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

5. Tuesday 23 May: morning

In preparing to lead the Assembly in prayer during opening worship, the Moderator said that no cause, whether political or religious, can justify the action which killed so many children and young people in Manchester last night. The General Assembly stands firmly with those who have been affected by the terrorist action and assures the people of the great city of Manchester of its prayers and offers the assurance that God walks with them through this difficult time. He called the Assembly to stand for a minute of silence before his prayer.

The scripture reading which followed was read in Gaelic by a member of Greyfriars Gaelic Congregation in Edinburgh. It was the story of the Samaritan woman and the gift of Living Water.

The first business of the day was the report of the Church and Society Council. The Convener, Revd Dr Richard Frazer, began by quoting a poem by Carl Sandberg:

*The single clenched fist, lifted and ready,
Or the open, asking hand, held out and waiting.
Choose.
For we meet by one or the other.*

He said these words express the contrast between the world as it is becoming and the world as Christ would like it to be. So the theme of the report is Surveillance from the Cross, with the image of Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross forgiving those around him. He said that in the last 24 hours we have seen the results of the clenched fist. He said the Council would bring another section to the deliverance following the incident in Manchester last evening.

The Convener went on to say that much of the report seeks to take forward the Speak Out process that was agreed last year. He said it was a form of welcoming hand seeking and asking, listening to people. How we relate to each other is at the heart of the Speak Out plan. The Council wants to hear stories and celebrate remarkable work that is going on throughout the Church.

He turned to the work of the Society, Religion and Technology project. He said that Science and Religion are not incompatible. The Project has produced a special report on digital technology and surveillance in the modern world. Dr Frazer said we need to balance the developing digital technologies that help prevent atrocities such as that in Manchester last night with the impact that they can have on our public discussion and decision-making.

Dr Frazer then spoke of the Church's neutrality on independence but spoke with concern about Brexit. He said the Assembly had seen the benefit of the relationship with Europe in the peace between the nations. But the Council is concerned that the UK Government refuses to offer any guarantees regarding EU citizens in our society prior to negotiating the terms of Brexit. The Council seeks the support of the Assembly in calling out to those who would raise a clenched fist rather than the open hand of welcome and friendship.

The Convener went on to the issues of 'doing politics differently', giving the example of the 'Meet your MSP' programme initiated by the Scottish Parliamentary Office. The Council also considered Gender Injustice, Human Trafficking, Welfare Reform, Asylum and Refugees, Education, an Economy driven by Equality, and offered a section welcoming the development of pilgrimage possibilities, the latest of which is the opening of the St Magnus Way in Orkney, which is appropriate for People of the Way. Dr Frazer concluded his speech with a peroration in fulsome praise both of the team in the Council's office and the members of the Council.

The first question was from a commissioner who wondered whether there was a tension between the Council's ongoing campaign to institute the Scottish Living Wage and the inability of CrossReach, the Church's social care organisation, to pay this to all its staff. The Convener said he recognised the difficulties encountered by CrossReach because of its relationship with local authorities and the massive underfund they face.

Another commissioner spoke of the closure of local banks and the difficulties then faced by people without access to internet banking. The Convener replied that the Council is always mindful of the most vulnerable in society and alert to the impact of actions by organisation and institutions. In response to a question about health and social care, Dr Frazer recalled a conversation he'd had with a GP who spoke of the increase in work coming her way as a result of the breakdown in social care structures. There is a need, he said, for more counselling and support services.

As ever during the report of the Church and Society Council, many commissioners spoke of issues experienced personally and in their local communities – of the increase in suicides of young adults; of concern about the impact of Brexit on the Kirk's relationships with Churches in Europe; of a school that won't admit a local minister to be a chaplain; and of the low level of carers' allowance. This last question caused the Convener to speak of a benefits system that is often experienced as "hostile and vindictive".

Turning to the deliverance, one Commissioner declared with passion how she was fed up with the clenched fist that is so prevalent in the Church over issues like women in the ministry and eldership.

The Convener then moved a deliverance which expressed profound sadness at the attack at Manchester Arena last evening and the tragic loss of life, and affirmed the courage and grace with which the people of Manchester have already responded. It assured the people of that city of our sympathy and prayers.

There were words of thanks and support from the Church of England delegate, the moderator of the United Reformed Church, and the representative of Churches Together in England and Wales who said even the worst of evil cannot defeat love. The Revd Suzanne Fletcher stated that one of the children who was at the concert came from her daughter's school class in East Lothian. It is good to remember that Scottish children were there as well. The Youth representative from England added her voice to the comments. The Convener responded by saying that the responses showed the Assembly at its very best. It is an honour to be part of it.

Returning to the Deliverance, Dr Alison Elliott raised the issue of the effect of the new Data Protection regulations and the Convener said that they will monitor it. Dr Elliott also moved the strengthening of a motion which deplores xenophobic and racist acts following the result of the Brexit referendum.

A Commissioner from the Highlands commended the Council's work on refugees. He had seen the change in families from anxiety and fear to relaxation, contentment and safety. Another Commissioner, the minister of St Rollox Church in Glasgow (which is known as 'the asylum seekers church') asked the Assembly to call on the UK Government to end the policy of destitution of failed asylum seekers. She quoted one family with two young children which has had no income for 18 months. The Convener readily accepted the motion.

The Revd Ian Galloway from the Parish of Glasgow Gorbals spoke of the transformation of the community around him. He emphasised that the welcoming of people from other cultures and countries changed the Scottish community greatly and for the better.

Several Commissioners supported the concept of pilgrimage, each giving examples. Pilgrimages, be they short or long, help us meet others. A local pilgrimage in one community takes just one hour, around the church campus, but opens many opportunities for learning about people, including oneself. Another Commissioner urged churches and individuals to open their buildings and homes to pilgrims.

The RevD Peter Johnson moved a new motion instructing the Council to consider the effectiveness of microcredit in lifting people out of poverty. The Convener accepted it. Dr Elliott asked the Council

to report on the changes in the way Government decisions are made and report to a future Assembly. Another Commissioner, who spoke movingly of a small girl he knows, asked the Council to condemn the practice of Female Genital Mutilation as violence against women and invite the UK Government to take into account an individual's risk of FGM when considering asylum resolution. The Convener accepted and the Assembly applause showed its agreement.

Next, the Very Revd Dr Alan McDonald moved a motion asking that the Council call on the UK Government to ensure that ship to ship transfer of crude oil is not permitted in the inner Moray Firth. The potential damage to the environment is clear whereas a ship at an existing jetty is less dangerous. Some Commissioners wanted more information from the oil companies. A Commissioner from the area claimed the basic reason for the proposal for ship to ship transfer is economic. The Convener accepted the motion but said the Council will research the issue further. The Very Revd Dr Andrew McLellan moved another new motion welcoming the development of Prison Visitor Centres, which make families closer and reduce re-offending. He welcomed the engagement of the Church in the development of them.

With the completion of the Council's Report and Supplementary Report the Assembly was suspended for lunch.