

2008 General Assembly

of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #4

Rev Douglas Aitken

Friday 16th May 2008, Afternoon

The Friday afternoon session at the Church of Scotland General Assembly began with questions on the report of the Church without Walls Planning Group, all praising the National Gathering and several asking that another Gathering should move around the country. However, there was some concern about the funding of the event.

Returning to the presentation of reports, the Convener of the Parish Development Fund said that the Fund had enabled many congregations and groups to realise their dreams. Currently there are 83 projects receiving funding. The Fund has over the years allocated millions of pounds of grant aid to projects. The aim is to make many smaller grants rather than a few larger grants, yet the applications are still asking for more than twice the funding available. The Fund is asking that the Assembly consider extending the Funds resources beyond the present date of 2010. The Assembly agreed.

The Church of Scotland Trust reported next. The Trust holds title to the Church of Scotland property outside Scotland and looks after third party trusts. The Convener spoke of the intention to sell a number of properties in Israel, the proceeds from which will be applied to the expansion of the Hotel complex in Tiberias – including a Spa and a Church. He moved on to properties in Pakistan which under an Act of Assembly may only be transferred to a body in which the Trust and the World Mission Council have confidence. They do not have that confidence in the Diocese of Sialkot Trust and they are moving towards forming an independent Trust to which the title in the buildings can be confidently transferred.

The Assembly moved to an additional item before the report of the World Mission Council. The Moderator invited His Excellency Dr. Francis Moto, the Malawi High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, to address the Assembly. He said that Malawi's development was greatly helped by debates in this Assembly Hall. He briefly traced the connections between Scotland and Malawi since the arrival of

David Livingston in Central Africa. He said that the connection will continue in the long term. He referred to the increasing number of links between people in Scotland and Malawi – church to church, school to school, university to university, village to village, town to town. He wished these to continue and thanked the Assembly for their support and welcome.

The Assembly turned then to the report of the World Mission Council, presented by the Convener, the Rev Colin Renwick. The first section of his report was on the scandal of poverty, which he illustrated by the story of a school Chaplain in Malawi telling Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus by saying that the man was so rich that he could have a cup of tea whenever he wanted it! He emphasised the realities of global poverty for some 2.8 billion people and the growing threat of climate change, which will affect the poorest people most of all.

He went on to say that despite the sombre report, there are signs of hope – in local projects like micro-credit systems and in the two-way benefit of twinning. He added that a hard challenge for Scottish congregations can be discovering just how much a partner church has to give them.

He said that the Council has become increasingly concerned for those Christians who live in countries where their minority status makes life and witness difficult and even dangerous. The Council believe this is an issue it must examine more fully in consultation with partner churches.

The Convener then turned to Zimbabwe. A recent statement by the Zimbabwean Council Churches spoke of organised violence against individuals, families and communities accused of campaigning or voting for the “wrong” political party. It reports on abductions, torture, intimidation and humiliation, on empty shops, on a cost of living well beyond the reach of the majority of people, on hospitals without any medicine. It concludes, “we warn the world that if nothing is done to help the people of Zimbabwe from their predicament, we shall soon be seeing genocide similar to that experienced in Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and other hot spots in Africa and elsewhere.”

Turning to Israel and Palestine he said that the partnership with the Anglican Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem (which, with the Church of Scotland, is committed to peace and reconciliation) is a welcome relationship. The Council reaffirms its commitment to justice and peace in that hugely volatile and significant part of the world. The Convener said that while families remain separated from the farmland that has supported their family for generations, or cannot freely move about their

own land or remains a refugee or lives in a climate of fear and suspicion, there is little prospect of peace but every likelihood of increased extremism.

In the debate that followed, one commissioner, an elder, said that as a result of the Debt Relief campaign some of the funding to international agencies was used to help reduce debt and has not been replenished. He should know because he works for an international agency. Former Moderator Dr Alan McDonald said that thousands marched through Edinburgh to Make Poverty History and through Glasgow against the war in Iraq and yet our Government intends to spend £20 billion or £70 billion to replace trident. He said that this money would be far better spent on eliminating the scandal of poverty.

The Convener proposed an additional section to the Deliverance expressing outrage and urgent concern in regard to the extreme privation and suffering being inflicted on the people of Zimbabwe. It speaks of the courage of the churches in Zimbabwe and assured them of the prayerful support of the Church of Scotland. It also urged Her Majesty's Government to use its influence through the Southern African Development Community. This additional motion was supported by several emotional contributions from delegates and visitors from southern Africa.

We return tomorrow after the morning session of the Assembly. Join us then.