



## **Yesterday at the General Assembly – Tuesday June 6**

Following the ceremony, praise and worship of Monday's Opening Night and the installation of the new Moderator, Rt. Rev. Dr. Noble McNeely, yesterday marked the first full day of business at this year's General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), which is meeting in Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

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**NEWS EXTRA June 7**

Business before the Assembly concerned the Church's plans to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation; an alternative presentation by the Council for Congregational Life and Witness on the topic 'Fellow workers with God who make things grow'; and a report by the Church's Social Witness Council on how PCI, by providing residential, nursing, respite and various other types of care, is delivering an efficient Social Care service.

At the start of the annual weeklong gathering of 1,000 ministers and elders from the Church's 500-plus congregations across Ireland, the Very Rev. Dr. Roy Patton, Convener of the General Assembly Business Committee was the first to offer the new Moderator, Dr. Noble McNeely "God's blessing" as he chairs the Assembly during the week.

Dr. Patton highlighted some elements of the Order of Business, especially the alternative presentations saying that the General Assembly was more than "...simply a business meeting. Through the alternative presentations each afternoon we hope Assembly members will be engaged, inspired and enabled to participate more fully in the work of the Assembly."

## **Sensitive in speech, gracious in our communication**

He also reminded Members that the Assembly wasn't meeting behind closed doors or closed airways. "In seeking to be faithful there may well be things to be said that others will not like. But let's be thoughtful in what we say, sensitive in speech, gracious in our communication, commending Christ and His Good News at all times. Let the quality and standard of our discourse and conversations be an example and encouragement to others."

A major emphasis was placed of the Church's plans to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Very Rev. Dr. Rob Craig, Convener of the General Council said that 2017 marked the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. "In common with the Protestant denominations we look back to the person of Martin Luther and the nailing of his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg. An action, whose consequences for the Church, both for his lifetime and beyond, he could not have foreseen."

To mark the anniversary Dr. Craig said that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is holding three Reformation Celebrations in Belfast, Dublin and Londonderry. Entitled 'Faith at the Crossroads –

Rediscovering the Reformation', the keynote speaker will be Dr. Conrad Mbewe of Kabwata Baptist Church in Zambia, whose preaching ministry has led him to be described as 'the Spurgeon of Africa'. Each event is free of charge with praise led by members of New Irish Arts.

In a resolution passed by the General Assembly, it welcomed the plans to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary and commented the three events to congregations for their support. In a separate resolution, the General Assembly encouraged all congregations to "pray for and support 'Everyday Disciples', the Residential General Assembly being held in Ulster University, Coleraine...' in August.

## **Special General Assembly**

Since 1990 the PCI has held four special residential Assemblies and this year, every congregation has been invited to send three representatives where the theme of 'Everyday Disciples' will be explored through praise, prayer, seminar and keynote address. The Moderator has also taken the theme for his year in office.

Reporting on the Special Assembly, Rev. Gordon Best said, "it is more vital than ever before that God's people are equipped and empowered to

take Jesus out and make him known in our work places, the places where we socially interact with friends and neighbours, our places of recreation, sport and leisure, and even – sometimes hardest of all – within our own family homes and family circles...

“This should be a marvellous week of worship, Bible teaching, of learning and growing together as a Church, rising to the challenge of this call to our generation to be effective salt-soaked, light-bearing everyday disciples in the years ahead. We look forward to a great week together.”

Traditionally on the first day of business at the General Assembly, the Moderator receives guests from corresponding churches from Ireland, UK and overseas. This year was no different, welcoming more overseas delegates than in previous years.

### **Special greetings from Syria and Lebanon**

Guests were welcomed from as far afield as East Africa, Pakistan, Latvia and Hungary. Speaking on behalf of the overseas representatives, the Moderator of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, Rev. Fadi Elia Dagher said, “Although thousands of kilometres separate me from my home country I feel as if I am standing in

my own Church, in front of my own congregation and with my fellow ministers. This special feeling is not only due to the shared beliefs and the Christian bond between us, but also because the Irish Church was among the first contributors in founding our churches in Syria and Lebanon.

“In the past five years, churches have been destroyed, congregations relocated, elderly and children dead and suffering. Yet our Christian faith has kept us rooted in the region where Christ also suffered.

“Your support has been a cornerstone that enabled us to remain steady and strong in our witness for the Word of God; and in ministering to the needy, sick and homeless. I would like to thank you again for inviting us to this General Assembly.”

Rev. Dagher then presented the Moderator with the Lord’s Prayer written on a cedar wood plaque, to enable him to always remember that he has a sister church in the Middle East. Dr. McNeely expressed his thanks, adding that it would be given a prominent place in his home.

“It is significant to hear from you today, we hear news of your situation conveyed through our prayer topics. We assure you of our prayers and

the continued support of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland”, said Dr. McNeely.

The Moderator also received local representatives from the Methodist Church in Ireland, Religious Society of Friends and the Church of Ireland.

The Church of Scotland delegation was led by its Moderator, Rt. Rev. Derek Browning, who brought warm greetings from their General Assembly, “In these challenging times for the country that we love, it is good that we continue to remember each other in prayer. In these times when many wish to pull up drawbridges and patrol barricades, it is good that people of faith seek to keep the doors and windows of love open, where all are welcome and may find a place in the graciousness of the economy of God.”

### **Minute’s silence**

At 11am the Assembly joined with those across the UK for a minute’s silence as they remembered all who have been affected by the terrorist attack that took place in London at the weekend. This was led by the Moderator.

In the first of three alternative presentations that seek to give specific insight into the work of the Church in different areas of its ministry, the Council for Congregational Life and Witness (CCLW) presented 'Fellow workers with God who makes things grow.'

## **Fruitful congregations**

Taken from I Corinthians 3:7, the presentation reinforced the denomination's Fruitful Congregations initiative and was an opportunity to draw the General Assembly's attention to some of the key aspects of what 'fruitful' means. Three particular areas were highlighted:

- The development of Women's Ministry
- Leadership development, an important aspect of the Council's developing work, emphasized by the launch of a DVD Bible Study resource for congregations called 'Valuable Leadership'
- The SPUD Report, ('Speaking, Participating, Understanding and Deciding') which highlighted the importance of congregations making use of social media for communication with the emerging generation and in the areas of outreach and discipleship.

An important aspect of work that was also reported on was 'A vision for small and fruitful' -



an examination of existing congregational capacity for developing life and witness across the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Developing this ‘vision for small and fruitful’, Rev. Dr. Graham Connor, Convener of CCLW said, “70% of our congregations have fewer than 150 ‘active’ communicants, we could describe these as small. The story of the people of God in Scripture and in history clearly shows that small can be fruitful.

“I believe that this piece of work which we hope will ‘under God nurture small congregations in identifying encouraging steps towards more fruitful life and witness’ could be of great mutual benefit to the vast majority of our congregations across the island of Ireland.”

## **Effective social care**

The final report on this first full day of the General Assembly was from the Council for Social Witness (CSW). Members heard how PCI is delivering an effective Social Care service through the provision of residential, nursing, supported housing, respite, day care and various community based programmes.

Rev. Dr. Trevor McCormick, CSW Convener, gave the reminder that we are our 'brother's keeper'. There are brothers and sisters who have a particular physical or learning disability. The hosting of Christmas Cracker and now a Summer Cracker, is an innovative and encouraging programme giving contact with many who can so often feel forgotten or excluded", said Dr. McCormick.

The role of our 'brother's keeper was expanded to also include those who need support, care or nursing as their years increase. "The care crisis is too often presented as an economic, not a moral, issue... may we never forget that the question of responsibility is a moral question."

Dr. McCormick reported that the emotive headlines of a 'Dementia Tax' has been "troubling to many, so as a body of compassionate and caring people there is a need to be careful in our language and active in our care. Therefore the creation and opening of Dementia Gardens at both Corkey House and Sunnyside is timely."

He also reported that the reconfiguration of the newly named 'Trinity House' building in Garvagh is making good progress, with many of our residents and staff from Ard Cluan in

Londonderry and York House in Portrush looking forward to relocating by late autumn.

The Church's commitment to providing Adult Safeguarding Congregational Policy and Guidelines was confirmed. "As a Church we have a duty to protect all who are members or participate in the life and work of our church community. Harm, abuse or exploitation can happen anywhere, even in churches. Safeguarding is everyone's business and should be an integral part of congregational life", said Lindsay Conway, Social Witness Secretary.

Details of all resolutions and reports to this year's General Assembly can be found at [www.presbyterianireland.org/GA2017](http://www.presbyterianireland.org/GA2017).

Most of the General Assembly's proceedings are streamed live and can be viewed at [www.presbyterianireland.org](http://www.presbyterianireland.org). Live updates on proceedings can be followed @pciassembly on Twitter using the hashtag #PCIGA17.

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