

Editorial: When Theological Landscapes Shift: Reimagining Church and Society

This present issue follows the annual tradition of the past few years by beginning with an article based on the D. W. D. Shaw Memorial Lecture, delivered earlier this year at the University of Aberdeen by David Fergusson, one of the founding editorial board members of *Theology in Scotland*. Fergusson's lecture examines the historical partnership between the church and universities in Scotland. Although processes such as the secularisation of higher education since the 1960s and the diminishing number of ordinands for ministry have significantly altered the place of theology in academia, Fergusson contends that the study of Christian theology in the university context remains a vital and fruitful project. Not only does it address existential questions of those drawn to such study, but it also fosters rich interdenominational, interfaith, and interdisciplinary dialogue, benefiting the university as a whole – and, even more crucially, contributing to the health of the church itself.

The rest of this issue of *Theology in Scotland* continues to reflect on the swiftly changing religious and cultural landscape of contemporary Scotland. How do we make sense of the dwindling number of people professing a Christian commitment in contemporary Scotland? How do structures enable or stifle creative organic developments? What future shapes of the church can we discern from both our engagement with Scripture and recent experiments in church practice?

A few months before Fergusson's lecture, the University of Edinburgh's New College hosted a day conference entitled 'A Future with Hope: Resurrection, Not Restoration'. Various speakers – primarily from the Church of Scotland, but also some ecumenical voices – sought to explore ways in which the churches in Scotland, particularly the Kirk, might navigate today's swiftly evolving religious and cultural context. The conference built on an earlier 'Future with Hope' event featuring David McCrone, a leading sociologist, held at New College in November 2023, which reflected on issues raised by his analysis of Scotland's shifting sociological landscape. McCrone's analysis of contemporary Scotland offers a stimulating entry point for considering the nation's current state. As ever, evaluations of current trends and their causes are bound to be contested, but his depiction of a social fabric characterised by individualism, social fragmentation, and moral relativism will be well familiar to many readers in Scotland and

beyond. McCrone argues for the necessity of recovering a ‘shared sense of social reality’ in order to foster a more resilient civic society, capable of nuanced dialogue. As in Fergusson’s proposal, dialogue emerges here as a key characteristic of a healthy community.

In a country like Scotland, any historical discussion of social cohesion must consider the role that the Kirk has played in the evolution of the Scottish nation – and the stark decline in Church of Scotland membership as reflected in Scotland’s 2022 Census. Fiona Tweedie’s review of the census results provides an initial exploration of geographical trends and age demographics. Although compared to the Church of Scotland, other denominations might appear more stable on paper, Tweedie underscores a significant increase in those identifying as having ‘no religion’, suggesting a broader trend that could affect these communities as well. Meanwhile, research by Sheila Akomiah-Conteh, Liam Jerrold Fraser, and Fiona Tweedie draws attention to the growth and impact of ethnic diaspora Christian congregations in Scotland. Although currently these churches often operate in isolation from the traditional, white-majority churches, there remains a significant potential – and a compelling theological rationale – for greater collaboration, mutual learning, shared mission initiatives, and a unified witness to Christian fellowship that has yet to be realised.

Building on McCrone’s analysis, William Storrar addresses the rapid decline of the Church of Scotland, linking it to the cultural collapse of the communal, parish-based ethos which formerly thrived in a more collectivist, industrial society. This ethos, he notes, has become obsolete in today’s hyper-individualistic context. Storrar urges the church to acknowledge the limitations of traditional approaches and find ‘radical hope’ by re-imagining church life, drawing inspiration from both the Native American Crow tribe’s response to cultural devastation and the transformative narrative of Holy Saturday. Similarly, Sandy Forsyth examines the crisis surrounding the Church of Scotland’s understanding of ‘mission’, arguing that it has been diluted into vague objectives or weaponised to justify church closures and restructuring. Forsyth finds inspiration in the legacy of Tom Allan and his approach to mission. There is so much more at stake, Forsyth argues, than merely preserving institutional structures. Instead, mission must be understood and lived out through theologically reflective, lay-empowering, and relational community engagement, creating space for new possibilities shaped by God’s grace.

How does this vision translate into practical ministry? The conference featured several case studies of innovative missional initiatives, one of them

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being The Shed Project in Stornoway, presented by Tommy MacNeil. He illustrates how a struggling congregation can be transformed into a vibrant community hub, how struggling individuals can discover the transformative power of God's love, and how struggling disciples can learn to trust God's ability to multiply resources as they shift from an inward focus to mission. Richard Frazer, also drawing from personal experiences, argues that the church must move beyond maintaining old structures, focussing instead on nurturing the deeper spiritual work of renewal and hope. Despite institutional decline, God is still at work – embodied in acts of genuine welcome, forgiveness and transformation – offering a path forward amidst cultural upheaval. John Sturrock echoes a similar perspective as a layperson, reflecting on the church's ability to adapt by empowering the laity and expectantly embracing new forms of church life.

As the function of the 'national church' is collapsing, some are keen to point to the importance of the civic space it has provided. However, civic space can be inhabited in other ways; and conversely, the church need not be the cornerstone of civic society in order to remain the church. Having grown up in a context where all Christian churches were under severe pressure, and at times persecution, I am particularly drawn to the pre-Christendom Christian witness. Of course, it would be naïve to think that we can simply replicate the early church experience, and plenty could be said about the positive developments enabled by the Constantinian turn. However, in the time we inhabit now, rather than lamenting its 'cultural devastation', perhaps the Kirk – and other churches in Scotland – can let go of Christendom, and be inspired by the early church's resilience in order to reimagine Christian communities in a 'post-Christian' Scotland.

This issue's articles may not directly engage with early Christianity, but they do point to interesting parallels, particularly the centrality of mission for the identity of a healthy church community. This involves discerning signs of God's activity both within and beyond the church. As several conference participants noted, and as this issue's articles reflect, contemporary Scottish society is marked by a profound spiritual quest. The fact that so few of these seekers view Christian communities as a possible place to explore their questions is one that these communities must seriously grapple with. However, it seems clear that seeking the signs of God's presence – and therefore a kind of mindset that can best be described as missional – will be essential for the future of the church in Scotland.

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