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

10. Wednesday 25 May: afternoon

The Assembly resumed after lunch with an announcement by the Moderator that he had been in touch with the Revd Lindsay Schuter whose parish includes the Isle of Barra, from where a 14 year old girl had died and her friend seriously injured in the bomb blast in Manchester on Monday. The Moderator conveyed the Assembly's sympathy and concern and she had responded with the grateful appreciation of herself and the people of Barra.

The Assembly turned to continue consideration of the Mission and Discipleship Deliverance. Going through the sections of the Deliverance the Convener spoke on the motion to approve the theme of telling stories and commended it to the Church. He said the motion had been devised by three people who represented the full width of the theological spectrum. Stories are a fine means of mission. There was then an addition to the deliverance recognising the 37 years of service of the Revd Dr Roddy MacLeod editing the Gaelic section of *Life and Work*. This was agreed. Then the Revd David Cameron moved that the Assembly should establish a National Season of Invitation to the Nation. This was agreed.

The Moderator called for the Report of the National Youth Assembly to be presented. The Youth Moderator, Andrew Macpherson, rehearsed the three themes of the Youth Assembly: Mental Health, Gender Justice and the Future of the Church. It gave those present the opportunity to discuss important issues. He also said that young people were not trying to reshape traditional worship but to provide an addition to it and an encouragement to engage with the community.

The consideration of Gender Justice covered the whole area of sexual relationships and gender non-conformity. And there was the important issue of mental health. He said that suicide is the greatest reason for young deaths, and said that *everyone* has mental health. If you are ill with a mental health issue you don't have mental health; you are just ill. He said that 40 per cent of those who attended the last Youth Assembly had sought medical help for mental health problems within the previous twelve months.

The Youth Moderator concluded with a plea that people should inform themselves and take serious note of those who need help with mental illness of one kind or another. His superb presentation of an excellent report was warmly received. He was fulsomely thanked by the Moderator to appreciative applause from the Assembly.

The Assembly turned to the final report of today, the Report of the Theological Forum. The Forum brought to the Assembly its document, *An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage*. The Convener, the Very Revd Professor Iain Torrance, said that, knowing that there would never be full agreement on this issue, the Forum was attempting to help the Church move beyond a 'binary' argument to an approach that pursues respectful dialogue. The first section of the document outlines the Forum's understanding of Scripture. It then goes on to consider different kinds of argument – all of which were used over 50 years ago in the debates over the ordination of women: arguments about rights, arguments that drew analogies with other situations, and arguments about justice. "We gradually came to understand more deeply that the person who represents Christ at Communion . . . represents Christ in Christ's *person* and rather than in Christ's *gender*" – and so "the old polarization fell away".

There are a variety of arguments on same-sex marriage. Protestants do not consider marriage as a sacrament, as the Catholic Church does, but as a Covenant Bond before God. Civil Same-Sex marriage is legal in society; so the question has to be asked whether there is sufficient argument to say that such same-sex marriages cannot be celebrated in Church. The Forum has come to the conclusion that there is insufficient argument in theology to deny Church marriage to same-sex couples providing there is legal protection for those who in conscience would not be able to preside at same-sex marriages.

The Convener said there is a mountain of arguments in the public domain which purport to be about same-sex relationships but are actually about justice. When Christ entered the world, our human reality changed, he said. There are both procreational relationships and non-procreational relationships and *both* are equally valid.

Concluding, Professor Torrance said that since our discussions have been at a 'binary' stage, with two sides each vying to win over the other, the Forum was presenting a non-binary way forward and trying to see the issue differently. We should apologise to each other for things said on both sides, hoping for forgiveness.

Moving to the Deliverance, The Revd Steven Reid moved to receive the report with the exception of Sections referring to the document on same-sex marriage. He said that the document was one-sided and did not take into account the Word of Scripture. Another commissioner supported Mr Reid, saying that God has rights which are contained in scripture and that the report failed to give scripture its place. The Revd Lezley Stewart rose to support the Forum. She said she had not prepared a speech that she was sitting beside another minister with whom she had ministered in

Dundee. Their theological positions were far apart, but they worked together and lived three doors away from each other. Then they left to minister elsewhere and later their two congregations, which had inherited their different approaches, were united in what has proved a happy union. And she and the fellow minister are still firm friends.

The Moderator had said that all votes would be electronic and he called for a vote on the counter-motion. The result of the vote was 298 for the motion and 149 for the counter-motion. Moving to the Deliverance again, the moderator came to the third section, which received the theological document on same-sex marriage, to which there were two amendments. The Revd Dr Alan Hamilton wanted the Forum to continue its work. He argued that the Church has changed its mind on two occasions and said that it was important not to appear to throw out previously received reports to the Assembly, including the 2012 report of the Working Group on Sexuality: Believing in Marriage. The Revd Peter Johnston moved an *alternative* counter-motion which wanted the Assembly to recognise the Church's doctrine and practice in matters of human sexuality and marriage. In a vote between the two amendments, Dr Hamilton's amendment received 251 votes and Mr Johnston's amendment received 274. The Assembly now voted for or against the surviving amendment, which the convener was prepared to accept. It was agreed by 361 votes to 94.

Following a five minute break, both the Revd Dale London and the Revd Hector Morrison moved motions against part of Section 3, which they both claimed misrepresented the 'conservative' approach to scripture. Mr London withdrew his motion in favour of Mr Morrison's. The Assembly then moved to a discussion of Mr Morrison's motion. A number of Commissioners rose to support Mr Morrison, mostly calling for a return to God's word. The final contributor said that he did not wish to be led into interpretations of scripture his congregation would not understand. The Revd Hector Morrison replied to the debate and said if anything he had said had hurt or offended Professor Torrance he apologised. He just wished for the language of God's Word to be heard.

Professor Torrance closing the debate said that theology is progressing all the time and referred back to the debate on the ordination of women 50 years ago. He resisted the counter-motion in the name of Hector Morrison on the grounds that the Church must get away from the binary way of thinking. On the vote, 269 voted for the Forum's position and 191 for the counter-motion.

A motion asked for the Forum to contact the ecumenical relations committee to find out the views of other denominations. The Convener accepted the addendum. Another Commissioner asked the Forum to engage in further study of the scripture in the issues on same-sex marriage. The Convener

said the Assembly has had six reports on the issue based on scripture and the Forum wished to produce something different. The amendment fell by 127 votes to 284.

A final amendment to the Deliverance asked the Forum, in consultation with other Councils, to investigate theologically the theme of reconciliation, with particular reference to the decisions within the Church of Scotland, Scottish Churches and Scottish society concerning same-sex marriage. The Assembly accepted this.

Finally, the Moderator paid tribute to Professor Torrance at the close of his convenership of the Theological Forum. The Assembly then closed with the Benediction. It, and we, will return for the final day tomorrow.