

## General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

### 10. Thursday 23 May: afternoon

Following lunch, the Assembly returned to the Report of the Ministries Council and a motion calling for a review of the terms of the Call and Tenure for Ministers of Word and Sacrament and proposing a “more creative and flexible deployment of ministers”.

Two commissioners spoke in favour of this. However, the Very Revd Dr Derek Browning reminded the Assembly that a commission had completed extensive work on this matter just four years ago, and there had been no significant difference in the life of the Church since that time. The amendment fell.

However, a similar amendment was then brought before the Assembly which sparked a passionate discussion about change. This motion instructed the Council to consider incorporating a new principle when framing new legislation – “that no charge should, in future, be granted leave to call a minister on an unrestricted basis but that tenure should instead be granted on a renewable basis of no more than seven years” – and to report to the Assembly in two years’ time.

The Revd Tara Granados, putting forward the amendment, said the Assembly had already accepted sweeping changes this week and argued that the “the security blanket” of tenure should not be omitted from this welcome reform.

The Revd Scott Rennie said that ministers “can’t ask everyone else to change but be unwilling to consider making that change themselves.” The Revd Dr Doug Gay added that in the past tenure was necessary for stability, but today the Church needs not stability but flexibility. The amendment was accepted decisively by the Assembly.

The Very Revd Dr John Chalmers spoke with equal passion about the charity *Place for Hope* and its remarkable work in the fields of mediation, reconciliation and peace-making. He said a special conference – the Glasgow Gathering on Conflict and Faith – will be held at the end of October to mark 10 years of *Place for Hope*, and he urged everyone to support this.

In response to a call to affirm the ministry of Work Place Chaplains, the Revd Graham Crawford rose to speak on behalf of the 112 football chaplains and many rugby, basketball and shinty chaplains currently working in Scotland. The Moderator took the opportunity to thank *all* chaplains, whatever their field – whether that be universities, hospitals, prisons or elsewhere.

The Assembly agreed to a further amendment asking the Council to consult with the Business Committee about the possibility of providing childcare cover for commissioners who may need such support during Assembly week.

The report was wrapped up with a brief discussion about the provision of manses and an instruction to Council to explore the idea of a “mixed economy” that would allow the possibility of ministers living in their own homes. It was agreed that a timetable for further work in this area would be brought before next year’s Assembly.

With the deliverance passed, the Moderator thanked the Revd Neil Glover for the enormous energy, insightfulness and fresh thinking he has brought to the Ministries Council. He now steps down as convener after four years at the helm.

The Assembly then heard the Report of the **Joint Emerging Church Group** which draws on expertise from the Ministries Council and Mission and Discipleship Council and is charged with promoting growth initiatives within the Church in a joined up way.

The Revd Brian Porteous OLM, the group’s Convenor, said change is never easy – it always brings economic, emotional and political costs. But years working as a management consultant had taught him that change is nevertheless possible if an organisation can honestly take stock of where it’s at, where it’s going, and how it intends to get there.

He acknowledged that growth and renewal are some way off for the Church. However, there *are* areas of progress – for example, the Path of Renewal initiative – which give grounds for hope.

In developing its strategy for growth at local, regional and national level, the Joint Emerging Church Group has drawn on a major piece of research by the Revd Dr Sandy Forsyth into pioneering and church-planting. Dr Forsyth’s work, which sets a goal of creating 100 new worshipping communities in Scotland over the next decade, is published in the Blue Book.

“The implementation of this strategy will be a challenge,” Mr Porteous said, “and we need to be honest about that too. But if the choice is between trying to do our best to grow or of continuing to manage decline, then I know what bus I want to be on!”

In the discussion that followed, Mr Porteous spoke about Fresh Expressions, the pioneering ecumenical initiative working to engage with people who do not go to traditional church. He said lessons have been learned in particular from the ambitious goals of the Church of England Diocese of Oxford.

And in a final word of encouragement, the Revd Jane Howitt told the Assembly about an initiative in Latvia to establish 100 new worshipping communities which had proved very successful. “It can be done,” she said.

The Revd Neil Dougall, Convenor of the **Registration of Ministries Committee**, explained that his relatively new committee is there to assist any Church of Scotland minister not currently serving in a parish who wants to explore that option, and aids the transition back into parish ministry. In the last 18 months the Committee has considered applications from Church of Scotland ministers who have been serving in a variety of roles, and discussed with them gaps in knowledge and ways of gaining necessary experience. Mr Dougall ended by saying that the Committee is still new. “Every applicant it meets is helping improve how it works. It is grateful to everyone who has offered feedback.”

The committee’s report and deliverance was accepted without comment.

In 2018, the General Assembly adopted a new ecumenical policy for the Church of Scotland. The **Committee on Ecumenical Relations** then undertook to develop a strategy from the policy. The committee’s convenor, the Revd Sandy Horsburgh, said that “the strategy is ambitious and intended to be so” – aiming for the faithful participation of all Christians in the mission of God, underpinned by the Kirk’s understanding of its calling to minister to the whole people of Scotland. There is an increasing awareness that the Church of Scotland cannot and should not try to fulfil this calling alone; it requires the sharing with other churches in Christian mission and service.

The Ecumenical Strategy falls into two parts.

Locally, it offers encouragement, models of good practice, effective partnership and engagement with presbyteries. The Committee is re-focussing its work and their report highlights the possibilities for building relationships locally especially through uniting in prayer, for example during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and through *Thy Kingdom Come*, which had been mentioned a number of times this week. (In later questions, the convenor said there are many resources available from the *Thy Kingdom Come* website.)

Historically, the Committee has been most active nationally, but Mr Horsburgh said that increasingly hard questions about the value and effectiveness of national and international bodies need to be asked. They are, and solutions are emerging. For example, as was flagged up last year, one such body, Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS), is transitioning to become a Scottish Christian Forum with a lighter structure, based more on participation than on membership, providing an attractive space in which churches across Scotland can share in Christian mission and service, in the hope that other churches will feel able to participate.

Mr Horsburgh spoke about relationships with other denominations. Despite the decision of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland not to invite the Church of Scotland Moderator to its Assembly, or send theirs to this Assembly, the convenor said there has, if anything, been an intensification of contact and co-operation on a range of interests between the two denominations, and the Ecumenical Relations Committee stands ready to facilitate these further.

The relationship with the Church of England is enabling the sharing of resources and expertise between our churches, but perhaps the greatest progress has been with the Scottish Episcopal Church. The two denominations are recognising much more clearly their shared calling to ministry to the whole of Scotland and the committee is delighted that the Scottish Episcopal Church will consider adopting substantially the same ecumenical policy as our own at their forthcoming General Synod.

The convenor finished by thanking Ms Ros Mylne, who has worked as an administrator for the Ecumenical Relations Committee almost since its inception – he said that Ros would, very genuinely, be missed.

The Revd David Locke said that in his local setting he was working with new churches, independent churches, those whose theology may have been seen as very different – did the convenor have a view on this approach? He did – one of glad encouragement.

The Revd Janet Mathieson wanted the Assembly to know that this time last year she had celebrated communion at the Assembly of the United Mission to Nepal, a celebration she shared with a representative from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

The convenor was very happy that the National Youth Assembly chose “Being Ecumenical” as a theme at its meeting in 2018. The NYA’s report affirms that diversity is an enriching gift throughout the Church – what unites us is greater than what divides us. Mr Horsburgh welcomed the idea of establishing an Ecumenical Youth Forum and said this would be considered.

A request that the committee prepare a discussion paper on the 1999 Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification, written by the Roman Catholic Church with the Lutheran Church was resisted on grounds of available capacity.

This year’s report from the **Theological Forum** is to a degree a holding report, as the Forum continues with a number of pieces of work, including on the Westminster Confession of Faith and the place of Profession of Faith and sharing Communion in today’s Church.

Today, however, the convenor, the Revd Dr Donald MacEwan, offered the Assembly a study on the Church’s understanding of reconciliation – a document titled “He is Our Peace”.

The instruction to look at this subject had arisen out of divisions within the Church of Scotland and elsewhere concerning same-sex marriage. But the convenor said that reconciliation “seemed increasingly to us to be the hallmark of Christian faith and discipleship much more widely”.

He said there is a need for reconciliation at every level of society, from home to government, nationally and internationally. But the report first recognises that reconciliation is one of the scriptural expressions for the changed relationship between God and creation, including humankind, found in the cross.

The forum drew particularly on the thought of the theologian Miroslav Volf, originally from Croatia, who reflected deeply on questions of conflict, justice, forgiveness and reconciliation arising from the Balkan Wars of the 1990s.

Dr MacEwan acknowledged that conflict within the Church can seem insignificant compared to that which we see in the news. But conflict arises here as anywhere else and the Forum explored some of the many reasons for the persistence of conflict within the Church, before outlining many ways in which churches including the Church of Scotland have fostered good disagreement, healthy discussion and a reconciling spirit in the midst of pain, difference in belief and practice, and discord.

The Revd Gordon Kennedy encouraged the Forum to consider hosting conferences to promote and encourage biblical and theological reflection. The convenor accepted the amendment to the deliverance.

After the report of the Chalmers Lectureship had been presented, commissioners turned to the report of the **Church of Scotland Pensions Trustees**. The chairman, Mr Graeme Caughey, said he could not be happier about the content of this year’s report – which, he said, is saying something for a cautious, Scottish, Presbyterian actuary! The pension schemes, he said, are in great shape, better than at any time in their history. With only one exception, each of the scheme sections is in surplus. The exception is CrossReach’s pension scheme for staff, but Mr Caughey said progress has been significant here as well. He thanked warmly everyone involved in getting to the schemes to this position.

2019 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what was set up as the “Retired Ministers’ Housing Fund” in 1969. Initially, assistance was just small loans of around £500 to £1,500. By the end of 2018, the Trustees owned 212 houses. The Chairman, Mr Taylor, introduced a video clip of two couples who have benefited from the support of the Fund – one in rented accommodation, one in their own property, with the help of the Housing and Loan fund. One retired minister said: “We simply couldn’t have afforded a full rental house without the help of the Housing and Loan Fund.” He recalled living in a manse where he had to wear an overcoat all the time – this one, in contrast, was warm and cosy. And

when work had to be done in the house, the Fund was helpful in finding the couple alternative accommodation – “you all went above and beyond”, they said.

Since 1969, the Fund has granted loans of £13 million, £6 million of which have been repaid. The Chairman said that expectations of standards have shifted, and the complexity of requests before the Trustees has become greater, but the Fund is anticipating increased activity in the next five years with 31 applications currently lodged with it. Over 1,000 individuals have been assisted in one way or another over the last 50 years, Mr Taylor said, and the Trustees are gratified that the Fund has benefitted so many.

Speaking to the report of the **Church Hymnary Trustees**, the vice-convenor, the Revd Ann Inglis said that sales of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Church Hymnary are declining, though sales of the music, melody and, in particular, the CD editions went up last year. Ms Inglis said that although many churches use large screens – which can allow for using large size print as well as improving singing! – there’s room for both screen and book.

The trust has been pleased to support the development of a CH4 website by the Mission and Discipleship Council, which will be formally launched tomorrow.

The Chairman of the **Church of Scotland Trust**, Mr Thomas Watson said the trustees currently look after 48 third party trusts and use the income from them for a wide range of charitable purposes. The trust also acts as trustee for the World Mission Council’s properties in Israel-Palestine, which the Assembly heard about yesterday.

In Pakistan, problems are still ongoing in trying to fulfil the trust’s obligation to transfer properties it owns to an appropriate local trust. A long series of court cases have hampered progress and the idea of transferring the properties to the Pakistani Government has loomed over efforts to set up a suitable local trust rather than wait for the Church in Pakistan to find one of its own. Mr Watson was pleased to announce the recent formation of a new succession trust but warned that this will have to be registered, and the transfer of properties will then have to take place, which he predicted will take a long time.

As the **Church of Scotland Investors Trust** prepared to deliver the final report of the day, proceedings were briefly interrupted by an unexpected – but very harmonious - rendition of “All Things Bright and Beautiful” from climate change protesters in the gallery, ending with the line, “Let’s not destroy them all.”

Ms Catherine Alexander, the Investors Trust chairman, said it had been a difficult year of muted economic growth, trade wars and Brexit uncertainty. The total value of funds invested through the Church of Scotland Investors Trust was £435.1 million at 31 December last year.

Total income of more than £12.9 million was generated to support the work of congregations, Councils and committees of the Church over the 12 months.

“In a time of such uncertainty,” she said, “it is very pleasing that the Growth Fund held its value in falling markets and recorded a marginal increase, while the Income Fund recorded only a marginal decline.”

Ms Alexander gave the Assembly a brief summary of the Investors Trust’s work over the past year. She addressed concerns – debated earlier in the week – about the Church’s investment in the oil and gas industry. And she said other important ethical issues such as modern slavery, artificial intelligence and water conservation were also important concerns. The Investors Trust is a member of the Church Investors Group of like-minded Christian investors, she said.

This year’s annual forum for investors to meet and question the Investment Manager will be held at 121 George Street on 13 June.

Questions from the hall once again focused on the issue of climate change and the Church’s investment in the oil and gas industry. Ms Alexander said she took comfort from the fact that as a result of engagement with the industry, Shell now links its executive’s long-term remuneration packages to progress on carbon emission reduction.

The Revd Dr Richard Frazer, convener of the Church and Society Council, thanked Ms Alexander, adding “discussions on this will not go away. The world is changing. We are in the middle of a climate emergency.” Dr Frazer said his Council’s Speak Out process was here to help tackle the issue.

An amendment urging the Investors Trust to consider adding “fracking” to its list of industries excluded from investment was passed. So too was a motion urging the Investors Trust to publish a list of shareholdings of the Church of Scotland – not just the top 10 investments, as is currently the case.

Finally, the Revd Graeme Glover stood to thank Ms Alexander for carrying out what he called “a thankless task” so professionally. And this afternoon’s Moderator – the Very Revd Dr Derek Browning – closed the day by also thanking the Chairman for her fine work, and wishing her well as she stands down from the post.

In addition to completing the report of the Ministries Council, this afternoon the Assembly heard and fully addressed ten further reports. Those commissioners that stayed the course looked a little hot

and tired, but perhaps they felt some satisfaction, too, in a job done diligently. A little more diligence will be required tomorrow on the Assembly's final day.