

***In an exclusive interview for Herald on Sunday readers at Easter, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland talks to Writer at Large Neil Mackay about the existential crisis facing the Kirk and how only a revolutionary reimagining of religion can save faith in the 21st century***

The Right Reverend Dr Martin Fair is about to head out into a blustering gale to start a week long Easter pilgrimage on foot through Angus. The journey will give him time for reflection, he says.

As Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Fair has a lot on his mind – uppermost, the fate of the Kirk. He fears that unless the church takes radical action to redefine itself for the 21st century it “faces extinction by 2035”.

“What we’ve seen is 60 years of decline,” he says, in a wide-ranging conversation with The Herald on Sunday about the “State of Faith” in Scotland to mark Easter.

“If you look back to 1955, the Church of Scotland was at its peak with 1.5 million members. Work that out against a population of five million and it’s very significant. Today, we’ve about 350,000. The graph has declined every year – it’s not wee blips, not an oscillating graph, it’s straight downwards.

“That averages out that the church has lost the better part of 20,000 people every year – through death, people walking away or just deciding ‘I don’t do this anymore’. From the statistics, it’s a story of inexorable decline which will lead inevitably to the last church being closed.

“We lock the doors, put the milk bottles out and go away. If you continue that graph, that comes in about the year 2035.

“What we’re seeing is the withering of an institution, and that institution has been very, very slow to recognise that and respond appropriately. We’ve done the same as Kodak back in the day, deciding ‘this digital thing is nonsense, who’s ever going to want that?’ Or Blockbuster video which made the same mistake, thinking ‘streaming’?

“We’ve got our shops, we’ll hire you videos. We’re like the Ever Given tanker in the Suez Canal – it got stuck. As a big institution we’ve not been adept, or fleet-footed. We’ve not read the signs of the times. We’ve not been adaptable, and so found ourselves somewhat adrift from Scottish society and culture.

“There’s still some within the church who think ‘if only we could turn the clock back’. That’s gone, and the pandemic has accelerated the process of de-churching, as there’s a lot of churches that will probably not open again afterwards. It’ll be catastrophic to their futures.” It’s a stark picture. But Fair’s no quitter. He’s got plans which might not just save the Kirk from extinction, but redefine religion in Scotland in the 21st century. He wants to change the public perception of faith and put spirituality back into public life.

## **Humility and public service**

FAIR wants to return the Kirk to the principles of Jesus – humility, public service, love thy neighbour, good deeds, charity, and kindness. It's a bold, moving philosophy, which even the most committed atheist can respect ... that's if the Kirk carries it through, of course.

He is affable and charming, too, not anyone's idea of a conventional clergyman – as comfortable quoting the Beatles and Manic Street Preachers as the Bible. As a model for his vision of the future, Fair refers to the work his own church has been doing with drug addicts in Arbroath where he's a minister.

For 16 years, he's been caring for hundreds – “and I mean hundreds”, he says – of people suffering with drug and alcohol problems, loneliness, and mental **health** issues.

He set up a little centre – deliberately away from his church so it didn't feel religious – where those in need can just come for warmth, food and a shoulder to cry on. Nobody gets the Jesus talk, he explains. “They don't get hit with the Bible and told to come to church,” Fair adds. “There's none of that whatsoever.”

Fair says eventually these often marginalised folk will ask him, ‘why are you being so nice to us’. It's then – and only then, he insists – that he raises God.

“When they ask, we say ‘because we believe you're a child of God, you're precious and you're of ultimate value. God loves you’.

“The usual reaction is ‘I remember that from school, don't start on that religious stuff, and we say ‘that's fine, no problem’. We share that if people ask us, but if they want nothing to do with that then we'll continue to give them a hot lunch until the day they die.

“It's not a deal we're striking.”

Then usually, he says, after a while, people begin to ask more questions – and today, he adds, there's a “long line of young men and women” who are addiction free and have found faith in their lives.

## **The big idea**

FAIR'S “big idea” is so simple, so basic in terms of the concept of its philosophy, that it's almost audacious: he wants the church to get “on its knees” to the people. This is a minister who wants to walk the walk of Jesus Christ as well as talk the talk –something that will make him stand out as different in the minds of many secular Scots.

“It's absolutely crucial that the position we adopt is one of being on our knees,” he says. “Jesus came to serve, not to be served.” The Kirk became part of the establishment – that's where the rot set in, he feels.

“Ministers were in pulpits – six feet above contradiction. That whole thing has left us completely disassociated from ordinary folk.”

The church, Fair says, has to go back to the people “on our knees, humbly. That’s part of the church moving from the centre of society to the edge. I think we’ll be more comfortable at the edges on our knees, in a disposition of serving”.

He refers to fellow ministers in Glasgow who have handed out 30,000 food parcels to families in poverty during the pandemic. Fair notes that Maundy Thursday was this week – the night Jesus washed his disciples’ feet.

Fair recounts the story of Peter’s reaction: “Peter says ‘oh, not me, you’re the boss, you don’t have to wash my feet’. And Jesus said, ‘oh Peter, you’ve been with me for three years and you still don’t get it. Those who want to be first must be last’. That, metaphorically, is absolutely fundamental to what the church must be in coming days.

“I could meet a young person today whose great-grandparents might have been the last ones who had a connection to the church. Why would they listen to what I think?

“The privileged state the church once had is gone and I’m okay with that. I don’t want to be here because of privilege. People don’t care what you know, until they know that you care.” Christianity, for Fair, isn’t “about those who like to sing hymns on a Sunday, it’s about being where people are vulnerable, fragile and broken – and being alongside them.

“That’s where the church is going. That’s the hope for tomorrow. God hasn’t given up on Scotland.”

### **‘Socialism’?**

HE quotes the Book of Acts, where the followers of the early church “held everything in common, so that those who had much gave, and those who had little were able to benefit. Wow, what a picture of a way for society to organise itself”, Fair says.

If there’s a distinctly egalitarian, even “socialist” flavour, to what Fair says, he’s also got no time for intolerance of any stripe.

He acknowledges that on issues like gay marriage and women in the clergy “the church almost tore itself apart. My view is that I’ve got one job in life: to love people. So let’s just do that and leave everything else aside”.

He talks of a 16-year-old girl who was a lesbian and in a “very strict church”. She took her life. “Let’s just love people,” Fair says. “Could we do that? Isn’t that pretty radical?”

### **Bigotry and sectarianism**

FAIR wants to purge intolerance from Christianity. He’s saddened that if “you ask the average person in the street what the church is [they’ll say] it’s full of homophobic bigots”. Equally, in Scotland, sectarianism, Fair believes, has exacerbated religion’s decline. Again, as he often does, Fair turns to Easter scripture and points to Jesus’ “final discourse with his disciples on the night before he dies”. Christ, he says, “prayed that they might all be one”. There’s no

room for division, in Fair's view of faith in the 21st century. When it comes to sectarianism, he says: "We need a spirit of contrition and apology which owns that stuff."

He likes the idea of differing denominations of faiths coming together under one roof. "There's a Methodist building, there's a Catholic building – let's come together and see what we really need in a Christian church at this time." The message would be clear, Fair believes: "We're all on the same team here."

Part of the reason for Fair's Easter week pilgrimage around Angus on foot is to reconnect to the sites of early and medieval Christianity in Scotland – like Arbroath Abbey and the Celtic Christian standing stones at Aberlemno. As he speaks of the almost utopian way the early Christian church organised itself, he gives a nod to a verse from Jeremiah, saying: "Look for the path and find the ancient way and you'll find rest for your soul."

Fair takes a long, historic view of where organised Christian religion went wrong. He traces it back to Emperor Constantine who made Christianity the official religion of Rome in the 4th century AD. "I look back on that in some ways as the beginning of the end. We became part [of the establishment]. How can you speak truth to power? Where we are at now is an opportunity for the church to rediscover itself."

### **Closing churches**

AS part of this 21st-century "reformation" of religion, Fair says it's not just inevitable that there will be fewer churches, but also the way churches look and what they do will change too. The number of church buildings has fallen from around 2,500 in the Kirk's heyday to about 800 today – even that's currently "way too many", he says, and more will inevitably go. Churches need to become "sanctuary spaces" for ordinary people whether they're religious or not, he says. Fair has experimented with keeping his own church open throughout the night for those in need.

He tells of one man who arrived at 2am desperate for someone to talk to after his brother in Canada died. He talked, asked to light a candle and left after an hour. "I've never seen him again," says Fair.

"But the point is we were there when he needed us. There was space for him to do what he had to do – that's absolutely part of my vision."

It's all part of Fair and the Kirk's new policy called "Fresh Expressions of Church". He wants to see churches open at 3am on Friday night in Glasgow as clubs empty, for people who might need help in any form. "A sanctuary is a safe space, we need churches functioning like that."

### **Digital religion**

IN the past, various denominations have pinned their hopes on the online world reinvigorating religion. It's got a part to play, Fair believes, but this reconnection with ordinary people in need is much more important to him than digital gimmicks. Where Fair thinks the online world will help is with people who are curious about spirituality but nervous about attending church.

He believes that in our secular age there's an increasing number of people who identify as atheist or agnostic yet are aware of and troubled by the emptiness of the material world. "I consistently find people who have nothing to do with the church who are genuinely looking for something more than an everyday material life," Fair adds.

It's a "leap to walk through the door of a church" if you've never been before, he admits. Fair recalls an elderly parishioner, unable to make his regular trip to the bookies on Grand National day, who asked Fair if he'd put a bet on for him. "I'd never been to a bookies," he says. "I was out of my depth. I was timid, I didn't know what you do. I thought, 'this must be what it's like for somebody to walk into church for the first time'. There's a lot of demythologising that needs to go on."

Allowing curious folk to simply hover online and watch a church service would be a start, he believes.

### **Exceptionalism**

QUASHING any sense of "exceptionalism" by churches is vital if faith is to survive, says Fair. He worries that recent legal moves by some churches to have lockdown restrictions lifted so people could attend services could have given the wrong impression. The Church of Scotland didn't take part in the legal action. "We've worked with the Scottish Government," he says, "and were happy to have our buildings closed. We understood it was a temporary, public health measure."

With every right, he says – including the right to worship – comes responsibility. "We have a right to worship, but we have a responsibility to keep people safe, so we took that responsibility very seriously and therefore willingly and voluntarily were ready to close buildings and not gather together during the worst ravages of the pandemic because we cared about people. In other words: lay aside your rights to meet for the sake of your responsibilities."

So, was the legal action a case of "exceptionalism"? "It comes back to privilege versus humility and service," he says. "To be fair to the complainants, I don't think they were coming at it from a privilege-claiming position, but it's how it looks, the optics are important."

There's a rather beautiful simplicity to Fair's vision of faith. The church, he believes, should be about helping people and address three basic – but enormous – questions: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? "At some point we all ask those questions and my great sadness is that in recent history in Scotland, people, if they've asked those questions, haven't thought to themselves, 'I know I'll go to the church because that's where I'll be able to further that spiritual search' ... that's a million miles away from what the public perception is."

### **The wake-up call**

WHEN it comes to the existential crisis facing the church, "the wake-up call is here", he says. Most people like the idea of a church at the end of their road, even if they don't attend or don't even believe. "If we don't change, one day we'll wake up and the church won't be at the end of the road anymore."

Fair believes that if the Kirk is to survive it will “look completely and utterly unrecognisable in 10 years”. The church can’t just be about I am worship on a Sunday morning, he says. “We need to get out of our buildings and go to where people are.” He refers to the parable Jesus tells of the shepherd who counts his sheep and finds he has 99 and one missing.

“The shepherd leaves the 99 and goes off to find the one, right? I’m saying we’re almost at the point where the shepherd has now just got one left. We need to find the 99 – and yet the model of the church has largely been looking after the one that’s left.”

As with all Kirk moderators, Fair’s leadership of his church lasts one short year. Come May, he’ll be gone, returning to his life as a simple Arbroath minister, and another moderator will be elected. Fair’s vision of the Kirk’s future though will live on – it’s now engrained in church thinking.

As he gets ready to hit the road on his week-long pilgrimage by foot across Angus, he’ll be thinking of life after leadership, and the chance to spend a little more time with his family. At 57, his three children are grown up – one just left to join the fire service this morning – and his wife is a teacher. With the moderator’s job, he says, there’s an old saying which goes “you arrive in a limousine and leave on the bus. You just go back to the day job, you’re an ordinary punter again. I kind of like that”.

And his final thought for The Herald on Sunday readers at Easter? After the year we’ve had that’s easy: “Light always triumphs over darkness.”