

## General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

### 8. Wednesday 23 May: afternoon

The afternoon session began with the presentation of the Moderator's Shield and Moderator's Medals, formerly the Stevenson Prize – plus a £500 cheque – to members of Eyemouth primary and high schools for their inspirational work forging links with their local church.

Returning to the Church and Society Council report, the Rev Amos Chewachong of Newport-on-Tay, then urged the Scottish and UK governments to raise awareness of human rights abuses being perpetrated on the anglophone minority in his native Cameroon. He said homes have been burned, unjust arrests made and people killed. Mr Chewachong described the situation as “genocide” – and yet, he said, he never hears it featured in news items in the British media.

The Very Revd David Arnott shone a spotlight on Gaza where he said people are living in a virtual prison. Visiting Gaza had made a deep impression on him. Yet amid the ongoing violence, and the sadness and despair caused by Israel's long blockade, the “bright light of the Christian community” continues to heal people. Two other commissioners offered their support, one calling Gaza “a modern day Golgotha with very little sign of imminent resurrection”. Words matter, said the other, and it was important that the people of Gaza know “we walk with them and they have not been forgotten”.

Turning to the issue of misuse of alcohol, a commissioner asked if the Council had considered whether the introduction of minimum alcohol pricing might have the unintended consequence of pushing some people on low income to use cheaper illegal drugs instead. The Convenor said that the Council was keeping an eye on this matter.

Two commissioners spoke movingly, and from personal experience, about those living with dementia and the importance of the Church and church members dealing sensitively with those affected by the disease. An amendment commended congregations and communities working to become more dementia friendly, including Stirling Presbytery, which has employed a Dementia Development Worker.

A minister brought a new section, commending plans to facilitate custody for women in the community, and encouraging the Council and local congregations to support those who will be

resident in these units as they re-engage with life in the community. The Convenor said this was an excellent example of what we can do in our local contexts to make small differences.

Turning to investment in young people and, in particular, the proposals to establish a cross-council Young People and Education Action Group, a youth delegate asked about the new group's remit. This, and the name of the group, will be brought to next year's Assembly. The Convenor expressed his enthusiasm for the new group, assuring commissioners that it would keep education firmly on the Church's agenda.

A minister told the Assembly about working with individuals in the Highlands who have been affected by homophobic bullying and assault. He asked the Assembly to "note with grave concern a steep rise in hate crimes" and to seek ways in which churches can address homophobia and deal pastorally with those who have been victims of this. This, he said, was not a contentious matter but one of simple humanity. The Assembly agreed.

Finally, a commissioner asked the Council to urge the Government to reinstate Housing Benefit for under 25s. The Assembly accepted her motion, and with this the Council's report drew to a close.

The Assembly now turned to the report of the Registration of Ministries Committee, established last year and presented by the Revd Neil Dougall. This stand-alone committee's core task is to help ministers serving in other spheres to enter or return to the parish ministry. The register allocates individuals to different categories according to the nature of their ministry. Parish Ministers sit in Category O, for example, and Chaplains in Category E.

There was open pain and frustration in the hall, and clear apologies, as attention focused in particular on the categorization of Chaplains to the Forces. There have been concerns about the level of retraining required before returning to parish or other ministry and about a lack of communication. The Clerk to the Presbytery of England, which has a great number of serving chaplains within its bounds, spoke about ongoing deep frustration. However, he withdrew a planned counter-motion because he had received assurances that the issues would be looked at. The Convenor of the Legal Questions Committee reaffirmed those assurances from the floor and expressed profound regret if anything said or done had conveyed an unintended message.

Nevertheless, there were serious issues of perception, said the Very Revd John Cairns. Despite further assurance from the Secretary to the Council of Assembly that the different categories of registration were about administration and not status, an NHS chaplain said that's not what it feels

like. “I feel like a second class citizen”, he said. The Convenor closed the debate by expressing his sorrow that words had been heard in unintended ways, and the Assembly received the deliverance.

The Church of Scotland General Trustees has a new chairman this year, Mr Raymond Young. It was also looking to convey a new sense of direction. The Trustees, Mr Young said, have had a reputation for being reactive but are now adopting a more proactive way of working, keen to develop a more strategic approach.

The Church owns over 4,000 buildings across the UK, 1,700 of which are listed. Mr Young said that “the estate is too big for its needs, many buildings are in the wrong place, many are not welcoming, many are in poor condition, and many do not represent good stewardship”. There *are* new buildings, and major refurbishments sitting alongside the rationalisation of assets, but there is much to do.

The Trustees were delighted by the response to their series of seminars for Fabric Convenors last year. More are planned for 2018; and so is an updated website.

The Chairman presented the commissioners with four questions for consideration:

- Do we need to unburden the local congregation of some of the management and maintenance of its buildings?
- How can we help presbyteries?
- What about money? (Of the £700 million that the Trustees look after, they have control over only £7 million and have only got £1.5 million in grants available for this year. Should ways be found to enable a fairer distribution of resources? he asked.)
- And finally – is working in partnership the way forward?

There were questions about insurance policies; arbitration guidelines; energy procurement (and whether Trustees could secure a green option); and community right to buy and asset transfers.

Considering the deliverance, one minister said he greatly appreciates the way the Trustees are trying to remove the burdens of fabric administration from kirk sessions and presbyteries. A minister brought an amendment asking for conversations with the Trustees about historic buildings and the particular burdens they bring. Part of his building dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which means high insurance, repair and running costs. It would be good to talk, he said. The Chairman agreed, noting that “we may own the building, but if it’s important to the community”, then a conversation needs to happen. On a vote, however, the amendment fell. Another commissioner asked whether, when manses or other suitable premises under the Trustees’ stewardship become available, would they

consider the needs of asylum seekers? For a number of reasons, including the fact that the Trustees don't have direct ownership of most manses, the Chairman felt he had to resist this proposed amendment, which also fell.

Finally, a Youth Delegate asked the Trustees to investigate the costs and benefits of assisting congregations to reduce or eliminate fossil fuel used in churches and buildings and report back to the General Assembly of 2019. This amendment *was* accepted, on agreement that the Trustees report back in 2020.

With the clock now ticking, the Assembly returned to business remaining from the debate about the Council of Assembly's proposed Strategic Plan, which had been rejected on Monday after the Revd Robert Allan had brought a counter-motion asking for a far more radical approach.

Mr Allan's counter-motion had since been joined by a number of other proposed amendments. The Principal Clerk suggested that each of these ideas be seen as separate suggestions to be accepted or not for inclusion by the Council in future deliberations. First, the remaining sections of Mr Allan's counter-motion were considered – including instructions to consider suggestions made by Dr Doug Gay in his Chalmers Lectures; and the provision of more funds for mission work. There was an instruction to Presbyteries to challenge themselves to be “robust, imaginative and courageous” in reorganising ministries under their control. A couple of commissioners found these words vague, and the Council of Assembly Convenor was concerned about the amount of work this would involve; however, the Assembly *did* want this work to be undertaken.

The idea of kirk sessions meeting in conference to reflect on the state of decline of the national Church was discussed. It was important that kirk sessions had a space to be challenged about the situation faced nationally, Mr Allan argued. Though the Convenor didn't feel this amendment fell within the Council's remit, this too was accepted by the Assembly.

The Revd Jonathan Fleming now brought a detailed set of proposals around the redistribution of ministry resources to enable pioneer and church planting activities as well as nurture existing congregations. Some commissioners found those two proposals contradictory. Other commissioners argued that Mr Allan's proposals had already given the Council the ability to address these issues without the constraints that Mr Fleming's amendment would put in place. His amendment fell.

A first-time commissioner requested a facilitated conversation with under-40s on the radical plan. Another asked the Council to prioritise Jesus' injunction to “go and make disciples” and to draw on the World Mission Council's report on Christian faith in Africa in thinking about church growth. Was that injunction of Jesus more important than loving God and loving our neighbours? two

commissioners asked. The importance of communicating an underpinning vision was the thrust of another amendment but others felt that this request had been covered elsewhere.

Finally, a Pioneer Minister asked the Assembly to instruct the Council to devise a method by which the Annual Report and Accounts can be presented in a way that makes clear the manner in which all the Councils and Committees make savings and reduce spending in order to balance the budget. In part, she said, to pay for ministries like hers. The Convenor accepted the amendment, and so did the Assembly.

With this, the day's business came to a close and the many commissioners who'd remained in the hall for the duration made their way home for the evening.