

2008 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #8

Rev Douglas Aitken

Tuesday 20th May 2008, noon

After opening worship, Tuesday at the General Assembly began with the report of the Committee on Chaplains to Her Majesty's Forces. As always for this report, a large number of chaplains had been flown in for the occasion. The report was presented by the Convener, who said that the major problem for the Committee is recruitment. There are new chaplains in the Royal Naval Reserve and three chaplains for the Army, but, sadly, none for the Royal Air Force. He said that the Committee would continue to try to persuade ministers to serve in the armed forces.

He invited a senior chaplain, the Rev Angus MacLeod, to address the Assembly. He told of ten chaplains from a variety of denominations that were brought together to train before deployment in Southern Iraq. He spoke seriously about the situations which faced these chaplains – death and wounds and the shock that soldiers suffer. One chaplain put it – “I have never felt so useless and so used”. Colonel Macleod went on: “there is nothing remarkable about chaplains – they are just as talented and just as flawed as the next man”.

The Convener resumed and told of Colonel MacLeod's own experience. At the start of his tour the vehicle in which he was travelling was hit by a rocket. Fortunately, he and the others in the vehicle all survived but were under heavy fire. He therefore himself represents something of what chaplains can expect to experience alongside the fighting forces. Indeed, Angus MacLeod was wearing the insignia of having been Mentioned in Despatches.

In the debate that followed, one commissioner said that her son had recently returned from Helmand province in Afghanistan and he had spoken very highly of the chaplains there. However, since her son was one of only eleven territorials returning home no service or parade of welcome and thanks had been planned for them. She asked whether there would be such an occasion in the future. The Convener replied

that none was planned at present, but one might be in the future. A whole raft of former chaplains rose to commend service as chaplains to the forces.

At the close of the debate Air Marshall Iain MacNicol was invited to address the Assembly. He spoke somewhat critically of the stress placed on forces through lack of numbers and funding, and in that context he praised the role of chaplains both in places of conflict and at home. The Moderator thanked the Chaplains present.

The Assembly then moved to the Report of the Church and Society Council presented by the Convener, Morag Mylne. She said that, over recent years, she had heard a lot about the Church's perceived loss of status in society. She said that a lot of time is wasted wondering why no-one listens any more. And there is a lot of blaming – the Government or the media, for example, “because they do not understand any more”. She referred to the publication of the records of the old Scottish Parliament from 1235 to 1707. In them they were complaining about fuel shortages, public drunkenness, the level of taxation and politician's allowances. Things change, she said, but maybe not as much as we think. The power of the Church does not come from status or public regard but when the Church speaks of what it knows and when it speaks of, and in the manner of, Christ. To be Church in and with society, we have to serve God and to be with Christ – in poverty and in deprivation – understanding and fighting injustice – being with the unpopular and the unseen.

The report deals with Iran, embryology research, the death penalty, climate change – and all spoken from biblical bases.

The Assembly passed sections of the deliverance on engaging with politics and Government with the addition of a motion welcoming the BBC's commitment to the Gaelic tongue. Then the Assembly moved on to deal with two sections on Education and the needs of young people, to which there was added a motion congratulating the Boys' Brigade on its 125 years of service. On the section encouraging Presbyteries to engage with climate change, a new minister asked whether the Assembly itself was engaging with climate change and with its own carbon footprint – for example, is the book of reports printed on recycled paper? One of those responsible for publishing it said it was not recycled paper but that all paper used in the church was from sustainable sources, as far as possible.

The Assembly then passed a series of sections on Transport and Energy, including one challenging Church members to exercise environmental responsibility in their lifestyle and travel choices.

Commissioners moved to affirm their belief that capital punishment is always and wholly unacceptable. One commissioner asked that the Church should face up to the fact that the problem lies in relationships. The Assembly then passed a section which said that gambling is not the way to pursue regeneration. It urged the Government to halt any increase in opportunities for gambling – especially on the internet. A commissioner wanted to add a motion deploring the possibility of more casinos and their addictiveness. It was passed.

The Director of Simpson House, the Church's drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre in Edinburgh, made a plea that the problem of drug and alcohol addiction should not be forgotten in the concern for gambling.

The Assembly then broke for lunch and we will be back with another report at the end of the afternoon session. Join us then.