

Assembly Update 4

Monday, 20 May, 2013 – Afternoon

The Afternoon debate was opened by a former Moderator who stated that the number of pages of the Book of Reports – the Blue Book it is called – is more than the combined reports of four Councils of the Church and he questioned whether the issue before the Assembly was more important than the reports of the Social Care Council, the Ministries Council among them. He declared that it was not. He said that Jesus did not hold scripture as absolute and that the Church has changed in its understanding of scripture – when he became a minister, women were not admitted to the ministry and if that had not changed the Moderator's own congregation and this Assembly would be much the poorer. His point was greeted with warm applause.

The actual debate on the Report was continued by another minister who was moving an addition to the deliverance asking that, if and when the Overture goes down to Presbyteries for a decision, there is adequate background information and, further, that voting in Presbyteries to be by ballot so that individual belief is preserved. This raised a number of questions but the motion was carried by 514 to 96.

Next to move a motion was a professor in one of the Church's Theological Colleges. He was asking for a way of accepting a motion for a "mixed economy" and having the recently created Theological Forum consider the relevant ecclesiological positions informing such a mixture. Another minister, known to be a traditionalist, stated that both sides wish to preserve the peace of the Church and asked that the Theological Forum's consideration of the issue be attached to whatever deliverance is passed. The Assembly actually only voted on attaching the addendum to one section of the deliverance. It was passed by 547 to 89.

A former Principal Clerk moved that in terms of those ministers and deacons ordained before 31st May 2009 the Assembly should pass an interim act protecting them whatever the Assembly did at the end of the day. The amendment was approved but with less of a majority. Another past Moderator moved a counter-motion to two sections of the deliverance of the Theological Commission, which would have made all persons in a Civil Partnership eligible for selection or training as a candidate for ordination on the same terms and conditions as those not in a Civil Partnership. However, in his speech, he said that he remembered that in his ordination he promised to seek the peace of the Church and, to the surprise of the Assembly, he asked permission to withdraw his motion. The Assembly agreed. He was followed by the immediate past Moderator, the Very Revd Albert Bogle, who moved a motion which had the intention of holding the Church together. His motion affirmed the Church's historic and current doctrine and practice in relation to human sexuality but nevertheless permit Kirk Sessions who wish to depart from that

doctrine and practice to do so. His seconder said that he did not wish to depart from the traditional position of the Church based on the scriptures, but he believed in the freedom for Ministers and Kirk Sessions if they so wish to depart from the traditional position of the Church without fear of discipline. An amendment to the amendment added the restriction that no action on opening the ministries to people in Civil Partnerships can take place until the issue returns to the Assembly with an Overture prepared by the Legal Questions Committee.

The Moderator reminded the Assembly that the debate at this point had only dealt with amendments to the actual Commission Deliverance and that the Assembly had not yet reached the point of debating the actual Deliverance. As too often happens, the Assembly got into a number of legal problems to do with amendments. It has to be said that the Moderator has controlled the debate with gentle firmness and has made use of her legal advisors. The debate has been pursued with calmness and grace and the impression where we work is that both sides in the debate wished to avoid anything that would split the Church.

At last, at 4.14pm, the Assembly turned to the debate on the substance of the Report of the Theological Commission. The first speech was in favour of the Commission's motion which acknowledges that the question of those in same sex relationships who are also in a Civil Partnership is a matter to which liberty of conscience guaranteed by the Church on matters which do not enter into the substance of the faith actually applies. Another commissioner moved that the Assembly depart from the matter. As he did not have a seconder, his proposal fell. The next contribution came from an elder who pleaded with the Assembly to decide on this matter today. However, the legal complexities of the Church are such that a decision of this magnitude simply cannot be taken immediately by a single Assembly.

At 10 minutes to five the Moderator stated that some 21 commissioners still wished to speak. All spoke with a gentle passion for how they have struggled with this issue and they have done so, without exception, with a genuine desire not to allow the Church to divide. The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland declared that if the Church of Scotland went down a revisionist road, it would cause difficulties between his Church and the Church of Scotland. Another Commissioner, a former hospice chaplain, urged the Assembly to remember that we are all created in the image of God. He asked would God call one of his creation to service and deny another because of a given difference in their sexuality? He ended by saying that he dreamed that his grandchildren would be known not by the nature of their sexuality but by the truth of their character. Another commissioner declared that he was a traditionalist but, whatever the Church does today, he would stay in the church because, he said, "This is my Church and I am a part of it!" Another traditionalist supported the motion from the immediate past Moderator which, he said, maintains the traditionalist nature of the Church but allows those who feel differently and are comfortable with it to go that way.

When the time reached 5.30 pm the Moderator had still 21 people wishing to speak. In the interests of the Assembly, she said she would call the six names who had been waiting longest. The first was a Revisionist who said the important issue is not our sexual orientation but our love. Jesus told us to love our brothers as he loves us. The Moderator of the United Reformed Church said the future of the Church has to be in being an honest Church. He said that he cannot be in a Church that welcomes people from ethnic minorities but which rejects other minorities of people of a homosexual orientation.

Finally, the Moderator called the Assembly to the conclusion of the debate with the closing address from the Convener of the Theological Commission. "Whatever we do," he said, "we have heard the Word of God for our Church. Listen to the Word of God."

On taking the vote 624 votes were cast and from the three options before it, the traditional option fell. On taking the vote between the amended revisionist option of the Commission and the motion proposed by the immediate past Moderator, the latter was approved. The matter is now sent to the Legal Questions Committee to bring an Overture to the 2014 Assembly. The Moderator then thanked the Commission's Convener and discharged the Commission.

The Assembly rose at five past six to return tomorrow for the Reports of the World Mission Council, the Church of Scotland Guild, the Social Care Council and the Mission and Discipleship Council. We will report again after the morning session. Join us then.