

Science and Religion Forum Conference 2017

Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion

Bishop Grosseteste University, Longdales Road, Lincoln, UK

The Gowland Lecture

The Revd. Jennifer Brown

Some Reflections on the Gowland Lecture –Every year at the Science & Religion Forum conference, the after-dinner lecture on the first night of the conference is the Gowland Lecture, a talk open to the general public. This year's lecture was a talk titled *The Space Between – What Happens when Compassion Becomes the Boundary Marker* given by Professor Liz Grant from the University of Edinburgh. Prof Grant's area of expertise is palliative care, and she has worked extensively in sub-Saharan Africa.

One might wonder what palliative care has to do with the overall theme of this year's conference, 'Mental Wellbeing, Neuroscience and Religion'. As Prof Grant made clear, palliative care and mental wellbeing are intimately linked. Those in at the end of life often experience things like depression, anxiety, loneliness and exclusion, as well as physical discomfort or pain. Palliative care includes not just care of the body, but also of the mind and the spirit. As she made clear in her lecture, mental health for all of us is linked to physical health which, in turn, is linked to environmental health. Unfortunately, humanity has created a world in which we live in an unhealthy environment, be that the physical environment which is affected by pollution and climate change, or a social environment driven by economic criteria, technology and an 'us versus them' mentality.

This could have been a really demoralising talk, but instead it was inspirational. Prof Grant didn't minimise the scope of the challenges humanity faces, but she did emphasise the role that compassion can play in rising to those challenges. Compassion connects us to those who are suffering and helps to make them real to us. By sharing in another's sufferings, we are moved to provide practical help and, even where the help we can offer is small, coming alongside someone to offer

genuine care and concern, offering dignity and affirming their value, can make an incalculable difference.

Prof Grant offered a challenge to the Church, namely to practice compassion and to show the world what genuine compassion looks like. This is a challenge that I hope the Church will take up –the challenge to stand against the ‘us versus them’ society in which we live; to show that value isn’t about economic productivity, but learning to live well. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12, we are one body and when one part suffers, all suffer. But if the body is healthy, then all the parts flourish.