

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

by Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

1. Saturday 18 May: morning

Welcome to Edinburgh and the 2019 meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

This year, more than most, change is in the air. At last year's Assembly, commissioners called emphatically for the Church to be more radical in its planning for the future. So radical plans is what this year's commissioners will be asked to consider – from the Assembly Council, from the report of a Special Commission, and from many others who will insist that the Christian way is one of mission, of being present in the local setting, and of following Jesus.

However, the first morning began as it always does – continuity and change hand in hand. Former moderators gathered at the front of the Assembly Hall, facing not only this year's commissioners but, for this opening session only, representatives of local authorities from right across Scotland. Outside, under the gaze of John Knox, trumpets sounded in the New College quad, the Assembly gong sounded, and we began – smooth and orderly.

The outgoing Moderator, the Right Revd Susan Brown, handed over the moderatorial cross and ring to the Revd Colin Sinclair, minister for Palmerston Place Church in Edinburgh and Chair of the International Council at Scripture Union, with which he has had a long association. Ms Brown would go on to reflect on her year in office, but first the Queen's Commission to her Lord High Commissioner was read and His Grace Richard Scott, the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry, was welcomed for a second year in this role.

He picked up on the theme of continuity, tradition and change spanning the centuries: noting the Royal Company of Archers, the Queen's Bodyguard for Scotland, present outside in recognition of the importance of the occasion; and describing a photograph of John Buchan, Lord High Commissioner in 1935, showing his approach to the Assembly Hall in an open horse drawn landau, past crowds three or four deep in Princes Street – at a time when the Assembly lasted for two full weeks.

Speaking of his own upbringing in the Scottish Borders as an Episcopalian, he recalled that both his and his wife's families "had a particularly tricky 16th century" – they alternatively "murdered and married", he said. Recently, his Grace had walked the 60 mile St Cuthbert's Way through the Borders from Melrose to Lindisfarne, Holy Island, where Cuthbert became prior of the monastic community established there. It was, he said, a "hidden way", where earlier saints had explored ideas, and contemplated about "disagreeing better". He pointed to Cuthbert and St Paul as models to remember

when commissioners enter into heart-searching and serious debate – perhaps quite angry disagreement – and he wished for “wisdom” and “*careful* consideration” of hard matters.

‘Walking’ was the theme that the Revd Susan Brown (now “Brown 845”) had taken as her theme during her moderatorial year – a year that took her from the most northernmost regions of the British Isles to Uruguay, and to many islands and regions in between. As it happened, the Lord High Commissioner had bumped into her at the Premier Inn in Corby.

Walking, as Ms Brown said, is good for you physically, mentally and spiritually; and it’s good for the environment. Each of these areas of reflection threaded through her year of office. She had walked up the Mound in Edinburgh last year to mark 50 years since the ordination of women to word and sacrament, and alongside Christian and Muslim women in Glasgow. She had walked with Aradhana, “an amazing lady” in the Church of North India, into the slums of Nagpur to work with Dalit women – “the lowest of the low”; but she said she had perceived equally unsettling poverty in 21st century Scotland, and the hardship resulting from changes to the benefit system and delays in payments to universal credit claimants.

She discovered mental health to be a huge area for discussion right across the country, and a rise in anxiety and depression among teens and young people; and concern about “the social isolation our young people feel in an age when communication has never been easier. . . but where clicks and likes are in greater supply than hugs or face to face encounters.” People talked to her about about the worrying rise in suicide – especially among men; and about living with dementia. (How, she asked, do we “adapt the things we do, including worship, to make sure all are included?”)

Ms Brown, small in stature, huge in heart, demonstrated her humour – a photo from a visit to the naval bases in Scotland showing her in a “one-size-fits-no-one” rescue suit: and she concluded with her passion – passion for the plight of asylum seekers, including a Pakistani family which has been living in Scotland for seven years – the father, Maqsood, is a commissioner to this Assembly. At home, in Pakistan, Christians are under threat, but the family has not been granted permission to stay permanently. Compassion is required, she said, concluding: “God’s heart is big enough to hold everyone. Ours needs to be too.”

Following a half hour break, commissioners welcomed delegates from other churches and visitors from overseas. The Revd Nigel Uden, Moderator of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, spoke about the necessity of grasping “the Kairos moment” – a moment for decision or action that demands not that we be in *control* but in *counsel*. The Revd Ini Ukpuho, national Director of Ecumenism and Inter-Faith Relations for the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, spoke of heightened

levels of persecution and attacks on Christians around the world. He instanced one 16-year-old girl, Leah Sharibu, who has been held captive by Boko Haram for 453 days for refusing to renounce her faith in Jesus Christ.

Then commissioners got down to business, first by receiving the report of the Assembly Arrangements Committee. The convener, the Revd Fiona Smith, quoted the words of an elder commissioner to the Assembly of 1915, which she'd come across in the archives of Ness Bank Church where she is the minister. He wrote of "a democratic body, impatient of anything which interferes with its liberty of expression". His words, written 104 years ago, were still pertinent, said Ms Smith. However, "that does not mean that the ways in which the General Assembly works cannot change", and the committee is asking the Assembly for an instruction to work with the Legal Questions Committee to bring proposals to next year's Assembly which will lead to a reduction in the membership of the Assembly. At the same time, the committee is proposing that the current business Committee of 40 be reduced to a much smaller group of seven, to effectively oversee the committee's functions.

The convener spoke of the Heart & Soul event, which will take place tomorrow in Edinburgh's Princes Street Gardens. The shape, form and costs of the event continue to be under review, but it is regarded as offering a unique setting "where creativity can grow, collaborative working can be nurtured, the life and work of the Church showcased, and fellowship can be enjoyed". This despite what the convener later described as "an astonishingly small budget".

Turning to questions, five years as a goal for moving to a paperless Assembly seemed rather unambitious to one commissioner – but not to the convener. Moving to the deliverance, there was discussion about how much time commissioners should have between receiving their commission and the Assembly in order to book travel and accommodation – the committee wants them to have more, which means an earlier cut-off for appointing them.

The convener said that reasons for looking at a reduction in the size of the Assembly is not just about costs or even numbers; it's about asking how the Assembly functions, ensuring that what it does is fit for purpose in 15 to 20 years' time. In answer to another question, she confirmed that the task is about "equitable representation", ensuring for example that rural and small presbyteries won't lose out.

On behalf of the Scottish Bible Society, CEO Elaine Duncan spoke about the organisation's work of reducing what she called "Bible poverty". Following last year's Assembly, she had visited Cuba where one million Bibles had been distributed, reaching ten per cent of the population, and where Cubans are now starting to distribute their second 'million'. She asked for prayer for Christian leaders in China

who have to negotiate respect for their government and walking with integrity in their calling as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, in Scotland the Bible in illustrated formats is being used in after-school clubs to help children with literacy, as well as sharing biblical stories.

Finally, before presenting the Moderator with two Bibles for use in his moderatorial year, one in Gaelic, Ms Duncan asked commissioners to “dream a dream with me”. Imagine, she said, that on 1 January 2020, day dawns in New Zealand and the bible is read aloud in that country – and as the day unfolds in every country across the world, the same Bible passage is read in the native language of every nation – a worldwide “Mexican wave” of bible reading she called it. And imagine, she added, that this phenomenon takes place every day in the year 2020.

That is the vision of Bible 2020, and the Scottish Bible Society is helping to develop a reading plan for use on smart phones. She challenged commissioners to think of where they might read the Bible aloud each day in 2020, maybe in their home, maybe in their office – because, she concluded, the Bible is “a text for the world”.

Wrapping up the morning session with a few procedural items of business, commissioners then broke for lunch – to return at 2, o’clock to consider reports from the Legal Questions Committee and the Council of Assembly. We will be back to report what happens.