

General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

4. Monday 21 May: afternoon

Commissioners returned after lunch to take up the Special Report of the World Mission Council on Africa. This follows the recent World Mission practice of focusing on one theme or geographical area each year. But this year there was a specific task required: to understand the lessons to Scotland that might be learned from Christian Faith in Africa. Much of the content of the report had been written by or with members of partner churches in Africa, and today's discussion took place with the benefit of having some 20 visitors from different churches in Africa amongst the gathering.

Christianity is now rooted in the global south. 26 per cent of the global Christian population lives in Sub-Saharan Africa, with that figure estimated to reach 40 per cent by 2060. For one writer, "the global south is the new seat of Christianity", with Pentecostalism being the dominant tradition – active in mission work and evangelism.

The convenor, the Revd Iain Cunningham, said that it would be impossible to do justice to the breadth, depth and variety of expressions of Christianity that you find in Africa in a single report. However, what seemed most noticeable about African Christianity is its sense of confidence—not *self*-confidence but a deep-seated confidence in the good news about Jesus Christ.

Moreover, he said, "the report reminds us that in the global South the normal state of the church in the world is *growth*." He suggested that there is a vibrancy and vitality to faith and worship, and often also to Christlike service in the community, that is sometimes missing here in Scotland.

The Convener hoped that this was a report that would provide food for thought. Clearly it did, with one commissioner describing it as an eye-opener. The Revd Alistair May said that the report was "terrific encouragement" – he was thankful for the African communities from which we can learn, and for God's Spirit at work on that continent. "We need to learn *confidence* in the living God when we see what is being done in Africa", he said.

The delegate from the Presbyterian Church of Ghana thanked the Council for its humility in producing the report. He was sad to see the decline in young people in the Church in Scotland and said that "the Church in Africa is concerned for you". Above everything else, the church is a faith community, he added. If it is to grow it has to pay attention to its evangelism and outreach. The

Revd Bishop Chipasha Musaba from the United Church of Zambia added the Church in Scotland needs to make some radical decisions in order to bring young people back into the Church.

One commissioner travelled to Africa in 1999, at a time when there was concern about declining number of ministers in Scotland (“Does that sound familiar?” he asked) to try to understand how four million members of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa were served by 320 ministers. He learned that congregations were resourced through their lay members – who were themselves resourced by theological education by extension. “How can we put in place a meaningful programme of lay training to rise to the challenge of the hour?” he asked. The Convenor responded with the observation that, thirty years ago, the Church of Scotland tried to learn the lessons of theological education by extension but made it too formal and academic and, he said, “missed the point”. Many commissioners appeared to agree.

With only small amendments, all designed to strengthen the report, the deliverance was passed with a strong sense of approval.

The Council of Assembly then returned, bringing the outstanding items of its report – a draft strategic plan and an interim report on proposals for the national offices. It was the strategic plan that most people wanted to talk about first.

This was the product of around two years of consultation and development and offered “directing principles for planning and prioritising short, medium and long-term goals for the life and work of the Church of Scotland over the next ten years”. The convenor emphasised that some 2,000 people have been involved in consultation events, personal discussion and email correspondence in the plan’s development.

She referred back to the previous debate on lessons from Africa, saying she was struck by references to “confidence” and “culture”. She believed that this draft plan would help the Church of Scotland membership to feel more confident and to make decisions that are culturally appropriate to Scotland.

The plan’s key objectives (“Worshipping God – Inspiring Faith – Connecting People”) were supported by eight overarching goals: four designed to be *enabling* of people in the life of the local congregation and four indicating ways in which the national bodies can *support* both the regional and local church in terms of resources.

The Convenor concluded that “there is much to be done if we accept this strategy, but contrary to what we might believe, the workers are not too few”.

Turning to questions, the Convenor concurred with the Very Revd Dr Derek Browning that much of the plan is based on what is already being done in the Church.

One 35-year-old Elder asked how many of those who participated in the roadshows were between 25 and 40, and why “fellowship” had not been highlighted as important. “I miss fellowship with others in my age-group in the Church”, she said.

The Convenor said there probably weren’t very many consulted in the 25-40 age group, though the National Youth Assembly was consulted. She also said that just because the word “fellowship” wasn’t used doesn’t mean it isn’t important. Another commissioner asked about the phrase: “People will show deepening spirituality”. He asked how this might be measured. “Not everything that is important is measurable but may be seen in the way we live out our lives”, the Convenor replied.

Another commissioner asked why measurable actions had not been identified in the plan. The Convenor replied that the Council was not presenting an action plan, nor was the strategy a *fait accompli*. It would need working out in terms of measurable actions. It would be up to the working arms of the Church to decide how to enact the priorities.

A range of questions were asked about details considered to be absent from the plan: about specific areas of work; about timescales; about benchmarking; about specific theological emphases; about the difficulty for many of attending day-time meetings; and about the needs of small rural congregations that simply struggle to stay above water.

Turning to the deliverance, the Revd Robert Allan brought forward a counter-motion comprising five new sections, the first of which read: “Instruct the council to return to the General Assembly of 2019 with a radical action plan for 2019-2022 to achieve much needed reform within our Church.”

He argued that to accept the draft strategic plan would be to put another nail in the life of the Church of Scotland. He said there is distrust of Church structures *within* the Church as well as out of it; and the Council should be challenging the assumption that the Church changes slowly, not accepting it. “We need structures lean and fit for purpose”, he said. “How can we change the world if we can’t reform ourselves? What we need is a plan for radical change.”

The Principal Clerk advised the Assembly that if the opening section of Mr Allan’s counter-motion was accepted then all the sections brought by the Council would fall. In that event, the following sections of Mr Allan’s counter-motion would be examined one by one.

A former Moderator rose to say that he'd rarely read a report from any committee that had caused him so much disappointment. He described it as "building castles in the air" and believed it was depriving the Assembly of the ability to make decisions. "We need meat on the bone," he said.

Other commissioners questioned the lack of detail – one of them summing it up as too much "what" and not enough "how". A plan stretching over a decade invites inertia; we need to act sooner, he said.

The Revd Prof David Ferguson wanted to support the first part of Mr Allan's counter-motion, believing this would strengthen the hand of the Council of Assembly, allowing it to come back with practical and structural measures; while the Revd Neil Dougall felt that commissioners were struggling to work out just how change is effected in a Presbyterian organisation. There is a desire for everyone to have their say, he said, but how would they get the radical change that Mr Allen had called for? The Assembly is good at pulling things apart, he argued, but not good at crafting something back together again. "We haven't got a lot of time", another added.

Drawing this section of the debate to a close, the Convenor reminded commissioners that it is up to the Assembly to instruct a council what to do. If radical change is desired, she said, then radical change can be proposed. However, radical proposals require radical decisions. Would an Assembly in a future year be prepared to take those decisions? She added that work is already being done on implementation and that if kirk sessions and presbyteries chose to use the Council's plan in a radical way, then "all power to them".

In an electronic vote, 130 voted to proceed with the Council's plan as in the report; 439 voted for Mr Allan's counter-motion.

The Assembly turned to the additional sections of Mr Allan's counter-motion. However, a number of commissioners were concerned that they were now being asked to vote on detailed proposals which they had not had the opportunity to study in detail. In the light of this, the Assembly accepted the Principal Clerk's advice that Mr Allan's sections and other related materials should be taken up at a later point in the week's business.

With this, the Assembly moved to a discussion of the work being undertaken in relation to the Church's national offices.

Options brought forward to the 2017 Assembly were still on the table:

- Basic repair and maintenance
- Refurbishment

- Relocation

One commissioner was concerned at the lack of speed on this issue, the money spent so far, and the amount proposed for possible work in the future. Another commissioner urged the Council to look urgently at the relocation option and not to confine its search to the city centres of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling or Perth. A deacon agreed, and said that downsizing and reducing our carbon footprint would send positive messages to the wider world. The convenor responded to these and other questions by restating that the Council had come to this year's Assembly expressly because there is a lot more work to do.

The Assembly accepted this remaining section of the Council of Assembly report and the session closed with the singing of the blessing, "May the God of peace go with us". With this, and the Moderator's own blessing in their ears, commissioners dispersed, to return tomorrow morning for the report of the Ministries Council. We will be there too.