

General Assembly 2017 podcasts by the Revd Douglas Aitken

4. Monday 22 May: afternoon

The Assembly returned after lunch to resume consideration of the Joint Report on the Centenary of the Balfour Declaration. The Very Rev Dr Andrew McLellan asked the Assembly to add a sentence to section 3 of the Deliverance, urging the Scottish and UK governments to ensure that any public celebrations of the Balfour Declaration are undertaken sensitively, recognising the costs involved for the Palestinian people. He spoke of Jane Hainey of the Church of Scotland who gave her life trying to save Jewish children and declared as unacceptable the cruelty the Third Reich exercised against Jews. The Churches of the world, including this Church, were silent. So there is history on both sides.

For Jewish people, the Balfour Declaration brought great joy. But it has brought years of misery for the Palestinian people. He has met with people who have lived in refugee camps since the creation of the State of Israel in 1947. He said Gaza is a prison which would not begin to meet the standards of Scottish Prisons which he had to enforce when he was Chief Inspector of Prisons. He said that the people of Scotland must be informed. And he hoped the Assembly would urge sensitivity.

The Assembly agreed. However, the Rev Tom Gordon wanted to strengthen the section even as amended by the Assembly. He said that it is vital to use a prophetic voice and with integrity to remind the governments in Scotland and London that the promises to the Palestinian people under the Declaration have never been kept, and it is important to secure their human rights which continue to be violated. Another commissioner pointed out that Palestinians protested in Ramallah demanding that the Jews be driven into the sea and the Palestinians rule from Jordan to the Mediterranean. So there are wrongs on both sides. Dr McLellan returned to say that he felt the motion as amended missed the point. What was wrong in the Balfour promises was that they did not include any *political* rights for the Palestinian people.

The Revd James Aitken moved an amendment seeking support for those who are committed to the use of non-violent means to achieve a just peace. The Assembly agreed with the sentiments of his motion. Then Tom Gordon moved another counter-motion calling for the Assembly to condemn all infringements of international law including the expansion of the illegal settlements, which are an obstacle to peace, and urge the adoption of economic measures to pressure Israel into complying with international law.

The minister of St Andrews Church in Jerusalem, Paraic Reamonn, wanted to delete the part of Mr Gordon's counter-motion that called for sanctions, arguing that this would cause more problems than it solved and possibly prevent church members from visiting, studying and working in Israel-Palestine.

Another Commissioner moved a motion declaring that the continuing declaration of Hamas that Israel has not the right to exist, is as great a hindrance to peace as Israel's settlements. The Convener responded by reminding the Assembly that the report is on the Balfour Declaration and not on the wider situation, but he would accept the motion.

A Youth Participant asked the Assembly to remember that 2017 is the Jubilee of the creation of the State of Israel and Scripture says that a Jubilee year guarantees rights of land and property. She urged commissioners to engage in prayer. The Revd Sarah Brown moved the motion that the Church endorse the Kairos Palestine document and invite the World Mission Council to produce resources to encourage all church members to engage with the document. The Convener accepted the motion, noting that some resources already exist, for example the Advent resource *Come All You Faithful*.

Turning to the Report of the Social Care Council (CrossReach is its trading name) the Convener, the Revd Bill Steel, said that the Council is noted for its pioneering work, innovation and creative responses to the needs of society. He quoted three examples:

- the **Daisy Chain Early Years Project** in Govanhill, helping families from many backgrounds and cultures to build positive relationships
- **the Prison Visitors' Support Centre** at Perth Prison, working with prisoners' families to increase self-esteem and maintain communication, and so reduce reoffending
- and the **Heart for Art** projects, now in 11 locations, where people with Dementia can take part in therapeutic art sessions

However, the greatest concern is that the main work of the Council is in a sector that is in significant transition and subject to financial constraints that have not been seen before to such a degree. This means, for example, that though the Scottish Government has made funding available to allow all care and support staff to be paid the Scottish Living Wage, it is not possible to pay this to *all* CrossReach's employees, especially when reasonable salary differentials are taken into account.

Another development has been the Council's response to a legal requirement that an employer can only make it an occupational requirement for employees to have a faith commitment if it represents "a proportional means of achieving a legitimate aim" of the organisation. After what the Convener described as "a number of heart-searching discussions" the Council has moved away from its previously held position. It will now be the case that management and supervisory staff will be required to be Christian but that the majority of care and support staff won't – though they *will* still be required to be respectful of CrossReach's Christian ethos and commitment.

In response to a later question, the Convener conceded that this new position means that when new staff are hired, they will be advised that there would be a ceiling to their promotion if they do not hold a Christian commitment.

Turning to the deliverance, the Very Revd Dr Russell Barr spoke about how much he had learned about CrossReach's work during his moderatorial year, and was so impressed by the initiatives it undertakes with many of Scotland's most vulnerable people. He said CrossReach has been described as the Kirk's "best kept secret" and urged commissioners to make the secret public.

The Report of the Panel on Review and Reform was given next. The Convener began by saying that there is no quick fix for problems facing the Church nor is there a single solution to turn the ship around. Instead, there is the need for a fundamental rethink about what it means to be the Church in 21st Century Scotland. He went on to say that the Church hasn't lacked ideas but it has lacked the will to implement them. He added that perhaps this is because the experience of change is painful. The Panel is committed to providing practical help for churches to help them move through the changes which need to be made. In this regard the most significant part of the Panel's work has been on the Path of Renewal, supporting 40 congregations as they seek to become missional churches. The Panel looks forward to working with another 40 congregations but that is dependent on funding being available and also raises the question of the kind of leadership needed to develop missional churches.

Added to the problem, people are telling the Panel not to shape the number of congregations round the declining number of Parish ministers. They want a minister of Word and Sacrament in every charge. However, the Panel is clear that ministry of word and sacrament should not *equal* stipendiary ministry. Rather, it recognises the importance of having someone in each charge who takes on leadership responsibility for helping God's people to move forward into the plan God has for them. It may give elders a different kind of role. And it should fully include Ordained Local Ministers and perhaps Commissioned Local Ministers. It might mean people serving in their own congregation, given some theological training before they start and in post, and allowed to serve as ministers of word and sacrament in a time-limited way in a specific context.

The Convener concluded by saying that the Panel is not coming with a view of which approach to take, but simply to give the Assembly the opportunity to discuss the issue and set parameters for the next stage of discussion. The Panel's view is that the Assembly should invite it to explore all options.

Commissioners asked about the placing and responsibilities of Ordained Local Ministers and possibly of Deacons being used in the celebration of the Sacraments. The Convener was asked how much the Panel had considered other forms of team ministry and how far had they been successful. He said the Panel has not explored the success or otherwise but have simply taken note of them as part of exploring possibilities.

If someone feels a call to the ordained ministry but cannot do so in their own congregation, is there way of shortening the amount of training required and can there be greater flexibility in it? In almost every answer, the Convener said the Panel was noting the questions and would wish to explore these with other Councils. The Strategy Group of the Council of Assembly on which the Convener serves is aware of the need to provide training at different levels. The Panel is aware that the future requires a change of mind-set to a more missional mind-set.

Turning to the Deliverance, one Commissioner asked that the Panel should consider paying Auxiliary Ministers *as well* as Ordained Local Ministers. Another Commissioner suggested that the Church is seeking to make use of Ordained Local Ministers as quick fixes to its problems. The Principal Clerk moved a motion to instruct the Panel, with the Theological Forum, the Ecumenical Relations Committee and the Legal Questions Committee to consult widely and explore whether in the light of ideas in the Panel's Report the sacramental ministry in the Church of Scotland needs to be changed, and report to a future Assembly.

Supporting the Principal Clerk, another Commissioner wondered if the suggestions of sacramental issues are really the remit of the Panel of Review and Reform; yet another regretted that the issue of sacramental ministry should appear in a Supplementary Report. However, the Assembly agreed the Principal Clerk's motion. A final amendment added the Mission and Discipleship Council to the group set up to consider the training of Pioneer Ministry.

Finally, the Convener of the Assembly Council made a second outing to the podium to present the Council's interim report on property matters. The Council was asked by the 2015 Assembly to assess the future of the Church offices in Edinburgh. That remit has also drawn in Charis House (the HQ of CrossReach) and the Assembly Hall itself – all of which are requiring substantial work.

Ms Bonar said that 16 initial options had been reduced to four. These four options cover the possibilities of:

- “doing the minimum” (which would bring the buildings up to standard but would require ongoing spending)
- total renovation (allowing the lease or sale of 123 George Street)
- the “move out and sell” option – which could turn out to be the most expensive

One commissioner implied some scepticism about the current demand for properties such as 123 George Street; another asked if the Council was considering the need for meeting space out of normal working hours (it is); another wanted assurance that the Council was receiving ongoing property advice. With that, the Assembly agreed that the Council should continue with its investigations, and Commissioners called it a day and went home. They – and we – will be back tomorrow for the reports of the Church and Society Council, the Church of Scotland Guild and the Iona Community.