

2009 General Assembly

of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #11

Rev Douglas Aitken

Wednesday 27th May 2009, 2.00pm

Following the opening worship on the final day of the Church of Scotland General Assembly, the Moderator and the Assembly invited the Most Rev. Archbishop Desmond Tutu to address them. He said: Isn't it amazing that we have this omnipotent God who is impotent in this world of injustice. Surely He is waiting for people to work with Him to bring justice and peace to the world. He spoke of the prayers and vigils all over the world for South Africa which had, with God, brought democracy and freedom. He especially thanked Scotland and its Church for all that they did with hospitals and schools and universities. He said: "There was a barren land and you said to God yes, we will work with you for South Africa", and show God's omnipotence. You taught us to proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God – to cry out "Thus says the Lord". You inspired us to cry out against the evil of apartheid. We, each one of us, is born in God's image irrespective of colour. Some who said "Thus says the Lord" were imprisoned, tortured and persecuted. It must always be so for those who declare against injustice and discrimination. Jesus said: "If I be lifted up, I will draw ALL" – not some, all. He repeated "all" a dozen times – naming some – declaring that we are all God's family. How can we refuse while there are those who go to bed hungry? God cries to you: "Help me, I have no-one else, help me!" The Archbishop then sat down to an extended standing ovation.

From the sublime, the Assembly turned to the mundane by hearing the Report of the General Trustees given by the Convener, Mr Findlay Turner. He said the Trustees had received many applications for advice, for approval of work on buildings and requests for funds. In terms of the care of buildings, he urged congregations to approach the Presbytery and the Trustees at the earliest time and before the condition of the building becomes too damaged to repair. He reminded congregations to make sure that their buildings are adequately covered. And he indicated that lottery funding had reduced greatly with the money going towards the preparations for the 2012 London Olympics. The Convener said that in highlighting some of the problems facing the Trustees and the Church at large he was concerned that he might be seen as downbeat or depressing. Rather he regards the difficulties as challenges which the whole Church has to address in the service of its Master.

The Assembly turned to questions. A number of issues were raised. The Convener would not respond to individual cases on the floor of the Assembly. One commissioner asked whether the General Trustees had thought of the implications of the Assembly's decision that the 5% reduction in carbon footprints year on year should be mandatory and not voluntary. The Convener pointed out that it was going to be very difficult, but the issue lay with individual congregations and not the central committees and councils of the Church. Another commissioner asked how to move Historic Scotland to agree changes in listed buildings. The Convener replied that the initial application goes to the Planning Authority

and Historic Scotland. The General Trustees do try to negotiate an acceptable solution. He added that the last word rests with the General Trustees.

The next Report before the Assembly was the Social Care Council which trades under the name of CrossReach. It was presented by the Convener, the Rev David Court. With the Scriptural promise that Christ touched a leper and the leper was healed, the Council believes that every individual who comes into the care of the Council should have the very best of care. Partnership with others is how the Council works. For example, the Visitor Centre run by CrossReach at Her Majesty's Prison in Perth works with the Scottish Prison Service to help family visiting prisoners. It helps to prevent re-offending.

The Convener indicated that the current credit crunch has meant that some of the work on buildings, refurbishing and replacing, has had to be pulled back. In response to a question, he indicated that in the case of one home intended for replacement the problem is with Planning and the Board's commitment to the replacement is firm. But the rating system of the Care Commission suggests that much of our provision for those in need is of the highest standard. He also emphasised that many of the staff have accepted training to ever higher levels.

At the close of the debate, when the deliverance was passed without amendment, the Convener presented to the Assembly members of staff who are retiring after many years service along with new appointments. Then the Moderator thanked the Convener who is retiring after his several years of service.

The Assembly heard at this point, a statement clarifying what ministers might be allowed to say when leading worship in the aftermath of the moratorium agreed by the Assembly on issues linking sexual orientation and ordination.

The Panel on Review and Reform reported next. The Convener, the Rev David Cameron, said that the purpose of the Panel was to explore the state of the church and how it can be better organised to maximise its ability to communicate the Gospel. He concentrated on the contributions of Presbyteries and how it seems that little decided at that level reaches the congregations. The Panel will consult on the role, size, and function of a revised Presbytery structure. There are in the report, four possible formats for a new Presbytery structure – and these may not be the only possibilities. There may be a variety of needs which cannot be met by one single format.

In the next fortnight a letter will go out to all presbyteries and Kirk sessions inviting ideas about a new structure. The Panel has also looked at the function and practice of Superintendence and visits to congregations.

One commissioner said that he wanted much more flesh on the outline structure and moved a motion to that effect. The next two contributions both opposed the motion on the grounds that it would restrict the breadth of debate and discussion. The Assembly agreed and turned its attention to the less controversial reports of the Central Services Committee, which effectively runs the Church Offices, the Nomination Committee which brings names for the Assembly to appoint to the Councils and Committees of the Church, and the selection Committee, which proposes names for any ad hoc committee or Commission established by the current Assembly. The report included the names proposed for the Special Commission which in this Assembly was charged with consulting with Presbyteries and preparing a study on ordination and induction to the ministry of the Church of

Scotland in the light of the report accepted by the 2007 Assembly called “A Challenge to Unity: same sex relationships as an issue in theology and human sexuality”. The Commission will be convened by a Court of Session Judge, Lord Hodge.

The Assembly will return this afternoon for the formal closing of the Assembly, but we take our leave at this time. We hope our reports have been helpful. Now, from Edinburgh and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: Good Bye.