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by Laurence Wareing

10. Thursday 24 May: afternoon

The afternoon session opened with the report of the Theological Forum, presented by the Revd Dr Donald MacEwan.

The Forum's theological thinking over the past year has resulted in work on Holy Communion (with the Panel on Review and Reform); on the oversight of ministers (with the Ministries Council); and on a report on a theology of reconciliation, which will probably be brought to next year's Assembly. This latter work has included reading responses from ecumenical partners to the Forum's report of last year on same-sex marriage. Later in the debate, in response to a question, Dr MacEwan outlined some of these responses in which, for example, it was recognised that people could take different approaches to same-sex marriage but still believe scripture to be important. Amongst other comments, some said that the report didn't pay sufficient attention to questions of power, powerlessness, justice, the marginalisation of some in society, or to human rights issues. Some said that the Forum should have recognised that this issue was about scripture, and for others it was not.

The principal piece of work in this year's report focuses on whether children who have not been baptised should be permitted to share in a service of Holy Communion. The Forum wanted to take account of genuine pastoral situations, and was alert to a society in which children (and adults) are finding their way into church communities in which they have not been brought up. The Forum concluded that there is no reason to revise the traditional ordering of baptism first and then admission to communion. "However", they said, "it is important that such a normal ordering should not be so elevated that it lead to church practice that is too rigid, unwelcoming, or ungenerous." Indeed, in the context of pastoral care and education, receiving communion may itself lead to deepening faith, discipleship and ongoing participation in communion.

The Right Revd Mgr Philip Kerr spoke about the Catholic tradition of giving a blessing to those who come to communion but are not baptised. The Convenor responded that the Forum doesn't say that this is wrong; but he also spoke about children, for example, who wish to "share in the meal" – pastorally it would be right to permit this.

In response to a question, Dr MacEwan said that, with regard to public profession of faith, the Forum is confused – and, he thought, the Church is too. He wondered whether there might be a future opportunity to work on this issue and at least, he said, “express that confusion more clearly”! When the Assembly turned to the deliverance, one commissioner presented the Forum with just that opportunity, which the Assembly supported.

One commissioner said he’d been shocked to hear how few children are permitted to take communion – he called this “malpractice”. “What would Jesus do?” asked one commissioner. And his response? “In the words of Nike, ‘Just do it!’” Another welcomed the report because, he said, the situation is “messy on the ground”, and in answer to his question, the Convenor acknowledged that Church law may need to be reviewed.

The Assembly then received an Overture instructing the Forum to examine the present-day value of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Overture was presented by the Very Revd Dr Finlay Macdonald, a former Principal Clerk of the Assembly, and Mrs Isobel Hunter.

The Westminster Confession was adopted by the General Assembly of 1647 as a summation of the faith of the reformed Church and ever since, to a greater or lesser degree, has been recognised as a key statement of faith. Over the years, however, unease about some aspects of the Confession’s teaching has meant that the Church has distanced itself from some parts of the statement. Dr Macdonald questioned how useful the Confession now is, and said that considerable work has to be done to find out which bits individuals are no longer required to accept. Mrs Hunter said that when she was becoming an elder she’d been advised not to read all the Confession and told by her minister that he hoped it wouldn’t put her off for life. It is important, she argued, to have a confession of faith that will inspire for life, not put off for life. In conclusion, Dr Macdonald said that the Presbytery was saying no more than that there is an issue here and that the Forum was well placed to consider it.

Dr Peter McEnhill had been curator of the original Westminster Confession in a room high in a building in Westminster College, Cambridge. He said that in ten years, not one person came to study the document. Scottish friends who passed through, when invited to see it would ask – “How many stairs?” What we need is a document that doesn’t live in a small suitcase in a high room but actually expresses the life of faith, he said. For others, however,

the Westminster Confession does lie at the heart of their faith. “We’re arguing over the soul of the Church”, said one. “How would this work help the Church or Scotland?” asked another. “We need to live with our history.” Another added, “We have a Church in crisis and some really big issues to tackle. Do we really need to have protracted discussion and cause further division and spend a great deal time and money?”

Others did feel that it would be good to think about how to express our faith in terms that are more appropriate to the present day and the Assembly voted overwhelmingly to receive the Overture.

After a short break, Graeme Caughey, chairman of the Pensions Trustees, gave the Assembly a positive update on the Church’s three pension schemes. He said all three had a “highly successful year”, each having benefited from years of hard work by previous and current trustees.

He said the largest scheme – the Ministers Scheme – was providing a successful model, which the other two staff schemes were following. Put simply, he added, after previous difficult years, a great deal of hard work had “broken the back of the underfunding issue” and things were “heading to full funding in a few years”. The Assembly was assured that all the assets of each of the schemes would be used solely for the benefit of their members.

Turning to the Report of the Housing and Loan Fund, the Revd Ian Taylor, chairman of Trustees, began with a quote from the Gospel of St Matthew: “When I was a stranger, you took me into your home.” He said the Fund has been taking those words of Christ seriously for nearly 50 years.

The Fund presently owns 222 houses let to retired Ministers or their bereaved spouses or former partners. In addition, last year it had in place 118 loans which, when added to retired ministers’ own savings, had enabled many “brothers and sisters in Christ” to buy their own homes.

“The Fund,” Mr Taylor said, “remains in a healthy financial position due to the continuing

careful stewardship of the Trustees” – good news for the many servants of the Church who might experience anxiety when approaching retirement.

The Council of Assembly now brought a Supplementary Report asking to appoint a special commission to review the shape and organisation of the Church of Scotland Pension Trustee board and bring forward any recommendations for change, including any appointment of additional Trustees, to the Commission of Assembly. Mrs Sally Bonar, the Council Convenor, assured the Assembly that the Council recognised the independence of the Trustees to make decisions about the schemes they managed. This proposal was not about the individual Trustees; it was about good governance.

In the questions that followed a range of concerns emerged about the way the report had been brought forward late in the day, and with such urgency attached to it that the findings of a Special Commission couldn't wait until the Assembly of 2019 for full discussion. The Convenor said that the urgency was because if a review did indicate a change in structure, there was a danger that valuations due this year might become technically incompetent.

It emerged that the Trustees themselves were not happy about the proposed review. They felt the review was being proposed in response to the Council's budget concerns and that it might result in moving assets in directions with which the independent Trustees were unhappy.

Mrs Bonar said that the Council's anxieties had to do with the fact that the same six trustees, together with council-nominated Trustees, managed three different funds with different needs. There might be conflicts of interest, Mrs Bonar said; but the chairman of the Trustees said that a conflict of interest policy was in place and that legal advisors are present at every meeting.

A difficult debate followed, including two separate votes, first to depart from the business and, second, not to receive the report.

The Very Revd Dr John Cairns rose to propose a counter-motion to the substance of the deliverance, inviting the Pension Trustees to bring a Report to the General Assembly of 2019 on effective and efficient structures for trustee oversight of the closed funds and the most efficient means of administering the funds. Dr Cairns felt that the Council had not clearly

identified the problems they perceived and had not sufficiently discussed their concerns with the Trustees.

On a vote, Dr Cairns' counter-motion was carried.

Next came the report of the Church Hymnary Trustees, which oversees matters relating to Church Hymnary 4, published in 2005. Mrs Ann Inglis said that overall sales, unsurprisingly, had fallen but sales of the words only edition have remained reasonably high. The Trustees have continued to support the Scottish Church Organist Training Scheme and workshops have been well attended. They've also investigated the possibility of producing CH4 in a large print format. The Trustees are not persuaded that there is enough evidence to justify a production that might lead to unnecessary costs. There are options for individuals to produce words in a suitable format.

In response to a question about a possible CD, Mrs Inglis said that copyright issues prevented the production of CDs of the complete hymnbook.

The Church of Scotland Trust then introduced the three strands of its work:

1. To oversee 48 third party trusts set up to benefit the work of the Kirk – this can be complicated when circumstances change over the years.
2. Taking responsibility for heritable property within the International Presbytery.
3. Oversight of overseas properties, in particular in Pakistan where the ownership of property in Sialkot has caused difficulties over many years. The retiring Chairman, Mr John Hodge, said the Trust is able to create a trust with independent trustees rather than wait for the Church of Pakistan to produce a suitable body. A final draft of such an arrangement had not yet arrived, but Mr Hodge was sounding unusually optimistic about this recurring matter.

Finally, the Assembly heard the report of the Church of Scotland Investors Trust. 2017 saw share markets grind inexorably higher with a marked absence of volatility, said the Chair, Ms CY Alexander, and all three Investors Trust funds recorded positive performances.

Picking up on matters discussed in yesterday's Church and Society report, Ms Alexander said that the Trust applies ethical exclusions to investments held where possible. However, its preference is to operate in line with the findings and recommendations of the cross-

denominational Church Investors Group because of the breadth of work that would be required for the Trustees to research environmental social and governance (ESG) developments on their own. However, the Council of Assembly has agreed to consider the trust's recommendation that an ESG resource be put in place for all investing bodies within the Church of Scotland.

An amendment urging the Investors Trust to investigate the risks and rewards of continuing to invest in fossil fuels companies fell after the Convenor said that the Trust takes climate change very seriously and that the amendment was asking for exactly the kind of assessment the Trust's managers undertake daily.

In short order the Report of the Chalmers Lectureship Trust was received and the Assembly suspended until our final day, tomorrow, which will feature the report of the Mission and Discipleship Council.