

GENERAL
ASSEMBLY
SUPPLEMENT

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General Assembly 2022

- Final approval for Church of Scotland ministers to officiate same sex marriages
- Help for ministers in fuel poverty
- Historic Declaration of Friendship with Catholic Church in Scotland
- Presbytery mergers agreed
- Further reforms to central Church
- Westminster Confession of Faith retained as subordinate standard, alongside new Book of Confessions



SAME SEX MARRIAGE

The General Assembly gave final approval to the legislation that will allow Kirk ministers to register to become celebrants of same sex marriages if they wish.

In the debate, holders of the traditional view that marriage should be between a man and a woman continued to argue that same sex marriages are unscriptural. The Rev Scott W Burton said the position against same sex marriage was 'about a faith that

says it's more important to be in line with God and his Word than what my community, my nation or my world might say otherwise'.

The Rev Philip Gunn said: "Quite simply put, this overture is not biblical and we see the scriptures, old and new, that point to God's teaching on marriage and human sexuality."

In response to a question on whether the church would financially support a minister who was taken to court over refusing to

officiate a same sex marriage, Procurator, Laura Dunlop QC said that she considered the protections built into the scheme, under which ministers are legally banned from officiating same sex weddings unless they 'opt in', to be sufficient.

The legislation was drawn up by the Legal Questions Committee in response to an instruction of the General Assembly of 2018. Delayed due to the cancellation of the 2020 Assembly, it was approved last year, and by

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2022 SUPPLEMENT

a majority of presbyteries under the Barrier Act.

Urging the Assembly to approve the proposals, the Rev Craig Dobney said: "I have seen the heartbreak of those in same sex relationships in our congregations who are unable to marry in their home church, devout Christians though they are. To be married in front of their church families would mean everything to them."

And the Rev Dr Lezley Stewart pointed out that the debate had been going on for years, and at every point the church had continued its trajectory towards allowing same sex marriage. "It's General Assembly 2022 and we need to take account of that collective voice over many years," she added.

The Assembly passed the Act by 274 to 136.

Later in the week, there was a question about an amendment to the Marriage Services Act resulting from the decision. The Rev Michael Weaver said there was concern among ministers holding the traditional position about the removal of the words 'husband and wife'.

Mrs Dunlop said that the inclusive language contained in the Act, which meets the legal requirements for the solemnisation of marriage, did not preclude the use of additional wording.

MINISTERS AND FUEL POVERTY

The Assembly voted to introduce a scheme to support parish ministers facing hardship due to rising energy prices.

On the opening day of the General Assembly, ministers spoke of deciding not to put the heating on in winter, only heating one room of the manse, or even skipping meals as the cost of heating large, often old and poorly-insulated buildings rises by thousands of pounds.

The Rev Iain Majcher said he feared for his family this winter. The Rev Peter Johnston said that he and his wife had already turned the heating off last winter, and had still faced a monthly direct debit of £572. The Rev Bryan Kerr said that while Church of Scotland ministers were not poor, worries about fuel bills were, for many, 'overtaking their ability to minister'.

Later in the week, the General Trustees accepted new measures aimed at making sure manses are energy efficient.

Congregations were instructed to provide an Energy Performance Certificate with



Archbishop Leo Cushley and the Rt Rev Iain Greenshields, Moderator of the General Assembly, after the Assembly approved the Saint Margaret Declaration.

the Manse Condition Schedule from the end of this year, and to ensure the Energy Performance Rating for the manse is within categories A-C by 2025 – either by making improvements or by replacing the manse.

CHURCH REFORMS

The Assembly heard several reminders of the need to keep up the pace of reforms. The Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, Convener of the Assembly Trustees, said in his speech: "The task remains redesigning the architecture of the whole system in order to build a Church of Scotland which is relevant and fit for purpose."

And the Rev Rosie Frew, convener of the Faith Nurture Forum, acknowledged there had been pain over the past year as the Church grappled with Presbytery restructuring and Presbytery Mission Planning, but said: "We're currently living in an in-between world – in between an old system and a new system. It's like being in a chrysalis, a dark and difficult place of transformation before the beauty of the butterfly emerges."

The Assembly agreed further reform of the central structures, under which the work of the Faith Nurture and Faith Impact Forums will be brought together under a single Active Faith Leadership Team with four Programme Groups: Mission, People & Training, Public Life & Global Justice, and Resource & Presence.

The process of merging presbyteries continued as the General Assembly approved the creation of four new presbyteries: Lothian and the Borders (merging Duns, Jedburgh, Lothian and Melrose & Peebles), Perth (merging Angus,

Dundee, Dunkeld & Meigle, Perth and Stirling), Forth Valley & Clydesdale (Falkirk joining the existing presbytery of that name) and the North East and Northern Isles (merging Aberdeen & Shetland, Gordon, Buchan, Kincardine & Deeside, Orkney and Moray).

Proposed arrangements for a Pioneer Mission Fund and the Seeds for Growth Fund, which will support the establishment of new worshipping communities and work with the under 40s, were also passed.

DECLARATION OF FRIENDSHIP

The General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a Declaration of Friendship with the Catholic Church in Scotland.

In the Declaration, to be named the Saint Margaret Declaration, the two Churches 'recognise each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and wish to express our friendship and respect for one another as fellow Christians, citizens and partners in announcing the Kingdom of God in our land'.

The Rev Sandy Horsburgh, convener of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, said that friendship was 'a key biblical concept'. He added: "Friendship is a very deep relationship, a relationship of conscious and deliberate choice, in which individuality is respected and there is room for disagreement, but a relationship in which we stand alongside one another, support one another, rejoice together and weep together, pray for and with each other, and do things together."

"We regret that our two churches have not always been friends, that we have not always recognised one another as children of God in Christ, because we should have

done. We recognise our need for repentance and forgiveness for the hurts and harms we have caused one another. In making this Declaration of Friendship, we are decisively and deliberately putting these things behind us."

Archbishop Leo Cushley, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh, told the Assembly that the Declaration meant that the two churches 'stand shoulder to shoulder before an unbelieving world'. He added: "By acknowledging all the good we hold in common, we can walk and pray together as friends, deepen our affective unity and be a more authentic Christian witness in the land."

The title Saint Margaret Declaration was proposed by the Rev Dr Grant Barclay, who said that St Margaret, the 11th century Queen of Scotland, was 'a figure of unity in political and church life in our nation', and closely associated with Scotland's newest city, Dunfermline. The suggestion was warmly welcomed by Archbishop Cushley and the Moderator, minister of Dunfermline:

St Margaret's Church.

BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

The Assembly agreed to the creation of a new Book of Confessions, retaining the Westminster Confession of Faith as a subordinate standard of the Church, but adding other confessions that 'express the range and depth of Reformed thought'; and the preparation of teaching materials on the confessional position of the Church and the vows of office holders.

Convener of the Theological Forum, the Rev Dr Liam Fraser, told the Assembly that the reforms would mean Church office holders who disagree with the Westminster Confession would no longer have to subscribe to it; that those for whom the Confession is important could be reassured that it was being retained as a subordinate standard; and that the new teaching resources would ensure that 'the Reformed identity of the Church of Scotland will be maintained'. He added that it would 'resolve a disagreement over the role of the

Westminster Confession that has continued for centuries, allowing us to move on to other pressing matters'.

The Rev Mike Goss, who admitted he had been 'deeply suspicious' of the proposals for reform of the Church's confessional position, praised the proposals. He said: "I think the work that has been done to try to do something coherent that could be assented to by the whole church and gives us a confessional basis is to be welcomed... I am also hugely grateful for the emphasis on education, training and learning. All of this can only be deeply helpful."

CHAPLAINCY PRAISE

In a sometimes emotional session, the convener of the Committee on Chaplains to HM Forces recalled praying with a bereaved refugee while she was serving as a chaplain.

The Rev Dr Marjory MacLean said that in 2016 she had been on the Navy vessel HMS Enterprise as it rescued migrants trying to cross the Mediterranean from Libya.

She said: "On that unforgettable day, with

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The Rev Dr Marjory MacLean

over 700 migrants squeezed onto our quarterdeck, we discovered that two women had died in the lower layer of humanity crammed two deep onto one of the inflatable craft. Each of the two was travelling with family members who were distraught. The sister of one of these ladies was an East African woman, French-speaking and wearing a wooden cross round her neck...

"I extemporised a prayer, with my young colleague at my shoulder translating as best he could. And then, suddenly, the sorrowing figure took a breath and began to pray; desolate, lamenting prayer, desperate, fast prayer, too fast for the young lieutenant beside me to keep up with the translation. He looked at me in panic, and I waved him away. It didn't matter to me what she was saying; she was praying now her own sorrow and need, and I only needed to keep holding her hands."

As is customary on 'Chaplains' Day', the General Assembly was addressed by a senior member of the British military. Lieutenant General Nick Borton, Colonel of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, said the Chaplains Department have 'a long and glorious history of providing pastoral care, spiritual support and moral guidance'.

KEY DECISIONS AND SPEECHES

● The General Assembly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, calling for an

immediate ceasefire and 'just and peaceful solution'.

- The Faith Impact Forum introduced work on a Jewish-Christian glossary intended to aid understanding between the two faiths. Rabbi David Mason, who is working with the Forum on the glossary, said it offered a way that the two communities can express opinions without offending each other. "Harmony doesn't mean we will agree, it means we will disagree well. There is no attempt to change the other, just to understand the other in a deeper way."

- The chair of Christian Aid, Archbishop John Sentamu, challenged the Church not to resist change, and to continue its work in challenging poverty. He said: "The harvest is ripe and you as a national church have the greatest delight to make Jesus Christ visible and known in many different places, tackling poverty, and always rejoicing that He who called you is faithful."

- The outgoing Principal Clerk, the Rev Dr George Whyte, urged the Church of Scotland to show humility and listen to others. He said: "Any group which lacks humility doesn't listen... either to the God who might have new plans, or to the neighbour who might have new needs, new questions or - heaven forbid - new insights."

- The Rev Fiona Smith was sworn in as Dr Whyte's replacement, becoming the first woman to hold the role permanently.

- Professor Jason Leitch, the Scottish Government's National Clinical Director, thanked the Church for everything it had done during the pandemic: "Whether you run the tiniest church in Scotland or one of the largest fellowships, the work you've done for those you serve has been absolutely without precedent."

- The Assembly agreed to recognise the 'terrible harm' caused under Scotland's historic witchcraft laws and to apologise for the role of the Church in persecuting victims.

- The convener of the Social Care Council (CrossReach), the Rev Thom Riddell, said that 'thousands of lives have continued to be

transformed over the past year' by CrossReach services. He urged the Assembly to make their voices heard as the Scottish Government presents legislation for a National Care Service in coming weeks.

- During the report of the Iona Community, there was applause for the musician and worship leader John Bell, who retires later this year.

- The General Trustees encouraged Commissioners to write to their MSPs to protest against new rules which will require church office bearers to be named on the Land Register.

- Members of the Church were urged to put themselves forward to serve on the national committees. Convener of the Nominations Committee, the Rev Julie Rennick said: "If you haven't taken that step yet, please consider it... it's not just a privilege, it's often enjoyable too."

- The National Convener of the Church of Scotland Guild, Margaret Muir, said the last two years have proved the movement is 'not afraid of challenge or change'. She said: "If you had asked what would happen to the Guild if a global pandemic closed everything down for 18 months not many people would have thought we would survive, but survive we have."

- The Lord High Commissioner, Lord Hodge, said that the week had given him 'a strong sense of the energy and vibrancy of initiatives being taken at a local level' across Scotland.

- The Moderator, the Rt Rev Iain Greenshields, praised the Assembly's willingness to work together to find a way forward through difficult debates. "If the Church is to do anything it has to work together on mission," he said, "And it has to work together to bring Christ to the people and the people to Christ, and surely that is our greatest privilege."

Words by Thomas Baldwin

Pictures by Andrew O'Brien for the Church of Scotland

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