

Moderator,

May I be amongst the first conveners reporting to this General Assembly to congratulate you on your appointment as our Moderator. We look forward to your leading us in worship, prayer and your chairing of our debates and discussions over the course of this General Assembly.

I begin my report with the sad duty to inform the Assembly that the Committee was notified a few days ago of the sudden death of Miss Chris Brown on the 13th May. Chris worked for 121 from the age of 16 until her retirement in 2001, and as well as being PA to the Moderator, she was also PA to three Principal Clerks – Donald Macdonald, James Weatherhead and Finlay Macdonald. Many former Moderators have fond memories of Chris - and plenty stories of times she went above and beyond, and I am sure that many commissioners will remember Chris and her professionalism. In retirement Chris kept a keen interest in the General Assembly, she had read all of the reports for this year, and she was looking forward to watching the Assembly online. The committee sends our thoughts and prayers to her many friends, and former colleagues who will mourn her passing.

When I was a young student undertaking my probation, my supervisor loved to tell the the ancient Grecian story of the wise sage sitting on the road that led from Athens to Argos, the city rather than the shop that is. As they sat on the road, a traveller who was coming from Athens and heading to Argos asked the sage if they might help; “Can you tell me about the people in Argos?

Where do you come from?” Came the reply.

The traveller answered - I come from Athens.

The sage asked further - Tell me about the people in Athens.

The traveller was quick to reply - “the people in Athens are friendly, and kind. They are warm-hearted and quick to know a stranger.”

“I’m delighted to tell you” the sage began, “that the people in Argos are the same!”

A few hours later another traveller from Athens came along the road. He too was going to Argos and stopped at the sage and asked; “Can you tell me about the people in Argos?”

Where do you come from? Came the reply

The traveller answered - I come from Athens

The sage asked further - Tell me about the people in Athens.

The traveller was quick to reply - “The people in Athens are unfriendly, unkind and dishonest. They wouldn’t help a stranger - even if they stood to gain for themselves by doing so!”

The sage paused, and said sadly; “I’m sorry to tell you that you will find the people in Argos the same.”

It is my hope that as you have made the journey from parishes across our denomination, and from even further afield - or as you have settled yourself online via the live-stream that we will all find this Assembly in the spirit with which we enter it. But our gathering is not only shaped by the people who sit beside us or who join our proceedings remotely, our debates and discussions are shaped by the very space in which we meet - this Assembly Hall.

Since the Union of 1929, the General Assembly Hall has been the annual gathering place for the General Assembly to convene within. It is a much loved space, in which many wise words, heartfelt prayers, and reimagined visions have been cast. It is a place where the direction of the Church has been set, and where theological debate and discussion, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit influences and leads our decision making. It has been a place of disagreement - at times more charitable than others - and has been a place where we have honoured those Saints who have served the Church with faithfulness, gladness and openness whose race now lies behind them. It is a place steeped in history - built upon the remains of the Palace of Mary of Guise - whose lintels you can still see in the black and white corridor - and built as part of the vision of training ministers to serve the people of Scotland, the foundation stone laid by Dr Thomas Chalmers in 1846. This building played a formational role in modern Scotland - housing the Scottish Parliament between 1999 and 2004.

However, it is also a place in significant need of investment. The Assembly Business Committee are responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of this building - and I must pay tribute to the Convener of the Property Group, Dr Graeme Roberts, as well as Ros Taylor and our own Catherine McIntosh for the inordinate time, effort and energy which they expend on ensuring that the building is maintained and kept wind and water-tight. This is not cheap. As commissioners will note from our report, 1.3 million pounds have been spent over the last decade in maintaining what we have - not on the investments which are now overdue and which include carpeting, overhauling the seating, renewing the lift and work on the plumbing and toilets. A significant capital sum would be required to carry this work out to the standard required, and we are cognisant that spending this money on a General Assembly Hall which is underutilised for its location at a time where we are closing parish buildings in every community would be insensitive, and has the potential to come over as deaf to the ongoing pain that is present as well-loved churches which have served local needs for generations are closed and sold.

The Committee will continue to consider all options for this building and we will bring proposals to next years General Assembly. I would ask that the Assembly trust us to carry out this process - which requires sensitive conversations and negotiations.

In 2022, the General Assembly instructed the committee to consider the terms and conditions under which presbytery clerks were being employed, with concerns expressed about the disparity which existed between Presbyteries in the remuneration, allowances and benefits between post holders. This has been a very complex area for the committee to operate within. It has involved engagement with a multitude of stakeholders including Presbyteries, post-holders, the solicitor of the Church, the Principal Clerk and the HR department. At the core of this matter are people who have been called into the service of our church - and whose terms of employment would be affected by any decision - while a great deal of work has been ongoing in this area, I regret that we are not yet in a place where we can present a full report, and it has become apparent over the course of this work that the Principal Clerk is better placed to take the lead on this area. There is a slight amendment to the section of deliverance in my name, which is simply to focus the efforts of this work on Clerks and Depute Clerks rather than also looking at the other roles currently being recruited within Presbyteries. I am grateful too for the input of our colleagues in the Legal Questions Committee who have assisted us in structuring our thinking, and in presenting amendments to the Standing Orders of the General Assembly in relation to the participation of Probationers and Youth Representatives.

I have spoken about the work which is undertaken by the property group in ensuring the facilities we meet in are fit for purpose, but bringing together the different components required to ensure the General Assembly is able to run takes many people many hours. Indeed most of those who facilitate the Assembly this week do so as volunteers - for example, all of our Stewards give up their time freely to ensure that Commissioners can contribute fully to the proceedings and should we need to evacuate, we can do this safely and efficiently. So might I encourage all of you who are here in person to thank a Steward over the course of the Assembly for giving up their time freely to enable us to meet? They are those who on the road between Athens and Argos are of good cheer and who will welcome strangers, are warm-hearted friendly and kind.

Two of the volunteers I wish to draw to the attention of the Assembly are Roy Pinkerton and David Stewart who prepare and index a summary log of the proceedings. Roy and David's role is to ensure that every contribution to the Assembly is timestamped and recorded in order that it can be referred back to in the future. An audio log of the proceedings is kept in perpetuity for future reference, and it is not uncommon for the log to require to be checked to ensure that the spirit of what the Assembly intended is considered in any implementation work. This highly specialised work has transformed over the years from shorthand logbooks to the more technological work today, and we are grateful to David and Roy for all that they do.

Some of those who facilitate the General Assembly do so as paid contractors. I would not usually highlight their contribution, enormously grateful though we are to receive their expertise, wisdom and services. However, I must make an exception this year to pay tribute to one person who has been a fixed feature at the General Assembly for the last fifty years. John Williams first Assembly was in 1974, he has not missed a single Assembly over this period. John facilitates all of the audio visual components of our gathering - from ensuring that the cameras and microphones are working and operated, to running cables to communicate to the top table and technical corridor, to ensuring the right information is displayed on the screens in the Hall. John's advice was invaluable when the Pandemic came and forced the church to move to a purely online General Assembly, and we had to rely on his technical knowledge as to what was possible for us to do. John now manages our hybrid style Assembly, ensuring that those who are participating remotely have the same information available to them as those who are in the Hall. John advises the Assembly Business Committee and we value his contributions and ability to suggest new improvements to how commissioners might be supported in their engagement. John's health has suffered in these last years, but despite the punishing schedule of treatment he undertakes, he continues to be present at the Assembly and is a key part of our General Assembly team. Moderator, John Williams - as you might expect - is here, and I wonder if you and the Assembly might be minded to receive him and make a presentation to him in recognition of his fifty years service?

Presentation to John.

Moderator, the committee is pleased to have made our arrangements for the Assembly to take place. I present the report of the Assembly Business Committee, and I move the deliverance.

At Scottish Bible Society

Moderator, I am delighted that Elaine Duncan, Chief Executive of the Scottish Bible Society is with us this morning. I seek leave for her to address the Assembly and to make a presentation to you upon your appointment.