



Photograph: Andrew O'Brien/Church of Scotland

The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh today, during a debate on the Columba Declaration, a historic agreement recognising the longstanding ecumenical partnership between the Church of Scotland and the Church of England and paving the way for future joint working between the two churches.

The Columba Declaration received unanimous backing from the Kirk Assembly, having been approved by a majority of the Church of England General Synod in February.

The Scottish Episcopal Church's representative at the Assembly, the Bishop of Moray, Roth and Caithness, the Rt Revd Mark Strange, also spoke at the Assembly, expressing the churches' common desire to move forward in furtherance of the Gospel of Christ. (read a statement by the Primus of the Episcopal Church here).

Read the Archbishop's address below

It's a huge privilege to be here, and I want to thank you, Moderator, and all of you for your wonderful warm welcome. I want to say what a special privilege it is to stand in the place of so very many distinguished guests speakers who've spoken before me here. And I must say it's cosier than the General Synod. (Laughter.)

You know there are distinct differences between the bones of Becket and myself. The bones of Becket would be briefer. (Laughter.)

I also want to pay a special tribute to the group who worked on the Columba Declaration, all those involved, from the Church of England especially, Peter Forster, the Bishop of Chester, who has worked for long and hard and whose love for the Church of Scotland is well known. There is always, I have to say, a delightful and perverse sense of schadenfreude when speaking at Assemblies in this way. One has the interest of taking part in the Assembly without the slightest responsibility for the decisions. (Laughter.)



It was a huge pleasure, both institutionally but also personally, to have the previous Moderator's presence at our Synod and to hear his speech there in February. It was a privilege for us. We did our best to corrupt him in every way possible (laughter), but the arranged ambush by five bishops in which two would have held him down and three ordained him episcopally misfired. Perhaps another time. (Laughter.)

As a theologically very under-educated Archbishop, I am slowly learning a little. One of the greatest pleasures in learning has been through ecumenical meetings and dialogue. There are clichés which we all trot out on every possible occasion, so let's get them over and done with now: "There is a lot to do although we have journeyed far; what unites us is more than what divides us; our common history tells us... whatever; real unity is invisible; what we need is a new Committee." (Laughter.)

But, at the risk of quoting another cliché of which I was unaware, I want to suggest that the key question for us today, for you today, is not just "what shall we do?" – which is easy to answer with clichés – but "what shall we do NOW?" 'What do we do now?' is a very hard question. It is only askable with any sense where there is vision.

At the risk of inadvertently presenting as profound what is another ecumenical cliché, I want to start approaching that question with an assumption. The assumption is that we are not and never can be united by the process of doctrinal discussion and agreement alone. It is essential, but it is not sufficient. Because we are always already united by a person, Jesus Christ, in whom we worship the Trinitarian God and to whom we bear witness in word and deed. Not a lot else matters if we are doing those two things (worship and witness, and all that flows from them) – and nothing is worth doing unless its rationale and grounding are in those two vocations.

Ecumenism therefore is from above and is person-shaped. The key sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit of God in the life of the church is the creation of a dynamic ordering and profound love amidst welcomed diversity.

If we begin with that assumption, then certain things follow. First, for me at least, is an apology.

The Columba Declaration is one that I support strongly and I hope you will, but the handling of its announcement caused much consternation and deep hurt to the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC). That hurt is exclusively my responsibility and I want to put on the record to you and to them my apology. We know that the goal of unity envisaged in the Columba Declaration cannot be pursued by some churches in isolation from others, and in our context that must mean a particular place for the Scottish Episcopal Church as your Anglican partner in Scotland, and as our immediate neighbour in the Anglican Communion (we have many close links, including ordained ministers moving between our two churches, as we do with the Church in Wales). For this reason there is great importance in the motion at our Synod saying that the Contact Group to take the Columba Declaration forward should include an SEC representative, whom we ask to be a full participant.

Secondly, what the Church of England and the Church of Scotland do next if you vote in favour of the Declaration this morning will be guided not

only by the context of our existing ecclesial structures, but also by the context in which we find ourselves. We are united in witness to Christ as churches of our two nations within the one country of the United Kingdom. That gives particular parameters to our unity in witness.

- Politically, we are united in witness to Christ by our common national context, including the referendum on Scottish Independence in 2014, the recent elections and the imminent referendum on EU membership. Christ, who made us his holy nation, calls us – whatever our views on Europe – to live out that unity.
- Historically, we are united in witness to Christ as churches shaped by the Reformation, with its 500th anniversary next year – including the inheritance of Reformed theology. Jesus meets us through the tumult of historic wars and cruelties, and holds out nail-imprinted hands calling for love, for witness to the good news, not to be perpetrators of the bad.
- Economically, we are united in witness to Christ by the growing inequality of our land; by the suffering of the poor, including food insecurity. Jesus sits with the poor, as we stand before them, in judgement on our disunity.
- Globally, we are united in witness to Christ as churches called to reconciliation, recognising that our relationship has been marked by conflict, including violence and bloodshed in earlier centuries; but now demonstrating what it means to live well with difference in unity, in the context of religiously motivated violence in many parts of the world. Jesus calls from the camps and the roads, from the violated women and orphaned children, the traumatised soldiers... will we show good disagreement?
- Culturally, we are united in witness to Christ as churches called to share the gospel with the whole world, as we have done in the past overseas (for example in the South Sudan), now facing common challenges together, as we do, in this country of secularisation, with declining numbers of regular worshippers and clergy, and standing in solidarity with those whose faith puts them in danger today, or commitment to no faith. Jesus calls us from those lost and wandering, from where he is found, seeking our united voice, our united witness by voice as well as action, confident that in Christ we have the good news that is the only solution to the lostness of individuals and peoples.

At the opening service of our current General Synod last November, the Preacher to the Papal Household, Father Raniero Cantalamessa, said: “In many parts of the world people are killed and churches burned not because they are Catholic, or Anglican, or Pentecostals (and he might have added Presbyterians), but because they are Christians. In their eyes we are already one! Let us be one also in our eyes and in the eyes of God.”

The report to be debated today is about growing in communion through and for partnership in mission, taking us back to the roots of the ecumenical movement. But more than that it is about the call of Jesus Christ to visible unity, so that he may be known.

We know there are serious issues to be faced in our relation with you around recognition and reconciliation of ministries. We know too that while in facing common challenges we have so much we can learn from one another, and so much we can do together. We won't always necessarily find ourselves walking in step with one another, something I've been particularly conscious of, as, like you, we have been considering the issues around same-sex marriages, and following your earlier debate on ministers in same-sex marriages. But what we believe we are providing in this report is a sound framework for us to affirm and build on the agreement we have, for the sake of our common witness to Christ.

All churches today are being called to be renewed in our witness to Christ, confident that in looking to him and being drawn to him we will be led into a deeper relationship with one another. With Alison I pray that the debate today, and implementation of the report if approved, can contribute above all to our unity in witness to the one Lord Jesus Christ, in our place and time – not for our sake, but that God's Kingdom may be seen, and his reality shown in our common witness and worship; and most of all that the poor and the despairing may know that Christ is hope and life.

Thank you.

8 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/archbishop-addresses-church-scotland-general-assembly>