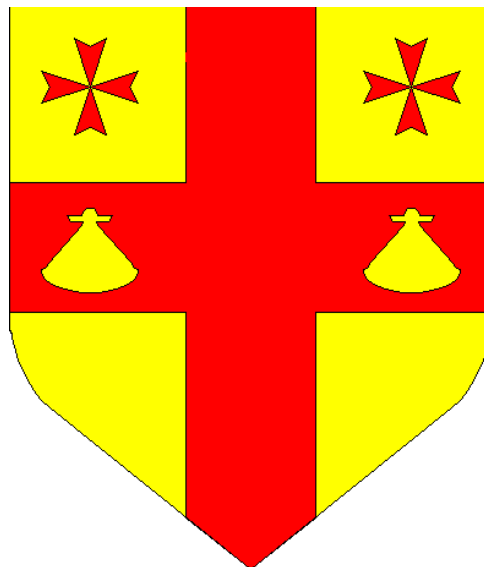


# This is my Story This is my Song

Reminiscences and Musings of a Maverick Presbyterian

Alasdair Bothwell Gordon



Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Isidore of Seville

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The time is surely coming, says the Lord God when I will send a famine on the land: not a famine of bread; or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

Amos 8:11 (NRSV)

For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God  
I Peter 4:17 (NRSV)

Never ask, "Oh why were things so much better in the old days?" It's not an intelligent question

Ecclesiastes 6:10 (GNB)

Where there is no vision, the people perish

Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

Jeremiah 31:31 (NRSV)

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.

Joel 2:28 (NIV)

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.

Joel 2:25 (KJV)

Run the straight race through God's good grace

Lift up your eyes and seek his face;

Life with its path before us lies;

Christ is the way and Christ the prize.

[John S B Monsell]

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## ***Foreword to First Edition***

This little booklet is at least semi-autobiographical in that it covers certain aspects of my own life and my various careers. The booklet also looks through my eyes at the current state of the Church of Scotland, an organisation for which I have both affection and respect but of which I am not uncritical.

I have divided the booklet into two parts:

- Part 1 (This is my Story) deals almost exclusively with my life history and my somewhat ambivalent relationship with the Church of Scotland.
- Part 2 (This is my Song) looks through my eyes at the current state of the Church of Scotland and how I see things changing and developing in the future.

I was prompted to put pen to paper as I recently passed my seventieth birthday and have come to realise that I am now living in the later chapters of my life.

This booklet is certainly not an academic treatise nor does it pretend to be a work of originality or of great insight. The booklet, especially Part 2, is both unashamedly subjective and opinionative. Some people may well consider it to be highly opinionated.

The reason for including some autobiographical material is to put myself in context. So, I have dug a little bit into my own past. I have done this in summary form and have missed out a considerable amount of what could be tedious and irrelevant details of my personal history. So, it is not a full autobiography.

I have also kept the names of living people to a minimum as I have no wish to embarrass anyone. Responsibility for what is recorded on the following pages rests with me and with me alone.

There are comments in the booklet that some readers could well find upsetting, unsettling or plain downright annoying. I have tried to be honest. I have no wish to offend anyone. I am not setting out to justify myself, score points or settle scores.

If people choose to take offence at anything that I say in the following pages, that is their option and their choice. If I have been unfair or unduly harsh, I am sorry. I hope too that at least some readers will find my comments interesting and stimulating.

We have an established and honourable tradition in the Church of Scotland that principles should not be confused with personalities. I wish to adhere to that tradition.

This booklet was mainly written during the month of July 2013. Subsequent events may cause at least some of my comments to go out of date quite rapidly.

To avoid doubt, I do not consider that my opinion is the last word on any subject.

This is *my* story, this is *my* song!

Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton,  
South Lanarkshire  
Scotland

July 2013

## ***Foreword to Fifth and Final Edition***

I am grateful to all of my friends who made comments on the first, second, third and fourth editions of this booklet. I *do* actually listen to what people say and in some cases I have taken their comments or criticisms on board.

Some people were kind in their responses. Others received my various thoughts graciously, albeit with politely disguised irritation. Some said nothing at all, which leaves me guessing.

I have revised and virtually doubled the text over the course of time. I have also corrected a number of minor errors and updated certain factual information.

Let me emphasise again that this booklet makes no pretensions to being either a literary or scholarly work. It is written in a conversational style.

As before, I take sole responsibility for all comments and interpretations in the booklet. If there are times when I sound harsh or critical, please bear in mind that the person whom I criticise most is Alasdair Gordon.

In March 2018, after having enjoyed many years of very good health, I was suddenly taken ill and diagnosed with terminal cancer. This fifth edition will, inevitably, be the last.

This is *my* story, this is *my* song!

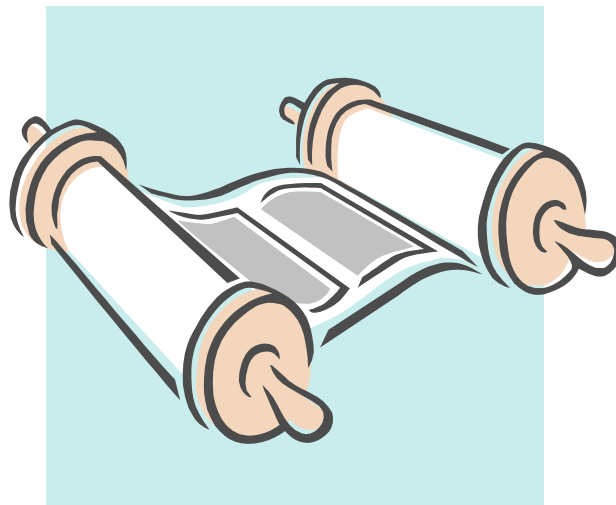
Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton,  
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August 2018

# Part 1

## This is my Story



## Early Years and First Call to Ministry

I am an only child. This may account for the fact that I do tend to be somewhat self-centred and self-opinionated although I hope that I do not present myself as arrogant. I would not, in all honesty, describe myself as a natural team player. People who know me, and are well-disposed towards me, will probably say that I have always been quite an independent thinker. Those who are less well-disposed may consider me to be somewhat of a maverick or, perhaps, even a bit of a loose cannon. I certainly have the reputation across the board for being unpredictable and for often surprising people by what I do and say. My own mother said of me that I was a “dark horse” and she was never entirely sure what I was thinking. When I was a child, she used to claim that she could read me like a book. The truth is that she and I both knew that this was completely untrue. As an adult, I have sometimes irritated people by my inscrutability.

So, although I have a very long connection with the mainstream evangelical tradition in the Church of Scotland, I have never been one who blindly follows any one party line. In Kirk politics, I have often taken a pragmatic approach, which some colleagues, at times, have found both puzzling and frustrating.

I first saw the light of day in Aberdeen during World War II. In fact, I was born on 20 April 1943, the day before the worst air-raid to hit that city. At the time, my parents were resident in Peterhead (Aberdeenshire) and my father was Principal Classics Master at Peterhead Academy. I still consider myself to be a “Peterheid loon” and have a great affection for that charming, if somewhat chilly, little town.

Not surprisingly, people can see in me some similarities to both of my parents. However, I am not obviously like either of them. In particular, I do not seem to have inherited many of their respective abilities and talents!

My father, Charles Gordon, was somewhat of an intellectual and had about him the touch of a Renaissance man. He did not have an easy young life. His mother, a strong, stable and resourceful lady, died when he was a young teenager. His father had been invalided out of the First World War. Charles very much had to make his own way in the world. After mopping up many school prizes at Robert Gordon's College in Aberdeen (where he was a scholarship boy), he managed to clock up two First Class Honours degrees in different subject areas when such awards were much rarer than they are



now. He was a brilliant linguist. Although on paper he only had schoolboy French, he was often complimented (by French people) on his elegant and accurate written French prose.

Dad had a lifelong interest in cryptic crossword puzzles which would have left most people standing. Even in his last illness and only days away from death, he was still solving the Sunday Times "Mephisto" puzzle!

Yet, although most people thought of him as a linguist, he also had a lifelong interest in Mathematics. During the time when he was Rector of Dunfermline High School, if a member of the Maths department was absent, he would willingly step in and teach such areas as calculus and trigonometry and solve complicated algebraic equations. I have often thought that, with his unique insights and knowledge, he would have made a good code breaker. After he retired, one of his neighbours was a lecturer in mediaeval French at Aberdeen University. He used to often bring in texts of documents written in obscure and archaic French mixed up with smatterings of (often ungrammatical) Latin. Dad could almost invariably decipher and translate them.

After his death, I made a point of depositing his personal papers, writings and other items, such as his University Greek medal, to Aberdeen University Library archives for preservation. I am glad that I took that simple step. Too much of our social history finishes up on the skip.

In spite of his academic achievements, Charles was always modest and unpretentious. He carried his learning very lightly. Whilst some people have compared me unfavourably with him on an intellectual basis, he himself never once made such an unhelpful comparison. He had no wish for me to be a carbon copy of him, simply to be true to myself. I do readily admit that I am not half the man that he was.

In 1968, at age 60, Charles retired from his post as Rector of Dunfermline High School, after tenure of 20 years and took up a new post of Research Lecturer at Moray House College of Education. This was with a view to researching and delivering training to head teachers and potential head teachers on efficient methods of school timetabling and general school administration. This was, at the time, somewhat of a pioneering area on which Charles had established himself as quite an expert and perhaps it was something that particularly appealed to his mathematical leanings. There were no computer programmes available in those days. He was virtually

"head-hunted" by Dr Douglas McIntosh, formerly Director of Education for Fife, who had just taken up the post of Principal of Moray House. Charles was somewhat surprised at the invitation as his relationship with Dr McIntosh over the years had not always run entirely smoothly or even amicably.

In due course the need for the service grew and Charles became Director of the new Timetabling Advisory Service at Moray House, travelling all of the country, from the South West to the Shetland Islands, presenting seminars and also attempting to rescue despairing head teachers.

For a period of about 18 months, he also served as an Advisor in Education to the Irish Government, an appointment that has always had about it an element of mystery. Charles never knew why he had been invited to take up this role. However, he greatly enjoyed his trips to Eire and especially his repartee with some of the teaching nuns.

Charles was even more surprised - and somewhat amused - to discover that a street in Dunfermline, near to the High School, had been named "Gordon Terrace" in his honour, shortly after he retired.

Charles had always been careful not to align himself politically. West Fife, at that time, was staunchly Labour and I suspect that if he had been prepared, even half-heartedly, to wave the Red Flag, certain honours might well have come his way. The only honour he actually received was the award of a Fellowship of the Education Institute of Scotland (with whom he had a long and somewhat ambivalent relationship) for "signal services to Scottish Education".

I remember that Charles used to maintain staunchly that he would never agree to serve on a local authority education committee after he retired. Throughout all of his teaching life, he had been an apologist for the position that there should be representation on these committees by current members of the teaching profession. Only a few months after his move to Aberdeen in 1968, he was co-opted on to Aberdeen County Council Education Committee, where he served happily for many years. Never say "never"!

My mother (Gena) was much more artistic. She came from a family for whom music was very important. Gena was a brilliant pianist (LRAM in pianoforte), a competent organist, a good singer and she could turn her

hand easily to drawing, painting, embroidery, cooking, baking and such like. How far, if at all, I have inherited any of my parents' talents and attributes, other must judge.

I was always close to both of my parents and still miss them.

I have been connected with the Church of Scotland for just about as long as I can remember. My parents were both "Kirk" people. My father was an elder for most of his adult life. As a schoolboy and as a student, he had attended Torry United Free Church in Aberdeen, where the father of his best friend, John Guthrie (later long serving Church of Scotland minister at Cullen), was minister. Torry UF was then, as now, a staunchly evangelical congregation. My mother was brought up in church culture as her father (my grandfather, Alex Sinclair) was an enthusiastic and committed church organist in Peterhead from the age of 18 to the age of 80.

My own earliest recollection of church was being taken to an infant Sunday school in Bridge Street Church in Wick sometime around 1945. At the time, my father had recently been appointed Rector of Wick High School.

Throughout my childhood and my teenage years, God was very real to me and I do not recollect having any particular problems of doubt. This means that I cannot point to a great "conversion" moment in my life when, as it were, I saw the light. I cannot really remember a time when I hadn't seen it although, like many people, I have blown hot and cold over the years.

In 1948, when I was aged five, our family moved from Caithness to West Fife, after my father had been appointed Rector of Dunfermline High School. This move was a huge culture shock for me. Apart from Sunday school, I had never really interacted with other children before. In Caithness people tend to speak quietly and avoid eye contact, whereas in West Fife they tend to be quite loud-mouthed and "in your face". It seemed to me that everyone was shouting. I found this scary and I can only describe my first day at Canmore primary school in Dunfermline as among the worst days of my entire life. Fortunately, I did settle down surprisingly quickly. Children are much tougher and more resilient than we sometimes imagine.

Primary school was happy enough for me. It was a very different world and school was certainly low-tech by current standards. In the infant class, we were still often using slates and the building was illuminated by gas. Paper

was in short supply in these somewhat austere post-war years. Sweets were also strictly rationed and I believe that did me no harm whatsoever. Kids of my vintage were pretty fit and well enough fed. There were very few obese children (I doubt if there were any in my school) nor did we seem to be affected by the diverse allergies that seem to dog so many children today. The great fear at that time was contracting polio, fortunately now a thing of the past in the UK.

I doubt if any of my former teachers would have described me as in any way troublesome. I was a quiet child and basically did as I was told. I managed to keep myself out of scrapes. However, I remember when I was aged around nine, a rather rough boy tried to pick a fight with me in the playground. I punched him so hard that I sent him flying. I am not proud of doing so but it did demonstrate to my contemporaries that, even if I was quiet and solitary, I was not going to allow myself to be bullied.

I remember very vividly the early 1950s with the unfolding of various important events - the Festival of Britain, the death of King George VI, the conquest of Everest, the breaking of the four-minute mile and, of course, the Coronation in 1953. In those times, the general feeling was optimistic and forward looking. Rationing had recently come to an end and people were moving into new modern houses with proper bathrooms and kitchens. Our primary school was wired for electricity for the first time. Parents and staff raised sufficient funds to provide a school radio system. There was still a real sense of community and moving forward to better things. This contrasts with today, where so many people seem to be highly individualistic, competitive, insecure, cynical, disillusioned or angry.

At the time of the Coronation, there were some popular songs (and some were better than others!) surrounding the event. One of these began with the words "Elizabeth of England..." When we were learning it in class, I sat silent with my arms folded. The teacher stopped playing the piano and asked me why I was not singing. I replied politely but assertively, that the Queen was not just the Queen of England, that she was Queen of Scotland too and so it wasn't fair! The teacher gave me the strangest look - a mixture of smile and frown.

Anyway, nothing further was said on this subject and I always remained silent thereafter at any class renderings of this trivial ditty. Once again, I had demonstrated my unpredictability and individuality! I also learned something of the power of passive resistance and standing my own ground.

Not long after this event, when I was aged ten, I contracted viral pneumonia. Apart from my diagnosis with terminal cancer in 2018, this is the only time in my life when I have been seriously ill. The doctor was in a state of considerable anxiety as he had lost a strong young farmer to the same virus only the week before. Antibiotics were of no use as it was a virus. I was comatose and withdrawn. I sensed something was wrong because of my parents' forced jollity and their whispering with the doctor outside my bedroom door. Children may be small, but they are not stupid. The doctor was visiting me up to three times a day, although unable to do anything of consequence. I thought that there was at least a possibility that I was going to die. In fact, I asked my mother if I was going to die and her immediate laughing refutation of such an idea was totally unconvincing.

I wasn't really afraid since I did actually believe, with a simple and childlike faith, that Jesus would take me to heaven. I was a bit worried, however, as to how I was going to manage without my Mum and Dad to look after me. I did not realise at the time how difficult it must have been for my parents to face the real possibility of losing their wee boy, especially an only child. In any event, the crisis passed, I made a full recovery and have enjoyed remarkably robust health throughout my adult life. This is something that I never did take for granted. My diagnosis with terminal cancer in March 2018 has shown that we can never know what lies ahead of us.

During our twenty year stay in Dunfermline I went to Sunday school at Dunfermline Abbey and, as a young man, I became actively involved in the life of Erskine Church which was, at the time, located in the centre of the town.<sup>1</sup> This congregation subsequently moved out of the town centre and relocated in a residential area. On my last visit to Dunfermline in 2013, I was sorry to see my old church boarded up and derelict although I believe there are plans to convert the building to community use.

In my early teens, I was positively affected by the "Tell Scotland" movement of the 1950s and the visits of the late Dr Billy Graham. Dr Graham made a particular point of working with local churches throughout Scotland and indeed insisted upon it. This was a time of real refreshing and renewal and its effects were long lasting. Even people who would not have described themselves as card-carrying evangelicals surprised themselves by

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<sup>1</sup> *Autumn Leaves* Volume 2: 25-46. Also *Whose Faith Follow* pages 10-19

being caught up in the momentum, just as had happened in the previous century with the revivals led by DL Moody and Ira D Sankey.

There was, at the time, a young doctor in Dunfermline who had a severe drink problem. He was on the verge of losing his career, livelihood and family. In those days, the police were able to turn an occasional blind eye to drink driving in a way that certainly could not be tolerated today. However, he was on his last warning. Without telling anyone, the doctor in question went to the Billy Graham Crusade in Glasgow and "went forward" in the Kelvin Hall. He experienced a remarkable healing and never touched a drop of alcohol again. In typical Scottish understatement, people in Dunfermline remarked that there must be something in this religion stuff, right enough!

In my mid-teens, partly as a result of visiting Oberammergau on a school holiday in 1959, I seriously thought about converting to Roman Catholicism. I loved the ritual and order as well as the more mystical aspects. I was also very much aware that for practising Catholic people, their religion seemed to make them happy, whereas the opposite sometimes seemed to apply in Presbyterianism! As this was before Vatican II, the Mass was still being said universally in magisterial Latin, which aesthetically greatly appealed to me, although I make no pretensions to being a classical scholar. Anyway, the Roman Catholic Church had a narrow escape in that this adolescent phase soon passed and I returned to the fold of the Kirk.

Both as a child and as a teenager, I was somewhat of a mystic and a day-dreamer. (I probably still am.) I was often, it seemed, somewhere else. I generally preferred my own company to that of my peers. Even now, although I can be reasonably outgoing and friendly, I still value a certain degree of solitude.

As an older child and then a teenager, I liked to indulge my life-long passion for matters horological. For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by clocks and watches of all kinds. To my mother's despair, kindly friends and neighbours would sometimes give me an old clock to play with and this would keep me amused for hours. As time went on, I developed quite a reputation for being able to repair wind-up alarm clocks, on which everyone had to rely in those days. I remember a neighbour, somewhat shame-faced, coming to the door with a box explaining that he had taken his "Smiths" alarm clock to bits and couldn't get it together again. Could I do anything to help, especially as his wife was more than a

little annoyed with him? Pretty soon, I had it reassembled and up and running. I was also regularly invited by neighbours to come and adjust their pendulum clocks when, especially after Spring Cleaning time, they had been moved and put "out of beat".

My parents were concerned that I spent too much time on my own. They felt that I would benefit from the company of young people of my own age. I was sent to join first the 2<sup>nd</sup> Fife (YMCA) Cubs and then the Scouts at a later date. I think this was good for me and in many ways I enjoyed it. I did not much care for the annual camps with their rain-sodden tents, terrible food and unspeakable sanitary arrangements. However, in those days such conditions would have been considered by our parents as character forming. Maybe they were!

At a later date, I was connected with the Boy's Brigade, an organisation for which I also have considerable respect. For a minister, dual nationality can sometimes come in handy when it comes to uniformed organisations!

At school, I was very interested in religious studies. In my time, the exams for the Scottish Higher Leaving Certificate were held just before the Easter holidays. This left us with a summer term that was filled with interesting (and non-examinable!) activities and projects. I chose as a religious studies project to go "In search of Saint Serf", a Celtic Saint, known as the Apostle of the Ochils. I cycled for miles over several Saturdays, accompanied by a long-suffering school friend (whose daughter, Rev MaryAnn Rennie, is now the Minister of Dunfermline Abbey).

We were very fortunate at Dunfermline High School in having a specialist teacher in Divinity, Rev Edwin S Towill, an Anglo-Scot who came originally from Carlisle and had enjoyed a very successful parish ministry in Edinburgh. He had a remarkable understanding and tolerance of teenagers, whilst at the same time establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries. He had his own unique way of opening up religious debate and making people think. He also had a wide knowledge of church history and understood its many traditions.

He was one of the few people whom I have met who could actually be "all things to all men" and yet maintain his own position and integrity. He seemed to be equally comfortable preaching in Dunfermline Abbey as in the local Baptist church where he was an established favourite. I think he taught me to see that it is important to know what you believe and why you

believe - but equally important to understand why others sometimes take a different position - and to be able to respect that tradition. Mr Towill did a great deal to foster my own self-esteem and I owe him a considerable personal debt. It is with regret that I say now that I don't think I ever thanked him properly.

In my sixth year at school, with Mr Towill's encouragement, I wrote a booklet entitled "Lochore and Ballingry - A Parish History" <sup>2</sup> which was also serialised over three weeks in the local newspaper, "The Dunfermline Press". My teachers and peers expressed considerable surprise. Teenage schoolboys do not generally write articles for newspapers. I was told (neither for the first time, nor for the last time) that I was a "dark horse". The articles gained me the school Divinity prize, one of the very few prizes that I have ever won throughout my entire life.

I was very well behaved at Dunfermline High School, although by no means academically distinguished. As my father was the Rector of Dunfermline High School, I maintained a low profile throughout my time there. Some fellow pupils and teachers were somewhat wary of me, fearing that I might tell tales out of school. I never did, nor would my father have dreamt of putting me into such an invidious position. Nevertheless, my experience at school did tend to foster my existing tendency to be somewhat solitary.

I was told in later life that, both at primary and secondary school level, I enjoyed the reputation among my teachers as being the one pupil in the class who was most likely to ask a really awkward question. Some people might say that I have not greatly changed in that respect.

At school, I absolutely hated games and gymnastics, I suppose largely because I am not a natural team player. I was fortunate in that my gym teacher was very understanding and did not force me. I was allowed to go running or swimming on my own or with one or two pals to count as the equivalent of a gym period, which was very tolerant for those times. I still have absolutely no interest in any kind of sport, either as a participant or a spectator. I have only once in my entire life been to a football match and really could not understand why hundreds of people were getting so excited over a few men in ridiculous shorts kicking a bag of wind round a field. However, I am well aware that this is very much a minority view! It would be a very dull world if we were all the same.

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<sup>2</sup> *Autumn Leaves* Volume 2: 12-24



During my later years at school, I attempted, with rather limited success, to foster an interest in music, hoping that I might just possibly have inherited some of the talent that was on my mother's side of the family. I went for piano lessons, with very little success. Like many adults, I regret that I did not persevere. I even went to a music camp that was organised for older school kids by Fife County Council. This took place during the Easter holidays, based in Abington, South Lanarkshire in what had been a prisoner of war camp. It was as though little had changed since the war. The dormitory huts were primitive and cold and there were few decent washing facilities. The food was sparse and everything seems to be watered down. This was not the kind of grub that teenage boys enjoy. My generation, being wartime babies, had been brought up not to turn up our noses at any food, but I think this was the worst fare I have ever endured. However, occasionally we were given a Scotch pie which even the camp school kitchen staff could not water down. These were like manna from heaven and even today, the sight of a Scotch pie brings a smile to my face.

I also have had a great interest in hypnosis and altered states of reality since I was a schoolboy. I often put myself into a hypnotic trance, something I taught myself to do. I see no problem with hypnosis being used in Christian circles although some people will rush to condemn it, usually out of ignorance and prejudice. There is no question of occult influences or of forcing anyone to do what they do not want to do.

I also see great value in the responsible use of Christian meditation. I am interested to see the increasing use of Mindfulness in a Christian context, even though its origins are not specifically Christian. To me, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.<sup>3</sup> It may seem odd for someone who is known to be in the evangelical tradition of the Church of Scotland to be somewhat of a mystic. I am sorry if I don't fit the template. As I have already said, I do not always tow any party line.

I was ordained as an elder of the Church of Scotland in Erskine Church, Dunfermline at the tender age of 21, which, in retrospect, was probably far too young. I was also a member of the choir which was a great place to learn to sing in harmony. It has stood me in good stead.

After leaving school I read for a degree in law (LLB) at Edinburgh University. It was actually considerably easier at that time to get into the

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 24:1

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