

2008 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #6

Rev Douglas Aitken

Monday 19th May 2008, Noon

On Saturday, we left the Commissioners making their way to a Garden Party where it didn't rain but the wind was cold. Not many of them returned for the Youth night, which was a pity, because they would have found more than 200 young people and children dancing round the Assembly Hall lit with coloured lights sweeping over them to the rhythm and beat of the London Community Gospel Choir.

As someone said, it makes a Kirk service seem very dull – maybe if services were more upbeat and joyous there would be more young folk in the Church. Maybe.

On Sunday morning the Moderator preached on Love as the essence of the Gospel; on Sunday evening – as a result of the Assembly's new midweek to midweek timetable – another service was held, this time in the Assembly Hall. Here, the Moderator spoke of the need for the Church to be a healer in the world. Some 300 people were there to hear him and sing songs unaccompanied under the direction of John Bell, and other hymns led by keyboard and strings. One commissioner described it as very a moving occasion.

Monday morning began with the celebration of Holy Communion, always a special experience. The Assembly then called for the report of the Special Commission on Structure and Change. This Commission was established two years ago following a petition presented by the Very Rev Dr John Cairns, to identify the effect of recent changes to the Church structure, the holding of funds, its constituent character and the powers of its courts and Councils. The Commission's report was presented by its Convener, Lord Brodie, a High Court judge, son of a former Moderator. Dealing first with the structure, the Convener said that the Commission had come to the conclusion that the place in most need of change is the Presbytery. This matter had been started in 2004 but the proposals made then did not find support in the Church at large. They now propose that this be looked at again.

Also they feel that the Assembly and the Council of Assembly require different sets of secretarial skills and that the post of Principal Clerk – managing the Assembly

and the administration of the Church – and that of Secretary of the Council – managing change in the church – should therefore be separated. Turning to finance they believe that a congregation should be permitted to retain all money raised locally over and above their assessment for the central Church. Currently about 59% of extra money raised locally also goes to the central Church.

Moving on to the matter of the third article of the Articles Declaratory, the Commission decided that it needed to be looked at. The Articles Declaratory are effectively the constitution of the Church. The third article makes an assumption that the Church is speaking for the people of Scotland, rather than to them. It assumes that the people of Scotland are all Christian.

In the debate that followed, Dr Cairns made a plea to the Assembly to receive the report with genuine objectivity and balance and not come to it with personal agendas. However, the next speaker was the Rev David Clark, a vice-convener of the Ministries Council, who declared that the report was in many of its assumptions and results wrong. Another Commissioner said that the Church of Scotland was more Congregational than Presbyterian, protective of the local area. He said the central Church was a regulator of the church's work. Another speaker said that the central Church was growing more powerful and the Presbyteries were being emasculated. He was supportive of the instruction to the Panel on Review and Reform to look again at the presbytery structure including size, devolved powers, staffing and an appropriate budget.

The Convener of the Council of Assembly moved a countermotion to the sections of the Deliverance which instructed the Council of Assembly to separate the roles of Principle Clerk and Secretary to the Council. However, she said that the proposal would cost more money than is presently available. She went on to say that her countermotion was not brought because the Council disagreed with what was proposed, but because it believed that the Special Commission had not done enough research among our sister churches to come to the present conclusion. When the Assembly voted on the matter by standing the Moderator was unable to decide which motion had succeeded and the commissioners moved to the first electronic vote of the Assembly. The Special Commission's motion was agreed by 287 to 224. The two roles will be separated.

We will back with a further report this evening. Join us then.