

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

11. Friday 24 May: morning (final)

Following a blockbuster session yesterday, today's timetable had a more slimline look about it. But time would tell. . .

Following worship, during which the *ad hoc* Assembly choir was on particularly joyful, jazz-inspired form, commissioners turned to business. This included receiving a new motion that ensures all business and decisions agreed this week will now be taken up by the new groupings and bodies that the Assembly has created.

The Business convenor paid tribute to the 225 Assembly stewards who between them have completed 790 shifts this week, and she also noted some individuals who have given long service to the Assembly over many years, from Assembly officers to cloakroom attendants and camera operators.

It is the **Nominations Committee** that gathers names of those willing to serve on the councils and committees of the Church. The convenor, Ms Lynsey Kimmitt, encouraged commissioners to make members within their congregations aware of this opportunity to serve the Church. Although the Nominations Committee itself has a diverse make-up, even so it relies on nominations being brought by the wider Church in order to pursue greater representation and diversity across the Church's different bodies.

The Very Revd Dr Russell Barr, convenor of the **Selection Committee**, brought nominations for four groups that the Assembly had required to be appointed: eight people to serve on the new Assembly Business Committee (drawn from the current Assembly Arrangements Committee); a committee to nominate the next Moderator; a Special Commission to discuss the effectiveness of Presbyterian Church Government for present-day needs; and 12 people to become the new Assembly Trustees of the Church of Scotland – the convenor to be the Very Revd Dr John Chalmers, a former Principal Clerk and Moderator. Dr Barr said that priorities for choosing this group were relevant skills and a deep knowledge of the Church of Scotland's life, culture, present structures and relationships. An educated guess by the Selection Committee was that four of the twelve are aged under 40. Three of the proposed group were women.

In questions, there were some concerns about possible conflicts of interest and gender balance on the group. Dr Alison Elliot said it is well established that a gender-balanced committee makes for better decisions. She brought an amendment urging (not instructing) the Nominations Committee of 2020 to

ensure that the membership of the Trustees would achieve an equal balance of women and men. After some detailed discussion about aims and processes, and the need also to achieve a balance of skills, the amendment was put to an electronic vote and it fell.

The Revd Graeme Glover expressed concerns about the influence of “the establishment” on appointments – and the risks that come with being given power. Dr Barr noted his concerns. In thanking Dr Barr for his work, the Moderator reiterated a mantra from the week – “trust the trustees”.

Next, Dr Karen Campbell, convenor the **Safeguarding Committee**, presented its Report to the Assembly. The Committee works to ensure that everyone who comes within the Church’s care is free from the risk of harm and abuse. Dr Campbell said her committee had undertaken two rigorous reviews focusing on correct governance.

The first looked at how the Church’s safeguarding policies and procedures are working across the whole Church, from congregational to national level. The second was a result of the scandal surrounding the behaviour of some Oxfam workers overseas and aimed to make sure Church of Scotland staff operating abroad are safely recruited.

Dr Campbell urged everyone to take “a proportionate response” to this issue. Someone’s *role* in the Church, rather than their title, was the important thing, she said. Checks should therefore be carried out on anyone in a position of trust who has contact with children or vulnerable people, regardless of their job title. An online register of people undertaking such work will now be kept, she added.

Dr Campbell urged anyone who had questions about the new practices to phone the Safeguarding Service, where they would find help.

Mr David Alexander put forward a motion instructing the Committee to consult with the Ministries Council about the requirement for Interim Moderators to have PVG clearance, and explore whether this should really be necessary.

Dr Campbell explained that such checks on Interim Moderators and Locums were necessary because they worked just one step away from colleagues who were close to vulnerable people, and at times may need to step into their shoes.

A discussion followed about exactly what PVG clearance and Basic Disclosure Checks entail, and how much they cost. The Moderator then thanked Dr Campbell for her “hugely effective” work in protecting vulnerable people from the risk of harm and abuse. She now steps down from her post.

The **Iona Community Board** is not responsible for the running of the Iona Community. It provides a link between the Community and Church bodies. Following convention, the leader of the Iona Community, the Revd Kathy Galloway, was invited to address the Assembly.

Ms Galloway said that most people encounter the Iona community first through prayer and song, but stressed that these resources have been shaped out of engagement, and not just for a historic sacred site. She said “they have been written for demonstrations and blockades, in anti-poverty and anti-racism campaigns, in industrial disputes and in prisons, for pastoral crises and situations of deep tragedy. These places are as much our holy ground as Iona is.”

Ms Galloway paid tribute to all those involved with the Wild Goose Resource Group, which publishes and shares these resources, and in particular its three resource workers: John Bell, Graham Maule and Jo Love. Their first aim is to agitate, educate, organise – and for these reasons: “because the old model is broken, because it is increasingly, and unsustainably, bound to clericalism, and because renewal comes from experiments on the periphery”. Lay people need to be encouraged, Ms Galloway said, to enable “an empowered, competent, intelligent laity”.

The **National Youth Assembly** report was now presented by the retiring Youth Moderator, Ms Tamsin Dingwall.

The National Youth Assembly (NYA) was re-established in 1994, evolving over the years. Last year, 80 delegates gathered at Gartmore House in Aberfoyle and, as the biblical writer of Ecclesiastes advises, ate, drank, and enjoyed each other’s company. “It is God’s gift.” There was work to be done too, and this year delegates focused on three topics: end of life issues, ecumenism, and social media.

Ms Dingwall said that, following the weekend, the work had continued, with groups formed to progress what had been discussed around the three themes. The End of Life theme had itself addressed a range of topics: funeral poverty, child bereavement, and life-limiting illnesses. In following this up, youth delegates have worked with others to create a “conversations in grief” resource, have engaged in social media campaigns, and launched a fundraising initiative to support Child Bereavement UK. Other delegates are sharing examples on social media of how local congregations are doing ecumenism well. And as to social media itself, in her own youth work in Callander, Ms Dingwall said she had worked with a high school group to create a “faithbook” – tools to manage and deal with social media appropriately – including having the confidence to reduce reliance on it.

Ms Dingwall said that she had started her year believing she had to be an inspiration to others; but instead she met so many others who were an inspiration to her – including, she said, Someer Bakhsh and his brother – the two Pakistani boys living in Scotland that the Very Revd Susan Brown had told

us earlier in the week are in danger of being sent back to their country, where Christians are persecuted. Ms Dingwall had worked alongside Someer and had been “amazed at his strength during this tough time of uncertainty, continuing his commitment to the Church and performing exceptionally well during his exams.”

Questions followed, expressing support for the young people, and the report concluded with one Moderator thanking another Moderator. Ms Dingwall had been a real asset the Church – said Mr Sinclair.

Turning to the final report of the morning – that of the **Mission and Discipleship Council** – the Revd Norman Smith, Convenor, said that when he was ordained it seemed that the Church was operating as it had always done – “business as usual”, but it is no longer “business as usual”. He said: “Whether we like it or not, this is our world, this is the time we find ourselves in. We don’t get to choose our time, we only get to choose what we do with it.”

He said that because people *know* it’s not business as usual, this makes them ask seriously about the nature of contemporary discipleship. To support this question – to grow discipleship – the council has run conferences and published resources. The report describes six characteristics of discipleship. They include the ideas of faith as a journey of discovery, “whole life worship”, “being a servant” and “discipling one another”. These characteristics are offered for congregations to really grapple with and explore, to pray over and live with.

The Council has looked at how best to nurture the faith of young people. The National Youth Assembly has been a gift for a generation of young people – indeed for some it has effectively been their church, the thing that sustained their faith. “Without it the Church of Scotland would be much poorer”, he said. One criticism in the past is that the number of young people who can get involved is quite limited, so new proposals include replacing an annual residential weekend for around 80 young people with a range of weekends across Scotland, some for 11-18 year olds, some for 18-30 year olds. Other issues will follow from this, including a need to think about how young people are represented at the General Assembly.

Mr Smith said the council has more to do than there are resources to do it, so prioritisation is necessary. Mr Smith warned commissioners that taking on any new work will mean that some less highly prioritised pieces of work will not be done. With that warning – and a call to mission – commissioners turned to the deliverance. A member of the Church and Society Council said that everything done under that banner is about discipleships – she wanted to encourage the Mission and Discipleship council to remember that there are different ways of doing discipleship.

The Council agreed to look at possibly introducing a new *Common Order*, the book of Church of Scotland liturgies, maybe in an online form, appropriate to new forms of church; and the council accepted a request for an online supplement to CH4 also be considered, focusing on contemporary music.

At this point, members of the cross-generational group that have been looking at arrangements to succeed the National Youth Assembly, took up positions at the front of the hall in order to respond to questions about this work.

Mr Smith assured one questioner that representation of young people at the General Assembly would continue; and, in answer to a question about costs, he said that by having more and smaller gatherings of young people, it is possible to have a greater choice of venue, which means that costs would come down.

The Revd Stewart Cutler brought a new section affirming the importance of the NYA and asking for young people to be encouraged in leadership roles. He had presented the report of the first (1994) Youth Assembly and said his life was changed by the request of that year's Moderator: "Please help us – we need you". Until the proposed new Children and Youth Committee evolves a new larger scale residential event, he said we need to fund the continuation of the NYA: a space where young people can grow in faith and from where they can continue to contribute to the life of the wider Church. He argued that the Church has continued to disinvest in its young people – "we say we want to prioritise and invest in young people, but if we're pursuing other priorities that are already chronically underfunded, then it is only empty rhetoric". He said youth work in the Church of Scotland is underfunded and under-resourced, which he called a "damning indictment".

One youth delegate said that the NYA is very much about decision-making; "don't silence us", he said. The Revd Dr Karen Fenwick said the best way to give young people a voice would be to give them a vote in this General Assembly. The Principal Clerk said the way to do that is to make them elders locally.

Winding up the debate, Mr Cutler did suggest that funding for an NYA might come from other sources, not just Church budgets. The convenor said that the need for decision-making is not being lost, but the proposal for smaller gatherings is about faith formation – "we're not trying to do things for less; we're trying to do things better". He agreed with Mr Cutler that we need to invest in our young people; but that we need to get to grips with this not just at the national level but at the local level too. How, he asked, can we involve our young people in the decision-making of our local churches?

Another commissioner brought an amendment encouraging presbyteries and groupings in local areas to develop frequent regional gatherings, such as small groups, for discipling young people. The commissioner said that more local events often feel more accessible. This was agreed, as was a request to the Legal Questions Committee to explore reducing the minimum age of eldership to 16 (though an attempt to include the Theological Forum in this work was rejected).

After thanking and discharging the Young People and the Church of Scotland Working Group, the Mission and Discipleship Council's deliverance as a whole was agreed, the Moderator taking a moment to thank *all* the youth delegates for their advocacy in Christ's name.

And so we reached the end of the morning's business. Later, commissioners will gather to bring the 2019 Assembly to a formal close. There will be thanks to ministers, deacons and church workers, new and retiring; remembrance of those who have died in the past year; and the Lord High Commissioner and this year's Moderator will reflect on the week that has passed. And perhaps they will remember, too, those words of the Convenor of the Assembly Council last Saturday, when she said, "by the end of the week, things may look very different". Just *how* different perhaps remains to be discovered as the week's words become actions.

Thank you for reading, listening and watching our podcasts. If you have any feedback about our week of updates do get in touch at lw@laurencew.org. For now, from Simon Bendle and myself, goodbye.