

Scottish Bible Society (Bicentenary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S3M-4453, in the name of Dave Thompson, on the bicentenary of the Scottish Bible Society.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that 2009 is the bicentenary of the Scottish Bible Society (SBS); applauds the work of the SBS over the past 200 years in taking the bible into the world, including Scotland, and in promoting its use in all aspects of national life, including family, work, church, health, education and elsewhere; commends the innovative and creative ways that the SBS has developed to deliver the bible's message of peace, hope, love and transformation to societies that would otherwise lack access; highlights the contribution that the bible has made and will continue to make to countries throughout the world, including Scotland, as a sure foundation on which to build a strong and sustainable society, and wishes the SBS success in partnering with the Bible Society of Brazil to convert a bus for the north east of the country to provide on-the-spot medical and dental treatment as well as a sheltered scripture-learning space, which will help to foster community inclusion and belonging.

17:02

Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am delighted that the powers that be agreed to this debate and that I have the privilege to propose this motion of congratulation on the bicentenary of the Scottish Bible Society.

The Scottish Bible Society, which was originally known as the Edinburgh Bible Society, was formed in 1809 less than a mile from here. It has since gone from strength to strength and is now active all over the world. The society is not linked to any one denomination but seeks to promote the Bible with people regardless of any church connection. That is one of its strengths.

In preparing for the debate, I thought that it would be appropriate to explain the purpose of the Scottish Bible Society. I can do no better than use the words of the society's president, Lord Mackay of Clashfern, a man after my own heart, to whom I had the pleasure of

listening a fortnight ago at the Kingsview Christian centre in Inverness. In his introduction to the bicentenary issue of Word@Work, Lord Mackay said:

"The Apostle Peter had many wonderful experiences but one of the most outstanding must have been when, with Jesus and James and John, he heard the voice from heaven. 'This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased.'

Towards the end of his life, recalling this experience in his second letter to believers, he said 'And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark

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place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.'"

Lord Mackay concluded:

"This 'more certain word' is the scripture, the Bible. What a privilege the Scottish Bible Society has enjoyed for 200 years providing this light to many parts of the earth as well as here in Scotland."

This light is a message of peace, hope, love and transformation that has relevance to all aspects of national life, including family, work, health and education. It is all the more important in an age that is blighted by addictions, greed and selfishness and that has seen the erosion of community and the rise of the cult of individualism, for which we are all counting the cost.

Unlike a millstone around your neck, the Bible does not stop people from doing what they need to do; it helps them to do it. There is no doubt that it has contributed greatly to the life of Scotland, and that it is a sure foundation on which to build a strong and sustainable society.

We need only look at our language—be it Gaelic, Scots or English—to realise just how embedded the scriptures are in our lives, although most people think that that is just an old wives' tale. They do not realise what an influence the Bible has had and how often they quote from its pages every day.

I wonder how many members noticed the use of biblical phrases in my speech so far—or have I just been casting

my pearls before swine? Excluding the quotes from Lord Mackay, there were seven phrases: "the powers that be", "gone from strength to strength", "a man after my own heart", "counting the cost", "millstone around your neck", "old wives' tale" and, of course, "casting my pearls before swine". See if you can spot some more in the rest of my speech—there might be a wee test at the end of it.

As I have said, the Scottish Bible Society is active all over the world, and a little bird told me that the society began to provide translations in Nigeria in 1862 and Malawi in 1884. It expanded into China in 1863, Japan in 1875 and Korea in the 1880s. Those activities laid the foundation for today's active churches in all those countries and many more.

The society does not just provide scriptures; it also tries to help with medical facilities, for instance. That brings us to the Brazil project, which is the baby of Elaine Duncan, chief executive of the Scottish Bible Society and a good Samaritan. Elaine visited Brazil in 2007 and sailed on a boat called the Light in Amazonia, which is run by the Bible society of Brazil and which visits riverside communities up and down the Amazon. In the true spirit of doing to others what we would like them to do to us, it provides an holistic

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ministry, encompassing medical and dental treatment, health education and citizenship training, all underpinned by the presentation of God's word.

During Elaine Duncan's visit, she heard about the needs of the north-east sertão region of Brazil, where some 40 per cent of the poorest Brazilians live, and she learned of the desire of members of the Bible society of Brazil to practise what they preach and extend their ministry into that impoverished region, using a road vehicle. That immediately reminded her of the Scottish Bible Society's own mobile Bibleworld studios, which takes the story of the Bible to children all around Scotland. So, the project known as light in the north-east was born, with not a doubting Thomas in sight.

The aim in this, the Scottish Bible Society's bicentennial year, is to raise £200,000 for the multi-purpose vehicle, which will provide health care, dental provision, primary education resources, Bibles and a sheltered scripture learning space to the remote sertão region of north-east

Brazil. To date, more than £175,000 has been raised from supporters who know that it is better to give than to receive.

What a great way to celebrate a birthday: giving, not receiving. Does that not say it all about the Scottish Bible Society, and the God who gave his very own son so that we could have eternal life?

17:09

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Dave Thompson on his motion and on securing this evening's debate. As he said, the Scottish Bible Society, which is very important in Scottish life, has an important and admirable aim: to provide the word of God to people worldwide in a language that they understand, in an appropriate format for their use and at a price that they can afford.

It goes without saying that, for Christians, the Bible is the most important book in the world. It is a history, a narrative of the life of Jesus Christ, the inspired word of God and a practical guide to everyday life. However, it is not just Christians who should recognise the Bible's importance. It has been hugely significant in the development of Scotland as a nation.

One of the objectives of the reformation in Scotland was to ensure that the people had access to and could read the word of God in their own language: no more would it be the preserve of clerics. That ambition that drove reformers such as John Knox to promote universal education, with the consequence that, by the end of the 16th century, Scotland was probably the most literate nation in the world. One does not have to be a

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Protestant to recognise the historical significance of the reformation, and it remains to me a source of regret that the Scottish Government has no plans to commemorate its 450th anniversary next year. However, I say gently to the Minister for Community Safety, who is present, that there is still time for even those sinners to repent and change their stance.

The Scottish Bible Society does a great deal of excellent international work, to which Dave Thompson referred in his excellent introduction to the debate. However, the challenge faced today here at home by the Scottish

Bible Society is how to bring the word of God into the 21st century. At a conference on education that the Scottish Conservatives ran two weeks ago, I was struck by the contribution by Professor Lindsay Paterson of Moray House school of education. He said that when he started his career in lecturing teaching students more than 20 years ago he could make biblical references in his lectures, confident that they would be understood by his students without explanation. However, he said that that is not possible today, because familiarity with the Bible is no longer the norm among the young people who come to study. Incidentally, he also said that the same applies to Shakespeare, so there are clearly wider issues at play.

The Scottish Bible Society is aware of that disconnect and is trying to address the issue by working hard to find new and exciting ways of bringing scripture to congregations across Scotland and to a wider audience. For example, this year, four performances were backed by the SBS at the Edinburgh fringe, including a comedy about the book of Genesis called "In the Beginning".

We know that congregation levels have been in steady decline over past decades. According to data compiled by the group Christian Research, by 2010 the number of Scots who attend a Sunday service will fall below 10 per cent of the population. Nevertheless, the Scottish Bible Society works hard to provide materials for congregations across Scotland, and it is constantly looking for new ways of engaging people with Christianity.

One of the best ways in which it does that is through the Bibleworld exhibition in Edinburgh, which is a resource for schools and church youth groups. A visit to Bibleworld helps children understand how the gospel came to Scotland and continues to be spread throughout the world today. Children can dress up in biblical costume as a Roman soldier or a fisherman and take part in interactive quizzes about the life of Jesus. It is a very valuable project and well supported, and it shows what innovative ways can be devised to draw a new generation to the Bible.

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My thanks go to the Scottish Bible Society and its volunteers and fundraisers. Because of their efforts, the Bible is a source of inspiration, strength and comfort, not only here in Scotland but in countries worldwide. Their

work is to be praised and our heartfelt thanks are given to them. I congratulate the Scottish Bible Society on its 200th anniversary—long may its good works continue.

17:13

Karen Gillon (Clydesdale) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Dave Thompson on securing the debate, and I welcome those in the public gallery who have come from across Scotland for it.

From St Ninian and St Columba, to David Livingstone and Eric Liddell, to modern-day Christian movements, churches and organisations such as Tearfund Scotland and Christian Aid, the Bible has inspired countless Scots to look beyond themselves to the needs of others. The Scottish Bible Society has spent the past 200 years since its inception on 4 August 1809 seeking to highlight the relevance of biblical engagement in transforming society in our nation and across the world. The SBS has remained faithfully committed to Bible translation and provision of the Bible to people across the whole world. In doing so, it recognises the imperative connection between the message of the Bible and the real-life, day-to-day issues facing ordinary people across the world.

The Scottish Bible Society was established as great urban poverty gripped 19th century Scotland, with population rates exceeding welfare and housing provision, and with declining standards of living. At the same time, the institutional relationship between the state and the church was weakening. As a result, church members in Scotland began to carve out their role in the public sphere as education activists, colonial critics and missionary supporters.

The Scottish Bible Society's sensitivity to the societal challenges of the day, as well as its belief in the relevant wisdom of the Bible in contributing to meeting those challenges, is as strong now as it was 200 years ago. The society's faithful commitment to promoting the biblical message of personhood, of justice and equity and of belonging has laid the foundations of 21st century national and international commitments to—to name but a few—human rights, fair trade, debt cancellation and community cohesion.

Here in the Scottish Parliament, the aspiration that is contained on our mace—that we will represent the people of Scotland with "Wisdom", "Justice", "Compassion" and "Integrity"—can also find its

reciprocal values in Christian scripture.

The Scottish Bible Society has been devoted to the promotion of biblical principles internationally

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as well as in national life. At around this time last year, when my daughter Johann was born, a small contingent of Scottish Bible Society staff and volunteers embarked on a trip to Brazil. My good friend and mentor Maureen Clark was among them. Taking with them many familiar stereotypes of Brazil as a country rich in cultural and sporting prowess, they found the reality of the poverty in the favelas both startling and humbling. From speaking to Brazilians during their trip, the group became all too readily aware of the needs among that nation's poor, particularly for health care provision. David Thompson has already articulated how the group is now raising funds to support a mobile health unit. Despite the difficult economic situation in Scotland, the Scottish commitment to offer support to and solidarity with those in need is clearly unchanging.

I saw similar approaches when I met representatives of the Scottish Bible Society during a parliamentary delegation to Malawi. I was similarly moved by the challenges that Malawians face as they say prayers that we take for granted. For people in Malawi, "Give us this day our daily bread" means absolutely that.

In both those countries and throughout its bicentenary, the Scottish Bible Society has always encouraged an holistic partnership between faith and action. At home, the interactive displays of Bibleworld, the free insertion of "The Glasgow Gospel" in a recent edition of *The Herald*, and the presentation of the DVD "The Passion" to Scottish secondary school pupils all reflect the Scottish Bible Society's creative commitment in 2009 to the 200-year-old promise to present the Bible in a way that people can understand and engage with—and at an affordable price.

In the face of contemporary urban poverty, family and community breakdown, and cultural and racial divisions, a committed united biblical Scottish church is an essential partner as a force for good in challenging such concerns. Indeed, in an age of scepticism over the role of faith initiatives of any kind, the practical demonstration of faith in action as a force for social justice can only be positive. Working alongside other faith groups,

Government agencies and third-sector organisations, the Scottish Bible Society is equipping the Scottish church with the inspiration and example to articulate an agenda for social transformation. The society joins a long legacy of faith-based activism that contributed to promoting literacy for all in the 16th century, the abolition of the slave trade in the 19th century and, more recently, the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which resulted in more than \$88 billion of debt cancellation.

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In the opening verse of Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith's specially commissioned hymn to celebrate the Scottish Bible Society's bicentenary, we read:

"Light on the path, a lamp about our way,
wisdom to lead us through the longest day,
guiding our steps as once the Saviour trod:
here in the Scriptures is the word of God."

In closing, I again congratulate the 200-year-old Scottish Bible Society on the constructive impact that it has had here in Scotland, which was once known as the "Land of the Book" in Brazil, Malawi and other far reaches of the world. I wish the society's members every success in all that they do in the future, and I acknowledge them as partners with us in building a better Scotland in the years to come.

17:19

Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): Amazing is the power of faith, for I can truly say that I agree with every word that has been spoken so far in the debate.

I should declare an interest, because I am greatly honoured to be a trustee of the Scottish Bible Society. I thank and congratulate my colleague Dave Thompson on securing this debate to celebrate its bicentenary.

The mission of the society, which is part of a worldwide network of 145 societies serving 200 countries, is to provide God's word to all people in a language that they can understand, in a format that they can use and at a price that they can afford. The Bible message is made available in all formats—Bibles, CDs, DVDs and software. I have seen modern-day media being used at first hand in Bible house, where the most up-to-date audiovisual resources that are available bring the Bible stories to new life.

The work of today's Scottish Bible Society is based on a long tradition of Scots taking the Bible and its teachings to the wider world. That tradition continues to this day. The Scottish Bible Society has moved with the times to present and broadcast the unchanging wisdom and truths of the Gospel.

I recommend a visit to Bibleworld at Bible house in Edinburgh. Careful testing and retesting for clarity of text and ease of understanding, and a range of helpful guides that are based on the highest levels of scholarship, all ensure faithful adherence to the Bible's message.

Participation in activities spreads into and beyond the churches to schools and other organisations through a Scottish Bible Society that welcomes all to share in its good news. Its influence is worldwide and its translations span the

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globe. I know because I have a Bible in Chinese that I purchased at Bible house in Edinburgh.

The work of the Scottish Bible Society crosses all continents and frontiers, and it knows no boundaries. I have listened to reports of the work that it does through its Bibles and bandages for Brazil project, which reaches out to remote areas, creates employment, assists personal and spiritual development, and combats poverty and disease wherever they exist.

The inspiration of the Bible brings hope and practical help through the positive work of the society. At home in Scotland, the Glasgow Bible is but one example of the society's innovation and desire to reach out, whenever possible, in the language of the people.

I wish a happy 200th birthday to our national Bible society and thank all who work in, organise and fundraise for it. I thank the office-bearers for their constant faith and faithful witness, and I wish the society a long life and success in the continuing story of Scotland's outreach of the Christian gospel nationally and worldwide.

17:23

The Minister for Community Safety (Fergus Ewing): I congratulate Dave Thompson on securing the debate

and on allowing us to have such a debate this evening. I also thank all members who have taken part in the debate.

As Dave Thompson and other members have done, I congratulate the Scottish Bible Society on reaching its bicentenary, which is a significant landmark. I fully endorse its key messages of peace, hope, love and transformation to societies with which we share the world.

We have all learned from the Bible at an early age the importance of meeting—in an open and inclusive way—the needs of people who are disadvantaged, whether they are poor or in ill health, and whether they are living in despair or are depressed. We cherish those values. Such support underlies the work that all of us seek to do, even though we sometimes come at it from rather different perspectives. I think that I have been cast in the role of a sinner by Murdo Fraser—which is probably not the first time that has happened over the past 10 years, as members might recall.

Dave Thompson mentioned sayings that first appeared in the Bible that have become famous; he spoke about casting pearls before swine. Given that I am addressing the Presiding Officer, she might think that it is more a case of a swine addressing a pearl. I am cognisant of another quotation—from Matthew chapter 19, verse 30,

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which many of us might want to ponder as we approach all sorts of elections:

"But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

I prefer the latter part of that extract.

To be serious, I want to praise the work of the Scottish Bible Society. Members have alluded to various aspects of its work. Andrew Welsh mentioned that it has worked in China for many years. I think it is correct to say that Andrew Welsh is a speaker of Mandarin; he is also modest. He will know about the role that the society has played in China. In 1987, the Amity Foundation and the United Bible Societies opened a large printing press in Nanjing that was capable of printing 12 million copies of the Bible per annum. Donations from Scotland have supported that work and kept the cost of the Bible for poor rural Chinese people—such people often work for

50p a day—to a minimum.

The long history of connections between Scotland and Africa—in particular Malawi—has been referred to. I know that Karen Gillon, as a result of direct experience, has taken a close interest in Malawi and has visited there at least once. I know of her evident care about the conditions in which people in that country live, and I know about the contribution that she has made, as she will appreciate. For many years, Scottish printers who have been linked to the Scottish Bible Society have produced scriptures for the Sahara and Nigeria. Bibles have been sent to Malawi for almost a century. In response to HIV/AIDS, the Bible societies in Africa have formulated literature and imaginative teaching material for sufferers, carers, contacts and those who are at risk. That literature and material has found an enthusiastic response well beyond the religious community.

Borneo has not been mentioned. I have been assured that Scottish printers have developed useful and unusual skills: New Testaments for hot and humid Borneo required humidity-resistant paper and cloth, anti-cockroach glue for their spines, wrapping in tarred paper to withstand motorised-canoe transit up jungle rivers, and packets sized to fit local backpacks for onward carriage. No one can argue that we are not a practical people.

As well as taking Bibles to people abroad who do not have them, the SBS works to persuade people at home who have easier access to Bibles to read them. I think that Andrew Welsh mentioned that its Edinburgh headquarters contains the SBS Bibleworld exhibition, which I recommend to all members.

I think Karen Gillon mentioned the SBS partnering with the Bible Society of Brazil to convert a bus for the north-east of the country to provide assistance, including on-the-spot medical

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and dental treatment. That is surely an excellent example of the positive action that Scots are taking throughout the world to help those who are more disadvantaged than we are.

In our own country, we should not, of course, tolerate any form of religious intolerance, regardless of whom it is perpetrated against. The one Scotland campaign

continues to send a clear message on that front. It is also reasonable to say that we are leading the way in many respects in our interfaith work in bringing together people across churches and various faiths. However, there is always more work to do.

In conclusion, we cannot afford to lose our aspiration to be a welcoming, cohesive, inclusive and diverse society. We must stand together as a nation—as one Scotland—to make a better future for all people in our society. By working together, and perhaps by putting into practice some of the tenets that we learn of in the Bible, we can continue to build a fair, diverse, competitive and prosperous Scotland of which we can all be proud.

Meeting closed at 17:29.

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