

General Assembly 2019 podcasts

By Laurence Wareing with Simon Bendle

6. Tuesday 21 May: afternoon

Before lunch, and immediately following, the Revd Dr Karen Fenwick brought a counter-motion and a passionate plea that the Ministries and Mission contributions, which come from local congregations, be frozen. Contributions had increased by 23 per cent since 2015, in a period of austerity, and in the past year by nine per cent – none of her parishioners' wages or pensions had risen by that amount, yet the congregation had continued to meet its assessment. Dr Fenwick said; "We have changed from being fishers of men to being tax collectors and the biggest givers are pensioners; we're picking the pockets of our pensioners. Those who say that the Church is only after your money are right." She said we're heading towards being "bankrupt spiritually and financially". The current system dis-incentivizes congregations from mission, said one supporter, though another added that *nevertheless* there are members of congregations who have very little to give but give it still because they want to help the Church.

Though she sympathised with the counter-motion, the Council of Assembly convenor did say that freezing contributions now would increase the Church's deficit; and the Principal Clerk also reminded commissioners that the Assembly had already set the global level of contributions for 2020 – so Dr Fenwick's proposed freeze would come into force from the next round of budget-setting.

A number of concerns were raised, and the convenor indicated that the counter-motion could potentially lead to a reduction in ministry or stipends. Dr Fenwick commented that she didn't want to cripple ministry, but noted that during the morning there had been a number of references to where money was being unlocked and released. This is all about mission, she concluded. The counter-motion was clarified to ask that "in 2021 and subsequent years, there would be no increase in congregations' Ministries and Mission allocations over that which is asked in 2020 until such times as alternative arrangements have been approved by the General Assembly". In a vote, Dr Fenwick's counter-motion carried.

There followed a Petition from the Kirk Session of Duns and District Parishes, which has been without a minister for 15 months and is faced with an "unsupportable" Ministry and Mission allocation larger than its income. An elder, Mr Peter Johnson, asked the Assembly to urgently review such allocations with a view to potentially limiting them to no more than £10,000 a year when there has been a vacancy for six months or more. Mr Johnson painted a vivid picture of the congregation's difficulties, a case study of precisely the problems that had been discussed in the preceding debate. However, the

Council of Assembly felt that appropriate processes are already in place, and the kinds of issues raised by the petition fall within the scope of current reviews. On a vote, the petition fell.

The Revd Gordon Kennedy picked up on an issue raised yesterday about the effectiveness of Presbyterian Church government to support the mission of local congregations and developing leadership in the Church. He brought a request that a Special Commission be formed to look at the issue. The last time Presbyterian government had been looked at was in the 1950s, he said, and there was a need to inspire prophetic ministry today – are the Kirk structures the best way to do that? He said this is the time to ask the question. A number spoke in support of this deliverance, including the Convenor of the Theological Forum. Mr Kennedy's addendum to the deliverance was accepted by the Assembly.

Adding to the council's encouragement of a "season of prayer and preparation" across the Church from September, the Revd Michael Weaver urged presbyteries and Kirk Sessions to engage with the "Try praying UK 2020" campaign in April 2020 – he'd seen its value in his congregation as well as beyond it. And following agreement on new Growth Fund Regulations, the Revd Jane Howitt asked for a report to Assembly 2020 sharing the learning, and celebrating the achievements, of the Go For It fund, which has distributed over £7.5 million since its inception in 2012. The good news stories of the fund are worth hearing, she said. The amendment was accepted.

The report as a whole was accepted – did we hear a few cheers? The Moderator thanked the convenor for her work and for her confidence in the work of the Council; the Assembly responded with a very rare standing ovation. And to the commissioners the Moderator added a call to action: "We've made a start; but deciding is not doing – we must be ambassadors for the words."

The printed World Mission Report this year was noticeably short and to the point. In part, this is because the Council's other report is a major assessment of the Kirk's presence in Israel/Palestine. But perhaps it also reflects the fact that the new convenor of the council is a past Principal Clerk of the General Assembly, the Very Revd John Chalmers, who perhaps has a view on what a report should look like!

Presenting *his*, he said that if you are ever asked whether the Church of Scotland practices what it preaches, you have your answer in the report of the World Mission Council. He went on to describe a Church in partnership with other organisations, alleviating poverty and hunger, and acting to do something about the systemic causes of economic exploitation, gender discrimination, the violation of human rights and the abuse of the world's most vulnerable and marginalised people.

On this occasion he highlighted three areas of the council's work, beginning with responses to the ongoing "humanitarian refugee catastrophe", out of which the Church of Scotland was instrumental in initiating what became Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees. The convenor condemned the "populist backlash against migration" as "a pernicious xenophobia", and said "there has to be some clarity of voice from the Churches – who else will speak for the poor and the persecuted if we do not?" He spoke of the Councils' partnership with Mediterranean Hope, an initiative of The Waldensian Church and the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy, working on the creation of Europe-wide humanitarian corridors from Libya.

Then he turned to Nepal, where the United Mission to Nepal delivers Christian service to the poor in a country in which Christian evangelism is not allowed. For example, providing a small grant of £5,000 for an irrigation channel which has nourished a whole valley and allowed one farmer to produce crops of around 4,000 kilograms of cucumbers. Or – another example – the let us Build a House initiative in response to the devastating 2015 earthquake in Nepal. "This is the stuff that breathes new life in our Christian faith and which, in turn, can breathe life into our congregations", Dr Chalmers said.

Finally, he spoke of the council's involvement with the church leaders of South Sudan following the visit of Peter Gai, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan to the 2014 General Assembly. This led to the establishment of a training programme in the healing of trauma, and in the work of mediation, peace building and reconciliation. "We dreamt that one day church leaders in South Sudan would be the direct influencers of the political leaders of South Sudan," he said And at the beginning of April, six weeks ago, under the convenorship of Pope Francis, Church and political leaders were indeed brought together in the same room, and promises were made between opposing former rebel commanders.

The convenor said that, in these transformational stories, one could perceive powerful examples of presence, proclamation and practical action. "This modest church of ours, on the edge of Northern Europe has made a difference" – to the prospect of peace in a war-torn, troubled part of equatorial Africa and in many other places around the world.

The dominant topic in the questions and comments that followed was the persecution and suffering of Christians worldwide. In particular, the Right Revd Alwin Samuel, a bishop in the Church of Pakistan, spoke with gentle sorrow about the persecution of Christians in his country and the need to protect them – and likewise, he said, to protect also Muslims in the western world. Though most Christians in Pakistan live below the poverty line, Bishop Alwin said that it is the sword of Shia law that hangs over them 24/7. Emotional and social persecution is far more damaging than physical persecution, he said – causing considerable mental health issues. He spoke of a young Christian in extreme heat, looking

for water, who drank from a tap unwittingly forbidden to him – for which he was shot. The bishop spoke of the shocking abuse of prisoners; and of the abductions of girls who are then forced to marry Muslims – one who refused had acid thrown in her face, and subsequently lost her life. “We need your support”, the bishop concluded. “You have shared God’s love with us — be the wise of our wiseless persons. Help Pakistanis to see things clearly”, he asked.

In response, the Moderator asked commissioners to stand in silent solidarity, not only for Christians in Pakistan but for suffering Christians worldwide. The Revd Alison Burnside noted that it was through the Church of Scotland’s own past mission that individuals were converted to Christianity – we continue to have a responsibility for them in these times of persecution, she said.

The Revd Kirsten Fryer, pastor of St Andrew’s Church in Cairo, spoke about her work serving thousands of refugees every year. In her role with the Refugee Service, she sees refugees learning to train other refugees – they are amazing, she said. Refugees but amazing. A little Scottish church has become an oasis for refugees, and she wanted to thank the Church in Scotland for its continued support – not least, from the Boys’ Brigade who are enabling a new playground in to be built in the church grounds.

Ms Joanne Whyte, a youth delegate, brought an amendment encouraging congregations to educate and encourage churches around the world about the impact of climate change. The convenor accepted the amendment, saying that this is work already being undertaken by the Council but noting, also, that there are overseas churches that have much to teach us in the west about the issue.

The debate ended with a final amendment to the deliverance expressing concern for Christians around the world whose witness to their faith can be both costly and dangerous. The Revd Barry Hughes mentioned, for example, the Maldives – known to many in the UK as a holiday resort but which is listed as the 14th most dangerous country to live in if you are a Christian. He noted in particular the plight of the persecuted Yazidi people, an indigenous religious community who live now as refugees across the world having been ethnically cleansed from northern Iraq.

It had become clear that there would not be time for all the business scheduled for today. Commissioners were told that the report on Israel/Palestine, together with the reports of the Safeguarding Committee and the Iona Community Board will be re-scheduled for later in the week.

So we turned to the report of the Church of Scotland Guild, presented by Mrs Patricia Robertson, National Convenor. She said the Guild has played a hugely important role in the life of the Kirk for 132 years. Much has changed over that time, she said; however, she didn’t want to look backwards, but rather to celebrate the Guild of today and tomorrow.

The Guild is currently working to a three year strategy, “One Journey, Many Roads”. Mrs Robertson guided the Assembly through a year of events, partnerships and connections – which has included an important recent focus on events that bring Guild folk together, including a series of regional Roadshows and Gatherings and several roof-raising “Big Sings” – the latest of which is taking place right now – you may be able to hear it!

A second recent focus has been on partnerships – with other parts of the Church, as well as other denominations, faiths and issue-based organisations both in Scotland and overseas. Guild representatives have engaged with an Ecumenical Forum of European Croatian Women in Serbia, and a conference on the place of women in the Church that took place in Johannesburg.

The Assembly heard that the range of places, work and people covered by the Guild’s projects is vast. And so too are the sums of money being raised. Since last September, the Guild has raised £195,000 for the current group of project partners – bringing the amount raised since the current system of projects began to a staggering sum of £5.2 million.

Over the years, projects supported by the Guild have brought complex and challenging issues to the heart of the Church over the years – including prostitution, FGM, homelessness, the plight of refugees, HIV/Aids, and support for those living with dementia. “It is a long and varied list,” Mrs Robertson said, “but we are proud of the ways in which we have helped shape and change peoples’ attitudes and perceptions.”

Concluding, the convenor asked the General Assembly to approve changes to its Constitution, which – the Guild feels – reflects its wish to continue to be a movement with a sense of purpose and positive mindset. “We realise that changing a constitution or a name will not of themselves fix our problems,” Mrs Robertson said. “Rather, we offer these changes as part of a wider picture of the Guild as an organisation that travels its journey with a smile on its face!”

The Revd Dr Frances Henderson, a transition minister in Shetland, said that the uniting parishes on the islands have been drawing on the Guild’s example and their constitution in exploring their new ways of working. The Guild has been an inspiration on Shetland; and to youth delegates who value opportunities for intergenerational conversation and activity. Miss Helen Howden brought an amendment with the intention of raising the profile of guilds in local congregations. After some discussion, the encouragement of regular reports to Kirk sessions was agreed by the Assembly, as well as encouraging practical support for guilds locally.

As the Guild and many others prepared for this evening's Big Sing, commissioners were sent on their way with a sung blessing. We will return tomorrow when business will include the reports of the Church and Society Council and General Trustees.