

# The General Assembly 2019

## *Tales of the unexpected*

Several months ago Duncan asked me if I would be willing to attend this year's General Assembly. The prospect did not fill me with delight since I understood that the main criterion for being an Assembly Commissioner was that nobody else

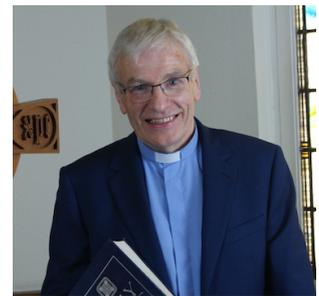


wanted to do it. The assumed narrative was that the General Assembly was a gathering of church bureaucrats who loved endless debates, and thrived on textual minutiae, overtures, deliverances and amendments, and who had relatively little enthusiasm for proclaiming the transformative news of Jesus and the extension of His kingdom. And so contrary to my expectations, I actually found the Assembly to be, for the most part, interesting and inspiring, and a forum where Godly people were tackling the real challenges of the life and work of our national church. I say "for the most part". There were times when the issues were entirely impenetrable, the debates punctuated by trivia, and an impression that the principle for

speaking was never to say in a few words what you could say in several points over half an hour. My report here presents a summary of the bits I understood!

Perhaps the most alarming incident in the week was when an elderly lady sitting next to me passed me a Werther's Original. Alarming because she must have thought that I was old enough to belong to the Werther's generation, but also because this was The Church of Scotland, and surely it *should* have been a pan drop!

The Assembly began every day with worship, which was uplifting and moving. The new Moderator, Colin Sinclair, was installed on the first morning and both he and the outgoing Moderator, Susan Brown, spoke inspiringly. In his first address Colin focused on Peter and John and the episode in Acts 3 where the crippled man outside the temple was healed. "Look at us" they said. Peter and John were ordinary



men who were broken, like the crippled man, but they had Jesus. And Jesus in the crippled man's life caused him to walk, and leap, and to praise God! We have nothing in ourselves, but our lives should exhibit the same love and excitement for God because of what He has done for us.

In a presentation by The Scottish Bible society we heard about Bible 2020 when people will be encouraged to read the Bible aloud in all sorts of places and



settings – home, work, shopping centres, because where people engage with the Bible, they engage with Jesus.

The Sunday service at St Giles Cathedral was a very structured and liturgical event, attended by various dignitaries. Not the sort of service where I generally feel comfortable, but there was something magnificent and honouring about a high profile public event where God was the focus. We should be glad that this still happens in an increasingly secular society. The Moderator spoke about the main theme of Assembly week – Jesus said; “Follow me”. The Heart and Soul festival in Princes Street Gardens on Sunday afternoon was an opportunity for many churches and other Christian organisations to publicise their work.

The main focus of this year’s Assembly was the report of the Special Commission, a group charged with the responsibility to re-shape the government of the church and the workings of the General Assembly, which are costly, administratively top-heavy and inefficient, in order to make them more fit for purpose in the contemporary world. These changes are to be implemented within a challenging timetable to meet tight deadlines.

Midweek we had a speech by the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who spoke inspiringly and honestly about the need for kindness, dignity and compassion to characterise our relationships in society, as well as the exchanges in Parliament. It is encouraging to know that the church has significant influence on our politicians.

Just as much as church administration needs to be made fit for purpose, so does our approach to ministry of word and sacrament. We need to be able to connect effectively with people, and this was the focus of the Panel on Review and reform.

The report of the World Mission Council was interesting and much work is done, discretely as well as in full view, to help and support Christians who are persecuted for their faith around the world. Again it was encouraging to hear how the church has meaningful input to the political sphere in this context.

Circulation breaks throughout the week gave us opportunity to prevent deep vein thrombosis and to meet people from other churches and countries.



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