

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2024

Ecumenical Relations Committee

Moderator, Commissioners, and friends.

I hope to keep this short, this afternoon, and build on the moderator's theme, because we have not just been invited, but rather reminded that we are "Building Together". Together we are building the "future shape of the church".

We are also reminded that while this is the General Assembly of the Church OF Scotland, we should never forget that we are only part of the Church IN Scotland, and part of the far wider church catholic, labouring alongside our Lord Jesus Christ, the Master Builder, Son of God, but also known as the son of the carpenter.

Last year, I reminded us that "we are not alone", and that comment received a hearty response from representatives of our sister denominations accompanying us on this journey. We were reminded that we cannot work in isolation, but we look for the future together; and this call was echoed by the then Moderator to "Remember who you are". Dear Christian, you are a child of God, working for the Kingdom.

This year, we are reminded that we are building together – building, not just as congregations within a single denomination, but building the kingdom of god, lead by Christ and in company with skilled tradespeople from across the denominational spectrum.

There are:

- those attuned to the spark of the Holy Spirit;
- those whose profession prioritises water and the sacraments;
- those who deal with gas - lots of gas;

There are:

- those who have much to do with wood and stone;
- others, the airy spaces;
- those who put a roof over people's heads
- and food on the table;
- as well as those that deal with
- planning, and architecture, and landscaping,
- and even demolition.

But, most importantly, despite our differences and the almost inevitable onsite arguments, we are building together!

Paul used the analogy of needing each other as parts of the body; but for this year, I'd like to stick to the idea of crafts and trades – with all our diversity and specialisms.

Moderator, like yourself, I also started work for a wee while in the trades.

My father was a carpenter/joiner, from a long line of builders.

I recall him telling me, one day, that “architects make plans, but joiners make them work”.

We had built an extension on a house, and the proposed staircase split on a half-landing that returned into the existing house, and also had to enter the upstairs of the extension – but the plan made no accommodation for the existing roofline. It was sheer common sense that we had to adapt the plan.

I wonder how we might better consider the existing rooflines of ecumenical colleagues. Not that we need all build our own houses, for Jesus said, “in my Father’s house there are many mansions”. Each mansion built onto the other and onto the other, as generation after generation extended the single house of God as an enlarged family.

We are building together and, by the grace of God, seeing the “future shape of the church” emerge!

On another job, I recall my father saying that half the work in building a house was in the foundation. In preparing the ground, knowing what we’re building upon, as even Jesus alluded to in talking about building on rock or sand;

The digging, the amenities, the foundation laid in the correct dimensions, the initial coursework, a damp course, the solum and any membranes required, getting it level so that the real building could commence... and all of this went on under the ground, with very little of it observed in the final building!

When we are building together it can sometimes be difficult to see any results for a while or just how far we’ve come.

And, so, your Ecumenical Relations Committee is pleased to remind us that there has been a tremendous amount of work completed along with the wonderful tradespeople of other denominations and crafts.

First and foremost we build upon Christ the rock.

Then the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the chief cornerstone.

We have the councils, like the First Council of Nicea, which led to the Nicene Creed – that the St. Andrew’s Declaration Group along with others, would seek to continue considering how we might commemorate next year as a milestone year;

We are reminded in our report of our denomination’s Declaratory Act, and how the 3rd Article Declaratory has to be read alongside the 7th Article with its ecumenical imperative.

We don't have to build alone across the nation because there are already plenty of others throughout the nation with whom to build the kingdom of God;

We see the development of a new Scottish Christian Forum, which will continue to evolve. A lighter, more flexible, and inclusive building, together, of the "future shape of the church";

We see renewed work, in the Joint Commission on Doctrine, and in the light of the St. Margaret Declaration;

and there are further existing and new friendships, that we do not report on, that are developing behind the scenes, for which we hope there may be future declarations;

And, we also see the work that we need to undertake with our new structures and Presbyteries and reviewing of plans – but how this, also, needs work to coordinate with other trades, other denominations to effect the Mission of God.

But it would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to thank so many who have made it possible, across the denominations. Particularly the Ecumenical Officers, and members of committees, not least those of your own committee; and the unsung heroes and heroines at grassroots level who labour together tirelessly to build the kingdom of God.

As we go forward, what a foundation we have to build upon, as we continue building together, and see the "future shape of the church" emerge, to the glory of God!

Moderator, I was a joiner rather than a gasman, so, with these few words, I hope I've hammered a few points home, but I'm out of gas.

I therefore present the report and move the deliverance.