
**General Assembly 2017 podcasts
by the Revd Douglas Aitken**

2. Saturday 20 May: afternoon

The afternoon session of the Assembly began with the Report of the Legal Questions Committee. The Convener said that in the current context in the UK legal advice was in considerable demand – not least in the Church. The Committee has been charged with bringing together the four different disciplinary acts into a single act that would cover all situations. This is proving difficult largely because it is important to get it right. Hopefully a draft act will come to the next Assembly.

The Convener moved to the matter of Arbitration. Many people seem to misunderstand the meaning of arbitration as a means of working out an agreed solution. In the context of a union of churches arbitration was not intended as a debate but to agree a decision. For this reason the Committee has proposed the ending of arbitration in relation to church buildings. This is really a matter for Presbyteries under their Presbytery Plans. The Convener moved on to the production of a Code of Good Practice for the Ministries of the Church and he commented positively on the consultative procedure that had taken place. The concept of a Presbytery Review to complement the Local Church Review was raised last year; the Committee has seen a number of suggestions and is now intending to run a pilot process.

The report states that the Registration of Ministries Act repeals all existing provisions relating to Practising Certificates. The Committee is in the process of updating the Constitution and Laws of the Church.

Turning to the Report of the Council of Assembly, the over-arching Council of all the Church's Councils and Committees, the Convener, Dr Sally Bonnar, began by calling for prayer. The Council has held 16 roadshows which around 1,000 people attended and it was clear that the one issue which had surfaced at every event was the call to pray. Having engaged in these consultations, the Council is moving forward on the issues of worship, making disciples and engaging community.

The Council is reviewing the way in which the Committee on Ecumenical Relations relates to the other Councils and Committees of the Church. The Council is grateful to our ecumenical partners for their contribution to its discussions.

Dr Bonnar also spoke of the importance of Inter-faith relationships, saying that the Council has approved the appointment of a permanent Inter-faith officer.

The financial state of the church also featured in the Council's Report. The membership is falling and it is recognised that financial support is, for the first time, also beginning to fall. Nevertheless, the decline in membership was seen as more of a challenge than a reason for depression. It means, however, that the Church cannot launch into new projects without careful consideration. In answer to a question the Convener said that the Council's strategic plan would be comprehensive and it would be the product of wide consultation and not a case of an imposition from on high.

One Commissioner said how much he had appreciated the roadshows and wondered whether much had come from and for the eldership. He also asked if suggestions in the Revd Doug Gay's Chalmers Lectures on a future for the Church were being included. The answer to both parts of his question was an emphatic 'yes!'

During the debate several Commissioners commended the Council's call to prayer. Another commended the council's work on the promotion of the Gaelic language in worship. Another Commissioner from the north of Scotland, having also commended the need for prayer, asked if the Council could consider the use of video conferencing for meetings in order to widen access to decision-making. The Highlands and Islands College uses video conferencing for including students from the Western Isles. His request was accepted.

The final report of the day was a joint report of five Councils and Committees on resourcing the implementation of Local Church Review. For reasons of pressures of work the joint committee has not completed its remit for this Assembly. It will return next year. As for us, we will return on Monday morning. Join us then.