

General Assembly 2018 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing

11. Friday 25 May: morning

In a week when interfaith dialogue was one notable theme, the Assembly's final morning began with an address by [Imam Sayed Razawi](#), Director General of the [Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society](#). Ahlul Bayt is a faith-based organisation working to meet the needs of the Scottish Shi'a Muslim community – it is a profoundly outward looking organisation in its engagement with other faiths and civil society.

Imam Razawi said that he was addressing the Assembly not just as representative of a diaspora but as a Scotsman. There's a 1400 year history of Shi'a Islam, he said, but he noted that cultures shape the form of a religion, and now a very Scottish Islam is developing.

He said that there is a need for more people to speak from the heart to touch hearts. There is no substitute for dialogue and the human touch. In a world where we see pain, confusion and all kinds of intolerance, fundamentalism and extremism, how do we regain confidence within humanity? Dialogue leads to conversation, he said; conversation leads to friendship; and friendship to hope. It's not legislation that changes people but hearts that change hearts. He described the concept of brotherhood in Islam as the moral responsibility of two people for each other. Concluding that our different faith traditions represent different shades of the Creator, Imam Razawi said that it's time to walk shoulder to shoulder with each other and with God. In the end he said, we all believe the same reality.

The first report of the morning was that of the Nomination Committee, which identifies ministers, deacons, elders and members to serve on the Church's national Councils and committees. This year there was a total of 130 vacancies to fill and the committee is sincerely grateful for all who came forward to serve. The committee tries to establish diversity within committees and is always keen to expand the pool of applicants in order to bring fresh thinking, but the Convenor noted that around half of Church members don't know they are eligible to serve in this way.

The committee has been looking at what prevents people from putting their name forward to serve on committees, especially students and people in work. Two of the factors that discourage potential applicants are getting to Edinburgh for meetings and the timing of midweek meetings. The committee would like to increase the use of video conferencing and other technology support; the Convenor encouraged commissioners to make use of technology options; and the committee wants this to be a priority in the Council of Assembly's thinking about church offices.

We need people of vision, said the Revd David Cameron in an amendment – and he called for the Assembly to encourage others to come forward to help shape the future direction of the Church.

Discipleship – hope – imagination . . . these were the key words as the Revd Norman Smith, Convenor, introduced the work of the Mission and Discipleship Council. He said that the picture that the Council sees of the Church of Scotland in action is not one of uniform decline; there is undoubtedly struggle, but there is also growth – and where there is growth it is down to the people: “They have hope, they have confidence and they have imagination.” And through the resources the Council offers, it wishes to help people articulate their hope. That said, resources can only help if they are used, and Mr Smith implored congregations to do just that.

“No one knows when the opportunity to speak about their faith will come about”, he said. As he pointed out, Jesus encountered more people outside the temple than in. “We need to be able to confidently communicate our hope on the bus, in the pub, at work, at home, wherever the opportunity arises”, he said, and have enough imagination to see when something is an opportunity.

Where there is “active missional imagination”, churches are engaging with their communities in diverse ways, finding those opportunities.

This year, the Council is asking the Assembly to instruct it to explore a new vision for Eldership. The tasks of Elders need to change to reflect a changing world, partly because of their developing roles as trustees with respect to charity law, but also to become what Mr Smith called “trustees of the soul”. Elders have a “discipling” role – and developing a culture of discipleship will lead to stronger churches and higher levels of confidence.

The Council is working with a group of young people to consider possible alternatives to the National Youth Assembly. The Convenor said: “When I see the dedication, vision, commitment and faith of these young people, I don’t worry about our Church. We have a lot of reason for hope.”

“We as a Council cannot choose decline”, he concluded. “We are seeing what God is doing so we are going to go for growth, for hope.”

In answer to a question, the Convenor said that discipleship leads to mission, so we need to get the discipleship right. There were contributions about the value of a number of different training and mission resources, old and new, including from a representative of the United Reformed Church, who encouraged the Church of Scotland to try its new Stepwise programme. Another commissioner thanked the Council for its resource on transgender experience and how the church can respond pastorally to their needs: *Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care*.

Training was also the subject of a new amendment from the Council, which wants to know what resources presbyteries and congregations are using to train and recruit local worship leaders, and how local worship leaders are deployed. The Revd Bryan Kerr said he was delighted the Council was “catching up” with where Presbyteries already are! One Elder said that, having undergone effective worship training, she and her daughter were able to be a real support when their church entered a vacancy. A minister shared his experience of a worship group coming into its own when he fell ill, adding that ministers should not only delegate tasks but give authority to lay people to undertake them. Let’s find out what each other is doing, pleaded Deacon Joanne Love.

A commissioner rose to spoke about Generation X – “the missing generation” (30-50 year-olds) who often miss out on church activities because they are in fulltime work. “We’re more than just the parents who come along with children to Messy Church”, she said. A minister originally from Africa thanked the Council for providing him with the tools that have helped him adapt his ministry to a new context. In response, the Convenor said that a lot of the Council’s resources are designed to release the passion and potential that already exists in congregations.

Ms Rebecca Gebaur brought an amendment that included “Millennials” into the conversation – Millennials (25-40 year-olds) have their own specific needs and challenges, she said, and she asked the Council to understand the contexts of both Millennials and Generation X-ers, and explore ways to make the Church an accessible and welcoming place for them.

The Convenor defended giving *instructions* to kirk sessions to explore fresh visions of eldership and to consider their ongoing engagement with children and young people. It should always be part of a kirk session’s agendas to think about these things, he said.

The Revd David Cameron asked the Assembly to instruct the Council to work with other Councils to explore the development of a programme of education and training aimed at lay members.

Tempting as it is to resurrect earlier programmes, it’s important to ask what works now, he said, to equip lay people to be disciples “to help turn the tide”. In accepting the instruction, the Convenor said that the Council would want to see “what else is out there”.

In the Year of Young people, one commissioner asked, would the Council find ways of further encouraging chaplains as they try to create relationships with schools, organisations and cadet forces?

The Revd Robert Calvert brought a new amendment encouraging the Council “to undertake further research into migrant and multi-cultural Christian communities in Scotland and to recognise and

resource them”. He noted that growing percentages of Scottish cities are what he called “new Scots”. We need to engage with them, he said – there’s a lot of bad and prejudiced information at the moment. Immediately following, the Revd Dr Elijah Obinna, originally from Nigeria and now a minister in Carlisle, spoke to support the Council’s goal of supporting Christians from minority migrant communities living and worshipping in our neighbourhoods but added that this should be in a spirit of mutual learning.

Finally, Mr John Mackay said that he will participate in the 2018 Vendée Globe circumnavigation of the world. Millions of viewers around the world will see his 60-foot yacht called “Believe in Jesus”. Mr Mackay commended this example of “fresh expressions” of faith and asked for prayerful support.

The Moderator of the National Youth Assembly, Mr Robin Downie, gave a presentation about last summer’s Assembly at Gartmore House in Stirlingshire. He said that, having been brought up in a small town on the west coast of Scotland, where there were not a lot of young people in his church, his experience of the National Youth Assembly has been incredible. Worship, especially, is seen as a powerful part of any Youth Assembly.

There had been three main topics of conversation, chosen by the young people themselves: Young people and discipleship; Interfaith understanding; and Priorities of the Church.

Addressing the question, “How do we create a culture of discipleship in our church?” a key conclusion was that inter-generational ministry is vital, with people of all ages learning from each other and sharing their faith journeys together. There was also a desire for the Mission and Discipleship Council to spread information on defining discipleship; indeed to become the go-to source of information and resources on the subject.

Amongst a number of guests from other faiths, Mr Downie said that a stand-out moment was listening to a speaker from the Baha’i faith. Mr Downie said that, before the weekend, he hadn’t really known what “interfaith was” and he was sceptical. However, it had been a fantastic learning experience. During the year, he also participated in an interfaith visit of young people to Rwanda, which he said was absolutely amazing. The Youth Assembly delegates concluded that good interfaith relations demand openness, cooperation, understanding, and willingness to hold conversations.

The young people also asked about what the Church can do better – including communication between councils, sharing what the Church does, and active listening – not just reading reports. There was a cry for the Council of Mission and Discipleship to better define and explain the different

roles within the Church, including types of ministry, so that people can better pursue a path which best fits them. This discussion has been followed up by a social media campaign.

In this Year of Young People, Mr Downie also said that a Church Toolkit has been produced, available online in the Resources section of the Church website.

A minister commended the Youth Assembly for holding together the twin themes of discipleship and interfaith communication, which could be seen as contradictory. The immediate past Moderator, the Very Revd Derek Browning, saluted Mr Downie's work, describing the young man as a credit to the Church and *his* mentor. The Secretary to the Church of Scotland Guild thanked the Youth Assembly for its very real partnership with the Guild – “two groups”, he added, “that tend to be defined in the Assembly not by what they do but by their age profile”.

Other commissioners described the youth delegates as “the embodiment of ‘together’” and as being “five years ahead of the rest of us”.

This brings to a conclusion our reports on Assembly business this year. Later the commissioners will gather one last time to hear addresses from the Moderator and the Lord High Commissioner about their respective weeks, to remember deceased ministers, missionaries and deacons, and to thank new and retiring workers for the Church.

Thank you for reading, listening and watching. If you have any feedback about our week of updates do get in touch at lw@laurencew.org. For now, however, we say goodbye.