

2008 General Assembly *of the Church of Scotland*



Assembly Update Transcript #9

Rev Douglas Aitken

Tuesday 20th May 2008, 5.00pm

After lunch, the Assembly returned to the report of the Church and Society Council and to an order of the day when the children from the two schools, from Edinburgh and East Kilbride, who won the new Stevenson Prize for religious education were presented with their prizes. The Moderator in his words of congratulation revealed that the chaplain to both schools was coincidentally the Rev John McPake – not the same man, but cousins!

The Assembly then moved to the consideration of the remainder of the deliverance. On euthanasia, a commissioner asked how it was possible for the Church to oppose the artificial ending of life and not oppose abortion. The Convener said that the two issues were of a different nature but that both were worthy of more serious examination.

The next section was under the title Housing and Homelessness. The first section under that title gave thanks for the work of Scottish Churches Housing Action. The Moderator at this point invited Mr Alistair Cameron, the Chief Executive of the group, to speak. Mr Cameron said that his organisation was supported by 13 denominations. He said that there is a requirement for 10,000 new affordable houses for rent each year and they are pressing for that commitment from Government. He also wished that when the Church had no longer use for buildings, consideration should be given to the possibility of converting them to affordable housing. One commissioner asked whether the Church is doing enough to meet the problem of homelessness. He said that building 10,000 new homes each year only provided roofs; what is also needed is the care of the homeless as people. Another commissioner said that when in her parish the glebe was re-zoned for housing, the congregation said that they would agree on condition that among the housing there should be affordable housing. The General Trustee, she said, refused on the grounds that they had to sell to the highest bidder.

The Very Rev Dr Andrew McLellan, in his present occupation as Chief Inspector of Prisons, told the Assembly that a prisoner released into homelessness is almost guaranteed to return to crime. There is no guarantee that a prisoner released into a home situation won't return to crime, but he is statistically up to three times less likely to do so.

Moving to the section on Peace, Europe and International Affairs, a commissioner successfully moved an addition to the section encouraging church members to study the report on Iran, and to encourage fellowship with Iranian congregations in Scotland. The Convener announced that two visitors from the Iranian Embassy in London were in the visitors' gallery. A motion on the paper urged the Government to make credible its opposition to any Iranian moves towards the manufacture of nuclear weapons by removing those held in and by the United Kingdom. One commissioner wanted to separate the question of Iran's nuclear ambitions from any proposal for unilateral nuclear disarmament. The Very Rev Dr Alan McDonald rose to declare the hypocrisy of holding nuclear weapons while requiring others not to have them. He concluded that nuclear weapons are always wrong, in Britain and in Iran. One commissioner said that he would not wish to leave his country defenceless; another rebuked him – what about the nations who do not have nuclear weapons, he asked. Are they defenceless?

On the section of the deliverance calling on the Government to recognise the Armenian genocide of 1915, the Rev Alison McDonald spoke of spending time with Armenians on an exchange of choirs, and she said that relations were very good but underlying everything there was the pain of lack of recognition of the genocide. The Very Rev Sheilagh Kesting supported the recognition from her own experience of Armenian feelings. In the final section of the international relations part of the deliverance, the Council wished to recognise the bravery and sacrifice of those who work to rid Burma of the military dictatorship, to deplore the action of the dictatorship to restrict the access of aid workers to relieve those suffering from the recent cyclone and to encourage church members to agitate, protest and pray for the return of democracy and the reform of national life in that country.

The Convener, Morag Mylne retires at this Assembly and the Moderator offered the thanks of the Assembly and the Church for her eleven years on the Committee and the Council, the last four as Convener.

The Assembly turned to the consideration of the Report of the Legal Questions Committee. The main issues brought to the Assembly were an act on the Discipline of Ministers, Licentiates, Graduate Candidates and Deacons, the use of arbitration

on the use of buildings – the Committee are considering this matter, but it is suggested that Presbyteries should make the decisions. Several other issues were in connection with the legal requirements of the Charities Regulator regarding the naming of congregations, and the presentation of accounts. The Committee requires congregations to ensure that their constitutions comply with the requirements of civil law and urge them, if they have not already done so, to consider adopting one of the standard constitutions, known as the Model or Unitary Constitutions.

At the conclusion of this report, the Assembly adjourned until 9.30 on Wednesday Morning. We will be here and our final report will be after the morning session. Join us then.