Assembly Arrangements Committee 2017 – Convener’s speech

**20th May 2017**

Moderator, first of all, we congratulate you on your election, and wish you well, not only for this Assembly, but also for your year as Moderator. At this time last year, you were occupying a different seat at this table. As commissioners may know, it is conventional for the Moderator to thank a retiring Convener, but to save any embarrassment you may feel, Moderator, at the prospect of extending thanks to yourself as the retiring Convener of the Assembly Arrangements Committee, we trust you will permit us to thank you now for your very notable contribution to the work of the Committee over the past eight years. Certainly we shall miss the stylish wit and humour which you have brought so regularly to our meetings but we are delighted to know that these - and many other gifts - are now to be put to good use for the wider work of the church and we wish you every blessing in the year ahead.

Turning to the Committee’s work during the past year, matters relating to the General Assembly Hall itself have occupied a considerable amount of time. This great Hall is a truly historic venue in our capital city and income from letting it is used to offset the costs of maintaining it. But the Committee has been concerned in recent years that the existing contract for the marketing of the Hall was not producing the revenue that we felt it could. We are currently working on a draft 5-year plan to develop the potential of the Hall as a venue for letting and as things stand at the moment we are confident that income can be increased. In the meantime, the arrangements we have put in place for liaising with existing and potential clients - including the successful part-time appointment of a Hall Officer - have been working well.

Thanks to the efforts of those involved, not least the technical staff who provide an excellent service to ourselves and to outside users, we have built up good relationships with existing clients over the years and already this year we have been delighted to welcome new ones. We were particularly delighted when the Edinburgh International Festival chose the Assembly Hall as the venue from which to launch its 70th anniversary programme. We remain open-minded as to the future direction that use of the Hall may take outside the period of the General Assembly and we continue to liaise with New College about the timing of their major refurbishment works. Commissioners will be well aware of the scaffolding currently around the exterior of the New College building. We were glad to see however that a large banner which was fixed to the front of the building earlier this year, advertising an event called “Monkey Business”, had been taken down again well before our General Assembly!

As we were instructed last year, we gave further detailed consideration to a June date for the Assembly. Obstacles to moving the date were greater than we had anticipated: the timings of examinations and graduations are nowadays much more variable than they used to be; conference-type accommodation in Edinburgh is neither as cheap nor as readily available as we had hoped. But the most decisive argument for keeping the Assembly in May was the importance to us of our Assembly date not conflicting with the dates of other assemblies and synods where ecumenical relationships continue to be greatly enriched by opportunities for reciprocal attendance.

On the move towards the provision of electronic versions of reports and papers, commissioners will be well aware that at many Kirk Session and Presbytery meetings now, there is an ever-increasing use of iPads and other electronic devices. Many presbyters and elders, especially in eco-congregations, prefer not to have to print out lengthy reports and now choose to receive their papers by email or by downloading them. The General Assembly has switched this year to the issue of electronic material, unless paper copies have been specifically requested. We know that this move has been welcomed by many but we made it very clear in last year’s report, and we repeat now, that paper copies will continue to be available for those who specifically request them. The Committee will keep these developments under close review following this year’s Assembly and we shall also welcome feedback from those using the App to access Assembly publications.

We hope that commissioners, particularly first time commissioners, have enjoyed and found useful the updated video clips on Assembly procedures, and also the trial this year of short information clips from the Conveners of some of the larger Councils and Committees, telling us about their work and about some of the issues contained in their reports to the General Assembly. We include mention in our report of the additional “replay” facility being introduced on the website this year and this week we are also to be trialling a method of recording proceedings for playback in 3D. Our aim in all of this is to make the business and procedures of the Assembly more accessible and available to a wider audience.

Alongside work in these areas, the Committee continues to work on the broader picture in reviewing and reshaping the General Assembly. We have focussed this year, on a trial basis, on reshaping Saturday’s events, but we shall continue to reconsider the shape of the Assembly week and the effectiveness of its processes and procedures. The General Assembly is the highest court of our church. Participation in its decision-making - whether in relation to the making of church law, or indeed any of its other functions - carries with it considerable responsibility. A major part of the commissioner’s role is to participate in effective governance - by scrutinising reports, by questioning and by holding to account the councils and committees which report to the General Assembly. Our processes and procedures therefore must help rather than hinder this. We must seek to ensure that they are fit for purpose. For example, in recent years and following extensive work by the Legal Questions Committee, some of the judicial functions formerly carried out within the General Assembly itself are now performed by smaller panels and commissions of the Assembly. We need to keep under review how we strike the right balance between transparency and efficiency in dealing with other types of business too. Sometimes even small changes can make a difference, such as the proposal to allocate a maximum of 15 rather than 20 minutes for Conveners’ speeches, in order to allow more time for questions and debate. And it may be that in future we shall have to consider, for example, whether there should be stricter limits on what sort of matters may be brought in Supplementary Reports, to ensure that commissioners have adequate time to consider the issues coming before the Assembly.

Highly important though the General Assembly’s primary functions are in relation to governance and the shaping of church law, another important function of the General Assembly is fellowship and encounter. Our Heart and Soul event has become a happy and relaxed part of the fellowship of Assembly week and we very much look forward to seeing you tomorrow in Princes Street Gardens between 2pm and 6pm. This year’s theme, Word of Life, offers us a wonderful opportunity to engage with church folk - and with non-church folk who are curious about what the church does. During the afternoon, together with our visitors and delegates, we shall meet people from our congregations and from Church Councils and Committees, using the theme of Word of Life to tell their stories in different ways. You don’t even have to press Button 5 to be there - so please come along and be part of this open-air gathering!

Moderator, the Committee has cause to be grateful to those who work behind the scenes on various aspects of assembly arrangements throughout the year. At this point we should like to highlight our particular thanks to David McColl, who has served diligently and cheerfully as Assembly Officer since 2000, and who will retire from that role after this year’s Assembly. We shall miss David’s presence and would like him to know how much we have valued his steady hand in carrying out his duties. We are very pleased to invite the Assembly to appoint Craig Marshall as Assembly Officer from June this year. Craig is currently Depute Assembly Officer – and has, as you may have noticed already today, a practised touch on the famous Assembly gong.

We also wish to record our immense thanks to Alison Murray. Alison will be retiring from what is a particularly key role in relation to Assembly business. We are grateful to Alison for her great professionalism and the unparalleled support she has provided for so many Moderators and Conveners. It is an indication of the esteem in which she is held that the Moderator has honoured her by inviting her during this Assembly week to wear the Disruption Brooch.

Later in the week, tribute will be paid to the Very Rev Dr John Chalmers who currently serves the General Assembly not only as Principal Clerk but also as Clerk to the Assembly Arrangements Committee. At this point we wish simply to acknowledge the enormous debt that the Church of Scotland owes to him and to thank him for his significant contribution to the work of our Committee.

Moderator, I present the report, and move the deliverance.