
**General Assembly 2017 podcasts
by the Revd Douglas Aitken****7. Wednesday 24 May: morning**

On this Wednesday of the General Assembly, worship was begun with the anthem “For the beauty of the earth” by composer John Rutter and sung by the choir of South Morningside Primary School in the Moderator’s parish. It was greeted with warm applause. Likewise, the lesson – the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus – was read by three pupils from the school. The Moderator thanked both the choir and the readers before his words to the Assembly about hospitality.

Before the start of Business the Business Convener brought greetings to the Moderator on his birthday. The Assembly immediately burst into song – Happy Birthday! The Moderator said in response, “You are very naughty Commissioners – but thank you!”

The Business Convener drew attention to the Moderator that Prince Ghazi of Jordan was in the Lord High Commissioner’s Gallery and would be willing to address the Assembly. He was so invited.

Prince Ghazi is a leading scholar of Islamic philosophy. He began by offering greetings and peace, and said that he declared on his own behalf and of King Abdullah II of Jordan that they are appalled by the latest atrocity in Manchester, especially as it was against children and also because it is done as reflecting his Islamic faith, which it does not. He went on to say how much society has changed and is changing and offered a vision of developments in the world over the next 25 years. It was a dystopian vision that the prince titled: “What lies lurking”.

The prince painted a picture of a world in which acts of terrorism will succeed in making Muslims “even more hated than they are already” – and that many of them will be held in internment camps. He spoke of limited nuclear strikes that would be seen to be effective and so attract others to adopt nuclear power. He also spoke of the depletion of wealth, the collapse of the environment and the rise of robots and concluded: “Having banished all the angels and all the birds from the sky we will be able to fly ourselves, mainly to shoot each other”. Ethics, he said, will give way to personal impulses and radicalism will increase in all religions.

So what to do? Prince Ghazi urged people to keep their faith and not to be buffeted by the vogue of the day. But to avoid the dangers of fundamentalism he urged people to put down their mobile phones, turn off the internet, and to spend an hour each day in concentrated reading. He said the first word of the Koran is “Read” and that the only prayer for *more* in the Koran is: “My Lord! Increase me in knowledge.”

In responding, the Moderator said that the Prince was welcome as a believer in God, and as a Peacemaker. He presented the Prince with a history of the Church of Scotland and two tartan scarves to keep him warm in Scotland!

The Moderator then called for the Report of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations.

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda. With these words the Convener the Revd Alison McDonald began the report. Then she provided a translation – *a reformed church is always requiring to be reformed.* In 1986 the Church disassociated itself from those parts of the Westminster Confession which condemn the Roman Catholic Church. But who would have believed that 30 years on the Pope would raise a Scottish Presbyterian minister as a Dame of the Order of St Gregory. She was referring to the former ecumenical officer, the Very Revd Dr Sheilagh Kesting.

The convener spoke of the World Communion of Reformed Churches meeting this year in Wittenberg where Martin Luther posted his theses which started the Reformation. It is a time for prayer, not just for ourselves but for the whole Church to determine how best we can be faithful servants of the Gospel. The whole community of faith is in a process of change. The Committee is being reviewed, as reported in the Council of Assembly on Saturday; and ACTS is also in a process of review and change. And the whole community of faith in Scotland is changing with a number of Orthodox, minority ethnic and independent churches increasing. The Convener said that God is calling the Churches to move closer together. She referred to the County of Cumbria as the first 'ecumenical county', of which the Border Kirk is a part. Its aim is that every person in the county may have the opportunity to discover God's love. She concluded by saying we are always requiring to be reformed for we do not yet reflect the God given unity to which Christ calls us as his one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

During questions and comments on the Deliverance, a number of speakers wanted to add further detail to the Latin quotation by emphasising the way in which *God* reforms us. Bishop Dr Joe Aldred, representing Churches Together in England, said there is still a "colour line" that affects ecumenical relations. He said we need to become "colour appreciative" – and he encouraged commissioners to seek out people of colour and develop good relations. The president of Churches Together in Cumbria said that "rumours of the death of local ecumenism are greatly exaggerated". Finally, the Moderator congratulated the Very Revd Dr Sheilagh Kesting on being made a dame and spoke of her legacy, which he hopes will become embedded in our ongoing ecumenical relations. Quoting the musical *South Pacific*, he observed, "There's nothing like a dame" – and the Assembly's warm applause showed that it agreed.

Turning to the Report of the Safeguarding Committee, the Convener began by thanking all those who have trained as safeguarding representatives; the purpose is to make and keep the Church a safe place to be. A new Safeguarding Manager has been appointed and takes up post in July. Talks are ongoing with the United Reformed Church with the purpose of that Church's Safeguarding training being done by the Church of Scotland. The aim is that every person involved directly with children or vulnerable people of any age should be checked for the Protection of Vulnerable Groups certification.

Professor June Andrews of Stirling University was invited to address the Assembly. Her work is in the field of dementia. She said dementia is a downhill journey, on which memory loss is not the worst symptom. The purpose of those who work with people with dementia is to keep them well and one of the factors in the treatment of dementia is to help the patient maintain their faith and religion. She challenged commissioners by saying that if you say it is too difficult to get a person to a service or a church, then you are not really trying. She also made the point that most people don't die of dementia; a memory loss may make them walk into danger; a fall may lead to incapacity, but the actual cause of death is not necessarily dementia. The important thing is to make the person's life as uncomplicated as possible and even the journey towards death should be as pleasant as possible and without fear.

The large number of questions were mainly on the difficulty of getting training or persuading some people to be PVG checked. One Commissioner said that his Kirk Session considered the PVG checking an administrative burden. But another praised warmly the support his congregation had received from members of the safeguarding and legal teams and said that their experience at a difficult time had changed their thinking: he said that safeguarding is not an administrative burden but part of our pastoral care for one another.

The Assembly turned next to the Ministries Council. The Convener, the Revd Neil Glover, began by saying that he was asked to visit a young man about to have an operation. He had thought his previous visit had not been helpful, but said that, in crucial and worrying situations, people want a minister. So we must find our core vision. It must be a vision which takes us away from too much management, the tyranny of the in-box and so on. He referred back to the Assembly of 1645, which declared that there were to be parish ministers, deacons and elders, there was to be prayer, there was to be preaching, and there was to be mission among the poor with the minister as leader. For us, too, there must be prayer, pastoral care, and leadership in mission and preaching. But ministry happens now in a radically changed culture.

How can the Church enchant, nurture the community, embody the joy of the angels. The paradox is that ministry must enable the ministry of all God's people. He said that the wealthy have been taught the gospel by the poor and the supposedly wise have been taught the gospel by those whose voices are little heard.

He asked: How can we maintain our commitment to all the people of Scotland, how can the Christian community be sustained across Scotland when there are fewer stipendiary ministries? There are hubs, different types of hubs and there has to be space to experiment with new models beyond hubs and Fresh Expressions of Church and New Church plants and larger ministry teams. The Council is hoping to develop increasingly supportive relationships between Council and Presbytery and a better understanding of walking with congregations through change.

The Council is launching 'Ascend,' which is a central location to find the core services provided by the Ministries Council for support and development of those in ministry, offering coaching, pastoral supervision and spiritual accompaniment. Ascend is available to all ministers. Finally, the Convener paid tribute to those working as the Council's partners, to the staff in the office and to those who exercise ministries in parishes and in chaplaincies.

The presentation of the report was followed by a myriad of questions, mainly about local or personal issues. These are important for the minister or parish concerned and the Convener responded to them all. The Assembly will turn to the Deliverance in the afternoon.