



Humanity, Opportunity, Passion, Empathy

Christine Allen

Congratulations to friend of *Thinking Faith*, CAFOD's Christine Allen, who has been awarded an honorary degree from Liverpool Hope University. As she received the award of Doctor of Humane Letters in July 2024, she spoke to other graduates about the hope she has encountered and experienced in more than 25 years of tackling poverty on a national and global level.

I have worked all my life with people and communities who are bringing hope amidst despair. They have been not just in some of the most difficult and notoriously war-torn places around the world, such as Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, or of course Gaza and Ukraine where wars still rage; but also, as was the case in my early days with the Archdiocese of Liverpool working with community groups, in places closer to home, such as Kirkby or Netherton.

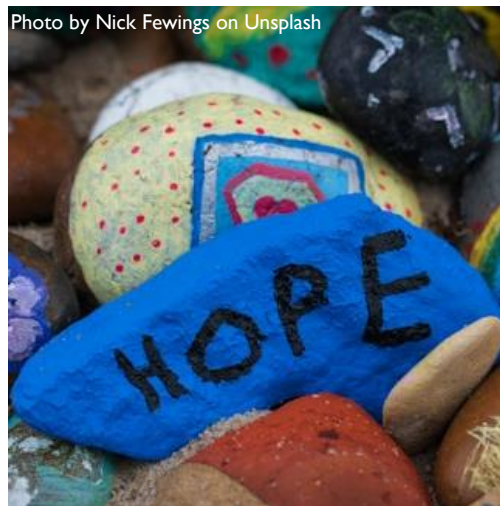


Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash

It is easy to feel a lack of hope in our world today. Amidst continuing and new conflicts, increasing climate uncertainty, growing poverty and inequality, and the rise of populist, nationalist politics, it is easy to forget that there are also many people working for justice, in social movements and as activists, as well as ethical consumers, feminists and so many others seeking to turn the tide every day.

I work for CAFOD, the development agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, and part of the global Caritas family, Hope is one of our values. Not some blind optimism, but something that transforms despair, feeds love and fuels our work. Hope exists *alongside* grief and fear. It is inspired by beliefs – our work is rooted in Scripture, and draws on and lives out Catholic Social Teaching – as well as people: the resourcefulness and strength of our supporters, volunteers, local partners, and the people and communities we seek to serve.

The writer Rebecca Solnit in her book, *Hope in the Dark*, reminds us that: 'Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable, an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists ... It is the belief that what we do matters.' It's easy to be seduced by the certainty of both sides. Living in that space of ambiguity is a necessary skill and ever-present task in our world today.

So I want to offer you four words to reflect on as you embark on your lives – where I know that what you will do will really matter.

Humanity – all around the world I see instances where people's humanity is being eroded, undermined. Even in helping people or making a difference, it is vital to work in such a way as to promote the dignity of people. If we are open to being moved by our common humanity, then it's much easier to build, and rebuild, dignity. When we are more human ourselves, when we bring our vulnerabilities and are more open to being affected by people, we see our connections to one another and then, of course, our responsibilities towards one another. By being more human we can bring a real hope, because we are all people with dreams and we recognise how powerful it can be to help other people fulfil theirs – like the women, victims of violence in DRC, who were making soap and charcoal balls to sell in the local market to rebuild their lives.

Opportunity – during our lives we will have many opportunities and chances to make decisions. They might be big or they might be small. But the question is: what will drive you in your decision-making? How will you use your opportunities for the good of all? Saint Oscar Romero challenged us when he called us to ‘aspire not to have more, but to be more’. You have already taken that opportunity – in graduating today. When might you take those future opportunities to be more?

Passion - it is easy to feel hopeless when you think you are stuck on a treadmill, when you do not have a sense that what you do makes a difference. So, think about what drives you. What gives you energy? Go with it. Because we do need sustaining. Life can be a tough gig. While we can associate passion with energy and drive, it can also mean – as in the case of the Passion of Christ – to suffer, to bear or to endure. Sometimes we just have to hold on. I remember meeting a group of women in South Sudan whose community had been torn apart by violence – houses set on fire, people killed (I was standing by the cathedral, just in front of a mass grave), the women’s community savings box ripped open.¹ They had nothing. But with resignation, they said they would rebuild for the sake of their children. They knew they could, because they had done it before. For the sake of their children.

My final word is **empathy** – to feel connected to people is about putting your feet in their shoes. Feeling how they feel can give you better insight. Sometimes talking about hope can make people furious! It can be too much of a challenge. I’ve been accused of being naïve, that when I grow up, I’ll see the world differently. However, I’ve been affected by too many people whose lives are shaped by poverty, inequality, violence, or other such precarious situations, which means that they are the people that I want to stand alongside. Empathy enables us to feel those human connections and inspires us to continue.

You will have spotted that those four words – Humanity, Opportunity, Passion, Empathy – spell HOPE. Apologies for the cliché! But there is a reason. You bring hope, but you also bring it alive. You *are* hope.

The values of Liverpool Hope University – faith, hope and love – remind me of something said by the Christian writer and thinker, David Wells, who recently addressed CAFOD staff and volunteers. He said: ‘Faith gets you up in the morning, love brings you back home again. Hope makes the sandwiches for the journey.’

Today heralds the start of a new stage in your life and a new journey. I hope that you consider your humanity and work for the good of all; that you use your opportunities wisely to serve others and act in solidarity; that you follow your passions, what gives you life, helps you endure the tough times; and that your empathy with others makes you a whole, rounded person.

In this world that is often without hope, you are hope. May you bring hope to others.

Christine Allen is Executive Director of [CAFOD](#). This text is adapted from an address given to a [Liverpool Hope University](#) graduation ceremony at Liverpool Cathedral on 24 July 2024.

¹ Village Savings and Loan schemes are like our Credit Unions, where people pay in small amounts and can borrow. In communities like this in South Sudan, there are no bank accounts, so the money is kept in a cash box with three locks, the keys of which are held by three different people.