

General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

9. Thursday 24 May: morning

The morning's session began with the report of the Committee on Chaplains to her Majesty's Forces – presented by its Convenor, the Revd Gordon Craig.

He began by following up yesterday afternoon's debate on the report of the Registration of Ministries Committee by saying that the Register had unintentionally caused Chaplains to feel marginalised, in particular by the process required to transfer from chaplaincy to parish ministry. However, the Convenor reiterated yesterday's assurances from the Convenor of the Legal Questions Committee, that practical measures are being put in place to allow chaplains a seamless transition back to parish ministry. Mr Craig said that his committee will play a significant role in that process.

Chaplains never "leave the Church", the Convenor said; rather, they minister in another part of the vineyard. "They go where their people go and minister to them in all manner of situations." He mentioned the Revd Dr Mark Davidson who was deployed for a number of months on board a Trident Class submarine without contact from the outside world; and the Revd Nicola Frail, deployed to South Sudan, ministering to the UK Engineering Task Force as it undertakes building work that will allow humanitarian assistance to reach those in need.

However, each of the three services is in urgent need of new chaplains and Scotland is proving a difficult recruiting ground. Mr Craig urged any minister with "the slightest inkling of a Call" to either full time or reserve chaplaincy to test it.

He quoted the Revd Stephen Blakey, soon to retire following 41 years of service as an Army Chaplain, who writes that the Service Chaplaincy is a very special form of ministry. It has, he says, "a powerful incarnational dynamic of putting on the uniform": the minister becomes one with their soldiers because they dress like them, go to the places they go, eat the same food, endure similar discomforts and face the same dangers.

Taking up the issue of chaplains feeling connected to other areas of the Church, the Convenor said that chaplains do have Church of Scotland email addresses if they desire one, but they don't receive digital copies of the Church's *Life & Work* magazine. The Committee later agreed to look at available options.

A serving parish minister said that on a daily basis forces chaplains work in hubs, “do ecumenism really well”, work with young people, and are present to address questions of faith as and when they arise. Just as forces chaplains may need some training to bring them up to speed with current needs in parish ministry, she said, so she felt she would benefit from training in order to better understand the ways in which forces chaplains undertake ministry.

The Revd Louis Kinsey brought forward an amendment to the deliverance, urging Presbyteries to appoint armed forces champions. He noted that members of the armed forces make up around ten per cent of the whole population of Scotland. The convenor welcomed the amendment; so did the Assembly. Mr Kinsey then requested a future report concerning the work of Cadet Force Chaplains, indicating that chaplaincy vacancies do exist. Other commissioners enthusiastically endorsed the value of chaplaincy to cadet forces, not least for the chaplains themselves. It was emphasised by the Convenor that these are youth, not military, organisations, so don’t normally fall within the remit of the committee. However, he was happy to agree that the committee will look at this issue.

As is the custom, the Convenor then requested that commissioners invite a senior representative of the armed forces to address the Assembly. Major General Bob Bruce, Military Secretary and General Officer Scotland, spoke about the deepening importance of the role of military chaplains. Padres are the first people to whom military personnel know they can turn at difficult times – and he named many of the difficult situations in which the armed forces are active throughout the world. He said the sight of a padre climbing out of a helicopter in a dusty environment to set up to lead a service is “wonderful and uplifting”. The military cannot go into demanding situations without some spiritual support – the physical presence of a chaplain can turn the mood of a large group of soldiers, Major Bruce said – they are a calming presence, and he added: “When the going is really hard, we are absolutely dependent on them.”

The forces have never been better supported but never less understood, the Major concluded, so he was especially thankful of the support shown to the forces and their chaplains by the Assembly.

Following a short break, Mr Bill Steele presented the report of the Social Care Council, often referred to under its trading name, CrossReach.

This year will see the start of a development and fundraising partnership with the Church of Scotland Guild (one of the Guild’s new three-year projects): the *Join the Dots* initiative is designed to combat loneliness and isolation where it is experienced within different age groups across Scotland. The Convener said that this initiative has been in part inspired by some of the people with whom CrossReach works and the situations they experience.

Mr Steele spoke, for example, of young people from CrossReach's Care and Education Services and the Daisy Chain Early Years Project in particular who have spoken publically about the positive difference coming into contact with CrossReach has made in their lives. However, they have also spoken about the negative impact on their lives caused by the attitude of others in the communities around them, undermining their sense of self-worth and making them feel alone – even in a crowd. Older people, too, can feel alone in a group situation – projects such as the music-centred Playlists for Life, or the Heart for Art programme for those living with dementia help address that loneliness.

Mr Steele said that the Council is not alone amongst care providers in having to make the hard decision to close certain services, as it has to do this year. As austerity measures continue to bite, he said, the Coalition of Care Providers in Scotland reports that in 2017 60 per cent of providers withdrew or decided not to participate in procurement exercises and 30 per cent withdrew from one or more live contracts. That said, the Convenor was also glad to report some good news: the imminent completion of a new Education Campus on the Erskine Waterfront.

The Council is exploring new pathways to recruitment, including through digital technology, a recently launched volunteer strategy, and a pilot partnership with The Princes Trust through which the Council will offer work placements and interviews to a number of young people who have already been supported by the Trust and are interested in a career in care. The Council also continues to address the pension deficit and issues of low wages and the living wage for all, though the latter goal still remains out of reach.

2019 will mark 150 years since the Assembly commissioned the Committee of Life and Work, out of which the Church's current commitment to social care was born. The Convenor invited commissioners to consider how they might contribute to the celebration.

Turning to questions, a commissioner spoke about one CrossReachcare home that has had to close in his parish in Caithness. The Convenor said that conversations are being undertaken with NHS Highland with a view to seeing what initiatives can be developed in the future. In response to a later question, the Convenor outlined how the Council has tried to minimise the impact of redundancies in such situations. "We don't do things lightly or without care", he said. In response to a question about differentials between salaries, the convenor said that these *have* been pared back but roles with greater accountability do deserve higher rewards.

A commissioner commended Morlich House in Edinburgh, which has been recognised for excellent practice and innovation. Outbuildings and a redundant garage have been transformed into a 1950s street and house where people living with dementia experience an environment with which they

may have been familiar in younger days. In the main house, the Kings Fund Environmental tool has been used to ensure that other features ensure that all those who live there can easily access information, for example *via* plasma screens and notice boards adapted to give pictorial information about activities.

A minister speaking from a northern rural parish asked how the council can help in an area where other services for older people have been closed or become too expensive for local people to access. The Convenor commended an online social care forum – a live, interactive resource, where experiences and solutions can be shared. A youth delegate praised the initial support offered through Stirling Presbytery to her family on her father's diagnosis of Alzheimer's. She said that ongoing help would be appreciated now that her Dad's condition was worsening and the family are finding it harder to cope. How could the Council help? The Council does have a dementia development team and the convenor hoped that contacting the team might be the start of a journey together.

Following a heartfelt vote of thanks by a commissioner to the Council for the care both his mother and aunt had received from CrossReach, the report was concluded and the Assembly suspended. We will return after lunch for the Theological Forum and to hear from a wide range of the Church's smaller committees. Join us then.