.

And I wish the Church of Scotland well, as you continue to play a central, vital and highly valued role in Scotland's national life, for many years and generations to come.

Thank you very much.