Moderator,

My predecessor, as convener of this Council once announced (memorably) to the Council, “This year China will be huge!”

It was, has been for a long time, and probably will be huge ...well into the future.

The same, of course, could well be said of the continent of Africa. It is huge in all sorts of ways—not least in its geography.

Africa covers fully one fifth of the total landmass of the planet. And it is home to 1.3 billion people.

Of course there isn’t just one Africa (any more than there is one homogeneous China.)

Nigeria is different from Zambia, Ghana different from Zimbabwe, Cameroon very different from Madagascar.

It would be impossible, therefore, to do justice to the breadth, depth and variety of expressions of Christianity that you will find in that continent in a single report to this General Assembly.
It was the General Assembly of 2016 that agreed the following deliverance.

“The General Assembly, given the current rapid growth of the church in sub-Saharan Africa, instruct the Council to prepare a report for a future General Assembly, in consultation with our partner churches in the region, detailing what is happening, how we might respond to this move of God’s Spirit and what we might learn from their experiences.”

That was quite a task!

The report that has been produced does not pretend to provide a comprehensive analysis of the African experience of Christianity, nor does it claim to identify categorically all of the possible reasons for the remarkable and rapid growth of the Christian Church in sub-Saharan Africa.

It certainly doesn’t suggest that there are any simple techniques to be copied, structures to be mimicked, or ways of working that could be lifted straight out of one context and transplanted into another in a way
that would guarantee similar church growth here in Scotland or anywhere in Europe.
But we hope it still provides some things that will make us stop and think.
The great thing about Christianity is that it is flexible enough to be able to take root in any culture. And it has to in order to be truly relevant to any particular group of people.
I remember the first time I visited Africa, some 17 years ago. It was to Kenya.
During a service of worship I observed two church elders side by side during some hymn singing.
The older man, John, had come to faith and been brought up in the church as a child while it was still being run by Church of Scotland missionaries. He had been taught that the right way to sing praise to God was to stand rigidly at attention holding his hymnbook in front of him and with a solemn expression on his face.
So that’s exactly what he did.
The other, slightly younger elder, Geoffrey, had come to faith after the missionaries had left and during the
time that the church in Kenya had begun to really indigénise and take on African characteristics. When Geoffrey sang his whole body moved with great freedom and rhythm and he sang with a huge smile on his face. If you’d watched a video of the two men with no soundtrack you’d be convinced that they were singing two entirely different songs. Now the faith of each man was authentic; the worship each was offering was sincere: the difference in their way of worshipping was entirely cultural—though in John’s case he had to leave the natural musical culture of his people outside the door of the church and step back into that other world of the colonial past. I’m tempted to suggest that something similar actually goes on Sunday by Sunday in many of our churches here in Scotland! But, I’ll not labour the point. What is always interesting and inspiring about stepping into any unfamiliar cultural context—and observing how Christian faith and experience has
taken root there— is that we can learn things from each other.

When we make space not just to talk but also —truly and humbly— to listen to one another, a sort of cross-fertilisation takes place in which there is mutual enrichment and a deepening of faith all round. It is almost always a two-way experience. And in particular we can all rediscover from each other those essential elements of faith and of Christian life and of Christ-like service that transcend any particular culture and apply to us all.

Cross-cultural contextual Bible study does something similar because it lets both sides of the dialogue separate out what is specifically cultural from what is truly universal.

The report sets out to identify those things that are not purely cultural and it suggests some recurring themes, certain ever-present characteristics that you would expect to find in a healthy, growing church regardless of the culture in which it takes root.

These include:
• a commitment to understanding the message of the Bible and its contemporary relevance;
• an awareness of the spiritual dimension to life and a willingness to engage seriously in prayer, both individually and communally;
• a lack of embarrassment about sharing your beliefs with others;
• a recognition that Christian faith is about a whole way of life, not a one-hour a week hobby
• and the practical outworking (perhaps out of necessity) of the notion that Ministry (including the leading of worship) belongs to the whole people of God, not just those who have been ordained. [This may be one area where we, out of our own necessity, may require to learn lessons.]

Above all what seems most noticeable about African Christianity is its sense of confidence—not self-confidence—nor confidence in the church as an organisation or institution—but a deep-seated confidence in the good news about Jesus Christ... that it really IS good news.
As the report says “none of these factors is new; they have been key elements of the Christian faith since its beginning.”

The report also reminds us—living as we do in a context where “the decline of the church seems inevitable”—that in the global South “the normal state of church in the world is growth.”

Of course, it would be naïve to suggest that everything about the Church in Africa is good, or even that all kinds of church growth are necessarily good. (For example, the so-called ‘Prosperity Gospel’ is not something that most of us would ever endorse or encourage, or even recognise as Biblical.)

There are some aspects of African culture (as there are of European culture) that run contrary to the spirit of the gospel.

But as anyone who has visited an African church will know, there is a vibrancy and vitality to faith and worship, and often also to Christlike service in the community, that is sometimes missing here in Scotland.
These things need not, indeed *should* not, be missing here, even though a Scottish expression of the Christian faith is always likely to be different from an African one—as long as each is being relevant and true to its own culture.

Inevitably a report like this can only scratch the surface but there is a helpful Bibliography that may be useful for those who wish to explore further what lessons may be learned.

Sometimes you only really begin to see something when you’ve looked at it from a different angle, from a different perspective. This is precisely why the World Mission Council is always trying to encourage congregations and individual church members to engage with the worldwide church, whether in Africa, or Asia, or the Americas, or even other parts of Europe and the Middle East.

It is good to listen; it is better to learn; it is essential to put into practice what we do learn.

So, Moderator,

we offer this report to the Church as a simple starting point for congregations and individuals to explore for
themselves the many lessons that may be learned from the African experience and the experience of the whole Church of Christ around the world.

Moderator,

*I present the report, and once again, as I am not a Commissioner, would ask the Principal Clerk to move the Deliverance.*