

REPORT OF ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2006

INTRODUCTION

Despite its size or, perhaps, because of it, the United Free Church of Scotland has long recognised the importance of being part of the one Universal or Catholic Church, and of the need to contribute to and benefit from the many opportunities which are presented to it through our participation in the activities of the wider Christian community. That said, the ecumenical dimension of the Church's life and witness has often, in practice, been regarded as an optional extra amidst the more immediate demands of survival at the local level. The contents of this Report may be a helpful reminder of the inestimable value of belonging to the household of faith, that fellowship of believers worldwide within which it is our privilege to serve the living Christ, the only King and Head of the Church.

THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC) - NINTH ASSEMBLY

In last year's report to the General Assembly the Committee expressed its regret that, in view of the considerable costs involved, it could not see its way to recommending the Church's participation in the WCC Assembly to be held in Porto Alegre, Brazil from 14th to 23rd February. Following the Assembly, a commissioner who wished to remain anonymous, intimated his desire to make a substantial contribution towards the cost of ensuring that the United Free Church would be able to take up the place allocated to it. It was an offer the Committee felt it could not refuse. The Committee wishes to record its indebtedness to a most generous donor and to the Rev.C.C.Brown who was prepared to make the long journey to southern Brazil and to take his place in our name alongside the 1200 core participants and the many others who welcome the opportunity to share in such large and inspirational events. The theme of this Assembly was appropriately cast in the form of a prayer - 'God in your grace transform the world' - and we look forward to hearing and reading more of how the challenging implications of such a theme can and should impinge upon our witness as Churches.

PROPOSED COVENANT WITH THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

All 3 Presbyteries and 28 Kirk Sessions responded to the invitation to comment on the discussion material presented to last year's General Assembly in the Joint Report of the Church of Scotland - United Free Church of Scotland Working Group. While responses were mixed and understandably often reflected the positive and negative experience of congregations in the local situation, there was encouraging evidence of promising and creative relationships already existing in a significant number of areas and of ways in which co-operative ventures of one kind or another are making an increasingly worthwhile contribution to the witness of the Churches in these communities. Misgivings expressed by some appear to reflect a misunderstanding of the nature of the relationship envisaged in the proposed covenant and to take insufficient account of the anticipated degree of flexibility surrounding its implementation in the light of the differing circumstances prevailing from place to place.

The prevalent mood would appear to reflect a healthy blend of cautious optimism and genuine uncertainty as to how the proposals will work out in practice but the Committee has been encouraged by an overall willingness to respond to the challenge which the proposals present, and on that basis seeks the approval of the General Assembly to proceed with arrangements for a formal signing of the Covenant by the Moderators and Clerks of the two

General Assemblies to take place in Dunblane Cathedral on Saturday, 16th September, 2006.

It is further proposed that if the Covenant is approved an Implementation Group, consisting of personnel other than those involved in the initial Working Group, should be set up to monitor developments and to report back to both Assemblies in two years' time.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

The Committee has continued to be actively involved in the various networks established by ACTS and in a significant number of the Associated Ecumenical Groups (AEG's).

Following a lengthy and rigorous review of its increasingly heavy commitment to preserving the financial viability of Scottish Churches House and the consequent limitations which it imposed upon the development of ACTS other activities, it was decided to sever ACTS long-standing link with the House and to move its offices to Forrester Lodge in Alloa. The decision to move was not taken lightly but it is hoped that both ACTS and Scottish Churches House will stand to benefit from the separation and the financial independence resulting from it.

In addition to the many ongoing activities promoted and serviced by ACTS a major event - the Scottish Ecumenical Gathering 2006 - will take place in the Bells Sports' Centre on Saturday, 17th June. The overall theme will be 'Seeds of Hope'. An impressive array of key-note speakers have been invited to explore different aspects of the theme and a wide-ranging programme of supporting activities for young and old is planned. In common with other Churches we have been invited to provide a stall and would welcome your support for what promises to be a high profile and extremely worthwhile occasion.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES HOUSE

Following the decision of ACTS to withdraw its funding from the work of the House an appeal was launched for a sum of £120,000 to give the House a two-year breathing space in which to review its operation, and, with the help of expert advice, to seek ways of boosting its income sufficiently to overcome the substantial shortfall of income over expenditure currently running at approximately £60,000 per year. The fact that such a large sum was raised over a comparatively short period of time is indicative of the place the House continues to have in the life and affection of the Christian community in Scotland.

In addition to the regular ongoing activities of the House an Interim Management Group has been set up to explore what can be done to secure the future viability of the House and its continuing contribution to the ecumenical dimension of the Churches' work and witness.

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (CTBI)

The proposed changes in the operational structure of CTBI have been agreed, and by devolving greater powers to the secretaries of the ecumenical instruments in the four nations (ACTS in Scotland) a significant slimming down of the current centralised London-based operation is envisaged. There will be a Management Group consisting of the General Secretaries of the four national instruments while the Church Representatives Meeting will be replaced by a larger gathering of Church leaders every two years. The newly appointed General Secretary is the Rev. Canon Bob Fyffe of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Each of the national instruments has been invited to nominate three trustees who will work alongside

the Management Group and will have an increasingly important role to play in providing a vital link between the Group and the ecumenical instruments of the four nations. The three trustees nominated by ACTS and appointed are Mrs. M. Clark, Rev. S. Kesting and Rev. D. Nicol.

WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WARC)

A recent communication from WARC seeks the agreement of member Churches to a proposed merger involving the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council. It comes as the unanimous recommendation of a joint committee of the leadership of the two organisations and is commanded as a major step forward towards the achievement of a greater measure of unity within the Reformed family. It is claimed that the new global Reformed body to be called the World Reformed Communion will further strengthen the worldwide witness of Churches adhering to the Reformed tradition. The Committee is seeking further information concerning the Reformed Ecumenical Council and will make a formal response as requested by 1st February, 2007.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES NATIONAL SPONSORING BODY FOR LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS

While the national body continues to examine some of the complex practical issues associated with the development of LEPS, it has also been concerned in recent months to set up nine geographically determined Regional Advisory Groups whose function will be to give guidance and support to existing LEPs in their area and to assist congregations contemplating action along those lines. Presbyteries have been invited to nominate representatives to those Advisory Groups where appropriate.

FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

The Committee felt led to initiate an informal approach to the Free Church of Scotland with a view to renewing the practice of our two Churches being represented at our respective General Assemblies. Revs A D Scrimgeour and J O Fulton subsequently met with the Convener and Clerk of the Free Church's Ecumenical Relations Committee when it was agreed that the possibility should be explored further by the appropriate authorities. As a result of these discussions, an invitation has been extended to the United Free Church to be represented at the Moderator's Reception of the Free Church and it is anticipated that we will have the pleasure of welcoming a delegate from that Church at our forthcoming General Assembly.

VISITS TO OTHER CHURCHES

The Committee wishes to acknowledge the visits undertaken by the Moderator of the General Assembly to the Assembly of the Baptist Union, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Synod of the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church Synod of Scotland. Rev A McMillan represented the Church at the Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church and Rev S J W Matthews represented the denomination at the Assembly of the United Reformed Church.

CONCLUSION

The Committee wishes to express its sincere appreciation of the time and effort expended by so many at both local and national levels in the development and maintenance of inter-church understanding and activities. The Committee recognises that such involvement can often make heavy demands on already over-stretched human resources but

believes the benefits gained both personally and corporately far outweigh the pain. The unity which Jesus sought for his earliest disciples can never be a matter of indifference to those who seek to follow in their footsteps.

In the name of the Committee

A DOUGLAS SCRIMGEOUR Convener

ANDREW McMILLAN Vice Convener

JOHN O FULTON Secretary