PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

"The core o'ocht is only for the few"

Exploring Langholm's Hugh MacDiarmid's damning verdict on the church

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I am the Church of Scotland minister to the parish of Langholm Eskdalemuir Ewes and Westerkirk. My ministry has a rural and semi-rural setting on the eastern boundaries of Dumfries and Galloway, seven miles from the border with England.

According to local historian WS Young (2004), Staplegordon Church was granted to Kelso Abbey by William de Cunigburc in the 12th century and confirmed by William the Lion (1165-1214). The date of building a stone church is not known. The site was used as an Early Christian burial ground; a boulder with a 7th-8th century cross carving, apparently intended as a headstone, is built into the churchyard wall. It became ruined after the parishes of Staplegordon, Wauchope, and half of Morton, were amalgamated to form the parish of Langholm, and Langholm church was built, in 1703. The present Parish Church was completed in 1846. It is the last place of worship still in use in Langholm. In 1975, the congregations of the Erskine Church and the Parish Church, the last two worshipping communities in the town, united and the Erskine Church building was closed .

Now the parish is in a transitional phase. Having once employed over 2000 people in the textile industry, almost all those jobs have gone and we are looking at a period of major change in the demographics and working patterns of local residents.

Government projections show that we will be the most rapidly ageing population in Scotland over the next twenty years and this is likely to have a major impact on the ministry needs of the population. Already, Langholm and the surrounding area is seeing an influx of people retiring, often from England,

because house prices are lower here and the NHS provision is perceived as better than in many parts of England.

In the 2011 Census 49% of my parishioners described themselves as 'Church of Scotland'. However, it won't surprise you to learn that we do not see 49% of the population of the parish in church on Sunday. Indeed, the Scottish Church Census of 2016 indicates church attendance in Dumfries and Galloway is 4.6% of the total population, the second lowest by council in the whole of Scotland, and significantly less than the national average of 7.2%.

The title of my piece, 'The core o' ocht is only for the few', is from Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'A Drunk Man looks at the Thistle', published in 1926. MacDiarmid was born in my parish and was a Sunday School teacher at the South UP Church in Langholm.

MacDiarmid accuses the Kirk of keeping Christ to themselves like, he says, Burns Clubs do with Burns, using a caricature of the real man. It is the working title of my doctoral research at Glasgow University. I chose it because it challenges me to reflect on who the Christian Church is for and who it should aim to include.

Will Willimon (2002, p.249) wittily retells the story of Eldad and Medad from the book of Numbers. A little clipe, as we say in Scotland, comes running to father Moses. 'Daddy, Daddy, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' Earlier, the Lord, after speaking to Moses, had decided to spread a little of the Holy Spirit on some of the elders, a Spirit that the Lord had previously disbursed mainly to Moses.

Now, having received the gift of the Spirit, Eldad and Medad get 'downright loquacious' and began speaking up for God. Joshua, one of the 'chosen men', doesn't like this effusive spirit: 'My Lord Moses, stop them!' We cannot have uncredentialed, uncertified people prophesying and speaking for God, he continues. Today, Eldad and Medad, tomorrow my son or daughter. Joshua asks Moses for a 'prophetic restraining order.' And what does Moses reply? 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.'

As Willimon observes (2002, p.253), 'the greatest challenge facing the church in any age is the creation of a living breathing colony of truth.....people who

can speak truth to power; old men and women, janitors and maids with visions and dreams and who do not mind telling the world about them.' The route that these people have taken to faith does not matter. The local church must be a learning, empowering and enabling community for all its members. An important first step is to equip them with the vocabulary to explain their faith, particularly in relation to personal tragedy. Many a Christian faith has been broken because the simplicities of belief could not withstand the overwhelming assault of suffering. 'Why did God allow this to happen?' are the last words they say as they close the church door behind them (Pritchard, 2007 p.122).

The traditional model of ordained clergy which has persisted since the days of Jean Calvin – pastor/teacher, elder and deacon – is coming under strain in the Scotland of the 21st century. Whilst there are undoubtedly very good theological arguments for alternative forms of ministry and some form of increased lay involvement, there are pressing practical ones too. Doug Gay (2017) identifies 'two significant problems with the ordained ministry in the Church of Scotland today. The first is a set of concerns about how well this model is working, both in relation to allowing the ministry of the whole people to flourish and in respect of its ability to respond to church decline. The second is the deadly simple problem of supply. If we make this model of ministry effectively indispensable to our ecclesiology in Moltmann's terms, *assignments* inflexibly essential to the *charge* given to the church, then we have nowhere left to go' (Kindle Locations 2037-41).

This is a particular problem in rural charges like mine. Four of the charges in the presbytery have been without a permanent minister for over four years. In the General Assembly records of the 17th century we read of ministers being reluctant to go north of the Firth of Tay. That continues to be a problem but there is also an alarming number of vacant charges south of the Central Belt.

This is concerning enough in itself but there is also a reducing number of active members of the church to call upon to collaborate with. As I mentioned earlier, the number attending church on a Sunday throughout the local government area, Dumfries and Galloway, is almost the lowest in Scotland at 4.6%, according to the Scottish Church Census of 2016. Consequently there is a particular problem for the south-west of Scotland although this may well be replicated in other predominantly rural areas of Scotland. Before we enlist the help of others, they need to be available to us. As a local congregation, we are addressing this

problem. Although we may have to consider closure of one or more church buildings we are not, as far as I can judge, one of the congregations which 'are never going to grow again and will have to be linked or united or dissolved' (Gay 2017, Kindle Locations 2071-2072).

We have experimented as a congregation with the missional tool 'Future Focus', a resource provided by the Church of Scotland, but with no success in engaging a critical mass to take the project forward. More promising is the start we have made with another, more detailed missional process, 'Path of Renewal.' Optimism for this is based on Path of Renewal's targets, one of which is the people of God who remain at the fringes – the 49% identified in the Statistics for Mission.

For centuries, Langholm achieved full employment in the textile industry and, consequently, in an age when working-class families did not send their children to university, a highly articulate community developed. This still pertains in our predominantly older congregation.

At a time when fresh expressions of church, both with and without capitalised first letters, receive much attention in denominations, congregations and the academy, may I make a plea for balance? James F Hopewell in his classic text *Congregation: stories and structures* wrote that attention to the history and heritage of the congregation may be the best way to discern a more effective pastoral strategy that builds upon its story, assuming, of course, we regard that story as important. He argues persuasively that it is. He promotes a congregation's historically-forged identity over against what it may become and gives support to such as Davison and Millbank (2011) in their advocacy of the depth and insight of a congregation's tradition. The book is too polemical for my taste but I found it a valuable read. It is unequivocal when the authors state (p. 64) '[t]he argument of this book is that the form of the Church embodies her Faith.'

They address a concern of mine, namely that the Body of Christ in a given community becomes disunited through various styles of worship and venues. As they put it (p.66), albeit perhaps harshly, '[t]he Fresh Expressions ideal is for a mixture of network communities. In contrast the inherited church is a network of mixed communities.' Davison and Milbank (p.155) have also prompted me to revalue the places of worship in our parishes (four, three of which the national Church is responsible for maintaining): '[a]t a time when our

localities are being stripped of their post offices, pubs and local shops, it would be cruel and ungenerous to abandon our parish churches and the commitment and solidarity they embody.' Emotive perhaps, but also challenging and not without support. As the authors point out, John Inge (2003, 126 et seq.) argued strongly that Christian theologians had made a serious misjudgement in undervaluing the importance of a 'theology of holy places.'

I have great sympathy for these arguments but the practicalities, especially financial, of maintaining church buildings are daunting. Ours were all built in the 19th century and are constructed with good quality materials. Whilst this is a good thing, it has led to our congregations shying away from maintaining them properly because of the cost of doing so. A vicious circle may ensue resulting in one or more becoming unfit for use. In any event, there are strong arguments that one of our church buildings is on the verge of redundancy; the population of the village is 250, nearly all Buddhist and the regular worshipping congregation numbers only five. There are also strong arguments about the suitability of 19th century buildings for 21st century worship, or, at least, for a congregation with 21st century expectations of comfort.

I have been greatly blessed by the recent appearance of two excellent books: *The Invisible Church* by Steve Aisthorpe (2016) and *God's Belongers* by David Walker (2017). Their focus is very similar and it is interesting to reflect on how both writers subject, amongst other ideas, Roger Standing's concept of the 're-emerging church (2008) to rigorous scrutiny.

Aisthorpe (2016) writes that 'with the exception of… two books… I was disappointed with the quality of literature I found on church-leavers' (p.13). He 'explores the world behind the statistics of apparent church decline and offers an….explanation of some of the processes at work within it.' His outlook is optimistic: 'In the stories of people who share their experiences of believing but not necessarily belonging to any church, a wealth of encouragement, wisdom and inspiration is unearthed' (back cover). He reminds us (p.190) that the Dissolution of the monasteries in 16th century England, Wales, and Ireland included 'the purging of widespread corruption and the hastening of the demise of an ailing institution.' His implication is unmistakable: is the Church of Scotland a similarly ailing, if not failing, institution? Might we be accompanying not only individual congregations to their natural death, as suggested by John Pritchard in his book, *The Life and Work of a Priest* (2007),

but also whole denominations, as their unsuitability finally means they can continue no longer?

The wider denominational picture is beyond the scope of my study but would have an impact on all localities, including ours, if Stuart Murray (2004. 6) is correct when he predicts the closure of the last Church of Scotland congregation by 2033. Aisthorpe, addressing this theme, discussed in recent years by Harry Reid (2001) and Finlay Macdonald (2004 and 2017), is surprisingly bullish (p.190): 'Those who forecast the demise of particular denominations and others who predict that the Church remain on its present course until 'we intentionally act upon it with new paradigms misconstrue the nature of the evidence and the fundamental qualities of the Church.' As we reflect on Aisthorpe's claim that the Church, like each person of faith, is on a journey, we would do well to remember that it is still only 2000 years old, a long time in comparison to the lifespan of an individual believer but not in terms of the life of the created world. Discussing the pain experienced by those who feel guilt about leaving a congregation, Aisthorpe (p.200) makes this memorable assertion: '[w]hen a congregation, …….. sees itself not as the sole legitimate context for Christian journeying, but as a resource to both those who stay and those who pass through, pain associated with different ideas about loyalty and commitment will be prevented.'

David Walker (p.20) describes four groups who 'belong to God and the church in four distinct ways: through people, places, one-off events and regular activities.' With Aisthorpe, he claims that this model of belonging poses a challenge to traditional ways of thinking about Church and mission (pp.12-13): 'this challenge lies in the fact that any one of the four dimensions of belonging has a direct relationship with coming frequently to church…….To put it bluntly, are we in mission to help people become, and become better, disciples of Jesus, or to help them become, and become better, committed members of our regular worshipping community?' Predictably perhaps, Walker has found that the occasional churchgoer is pluralist as regards world faiths. This has significant support in the academy. Further, occasional churchgoers, claims Walker, do not treat the Bible as historically accurate and regard church attendance as very much an optional extra. Nevertheless, they continue to believe in God and in Jesus Christ and make a positive choice to self-identify as Christian. More surprisingly, however, they are not seeking more modern and interactive styles of worship than appeal to regular churchgoers and they are

not, at least according to Walker's research, attracted by notions of spirituality (p.85). Once again then, we are presented with research that challenges the notion that a 'fresh expression' of church fulfills either of the mission aims Walker describes.

Another aspect of Walker's research (p.83) reveals that, not only four-fifths of once-in-a-while attenders but also over half of frequent attenders, wished to agree with the statement 'You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian.'

It's an expression I hear regularly during pastoral visits and other interactions with people who do not attend church regularly. As he observes, this begs the question, what is it other than churchgoing that make for a 'good Christian'? He also suggests that over half of frequent church attenders will not be motivated to invite friends and neighbours into regular church attendance if they believe that is not at the heart of what being a Christian is about. And yet we are challenged by Tim Gibson (2010, 28-29): 'Following Stanley Hauerwas and Sam Wells, I want to say that 'through worship God trains his people to take the right things for granted.' For Gibson, the Eucharist has both ethical and salvific implications.

It is essential that we empower our members, as well as striving to increase their number. As Doug Gay (2017) writes, 'This journey of diversifying worship and empowering members has to spread across the whole of the Church of Scotland in the next decade, and it has to spread beyond worship. There are already many ministries within our congregations which are not carried out by ministers; but there are also many members within our congregations who have not discerned their place in the work of ministry. The future of the church has to involve creating more opportunities for people to serve, but also forming more people to take up those opportunities. While I am arguing that some of these opportunities should involve unbundling work which until now has been mostly done by ministers of word and sacrament, I also believe we need to develop a new understanding of how ministries are going to be shared between ministers and non-ministers' (Kindle Locations 2367-2373).

It is crucially important too that ministers involve themselves in further study beyond their undergraduate theology degree. In the classroom of God, we are one of the teaching assistants.

Yet surprisingly the Church of Scotland, despite its traditional and continued insistence of a university-educated clergy until recently had no dedicated fund for postgraduate research. Additionally, one of the principal supporters of Church of Scotland ministerial students, the Duncan Trust, expressly prohibits the use of its monies for any form of postgraduate study. Alongside the increased workload on parish ministers in a period of decreasing numbers, the overall effect has been a decline in the number of ministers studying beyond the minimum educational requirements of the Church.

Things may improve. The Kirk has now set aside a fund, effective from 2017, specifically to fund ministers involved in postgraduate study. However, it should be remembered that the Church of Scotland's influence at the four ancients is at an all-time low. Doug Gay (2017) again, 'There are no posts left which have to be filled by Presbyterians, or by Protestants and few which have to be filled by Christians. We are now reliant on a de facto situation in which universities happen to have appointed Presbyterians, Protestants and Christians. This could change very rapidly and we would have no way of formally contesting that. Our marginality has been increased by the collapse in the number of candidates we are sending for IME [Initial Ministerial Education] and our dilemmas about reducing the number of recognised centres. When we have fewer than 30 candidates a year entering IME as candidates (in some recent years this has dipped below 15) and we spread them randomly over five centres, the system begins to crash. Some centres have no candidates and most do not have healthy or viable cohorts any more. Universities, understandably, insist on minimum numbers in order for courses to be viable. This means that specialist courses for the formation of ministry candidates are becoming almost impossible to run, unless they can attract additional students.

'All new courses have to be approved by university Senates and it is also the case, within secularising universities, that courses on prayer, spirituality, preaching, mission, etc. are looking increasingly exotic to colleagues scrutinising their academic credentials. Meanwhile, we want universities to keep employing suitable people who can run such courses, even though we are not endowing the posts or even sending them students to take the courses' (Kindle Locations 2107-18). This has a knock-on effect for prospective postgraduate students. Although as Gay observes later, (Kindle Location 2118) we have been fortunate that there are gifted staff in core areas so far but there is no guarantee that will continue. Broadly speaking, it is and will be the same staff who are involved in

IME subjects who will be the supervisors of ministers' postgraduate research. And yet the need for the time and space that postgraduate study makes available for exposure to new ideas, reflection and action planning has never been greater.

I shall conclude with a few thoughts on what we think we are bringing to the world.

Robin Meyers (2015) cautions against the mistake that we know what true Christianity is and that there is an unspoken consensus about what the true and fixed meaning of faith is. 'The greatest illusion of all, however, is the idea that anything resembling early Christian discipleship would be recognised, or tolerated, in the present age' (p.44). Echoing the missional writings of David Bosch, when Meyers writes about resistance to orthodoxy, he is highly critical of the church's tolerance of it: 'dwindling church attendance itself is an act of resistance by human beings who suspect that, deep down, they have been lied to by an institution that often refuses to let them grow up, intellectually or spiritually.....

'[B]oth the message and the purpose of the church today bear almost no resemblance to those Beloved Communities that were first called 'The Way' and were such defiant, anti-imperial, cultural thorns in the flesh of the Roman Empire' (p.50).

Marcus Borg (2011) argues 'the question isn't whether one must be Christian in order to love God or to share this passion [which is the dream of a world of justice and peace]. Rather, the question is whether we can be Christian without sharing God's passion for transformation of ourselves and the world. Can we be Christian without embracing God's passion for a world of compassion, justice and peace..... Christianity.....at its best, is about truth, goodness and beauty. And it addresses the two great human yearnings – our longing for personal transformation and our desire that the world be a better place' (pp.233, 234, 238).

This begs the questions, to what extent does our decline as a local congregation reflect our failure to satisfy these yearnings and are they yearnings felt by those who self-describe as Christian but do not attend church?

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