



forward together

www.forwardtogether.org.uk

An organisation for evangelicals in the Church of Scotland. Editor: Ian M Watson Issue No.5 June 06

THERE'S MORE THAN JUST ONE ISSUE

by our chairman, Gordon Kennedy

I am writing this on the 7th June 06 and yet I am willing to make a prediction for the final of the World Cup, which will not be played until 2nd July. Whichever two teams are playing in the final, within 30 seconds of the kick-off, the commentators will be talking about England!

Sometimes in the run-up to such major sporting tournaments, be it football, tennis, golf or whatever, you would think there was only one side taking part. We get weary with the commentators going on and on about their team and long to hear of other teams and other players—especially those who don't have an injured foot!

It is a cheap and easy accusation to throw at Forward Together to say that we are only about one issue. Not only Forward Together, but evangelicals in general are regularly accused of being obsessed about sex.

It isn't good enough for us to assure one another that this accusation is without foundation; we must be able to demonstrate this to those who would make the accusation and so change the general perception.

At the recent General Assembly it was heartening to hear many Forward Together members speaking on a wide range of topics: Israel/Palestine, HIV/AIDS, embryology and stem cell research, the Church's work of social care, training of ministers, the working of the General Assembly and its administration to name just a few.

At the General Assembly it is essential that all who speak remember they are commissioners, members of the General Assembly. They do not speak on behalf

of any other group or congregation or Presbytery. It is therefore impossible for speakers to identify themselves as Forward Together members that all might know how wide is our range of interests. If we are to demonstrate that Forward Together is not a single issue group we must do that outside of the Assembly hall.

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General Assembly"
but
"Give me Scotland."*

At our AGM in 2005 the Steering Group were asked to help members prepare for and engage with the General Assembly and over the past year we have tried to do this.

This will continue to be part of the work of Forward Together; and I hope we will improve our resourcing of members and commissioners in years to come.

However, I am aware that it would be possible for Forward Together to become focused upon the single issue of the General Assembly. This would not be a good thing.

As evangelicals within the Church of Scotland we must offer our service across a wide range of areas in the life of our Church, our congregations, our communities and our nation. We do not cry to the Lord, "Give me the General Assembly" but "Give me Scotland!"

By and large, our nation ignores the General Assembly, the coverage in the press is sparse and often inaccurate.

While successfully engaging at the General Assembly is something we strive to achieve it will not immediately impact upon our members or our communities.

We are gospel people and must work together to bring the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ to all the people of Scotland. Since our nation will not hear our speeches at the General Assembly we need to find other ways of speaking for the Lord on the contemporary issues facing our nation and our communities so that they will hear.

We do not have to search long to find answers to the questions people are asking; we do need to work hard to create opportunities to share these answers.

Our lives as Christian people, our ministries in which we serve, should so honour God and serve the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that we will by our gospel service earn a good reputation within the Church and within the nation.

As we work for the Lord in the diverse communities that make up modern Scotland we will inevitably demonstrate a concern for all parts of human life and human society and that the gospel should be at work in every part.

In this service of the Lord in Scotland we rejoice that Forward Together is not alone in seeking to share the gospel of God's love with our nation. We look forward to working in partnership with others that we might serve effectively in our day.

There is much work for the Lord to do, let us continue to pray for one another and strengthen one another to good works and faithful service in many different situations.

ASSEMBLY DIARY

SATURDAY

Widely expected to be the most controversial in years, the 2006 Assembly got off to an uncontroversial start, with the usual pomp and ceremony in the morning. Alan McDonald, the new Moderator, was installed; and though visibly nervous (who wouldn't be) he eased the tension with a good humour which persisted throughout the week.

In a speech which revealed his deep knowledge of the Bible and of current Christian thinking, Lord McKay of Clashfern, the Lord High Commissioner, encouraged the Assembly by reminding us of the Burning Bush which was "yet never consumed", ever a picture of the Church. Christ has promised us that he will build his Church. We are truly blessed to have such a noble and humble man as a brother in Christ.

The Convener of Assembly Arrangements introduced a reform to debating procedure—allowing the movers of amendments to have a right to reply before Conveners sum up the debate.

In the evening, World Mission reported. There were grumbings about our luxury Scots Hotel in Tiberias, but in the end the Convener was given an easy ride. The Assembly heard three moving speeches from Bangladesh, Zambia and Palestine about poverty.

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MONDAY

The Council of Assembly reported, mainly on the progress being made in the restructuring of the Church's councils.

Bill Wallace brought a motion clarifying that whenever spokespersons speak on behalf of the Church they must be mindful of General Assembly decisions. Where there are no relevant Assembly decisions the spokesperson should not comment unless the relevant Council has come to a view on the issue. This was accepted. The Convener, Helen McLeod, also indicated that training would be given to Conveners on their responsibilities.

Former Moderator, John Cairns, brought a petition, with over 6000 signatures, to the Assembly entitled "A Voice for the local church", complaining of over-centralisation.

After a long debate the Assembly supported the petitioners and have agreed to appoint a

seven member special commission to consider the grounds of the petition.

TUESDAY

The day began with an account of the HIV/AIDS project. Peter White of Sandyford Henderson brought what seemed to many of us the sensible suggestion that those representing the Project should "commend chastity outside marriage and faithfulness within it, especially to men." This was resisted as imperialist—a Western church imposing its moral values on Third World peoples—and so Peter's motion fell.

Then followed the report of the Church and Society Council. Inheriting the old Church and Nation propensity to leave no stone unturned the report covered religious observance in schools, policy towards asylum seekers, nuclear weapons, investment in Israel and Palestine, among others.

Most controversial was the section dealing with stem cell research. Holyrood Abbey elder and leading authority, Callum McKellor, spoke passionately about the intrinsic value of human life from conception. Nevertheless, baffled by science and seduced by promises of wonder-cures, the Church of Scotland is now the only Church in the world (as far as we know) which condones the creation of human embryos for the sole purpose of research.

With the Assembly Hall packed to the gunnels, Ann Inglis, Convener of the Legal Questions Committee rose to speak. It had been agreed previously that the civil partnership issues should be taken first. This was the issue we were told could split the Kirk. FT's contribution to the debate "A Step To Far" led to the publication of another booklet by OneKirk "Stepping Forward" claiming to be the moderate voice in the church. There was great tension in the Assembly from its opening on Saturday until Tuesday afternoon when this debate was taken.

In her opening speech the Convener spoke very clearly of the need for the church to respond to the introduction of Civil Partnership legislation and introduced the idea of pastoral freedom of conscience as an intrinsic right enjoyed by ministers which was being declared by the Committee's draft act.

Jock Stein spoke to his deferment motion. He wanted the Assembly to postpone any decision until the Working Group on Human Sexuality had reported. After some debate this was comfortably defeated and the Assembly proceeded to the debate on the counter motion in the name of our chairman.

The debate was carried out in a most gracious

and inoffensive way, positions were stated clearly and passionately but the Assembly was at its best. Our secretary successfully moved an amendment the effect of which was to convert both the Committee's motion and Gordon's counter motion into overtures under the Barrier Act.

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The Barrier Act process involves each Presbytery voting to approve or not approve the draft Act sent down to them. Each Presbytery has one vote and a simple majority carries. The result of the voting, together with the numbers voting for information only, is reported to next year's General Assembly on the Report of the Committee on Classifying Returns to Overtures, usually taken as part of Session I on Saturday morning.

Dr Weatherhead (a former Principal Clerk) writes "If an Overture fails to obtain the approval of a majority of Presbyteries, it falls, and may not be sent down again in the same form by the next Assembly. If it obtains such approval the next Assembly may enact it, but need not do so." The Steering Group will prepare advice for members on engaging in this process within Presbyteries over the summer months.

WEDNESDAY

During the report from the Committee on Ecumenical Relations a covenant between the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland was signed. Both churches committed themselves to closer co-operation and sharing of resources.

FT member, Douglas Cranston, brought the report of the Ministries Council to the Assembly. The issue generating most discussion concerned the recognition of the Highland Theological College as an approved academic provider for Candidates training for the ministry.

As anticipated, the liberal wing of the Church opposed this proposal tooth and nail. But to no avail. The Assembly overwhelmingly accepted Douglas' assurances that the College was a fit and proper place where ministers of the gospel could be trained. This is undoubtedly one of the most significant decisions made by the Assembly in recent years.

THURSDAY

The Assembly heard from the Committee on Chaplains to HM Forces. The Convener made a plea for more ministers to consider

Chaplaincy work. There was an up-beat report from Albert Bogle on the various events and conferences held under the banner of Church without Walls. The Guild, The Church Hymnary Trustees and the Mission and Discipleship Council also reported.

FRIDAY

Reports were received from the Nominations Committee, the Social Care Council, and the Safeguarding Group. Of most interest to FT members was the Assembly's decision not to instruct investigation into the status of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Assembly was persuaded by suggestions that this would be to open a Pandora's Box and would threaten the peace and unity of the Church at a time when we must present a united front to the world

WEDNESDAY MEETINGS

Once again we held our lunch-time meeting in the Quaker Meeting House, and once again it proved very popular with Commissioners and FT members. The speaker was Prof. Ian Leigh of the University of Durham. Prof. Leigh spoke about current thinking on legislation affecting freedom of speech and how it might affect our faith in practice. Some of his observations were rather sobering. There were good questions relating to current freedom to preach the unique gospel claims about Jesus Christ, how free we would be to speak in church courts without fear of prosecution, and speculation about the curtailment of such freedom in the future. We hope to be able to publish Prof. Leigh's talk on our web-site.

In the evening we held our second Annual General Meeting, and as AGMs go it too was well attended. Our chairman, Gordon Kennedy, reviewed the year, emphasising that preparation for the General Assembly was the remit given to the Steering Group by last year's AGM. Gordon encouraged FT members to play a full part in the courts of the Church. We should be actively considering nominations to the central Councils. Now that the civil partnerships issue has been passed down to Presbyteries, we will be preparing material to assist members in the debate. Members are asked to report decisions to the Steering Group. Anne Allan and Bill Wallace, who are stepping down from the Steering Group, were warmly thanked. Revs. Ian Cathcart and Jim Stewart were voted on. Other suggestions were made and these will be followed up. A fuller minute of the meeting will be sent to members.

We asked Youth Delegate and FT member, Graham Caskie, to give us his impressions of the Assembly.

Last month I had the privilege of being the Youth Representative for Dumbarton Presbytery at this year's General Assembly. I stayed in the Gillis Centre with all the other Youth Representatives where each night we discussed the principal issues concerning the next day's business. This was very encouraging but also at times very difficult. Being an evangelical in such circumstances proved difficult with so many others coming from a completely different perspective. One asked me during a discussion on the civil partnerships issue whether or not as a lesbian she should stay celibate for the rest of her life. It was only with God's strength and grace that I was able to answer "yes" and still be able to discuss with her other issues.

During the week there were three significant moments which stand out for me. Tuesday afternoon during the civil partnerships debate there were times when I was so proud to be part of a church where such a debate could take place in an atmosphere of grace and understanding. Yet at the same time I was in a state of despair at how such distortion of God's word could be portrayed as "the truth". Although Gordon Kennedy's counter motion was defeated by the narrowest of margins, it was with a great sense of relief that Ian Watson's amendment to put the Legal Questions' Committee's proposal down through the Barrier Act was accepted.

On a much more positive note it was very encouraging to see the Ministries Council's proposal to give accreditation status to the Highland Theological College (HTC) accepted by the Assembly. To have somewhere in Scotland where ministerial candidates will be taught in such a setting, I believe, was a step long overdue. It will certainly be interesting to see how the traditional universities will stand up to the same scrutiny that was subject to the HTC.

Finally, and on a more personal note my chief highlight was the celebration of Holy Communion on the Monday morning before business. I was privileged to be one of those serving the elements to those in the hall. It was a very humbling experience made all the more so by the fact that I was also celebrating my 21st Birthday the same day. Being able to worship our great God in this way on such a day was a moment which I will never forget. Thanking him for giving me life and remembering the sacrifice he made for us in sending his son Jesus Christ to die for us, made the words of Psalm 24 which we sang that morning even more poignant. "Who is he, this King of glory? The Lord Almighty - he is the King of Glory".

HISTORIC DECISION

Undoubtedly the most important and far-reaching decision of the Assembly was to accept HTC as a place where candidates can train for the ministry. FT congratulates Andy McGowan on their achievement. Andy explains more fully the significance of the decision.

The decision of the Church of Scotland, meeting in General Assembly in Edinburgh, to add Highland Theological College UHI (University of the Highlands and Islands), based in Dingwall, to the list of places where Ministers can be educated and trained is a huge encouragement to us.

The College was created in 1994 and the first two staff members were Hector Morrison and myself, both of us Church of Scotland ministers. Naturally we are delighted that our Church has recognised our College.

This is also a great step forward for the churches in the Highlands and Islands since, up until now, students for the ministry had to leave the area to go to the cities in the south and east. This often meant that the churches would lose these students and their families. For the first time since 1560, education and training for the ministry has now been made available outside the cities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, St Andrews and Aberdeen.

Since the Church of Scotland only works with designated providers of higher education, this is also a further recognition of UHI Millennium Institute, the network of colleges and research institutions, designated by the Scottish Parliament in 2001, which is creating the University of the Highlands and Islands. Under current regulations, HTC would not have been recognised if it was not an academic partner of UHI.

Highland Theological College provides opportunities for men and women to study the Christian faith, on a full-time, part-time or open learning basis, from an evangelical and Reformed perspective. Students can enrol for anything from an Access course to a PhD, just as in the ancient universities.

Anyone interested in taking a course should contact: HTCAdmissions@htc.uhi.ac.uk
Or write to: Academic Officer, HTC, High Street, Dingwall, IV15 9HA.

Now that finance for study leave has been restored, ministers should consider a distance learning course from HTC. (ed.)

IN THE NEWS

“Sexuality time-bomb set to explode under Kirk” “Row over blessing for gay marriages has split the Kirk” “Kirk facing crisis over gay clerics” “Kirk gay wedding battle”

For a short time it appeared as if we had returned to the halcyon days when the General Assembly and Church debates were respectfully reported in the national press. If nothing else, the civil partnership debate certainly got media attention.

Forward Together representatives were the exclusive spokesmen for the evangelical position. Whether on TV, radio or in print, journalists and programme-makers turned to Forward Together Steering Group members to articulate the orthodox, Biblical view on homosexual partnerships. Gordon Kennedy, Bob Fyall, Bill Wallace, Andrew Philip, as well as myself, were all quoted or broadcast at one time or another.

It was not always a pleasant experience. An old, and therefore flattering photo of Bill Wallace appeared in the Daily Mail. And our chairman, Gordon Kennedy, was described as “an austere looking bearded man” by Kenny Farquharson of the Sunday Times. Nevertheless, we believe it is a price worth paying!

Perhaps we are being paranoid, but it seems to us that the coverage leaned heavily in favour of the gay lobby. The Aberdeen Press and Journal and its sister paper the Dundee Courier took a very pro-gay stance. Both papers interviewed local ministers who supported the Legal Questions Committee’s report. Apparently, Rev. Mike Mair of Cragiebank, Dundee, “felt compelled to speak out” having received FT booklet “A Step too Far”. Mr. Mair admitted to having conducted a “blessing” in the recent past.

Rev. Bob Brown of Queen’s Cross Church, Aberdeen, was “unhappy” with FT’s counter-motion. He had been a guest at a civil partnership celebratory lunch. Mr. Brown took exception to our identifying the Bible with the Word of God. He said: *far from being located only within scripture, the word of God is encountered in the world as well as the Church.* He seems to have particular difficulty in believing that King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. This proves that the Bible should not always be taken literally.

Interestingly, the Press and Journal interviewed Ms. Monica Stewart, who had “married” (their words) her partner. Ms. Stewart is reported to be an elder at Queen’s Cross Church. She is a daughter of the manse, and the grand-daughter of the late Prof. James Stewart, one-time Moderator of the General Assembly. She said: *What I and others are seeking is an inclusive church dedicated to the gospel and characterised by grace and not by prejudice.*

In the run up to the big debate the newspapers made much of the possibility of a split in the Church. Both sides seem to have been preparing to walk out, Disruption-like, if they didn’t get their way. It must have been terribly disappointing that this didn’t happen.

Ron Ferguson used his column in the Herald to bemoan the Church’s obsession with sex. “What is it with churches and sex?” he asks. Rather sportingly, he allows evangelicals the right to argue that the church shouldn’t allow its agenda to be dictated by cultural trends. His own opinion was formed by meeting Christian gays. And in this Ron is typical of most who argue in favour of blessing civil partnerships. Gay men and women are nice people.

*“an austere looking
bearded man”*

As for TV coverage, I, your editor, have no complaints. I appeared on both programmes, for a grand total of 30 seconds. However, while Gordon Kennedy and Bob Fyall gave very cogent arguments in favour of the evangelical position, most of the programme devoted to civil partnerships was nothing but a platform for the gay Christian community. We were treated to actors playing the part of homosexual ministers or silhouettes of the real thing telling us their story. Do their congregations know?

So, to whom do we award the prizes? For the most biased, anti-FT article, the prize goes to Kenny Farquharson of the Sunday Times. We are the stern dominie, the sex police, forbidding our flock the pleasures of the flesh. The name “Forward Together” is a misnomer, and we exist to call the Kirk to heel. No doubting where you stand, Kenny.

On the other hand, Ian Swanson, of the Edinburgh Evening News, gets the prize for balanced reporting. In his article on 20th May, he gives equal space to myself (for FT), George Newlands (for Affirmation Scotland) and Peter Johnson (for OneKirk). You can’t say fairer than that!

You can read the news reports for yourself by logging on to our web-site.

A FAST GROWING MOVEMENT

In the run up to the General Assembly Forward Together membership passed the 500 mark, and is steadily heading towards 600.

Membership is open to anyone actively associated with a Church of Scotland congregation, either as a member, adherent or regular attender.

The annual membership fee is £10, or £5 for the unwaged.

Kirk Sessions can join en bloc for £50.

Application forms can be obtained from the Secretary:

Rev. Ian Watson
The Manse
2 Lanark Road,
Kirkmuirhill
ML11 9RB

or from our web-site at
forwardtogether.org.uk

Current members are reminded that their annual subscriptions are now due. Without these subscriptions we are unable to publish the material you find so helpful.

Copies of our well-received booklet “A Step too Far” are still available on application to the Secretary.

Towards the autumn the Steering Group plans to issue guidance for members taking part in the civil partnership debates on the floor of Presbyteries.