

General Assembly 2017 podcasts by the Revd Douglas Aitken

1. Saturday 20 May: morning

Welcome to Edinburgh and the 2017 meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The first part of the morning session on the first day consists of formalities. The Moderator, the Right Reverend Dr Russell Barr, led the Assembly in worship before presenting the name of the Reverend Dr Derek Browning, minister of Morningside Parish in Edinburgh, to be Moderator for 2017-2018. Having consecrated Dr Browning and handed over the Moderator's ring and pectoral cross, Dr Barr assumed the title Very Reverend, while Dr Browning becomes Right Reverend.

The new Moderator offered a brief word of thanks to Dr Barr for his services over the past year and then called for the Queen's Commission to her Lord High Commissioner to be read. The Lord High Commissioner for this Assembly is the Queen's daughter, Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, the Princess Royal. Dr Browning on the other hand has 'run' the Assembly for the past three or four years as Convener of the Business Committee.

During the opening worship the Moderator announced the death early this morning of the Very Rev Dr James Weatherhead, former Moderator and for 11 years Principal Clerk of the Assembly. The prayer that followed was shared by the Moderator's chaplains and closed with gratitude for the life of James Weatherhead and a blessing for Her Grace the Lord High Commissioner.

The Queen's letter was read and Her Grace addressed the 835 Commissioners, Delegates, Guests and Youth Participants that make up the Assembly.

In her address the Lord High Commissioner said that she first visited the Assembly aged 18 when she accompanied the Queen on a visit; and she was Lord High Commissioner in 1996. This meant, she suggested, that she has "some perspective" on the work of the Church of Scotland. She said that she was delighted to read that many of the caring projects she visited 20 years ago are still thriving – she referred to the work of CrossReach on several occasions. She also pointed out that she had rarely visited a country across the world where there wasn't a Scotsman, many of them ministers. Later, the outgoing Moderator, the Dr Russell Barr, would also observe that this 'reach' of the Church of Scotland is enabling it to assist the UK Government in combatting human trafficking in Kenya.

Her Grace spoke of the Church's contribution to the development of the Nation. The Church has always been welcoming and she noted that today there is a great need for welcoming and offering hospitality. She said that worshipping numbers may be reducing but she believes that "spiritual

leadership is needed more than ever”, and ministers have a great responsibility in the community where they are always held in high regard for their contribution to a wide variety of issues. She concluded by saying that she looked forward both to the visits she will make and to the debates of the Assembly, to which, in the name of the Queen, she invited the Assembly to turn.

In thanking Her Grace, Dr Browning made mention, to sustained applause, of her presence at Murrayfield and wherever the Scottish rugby team was in action. He thanked Her Grace for her words. He then invited the immediate past Moderator, Dr Russell Barr, to give the Assembly a brief report on his year in office.

Dr Barr began by saying that he and his wife had danced into the Hall after bidding farewell to the Lord High Commissioner at the end of last year’s Assembly – and that the fun extended throughout the year. He then spoke of his visit to the Presbyterian Church United States of America, where they have more ministers than charges, and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa where the problem of human trafficking was raised.

From his visits to Presbyteries he discovered work by the Church in areas of health and welfare that made him proud to belong to the Church of Scotland. One Council Chief Executive thanked the Moderator for the support local congregations had given to refugees from Syria. He said that if there was a problem, it could take 20 emails, 30 phone calls and two weeks to resolve it. But if he contacted one of the Kirk’s ministers, the matter was resolved by 6, o’clock the same evening!

He spoke of local work and issues in which the Kirk is an essential partner, the work of CrossReach, of Chaplains to the Forces and, finally, of the work among and for the homeless, which has been and is his special mission. He spoke of 28,226 applications assessed as homeless in Scotland in the year to March 2016 and added that the figures are hardly different from 25 years ago; the figures include 5,751 pre-school and school aged children and he declared that the issue only needs political will to deal with it. He asked the Assembly to speak with one voice to say that these figures are unacceptable.

Dr Barr concluded his speech with thanks to all who had made his year as Moderator so special.

The first item after a short break in business was the appointment of a successor to the Principal Clerk. The Rev Dr George Whyte, currently Depute Clerk, takes up his new post on 29th July. The Moderator was then invited to welcome delegates and visitors from Churches around the world.

The Convener of the World Mission Council said that he had arranged for two seats to be left vacant with the names of two delegates, the Revd Rola Sleiman from the Evangelical Synod of Syria and

Lebanon, and the Revd James Choul of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, to be placed on them. Both were unable to attend this Assembly because of government and airline refusals to let them travel. Two delegates, from Wales and Taiwan, were invited to address the Commissioners.

The Moderator called for the Report of the Assembly Arrangements Committee, of which he was convener last year. The new Convener, Mrs Judith Pearson, began by congratulating Derek Browning on his election as Moderator and went on to raise some of the issues being worked on by the Committee. It believes that the letting of the Assembly Hall between Assemblies could produce greater revenue and they have worked towards that end. The issue of possibly moving the meeting of the Assembly to a June date has, for a number of reasons, proved unworkable. She referred to technical developments, including the provision of the Assembly Reports and papers in electronic format. The entire proceedings of the Assembly will also be made available online for the first time.

The Committee is continuing to work on the reshaping of the Assembly business. This includes reducing the time for Conveners' speeches from 20 minutes to 15. In addition, the committee is working on producing guidance as to what matters might be brought in Supplementary Reports, because Commissioners do not often have sufficient time to deal with the issues in them. She spoke of the Heart and Soul event in Princes Street Gardens tomorrow and concluded by offering thanks to three servants of the Assembly who are retiring - Alison Murray, the Moderator's Secretary; John Chalmers, Principal Clerk; and David McColl, the Assembly Officer for the past 17 years.

The CEO of the Scottish Bible Society, Elaine Duncan, gave a report on the work of the Society. She spoke of the retirement of their mobile classroom van, originally funded with the support of the Church of Scotland Guild. It has travelled the length and breadth of Scotland helping children to learn of Jesus. Now the Society is launching its Bible World books. She then gave the example of the work of the Bible Society in Peru. In a programme called The Bread of Life programme, children receive a meal at the end of the school day and she was able to give out Bibles also, supported by folk in Scotland. She then turned to the Moderator and presented him with a copy of the Bible

The next few items of business were quickly agreed. The Report of the Returns to Overtures brought the issue of Registration of Ministers. Having been agreed by a majority of Presbyteries, this was accepted with one amendment by the Assembly.

The Assembly was suspended for lunch at this point, to return in the afternoon for the reports of the Legal Questions Committee, the Council of Assembly and a Joint Report. We will report on them later. Join us then.