

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

4. Monday 20 May: afternoon

Following lunch, the Assembly returned to the report of the Special Commission. Sir Ewan Brown brought a number of proposed amendments to Appendix 1 to the report, which outlines the constitution and remit of the proposed new Charity Trustees body that would replace the Council of Assembly. The convener accepted Sir Ewan's request that the names and biographies of proposed trustees be published "at least 24 hours" before commissioners are invited to vote on their appointments; and also that the attendance record of trustees at meetings be published for the Assembly each year. Otherwise, in the debate that followed, the Assembly accepted the Commission's original viewpoints. It was underlined that ministers may be trustees because they are not employees of the Church; those who *are* employees of the Church, such as associate ministers or staff in the central offices, may not be trustees. Sir Ewan also wanted to reduce the Commission's limit on the number of trustees who may be ministers or deacons of the Church from one half to one third, but his amendment fell.

There was some concern that the desire to streamline structures and establish accountable governance might be made at the expense of the overall vision of the Church. Two commissioners brought alternative proposals for a group of experts and representatives of the wider Church with whom the trustees might consult as a kind of sounding board. The Revd Scott Rennie said that the Assembly is the place to bring imaginative scrutiny and expertise to bear on proposals developed by the trustees and councils; he said that we don't need to create more "sideways bodies" to complicate the issue. After looking at both proposals, the Assembly agreed that no such group should be established at this time.

An amendment brought by a youth delegate requiring diversity of appointees to the trustees, reflecting youth and gender, was accepted by the convener without further comment.

With the final form of the Appendix agreed, including some clarification of the continuing autonomous role of the Housing and Loan Fund, the Moderator turned to the rest of the sections of deliverance.

The need for a clear description of the role and composition of the audit committee was agreed, as was a request for more consideration and the better definition of the relationships between the Convener of the Trustees, new Chief Officer and Principal Clerk. Another commissioner felt that the

trustees would need a good deal more than the estimated 20 days per year to achieve the work being set for them.

The Revd Jane Howitt didn't want the trustees to be held to the goal of a 20 to 30 per cent reduction in the costs of the central organisation – figures which the commission itself had described as “estimated and deliberately imprecise”. She wanted new trustees to do the necessary financial analysis and come up not with an indicative reduction but a rigorously costed one. However, the convenor insisted that “the Assembly needs to give the trustees a very clear steer” – the financial situation is serious. The amendment fell.

The Revd Michael Weaver felt that the deliverance should be bolder by stating explicitly a time frame of one to two years, if possible, for the reduction of costs, and said that “we should not let time slip by”. He cited a multi-national company with millions of employees but a central office staff of just 35. Another commissioner pointed out that the Church will need the expertise of those who work in the central offices in order to carry out the reductions being proposed. Mr Weaver's amendment was accepted by the convenor, and by the commissioners.

With another amendment brought by the commission itself, the Assembly agreed to speed up the process of merging the four major councils of the Church so that this will take effect on 1 January 2020. The convenors of both the Councils of Ministry and Mission and Discipleship expressed their support for this move, and thanked the commission for its constructive, open approach in preparing its proposals. They also took the opportunity to praise generously the work of their councils' staff. This move inspired some to express later a desire that the process of reducing the number of presbyteries *also* be speeded up – this will be discussed further when the Council of Assembly presents its Radical Action Plan.

The Revd Ini Ukpho from the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria stressed the importance of focussing on spiritual and missiological reforms, not just structural reforms. “Every reform we make should not be focused on us, to be about us,” he said; “it must be about the next generation.”

A delegate from the Uniting Church in Australia urged those working on restructuring the Assembly to look at denominations like her own, where their six-day triennial assembly holds discussions in small table groups, and questions are answered in plenary sessions.

As the final sections of the deliverance were passed, on behalf of the committee that oversees the employment of staff in the central offices in Edinburgh, Mrs Anne Lamont said that change can be hard, both for those managing it and those directly affected by it, but that uncertainty can be harder. Mrs Lamont said she believed that staff at '121' would rise to the challenges and that a duty of care

would be offered to them. She asked that the commissioners keep staff at the central offices in their prayers.

The close of the debate was marked by lengthy applause. The Special Commission was thanked and discharged, the Moderator calling its work a “monumental act of service”. Thanking Professor Fergusson in particular, he added that it would be only be in the weeks and months to come that the significance of this day would sink in.

Following a very short break, the Assembly turned to the Report of the Social Care Council, which operates as CrossReach and whose predecessor body was set up by The Committee on Life and Work in 1869 – making this the 150th anniversary of structured and formal social care in the Church of Scotland. The occasion is being marked by an exhibition at St Cuthbert’s Church in Edinburgh, which everyone was encouraged to visit.

The convenor, Mr Bill Steele, began by focusing on the Council’s long tradition of looking for solutions to the social problems of the day, and he highlighted some of the important work it is currently engaged in – including art therapy for people with dementia and support for disabled children and those affected by homelessness. These are what the report describes as “missional services” delivered by the Council on behalf of the whole Church.

Mr Steele said CrossReach’s services sit alongside the incredible work being done by local churches in their communities, and he invited everyone to share information about inspirational social care initiatives on the Social Care Forum website.

A recent survey suggests CrossReach’s work has never been more highly valued. However, Mr Steele said that these are challenging times for the whole social care sector, and some of its services are struggling to break even. He said issues around funding and staffing have hit its Older People Services hardest, and work is being done to clear these hurdles and find the best way forward.

The Assembly’s attention was drawn to a report by the Fair Work Convention, an advisory body to Scottish government ministers, which highlights “both the chronic undervaluing of the social care workforce compared with their colleagues in health, and the additional strain placed on staff and service users through competitive tendering”. The convenor said CrossReach’s senior staff will continue to be involved in discussions with the Scottish Government on these and other areas of concern.

Turning to recent successes, Mr Steele said a new partnership with the Princes Trust to deliver “bespoke employability training to young people interested in working in care” is in contention for a Scottish Social Services Council award. The Bungalow in Stonehaven, home to five adults with complex

physical and learning disabilities, has been named “Specialist Care Home of the Year”. And CrossReach was recently presented with the government-accredited Customer Service Excellence Award.

While much has changed over the past 150 years, the convenor said the urgent need to address difficult social challenges has not. Some of these challenges are familiar – such as child poverty, addiction and disability. Some are very much of our time – such as cyber-bullying and the growing number of people living with dementia. He thanked everyone who had “batted in” CrossReach’s corner over the past year and helped it make a difference.

Recent fresh headlines about historic abuses at the Lord and Lady Polwarth Home in the 1970s have cast a shadow over success, but the convenor concluded: “the past 150 years of Christian service have, with very few exceptions, left an extremely positive legacy, offering hope and a better future to many”.

Asked how reliant the Social Care Council is on the Ministries and Mission Fund, the convenor said that it was especially important for the maintenance and development of counselling services in particular – so a reduction in contributions from that fund would have a dramatic effect on individuals using those services.

The fund is also used to help place staff on a living wage. He later clarified that CrossReach pays the Scottish Living Wage when it can – though there are instances where local authorities pay more. One commissioner was concerned that this might mean that staff would be trained up through CrossReach but then go to work elsewhere for better pay. The convenor said that a great many people remain working for CrossReach out of their commitment to the organisation and what it stands for.

To another commissioner, Mr Steele said that, as finances stand at the moment, the money CrossReach draws from the Church is very small. There is a real potential for churches to buy services from Social Care – “we’d be very happy to take that on”, he said. However, reassuring another commissioner, he said that the decisions of the Special Commission wouldn’t result in any service changes in Social Care.

The Very Revd Andrew McLellan, chair of the Scottish Prisons Visitor Centre steering group, praised CrossReach’s work in providing two such centres. He said he loved it when he heard people in the secular environment – politicians and visitors – praising the work of the centres which, he said, is manifestly an offering of the love of God.

Concluding the debate, the Moderator added that through the Social Care Council the Church gets its hands dirty – for which the Assembly gives thanks.

A day that began with a celebration of Holy Communion closed with a sung blessing – and the sense that, yes, perhaps today something significant had happened in the life of the Kirk. Tomorrow we will return for discussion of a Radical Action Plan and for the reports of the World Mission Council, the Church of Scotland Guild, the Safeguarding Committee and the Iona Community Board. Join us then.