

Assembly Business Committee Speech – General Assembly 2020

A man walked into an ironmongers and announced that he wanted a quarter inch drill bit, only to be told, 'No you don't - you want... a quarter inch hole!'

There are many things the world wants at the moment, many things the Church wants and needs and our talk and decisions towards structural reform and radical action at last year's Assembly has been brought into sharp focus by the changing circumstances Covid-19 has brought. If ever there was a time to look to what we really need as God's Church, it is surely now. Our General Assembly is a means to an end - a tool with which we shape the Church's work and mission.

This is the first General Assembly since the now Very Reverend Colin Sinclair completed his term of office. We want to place on record the Church's gratitude for his leadership, guidance and for the many hours of screen time towards the end of his year. The video summary of 'a year with a difference' can be viewed on the Church's YouTube channel. We wish Colin and Ruth well, and are grateful that Colin is here in the Hall with us today, as a former Moderator ready and willing to take the chair should you, Moderator, wish a break at any time.

Moderator, Martin, nearly 5 months into your year you have had more than your fair share of online meetings; sometimes we call them 'virtual'. Far from virtual, this is your real General Assembly. A very different year to the one you planned and prepared for. You have adapted to this season we find ourselves in - the online ministry to church and nation has been so much appreciated, as have your pastoral calls to colleagues in ministry, TV and radio appearances. We wish you and Elaine God's richest blessing as you continue your year in office. Martin, thank you for all you have been doing, and indeed for your full participation in the Assembly Business Committee.

The Committee was formed at GA2019 (with a remit much broader than its predecessor, the Assembly Arrangements Committee), and I was privileged to be appointed Vice Convener and working with friend and colleague Rev Fiona Smith who, after steering the committee into new paths, sadly made the decision to resign. I and the whole Committee are grateful for her efforts as ABC established and developed its remit.

That remit includes reviewing how we come together in General Assembly. Little did we imagine the lessons there would be in 2020. We had already moved towards reducing the

size of Assembly and will be bringing an Overture for consideration by Presbyteries to the next GA, along with far-reaching proposals of how we might be a leaner, effective, engaging Assembly, supporting the ministry and witness of Presbyteries and Congregations. Together we have experienced the potential of the webinar, online collaboration and ways in which we move from the lurching from one meeting to the next, reduce travel time and costs and discover new and creative ways.

It's often said that the Assembly is a well-oiled machine... a sentiment that captures something of the immense work, much behind the scenes, in enabling GA. It's a pretty outdated metaphor, though, and well-oiled machines just keep doing what they always do. It's time for a new metaphor – suggestions on a postcard – or submitted via the Assembly Hub! It's time for the change.

Circumstances mean that we have to interact with one another and transact our business very differently this General Assembly. In five training sessions this week, 631 Commissioners took up the opportunity to become familiar with the Assembly Hub being used alongside Zoom Webinar to facilitate our business. Neil Maclennan at Sanctus Media and John Williams at OSCUS and their teams continue to provide quite excellent, and developing, technical support. At training sessions, elsewhere and in our own committee deliberations have been questions and discussion about what future General Assemblies might look like.

As we look forward to the possibility of gathering in the hall, meeting one with another and singing, we make plans with the Precentor and invite you to appoint Colin Renwick as Precentor. But who knows when such a large gathering with singing might be possible? Assembly Business Committee will make a decision early next year about the venue for the next Assembly – here where I am, or online where you are. Perhaps a hybrid, blending remote and physical gathering, perhaps augmenting formal decision-making sessions with opportunities for working together on various issues. Our thinking towards 22nd May 2021 will continue and will be shaped by many factors including the experience of this GA and Scottish Government restrictions.

We bring a number of proposals to change Standing Orders, to include LQC in the list of Committees which have the right to appoint a corresponding member, include the Assembly Trustees as corresponding members, provide that only permission from the Moderator is required when a staff member is invited (at the suggestion of a convener) to answer a question, SO56 regarding proposals with budgetary implications has been reworded to simplify and clarify, we also propose a rewording in all cases where 'in print',

'bound' 'paper' would be better referred in generic terms such as 'in proper form', and 'document'.

A number of Standing Orders are rendered obsolete or unworkable in this Remote Access context and we propose suspending certain Standing Orders for the duration of this Assembly – as outlined in the report. These proposals will be proposed by Legal Questions Committee—their sections 2,3,4 will be taken immediately following the ABC deliverance.

Much more could be said of our ongoing work. Our Remit includes oversight of the Assembly Hall and Moderator's flat, Oversight of Presbytery Restructuring, support for the Moderator, monitoring the implementation of Assembly decisions.

These aspects will be reported more fully next year, as we (and encouraging others to do likewise) limit our business on this occasion to the essential.

Moderator, I present the report of the Assembly Business Committee and move the deliverance.