

2008 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #5

Rev Douglas Aitken

Saturday 17th May 2008, Noon

Saturday morning at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland began as always with worship, in which some children from the Children's Assembly took an important part.

The business of the Morning began with the report of the Mission and Discipleship Council, presented by Dr. Angus Morrison. He outlined the way in which the Council fulfils its remit. It is done by a number Task Groups and Committees. There is the Netherbow Storytelling Centre, providing a presence and a window for the Church; there is the Mission Forum, to keep before the central administration of the Church the priority of mission; there is the Rural Strategy Team, committed to supporting rural Churches; and there is the important "Why Believe?" Group, which includes members from ecumenical partner churches and seeks to help Christians engage in debate and discussion of the Christian Faith in the marketplace. He showed to the Assembly a copy of the full up-to-date range of resources available to congregations and Presbyteries.

The Convener then spoke of the work of the eight Regional Development Officers based in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth and Inverness who have been appointed to serve the congregations in their area. He went on to read the vision statement of the Church: "to be a Church which seeks to inspire the people of Scotland and beyond with the Good News of Jesus Christ through enthusiastic, worshipping, witnessing and serving communities."

He went on to speak of the publication launched jointly by his Council and the Panel on Review and Reform – "Future Focus – a way forward for congregations". It is yet another resource for a church in a process of change and development.

Another issue dealt with by the Council in conjunction with the Council of Assembly is the use of Gaelic for worship and its development, because it is described as a precious part of the Scots national heritage. In fact interest in the Gaelic tongue is growing significantly. During the debate that followed the report, a new section to

the deliverance was proposed suggesting that while it is right to promote Gaelic, the Council should also support the Scots tongue which, it was argued, is a separate language in its own right. The motion failed, though the Convener did say that the Council produces Scots-language resources.

Returning to the Convener's speech, he told of the work of the Mission and Evangelism Task Group, which as part of its remit has developed a keen interest in the area of new models and fresh expressions of Church, and the Council has appointed the Rev David Currie – a specialist practitioner in this area.

The highlight of the year for the Education and Nurture Task Group was the National Children's Assembly, which gathered 120 children over a weekend, 20 of whom are present in the Assembly as Ambassadors. The Assembly saw a five minute video from the Children's Assembly, which ended with the prayer: "may we remember how precious children are".

There has also been an opportunity for work with the 25+ age group with the "25+ Network" – a place of faith-sharing and learning over a weekend.

At this point in the debate, the Assembly broke from its business to hear the Right Honourable Gordon Brown, Prime Minister, who is a guest of the Lord High Commissioner. Twenty years after Margaret Thatcher delivered what came to be known as "The Sermon on the Mound", Gordon Brown was the first Labour Prime Minister to address the General Assembly. He spoke of the contribution the Church has made, both to himself, as a son of a Minister, and to the world.

He described the Church as respectful of all but deferential of none. He said that he believed that Britain was a fair society, but it could be fairer. He is committed to enabling every person, young and old, to achieve the best their talents can permit. He asked how in a world with so much injustice we can find common ground. He affirmed that, contrary to received wisdom, the greatest arsenal of power today is not nuclear or biological or chemical but people – the discovery of our capacity to come together across borders and oceans and to stand together as one.

He believes that the union of the information revolution and the human urge to cooperate for justice makes possible for the first time in history something we have only dreamt about: the creation of not just a global society but a moral universe working for change. He concluded his address with the words: Our task now is extraordinarily complex and yet very simple: together we must make this world a better home, not just for some but for all.

In his reply to the Prime Minister, the Moderator said that the Assembly is glad that he shares our belief in a better world for all and, while confirming the right of freedom of speech, the Assembly would distance itself from the personal and sometimes distasteful comments on Government in recent times. He said they were “unworthy of our political process”. He congratulated the Prime minister in his stand for justice and the removal of poverty despite some vested interests, and he assured him that he is constantly in our prayers.

Returning to the business, the Moderator invited the Children ambassadors to lead the Assembly in a song. And then a number of children then put questions to the Vice Convener of the Council, the Rev Jock Stein. The first question was asking for young people to be involved in discussions about children’s work; another asked for ministers in Church when talking to children could they speak in words they understand. Could adults please listen to children? In a whole variety of questions the Assembly did just that – listened to the children.

The debate thereafter concentrated on the provision of resources for work with children and young people and the training of the eldership.

The Morning Session ended with the report of the Church Hymnary Trustees. The most important item was that it has proved impossible to produce a CD-ROM with words and music that is fully cleared for copyright.

This afternoon the Commissioners are invited to the Lord High Commissioner’s Garden Party in the hope that the gentle rain outside will cease and some, if not all, will return this evening for the Youth Night. So we will return after the morning session on Monday. Join us then.