

General Assembly 2018 podcasts by Laurence Wareing

1. Saturday 19 May: morning

Welcome to Edinburgh and the 2018 meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

It is with mixed feelings that we bring you this first summary of the year's business. The Reverend Douglas Aitken, who recorded these podcasts for a decade and a half, died just before Easter this year. The great breadth of experience and knowledge of the Church worldwide that Douglas brought to this work, and his fine speaking voice, is missed hugely. But he was deeply committed to the work of the General Assembly and his spirit lives on.

The day's opening worship commenced with the unique sound of unaccompanied psalm singing: "All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice"; and the Moderator, the Right Reverend Derek Browning, reflected on the Assembly's theme: 'Peace be with You'. Is there peace in the Church? he asked. Where is peace in the world? During his year of office, he said, he encountered many places around the world where communities and individuals wish to build "longer tables and not higher walls". He added: "with peace in our hearts, we can still speak of God in a secular society".

Dr Browning referred to the General Assembly as a "theatre of faith lived out loud". The first part of this morning's session consisted, as ever, of well-honed ritual and formalities and, following worship, Dr Browning presented the name of the Reverend Susan Brown, minister of Dornoch Cathedral, to be Moderator for 2018-2019. Mrs Brown takes up the role exactly 50 years after the first woman was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Church of Scotland: more about that later in the week. Having consecrated Mrs Brown and handed over the Moderator's ring and pectoral cross, Dr Browning assumed the title 'Very Reverend'; Mrs Brown becomes the 'Right Reverend'.

The new Moderator thanked the commissioners for electing her to the role, asked for continuing prayer and referred to the "two very special Highland parishes" in which she has served. She then called for the Queen's Commission to her Lord High Commissioner to be read. The Lord High Commissioner for this Assembly is His Grace Richard Scott, the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry. He has been associated with a number of major institutions including, for ten years, as President of the National Trust of Scotland.

Following the reading of the Queen's letter, the Lord High Commissioner himself addressed the 842 Commissioners, Delegates, Guests and Youth Participants that make up the Assembly. He noted that among the commitments that prevent Her Majesty being present in Edinburgh in person was the marriage of her grandson in Windsor at midday today.

None of his Grace's ancestors has held the role of Lord High Commissioner. He himself is an Episcopalian and his wife a Roman Catholic. He spoke movingly, however, of those who have inspired him by expressing their faith in different ways: among them the Church of Scotland minister of his local church, the late Bill Scott, who he described as "the best and kindest of men"; and of a local woman of exceptional courage, Ethel Walker, the inspiration for Sir Walter Scott's character, Jeanie Deans. When her 18 year old sister was condemned to death under a draconian law against concealed pregnancies, Ethel put her trust in the Lord and walked to London, 350 miles, barefoot, to find and petition the Duke of Argyle and the King for mercy.

"Our Faith, founded on the Holy Bible, brings us together today", His Grace said, and he recalled Her Majesty's words at the meeting of Commonwealth leaders in April. She spoke of shared inheritances which "help us overcome difference so that diversity is a cause for celebration rather than division". In the words of St John the Evangelist, His Grace concluded: "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another."

The Moderator thanked His Grace for his words and then invited the immediate past Moderator, Dr Derek Browning, to give the Assembly a brief report on his year in office. He described the year as a huge privilege and "outrageous fun", and said that it had been marked by different images of bridge building. Faith at its best builds bridges, he said.

He had spoken a blessing for the opening of the Queensferry Crossing across the River Forth. A bridge, he said, connects people and places – they are concrete and steel parables of the relationship between earth, sea and sky.

He met his holiness the Pope in the Vatican. He experienced the Pope as a man of immense grace and kindness, and with a wicked sense of humour. It was a privilege to pray with him and talk about situations in the world. One of the Pope's titles is "Pontifex Maximus", sometimes translated as "greatest bridge maker" – the Pope is a bridge builder, Dr Browning said, between the poor and the

Church; between refugees and the Church; between different faiths. “His ability to be a bridge is incredible.”

Finally, Dr Browning spoke about the work of CrossReach, the social work arm of the Church, and a particular visit to a day care centre in Kilmarnock: Morven House. He met a man who was there on his second visit; a man with low self-confidence. “This place is great,” the man told him. “So far, nobody has judged me. I think they may be able to help.” Here was another bridge between a small, caring church centre and a lonely, uncertain individual.

No doubt noting that the Assembly Hall gathering included Scotland’s First Minister and leaders of local authorities from across the country, Dr Browning concluded with a plea to those in local and national government, to take seriously the expertise that already exists within the Church. He said: “We have been in the business of building bridges for generations. . . It’s not simply about ‘doing God’; it’s about doing humanity’. . . We demand to share in the privilege of serving others alongside government and charities and NGOs – and not to be excluded because of our faith profile. We have tables to share”, he insisted. “We have bridges to help build.”

Following a short break, business resumed with the proposal and appointment of Ms Christine Paterson as Depute Clerk. The Moderator was then invited to greet delegates and visitors from other denominations and ecumenical bodies in the United Kingdom and from throughout the world.

Two visitors were invited to address the Assembly: the Revd Alistair McHaffie, a Church of England vicar, who had started life as a member of a Free Church in Troon, on the West Coast of Scotland; and on behalf of the overseas visitors, the Revd Rola Sleiman from the Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. In 2017, Rola became the first female to be ordained to the ministry in the whole of the Middle East. She was prevented from travelling to the Assembly last year; *this* year she stood before commissioners to declare: “We are to be pioneers and not to submit to social conceptions.”

The report of the Assembly Arrangements Committee was presented by Ms Judith Pearson. She outlined the demanding, multi-faceted role required of commissioners to the General Assembly, and asked how the Assembly might be made more effective in carrying out its functions of law-making and governance. She said that the Assembly needs to hear as many voices as possible, from all commissioners (not just ministers!) from across all Presbyteries. As well as offering a range of resources offered to help commissioners prepare for the Assembly, the Committee has proposed a limit of five minutes on most speeches – including now allowing five minutes for the seconder of a motion or amendment to speak. “It’s a small change,” she said, “but the intention behind it is to allow more voices to be heard.”

A number of questions followed, many about appropriate use of money.

There was a question about the rates paid to commissioners, to which the convenor responded by saying that these rates are always kept under review. One minister with a form of dyslexia said that reading the *Blue Book*, the book of Assembly reports, was very difficult for her. She asked if there was a way of producing an electronic version that can then be converted to a more appropriate font. The Convenor promised to look at this. A question about the place of prayer in Assembly business received a reply that the business has to be done, but that there are a growing number of ways in which prayer is incorporated into the week – not least through Sunday's *Heart & Soul* event in Princes Street Gardens.

A former Moderator and Principal Clerk brought a new section of the deliverance, encouraging the committee in its desire to publish a further volume of the *Fasti* (a list of ministers that extends back to the Reformation) for the years 2000-2020 – there was a discussion about its value as an historical document. The Assembly also considered the costs associated with the Moderator's visits to presbyteries, normally lasting ten days. The convenor accepted that there should be flexibility around visits, which this coming year will be to the presbyteries of Hamilton, Kirkcaldy, Annandale and Eskdale, and England.

The CEO of the Scottish Bible Society, Elaine Duncan, gave a report on the work of the Society. She enthused about the million Bibles that have been distributed across the island of Cuba. She showed an image of children queuing for Sunday School in Malawi, where the Scottish Bible Society provided almost ten thousands Bibles for Malawi last year as part of a multi-year partnership with the Bible Society in that country. Her team had met a local pastor whose Bible had fallen apart over time. "How can I teach my church when I don't have a whole Bible?"

Finally, the Scottish Bible Society has seen the Bible used in other parts of the world as a tool for helping to heal trauma. Ms Duncan reported that the programme has now been introduced into Scotland. She then turned to the Moderator and presented her with a copy of the Bible.

The next few items of business were quickly agreed and the Assembly was suspended for lunch, to return in the afternoon for the reports of the Legal Questions Committee, the Council of Assembly and a Joint Report concerning the resourcing of Local Church Reviews. We will bring you an update on them later today.