

General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

6. Tuesday 22 May: afternoon

When the commissioners regathered after lunch, to mark the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women three presbyters were invited to address the Assembly

The Revd Margaret Forester introduced herself as commissioner 007, “licensed to preach”. In 1963 she sat in the gallery of the Assembly Hall and watched Mrs Mary Lusk (later Levison) present her petition to become a minister of word and sacrament to the Assembly. Margaret said that the issue of ordaining women had been raised in every decade of the 20th century, with the Congregational Church leading the way with the ordination of Constance Coltman a century ago. The Panel on Doctrine, which was given the task of considering Mary’s petition, acted slowly and Margaret said that she and other campaigners were effectively “gagged” by the Church they loved. It was the press, she said, that gave them the publicity they required and fuelled the demand for a debate at the Assembly of 1967.

Margaret concluded by saying that there are places where the Church must still speak out for and with women – where children are refused education, where women suffer violence, where church denominations refuse women ordination and, in the Church of Scotland, where parishes have no women elders. Her speech was greeted with a rare Assembly standing ovation.

Two other ministers took up the story. First, the Revd Jean Montgomery, who spoke about her journey into ministry under the influence of Professor William Barclay; and the Revd Aquila Singh, who spoke about what she’d learned from women ministers: about building people up and never leaving them behind; and the about the importance of integrity. “If you talk the talk, you need to walk the walk”.

The Assembly now returned to the report of the Ministries Council, moving fairly rapidly through the remaining sections of the deliverance. There was a plea that presbyteries deal in a pastoral way with ministers dealing with long-term ill health issues; there was a contribution from a minister who had moved into the Church of Scotland from overseas but had found the transition difficult, not least financially; there was testament to the “grace, wisdom and pastoral care” of the Revd Professor David Fergusson who is stepping down as Principal of New College in Edinburgh; and there was concern about the care of individuals undergoing an investigation about their conduct within the Church. A minister from the Presbytery of Stirling asked the Council to reconsider giving advisory figures for ministries in a presbytery, which he felt created an ambiguous situation. His motion was

accepted. A number of other proposed sections were heard, discussed and, for the most part rejected.

This year, the Committee on Ecumenical Relations has brought a policy in need of a strategy. There are reasons for this. The policy is titled: *Local, Universal and shaped by the Mission of God*. It takes into account a shifting ecumenical landscape in Scotland and a desire that the committee has heard for more support of ecumenical relations locally.

The committee was also asking the Assembly to instruct it bring a strategy for implementation *next* year. The reason for the delay, Mrs McDonald said, was so the Committee could take into account a significant review of Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS), the ecumenical body with which the committee has been closely linked since 1990. That review has concluded that ACTS does not now reflect, nor engage with, the increasing diversity of Christianity in Scotland; that its structures need overhauled to release energy; and that churches need a clear vision of its purpose.

The committee is clear that an ecumenical understanding of the Church is not an add-on but should be integral to the Church of Scotland's self-understanding and believes that this new policy is "comprehensive, comprehensible and relevant to the situation faced by the Church today".

The Convenor said there was nothing new to report on conversations with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, which still feels unable to accept an invitation to send a representative to the General Assembly because of the Kirk's stance on same-sex relationships. The convenor said it was important to seek out spaces for conversation and communion, and efforts were being made to that end. In response to a question, the Convenor also said that it had asked ACTS to place the results of its review on its website; in its absence, she said hard copies could be requested directly from ACTS.

How will the new focus on the local help local interfaith conversations? asked one commissioner. The convenor didn't want to anticipate the strategy to be published next year but did say how good it always is to hear about local initiatives. At the other end of the scale, the Right Revd Christopher Hill, President of the Conference of European Churches, was one of a number of representatives to speak on behalf of partner churches and organisations. He spoke particularly about the urgent need for Churches to work together across Europe, for example in response to rising nationalism and to the flow of refugees into the continent. Another commissioner spoke of being profoundly affected by the largely Catholic Focolare Movement, which enacts ecumenism in daily life and states: "We must unlearn the religion we have been taught and live together the life of Jesus".

Introducing the report of the Panel on Review and Reform, the Revd Graham Duffin said that he belongs to a generation that believes that it can fix everything – "and if we can't then no one else

can.” Except, he went on, when it comes to the church, despite our best efforts, we haven’t. We need instead to trust in God. There is no silver bullet.

There are four things then that the Panel believes are needed to help the Church move forward:

1. the development of a missional mindset throughout the church
2. enabling leadership (Mr Duffin referred back to the example of God releasing women to take forward their sense of call in 1968)
3. good support structures at regional and national level
... but finally –
4. “it is time to do less talking and more trying things out” – this means “testing, trying, experimenting in new ways so that we can learn together”.

The Panel is seeking to build churches marked by

- people joining and staying – whether formally or not
- a growth in faith and commitment
- a growing impact on our communities and more widely

Because such a Path of Renewal takes time to show its fruit, the Ministries Council has agreed to extend the funding for the scheme for a further two years and is taking on ownership for Path of Renewal.

Perhaps aware that time was moving on, the Assembly accepted the Panels’ report gratefully but with little discussion.

Safeguarding is a task that everyone shares, said the Convenor of the Safeguarding Committee. She brought to the Assembly a Safeguarding Act that contains nothing new but consolidates legislation accumulated over the passing years. She urged commissioners to make use of their local safeguarding officers, and she thanked volunteers for their commitment to this important work.

In response to a question, the Convenor said the Committee is hoping to develop an e-learning resource to facilitate training. She also assured another commissioner that the Committee always passes on pastoral in issues to the relevant departments in the event of receiving any allegation.

The Iona Community Board was established by the General Assembly when the community was founded, to keep an eye on this “radical new experiment”. It doesn’t *run* the Community. This year its report especially highlights changes in the Island Centres, including the Abbey, which has played an important part in the spiritual lives of many Christians. The Convenor, Mr Alan Kimmitt, urged

commissioners to consider contributing to the current Capital Appeal, so that others can benefit in the future.

The Revd Kathy Galloway, a member of the present Leadership Team, was invited to address the Assembly. She took the opportunity to pay full tribute to the Revd Dr Ian Fraser, who died earlier this year aged 100. He had been a member of the Iona Community for 75 years and was a remarkable man with a truly global reach – through his pioneering ecumenical activities and through his advocacy of basic Christian communities throughout the world. Ian was a “living rebuttal of the heresy that religion and politics don’t mix”, Kathy said. Standing alongside ordinary people in situations of extreme disempowerment, Ian and his wife Margaret revealed not victims but people resisting the powers of injustice and terror and living purposefully with a different kind of power. He wrote a good deal about tax, for example, and his commitment to evangelical confrontation saw him withhold that part of his tax dues that went to military spending in the 1980s, fight his case all the way to the European Court of Justice, and refuse to pay his poll-tax in the 1990s.

The Guild is coming to the end of its three-year strategy, “Be Bold, Be Strong”, and will now embark on its strategy for 2018-21: “One Journey, Many Roads”. This will be supported nationally by roadshows, regional gathering and Big Sings that all give support to local Guilds, some of which can otherwise feel small, overlooked and rather lonely.

Echoing Monday’s debate about the Church in Africa, the National Convenor, Marge Paterson, spoke of her visit this past year to Malawi, with which the Guild has developed a close connection through the Guild there. There were conversations with Christian Aid to discuss how Bolivian solar technology (which the Guild has supported through its projects scheme) could be used in Malawi; with the Malawian Bible Society who explained how the bible is being used to tackle illiteracy; and there was a visit to another past Guild project – the Livingstonia Synod’s AIDS project.

The total raised for the six projects supported over the past three years was £725,091.50

The Convenor then announced the six new projects for the coming three years, four of which have been specifically chosen to recognise the Year of Young People:

- The Boys’ Brigade Scotland will engage in practical inter-generational work
- The Free to Live Trust’s “Seema’s Project” aims to work with children born to sex workers in the slums of Pune in India
- “Growing the Future” will see the Guild work with Malawi Fruits to train and support young farmers as they move from subsistence farming to sustainable agriculture

- In Kanyama, Lusaka, the World Mission Council and the United Church of Zambia will help empower teenage mothers
- The Sailors' Society project, "Port Chaplaincy in Scotland" seeks to provide a chaplain in every port

and finally –

- "Join up the dots" – a CrossReach project to tackle issues of isolation and loneliness experienced by people of all ages across Scotland.

Membership of the Guild has grown this past year, the Convenor also said – 600 new members including members of the 2nd Linlithgow Company of the Girls' Brigade – the second honorary Guild Group, the first being the National Youth Assembly.

One commissioner said that the Guild's report is encouraging, easy to read, and the only report in the *Blue Book* to which her English teacher wouldn't have taken a red pen! Two other commissioners said that what the Guild has done by supporting projects over the last project cycle was truly remarkable: "Breaking the Cycle of FGM in Kenya" has seen the incidence of FGM dropping and awareness about the scourge increasing; while the introduction of solar ovens is transforming whole communities in Bolivia.

On this positive note, business was suspended – though many commissioners will be returning to the hall this evening to participate in another of the Guild's popular Big Sings. We'll be back tomorrow when the Church and Society Council will report. Join is then.