

Reflections on ‘A Future with Hope’ from a lay perspective

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This article is the unforeseen consequence of an act of folly during the conference on ‘A Future with Hope: Resurrection, Not Restoration’. In the final plenary session, speaking from the audience, I noted that Rev Dr Sandy Forsyth had emphasised, in his closing address, the need for bold humility and had expressed the view that the laity were the key, not the clergy. I asked the provocative question whether, given that the excellent speakers were nearly all clergy, it was time for the clergy, in humility, to step aside and enable lay people to be more actively engaged. If so, I asked: how was that to be achieved?

Not long after, I received a kind email from Professor Alison Jack wondering if I might be interested in writing up a short reflection, to be published in this journal, on the issues raised for me, reflecting the perspectives of a lay person on the future of the church. My plea that I am not a theologian was met with the response from the editor that this was, at least partly, the point!

As a lay person, I am interested in where the church (both small ‘c’ and large ‘C’) sits in today’s world – and where it might be going. I take as my starting point the observation that humanity is currently facing immense challenges, whether locally (such as the cost-of-living crisis and provision of health services) or worldwide (with destructive climate change, emerging AI and large-scale violent conflicts). Against that backdrop, it seems to me that the radical message of that counter-cultural individual, Jesus, offers so much and yet, at least in this country, appears to reach so few.

My interest was sparked initially by Professor David McCrone’s observations at a New College conference in November 2023. He recalled

his contribution back in 1996 to a conference on 'The Future of the Kirk' (subsequently published in this journal). McCrone spoke then of chaos, consumerism, and a plurality of identities. '[S]omething new is happening to our world and the way we interpret it', he said. We were entering a world of 'difference and unpredictability'.¹ Importantly, he suggested that the focal points now would be local and global; the national was 'too small for the big problems of life'² and too big for the small ones. Conventional ways of doing things were being subverted; older forms of 'social explanation' were in decay, including the meta-narrative of religion, while 'lower case religion', or spirituality, was vibrant.³

While he was speaking in the context of the nation state, McCrone was surely also speaking about the national church. Against this backdrop, the relatively uninformed lay person might ask: why has so little appeared to happen since? Following this, Professor Will Storrar's powerful description of the cultural devastation and hyper-individualism we face as a society in the post-modern world, and its implications for the national church, resonated deeply with me. Recognition that the national church is not (at least wholly) to blame for its decline, or even its death as we know it, could be a useful reframing of the situation and provide a different starting point for many of us, especially among the laity. But we are also challenged to reflect on the implications of Storrar's 'hot' and 'cold' explanations of church decline. They reminded me of the metaphor of the frog in the pond which is unaware of the gradual heating of the water until it is too late. Perhaps, as with the climate, changes in, to and around the national church have been indiscernible until it has become too late. At a deep level, we know it to be true ... and yet, we have been unable to bring ourselves to accept the fact of change. Denial and inertia prevail, masked by notions of 'stability' and 'continuity'. Cognitive dissonance abounds.

I wonder if this might be the story of the church in Scotland – or at least the Church of Scotland? What is the church's equivalent to fossil fuel addiction and denial of its effects? Does continuing attachment to what has

¹ David McCrone, "The Post-Modern Condition of Scottish Society", in *The Future of the Kirk: The proceedings of the conference held at the University of Aberdeen on 16 September 1996*, ed. D. A. S. Fergusson and D. W. D. Shaw; *Theology in Scotland* Occasional Paper no. 2 (St Andrews: St Mary's College, 1997), 14, <https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i2.2817>.

² McCrone, 14.

³ McCrone, 16.



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gone before prevent it from moving on? The lay person might also ponder: what use is this discussion if it is confined to the ivory towers? How far does the understanding of change, as described by McCrone and Storrar, reach – to Kirk Sessions, to the pews? Does it matter? Perhaps it is more important that Forsyth's laity-focussed, practical expressions of new ways of doing church locally reach these parts of the church body? Or might Forsyth's vision also get stuck in New College or the General Assembly? If so, what will be lost? How do we take what we heard in the conference and make it meaningful in the wider church – and in the wider community? Recalling McCrone, perhaps the institutions and structures of a 'national' church must fall away? Perhaps we need to say, prayerfully and with respect: 'enough'. The Franciscan theologian, Richard Rohr, has argued that we must move 'from a belief-based religion to a practice-based religion', or little will change.⁴ Can the Church – and the clergy – cope with discussing these things with the laity – and with Scotland generally? And, if it can, how will it do so?

In simple terms, in addition to the often unacknowledged and unrecognised work carried out so ably by the clergy, lay people are responsible for so much of the work of the church, especially if one takes an expansive view of living out one's call to follow Jesus, acknowledging that, day in, day out, Christian folk respond to that calling in all sorts of ways, very often outside the walls of church buildings. Following Jesus is not just about being in a building on a Sunday, important though the sacred space is. We heard many inspiring examples of 'fresh expressions', often lay-led. As Rev Tommy MacNeil reminded us, most of Jesus' ministry was outside, in the margins. Adopting David Bosch, mission may be defined as a 'movement of God's love towards people'.⁵ And we also heard that we don't need to take God to folk: God is already there. Our task is discerning what God is doing in a situation, looking at things through the eyes of those we seek to help, and listening, rather than telling. Letting people discover God, in a language that appeals to them. Maybe that is the challenge? It's a big letting go: getting out of the way so that people can encounter Jesus for themselves. That this requires 'bold humility', to use David Bosch's

⁴ Quoted in "The Inefficiency of Faith", Center for Action and Contemplation, 14 January 2024, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-inefficiency-of-faith/>.

⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), 390.

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words,⁶ perhaps goes without saying. For this lay person, these concepts almost feel like a radical reimagining of what we have understood 'church' to be.

Departing from the safety and presumed certainty of hierarchies, rules and structures and finding ways to energise the laity to take forward a new way of doing church feels like a key to the future, at a time when, as Storrar noted, hyper-individualism entails a marked decline in commitment to serving institutions. Few of us are immune to these societal changes, not least the generation which will need to take forward any form of fresh expression of church if it is going to be sustainable. And yet, for many, the ideas of relationship, connection, community, compassion, mutuality, interdependence and loving others still hold strong, even if these are now expressed in new ways.

None of this is binary. Things are complex, nuanced, ambiguous, paradoxical. Can we live with, and in, that? Boldness and courage are required. And, as we strive in our imperfection, we remember that whatever happens will be in God's time: *kairos*, not *chronos*. Everything has its season. Fixating on a particular solution or solutions sits uneasily with the essence of journeying in faith, without knowing the destination, opening up all sorts of roads less travelled, possibly right there in the margins. Might Moses and forty years 'transition' in the wilderness provide us with a narrative for what is coming?

Recently, I came across the idea of the 'tempered radical' – those who identify with and are committed to their institutions and yet, at the same time, also to a cause, community or way of thinking that is fundamentally different from, and may be at odds with, the dominant culture of their institution. In other words, they can work for transformation on the inside and yet have at least one foot on the outside, on the edge, seeing things more broadly. As a lay person, this seems helpful in a church context. Of course, the Bible offers many similar stories and the New Testament authors themselves often wrote from the fringes. Do people like Storrar and Forsyth fulfil the tempered radical role in the church (whether small 'c' or large 'C') today?

I found Storrar's reference to the late Alan Lewis's writing to be helpful. *Between Cross and Resurrection* is said to be the culmination of Lewis's life's work and, as Storrar pointed out, his exploration of Holy Saturday is

⁶ Bosch, 420, 489.



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a reminder that the God of Jesus Christ does not intervene to prevent catastrophe and rupture. And yet there is always resurrection to come. God is not in decline. Perhaps the message for the people in the pews is that the national church as we know it does indeed need to die in order for the necessary and inevitable resurrection to occur. As the late, wonderfully innovative Rev Dane Sherrard said of his last mission-centred, community-focussed project at Fogo Parish Church: 'The little church may have been all but dead – but now it is most certainly alive!'⁷ Amen to that.

⁷ <https://ascend.churchofscotland.org.uk/story/dane-sherrard/>.

