

General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

5. Tuesday 22 May: morning

We bring you this update as, outside, many are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Church of Scotland.

Before worship began this morning, three children from the Moderator's parish in Dornoch performed highland music, to the great enjoyment of everyone present. *Following* worship, in which the Moderator reflected on that 50th anniversary, a commissioner spoke in praise of yesterday evening's youth-led evening of celebration and testimony: "Walking Together". Mr Macgregor was disappointed that not more commissioners were able to attend the event. On the anniversary of the Manchester bombing one year ago, the Revd Dr Lindsay Schluter, whose island community of Barra was directly affected by the trauma, offered thanks to the Church's Press Office, which had given, she said, invaluable support and guidance at a terribly difficult time.

The General Assembly is not a series of annual stand-alone events; rather, each Assembly represents a staging post in an ongoing process. This should not be a surprise for a Christian denomination that speaks of itself as both reformed and always reforming. The decade-long discussions around the subject of same-sex relationships is one obvious example of this long-term process. The reports of the Ministries Council are another – constantly taking stock of the current needs and circumstances of the parishes and ministry opportunities for which it takes responsibility.

A key question is: how is ministry exercised today? This year's report develops further the Ministries Council's thinking on how the Church defines ministry. The council believes that any definition must consist of three things: first, Calling; followed by Understanding and Practice – practice which requires continual change.

The Council oversees four recognised ministries:

- Parish ministers of word and sacrament
- Ordained Local Ministers and Auxiliary Ministers
- The Diaconate
- The Readership (which a later speaker described as the "unsung heroes of the Church")

– and it also has responsibility for just over 100 Full-time equivalent Ministries Development Staff.

This year, the Diaconate has completed a vision statement: *Deacons of Word and Service*. This speaks of a ministry that bridges the institution of the Church and its service in the world. It was the Right Revd John Armes from the Scottish Episcopal Church who later spoke in praise of deacons who, he said, embody the injunction to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord”.

The work of the Ministries Council is hugely varied. Difficult decisions are being faced and the Council is reiterating its call for a more collaborative approach to planning and the deployment of ministries. In the Church’s 64 Priority Areas, Asset-based Community Development is supporting local communities to recognise their own assets and strengths, fostering a “can-do” approach.

The Convenor concluded that “transformative change almost always seems to happen in the place of vulnerable, risky, truthful encounter”. A number of later speakers said how inspirational they’d found Mr Glover’s speech.

Amongst the questions that followed, there were a number about hub-style and flexible ministries – and there was an urgency expressed about the need for them. Currently there are five hub-style ministries – the furthest advanced of which is in Argyll.

The Convenor agreed with one speaker that ministers have a wide range of responsibilities, and there is a balance to be struck. Too often ministers say they’ve called to preach and to be a pastor but they spend too much time answering emails. He affirmed that the core task is to be “ministers of the gospel” and hoped that central services could support them in other areas of their work. One minister asked what is being done to encourage ministers of age 55 and over to access training for ministry of word and sacrament. The convenor responded that there is no age restriction for Ordained Local Ministers and that the ability retirement age for Parish Ministers is being reviewed.

In response to another question, the Convenor said the council has delayed bringing a capability procedure, that looks at whether a minister is a “good fit” in a given situation – a necessary task. The Council hopes to bring a report to next year’s Assembly.

The Revd David Cameron asked about the estimated number of ministers (expected to decline by 20 per cent over the next five years) and whether advisory figures about future ministries take into account changing demographics in Scotland. The Convenor said that at the 2011 Assembly, the Council had looked at numbers and looked at mission potential but, because the numbers tended to dominate thinking, the unintended result had been that presbyteries found themselves locked into conversations about attrition. The Council hopes that the new advisory approach will be more positive and productive.

One minister spoke about the range of worship leadership in her parish. The convenor said that training of all God's People will be an essential element of the hub ministry initiative – and added that the Ministry and Discipleship Council is also concerned about this area.

In response to another question, the Convenor said there was thinking about student-centred training in the future that might have an impact on the number and location of institutions where training takes place. Mr Alex Miller asked whether, by presenting advisory numbers, this would lead to a fair deployment of ministries in the process of presbytery planning. Currently, there is considerable disparity in local experience. One presbytery has 62 per cent of its posts vacant; another has just five per cent. The Convenor said that it was difficult to ensure that in every area of the Church posts are being created in a way that ministers will be attracted to move there.

The Revd Alan Sorenson asked about the definition of ministry in progress. How detailed and comprehensive is it intended to be – will it be as detailed as a job specification? – to what extent will it allow ministers to play to their strengths? The Convenor said the Council needs clarity in a number of areas – in order to design high quality training that matches the role people are being asked to do; clarity about the difference between roles; and to help avoid breakdown between ministers and congregations over expectations. The definition is being built on the back of wide consultation.

An NHS chaplain based in London said he felt he had no ability to liaise in any valuable way with the Council and asked for help. Another minister requested greater support for recruitment for the diaconate. Financial disincentives make churches reluctant to consider linkages, was the experience of another commissioner – could that be addressed?

A number of commissioners asked how quickly the Council will bring forward proposals on hub-style and more flexible ministry arrangements. Vacancies are increasing faster than presbytery planning can catch up with them, said one “serial locum minister”. There is an urgency to have clarity about unrestricted and restricted calls, for example.

After a coffee break, the Assembly turned to the deliverance and to the marking of 50 years since women have been ordained to parish ministry within the Church of Scotland. At the present time, around 30 per cent of those in one of the recognised ministries are women (including the Diaconate, which for many years was exclusively female). Dr Roderick Campbell, spoke of the Revd Mary Levison, who had been a member of his congregation in Edinburgh. Mary was the first woman to be ordained as a minister in the Church of Scotland. He said that she'd set a pattern for other women to follow. He asked: “Where would the Church be if the Assembly had not made that decision 50 years

ago?” The Very Revd Dr Andrew McLellan Dr McLellan associated with Mary two words: holiness and love – she was “a saint in the biblical sense of the term”.

The Revd Alan Sorensen followed up his earlier question, asking the Council to bring “a clearer description of ministry”, rather than what he feared could be an inflexible job description. His seconder said that the clarity the Council requires should happen in conversation with ministers in the early stages of their training. The Convenor accepted the amendment, and so did the Assembly. A counter-motion on the same topic asked for a “sharp focus on the importance of the ministry of word and sacrament to the vitality of the Church and its implications for other tasks commonly thought to be the work of ministers”. The proposer said what the Church requires is specifically Ministers of Word and Sacrament, not just “ministers” – this would provide “steerage” for the Church’s understanding of its task. He was supported by a speaker who said being a minister of word and sacrament is all he knows how to do, and this was what he was trained for. “I’m not a manager; I’m not a fundraiser”, he said. Opposing the counter-motion, other commissioners said that it would “hive off” one form of ministry and give it a sense of inappropriate importance and diminish the ministry of the whole people of God – including, said one speaker, deacons, “the greatest multi-taskers of them all!” On a vote, the counter-motion fell.

Speaking in praise of a team of three interim ministers who have been working on Shetland, a minister from there said they’d not brought a magic wand nor always given church members an easy ride, but they did stand alongside the churches as they began on a radical journey and started to think outside the box.

Mr Gordon Pennykid, a deacon, said that deacons often find themselves on the “outside” – despite being employees of the Ministries Council. He said deacons offer a pivotal, complementary ministry but one, he felt, that is not valued on a par with the ministry of word and sacrament. His new section called for affirmation and employment of deacons – and was warmly welcomed by the Convenor.

In relation to the development of a five-year recruitment strategy, two commissioners raised issues of financial and other support given to ministers in training and asked for a radical approach.

The Revd Dr Alistair May brought an amendment affirming that the Church of Scotland offers to conduct a Christian funeral services for any person in Scotland without distinction – a personal service without a fee. This needs to more widely known, he said, including within the funeral industry.

The Assembly broke from lunch – many to celebrate further the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women.