

2008 General Assembly

of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #7

Rev Douglas Aitken

Monday 19th May 2008, 9.00pm

The Monday afternoon session of the Assembly began with an Order of the Day - the presentation of staff appointed and staff leaving the employment of the Church. Then the Assembly received ministers newly inducted to their first charge, and ministers who are retiring.

The Assembly then returned to the report of the Special Commission on Structure and Change. The Convener of the Stewardship and Finance Committee moved a counter-motion to the item in the Commission's report which was aimed at enabling local congregations to have funding to fulfil its mission in the local area. One commissioner said that the current allocation system stifles the work of the local church. The minister of a wealthy Edinburgh congregation asked the Assembly to reject the counter-motion because he wants the freedom to be able to excite his congregation about projects and causes beyond the allocation. He said there is no way he could excite his congregation to give to a common pot from which a central committee will decide to what cause it should go.

On the vote being taken, the counter-motion fell.

The Assembly then moved on to another motion with amendments and a counter-motion. It refers to the third article declaratory – part of the constitution of the Church. Dr. John McPake wished the Commission's motion to include an ecumenical dimension, and therefore should include article seven as well. Martin Johnston wished in the Commission's motion and the coming counter-motion that the voices of the most vulnerable and poorest in the land should be heard. Dr McPake's motion failed and Mr Johnston's was accepted by the Convener.

The Commission proposed another Special Commission of nine persons to consider the third article declaratory and its relationship to parish staffing policy and Presbytery Plans and the financing of the Church's work and to make recommendations regarding the article and report in two years time. The Rev David Cameron moved a counter-motion opposing this. Again the vote by standing seemed

too close to call and the Assembly moved to an electronic vote. The Commission's motion carried by 308 votes to 242. The Assembly then thanked the Special Commission and discharged it.

The Report of the Housing and Loan Trustees was presented by the Convener, Mr Kenneth McVicar. At the last Assembly, he had said that the Trustees would wish for a cooling down of the house price increases. He raised a smile by saying that little did he imagine the effect that his words in the Assembly would have on the Bank of England, the Government and the whole banking industry. The trustees have on their books 377 ministers, widows and widowers who either have loans towards house purchase, or are tenants. There are 74 more ministers due to retire over the next five years who have been promised help from the trustees. There is one concern. Presently, those who are tenants are not taxed on their accommodation as income; but those who are helped to purchase a house will now be liable for tax. The Trustees are working to persuade the government to make their borrowers similarly exempt of tax as their tenants.

Mr McVicar said that, when the Prime Minister was in the Assembly on Saturday, the Principal Clerk handed him a copy of the Supplementary Report, which refers to the issue of the tax. The Prime Minister said that he would look at it on the flight back to London.

Mr McVicar retires as chairman after being a trustee for 32 years and chairman for 25 years. In that time he has attended 123 of the 125 meetings that have been held. The Assembly responded with a generous round of applause.

In presenting the report of the Pension Scheme Trustees, the Vice Convener made only one important point, namely that the fund is in a good state and the funding levels are 90% and they hope to have the funding at 100% in the near future.

The Report of the Ministries Council was presented by the Rev Graham Finch, the Convener. He began by celebrating the 40th anniversary of the parish ministry being open to women on the same conditions as men.

The Assembly heard an interview with the Rev Margaret Forrester who was ordained to the ministry in 1974 and the Rev Joanne Hood, who was ordained in 2003.

The Assembly moved on to the next section of the report which concerns the plan for church planting. The Council wants to make a major review over three years of the ways in which we recruit, assess and train ministers.

At this point, the Assembly broke for an hour in order to give the commissioners the opportunity for some refreshment before returning for a further session. A rather depleted Assembly passed without comment a section on tenure for ministers. On the section on a Code of Professional Practice and Good Conduct, one commissioner moved the deletion of the word “professional” because the minister is a servant of Jesus Christ and not a professional. The Assembly did not agree.

It then considered a section on the issue of congregational conflict and passed it with little debate. It instructs the courts and boards of the Church to study the report and reflect on their own procedures.

Moving on to the question of seminary training for ministers: in this connection, the International Christian College in Glasgow is not at this time recommended as a suitable college. The stumbling block is the Statement of Faith which members of staff are required to sign before they can be appointed, since it is a statement that some ministers would find difficult to sign. In answer to a question the Convener said that the Council voted 16 to 15 against accrediting the International Christian College. On the vote being taken the Moderator said that it was too close to call and the Assembly moved to another electronic vote. The Motion of the Ministries Council that the International Christian College be not accredited as a suitable place for the academic training of ministers succeeded by 166 votes to 147.

The hour being late, the Moderator asked for questions on the rest of the deliverance – another 19 sections. One commissioner, chaplain to the oil and gas industry – reminded the Assembly that the 6th July is the twentieth anniversary of the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster in the North sea when 167 off-shore workers died. He asked that those affected should be remembered in prayers on that day. Another commissioner asked that 20 years of healing ministry in the Church of Scotland be recognised. The Convener was not prepared to accept the motion. Neither was the Assembly.

At the very end of the debate, there was some concern about the inspection of ministers’ log books. The requirement has come down from the Church’s Internal Audit Committee and the Solicitor of the Church advised that the requirement was part of the expectation of charities by the Charities Regulator. The General Treasurer said that ministers’ expenses amount to between £2 and £3 million a year. A counter-motion on the issue fell.

At the end of a very long day the Assembly adjourned at 8.35 pm to meet again on Tuesday at 9.30 am. We hope to be here and our next report is after the morning session on Tuesday.