

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

8. Wednesday 21 May: afternoon

After lunch, seven excited children from Deanburn Primary School in Bo'ness received the Moderator's Medal and Moderator's Shield – a prize which encourages interesting links between schools and churches. The youngsters all help with Café Connect, a joint project with Bo'ness Old Kirk, which brings together church-goers and children once a week for a morning of snacks, songs, stories and games.

Returning then to the Report of the Church and Society Council, commissioners accepted an amendment encouraging congregations to continue with initiatives aiming to transform the lives of prisoners, ex-offenders and their families, including finding ways of working with the new Community Custody Units for women offenders.

There followed a discussion on a motion recommending the Church adopts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of anti-Semitism and guidelines to help it tackle the growing scourge of anti-Jewish racism. One commissioner spoke against this, saying the Alliance urges other organisations to draw up *their own* definitions and guidelines to fit the work they do. However, the Revd. Louis Kinsey felt that to reject this amendment would send a negative signal to the Jewish community, and it was carried.

An amendment from a former secretary to the Education Committee instructing the Council to continue and develop the Church's longstanding contribution to education in the widest sense was accepted. The Revd William Heenan expressed concern that a focus in the report on supporting children in their earliest years appeared to overlook young people aged 3 to 18. The convener, the Revd Dr Richard Frazer, assured the Assembly this issue would be addressed, noting that the Young People and Education Action Group was still taking its first steps and asking the Assembly for patience.

Changes to the Scripture Union Scotland Ethos Statement – which was appearing to have an adverse effect on chaplains, youth workers and volunteers in schools – were then brought to the attention of the Assembly. An amendment called for “meaningful conversations” between the Council and Scripture Union on the issue. The Revd James Dewar, Chair of the Trustees for SU Scotland, questioned if the Assembly could vote on a statement it hadn't seen and asked for the amendment to be resisted. He added that he was always happy to talk to anyone about the Ethos Statement, which urges people to lead a Biblical life. Several commissioners supported the amendment. Speaking from personal

experience, they said the statement risked excluding people with real talents, and may be doing more harm than good. The amendment was carried.

The report of the General Trustees was up next. The Chairman, Mr Raymond Young, described it as “Radical Action Plan, Part 3”. He said we need to “get real” about our buildings. There are some really good spaces in the Church, but there are too many, and many are not fit for purpose. Nor is the Church a building preservation organisation, he added.

Referring to the trustees’ own Health and Safety Toolkit handbook, the chairman mentioned recent high-profile fires – at Notre Dame and at the Glasgow School of Art – which may well lead to stricter requirements for public buildings – including churches. The team that advises on property has been expanded. He said, “We cannot have safeguarded people in unsafe buildings.”

Over the years the trustees have regularly said that the Church has too many buildings. Each Assembly has nodded in agreement. And yet at the start of this year, Mr Young said, presbyteries said that 86 per cent of all church buildings are expected to remain in use beyond the lifetime of the presbytery’s plan. Only 6 per cent – about 180 church buildings are expected to go. He repeated: “We need to get real.”

As an example of a presbytery that he feels *is* getting real, the chairman said St Andrews Presbytery has been reviewing its building requirements for the next 10-15 years. It started by agreeing minimum criteria for a 21st century church – such as access for all through the front door, being dementia friendly, comfort, heating, a welcoming space, a kitchen for hospitality, proper toilets. People faced up to the reality that some churches were incapable of being adapted for the future. In some cases the congregational age profile was such that unless something dramatic was to happen there would be nobody left in 10 years’ time – and the quality of the building was not going to attract new people.

New congregations or church presences might not involve a church building. He said “We need to be fleeter of foot, not encumbered with buildings that take up the energy that should be used for worship and mission.”

The trustees are developing an overall plan for the Church’s congregational land and buildings and has brought to this Assembly a consultation document for approval, titled “Well equipped spaces in the right places”. The task, Mr Young concluded is “not about managing decline. It is about equipping ourselves for the future, for growth.”

During questions, the Mr Young said the trustees are developing some application forms to aid consistency and transparency on how decisions are made and money distributed; and he agreed with a commissioner who said that, when facing change, it’s often emotional attachment that is the

problem. The chairman said that providing objective criteria as a starting point – as in St Andrews presbytery – can help. The first question, he said, is not “What buildings should go?” but “Which ones should we invest in?”

The minister to the deaf communities raised the issue of a lack of flashing fire alarms in many churches. Another commissioner asked why Kirk Sessions were not being instructed to return the consultation forms, since this is such an important issue? The convenor said the Assembly could “instruct” if it wished to. Later, it did.

Turning to the deliverance, a commissioner stood to thank the trustees for their experience and compassion, and helping her congregation to be missional. In her case, a new building project is to begin shortly. At Dr James Jack’s Duddingston church in Edinburgh, the trustees were one body to help a glebe be converted into a peace garden, with input from the local community, including primary-aged children. This is a place where connections are made and mission takes place.

The World Mission Council’s strategic review of the Church of Scotland in Israel and Palestine was now presented, held over from yesterday.

The Church of Scotland’s physical presence is embodied in four buildings: St Andrew’s Memorial Church and a Guest House in Jerusalem; a Hotel in Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Tabeetha Mission School. These buildings have been matters of contention over the years, said the convenor, the Very Revd Dr John Chalmers, but we are where we are. So in their report, the council, “with the concurrence of our partners in Israel and Palestine”, recommends “the retention, for now, of all the land and institutions to which we currently hold title”. Much of the rest of the convenor’s speech responded to the implicit question: Why?

The convenor indicated that the Kirk’s presence in Israel-Palestine is not just about property, but property does support the council’s work in the region – and he commented on the £1 million accounting deficit that the Special Commission had highlighted, saying that it’s common for a business to be cash positive while showing a deficit on the balance sheet. The operating profit of the hotel and guest house over the last 10 years amounts to more than £2.4 million, he said.

Tabetha School in Jaffa is one of the few schools in Israel where Christians, Jews and Muslims work and learn together – it “breaks down barriers and fosters positive relationships and conversations between faiths that are too often separated and consequently suspicions of one another”, he said. The school does need investment, however, and as this is beyond the Church’s means, a group has been appointed to explore options.

“In any other part of the world we would not make such recommendations about the retention of buildings and institutions”, Dr Chalmers said, “but this is not any other part of the world. “Alluding to decisions of the Assembly that go back 30 years, he said that “it is because we have journeyed with the people of Israel and Palestine throughout many years of conflict that we are compelled to continue the journey.” Though the Church of Scotland’s work is “a drop in the ocean”, its partners say it makes a difference. For example, Sindyanna of Galilee: a unique non-profit organisation led by a group of Palestinian and Jewish women working to create social change from the group up. The olive oil they produce – and which is used in the hotel – is not labelled “extra virgin” but Extra-Hopeful, Extra-Peaceful and Extra-Unified.

There is, the convenor said, an “awful asymmetry” about the Israel-Palestine conflict – so while condemning attacks by Palestinian suicide bombers and rocket attacks across the Gaza border, the Church of Scotland does find itself advocating for the poorest, the most marginalised and the vulnerable. He said, “We reaffirm our call for our own Government to join the 137 out of 193 member states of the United Nations to recognise and help to establish the State of Palestine.

At the same time, the Church of Scotland engages with the Jewish community in this country, which needs to hear that we are rigorously opposed to anti-Semitism in all its forms. That does not inhibit the Church from reporting the lamentation of those we accompany in Israel and Palestine.

Dr Searle asked whether the Church was working with Messianic Christians in Israel. The Revd John McCulloch, the current minister of St Andrew’s, Jerusalem, responded that there is ongoing contact with Messianic Jews. The Revd Peter Macdonald asked, given the 52-year occupation and colonisation of the occupied territories, why does the council still have hope in a two-state solution? The convenor replied that those they work with have that hope – sometimes a hope against hope – and he felt this was the plan that needed to be adhered to until there is a different proposal on the table.

In answer to another question, the convenor mentioned a number of opportunities and partners with whom young people can engage – to see both the holy stones and living stones of Israel-Palestine. Other commissioners spoke about their inspirational visits to the Holy Land, one mentioning a brief conversation with a Palestinian: “How do you continue to hope?” “We do not have the luxury to give up on hope.”

A youth delegate stated his commitment to the belief that Israel is God’s promised land for the Jews, but added that there is “no such thing as a racist Christian” and work for peace must continue with both sides. The Revd Peter Macdonald responded that there are ways of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures “other than as an eviction notice for 1 million Palestinians”.

Dr Bernard Sabella, himself from “the land”, affirmed that the school at Tabeetha was a model for inter-community conversation in a setting where most schools are confessional. He said that in the Kirk’s other properties, Jews and Palestinians were working alongside each other. “Come to the Holy land and meet the people”, he encouraged commissioners, “– you have fantastic facilities.”

Turning to the deliverance, Mr Jo Elliot questioned the wisdom of the original investment in the Tiberias hotel, and said that income from the properties in Israel-Palestine did not support work with vulnerable communities as the Council had asserted. The Very Revd Dr John Cairns responded by saying that there are things that are more important than money, including building trust between Christians and standing alongside our brothers, sisters and friends. The convenor agreed and restated that there are serious budget controls at the hotel, and that the “social return” is invaluable.

The Revd Andrew Sarle – grandson of a Jewish holocaust victim – brought an amendment asking the Assembly to endorse the statement from the Palestine Platform that reaffirms the need to respect the rights and welfare of the Palestinian people as part of the deal about to be proposed by the US administration. Mr Sarle said that “nothing that happened in my family over history can exonerate what the State of Israel is doing.” He compared what is going on in Israel-Palestine to what happened to his grandfather’s business – a comparison that many inappropriate and invidious. The convenor encouraged *study* of the statement, but distanced himself from the way it had been presented. Mr Sarle apologised.

Finally, the Revd John McCulloch brought an amendment in support of the Tent of Nations above Bethlehem. A sacred space is being built amongst 300 olive trees that are under a demolition order – in an endeavour to protect the olive trees from Israeli bulldozers. This was accepted and, further, the congregation of St Andrew’s Jerusalem and Tiberias was encouraged to develop this natural sanctuary as a place for worship and the regular celebration of communion.

Next, the Revd Jenny Adams presented the Report of the Panel on Review and Reform, which focused on its Path of Renewal initiative. This brings ministers and church members together to explore new approaches to church life.

Path of Renewal, which has been running for three years, aims to help churches to move to a more missional approach. To date, 52 congregations spread across Scotland have been involved, taking part in conferences, mentoring and learning. Ms Adams said she hoped people in every part of the Church could learn from the research that has been gathered.

“But research, reports, even General Assembly deliverances, are not what will bring transformation, renewal and regeneration to the Church, locally or nationally,” she said. “We need to have a culture

that supports innovators, that encourages experimentation, that gives permission to venture on new paths for which there is no map.”

There have been two tranches of Path of Renewal to date. A third has been proposed, to be overseen by the Joint Emerging Church Group. Ms Adams commended this to everyone – “it might be a path for your congregation,” she said. Several commissioners rose to echo her words, one calling Path of Renewal “a transformative experience”.

This was the final report of the Panel on Review and Reform, which will be replaced in the new Church structures by a research facility. However, the Revd Jenny Adams promptly returned to the podium to present a report on Sacramental Ministry by a joint working group representing the Panel on Review and Reform, the Theological Forum, the Committee on Ecumenical Relations and the Legal Questions Committee. The Working Group had been established in 2017 to ask whether there should be any change in how the sacraments, in particular the celebration of Holy Communion, were offered given the growing number of contexts where congregations find it difficult to access this central Christian experience.

Ms Adams said the group recognised the missional, spiritual and pastoral value of the sacraments; it believes that Word and Sacrament together are essential for the life and growth of the Church as the people of God. However, in both traditional church contexts (for example where there is a long vacancy between ministers) and in new forms of church (for example where leadership may be in the hands of a youth worker or a deacon), there is often simply no ordained minister of word and sacrament at hand to celebrate communion. The gist of the working group’s deliverance was that a successor joint group be established to develop *proposals* for how sacramental ministry may be offered in such situations (perhaps to include more flexible routes to ordination), but those proposals to be based on the *principles* that the present working group had developed.

These principles include the Reformed belief that Sacraments can never be separated from the Word; that the calling to preach the Word and celebrate the Sacraments are affirmed in ordination; and that only those who are called and ordained to preach the Word should celebrate the Sacraments.

How discernment, calling, selection and training may be done, particularly for new worshipping communities, is what the new group will consider – reporting to the General Assembly of 2020.

In the questions that followed a number of commissioners described precisely the situations and options that the working group had considered – for example where there are church workers but no ordained minister; the option of looking at ordained youth ministry; a possible role for deacons. The Revd Susan Cord compared the ministry of lay persons in Fresh Expressions of church in England to

the function of Ordained Local Ministers in Scotland – the convenor agreed that this too raised options for sacramental ministry. Others asked for more detail about the theology that required ordination, and indeed whether the assumption of ordination creates too narrow a prescription for the new working group. These were all questions for the successor group to consider, said Ms Adams. So, as she passed the baton on, the deliverance as a whole was received.

Perhaps it was a measure of the range and seriousness of the afternoon's debate that the reports of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations and Theological Forum were held over for another day; these alongside business still remaining from yesterday. We will keep an eye on where they resurface.