

## General Assembly 2017 podcasts by the Revd Douglas Aitken

### 11. Friday 26 May

Welcome to the final day of the 2017 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. It is the day when the Assembly Choir, a gathering of volunteers brought together at the start of the week, contributed to the worship by singing the anthem, 'There is a balm in Gilead' arranged by Lloyd Larson.

At the start of business Loretta Minghella, Chief Executive of Christian Aid in the UK, was invited to address the Assembly. She said that poverty is unnecessary and that the Church of Scotland is one organisation that doesn't subscribe to the idea that we don't help those who "are not our own".

She spoke of a visit to Kenya and in the slums she met a family where the children were too weak to walk to school. The grandfather was soon to die, and the daughter pondering whether to sacrifice her virginity in order to pay for the grandfather's funeral. She had also just returned from South Sudan, the newest country in the world which was greeted with joy and is now devastated by war and famine. Here people danced with gratitude for help received and presented Ms Minghella and her colleagues with two chickens and an aubergine. "Hungry as they are, they are still ready to give", she said.

She spoke of Climate Change and the hurricane in the Philippines and the devastation that followed, and she quoted a colleague who said, "Forget making poverty history; climate change is making poverty permanent." She also commended the Guild's support for a project in Bolivia, providing solar ovens that help save the environment. She said that women from Malawi are going to Bolivia to see how it works.

The business of the day consists of the reports of eight committees that are really responsible for the smooth running of the Church, but are usually hidden in the Head Offices. The first Committee to report was the General Trustees. The Chairman, Mr Iain Douglas, explained that the General Trustees hold title to most of the churches, halls, manses and glebes around the country; in 2016 their funds allowed them to support congregations with investments of six and a half million pounds. [£6.5million]

It is Presbyteries, not General Trustees, who decide which church buildings are *required* and he said that greater collaboration is needed to make for informed decisions. For example, regular meetings take place with Glasgow Presbytery and the Trustees have also established a "Cluster Pilot Scheme" with the five Tayside Presbyteries to discuss building issues.

The Trustees publish guidance to try to ensure that congregations are advised about changes in the Law which affect our buildings. Only yesterday the Trustees had launched their Health and Safety Toolkit. Over the next month all congregations and presbyteries will receive their own copy.

As in previous years, Mr Douglas said that many of our buildings are much too big and expensive to maintain and no longer serve a congregation well. “Neither the General Trustees nor the Church as a whole is a building preservation body.” He said that so many of our existing buildings must present a very unwelcoming prospect to people unfamiliar with church worship. So, when thinking about *new* buildings, he suggested that certain principles around welcome, light, flexibility, operational costs and warmth might be taken into account – though his first principle was: “The building should be located where people are to be found.” He concluded: “Our buildings need to reflect our duty to serve people rather than being a burden which deflects us from our mission.”

The first question asked that Disposals of Property be recorded in the Report; another Commissioner asked that when properties are inspected under the quinquennial fabric inspection regulations, those doing the business have all the necessary equipment to ensure complete inspection, which had not happened in the case of her congregation. In answer to another question, the Chairman said it is an Insurance principle that empty buildings carry higher risks than used ones and so may attract a much higher premium than when in use. He added that it is an issue they may look at. In answer to another question he said that the sale of a redundant building is or can be an ‘emotional’ problem. Often a building might continue to be of value to the community. This is why the Trustees encourage community buy-out. The Presbytery Fabric and Glebes Convener of the Presbytery of Duns asked if the Trustees had a list of criteria which might help Presbyteries in considering issues of buildings. The Chairman said that the Trustees are working on giving more help to Presbyteries. A Commissioner wished to invite the General Trustees to consider whether monies held by the Trustees in their fabric fund could be used to help meet their congregational Ministry and Mission contribution which the congregation find difficult to pay. The Chairman said they would look at the matter though the Council of Assembly would need to decide. The Assembly agreed to that process.

The Moderator thanked the Chairman who is retiring from the post. The Assembly then turned to the Report of the Housing and Loan Trustees whose responsibility is to provide Housing for rent at 50 per cent of a commercial rent to retiring Ministers, Widows and separated spouses, or provide loans toward the purchase of housing. The report was presented by the Convener, the Revd Ian Taylor. He outlined the work of the Trustees, including the fact that there were five applications for rentals in 2016 and just eight applications for loans. He said likely needs in the immediate future will cost in the region of £4.5 million. He added that there is income from the sale of properties no

longer required. He said that should a house be difficult to sell they will offer it for rent at a commercial rent. The Trustees hold currently 234 houses for rent as at the end of 2016.

Turning to the Deliverance, the Revd George Lind spoke of the helpfulness of the Housing and Loan staff in helping find a solution for a member of his congregation whose husband, a retired Minister, had died following a period of suffering from dementia. In the space of a phone call with the office the whole problem was resolved. The Assembly then turned to the brief deliverance which was passed without comment.

In the absence of the chairman, Lord Brodie, the report of the Church Hymnary Trustees was then presented by their Vice-Convenor, the Revd Ann Inglis. She noted that, though sales of the words edition of CH4 have fallen, the sales of every other version of the hymn book have risen. She addressed an issue *not* in the report – enquiries about an extra-large print edition. The trustees had not costed such an edition but estimated that it would be high – she was also concerned about the weight of such a book and observed that large print for one person is not large *enough* for another. She said there are alternatives to print versions.

This issue dominated the questions and debate that followed. One visually impaired deacon commented on the fact that CH4 in Braille is stapled, not bound, so is vulnerable to falling apart. In response to another commissioner, the vice-convenor said the Trustees would look at the possibility of producing bound Braille copies.

Moving to the deliverance, a commissioner raised the issue of the extra-large print edition already mentioned, but pointed out that his proposed amendment requested only “a format of CH4 more easily accessible to the visually impaired”. He made the point that few people who go blind later in life learn Braille code and he quoted a Royal National Institute for the Blind forecast of increased visual impairment over the coming years. On a vote, his amendment was carried.

At this point, the Moderator paused business to report breaking news that at least 23 people had been killed and 25 wounded after gunmen opened fire on a bus carrying Coptic Christians in central Egypt. He led the Assembly in prayer.

This was followed by the Report of the Chalmers Lectureship Trust, which simply recorded the success of the current series of lectures given by the Revd Dr Doug Gay, and that the next series is under consideration. The deliverance was passed without comment.

Turning to the Church of Scotland Trust, the Convenor explained that the Trust’s responsibility is furth of Scotland where they act like the General Trustees in Scotland. The Trust manages several third party trusts and ensures that the monies are placed appropriately. They are concerned that

before congregations in the European Presbytery make changes to their buildings they must get permission from Presbytery and the Trust. The Convener said that the problem of the properties in Pakistan is still on-going. For one reason or another it has still been impossible to transfer the property to the Diocese of Sialkot. The issue has been going on for some 15 years and it is coming to the point when the properties may have to be transferred to the Government of Pakistan.

The deliverance brought only changes in membership of the Trust, ensuring that appropriate skills are maintained. It passed without comment.

The Chairman of the Investors Trust formally presented the accounts and observed that the Chinese curse – “may you live in interesting times” – certainly applied to 2016. However, despite world events creating financial volatility, the overall effect on investment funds was positive. All three investment funds have posted growth in excess of inflation, though the two best performing funds fell behind the benchmark set for investors. The trustees will keep an eye on the performance of their Investment Managers and change them if necessary.

The Chairman said that discussion on fossil fuels was giving rise to the need for a wider statement of principles on investments and she said that discussions with other interested parties across the Church will continue.

The Moderator called for the report of the Pension Trustees. The Convener turned to the issue of discretionary benefits for pensioners whose service was before 1997 and while there is no legal requirement to raise these benefits, the Trustees have raised the benefit by one per cent. The Widows and Orphans fund is ring-fenced and has been increased by 10 per cent; the Ministers’ Contributors’ Fund has been increased by 25 per cent because of account funding and actuarial advice. The General Fund is healthy and has had some increase. The Trustees holding are about £500 million. The Convener said that as he is retiring it gives the trust the opportunity to appoint someone new to lead the trust. The deliverance is simply an appointment of a new trustee. In conclusion the Convener said that the schemes are in good health and heart. The Moderator thanked the Convener for his long and faithful service.

The next report was that of the Nominations Committee, which appoints proposed ministers, elders and deacons to the Councils and committees of the Church. Then the commissioners received the report of the selection committee; they heard a protestation, which simply brought a legal matter to a close; and then they rose for lunch.

As for us, we have sought to report with diligence and hope it has been helpful. But we have come to the end of our work, so from Edinburgh, the General Assembly, and from Laurence Wareing and me – Douglas Aitken – goodbye.