

2008 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland



Assembly Update Transcript #1

Rev Douglas Aitken

Thursday 15th May 2008, Noon

Welcome to the 2008 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland meeting in Edinburgh. After the opening worship, conducted by the Right Rev Sheilagh Kesting, the retiring Moderator, the Assembly proceeded to the election of the Rev David Lunan to be its Moderator for this week and the coming year.

Following the reading of the Commission to His Grace the Lord High Commissioner, the Queen's letter to the Assembly was read. The Lord High Commissioner is the Queen's representative to the Assembly. During the sitting of the Assembly, the Lord High Commissioner ranks after the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh and before the rest of the Royal family, while the Moderator ranks after the Lord Chancellor and before the Prime Minister and the Dukes. This year the Lord High Commissioner is the Right Honourable George Reid who, until last May, was the Presiding Officer or Speaker of the Scottish Parliament. He is also the first Scottish National Party politician to hold this high office.

Addressing the Assembly, Mr Reid said: "...If you are to be fishers of folk and not – as my minister put it two Sundays ago – 'Keepers of the aquarium', you will need to speak from the soul on such issues as human kindness, hybrid embryos, prostitution and human trafficking, the battle with HIV and AIDS, the sharing of our experience of the God-given value of life with those of other faiths, and the revival of communities through churches which work outside man-made walls." And then he added: "Take care about being too canny" too careful. And he quoted a sign outside a church which read: "In every community there is work to be done; in every nation there are wounds to be healed; in every human heart there is the power to do it."

When the Assembly moved to the business before it, the first report to be introduced was given by the Rev Bill Hewitt, Convener of the Assembly Arrangements Committee. Apart from the logistics of running an Assembly, the Committee is asking the question: What is the Assembly for? Is it simply a Court of the Church, is

it the AGM of the Kirk, or is it a showpiece of the Church? To discover an answer to those questions, the Committee intends to consult the Church at large about other possible changes that might be appropriate to make better use of the bringing together of commissioners from around the country. There were a number of questions to the Convener, largely about worship and the place of the Communion Service, which remains on Monday morning despite the Assembly starting on a Thursday rather than a Saturday. One Commissioner, a former Moderator, asked if the Assembly might sometimes meet in Glasgow or Aberdeen or Dunfermline – but the response from the Convener was that it would cost too much.

At the close of the debate on Assembly Arrangements the Moderator invited Elaine Duncan, the Chief Executive of the Scottish Bible Society, to address the Assembly. She spoke of various events in which the Bible Society is involved. She told of some of the disaster areas where the Society's work is respected. In the world there are 6,900 languages and there is a great amount of Bible translation work still to be done. The Scottish Bible Society has been part of that work for 200 years. She concluded her address by presenting a special copy of the Bible to the Moderator.

The Assembly moved through three items of formal business and then heard the report of the National Youth Assembly given by its Moderator, Judith Taylor. She stressed that the young people debated with vigour on a number of sensitive and important issues such as same sex relationships and the care of the elderly. She told of the glittering special dinner at which the Youth Assembly met in styles of dress that would rival the Hollywood Oscars. At the close of the dinner, the Youth Assembly members are asked to contribute the cost of the meal or whatever they feel they can afford. In the space of about 20 minutes the members of the Youth Assembly gave a total of £6,250.92 pence which has gone to a nursery trust in Malawi.

At the conclusion of this debate, the Moderator thanked Miss Taylor for her two years as Moderator of the Youth Assembly and because the next report before the General Assembly is that of the Council of Assembly, he suspended the Assembly ten minutes early for lunch.

We will be back with another report after the afternoon session here in Edinburgh. Join us then.