

## Editorial: Laity in Christian Work and Witness

Regular readers of this journal will know that for the last few years, the issues of *Theology in Scotland* have been arranged thematically. This current issue takes a short break from this practice, and presents a spread of interests and themes in the articles contained here. What unites these various contributions, however, is the authors' interest in the significance of the 'laity' for Christian work and witness. I put 'laity' in quotation marks here, as, theologically speaking, it is a problematic term: whatever (important) theological endeavours have attempted to dismantle the two-tiered distinction between clergy and lay people, practically speaking, full participation and empowerment of all God's people are rarely achieved, and exclusion or an unequal distribution of power remain common experiences. But, as the articles in this issue illustrate, the 'work of the people' – within and outside liturgical contexts – is an essential part of the life of the Church and the mission of God.

We start with mission in the article of John Carswell, who discusses a missional approach to sharing the good news of Jesus by reflecting on the impact of local churches (or individual Christians and Christian leaders) engaging with their local communities through Community Organising (CO) practices. Understood as mission that is being carried out *with*, rather than *for*, those who may be variously disadvantaged, as Carswell argues, CO is a key means of making the gospel 'plausible' to those within, but especially those outside, the church sphere. 'Plausibility' here is used not in the apologetic sense but as a practical way of paying attention to God's presence and ministry that is already happening in the world, often in places which traditional Christianity least expects. Carswell's piece includes several inspiring examples of what could be considered CO initiatives in Scotland.

Another aspect of CO is explored in Laura Gilmour's article on the role of non-violent direct action, particularly in the context of climate justice campaigns such as Christians in Extinction Rebellion. How might such protest actions be appraised through the lens of the Sermon on the Mount? Drawing from the work of Glen Stassen and David Gushee, Gilmour employs a particular hermeneutical strategy of 'transforming initiatives'. In this light, turning the other cheek, handing over one's coat, and going

## Editorial

the extra mile are seen as realistic forms of performative truth-telling, exposing systemic injustices and inviting reconciliation as well as material change. Drawing parallels between these biblical examples and modern-day protests, such as those at COP26, Gilmour argues that these acts of non-violent civil disobedience reflect a deeply spiritual, as well as practical, faithfulness to the values of God's kingdom.

The materiality of the Christian faith is also explored in Darren Philip's article, in which he discusses the historical and contemporary significance of the practice of a physical uplifting of an offering as a part of Christian worship. The enforced pause in this practice as a result of Covid-19 restrictions has led to a pragmatic and more permanent removal in many congregational worship settings. There is a theological depth to the practice, he argues, which is about the refusal to exclude material possessions from complete personal and communal devotion to God. However the majority of financial gifts may be collected nowadays, there is something about a physical expression and presentation of offering which must, in his view, remain an integral part of worship. The offering represents a people's response to God's grace and an invitation to service, and the loss of this practice has serious theological, missiological, and liturgical implications. Philip writes with the Scottish Reformed tradition in mind, but his reflections will be relevant to other ecclesial contexts too.

It is from such a different ecclesial context that Mary Cullen's piece offers a case study for examining the ongoing impact of the Second Vatican Council on the role of lay people in the life of the Catholic Church in Scotland. The Council's emphasis on the shared responsibility of all baptized people for the life and the mission of the Church has been a powerful vision, but one that has frequently lacked appropriate frameworks for meaningful and significant lay involvement. Against this background, Cullen provides an overview of the birth and over three decades of service of *Open House*, an independent Scottish Catholic journal founded to uphold Vatican II's vision by providing a platform for lay voices and promoting dialogue within the Church. As the current editor of the journal, Cullen celebrates Pope Francis' recent call for a synodal Church, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Vatican II's reforms and the role of initiatives such as *Open House* in fostering inclusivity and participation within the Church.

In the Arts and Culture corner, Liz Macwhirter offers one of her poems, and reflects on the significance of theo-poetics as a form of engaging in

## *Editorial*

social change, weaving in biblical, historical, and contemporary interdisciplinary insights. David Jasper writes for the Gifford Lectures corner, offering not only an overview of the impressive legacy of these lectures, but also a glimpse into the ‘behind the curtains’ work and decisions preceding the lectures, as he shares his own perspective as a convenor of the Glasgow University Gifford Committee. As usual, there are book reviews that I hope the readers will find helpful, finding in them some echoes of the themes reflected in the rest of the journal.

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