

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

9. Thursday 23 May: morning

As ever on a Thursday morning, the make-up of representatives ranged round the hall looked rather different as they included uniformed chaplains and representatives of the armed forces, joining the Assembly for the Report of the Committee on Chaplains to Her Majesty's Forces, the first report of the day.

The Rev Dr Marjory MacLean, the convener, began by recalling a visit last year to HMS Prince of Wales, the aircraft carrier under construction in Rosyth. After been shown around the vast ship ("We walked miles – literally!" she said), a beautiful prayer was heard in its unfinished chapel for the ship's company and their families. Dr MacLean said the little silent moment at the end of that prayer was the highlight of her working year.

Two themes emerged from that extemporised prayer in the ship's chapel, which was led by last year's Moderator, the Very Revd Susan Brown.

Firstly, while our military personnel may face difficult and sometimes controversial tasks, none of them makes the political decisions that create those tasks. All are also human beings who need to be loved, cared-for and shepherded.

Secondly, there is a scaffolding of support surrounding our Armed Forces that includes families, veterans, service charities and the cadet force – and the Church of Scotland is part of that support.

Dr MacLean said that the Church of Scotland and its General Assembly have always had the reputation for understanding the difference between the prophetic word spoken to those who lead and decide, and the pastoral word spoken to everyone. We may speak with passion in different ways during the Assembly; but she said "our voice is not ambiguous or contradictory, but rather intelligent and complex and nuanced. It is worth reminding ourselves of our Church's wise appreciation of these distinctions . . . because every one of the pastors sitting in uniform in front of us, Regular and Reservist, deserves our prayers and our love."

The Assembly heard that Dr MacLean's committee was close to completing a list of Armed Forces Champions in Presbyteries, and that restructuring of the Huts and Canteens Fund had made it possible to support the work of the armed forces charity, SSFA.

Finally, Dr MacLean also acknowledged the hard work of *all* our chaplains to Sea Cadet, ACF and Air Cadet units.

As is customary, a representative of the armed forces was then invited to address the Assembly – on this occasion, Rear-Admiral James Higham, Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff (Ships).

He introduced commissioners to some of the well-known phrases that are contained within the Royal Navy's own dictionary – Jack Speak; Jack being the naval term for a sailor ... Jolly Jack Tar. Chaplains, he said, attract numerous entries in Jackspeak: the most common being "God botherer".

Rear-Admiral Higham said that, as a professing God botherer himself, he likes the term because it seems to capture so much of the Navy's prevailing view of God and indicates why the bond between sailor and chaplain is such a strong one. For sailors who spend so much of their lives at the mercy of the elements, experiencing both the beauty and majesty of the night sky and the terror and power of an ocean storm, it's no wonder that the idea of God has always been such a tangible notion to sailors. He said, "it just isn't something that we bother about very much – the chaplain, our God botherer, is there to do that for us." He added, "The spiritual domain, the wellbeing of the mind as well as the body is a central part of good leadership in the Royal Navy."

The Rear-Admiral then updated commissioners on recent developments in the navy – bringing the world of a truly global navy into the heart of the Kirk's highest court. The navy is growing, he said. From 2015 to 2025 the tonnage of grey steel will increase by 30%. Aircraft carriers, submarines, and patrol vessels are being deployed right across the world – from the seaboard of the United States to the Indian Ocean, where the navy disrupts illicit drugs activity. "And everywhere that the Royal Navy has gone," commissioners were told, "your Chaplains – our Chaplains – have been with us, with more than half having been able to deploy in 2018 alone."

Presenting the Report of the Ministries Council, the Revd Neil Glover reflected on what he called the "strangeness" of being a minister. He talked about how that "Holy strangeness" had inspired him as a child, listening to memories of his grandfather, a Congregational minister who worked during the Blitz, and his father, also a minister, who supported striking miners in the 1980s. . . and was called a "quasi-Communist" for his troubles.

Mr Glover said that "strangeness" continues to inspire him today when he meets Deacons – "almost every one of whom is a bit of a legend"; hard-working auxiliaries and ordained local ministers; inspiring readers; and amazing youth workers "doing crazy outrageous things". "Humans doing the work of the divine; the ordinary and extraordinary mixed; pastoral and prophetic mixed."

The convenor said it is hard to capture this strangeness of what ministers do in words but his Council have had a go with its Formation Framework for ministry – a kind of vision of what a minister should be. The framework has so far focused on full-time ministers of Word and Sacrament, but in future will be expanded to other recognised ministries and, in light of the Radical Action Plan, “all God’s people”.

In assessing the diverse work of the Ministries Council, Mr Glover said there must be one over-riding question: does the work encourage, inspire and enable those in ministries in the Church of Scotland? He drew the Assembly’s attention to the Report’s section on the Priority Areas Committee’s efforts to tackle poverty; on the work being done in ministerial education and support; on the Ascend support and development programme for ministry; and on the Church’s academic partners who will provide future generations of ministers.

He said there is also new legislation to support those in ministry suffering long-term ill-health. Work has been done on building on the idea of hub-style ministries. And there are new proposals for the payment of ordained local ministers and auxiliary ministers in certain situations.

In order to continue to properly fund the work of Ministry Development staff, Mr Glover said there would be a pause on recruitment – although this would not involve redundancies. “Above all it is about ensuring that people are supported and their gifts are nourished”, he said.

In the questions that followed, one commissioner said that flexible learning study and financial support from the Ministries Council had made it possible for him to leave a well-paid job and pursue his call to ministry. The convenor assured him that “mixed-mode” learning in the future will include distance learning.

There were a number of questions about the proposal to reduce the number of academic partners – where future ministers receive their academic training – to two. Responding to the new Principal of New College, the Revd Professor Susan Hardman Moore, the convenor said the council would welcome all kinds of bids for training, including collaborative bids from institutions. The chaplain to St Andrew’s University asked about the benefits and risks of the move. Outlining these, the convenor said that in a recent survey of ministers, 32% didn’t feel their call was directed towards traditional parish-based ministry; and many more, who often rated the teaching they’d received highly, nevertheless didn’t feel it had fitted them for the form of ministry in which they’d found themselves. Could the convenor reassure commissioners that the choice of training centres wouldn’t disadvantage those in rural areas or those with disabilities, was a further question. Inclusion is a value that will inform the decision, the convenor replied.

To another commissioner, Mr Glover agreed that no specific training for church planting currently exists, but that this is an area of work being explored further.

In a context when society values older people contributing in the workplace, what steps are being taken to encourage and facilitate ministers to stay on beyond age 65? was another question. Retirement is a personal decision, said the convenor, but support, including conferences, is there for those who do wish to minister for longer. In response to another questioner, Mr Glover drew attention to research around resilience and wellbeing, which said that “ministers are happiest in small towns and priority areas” – something for commissioners to ponder on.

The Revd Muriel Pearson asked about the amount of work the Council is being asked to do – as evidenced by the number of sections in the report’s deliverance – and how the council prioritises its work. The convenor thanked Ms Pearson, and agreed that prioritisation will be an important task for his successor!

Following a number of technical questions about the Readership and other forms of ministry, and about revisions to the Act that addresses long-term ill-health, the Assembly broke for half an hour.

There was considerable concern about the amount of business still to get through today; speeches had already been restricted to three minutes and, as the Assembly now moved to the deliverance of the Ministries Council, the Moderator urged commissioners not to thank or congratulate too much, but confine themselves to questions and simply get on with the business. The Assembly approved this approach, though one commissioner was concerned that in such an approach, *nuanced* contributions might get lost.

The council agreed to a request to review the conditions of appointment of the minister to deaf people in Scotland, and to look at the length of ministerial candidates’ probation; and the convenor unpacked further the process for appointing academic partners, and clarified that any academic partner had to have enough candidates in order to justify offering the required specialist training to its parent institution. The number of candidates has fallen (200 down to 45 since the 1980s), and so the number of academic partners has to fall also; but some commissioners were concerned about the impact of such a move on those living at a distance from the chosen training centre – not least mature students with families. One amendment asked for a reduction in partners, without limiting the options to just one or two. Mr Glover re-stated that “this cannot work if distance learning isn’t offered”, but argued that with fewer partners, more investment in courses would be possible and a breadth of students across those academic centres made possible.

At this point, an Overture brought by the International Presbytery, within which it is impractical to unite charges, requested greater flexibility in how ministers are appointed and what kind of ministries are appointed. The council – and Assembly – accepted the Overture and its intention to “explore” options.

The Revd Scott Brown questioned the rule that candidates have to serve at least ten years – did this not restrict who could apply? The Convenor said it was down to the cost of the resources required for each individual candidate.

The revision of the Income Protection and Ill Health Act drew a number of detailed questions, which the convenor answered, acknowledging that this had been the hardest piece of work the council had worked on over the past year – one which needed real sensitivity as well as necessary clarity. One commissioner asked for a matching up of doctors and assessors with the *kind* of illness being experienced and *where* it is being experienced; the convenor confirmed that this would be the case.

At this point, the Assembly rose for lunch, to return later for the rest of the Ministries debate and, amongst other matters, the Ecumenical Relations and Theological Forum reports held over from yesterday. Join us then.