

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

7. Wednesday 22 May: morning

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The day began with an address by Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who said it was a “deep honour” to be invited to speak to the Assembly.

It was exactly 20 years ago that Ms Sturgeon made her first speech as an MSP in the Assembly Hall, then being used by the Scottish Parliament. Ms Sturgeon said it was “very special” to be back and she was reminded of how the Church of Scotland remains at the centre of Scottish spiritual *and* public life.

For many years after the Act of Union of 1707, the First Minister noted that the Church of Scotland served as “a kind of surrogate Parliament”. The Kirk also played an important role in re-establishing the Scottish Parliament 20 years ago. As such, Ms Sturgeon said, the Scottish Parliament owes a major debt to the Church of Scotland and previous General Assemblies. She also noted with a smile, that the Assembly owes the Scottish Parliament a debt, too – it was thanks to MSPs that the Assembly Hall’s wooden benches were replaced with padded seats, for which commissioners must be “feeling very grateful”.

Turning to the Report of the Church and Society Council, the First Minister noted how today’s Church remains passionately engaged in the great national and international issues of the day, including climate change, and cooperation between faiths. “At a time when intolerance and bigotry appear to be on the rise in some parts of the world,” Ms Sturgeon said, “it is important that major faiths in Scotland stands together in solidarity.”

Her main message to the Assembly was therefore a heartfelt “thank you” for the Church’s highly valued contribution to Scotland and countries around the world, which benefits not just Christians but people of other faiths and none.

Ms Sturgeon said three values – kindness, dignity and compassion – should define the role of government ministers just as they define the role of parish ministers. At a time of division over issues like Brexit and climate change, she said “the Church is well placed to remind us of this when politics falls short”.

In his reply, the Moderator said that, like the Government, the Church is seeking a flourishing Scotland, as well as being a voice to the voiceless. The Church is not just a hobby for religious geeks, he said. It cares about Scotland and it values the open doors the Government gives it to speak on important issues.

The Assembly moved to business and the report and supplementary report of the Church and Society Council. Its convenor, the Revd Dr Richard Frazer said that, this week, the Church of Scotland has started to tell a new story about itself. He said: "The Church's story, our story, cannot be contained in our annual statistical returns about numbers and the trends towards decline. The story we live, but do not often tell, is about being the salt of the earth, building community, tackling injustice, helping people to belong."

Work alongside refugees has been an important strand for the council. The current UK Government policy regarding the re-settlement of refugees comes to an end next year and the council awaits a statement of what future priorities will be. "We call on the UK Government to be generous and take its place alongside the international community in offering hope to displaced people from around the world." At the same time, Mr Frazer applauded the Scottish Government's resettlement strategy that recognises the gifts of the strangers who come empty handed to our shores as "New Scots".

Stories of a "hostile environment" in our country are "an appalling indictment", the convenor said. Alluding to historic examples of the Kirk's own religious bigotry, the convenor noted that the council has brought a motion inviting the Assembly to affirm its support for the internationally agreed definition of antisemitism drafted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. He spoke too of injustices and tragedies across the world.

Back in this country, the council is in discussion with the Scottish Government and others about how to sustain and re-imagine the work of healthcare in a Health and Wellbeing Commission. The council has deep reservations about the roll-out of Universal Credit and its impact on the poorest in our communities.

Faith-consistent finance, gender justice, and concerns about the Climate Emergency are all on the council's table. The convenor said the Church needs to step up and do its part in caring for God's creation, applauding efforts by the Church of Scotland Pension Fund and the Church Investors Trust to apply ethical parameters in order that the Church invests its money where its values are.

Last year, a cross-council working group was established to focus on investing in young people. The council is supporting a number of Scottish government initiatives that both help overcome the negative impact of adverse early years' experiences, and offer children equal protection in law. "We continue to urge the Scottish Government that a top up of £5 in Child Benefit would go some considerable way to lift at least 30,000 children out of poverty."

Indeed, the Council is encouraging engagement with government and politics at all levels. In particular, Dr Frazer said, "we need to ensure that we create an authentic place for those with lived, contemporary experience of poverty to participate with integrity in debates and decisions of Church and society". On the eve of the European Elections, Dr Frazer urged that the rights of EU citizens be protected and that the most vulnerable in our communities not carry the greatest burden. "We need to tell a different story about ourselves", the convenor concluded, a story about justice and sufficiency, of healing and reconciliation: "reconciliation with one another," he said, "and with this beautiful, fragile planet."

Since 1994, the Very Revd Dr Alan McDonald has pursued both support for the families affected by the crash of a Chinook helicopter on the Mull of Kintyre, and the truth of what happened. On the occasion of the 25th anniversary, he moved an amendment to the deliverance, assuring the bereaved families of the Kirk's continuing thoughts and prayers; and urged the Ministry of Defence to ensure that all the records of the case be kept in a safe place and not deleted, as is presently being considered. Accepting the amendment, the convenor recalled Dr McDonald's own assertion in 1994 that "only by discovering the truth about these things is there any possibility of families coming to any resolution in their grief."

The convenor brought an amendment recognising and reaffirming government declarations of a climate and ecological emergency. It noted the Committee on Climate Change's "Net Zero" report, which supports the intention of the Scottish Government to reduce Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions to zero, and committed the Church to playing its part in making this a reality. Miss Joanne Whyte, supporting the amendment, reminded commissioners that we're losing about 10,000 species a year, with 1.8 million species already extinct. "We are destroying the planet," she said. "Surely, Christians should do something about this crisis before it's too late."

Bringing a personal, human dimension to the debate, Mr Paulo Mucapelo Joao from Mozambique, addressed the Assembly in Portuguese. Climate change is "a Mozambiquean reality" because of its

experience of recent cyclones Idai and Kenneth – “a result of climate change”, he said. Thousands died; thousands of children have been left without parents; cities have been almost completely destroyed. He said: “Speaking about climate change for us is a trauma because people are weeping – people who are separated and need to find their children.” He appealed for help for people who have lost almost everything; and urged us to take seriously the subject of climate change, felt especially by people living close to the sea.

The Revd Sharon Hollis from the Uniting Church in Australia spoke of Pacific countries, also affected by climate change. The pressures of climate change threaten not just species but cultures, countries and people – women in particular – she said. She spoke of whole villages that have had to make plans to relocate from one island to another. The UN doesn’t currently recognise this as a reason for being given refugee status. “What does it mean to believe in God when your land is washed away?” she said. A youth delegate stood to point out the number of single use plastic bottles evident at the front of the hall. “What,” he asked, “are we doing?” Amending a call for all congregations to become eco-congregations one commissioner asked for “a concerted effort to immediately remove the use of single-use plastics in our church buildings.” A youth delegate also proposed that the council work with the Government on reducing the use of single-use plastic. The convenor accepted that request.

Gordon Strang brought an amendment expressing disappointment in the outcomes from engagement to date with oil and gas companies, and urged the Investors trust to disinvest from oil and gas companies by 2020. He said a lot has changed since the matter was discussed last year. “Our children are angry with us for dragging our feet on these matters”, he said. Shell, BP and Total are showing no intention of being anything other than oil and gas companies. He argued that we need to continue to engage but we don’t have to be shareholders to do so. He spoke as a former offshore worker. The expertise of his former colleagues will still be needed, but a just transition to a sustainable world *must* be encouraged. “The world’s looking to us”, he concluded.

Ms Catherine Alexander, Chair of the Investors Trust, was invited to address the Assembly. She said disinvestment only removes the Christian voice from the industry. It looks like we’re doing something but actually we’re doing nothing - it means we’re washing our hands.

The Revd Gordon Craig, chaplain to the UK Oil Industry, felt like “Daniel in the lion’s den”. Beware of thinking that engagement hasn’t been noticed, he said. He gets pulled up by CEOs to talk about engagement. He affirmed a previous speaker’s concern about the jobs that will be lost as the result of disinvestment and said companies are investing in fossil fuels because we demand energy – “it’s too

easy to blame the energy companies – we are all participating in this absolute disaster. Until we change, the oil and gas companies can't change", he said.

The Moderator of the United Reformed Church said that its own trust bodies have been urged to disinvest inspired in part by United Reformed Church youth. Ms Tara Shannon quoted studies that find "we will have a lot of poverty because of climate change. We need to act now."

Closing, the convenor said that the council's hands are tied by its commitment to engaging with the oil and gas companies; but he had deep sympathy for the counter-motion and handed the decision over to the Assembly "to express the conscience of the Church". On an electronic vote, Mr Strang's counter-motion fell by 40 votes.

In subsequent amendments, the convenor accepted a request to be alert about the sources of palm oil and to choose products that use *sustainable* palm oil. He rejected an attempt to congratulate Greta Thunberg and all involved in the recent school strikes and extinction rebellion on the impact they've made in raising public awareness – in the light of the preceding debate and decision, he said, it would be completely hypocritical to do so.

A number of speakers now spoke on the subject of refugees and asylum seekers, always from personal experience: the Very Revd Susan Brown asked commissioners to sign a petition on the 38 Degrees website asking that the sons of Maqsood Bakhsh be allowed to stay in Scotland; the Revd Jane Howitt asked that we give further emphasis to asylum seekers as well as refugees in general.

The Revd John McCulloch called for a moratorium on UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia in light of its involvement in the Yemen conflict. "The multi-trillion arms industry constitutes structural sin", he said. This amendment was accepted by the convenor, and the Assembly. Another amendment welcomed the Government's statement about the use of corporal punishment in Brunei against members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The Very Revd Dr Andrew McLellan spoke passionately about those in Scottish prisons, noting that more children in Britain last year suffered the imprisonment of a parent than the divorce of a parent. However, he withdrew his request that the council prepare a major report on prisons after the convenor said that he felt the council couldn't cope with such a remit at a time when it was having to deal with so much structural change requested by the Assembly.

The commissioners then broke for lunch.