

Assembly Arrangements Committee – General Assembly 2019

Thank you, Moderator and many congratulations, on your election as the Moderator of the General Assembly for 2019. It has already been a joy working with you in our preparations for the Assembly and although we have a lot of business to attend to this week, I hope that you will still enjoy your time in the Chair! Please also know that our prayers are with you, not only for this week but for the year ahead – may God's richest blessing be with you.

While doing some research last year in the Ness Bank Church archives, where I have the privilege of being the Minister, I came across a wonderful article in the June 1915 church notes entitled 'Impressions of the General Assembly' written by an elder commissioner who signed off his piece with only his initials F. E. M.

In the article he wrote eloquently about the beauty of Edinburgh but also poignantly about the reality of what was then being called the 'Great War'.

On the General Assembly he wrote about the nobility of this Assembly Hall, which was well filled, even crowded on frequent occasions over the 10 days. But he commented:

'One could not help being struck by the fact that the gathering was largely made up of bald and white-haired men and that the lay element was there in equal numbers with the clerical'

'Another feature of the Assembly that struck one, was that it is a democratic body, impatient of anything which interferes with its liberty of expression and as was evidenced on several occasions, capable of setting aside both law and precedent as interpreted by its Clerks.

Whilst the rules of the house are strictly applied, the freedom of speech is well guarded and although the house does not suffer fools or cranks gladly, any member who has anything worth saying is welcomed.'

These words may have been written 104 years ago but they still speak today of the essence, the spirit and the vitality that is at the heart of the General Assembly.

In our Presbyterian system of governance, we, the members of this Assembly, are all equal; we all have a right to speak (although it is wise to remember the caveat about the Assembly not suffering fools gladly!) because liberty of expression is at the heart of the Assembly. And

together, we are the Kirk's highest decision-making body and together we sit humbly beneath the headship of Christ.

In our ever-changing world this is the unchanging heartbeat of the General Assembly but that does not mean that the ways in which the General Assembly works cannot change.

Over the past year, the Assembly Arrangements Committee has been mindful of the instruction of the General Assembly of 2018 to the Council of Assembly to work collaboratively to bring about structural change and reform of the institution of the Church to enable a Church structure that is lean and fit for purpose for today's world.

A paramount issue for the Committee is to ensure that all Commissioners are enabled and empowered to participate fully in the business and the decision-making of the Assembly.

That is because it is a key function of the Assembly to review, scrutinise and hold to account the work of the Church's Councils and committees.

But the Committee cannot begin to review how the Assembly's business is conducted or consider the merits of, alternate decision-making processes, such as consensus decision-making or participatory budget approaches, until we first examine the number of commissioners to the Assembly.

Good stewardship of money and time as well as the decrease in the overall size of the membership of the Church also necessitates that we address this issue.

It is also essential that this review is undertaken when we are considering the future care and use of the Assembly Hall.

The configuration of the Hall does impose restrictions on how we meet and handle the business of the Assembly. It is also true that some of the electronic equipment we currently use at the Assembly is coming to the end of its serviceable life.

The Committee needs to be sure of the future Commissioner numbers before any recommendations can be proposed in relation to the Hall itself.

In other words, we need to examine the makeup of the Assembly first before we can look closely at how we function as the Assembly. It is for these reasons that we are 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.

The Committee continues to oversee the maintenance and repairs of the Assembly Hall which is a Grade A listed building. These costs, despite every effort to be prudent, are considerable. Further, the Hall needs inward investment to upgrade its facilities and improve access.

In respect of the revenue that can be made from the Hall, we have found no way of profitably letting the Hall either through third party management or in-house provision. There are also commercial impediments to us being able to secure a longer term let of the Hall.

The Committee is continuing to explore various options to secure the future of the Hall and there are some new avenues that have emerged, but we are not in a position at this stage to bring any details about these to the Assembly.

From last year's feedback survey, over 90% of respondents found the circulation breaks to be helpful or very helpful for meeting people and for practicalities such as comfort breaks. The Assembly doctor also commended the breaks for the health and wellbeing of Commissioners.

Given such a positive response the Committee has again timetabled circulation breaks throughout the week.

Last year's survey also provided very helpful feedback on the Assembly's use of the digital publications, the details of which are in our report.

This year the GA Publications website has been improved and can be accessed directly through the Church of Scotland's website. Enhanced WiFi provision has also been created with the installation of a new dedicated fibre optic connection in the Hall.

Every lunchtime through the Assembly there will be a 'Tech bar' open in the St Andrews corridor where Commissioners can go to get help and advice on using the digital publications. There are also additional charging points available around the Hall for Commissioners to use.

We live in the digital age and the Committee is committed to moving the Assembly over the next 5 years to being 'paper free'.

As instructed the Committee has reviewed the efficacy, role and size of the Business Committee. Our experience has shown that to have a Business Committee of 40, as is currently the case, is unwieldy and no longer fit for purpose.

A much smaller group could effectively oversee the Committee's functions (which are set out in our report). It is for these reasons that the Committee is proposing that the Business Committee be reduced to 7 people, being the Convener and Vice-Convener of AAC, the Moderator, the Clerks, the Procurator and the Law Agent.

This requires a change to Standing Orders which comes within the remit of the Legal Questions Committee and so the Convener will be invited to move this amendment. Heart & Soul has become one of the major highlights of the General Assembly. The Committee in collaboration with the Council of Assembly has undertaken an extensive review of Heart & Soul.

The detailed findings of the review are contained in our report and they have clearly established that Heart & Soul is seen in a very positive light.

It has a unique place in the life of the Church as a setting where creativity can grow, collaborative working can be nurtured, the life and work of the Church showcased, and fellowship can be enjoyed.

Nevertheless, it is recognised that there are challenges for some in the location and timing of Heart & Soul. An essential part of Heart & Soul's success is that it is attached to the General Assembly.

The Committee is also keenly aware that in going forward the shape and form of Heart & Soul, as well as budgetary issues must continue to be kept under review.

The Heart & Soul Board have worked extremely hard this past year to ensure that tomorrow's event is once more a highlight of this Assembly – so please go along and see for yourselves.

Commissioners' accommodation expenses we are pleased to report have been increased this year to £75 per night. If commissioners are staying in the Edinburgh areas with family or friends up to £80 may be claimed towards a gift or a meal as a gesture of thanks.

The Committee wishes to express its sincere thanks to Rev Dr Martin Scott for his service to the Assembly as Precentor in previous years in which he used his outstanding musical gifts for our benefit and enrichment.

The Committee also wishes to thank Rev Douglas Galbraith for agreeing to act as Precentor for this year's Assembly.

And finally, I would like to record my heartfelt thanks to the whole of the Assembly Arrangements Committee – they are a great bunch of people to work with.

My thanks also go to the staff who work so hard with all the Assembly preparations especially Catherine McIntosh and Susan Taylor who are running the Assembly Office. But we could also not run the Assembly without the Assembly Officer William Mearns, his depute Karen Mckay; the Chief Steward Sandy Gemmill and his depute Neil Proven as well as all our stewards and helpers who freely give their time to serve the Assembly – thank you to each and every one of you.

Moderator, I present the Report of the Assembly Arrangements Committee and move the Deliverance.