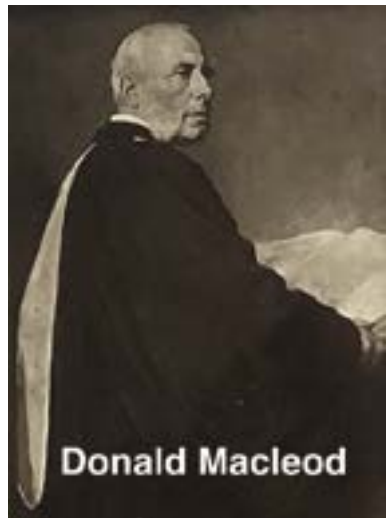


Good Words

Edition No. 603
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This is the 603rd issue of Good Words, started by our ancestors (two brothers) in 1860, stopped in 1910 and restarted in 2025 by their direct descendants (two brothers) we apologise for the 115 year interval.

In 1860, a time of huge crisis in the Kirk my ancestor Rev Norman MacLeod and his brother Donald ran a very cheerful magazine called Good Word. Within a year of its launching it was selling seventy thousand copies all over the world and the writers soon included Prime Minister Gladstone.



Now in 2026 the Church is in huge crisis and after a shameful gap of 115 years my brother Neil and I have relaunched Good Words.

This is issue 603. And it's great!

(Sorry, Donald Trump's style is getting to me)



Norman the first Editor was notorious, loved to dance, do impersonations, write jokes. Had his statue put up in Glasgow's George Square. Luckily Neil and I are far more quiet and reliable, apart from Neils wild bagpiping and my own publishing of the World's first edible newspaper (The Daily Meal), to help with the problem of missed breakfasts.

This issue has mini essays from a senior christian palestinian politician , also Scotland's leading humanist celebrant, then the main eco-minister in Scotland, a legendary minister from Glasgow's Gorbals, and finally an essay from the first Editor of Good words only a few days before he died.

Next issue mid July. Yippee we are up and running again. We would have asked the current Prime Minister to write, but were worried about our image.

We hope you enjoy this latest edition of Good Words. We will be back. Contributions welcome.

Inside -

Essays from Tim Macguire (Humanist celebrant): David Chapman, (Eco Chaplain):
Maxwell Macleod: Rev John Harvey: Norman Macleod (First Editor). News item on Tiberias hotel

Tim MacGuire

(Tim is one of Scotland's leading humanist celebrants and was recently invited to speak at the Scottish Parliament. When we asked him to file an essay for this issue of Good Words we were so excited by his offering that we were delighted when the Sunday Herald asked to print it before us, and do so here. A profoundly punctilious man Tim is also famous for his cooking.)

When Tom Nairn declared that “Scotland will never be free until the last minister is strangled with the last copy of The Sunday Post,” he captured something many Scots of my generation felt instinctively: that the Church of Scotland represented a dour, repressive past from which the country needed to escape.

Twenty-one years ago, when as a recovering Catholic I first stumbled into Humanism, I largely agreed. I imagined an independent Scotland that had shed its Calvinist carapace and emerged into the light of a confident secular European dawn, but - as Woody Allen supposedly said - if you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans, because things didn't turn out quite as expected.

I don't need to tell you that the Church of Scotland was painfully slow to adapt to social change: slow to welcome gay people fully into the life of the church; slower still to permit same-sex marriage. Yes: the Kirk failed to move with the times, so the times moved on without it. You know the stats. In 2001, almost half of Scots identified with the Church of Scotland. Today, only 4% do and something similar happened to marriage.

At the start of this century, the Kirk conducted more than 11,000 weddings a year, but the pattern repeated itself and for the past four years, humanist ceremonies have outnumbered not just Church of Scotland marriages, but all religious and belief marriages combined.

As a Humanist celebrant, you might expect me to rejoice; I don't.

“Rituals,” as Sir Grayson Perry observed, “don't come out of the ether from God.” They're how we create meaning, and when old rituals lose their meaning, we create new ones. Humanist celebrants like me stepped into that space very successfully. We offered ceremonies that better reflected the values and realities of modern Scotland. But ceremonies are only part of what churches do.

For the past thirteen years I have served as the Honorary Humanist Chaplain to the University of Edinburgh, and for the last three I have worked on the Chaplaincy Team at Napier University alongside ministers, priests, rabbis and imams. Although we start from very different philosophical positions, we are united by a commitment to the common good.

And over time, I've come to recognise something important. There are many differences between me and the religious leaders I work beside. But the most important is this: I have a virtual parish. They have a real one. Yes, I build long term relationships with the families whose weddings, funerals and naming ceremonies I conduct. But when the ceremony ends, I leave. Clergy remain embedded in the daily life of their communities in a way I and most Humanist celebrants do not. They visit the sick. They organise food banks. They sit with the lonely. They hold communities together quietly, persistently and often invisibly. Yes, the Humanist Society of Scotland did start a soup kitchen in Glasgow which ran for more than a decade, but now it's become 'Streetcare' - an independent charitable institution in its own right (and it's still doing good work). <https://streetcarevolunteers.co.uk>

The secular Scotland many of us imagined was supposed to replace that infrastructure of care with something better: a strong welfare state, properly funded public services, thriving civic institutions. Instead, we have food banks, social isolation, exhausted carers and hollowed-out local communities. In that vacuum, churches still matter - not because of their theology, but because they continue to provide forms of solidarity and local presence that few secular institutions have managed to replicate.

Humanists have been very successful at building alternatives to religious ritual. We have been much less successful at building alternatives to religious community.

Perhaps that will change - I hope it does. If secular Humanism is to become more than a philosophy of individual autonomy, it must find ways to root itself more deeply in collective life and mutual care.

And if it does, it could do worse than learn something from movements like the Iona Community: the belief that a

meaningful life is built through a commitment to peace, social justice and solidarity with society's most vulnerable. Because if those structures disappear entirely, where - exactly - are people supposed to turn? Tim Maguire is the honorary Humanist Chaplain to the University Of Edinburgh and Napier University. He is also a celebrant with the Humanist organisation, Humankind. <https://humankind.scot>



“ Why should we save the Church of Scotland”?

Rev'd David J.M.Coleman BA. BTh. PgDip.Environmental Chaplain

We should save it because of what it yet could be. Because of what it has been.

Which will involve connecting - or revealing the profound connections - between a sense of the sacredness of the endangered Earth, and the life/teachings of Christ, embodied in the global family that struggles to follow them with love and with justice.

In this, love is the key: love for our neighbour, including even the human neighbour. Even institutional neighbour? Because what we love, we will save, or die to ourselves trying. Or pray at the bedside for a good death. Which in Christian tradition is not unconnected with being 'saved'. Passing into the hands of God who remakes and repurposes every good thing, beyond our knowing and scheming.

“Worthy of saving” is a church, beloved among churches, not worried about that definite article (“THE”), not defined by control, colonial conquest, domination, or any of the other abuses that, historically, have pandered to the temptations Jesus definingly resisted: “Bow down and worship... money, power, oil.... and you'll be in charge!” Aye, right! - as Jesus said.... Jesus, who learned from birds, spoke with trees and scolded seas face to face.

My own ordination vows as a minister of a church, in the same Reformed family, rightly commit me to love for other churches. I take that to heart, which is why I'm writing. This compels me to use a better pronoun than “it”, which turns everything into an expendable, disposable asset. Like those hundreds of community landmarks which have already fallen below a defined bar of “viability”. So people haven't cared? Is that why they stayed away? Have they been encouraged to love?

The twentieth century, in the growing awareness of an environmental crisis, saw churches fixing prematurely on “stewardship” - that janitorial duty to an overlord, without a balancing love and care for the 'property' that is 'stewarded'.

Correspondence and conversation with the current General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed churches, and others around the world, confirms this is “part of the problem”. “Stewardship” is an aspiration far too miserably undemanding for followers of Christ, who have been taught that God cannot be loved without love for your neighbour; for those with whom you are in relationship.

For Christians elsewhere, that obviously includes fellow creatures, on whose wellbeing, science so authoritatively reminds us, we utterly rely.

So that we “love, listen to and fiercely protect God's Creation whom we also are”. [Conversation with Secretary of the Pacific Conference of Churches]

This affirms rather than invalidates a holistic Biblical ethos. And I've seen how faith is deepened, hope nurtured, and joy and community enriched when churches conspicuously embrace a partnership with the Earth. This has to be with eyes wide open, rather than based on the shallow white lie of “everything's going to be all right”. We know it won't be, in our lifetimes. But a church that faithfully encourages realistic spiritual resilience is not just worth saving, but will be a beloved, trusted friend to their nation. Good News.

“They”, the, Kirk, are a community of communities, of which I’ve visited more than most, short of a moderator or two. Communities are sometimes small (-is that a problem?-) long-term faithful, and in rural and island locations, often guardians of sacred places with a much longer life than the current mode of organisation. Custodians of ancestors’ bones, and saints’ crosses. Which belong arguably to the nation -the world - but will have lost something lovable if they cease to have a rooting in genuine devotion.

“Being saved” proverbially involves repentance and conversion. Green Church is More Church. Can we embrace the aspiration without being discouraged by whether or not formal targets are reached?



Saving the Kirk.

Rev John Harvey

We go to church in Gorbals in Glasgow. In the 1960’s and ‘70’s, when we lived in the “old Gorbals”, and the Council was busy demolishing the old tenements, the last two buildings to go were the pubs and the churches – centres of community, and of the spirit of the community.

Gorbals today is still a strong community, with a vibrant community spirit. Lively community activities happen every week – clubs, free meals, support for the elderly and people with addictions, a thriving local Housing Association, one of the top cultural centres in Glasgow (The Citizens Theatre). Sure, there are issues – poverty, unemployment, and everything connected with the current cost of living crisis – but in Gorbals, as in so many similar parts of Glasgow people, look out for each other – asylum seekers are welcomed – good neighbourliness thrives. It’s deemed to be a good place to live.

Our new wee church building is smack bang in the middle of the place, beside the Co-op, the Health Centre, and the Library. It’s open almost week, and tries to make a modest contribution to these and other activities in the community. A Community Development Worker, paid for by the Church of Scotland, works out of the building - and lots of local people use the place every week. We see our activities, exactly as all the others we’ve mentioned, as signs of the spirit of God at work – in fact, we believe God’s spirit is at work all over the place, whether labelled as such or not – the church has no monopoly on God!

Each Sunday, a small group of us gather in the building for the morning service. Maybe 35, maybe 40, sometimes less, sometime more, and we’re a very mixed bunch. Four or five young families with kids; some asylum seekers; some local people; people with higher education; people dealing with addiction or bereavement; people from Africa; a core of elderly people (us included!); and individuals who drop in for a whole variety of reasons, some just once, some over a longer period of time.

Every Sunday service is different. We don’t have our own minister - our minister is shared with a nearby congregation, and he comes once a month. Other services are led by a small group from amongst ourselves, occasionally by friendly ministers from elsewhere. So we get lots of variety, often with the opportunity for us to be involved, and there’s comfort, there’s challenge, there’s often laughter, and sometimes there are tears. It’s a cheery place to be – but also a place where serious issues can be addressed, and struggled with.

One of the wee songs we sing goes:

“God welcomes all
Strangers and friends,
God’s love is strong
And it never ends.”

That could be our motto. Each of us, in our own lives, has been ambushed by God’s unconditional love – known and shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We’re not here to shove that down other people’s throats –

but we're happy to share it, and keen to show it in how we try to live. Someone once said that "the job of the church is to keep the rumour of God alive in the world." As we've said before, the Church has no monopoly over God - and goodness knows we're never seeing ourselves as paragons of virtue! But as someone asked once, when he was challenged about the point of the church: "Who else will tell the story of how the God, who is Unconditional Love, works in the world?"

Maxwell asks "How can we save the Church?" We all know that today in Scotland we live in a secular, multicultural, fragmented, increasingly individualistic and consumer orientated society, anxious, often looking for simplistic solutions to complex problems. We also know that increasingly people want to belong to something bigger than themselves – and that people, mostly, deep down, long to live at peace with themselves and with their neighbours.

For sure, the Church can't offer all the answers. But from our experience, both of decades of belonging to the church nationwide, and of belonging to our wee church here in Gorbals, we know it can, and it does, seriously help. Concentrating on what local congregations are doing, in and for their communities; supporting and enabling local leadership; imaginatively using what buildings there are, and looking to use different ones, ringing the changes in styles and times of services, and above all listening to the real concerns of the people amongst whom they live – all that helps, much is already being attempted.

We can't "save the Church". It's presumptuous to think we can. If God still has a job for the church to do, God will save it – not necessarily as we would like it to be, but as God wants it to be.



The Scottish Eco Army

The Scottish Eco Army.

Good fun volunteer work designed to give the long-term unemployed references. to get them into paying work.

An idea for a new initiative for the long-term unemployed. Not up and running yet, this is just a concept.

Comments welcome

I recently had an ordained American social worker staying who was telling me of a system of encouraging long-term unemployed Americans aged between eighteen to twenty four to get back to work. We have been working up a British version and would welcome comments from those who understand these things better than we do (maxwellmacleod@yahoo.co.uk)

The core issue is that when folk leave school and dont get into work for a number of years employers dont want to give them any work as its too much of a risk.

The solution is to offer them, all be it briefly, good fun volunteer jobs from which they can get a reference.

What is the project?

It's not complex. A simple website listing places where you can get some volunteer work that is both fun and good for the planet. For example, we have a website of a charity that works keeping council owned riverside paths clear for dog walkers. The Scottish Eco Army client phones them, they say we meet every Saturday, come for a couple of hours, and if you stick at it we will fill in your Eco Army " He/she did well " reference/passport, a passport book stuffed with good references which they can then present to potential proper employers.

Joe turns up on time, gets taught how to use a strimmer, works for two hours without using his mobile or stopping and ends up with a good reference from his team leader

Also on the website will be other charities looking for volunteers, and employers looking for staff, provided they have a passport full of good references.

Others we have spoken to include highland hostel owners who have gardens that need tending in the off-season in exchange for free accommodation for a few days.

What exactly do we, the Scottish Eco army folk, do? We provide the website, the print off yourself passport and a bit of backup.

At the core of this backup is the principle that the clients aren't over taught. We don't tell them how to get to the hostel or to the various charities. It's up to them to make sure that the health and safety/ vulnerability protection laws are in place. In short, we treat them like adults and tell them that they are largely on their own. This may sound harsh, but bear in mind that our main aim is to get the clients' jobs and no employers will want to take on those who are not self starters

From our perspective, we will thereby avoid responsibility for our clients when they are on site. We are just effectively a data site, part financed by the government.

The site is also available for early retirement folk looking for interesting work.

Evidently, this system works well in the States, so we are trying it here.

Maxwell.



Bernard Sabella

(Epiphan (Bernard) Sabella is a retired associate Professsor from Bethlehem University with a particular interest in Palestinian-Christian identity. He is also a highly respected Palestinian politican with friends on all sides of the debate. I have walked with him through the markets of Jerusalem and it takes a long time ass he is much loved!)



The Church of Scotland, we are assured, is in a state of advanced decline. One hears this with the tone usually reserved for Victorian patients and endangered species: grave, statistical, faintly fascinated. A 70% drop in attendance, a remaining flock of some 60,000, and the steady hum of those who have already begun measuring the curtains for the funeral.

And yet, one cannot help but wonder: is the Kirk dying, or is it simply being declared dead by people who no longer attend it?

Having had the privilege of attending several General Assemblies in Edinburgh—occasions that combine ecclesiastical seriousness with a level of ceremonial enthusiasm that borders on theatrical—I have seen little evidence of an institution quietly preparing to vanish. On the contrary, I have observed vigorous debate, procedural drama, and enough polite disagreement to sustain a small republic. If this is death, it is remarkably busy.

Of course, numbers matter. One cannot indefinitely sustain a national church on nostalgia, good intentions, and excellent shortbread. But numbers alone do not tell us what a church is for. If the Kirk were merely a weekly gathering of the already convinced, then perhaps its decline would indeed signal redundancy. But that has never quite been its role.

The Church of Scotland has long functioned as a kind of national living room—drafty, occasionally uncomfortable, but open to all. It is where Scotland has argued with itself, consoled itself, and, on occasion, surprised itself. Remove it, and one is left with a curious question: where, exactly, does that conversation go? Twitter (or whatever it is now called) seems an unlikely substitute.

From my own involvement with the Kirk's work in the Middle East, I have seen another dimension entirely—one that rarely appears in discussions of membership statistics. There, the Church of Scotland is not a dwindling institution but a dependable partner, quietly supporting communities that have no luxury of debating whether religion is “relevant.” It is difficult to declare the Church obsolete while it is still busy being useful.

Now, let us turn to the future, where we are told that artificial intelligence may soon take over many traditional functions of the Church. This is, on the surface, an appealing proposition. Imagine: perfectly structured sermons delivered on demand, pastoral advice available 24/7, and committee meetings conducted with ruthless efficiency. No digressions, no delays, no one insisting on revisiting last year's motion for the fourth time.

One can almost hear the collective sigh of relief.

And yet, something feels amiss. For while AI can produce words—endless, coherent, occasionally even wise—it cannot produce the peculiar, stubborn reality of human community. It does not arrive late, it does not sing off-key, and it does not engage in the quiet, unglamorous work of simply being present. In short, it lacks precisely the qualities that make church both exasperating and indispensable.

A fully automated Kirk might be impressively efficient, but it would also be curiously bloodless. One suspects attendance might drop even further once congregants realise that their minister has been replaced by an algorithm with impeccable diction and no need for tea.

Which brings us back to the present moment. The Church of Scotland may well be smaller, less influential, and considerably less certain of itself than in previous generations. But it remains one of the few institutions still attempting to hold together a sense of shared moral and communal space—something that, despite all technological advances, has proven remarkably difficult to outsource.

So before we rush to write its epitaph, it may be worth asking not whether the Kirk is dying, but whether Scotland is entirely sure it can do without it. Because if the answer is “yes,” then by all means, let us hand things over to the machines.

But we should not be surprised if, somewhere down the line, we begin to miss the arguments, the awkward silences, and the deeply human business of gathering for reasons we cannot quite quantify.

And, of course, the tea.



Norman Macleod of the Barony. (First Editor of Good Words 1860)

Final entry in his journal June 3rd 1872, thirteen days before his death.

As for Scotland! The church of the future is not here. We ignore world questions. We squabble like fisherwomen over skate and turbot.

Where is the germ of the church of the future? In what church? In what creed?
In what form of government?

It may come from India, as the first came from the East. But all our old forms are effete, as old oaks, although young ones may grow out of them. Neither Calvinism, nor Presbyterianism . nor thirty nine articles or High Churchism , or low Churchism, nor any existing can be the church of the future!

May God give us patience to wait! It may may be a thousand or three thousand years yet ere it comes, but come it will!



MODERATOR?
WHAT THIS PLACE NEEDS
IS AN ACCELERATOR!

