

MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND 2015

The National Youth Assembly (NYA) took place 14 – 17 August 2015 in Gartmore House, near Aberfoyle, Stirlingshire. 92 delegates travelled from across Scotland and beyond, from Shetland to London, to be with one another, to engage in worship, discussion and fellowship.

The NYA is ever evolving to better meet the expectations and needs of its delegates. For improvement, change is necessary and as a result of continuous alteration, the NYA remains a relevant forum for 17 – 25 year old Christians to express their views and have their voice heard at a national level within the Church of Scotland.

A change for this year was moving away from advertising and indeed having a theme encompassing the whole event (2014: My Father's House, 2013: Identity, 2012: Breaking Barriers) preferring instead to simply theme the worship, choosing for 2015: Confession.

What do we mean by a confession? Confession means something different to each person as there is a duality and division within the word; for some confession is acknowledging an act where one has done something wrong whereas for others it is the word that stitches together what we 'confess' to be true and what we believe. It proved to be a powerful theme for our worship and weaved together a continual sense of purpose to the weekend.

At the heart of NYA are our discussions and in 2015 there were four, each structured in a slightly different way to provide variety and fully recognise that delegates engage in different ways.

Confessions of faith

The first of our discussions was around our Confessions of Faith and in particular whether they need updating.

The desired outcome from this session was for delegates to have more of an understanding of the confessions of faith to which the Church of Scotland subscribe and to consider if they are still helpful when articulating our faith or if they need to be updated. Alongside this we wanted to see if there was a collection of statements that emerged that the NYA felt important and valid to them as a collective group in 2015 so creating an NYA statement of faith.

Two theologians, Andrew Kimmitt and Rev Dr Frances Henderson addressed the Assembly regarding the Westminster Confession of Faith, the place of theology within our churches and how we confess our faith as a Church of Scotland. Delegates then adjourned to their small groups with a set of questions to stimulate discussion and to generate a set of statements.

With appreciation of the wide variety of beliefs and theological thinking amongst the delegates it is of no surprise that a large number of statements were collected. These statements were grouped into six main themes; Humanity, the Trinity, Jesus, the Christian Journey, the Life of the Church, and Scripture. Each statement was brought to the Assembly and discussed before a vote was taken as to whether it was something each delegate would hold as central to their beliefs.

Just as the General Assembly is made up of Christians from all walks of life, the delegates attending the NYA are no different and truly reflect the 'broadness' of our Kirk. This provided a discussion rooted in knowledge and full of insight, reflecting the broad spectrum of theological thinking. The discussion was engaging and fruitful, with many delegates voicing a wish to have similar discussions at a local level. Many delegates were surprised by aspects of the Westminster Confession, namely the parts that have

been removed over time and how long it took for some of those parts to be removed.

While there were delegates that thought it is important to confess our faith through written documentation for accessibility, unity and showing our history, there were others for whom it is not important as it becomes outdated, can be too specific and has the danger of not being inclusive.

While it proved impossible in the short time we had to agree on a set of statements that would form an NYA statement of faith the list of statements created and some of the discussion that followed can be found in our supplementary report alongside the results of the voting.

The future of the General Assembly

The second of our discussions was on the future of the General Assembly (GA) and led by the Convenor of the Assembly Arrangements Committee, Rev Dr Derek Browning.

The desired outcome from this session was for the voice of young people to be heard amidst the wider consultation being undertaken by the Assembly Arrangements Committee about the GA. Due to the different levels of experience of delegates it was decided that following input from Derek the discussion would take place in two different groups: those who had attended the GA before and those who had not.

Those who had attended GA before were asked to reflect upon their experience and what improvements they would suggest to ensure that the GA best serves its purpose in the life and work of the Church of Scotland:

- Pre delegate preparation is key to having successful, precise debates – the first thing to do with the GA that most commissioners experience is the blue book landing on the doorstep.
- Greater use of technology to enable those who are not as confident to have their voice heard should be encouraged. Having a live twitter feed which enables

people to express their opinions without physically standing up and speaking was suggested.

- There was a perception that the GA exists for the retired and ministers. To be inclusive and to reflect the breadth of the Kirk it must do better in facilitating the involvement of those that do not fit into these groups for example students who have exams in May, or those with child care issues.
- Variety in worship style/worship leader during the week to reflect all in attendance.

Those who had not attended GA before were asked to imagine designing an event for 800 ministers and elders, what it would look like and how it would function. Various suggestions were provided:

- GA should meet in teams/small groups to come to a consensus and then one person feeds back to the Assembly.
- Venue should be moved around Scotland to make the event open and accessible.
- There should be no stage; everyone should be upon the same floor.
- Does it need to be for so many people?
- People should be made to feed back to their local congregations so the whole church knows what is going on/has been decided upon.

For a fuller account of the suggestions and critique of the GA please refer to our supplementary report.

Climate Justice

The third of our discussions was on climate justice. The desired outcome from this discussion was to emerge with input from the delegates as to what they think the Church of Scotland should be saying and doing when it comes to climate justice and by way of a vote to indicate whether the Church of Scotland should remove its shares from the fossil fuel industry.

This discussion was deliberately structured in a different way to others. A panel was invited, comprising of

professionals from across the energy debate and from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences: including a petroleum geologist, a renewables expert and leaders of the climate justice activist world.

A discussion format modelled upon 'Question Time' was held whereby delegates had an hour to ask the panel questions. Questions from the delegates touched upon many issues including how the ideology of combatting climate change compares to the reality and what the responsibility of Christians is to tackle climate change.

Following time in small groups there was then a full group discussion focused around the views the delegates had heard from the panel. What emerged from this session was how local congregations could begin to tackle the problems of Climate Change/Climate Poverty in their own communities and what the Kirk should be doing nationally to set an example as a forward thinking, leading religious body in 2016 with its direction firmly fixed upon the future.

In terms of practical things local churches can do, delegates suggested:

- Reducing the use of paper in a service and trial using PowerPoints instead of orders of services.
- Making use of regular email updates as opposed to church magazines.
- Holding a 'skills exchange day' where members of the Guild can teach younger generations to be more thrifty by sewing, knitting, using tools and passing on the 'make do and mend' culture that is lacking in our modern world.
- Considering facilitating worship outdoors in summer months.

In terms of practical things that could be done on a national level, delegates suggested:

- Campaigning and informing others about Climate Justice and why we, as people of faith, should champion it.

- Re-evaluating the printing of over 800 blue books per year for the General Assembly, thinking about the possibility of replacing the annual hardcopy of the bluebook with an electronic device and having an 'opt in' process to the acquiring of hardcopy blue book material.
- Hosting an international 'walk to church' week in the summer.

Moving on to discussing whether the Church of Scotland should remove its shares from the fossil fuel industry, many different points of view were shared with some delegates feeling they didn't know enough about the intricacies of the debate to make an informed vote. Moral arguments were put forward for both sides with concern for the planet but also for people's jobs and the income of the Kirk; while we should stand up and be radical, we are also called to be careful stewards of our finances.

It was therefore suggested that instead of just voting for or against divestment a partial divestment approach should be included. Partial divestment must be defined: A removal of the churches shares in the dirtiest forms of hydrocarbon industry *ie* UCG, coal industry and shale gas whilst maintaining investment in mainstream hydrocarbon industry.

The discussion suggested that if a partial divestment approach were to be adopted by the Church of Scotland it would make a bold statement in terms of accepting that there needs to be a change in the way we do energy, whilst acknowledging that oil and gas will continue to remain the major part of Scotland's energy mix for the foreseeable future.

The subsequent vote reflected this breadth of opinion but was firm in saying that at least some divestment is needed:

- Full divestment – 35%
- No divestment – 10%
- Partial divestment – 37%
- Abstain – 18%

Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking

The refugee crisis dominated many of our media outlets in 2015 and is proving to be a problem that is not going to be solved in the short term. The world is an unstable place and many nations are locked within fierce conflict. The human suffering that ensues as a result from these conflicts is extensive and it is easy to forget that very often at the heart of this suffering lies the innocent lives of many children.

Our final discussion focused on child exploitation paying particular attention to human trafficking. The desired outcome from this discussion was to inform delegates about these topics and to ask the question: What should the Church of Scotland be doing to challenge/combat child exploitation?

Two words that were re-iterated time and again by the delegates were "*constant vigilance*" and several suggestions were made as to what the Kirk could be doing to help tackle child exploitation:

- Raising awareness within our own members about child exploitation in its many forms; education of the congregation, of the Sunday schools and of the wider communities.
- Each presbytery to make an effort to engage and promote the annual 'Anti-Slavery Day' (18th October) and utilise the 'Freedom Sunday' resource¹.
- Encouraging ministers to take a school assembly on the topic of child exploitation.
- Pray.

Delegates felt strongly that a child should never be stopped from fulfilling their potential because of their gender, where they were born, their financial situation or because they are forced into child labour. Education provides a route out of exploitation for many children; it is an escape from forced marriage, child labour and child

trafficking. Education is quite simply, life changing and lifesaving.

It was therefore fortuitous that Gordon Brown, the former British Prime Minister came to address the NYA with a Q&A session about his current campaign 'Up for School' which supports education initiatives around the world that seek to provide a primary education for the 58 million children who currently are uneducated.

As a result of the dialogue held at the Assembly between delegates and Mr Brown, a nationwide 'Sign Up Sunday', was initiated by the Kirk² to gather as many signatures as possible to help support the #UpForSchool campaign.

Remembering Srebrenica

Every year the Assembly raises money for a chosen charity through the gala dinner and this year was no exception with the chosen charity being Remembering Srebrenica³. Through education, Remembering Srebrenica seeks to equip people to be vigilant against hatred and intolerance within their communities. They strive to teach about the atrocities that occurred in the Bosnian genocide of 1995 so that future generations do not forget that dark period in history.

We were privileged on the Sunday evening to be joined by and hear from 2 people with experience of visiting Srebrenica and meeting those directly affected. We were able to raise £1039.86.

Promotion

It is not enough to depend on traditional methods of advertising such as church newsletters alone to promote our work within the Church of Scotland as people engage in different ways in today's world.

With this in mind we decided to invest in the creation of some short videos promoting the life and work of the

¹ <http://www.freedomsunday.org/about/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/churchofscotland/videos/vb.233258850032623/1084751468216686/?type=2&theater>

³ <http://www.srebrenica.org.uk/>

NYA, why it exists and what difference we make with and out with the Kirk. These videos⁴ have been designed to be used in a variety of settings, from school assemblies, to Sunday services, to youth groups, to Guild groups, to across social media.

We have also added a facebook page and Instagram account to our social media presence. We aim to regularly update all our channels with interesting and engaging items showing that the NYA is more than just a weekend event.

Conclusion

The National Youth Assembly was once again successful in reaching out to many young people within the Church of Scotland. Please see our supplementary report for a fuller account of NYA 2015 and the work that delegates have been doing since then.

⁴ https://www.facebook.com/cofsnationalyouthassembly/videos/545122778986842/?video_source=pages_finch_thumbnail_video&theater

The NYA remains an integral part of the Church of Scotland and continues to play a major part in nurturing and developing the faith of many young Christians within Scotland enabling them to have a voice and participate in decision making. For these reasons, and many more it remains an institution that the Kirk can be proud of. As we prepare for the future we look forward to seeing the findings from the NYA review, in particular concerning how the GA and NYA can be more aligned.

The 2016 NYA will be held at Gartmore House and will take place 12 – 15 August 2016. It is open to all 17-25 year olds with a connection to the Church of Scotland with 140 places available on a first come first served basis⁵.

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⁵ <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/learn/young-adults/about-youth-assembly-2016>