

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

3. Monday 20 May: morning

“Come, disciples of Christ, called from North and South, from east and West, called from all corners of the world!” . . .

. . . words spoken alongside is morning’s gathering song: “Come, o come, sisters, brothers come”. And so they did, from throughout Scotland and across the globe to open the day with a celebration of Holy Communion. Ministers, elders and delegates formed a unique gathered congregation. Even the communion silverware that glints under the camera lights is gathered, loaned for the day from parishes across Edinburgh. It’s a moving and symbolic event at several levels. As my predecessor at this microphone, the Revd Douglas Aitken, used to say: at communion, commissioners gather together as one united body before entering the divisions of debate.

Before they did, the Moderator congratulated the Principal Clerk on his appointment as one of Her Majesty’s Queen’s Chaplains; and the convenor of the Business Committee made a number of procedural announcements.

Replying to Her Majesty the Queen’s letter to this year’s Assembly, the immediate past Moderator, the Very Revd Susan Brown, said it was pleasing to hear Her Majesty has welcomed in particular the Kirk’s close partnership with the Church of England, and was aware of its work in Israel and Palestine. “These are indeed uncertain times,” the letter continued. “We hope that the Church of Scotland can continue to express the unchanging love of God to all the people of this nation.”

As the convenor, the Revd Professor David Fergusson, rose to present the report of the Special Commission, perhaps more than one commissioner recalled the words of the Council of Assembly Convenor on Saturday, who presented her own report “with some trepidation . . . aware that by the end of the week, things may look very different”.

As one might expect of a respected senior academic, former Principal of New College, and a former Vice-Principal of the University of Edinburgh, Professor Fergusson’s delivery conveyed both wide experience and gravitas. He knows very well what it means to be part of a Church that describes itself as *reformata semper reformanda*, “**reformed** and **always reforming**”. And radical reformation is what he called for.

The Special Commission was appointed last October to review the governance structure of the Church of Scotland Charity and recommend ways to make it “lean and fit for purpose to lead reform”.

Scottish Charity Number: SC011353

Professor Fergusson said this had proved to be a challenging remit, given the short time-scale the Special Commission had been given to reach its conclusions. However, he said there had been a remarkable consistency of responses from people consulted, and today's report only confirms views that have been reiterated over many years. Professor Fergusson said the report also echoes the cry for radical reform heard at last year's Assembly.

In an era of rapid change, the Assembly heard that it is no longer clear that structures which have arguably served the Church well for the best part of four centuries are able to respond with the speed and flexibility necessary to tackle today's challenges. "Continuing as we are is no longer an option for us," he said.

The Commission's task had been triggered by problems facing the Council of Assembly – specifically, its struggle to control expenditure; and set priorities and adhere to these at the General Assembly. However, there are challenges facing the whole Church at every level – national, regional and local. Many of these reflect the fact that membership of the Church has halved since the start of the century, and it is likely to halve again over the next 10 to 15 years. The Commission's task as to "kick start" radical reform.

In order to meet these challenges, Professor Fergusson said today's report proposes:

- Replacing the Council of Assembly with a new trustee body which would be better equipped to articulate a strategy for the church.
- "Slimming down" the Church's central organisation, including the General Assembly. "The General Assembly," he said, "must serve the Church and not vice versa."
- Devolving more responsibility to the regional level of the Church, which would mean fewer and larger Presbyteries – a reduction of 45 to 12 is proposed.
- Tightening financial controls, including curbing expenditure.

The new trustee body's aim will be to reduce the Church's central administration costs by between 20 and 30 per cent within one or two years – a figure described as "deliberately imprecise" because details have yet to be worked out. However, Professor Fergusson said savings of 10 per cent would be insufficient, while a higher figure of 40 per cent was considered unrealistic and potentially harmful to the Church.

The Special Commission's report also proposes creating a Chief Officer with appropriate management experience to oversee this work. And it calls for the fusion of four Councils, which often have overlapping interests, into two groups – with World Mission and the Church and Society Council

potentially merging, and the Ministries Council and Mission and Discipleship Council becoming one group. Meanwhile, CrossReach, the Kirk's social care arm, would become a more autonomous body.

A further proposal is for the Assembly Arrangements Committee to become a new, slimmer, Business Committee of the General Assembly with 12 members. He said the Special Commission's report has been seen as "hard-hitting and sometimes shocking" by some, with too much emphasis on the fiscal rather than the visionary. However, he disagreed with that assessment given the urgent need for reform. He also said the report offered a good opportunity to restructure the Church at every level and harness the talent and service of church members throughout the country.

He concluded by thanking everyone from across the Church who helped the Special Commission in its work, particularly the hard-working staff at 121 George Street. As he sat down, he received warm applause from the commissioners.

The Moderator now asked for questions. Asked to summarise why the Commission's plan is a "good trellis" on which to hang the detail of the report, the Convenor said that it deals with obvious problems that the Council of Assembly has experienced in trying to fulfil its role as charity trustees. He thinks it will enable the General Assembly to have a clearer sense of its priorities; and will work towards the elimination of debts.

The change of trustee body is only part of a wider strategy to devolve responsibility to regions and parishes – a strategy of "devolution" – "without reform of presbyteries, I doubt that we can succeed in what we're setting out to", he said. The Commission was focusing primarily on the presbyteries in Scotland, not those of England, Europe and Jerusalem – but this is an issue that will be addressed in more detail tomorrow when the Council of Assembly brings its Radical Action Plan to the Assembly.

There were questions about line management and accountability – the convener envisaged that councils would have their reports scrutinised by the trustees before presentation to the Assembly. The Revd Gordon Kennedy asked if this is the time for a robust report to be commissioned to consider the efficiency of the Presbyterian form of government for future mission. The convenor indicated this may be helpful. He also raised a laugh by recalling that in response to one suggestion that what the Church of Scotland needs is bishops, the Bishop of Chester – at that point a member of the Commission – said, "You already have too many bishops"!

In response to another commissioner's questions, the convener said that restricted funds of the Church will all be held by the new trustee body rather than the successor bodies to the councils, though the needs of the new bodies will be respected. Does the new plan have sufficient teeth, asked the same commissioner?

Shouldn't the trustees be appointed from representatives of the presbyteries, was another question? The convenor was "disinclined" to align the trustees with any particular groups in the Church such as the presbyteries. He was looking for a group of trustees that exhibited a wide range of necessary, professional skills. Trustees will be required to be members of the Church of the Scotland but whether the Chief Officer needed to be would be up to the trustees, though the convenor said he would expect the individual to be in sympathy with the aims of the organisation.

If the trustees are to scrutinise reports to the Assembly, one commissioner asked, what reassurances could the convenor give that the trustees wouldn't suppress theological or other opinions? The convenor said that the proposed constitution limits the areas in which the trustees could veto what was brought to the Assembly – their remit is specifically to do with policies, priorities and strategic objectives.

Mr Andrew Mackenzie wondered whether the initial group of trustees, to be appointed by the Assembly, should be allowed a longer period of transition and whether a longer period for implementing cost savings would be helpful. The convenor didn't want to be overly prescriptive about timescales (we "don't want to damage the core of the Church", he said), but he did impress the need for urgency and the need to move to a more regular system for appointing trustees sooner rather than later. In answer to a later question, he estimated that trustees would be required to give around 20 days of their time per year.

Regarding the relationship between the trustees and the General Assembly, a past convenor of the Assembly Arrangements Committee asked whether the will of the General Assembly would, at the end of the day, "trump" the will of the trustees, or would there always be an inevitable tension in that relationship? The Convenor said that it is the task of the *Assembly* to direct and approve the direction of the trustees; but for the disbursement of funds and other day to day issues, the Assembly needs to "trust the trustees", which may mean that there is some tension in the relationship – arguably something that is inherent in the Presbyterian system of government.

The Moderator asked the Assembly if it wished to receive the report. A former Moderator, the Very Revd Dr James Simpson, supporting the report said, "We need to build on the past but not live in the past". He described Professor Fergusson and his team as the kind of 'pioneers' that the Church needs and added that this was the kind of report for which he had waited for many years.

Following a brief tidying up of the report's wording, to incorporate amendments from the Convenor himself, the Assembly broke for lunch – to return for what will be a busy afternoon of debate and decision-making.