**General Assembly**

**Church and Society Council – Convener’s Speech – 23rd May 2017**

*“The single clenched fist, lifted and ready,*

*Or the open, asking hand, held out and waiting.*

*Choose.*

*For we meet by one or the other”.* Words by the Poet, Carl Sandburg.

Last night we witnessed the consequences of the clenched fist in Manchester – young lives cut short in an act of senseless brutality. How are we to respond? With the clenched fist of anger, retribution and prejudice – or the open, asking hand, held out and waiting. It takes us to a very vulnerable place not to raise the clenched fist, but I believe it is the place where Christ wants us to be, it is the place of the Cross.

Sandburg’s sentiment contrasts what the world so often looks like to today with the world as Christ would like it to be.

In our report, the term “surveillance from the cross” might have baffled a few of us – it certainly did me, when I first read it!

But in this harsh, judgemental, Big Data world:

Where people’s folly follows them forever and you cannot have your past sins forgiven;

Where keyboard warriors lash out their bile and there’s no mercy;

There are clenched fists all around.

Surveillance from the cross means looking out on the world with Christ’s outstretched, waiting and asking hand.

That is **our** task.

Moderator, much of our report this year seeks to take forward the Speak Out process agreed at last year’s Assembly. It’s a new way of working for us. We will of course react to important matters in the life of the nation and the world – but we’re keen not to be bombarded with a scatter gun of fresh deliverances as we take forward this new way of working.

Speak Out is about asking, waiting, holding out the hand of compassion.

Jesus asked of the blind beggar, Bartimeaus, “What do you want me to do for you?”

It would have been obvious to everyone what his problem was – he was blind and begging on the street – so why did Jesus ask?

Asking implies listening – It implies what you, Moderator spoke so powerfully about in your address yesterday – being **with** people rather than doing things **for** people.

A senior civil servant admitted recently that public policy has often been implemented as though, in his words, “people were robots”. We often don’t ask, we assume we know what’s best and so fail to empower people. “Your faith has made you well” said Jesus to Bartimaeus.

“Nothing about me, without me, is for me” that’s an important insight used by the Poverty Truth Commission.

This is how we grow **together** in the light of the risen Christ.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus might well have said “how blessed is the spirit of the poor”. When we “walk with” rather than “do for” we often hear stories of wisdom and resilience from those who’ve experienced hardship and challenge.

*A single mum bringing up 3 children on her own who says, social isolation is worse than poverty – a man half ruined by drug abuse who deepens understanding of the real power of forgiveness – an asylum seeker who describes what it really feels like to be a non-person.*

Through Speak Out we want to hear stories and let that grassroots wisdom shape our work. We also want to celebrate the remarkable and pioneering work that is going on throughout the church.

Statistics of decline don’t tell the whole picture – there is a different story to tell, one where pearls of great price are worth selling everything to have.

The image of “Head, Heart, Hands and Feet” is helpful here. “Head” work is about reflecting on policy. The “Heart” work is about cultural shifts that might be required reflecting on our faith in Christ and the world we want to see. The “Hands” work is about what needs done. Ready to serve but also ready to learn and be transformed as we bump into Jesus – already out there.

The “feet” work is about establishing partners in the work we wish to do. People everywhere want to be part of a change that challenges the “clenched fist” of an angry, fearful world.

The world is ready to heed our message of *the open, asking hand, held out and waiting*.

**Surveillance** *(Section 5)* **(and SRT** *(section 13)***)**

The Society, Religion and Technology project reminds us that faith and science are not enemies. Our way into a viable future rests on humanity’s ability to marry reverence with the best of our technology and science.

The digital revolution has a huge capacity for good, keeping us safe, developing better systems for analysing disease. It’s helping us to run the assembly better (and even you, Moderator, can keep your friends updated on your dynamic social life, as it happens!)

More alarmingly, we have come to see how new digital technologies are changing politics, shaping public opinion in the echo chamber that reinforces particular opinions rather than inviting discourse in the public square. It is altering the nature of democracy. We need to remember that consent must make room for dissent!

SRT helps us reflect theologically and ethically on crucial issues so that we will not sleepwalk into a technological future we neither understand nor want.

**EU and Supplementary Report – Independence Referendum**

In our supplementary report we restate the view that the church is neutral on the issue of Scottish independence. We’ve supported the constitutional convention and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, but we believe that there is a difference between independence and devolution.

The General Assembly has never expressed a wish to have a position, on independence recognising that there are honestly held opinions on both sides of the debate that are held with integrity. We see no obvious purpose being served by changing this position.

Policy around the EU has been developed by the General Assembly over many years. A report last year re-stated our long held support for the European project.

It has helped to eliminate the military rivalry that plagued the European continent for a millennium, it has brought about improvements to the working conditions of millions and improved environmental regulation and the status of human rights.

We express profound concern for and solidarity with the many EU citizens whose status within our society has been called into question by the refusal of the UK government to offer any guarantees prior to negotiating the terms for Brexit.

**Asylum and Refugees**

The theme for this Year’s General Assembly is, “Word of Life” and, when it comes to the refugee catastrophe, Jesus’s words, “I have come that they may have life, life in all its fullness” have a powerful resonance. Lives lived without the security of home, in the fear of violence, rape, discrimination and persecution is unimaginable for most of us. But the anxiety of seeking to make a new home in a foreign land is terrifying too. Do we raise the clenched fist or offer the open hand to those who seek refuge among us?

The hospitality offered by so many congregations is a source of profound inspiration, and of course we know that we often meet Christ in the stranger’s guise.

The generous decision of the General Assembly, to appoint and financially support Scottish Faiths Action for refugees is making the case for a more hospitable and open handed approach to the refugee catastrophe which continues in spite of our attention being drawn to other issues. Meeting people face, eye to eye, with an open hand, not a clenched fist, makes it hard to see people as a threat.

**Pilgrimage**

We are a pilgrim people, on the move for a better life, like so many fleeing the brutality of war just now – we are people of the Way. In presenting a report that seeks to rehabilitate pilgrimage, we acknowledge that since the Reformation, the practice of pilgrimage has not had support in our tradition.

We might remain sceptical about the power of relics and holy wells to offer healing but places, like Iona, have a spiritual resonance. We also know that to walk, march and journey is to seek to make a change.

A movement is emerging of people who see the journey as a metaphor for the life of faith. The latest of many routes to open is the St Magnus Way in Orkney. The time is right for the Church to rehabilitate pilgrimage as a tool of mission and spiritual growth.

**An Economy Driven by Equality**

The Islamic Finance Council started life in Scotland, directly inspired by Henry Duncan, a 19th century minister in Dumfriesshire, who realised that the poorest in his community had little access to prudent saving, ethical banking and usable financial services. We continue to work with Islamic Finance Council and others in promoting an economy that works for all, that encourages responsible investment, recognises limits to growth and the massive challenge of Climate Justice and we seek to act to match our values and our faith to what we do with our money.

At a time when influential leaders deny the significance of climate change, the need to renew our commitment to care for creation has never been greater.

It is therefore exciting to share the news that the ecumenical movement Eco –Congregation Scotland has just recorded its four hundredth registration. We are leading the way.

**SCPO (Doing Politics Differently)**

To say there’s a lot happening in politics would be the understatement of the century, but alongside all of that an exciting initiative, “Meet your MSP” and innovative work on participative budgeting holds out the prospect of “doing politics differently”. Today there is to be a fringe event at lunchtime today about participative budgeting.

As the Princess Royal pointed out, we in the Church of Scotland have done so much to promote reasoned debate and respectful dialogue and tomorrow, at the end of business here in the Assembly Hall we are hosting a Hustings event – but with a difference – enabling people with lived experience of challenging circumstances to tell their stories and pose their questions to politicians. Do we discuss with the open hand or the clenched fist? Choose! For we meet by one or the other.

**Gender Justice – Violence against Women Task Group**

Violence against women is not just a problem in other parts of the world, or in certain parts of society: it is not a problem, it is our problem. There are ingrained and inadvertent attitudes that still undermine true gender justice. It is ongoing work we need to support.

As does our work to resist the appalling trade in humanity – human trafficking. So many of those who are trafficked are caught up in the sex industry where human lives become commodities.

There are record numbers of people seeking support from foodbanks.

The welfare system increasingly victimises the most vulnerable.

The press reinforces the lies we often tell ourselves about the poorest.

It can feel like we live in a world where there are more fists clenched than hands open, asking and welcoming.

**Education and Education Review**

Whilst we undertake a major review of the role of the Church in education, a new Handbook for school chaplains has just been launched and there is to be a fringe event today in St Columba’s by the Castle to which all are welcome.

We have an honourable record in the development of education in Scotland that goes back centuries –it is a rich part of our Reformed heritage, as the Princess Royal mentioned in her speech. It is exciting to be a part of a group that seeks to re-imagine the church’s role in enabling young people to flourish in today’s world.

**The Team**

We have a quite remarkable staff team of highly gifted individuals working for Church and Society Council. I would like to pay tribute to all of them, for their commitment, faith and expertise.

Our two vice convenors, Pauline Edmiston and Wendy Young bring real expertise in global issues and social justice at home. Martin Johnstone, brings energy, wisdom, engagement across civil society and an infectious sense of fun that keeps us all grounded amidst the turbulence of unfolding events (and boy are events turbulent).

Rarely, in my experience, have I come across a group of people on a church council who are so engaged and energised for the mission of the church as it seeks to reflect on our direction as a society in the light of the Gospel.

Moderator, the world is going through turbulent times, there are clenched fists raised in threat all around.

Yesterday, in our joint report on the Balfour Declaration we chose a way that stands resolutely for justice and human flourishing. But we also chose that to inhabit that difficult space where we refuse to raise the clenched fist – instead holding out the open, asking hand.

It is in that space where we meet the Spirit of the risen Christ doing the work of the Kingdom – healing, transforming and blessing us all.

Let me finish with these words: *“The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire”. Teillard de Chardin.*

Moderator, I present the Report of the Church and Society Council and, as I am not a commissioner, would ask the Principal Clerk to move the deliverance.