

General Assembly 2017 podcasts by the Revd Douglas Aitken

3. Monday 22 May: morning

After Assembly worship, yesterday, in the High Kirk of Edinburgh (St Giles Cathedral) at which the Moderator preached, many Commissioners were joined by members of congregations from the length and breadth of Scotland in Princes Street Gardens where no less than sixty congregations, committees, Councils and organisations displayed their work and witness. Casual visitors to the Gardens helped fill the central path through the park. A hugely diverse gathering, including people from all around the world, enjoyed the celebration called “Heart and Soul”, which has become a regular feature of the Assembly Sunday afternoon; it was a great place to catch up with old friends and make new ones and to see how the mission of the Church is being worked out in local places as well as in the Courts and Councils of the Kirk. The Moderator was there, of course, and the Lord High Commissioner, the Princess Royal, taking a deep interest in the life and work of the Church at large.

Following the celebration of Holy Communion today, the first Report of the day was presented by the World Mission Council. This year the report focusses on “Women in the World Church.” The Convener, the Rev Iain Cunningham, began by suggesting that the first and perhaps foremost Apostle was Mary Magdalene – the first to see Jesus after the resurrection and the first to be sent to tell the other disciples. Who didn’t believe her, of course – perhaps because she was a woman.

The Council wants to celebrate the contribution of women to the mission of God to the world. The Convener said that he was delighted that many of the overseas delegates to the Assembly are women. Jesus welcomed women as disciples and in the early church some were elected deacons, priests, bishops, apostles, teachers and prophets. He then referred to other women: a theologian, Marie Dentiére a contemporary of John Calvin who is relatively unknown – because she was a woman; and Mary Slessor who said that *‘Scottish women had the chance to do overseas what their home church would not allow them to do in Scotland’*. So there is good reason to celebrate the great contribution women have made bringing the word of life to countless people in so many lands. Another reason to celebrate is the ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament of two women in the Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the first in the Arab Christian World. It had been hoped that one of them, the Revd Rula Slieman would be at the Assembly but, sadly, she was refused permission to board a flight.

The Convener went on to say that while there is much to celebrate, there are also great challenges – gender discrimination, gender injustice, and gender-based violence are all still endemic and engrained within human

society, including, sadly, the Christian Church, which claims that *in Christ there is no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free person, male and female*. So there is no justification for gender injustice in the Church.

Moreover, empowering women is one of the most powerful ways of addressing and eradicating poverty. It is not a theory but a proven fact and the Convener gave an example from Malawi to prove it.

Following last year's report on Care for Creation the Council held a successful conference on that theme. They propose to hold another conference on September 16th, along with other Councils and the Guild, with the title "Women in the World Church".

Finally, the Convener explained a change to how the Council relates to overseas Partners. This is in part a response to enquiries at Vocations Conferences from those wanting to explore service overseas. So, instead of waiting to hear what a partner Church needs before finding an individual to send, the council will now discern what skills people are offering and seek whether among their partners the skills match a need. He concluded by saying that as well as full time service, other options include short-term volunteering, twinning visits and the like to contribute to our Church's engagement with the wider world and the wider Church.

The first question asked if there was not a slight issue of hypocrisy in the report because within the Church of Scotland there are many places where the contribution of women is not accepted, for example as elders or ministers. Another speaker observed that only a small minority of the "most influential and visible voices in the Church of Scotland" are women. The Convener responded that he agreed with the sentiments expressed but the issue was a matter for the Ministries Council and not the World Mission Council, which he declared was not hypocritical.

The Very Rev Dr John Chalmers asked the World Mission Council to work with other Councils and other Churches to work relentlessly for a just peace in South Sudan and put pressure on the international community, which has been notable by its failure to do anything. South Sudan, he said, is "a forgotten place, a forgotten war and a forgotten nation". Sudanese ministers who have themselves visited the Assembly report that there is no peace anywhere. The work of the Church of Scotland in meeting with leaders of the South Sudan Church has to be done in Nairobi because it is not safe to enter the country.

The Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison moved a motion which was approved asking for the prayers of the Church for the Coptic Christians in Egypt; Mrs Ida Waddell commended the work on HIV-AIDS but pointed out that in Zambia, where she serves as a mission partner, HIV among young people is increasing.

The Assembly turned next to the Joint Report of the World Mission Council and the Church and Society Council on the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. The 1917 declaration was in the form of a letter from Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, to Lord Rothschild in words approved by the Cabinet. It read:

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

The Declaration was wholeheartedly supported by the General Assembly of the day. However before Balfour, in 1915 the British High Commissioner in Egypt and Sharif Hussein of Mecca had exchanged letters which led to Britain promising to support the emancipation of the Arabs if they joined the Allied side in the First World War. And in 1916 another agreement divided up the Middle East between Britain and France So the Balfour Declaration presented Britain with three incompatible commitments. In 1968 the Church and Nation Committee declared that *'it is out of the inherent contradiction of the Balfour Declaration that the troubles of Palestine since 1917 have arisen.'*

The World Mission Convener, in presenting the Joint Report, said that the two councils had been asked what should be done to celebrate this centenary and what can the Church do to promote peace and justice in Israel? The report had been created in consultation with Palestinian and Israeli partners both in the Middle East and in the United Kingdom. He said the centenary should be celebrated with great sensitivity and that it reminds us of "the danger of unintended consequences" and that people are most likely to disagree on the *factors* that make for peace and justice. So the path towards peace and justice is not easy. The reasons why the Church should be concerned are many – Lord Balfour was an elder of the Church and the Church had had work in the area for more than a hundred years in Jerusalem and Tiberias and its school in Joppa. He described sitting with a Palestinian family whose daughter had been killed by an Israeli soldier and also with an Israeli family whose son was killed by a Palestinian and, he said, their pain was the same.

The Convener said that this report does not complete the work the two Councils wish to do – they plan an in-depth strategic review of possible ways forward, to assess "all the consequences for others and ourselves". He made the point several times that there will not be agreement by everyone, but the matter has to be brought to the notice of those who can have the power to act. The minister of St Andrews Church in Jerusalem said that it was easy to point at one side or the other and apportion blame – but there is enough blame to go round. He commended the need for study material that people should be accurately informed. He suggested

that the idea that there is a viable ongoing peace process is “magical thinking” and so it is vital that the Church stands with Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli.

Turning to Section 2 of the Deliverance, a Commissioner said that he believes the Report does not include all the issues and he wanted the addition of the words ‘noting the limitations of the Report’. The Convener resisted the amendment on the grounds that the report *says* it is not complete. Another Commissioner said that the Report was slanted against Israel and was therefore unacceptable. Without further comment, the Assembly broke for lunch.