

**General Assembly 2018 podcasts
by Laurence Wareing**

3. Monday 21 May: morning

Over the weekend, the Assembly spilled out into the streets of Edinburgh – or, strictly speaking, its gardens. On Saturday evening, to mark the Year of Young People, there was a special event for anyone who *felt* young – in Princes Street Gardens, featuring the Manchester-based Christian band LZ7 and, as guest speaker, the Youth Moderator, Robin Downie. Then, on Sunday afternoon, the annual *Heart & Soul* event was rolled out with much more music and, this year, amongst others, broadcaster and writer Sally Magnusson; Louise Macdonald, CEO of Young Scot; and Dr Margaret Forester, talking about 50 years of women's ministry in the Church of Scotland.

And there were bubbles to blow, also – *lots* of bubbles – for young and old alike, including – once she got her hands on a bottle of them – an enthusiastic Moderator.

In the morning, the Moderator had preached at the Assembly service at St Giles High Kirk before going on to participate in the Gaelic Service at Greyfriars Kirk.

It was worship that also preceded this morning's business: a service of Holy Communion – always a reverent and moving occasion, symbolic both of the presence of God at the heart of the Church's conversations; and of the fundamental shared faith of all present, whatever their differing viewpoints may be.

During initial business announcements, one youth delegate requested that at future Assemblies, non-alcoholic wine and gluten free bread might be made available. He said that he'd just helped to distribute the communion elements but had not been able to receive them himself.

A reply to the Queen's Letter, received on Saturday, was read out by the immediate past Moderator, the Very Revd Dr. Derek Browning. This was followed by the Report of the World Mission Council. The Council's work is about making connections worldwide, especially with partner Christian churches. *This* year's report focussed on conversations across faith boundaries. (It's worth noting that a key objective of the Council of Assembly's strategic plan, to be debated later, also focuses on "connecting people".)

The Convenor, the Revd Iain Cunningham, asked whether the voices of our international church partners are the *only* voices we should listen to. Is it possible, he asked, "that sometimes it may also be good to talk... and even better to listen... to those whose whole understanding of the world, and of God, is often very different from ours?" He said that interfaith dialogue is not an optional extra

but at the heart of our identity as followers of Jesus Christ. For Jesus, he said, there weren't any "no-go areas" or any "untouchable" people.

"There really is no point in *saying* 'Peace be with you!' if we do nothing to help *build* that peace", the Convenor said, adding that "interfaith engagement, where we begin to listen to, and start to understand, one another is one component of that process. One particular interfaith initiative last year enabled five young Scottish Christians and five young Scottish Muslims to travel together to Rwanda in order to learn about peace and reconciliation.

Over the years, the Convener himself has travelled on the Church's behalf to a number of countries where conflict and violence has been rife – most recently with the present Moderator to Gaza, days before the beginning of the Right of Return protest marches that have led to the killing of dozens of Palestinian protesters. He said: "While in all of these cases religion was only *one* factor in a complicated mix of issues, the religious differences were in each case significant and cynically manipulated." Interfaith friendships matter, he argued, because the logic of our Christian faith *demands* it; because the example of Christ *demonstrates* it, and because the world in which we live here and now *desperately needs* it.

Finally, Mr Cunningham showed off his kilt and advertised a new official, registered Church of Scotland tartan. The World Mission Council, in partnership with Lochcarron of Selkirk, designed it. He said it represents peace well in the interweaving of its colours and he hopes it will be used for gifts when visiting partners and congregations overseas – and he presented the Moderator with a tartan stole.

In the questions that followed, the Revd Alan Sorensen asked for advice on beginning interfaith dialogue locally. The Convenor said that resources are being considered and he mentioned the recently appointed Church of Scotland Interfaith Officer. But we can begin with our own neighbours, he said. Later in the debate, the head of Christian Aid in Scotland added that the most powerful way to develop interfaith relationships is "to *do*" things together in the community. She said, "One of the best ways to *build* bridges is to walk on them together".

The Revd Graham Finch asked what the Council is able to do about Pakistani Christians who have fled from persecution to live in hiding in Bangkok. The Council is aware of the situation. It's difficult to get engaged directly in such situations, the Convenor replied. Normally this is the work of the partner Church, though in this instance the Church of Christ in Thailand is also finding it difficult to respond.

Mrs Kate Aspinwall spoke on behalf of the Palestinian Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center based in Jerusalem – “Sabeel” means “the way” or a spring of life-giving water. Sabeel seeks justice through non-violent means, and liberation from unjust structures. Every Thursday at noon, a communion service is held in its offices in Jerusalem – preceded by the distribution of prayer points to enable others across the world to engage with Sabeel’s concerns.

Mrs Mary Musallam brought greetings from the Tent of Nations farm above Bethlehem, which Dr Derek Browning had visited during his moderatorial year. For 27 years, she said, “we have lived in hopelessness and frustration, pain and fear” but the resolve of the organisation remains strong and she invited commissioners to visit. The Convenor said that the Assembly has often expressed its admiration for the Nassar family that owns the Tent of Nations – it is “a light that shines in great darkness”. Later, in response to a plea that commissioners pray for Palestinians to be recognised as people and as ‘a people’ by Israel, the Convenor responded by saying that the UK Government should recognise the State of Palestine as part of the process of creating a two-state solution.

A commissioner from Kingussie spoke about a year she spent living in Pakistan – the most informative and developmental period of her life. Pupils of her local school had visited their twin school in Malawi, as they do regularly; but this year visiting one of the Church’s mission partners in that country – an experience that she recommended to others travelling overseas.

A number of overseas visitors offered insights into the contexts from which they had come, often offering real gratitude to the Church of Scotland for its support over the years. The Revd Lee Jae Cheon from the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea said that, during the Korean war, three million perished, including Scottish soldiers – he said “the war is not over, just suspended”, and spoke of proposed ecumenical cross-Asia peace initiatives.

The Convenor indicated that it is the Council’s aim to continue work in strategic areas from the world – strategic in terms of church growth and in terms of the fault lines within human societies.

A commissioner from Haifa in Israel introduced himself as “a Christian Arab Palestinian Israeli” with Swiss heritage! When his father established the House of Grace in Haifa, it was out of a growing understanding that his task was not to “kick out his enemy” but to work with those in need, including former prisoners. Even though Christians are a minority, he said, “we have a great message to carry in the Holy Land.”

Christians are also a minority in Singapore. However, the Revd Kien Seng Lee argued that in the midst of dialogue and social action, we must remember Jesus’ commission to his followers “to make disciples of all people”.

Aftab Gohar, who lost his mother in a bomb blast in Pakistan, is a minister in Grangemouth. He thanked the Council for its work in Pakistan against the blasphemy law. He said that the Asia Secretary frequently visits Peshawar near the Khyber Pass, one of the most dangerous areas in Pakistan, on behalf of the Church. "You are always there", he said.

Turning to the deliverance, one minister proposed a new instruction to the Council. It raised the case of Asia Bibi, sentenced to death in Pakistan for blasphemy, instructing the council to seek the urgent assistance of the UK and Scottish Governments in securing her early exoneration and release from detention. Asia Bibi is a Christian woman accused of insulting the Prophet Mohammed after attempting to share water in a field with fellow Muslim workers. The proposer said that the instruction added "a human face" to an important issue of what he called Pakistan's "outrageous blasphemy laws". The instruction was accepted.

The Revd Stuart Duff spoke about a valuable learning experience in Nepal as part of his study leave. He wanted to encourage other ministers to take opportunities to visit partners overseas to learn about the work of God. His new section instructed the World Mission Council, with the Ministries Council, to encourage such possibilities, and this was accepted by the Assembly.

Miss Tara Shannon, a Youth Delegate, had also been to Nepal to visit the 'Let Us Build a House' project in Nepal following the earthquake there. Her proposed new section instructed the Council to make such opportunities available to people of *all* ages.

The Revd Jack Holt brought an amendment that commended "the on-going work of mediation and trauma training with significant church leaders in South Sudan" and asked for prayerful support. Rather than a drop in the ocean this was small seeds being sown, he said.

From South Sudan, the Right Revd Peter Gai Lual spoke about the need for God's peace in a broken world and added that people need material as well as spiritual support. "A hungry person is an angry person", he said.

Finally, the Very Revd David Arnott asked the Assembly to celebrate the centenary of the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, with whom the Church of Scotland has strong links. The Church has lived through many crises and currently faces the staged withdrawal of funding from the State.

Commissioners didn't get to the World Mission Council's Special Report on Lessons for Scotland from Christian Faith in Africa before breaking for lunch, but will turn to this – as we will – later.