

MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL YOUTH ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND 2016

The National Youth Assembly (NYA) took place from the 19th to the 22nd of August 2016 in Gartmore House, Stirlingshire. 96 delegates, aged 17 to 25 travelled from across the Church of Scotland's presbyteries and congregations, from Aberdeen to Ayr Presbytery and Irvine & Kilmarnock to the International Presbytery. Everyone gathered to have their voice heard and spend time together in fellowship and worship.

Each year, the setup and flow of the NYA adapts and this year was no different; three powerful discussion topics meant that it was wise to set time and space aside for delegates to reflect. Time was taken to reflect on our own mental health through a variety of methods and a prayer space with labyrinth was created for delegates to use throughout the weekend. These changes help to keep the programme accessible to all and the continuous change that the Assembly undergoes ensures that it maintains appropriate and significant status for the work it does and enables, within the Church of Scotland.

Worship, naturally, was an integral part of the weekend with a variety of styles of both traditional and contemporary. Around a large world map on the floor lit by fairy lights our worship on the Saturday evening centred on suffering around the world from food poverty and HIV to domestic violence and the plight of refugees. We are particularly grateful to Gartmore Parish Church for their warm welcome as we joined them for worship on the Sunday morning.

Discussions are at the heart of NYA, and in 2016 we had three very important topics at hand, each providing a different and perhaps new perspective to the given topics to delegates helping them to engage fully in each day's activities.

Gender Justice

The first of our discussions was on Gender Justice for which we had two aims. The first was to raise awareness and understanding of the issues that were being raised, for many delegates questioning gender roles was something they did not have experience of and so the topic was introduced in such a way to become clear and understandable to them. The second aim was to examine how the NYA delegates felt the Church of Scotland should be responding to such issues, bringing into consideration what our faith teaches us and inspires us to do.

The input for our discussions came from Katherine Gilmour, the Church of Scotland's Violence Against Women Development Officer and Fiona Buchanan, Church and Society Council and the Youth Development Officer for Christian Aid in Scotland.

Both Katherine and Fiona gave a presentation on what we mean by gender when considered separately to our biological sex and also what our society portrays as the qualities and attributes of 'each' gender. This led to an open discussion using a diagram called the 'Genderbread Person' where delegates suggested traits that are stereotypically associated with being male or female. From this, delegates expanded on how these stereotypes made us feel, and if the assembly felt they were positive or negative. Following this Katherine and Fiona moved on to look at what happens when we 'leave' these assigned boxes and display traits associated with the opposite gender.

The delegates of the NYA come with a vast wealth of differing personal and Church experiences, which was demonstrated in the wide range of responses to the first four questions presented to the small groups.

From these small groups discussions, delegates were presented with a list of statements on which to give their opinions and vote on the statements they most agreed with and felt most passionately about. Examples of these are as follows. (Where responses do not total 100%, this is due to delegates neither agreeing or disagreeing with the point.

What are the positives and negatives of gender norms or stereotypes?

- Gender stereotypes can have detrimental and damaging effects on both physical and mental health – *In response to this, 89% of respondents agreed to the statement while 6% disagreed.*
- Gender stereotypes can lead to domestic and sexual violence against men not being taken seriously – *In response to this, 95% of respondents agreed and 2.5% disagreed.*

How might people who don't conform to traditional gender roles feel about them?

- Feeling endangered – *This point was agreed with by 69% and 13% disagreed.*
- Pressure to fit in – *93% agreed with the point and 2% disagreed.*

How do you think traditional gender roles are linked to gender justice?

- The media has a lot of influence over the way we are informed about traditional gender roles – *This was agreed with by 83% of respondents while 12% disagreed.*

- Women in the world, and especially women in the developing world, still suffer as a result of gender roles and the associated stigma – *91% agreed and 2% disagreed.*

Votes were not taken in response to the final question, why should Christians care about gender justice?. Instead, feedback was taken and the responses focussed on us as Christians seeking justice in the world. It was also noted that we as a Church should work on keeping up to date with society's surroundings.

After a break, the Youth Assembly moved on to discuss what they felt a gender just Church should look like, and what would have to happen in order for that to be achieved. When asked if they felt the Church of Scotland specifically had a problem with Gender Justice, 82% felt that, to at least some extent, it did with only 18% disagreeing. There was a variety of reasons for the votes on both sides, and a fuller account can be found within the National Youth Assembly's supplementary report.

Mental Health

Our second discussion was held on the topic of Mental Health, focussing particularly on young people. For input to this part of the weekend, we were joined by the Scottish Government Minister for Mental Health, Maureen Watt MSP, who gave an account of the work being done by the Scottish Government in raising awareness and helping those suffering from negative issues with their mental health. After this we had input from both Viv Dickinson of CrossReach and Andrew Tomlinson of the Church and Society Council.

An anonymous survey was held early in the discussion to build an understanding in the room of how many people had experienced mental ill health, the severity of it and treatments people may have sought. While figures were broadly in line with national numbers, one standout figure came on the question 'Have you ever sought professional help for a mental health condition?'. That as many as 40% said yes, they had at some point sought professional

assistance was a shock to the delegates. Another question to highlight was; On a scale of one to nine, generally, how would you position your mental health? Breaking the responses into three categories, 55% responded positively (a score of 7-9), 30% neutrally (4-6) and 14% negatively (1-3). When asked the same question, but about when their mental health was at its worst, only 8% responded positively, with 42% neutrally and 50% responding negatively. These figures really represent the reason why it is vital that we recognise these issues and do our best, not just to highlight them, but to tackle them.

Delegates were then asked the three following questions;

1. What do you think of the work already being done?
2. What is your experience of mental health within the church?
3. What can or should be done?

Some of the key responses to these are below and, as before, a fuller summary of responses can be found in our supplementary report.

One powerful response which came from a delegate was that they had admitted to having felt that they 'knew a lot about mental health before the discussion' but had come away with their eyes opened by their small group discussion session. They went on to encourage those there to go out and share their stories to help others understand and to not be afraid of doing so. A lot of the responses were based around the lack of education that there is, particularly surrounding the stigmatising language we use and the poor connotations we associate with words commonly used. Another point was that we should start to help and 'myth-bust' some of the ideas people have about mental health. Further to this, one delegate raised the point that we should also help raise awareness of CrossReach, who they branded as the Church of Scotland's best kept secret. We learned about CrossReach employing a new Social Care Mission Officer recently to help build on positives and learn from mistakes.

Whilst in small groups delegates discussed, amongst other questions; "What do you feel the Church does well in relation to mental health issues?" and "What do you feel the Church could do better in relation to mental health issues?" In response to these questions we heard that; there are good pastoral care links in place, even if they are not specifically Mental Health related. People felt that the environments created by many youth leaders allowed a safe space to discuss the issues. Some delegates felt that their congregations created a warm welcoming family for them to feel safe in. There were a number of suggestions on how the Church could improve on its work, these included; mental health training for elders, enabling them to understand the issues and to be able to have meaningful discussions with those suffering. Other raised concerns about the mind-set that "God won't give you more than you can handle" as this can lead to trivialisation of, or lack of validity being given to, people's experiences with poor mental health. Finally, it was highlighted by a majority of groups that those in formal ministry themselves often feel exposed and vulnerable and should be able to access assistance easily and without feeling that they are failing those they support in any way.

Future of Ministry & Fresh Expressions

Our final discussion focussed on the future of ministry within the Church of Scotland looking also at Fresh Expressions amongst other initiatives. Input for this section came from; Rev Neil Glover, Convener of the Ministries Council of the Church of Scotland. Norman Smith and Lesley Hamilton Messer from Church Without Walls and Emerging Church. Rev Liz Crumlish from Path of Renewal and Very Rev Albert Bogle and his Online Church.

The first question covered in small groups was on what delegates sought in a minister. A strong passion for what they do and their faith was one of the key points covered as well as being approachable and empathetic when sensitive issues are being discussed. Other points included being open minded and able to take feedback on where people were not satisfied and being able to admit their own weaknesses. Delegates looked for somebody who

was an example to follow, particularly when it comes to accepting the variety of theological backgrounds and views that are present in our congregations.

Another question focussed on what could be changed, or new initiatives we could have in ministry in order to meet different goals i.e. to connect to a changing Scotland or to lead a diverse Church. Examples that were given included; exploring new media platforms, for example social media such as Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram, and combating problematic mind-sets and attitudes that are held about Church and ministry generally. Many spoke of trying out different styles of worship, while it doesn't need to be a permanent change it was felt that it is always positive to try different ideas in order to be able to draw genuine conclusions on them. A number of points were made of examples in which churches had started new initiatives for the congregation and wider community such as inter-faith dialogue, political hustings and new social events.

Next the small groups considered "What should the Church of Scotland do to promote and enable ministry of young people?" The point was raised that myths need to be displaced such as young people all being likeminded in terms of their actions and their theology. Many people spoke of their desire to lead worship and parts of services in their congregations but being frustrated when they were denied any opportunity. They felt it was important to involve young people but not to be tokenistic in their approach. Identifying gifts and talents was seen as vital by some delegates as part of upholding the ministry of all believers. Generally, delegates felt it was important to be encouraging and nurturing of young people already within congregations and to equip them for roles within the Church.

The last question discussed was how we meet the vision of having a Fresh Expression in every Parish by 2020. Ideas that were raised included; being open to new ideas and letting go of fixed ideas of what Church is and encouraging a mutual respect and dialogue allowing us to be more outward looking. Improving communication with our

communities was seen as a key way to getting more of the community involved with the life of the Church. A change in the idea that Church is only on a Sunday morning, was also seen as a way to achieve the aim. Finally identifying the needs of the community with an openness to try new forms of Church was seen, as crucial to developing fresh expression across the country.

Promotion

As our social media presence continues to grow, it has been important to start new initiatives to raise awareness and encourage year long engagement with the National Youth Assembly. One new initiative that started this year was our daily Advent reflections, running every day on Facebook^[1] from the first Sunday of Advent, all the way through to Christmas Day itself. There was a very high amount of interaction with the posts and comments saying that this had provided a faith link for those disconnected from the NYA. Some of the videos were shared out with the traditional Church of Scotland circles particularly the reflection focussed on Palestinian Peace Parcels. Reflections over the period of Lent are also planned. In addition to this our Instagram page and Moderator's Twitter account^[2] have seen good increases in interactions.

Conclusion

The 2016 National Youth Assembly was once again a success in reaching out to a wide variety of young people across the length and breadth of the Church of Scotland. The work that has been completed since the Assembly, and more detail on the feedback and discussion responses from the Assembly, can be found in our supplementary report^[3].

The National Youth Assembly continues to work closely with other bodies within the Church of Scotland and as ever plays a major part in nurturing and developing the faith of many young Christians within Scotland enabling them to have a voice and participate in decision making. For these reasons, and many more it remains something the Church can be proud of.

The NYA 2017 will be held at Gartmore House taking place from the 21st to the 24th of July 2017^[4]. It is open to all 17-25 year olds with a connection to the Church of Scotland; 2016 saw a large increase in the number of 'first time' delegates, and we would be keen to see this repeated again in 2017.

ANDREW MACPHERSON, *Moderator*
LYNDSAY KENNEDY, *Clerk*

[1] www.facebook.com/cofsnationalyouthassembly/

[2] <https://twitter.com/nyamoderator>

[3] www.churchofscotland.org.uk/youngadults

[4] www.churchofscotland.org.uk/youngadults