

# 2008 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland



## Assembly Update Transcript #10

*Rev Douglas Aitken*

Wednesday 21st May 2008, noon

Before the business of the day, the Rev Graham Finch, Convener of the Ministries Council addressed the Assembly. He said that during the debate on the accreditation of the International Christian College, a commissioner made a statement that students were marked down if they did not accord with the theological opinion of the staff. This has caused some hurt and concern in the staff of the ICC. The Convener said that this was not the view of the Ministries Council and he had gone out of his way in speaking to the issue to underline that the Council had no concern about the academic integrity of the staff. He repeated and underlined that the sole problem between the Council and the College was the requirement of the staff to sign a Statement of Faith.

He was followed by a commissioner who regretted that the Boys' Brigade could not provide a guard of honour for the Lord High Commissioner because they could not have boys off school midweek at this time. He asked the Assembly Arrangements Committee to consider that in their deliberations for next year's Assembly. He went on to ask ministers and elders to help find officers for leading Companies of the Brigade.

Another commissioner said that a commissioner had told the Scotsman newspaper that the Assembly has been dull. He wished to oppose that opinion, saying that he and his Elder had been moved and challenged by the deliberations of the Assembly and by the worship led by the Moderator.

The Assembly then moved to the first business of the day, the report of the General Trustees. The first issue the Convener raised was the complexity of arranging the Accounts and Property under the new charity law as prescribed by the Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator or OSCR for short. The Trustees, with the auditors and OSCR have reached a basis of reasonable estimate which, presumably, is acceptable by OSCR. The Trustees hope to have all buildings estimated not later than 2010.

He went on to appeal for any civil or structural engineers with expertise in architecture, land management and so on who might be prepared to assist the trustees.

A major issue concerning the Trustees is the insurance or inadequate insurance of ecclesiastical buildings. He said that the responsibility for the care, maintenance and adequate insurance lies with the local office-bearers. Revaluation of properties for insurance purposes are required at least every ten years and congregations not having had a valuation within the last five years should have one done by July 1, 2009. He went on to say that there has been a rise in the theft of lead and copper from church roofs owing to the increased price of lead and copper. He suggested that congregations contemplating roof works should take advice on alternatives to roofing materials.

There followed a wide-ranging debate, largely on local issues. One commissioner said that the Property Committee in his church consisted of a joiner, a plumber, an electrician and a handyman. Two of them had served for 50 and 40 years, the others less. He said the Assembly should recognise such service, without which his congregation could not survive. Another questioner spoke of her church's wish to pass a

redundant property to a Housing Association for conversion to affordable housing. The General Trustees cannot under their present constitution allow that but must sell to the highest bidder. Is there any way, she asked, that the regulations restricting the Trustees could be more flexible?

On the deliverance one commissioner welcomed proposals with regard to financial assistance for renewable energy projects in ecclesiastical properties. Another raised the issue of the cost of insurance particularly for rural parishes. He moved a motion inviting the General Trustees to consider whether in every case it is necessary to insure for complete reinstatement. Seconding the motion a minister of two rural churches said that their insurance bill this year is £1,900, but after revaluation the bill next year will be in excess of £4,000. That is more than 18% of their total income. The Convener opposed the motion and on the vote the motion was defeated.

The Assembly moved to the report of the HIV/AIDS Committee. The Convener, Dr Robin Hill, said that he would like the Assembly to see for itself the work done. The Church has given £84,000 to the work this past year. He invited a visitor with HIV to describe his own experience. When his infection was confirmed in 1995 he had a life expectancy of 5 years. He has spent his time on HIV/AIDS research and the

church ministry, coming to the U.K. to work with INERELA PLUS, an HIV/AIDS organisation. The Assembly watched a video interview with a minister in St Andrews Presbytery tell of the sponsored cycle ride last June raising some £6,000 in which the whole community were involved with medical staff giving advice and others giving support. And, since whole families were involved the presence of children removed any sign of the stigma.

Before moving to the debate, the Assembly listened to a tribute to the Rev. Nigel Ponde, the project's first director, who died at the beginning of this month. Three delegates from Malawi wished to commend the Church of Scotland for its work on HIV/AIDS in care, education and prevention. A delegate from South Africa said that the incidence in the infection was increasing by 1,500 deaths every day and that the Church of Scotland's support in Zambia and Zimbabwe is important.

The Central Services Council report followed. It has agreed that the Church should work towards becoming "Investors in People", a widely-recognised standard of good practice for organisations.

In presenting the Nomination Committee report, the Convener told the Assembly that not enough suggestions of names from congregations and Presbytery are being put forward for committees. He reminded those elected that under the new regulations they are Charity Trustees of the work of the Council or Committee. The Selection Committee followed which proposed names for a Special Commission established by the Assembly to consider the relationship between Article Three of the Articles Declaratory and Presbytery Plans, staffing and finance and its relevance in the current Church.

The business ended at 10 past 1 with the closing session of the Assembly due to begin at 3.30. We, however, do not return until next year, so it's goodbye from Edinburgh and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.