

Staff Blog: My Faith-links Roadtrip!

Grace O'Donovan
2018

Member Services Officer, Grace O'Donovan, shares her highlights from conversations across Scotland with our members involved in faith-based links to Malawi.



On **Saturday 16th June 2018**, the SMP welcomed members from across Scotland to its annual **Faith Links Conference** at the City of Edinburgh Methodist Church. It was an opportunity to bring together, and listen to, those across Scotland involved in a faith link with Malawi. Through a live WhatsApp group we also hear first-hand from Malawi about the importance and value of the role of faith in governance, how important the contributions of faith groups in Scotland are to their Malawian partnerships, and the role of faith in international development.

At the Faith Conference I heard directly from members about the value of personal contact, and of face-to-face discussions and interactions. While we hold regular topic-focused forums that bring practitioners, professionals,

students, academics, businessmen and women, and third sector workers together, part of what makes the faith community unique in our membership is their holistic approach to partnerships, their Malawi links, and international development. That emphasis on interconnection is part of what made the Conference so successful, having designed its agenda around *sharing*, *exchanging*, and discussing the *personal*. It was after listening to our members tell their own stories, that I decided to embark on a faith-links road-trip around Scotland. I wanted to hear more of the personal value of partnerships, and provide a listening ear for an important, though at times under-represented, part of our membership.

While most of our members lie across the Central Belt and are able to frequently attend the events and forums we host, key faith groups farther afield include Aberdeenshire, Argyle & Bute, and Ayrshire, even as far as Orkney. During the planning stages, I decided to target key areas that were relatively easy to



reach on a one-woman journey: the Borders, Fife, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Ayr, and Oban. As most of our faith members are working professionals, but connect with their Malawi links through their faith groups, I decided it would be best to host these gatherings on Saturdays, to give more people the opportunity to come along and attend. I also decided that the best environment for these meetings would be in cafes, making the setting informal and personable – there to chat, discuss their partnerships over a coffee, and get to the heart of the conversations through personal connection.

My first excursion was in the Borders, in a small town called Walkerburn. Not having visited the Borders on many occasions, I drove down from Edinburgh on a rainy Saturday morning feeling nervous as to whether many would attend, and whether it would be beneficial for those who did, as well as myself. It was an opportunity to learn and listen, and I also hoped it would bring the chance to get to know our membership on a more personal level.

I was met with a warm welcome, and after a round of coffees were ordered, I learned that those in attendance ranged from the World Mission group of Peebles and Melrose Presbytery, to independent international development

workers, and members of the Borders Council. They brought partners and friends, and many who had followed the work of the SMP for years, but had never been able to attend an event or met with one of its staff.

In total, about 15 of us sat in a small café and chatted about the history of their Malawi links, where their partnerships were now, the challenges and highlights they'd experienced, and I was sometimes asked for support on various things. It was a unique opportunity to sit, chat about my

own history and experience with international development being from South Africa, and to contribute meaningfully in person, rather than over the phone or through an email, as is often the means of communication in the professional world. It was also an opportunity to personally invite them to upcoming events, and explain more about our aims and goals as an organisation, and how best we can support them going forward.

My next visit the following Saturday, was to Aberdeen. A longer journey made more rewarding by the knowledge that the Aberdeen Presbytery was hosting visitors from Malawi, and that they'd be coming along as well. After trying to say 'Malawi' as loudly as possible to the barista in the hopes that the members I'd never met before would know I was from the SMP, and not just a woman alone at a café with copies of a Faith Conference Report to share, this tight-knit group and I sat down to chat. We shared Malawian handshakes, coffees, and our personal connections with the partnerships. What made this Saturday morning even more rewarding, was hearing the feedback from the Malawian visitors that our



approach to engaging members of the faith community and our long-term goals were aligned with theirs, and that it made the friendship far more enriching.

I visited Glenrothes in Fife, where I met with a few of our members from both churches and faith-based organisations, and this time, the most useful aspects were actually the sharing between members, offering support to each other and resources. Commonly asked questions like shipping goods to Malawi, were easily answered when one of our members present was of The Bananabox Trust, which has recently been set up to send containers to Malawi. It was an excellent reminder that the benefits were not only to be shared between the SMP and our members, but between our membership itself.



Travelling to Oban, a longer and more treacherous journey on the roads across Scotland, I met with members from the Netherlorn Churches in a seaside café on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Those attending were from two larger faith groups on the West Coast, and we engaged in lively debate over approaches to

some of the common challenges faced when church linking. It was an upbeat, and useful opportunity to hear different ways of addressing similar issues, and also made me realise that a platform for our faith members to share questions and answers amongst each other would be a useful tool across our membership.

Importantly, while many of our members fall into distinct areas of partnership – health, education, agriculture, etc – our faith members overlap and cross over into a range of them. What arose from these chats is the realisation that many not only do not attend for geographical and logistical reasons, but because there is not yet a platform or forum specifically for the work of our faith groups, and many feel underrepresented outside of the faith community, even outwith specific denominations.



We often bring members together or host events according to the Scottish Government priority areas, like health and education, but there is yet to be an open space specifically for those who work across all of these areas, but share their own interconnection through faith.

While Glasgow and Ayr were both postponed for numbers, the road-trip was undoubtedly rewarding. It helped me gain a better understanding of this specific part of our membership, allowed me to get to know many on a personal and interconnected level, and also made me realise that there is much progress to be made in advancing and better supporting these members. For any of you reading whom I met this summer on a Saturday morning in a café somewhere in Scotland – please do stay in touch, and I hope to see you all again soon! For our wider faith membership, please watch this space! Plans are coming together to better support you and your partnerships going forward, and I look forward to meeting more of you soon.