

SYNOD REPORTS

General Assembly of the Church of Scotland

May 2018

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INTRODUCTION

The General Assembly met in Edinburgh from 19 to 25 May, with the Rt Revd Susan Brown BD DipMin, Chaplain in Ordinary and Minister of Dornoch in the Presbytery of Sutherland, installed as Moderator. Her appointment as Moderator fell on the fiftieth anniversary of Act XXV 1968 permitting the ordination of women to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. This year's Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly was the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry.

Four new Acts of Assembly were passed: the Virtual Attendance at Meetings Act (Act VI 2018), the Parish Ministry Act (Act II 2018), the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacrament and Deacons Act (Act I 2018) and the Safeguarding Act (Act XVI 2018). A few legal highlights are also included in what follows.

LEGAL QUESTIONS COMMITTEE

An overture for a new Discipline Act relating to ministries and congregational office-bearers, which replaces four previous Acts, was sent down to presbyteries under the Barrier Act 1697.

An additional motion was included for the debate on conducting same-sex marriages, asking the Assembly to instruct the preparation of legislation for the 2020 Assembly which would only permit individuals, on application, to conduct same-sex marriages and to seek to provide protections for those who would refuse to take part. An early amendment was approved which insisted that an Act be brought forward only if the Legal Questions Committee felt that the legal safeguards were sufficient.

The recommendation that the size of the judicial pool should be reduced from 40 to 25 members was agreed by the Assembly.

The Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacrament (consolidating Act I 2018) clarifies the forms of ordained ministries and the basis of induction to a charge or other appointment.

The Virtual Attendance at Meetings Act (Act VI 2018) provides an innovative way of making provision for meeting attendance to be virtual – except for business regarding nominating committees for pastoral vacancies under the Vacancy Procedure Act (Act VIII 2003).

MINISTRIES COUNCIL

The Ministries Council produced legislation on various issues pertaining to human resources, including on continuing parish ministry beyond the age of 75; ill-health; and finance towards visas for those entering the UK from abroad to be inducted into a charge. Notably, those who wish to continue in ministry beyond 75 would have to apply six months before their seventy-fifth birthday and would be able to be granted permission to practise for extended periods of two years at a time.

An update was given on the implementation of the Registration of Ministries Act (Act II 2017), noting that it has been a long process. On the floor of the Assembly, some commissioners expressed concern about the categories of ministries, especially chaplains in non-parochial appointments.

Stipends were increased by 1.5 per cent across the five bands and agreement was sought by the Assembly to depart from linking the annual increase to the rate of inflation. Review of salaried ministries' scales is ongoing.

SAFEGUARDING COMMITTEE

The Committee set out appropriate standards in line with Scots law on the protection of vulnerable groups.

CHURCH AND SOCIETY COUNCIL

The Church and Society Council was defeated over a proposed deliverance asking the Church to cease investing in the oil and gas industry. The Assembly also affirmed the current position of the Church against the use of nuclear weapons and maintained that the United Kingdom should remain in the European Union.

GENERAL TRUSTEES

The General Trustees continued to encourage congregations to take full advantage of their properties and to ensure that they are used efficiently; and examples were given of creative uses of congregational estates. The Trustees also proposed a deliverance to

encourage the Trustees and the Council of Assembly to have discussions with the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator so that Central Fabric Fund loans are excluded from Congregational accounts as an Income Resource in line with the treatment adopted by the Charity Commissions for England & Wales and for Northern Ireland.

This would effectively help to highlight the fact that congregations receiving large loans for building works are not indulging in ‘false accounting’.

It was noted that the value of heritable¹ properties held in the name of congregational boards by the General Trustees was £515 million. That does not include heritable property owned locally and held by congregational trustees.

SOCIAL CARE COUNCIL

The Social Care Council (formerly the Church of Scotland Board of Social Responsibility) has engaged with the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry in giving evidence and assisting in investigations. The council has also kept up with new legislation: the introduction of the duty of candour imposed under the Health (Tobacco, Nicotine etc. and Care) (Scotland) Act 2016, which came into force on 1 April 2018; the introduction of the new Health and Social Care Standards, which came into effect on 1 May 2018; and the Data Protection Act 2018, which came into effect on 25 May.

The council has a pension fund deficit of £10.3 million and steps are being taken to reduce it.

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH

An overture from the Presbytery of Melrose and Peebles, led by a former principal clerk, was received to revisit the status of the Westminster Confession of Faith. This is still the principal subordinate standard of faith of the Church of Scotland – except for that part repealed under Act V 1986.² After a lengthy

¹ In English law, ‘real property’.

² Declaratory Act anent The Westminster Confession of Faith, which declares that ‘This Church no longer affirms’ various condemnations of Roman Catholicism contained in the text of the Confession.

debate, the vote to accept the petition to ask the Theological Forum to review the status of the subordinate standards was passed. The petition called for a response by 2020, but the Convener suggested that this timescale may not be adequate.

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Governing Body of the Church in Wales

April and September 2018

LYNETTE CHANDLER

Solicitor to the Province of Wales

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESSES: APRIL AND SEPTEMBER

The Archbishop of Wales, the Most Revd John Davies, reminded members that the Church was still addressing challenges and implementing radical changes following the Harries Review in 2012. He reflected that the Church in Wales is planning to celebrate its centenary in 2020 by ‘recognising concrete steps, solid progress and commitment to our core purpose in which everyone has a part to play’. The archbishop went on to remind members that a year ago the Governing Body committed itself to putting evangelism at the heart of the Church, stating that we had more than 1,200 local church buildings in regular use and that they must be places where newcomers and inquirers from communities feel welcome. He emphasised that the Church in Wales is not a private membership organisation existing to provide comfortably familiar services to its members. Nourishing and accessible worship and teaching in a variety of styles and forms must be offered to all who seek it.

Turning to the Evangelism Fund launched on Pentecost Sunday (which is a £10 million fund set aside by the Representative Body of the Church in Wales explicitly for evangelism project work), he reported that the Representative Body was clear that the fund was not to be used to ‘prop up’ existing structures but must be used to encourage significant new work and initiatives in communities and parishes across Wales. The archbishop reminded the members that, even though ‘The Bishops may articulate particular visions and seek others to develop policies and strategies, these will remain mere plans and heady aspirations unless individual contributions to the overall tasks at grass-roots level are encouraged, recognised, affirmed and supported.’