
General Assembly 2017 podcasts by the Revd Douglas Aitken

9. Thursday 24 May: morning

Thursday morning at the General Assembly has a special influx of colour as Chaplains from all three services appear in uniform. The Report of the Committee on Chaplains to HM Forces is the first on the agenda. The front pew and Lord High Commissioners Gallery is also peppered with the gold braid of senior officers of the three services.

The Convener, the Revd Gordon Craig, himself a former chaplain, began by saying what is usually said, that this past year has been a busy one for the Chaplains both at home and abroad. The chief concern at home has been the concern that under the Registration of Ministries chaplains' status as ministers of Word and Sacrament is being compromised. The Revd George Cowie, the Convener of the Legal Questions Committee, travelled south to the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Centre to assure the Chaplains that practical measures would be put in place to allow Chaplains a seamless transition to parish ministry.

Mr Craig referred to the many contexts in which the armed forces have played their part this past year – from anti-piracy and anti-people smuggling operations to training alongside allies in the eastern side of Europe.

The major issue, however, is the proposal to sign the Armed Forces Covenant. The covenant is “a promise by the nation that those who serve or have served, and their families, are treated fairly” – to date 1,500 organisations (including all 407 local authorities in mainland Great Britain) have signed the covenant, as have other Churches. The committee placed the Church of Scotland version before the Assembly for approval. The convener emphasised that the covenant is not about policy but is a pastoral document about people – serving personal, reservists, veterans and all their families. And Mr Craig produced a surprising statistic: that there are about 260,000 veterans in Scotland, some six per cent of the population, and when you add in the families it raises the total to ten per cent of Scotland's population. The proposed wording of the Covenant allows the Kirk to demonstrate its support for this group of Scotland's people, pastorally, liturgically and organisationally, but it will not impede the Kirk's ability to critically engage with the Government over defence policy and the issue of nuclear arms.

The Convener closed with the annual plea for ministers and deacons to consider whether God may be calling them to serve in the armed forces.

Turning to the Deliverance there was a single notice of motion which would add the words 'and implement' to the motion to approve the Armed Forces Covenant. This was agreed. The Moderator then addressed the Chaplains. The Convener drew attention to the fact that Air Marshal Stuart Atha was present and would be willing to address the Assembly.

The Air Marshal, who has been known to the Convener as "Wee Stuey", began by admitting that he came from Kilmarnock where he shared in the church with two former moderators. He has been astonished that he has risen through the ranks to his present status. At every level he has known and appreciated the presence and pastoral care of chaplains.

The Air Marshal spoke about the operational experts who control drones, directly participating in operations from their base. While the drones may kill people in far off places, they go home to family and friends in the evening. The help of the chaplain to deal with the moral issues their work raises is immense. He concluded his speech with an appeal for chaplains to be supported in prayer. As he finished, the clock reached 11, o'clock and the Assembly was called to stand to share in the national minute of silence in honour of the dead in the Manchester bombing on Monday evening. The Moderator then thanked Air Marshal Atha.

Turning to the Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council, the Convener, the Rev Norman Smith, began by saying the dominant narrative of the Church of Scotland in his 20 years in the ministry has been one of continuing decline. But that is not the whole story. There are still people finding faith or having their faith confirmed and deepened. People encounter Jesus and their lives are transformed. The Council has met and heard the stories of many people whose stories are very different from the one with which he began and "telling our story" became the Convener's overriding theme.

The Council are aware that people need to be helped to share their faith with people they meet in the community and has put together the course *Sharing Faith*, which has four sessions and is designed to help people talk about faith with each other. And to help people share their faith *within* churches, the Council has produced the resource *Conversations in Worship*.

Last year the General Assembly gave the council an instruction to bring a theme or themes round which the church could unite. It has chosen the theme of stories: Stories of Encounter, Stories of Transformation and Stories of Celebration. These themes are to run from 2018 and they are, Mr Smith said, "a chance for the church to share together this great story that God has given us".

We have a story to tell but the context in which we have to tell it is changing. Which is why the Council is reviewing the National Youth Assembly (NYA) to bring "a new thing" for 2020 and beyond, shaped by today's youth for today's youth. Since it began in 1994, the Youth Assembly has changed

and made its voice heard in the General Assembly. For many young people it has helped sustain and shape their faith. The Convener asked the Assembly to allow a new generation to discover something that will become as cherished as the NYA. He said it is time to turn to a new chapter.

He also said that a good number of congregations do not have the number of youth they used to have. The Council has put together a series of conferences under the heading 'Community of Faith' specifically aimed at helping congregations like these in the area of youth. Over 450 volunteers and paid workers attended. As the Year of Young People comes across Scotland in 2018 the Council will continue to develop the area of work among young people.

The Convener turned to the use of the online technology. The faith stories on Facebook have been viewed by 13,000 people since the beginning of April. The use of 360 degree photography of church buildings is also a magnificent way of showing off our beautiful church buildings for buildings have a good story to tell. While speaking of buildings, the Convener referred to the Committee of Art and Architecture known as CARTA. Because of that committee the Church enjoys what is known as Ecclesiastical Exemption that allows the Church to take decisions that otherwise would have to be taken by the local authority planning committee.

Questions were asked regarding resources but the Revd David Cameron also asked whether the council might move from producing *resources* to producing *projects*. The Convener said that "the greatest producers of mission are local congregations and our role is a catalyst that releases projects at local level".

Turning to the deliverance, a number of commissioners welcomed the emphasis on young people in the report, with an elder from Aran speaking about the need to collaborate with the community in order to engage effectively with young people. But, she said, that "without the church our work would fail. Get out there and be intergenerational!"

The Revd Louis Kinsey asked the council, together with the Theological Forum, to look at the question of inviting children to participate in Holy Communion. He argued that to insist that children must be baptised before coming to the Lord's Table establishes a higher bar than the one in place for adults, who are often invited to participate in Holy Communion if they "love the Lord". He also said that it is "unpalatable" to separate out a Sunday School into those baptised children that can take communion, and the unbaptised children who can't. This, he said, is "more than the Lord demands". His motion was accepted by the Convener and affirmed by the Assembly.

Youth delegate Esther Nisbet presented a passionate affirmation of the National Youth Assembly (NYA), which has been running in recent times since 1994 but which the Council has said it would

finish in 2019 in its current form. Without the NYA, Esther was clear that she would no longer have connection with the Church of Scotland. Through the NYA, she had found a community of passionate and dedicated people that invested in her. She asked the commissioners to allow their sons and daughters to prophecy and to be fully engaged in reviewing and planning for the future. Ms Nisbet's motion was accepted and she received a jelly baby from the Moderator for her pains!

In response to another motion asking that the NYA should continue beyond 2019 until any alternatives had proved at least as successful, the convener said that the NYA delegates were confident of the Council's commitment and that we should trust their ability to shape their own future.

The Revd Hugh O'Brien asked the Assembly to congratulate Scripture Union on its 150th anniversary year and to give thanks for its work with the nation's young people. He and another commissioner both spoke of coming to Christ as a result of Scripture Union's mission work. The Assembly gladly accepted his motion. It then broke for lunch.