

General Assembly 2018: Immediate-past Moderator's address by Mr Alan Yates

Monday 9 July 2018

As far as has been possible, the text below includes the deviations from the original text supplied to the URC communications department.

Friends, followers, disciples and apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, may his peace and grace be with you all.

Moderator, I think you'll be pleased to hear that in considering what I was going to say, I listened to quite a few people. First of all came plaintive voices from General Assembly 2016. From there came the plea: 'No more lycra!' I think they might be surprised and a little disappointed.

The second piece of advice is a longstanding piece of advice from my wife. 'Just be yourself,' she said: 'Don't try to be funny or witty, just be yourself!'

The third piece of advice is from my homiletics tutor who said that all great preachers make three points. And so, ... *[a slide is displayed to Assembly showing four points, prompting laughter from Assembly members]*. I want to talk about how I survived; my big fear on taking office; my big concern for our denomination; and then share some encouraging signs.

How I survived: 2016 was a very strange year. We voted for Brexit; Donald Trump was elected... and I was inducted as Moderator of General Assembly! It was just over five years ago when I heard the call to be General Assembly Moderator. For the sake of time, I'm not going to repeat the story (but if you're interested you can find me in the bar afterwards) but with the help of the 'Gideon fleece', I accepted the call with a deep sense that I didn't have the skills needed for the role, but an even deeper sense that God would not let me, or probably more importantly you, down.

However, the closer it came to 8 July 2016, the more concerned I got. The special pair of underpants, for me to wear outside my trousers, had not yet been delivered! *[a slide is displayed to Assembly showing an image of Superman, prompting more laughter from Assembly members]* ... But that wasn't God's answer to my prayer.

On many occasions when I have looked back, I have seen the hand of God providing superb support and guidance; not by giving me super powers but providing me super people. Let me start with Kevin *[Watson]*. I know he's not here, which is a great shame, because I thoroughly wanted to embarrass him. But you can't have everything. Kevin has been a wonderful partner and friend; extremely competent and diligent, superbly faithful and spiritual, and, best of all, accepting and encouraging. Thanking people carries great danger *[not being able to thank everyone]* but I particularly want to express my deep gratitude to our two chaplains: Gwen and Mark. We have been richly blessed by their gifts and, for me in particular, for Gwen's guidance and encouragement. Bernie, if you could pass on my thanks I'd be grateful.

For brevity, I will only mention a few others, but I think there are two men I particularly want to mention for their quiet, gracious, competent and erudite style; please Join with me in thanking John Proctor and Michael Hopkins. *[applause]* And finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Kate, for her wise, patient and practical support. Thanks to you all.

Not only has my time in office been quite hard work, it's been a fantastic great privilege, it has also been a great pleasure. In part due to the fantastic officers of General Assembly, the staff in Church

House, including our comms team, but also our dedicated synod moderators and their teams, and last, but definitely not least, you, the faithful disciples in our churches.

Let me share with you a little bit of my fear on taking office: in 2014, the single biggest topic concerning our denomination was same-sex marriage. It was clear there were (and still are) very strong views held on both sides of that argument, held with integrity. Because these views were based on prayerful study and thought, and not due to prejudice, they seemed to me to be almost irreconcilable. My fear was that I would be one of the moderators who presided over a split in our denomination. I was so pleased that that did not happen.

The fact it did not happen was not merely fortunate, I would argue it was miraculous. For our denomination, this was not simply a passive act of tolerance, but a gracious act of love, enabling us to walk side by side in love and friendship with those, some of whom we did not disagree with. Before you think I'm patting Kevin and myself on the back here, let me be clear that the previous two moderators, David Grosch-Miller and John Ellis, are the ones who helped steer that ship, not Kevin and me. Let me finish this point by giving my heartfelt thanks, not just the moderators and the General Secretary, who through their grace and love, steered us through that time, but also to all of you, who, through your true love of neighbour, you demonstrated the love of God. In the words of Kevin, it gave the 'united' in the United Reformed Church more power.

My third topic. It probably hasn't escaped your notice that our denomination has been shrinking ever since it was born. This has lain heavy on my heart because I did not want the denomination, or the wider Church, to sink into irrelevance. And maybe we, in some ways, have already reached there. When something tragic happens in our country, the press don't ring Church House in Tavistock Square, they ring Church House in Great Smith Street, Westminster.

Also, you'll probably be aware that the average size of our congregations is 35. If you strip out the larger churches ... the average falls to about 30, or even less. Should we be concerned about that? Here's the politician's answer: yes and no.

Yes, for the simple fact that it indicates fewer people know or care about the love of God. Fewer people understand the imperative to love your neighbour. Fewer people recognise that gaining social media likes is not your purpose for being on this planet.

Should you worry about it? No, because for the simple reason that the gift of faith is not in our remit to give, it is the task of our Lord. Without overcomplicating our message, our task is to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. If we are obedient to that command, I think we can let God worry about the rest.

Let me just quickly answer my question on relevancy or irrelevancy. In fact, I would ask you to go and talk to the people you feed, those that you give water to, those who you clothe, those who you care for ... We will never be irrelevant if we continue to feed the hungry, care for the sick ...

Lastly, let me move on to some encouraging signs. I think these signs serve not only to answer my previous concern but also as a summary of my experience as one of your General Assembly moderators.

I set one of my personal objectives to be an encourager of others. However, it seems to have operated the other way around – I came away encouraged. Across our three nations, from Lewes to Kirkwall, from Rhyl to Burnham-on-Crouch, and all stations in between – for those of you concerned about those examples, they are only the extremes of the churches I have visited; they do not

represent the breadth of geography of our denomination – I have been impressed and encouraged by the way the URC is demonstrating the love of God.

All of the large churches I have been to have been fantastic; all exuding energy, commitment, love and Christian service. And I recognise that servanthood like this doesn't come easy, but at this time I would like to particularly hold up some of the small churches. And smaller churches start off at a disadvantage because of their level of resources; financial and human.

[The Moderator grants this speech more time.] What I wanted to do was to tell two stories: first North Avenue URC in Chelmsford. Their membership doesn't even get into double figures and yet they run a successful lunch club and a youth club. It would have been so easy to throw in the towel, close the church and move to one of the larger churches in Chelmsford – and that would have been very unfortunate, as it is the only church building in a very deprived area. Instead, they joined forces with other denominations, particularly the Anglicans in that area, to show the face of the servant Christ. God bless you North Avenue.

My second example is Broad Chalke, near Salisbury, and that recently been publicised by comms for its fifth anniversary. They provide local shop, a post office, community rooms, a community cafe and a worship space. Five members could not have done that on their own; they did it with the help of the local Anglican church. God bless you Broad Chalke.

And so, I can confidently say that stories of our demise are rather premature, particularly if we can work in partnership with others at a local level. So, I implore you all to not let size deter your vision. Whilst not everything that is small is beautiful, being small does not prevent us from being successful.

Let me finish with the words from Zechariah chapter four verse 10, when he warns us ... 'do not despise the day of small things!' Amen.

Alan Yates
9 July 2018