

REPORT OF THE OVERSEAS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2006

There can be few more compelling scriptures revealing the Father's heart than those uttered to Ezekiel. They encapsulate the divine calling given to man, both to be saved and to be the agent in salvation.

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself."
Ezekiel 3:17-19 (NIV)

Such a calling gives unction to the Church to take the mission field to be the world.

INTRODUCTION

"New-born worlds rise and adore"
- but they may be very different from ours!

The Church of our Lord has over the years expanded into an incredibly diverse faith community as successive generations of missionaries reached out to all nations carrying with them their historical baggage into quite different situations. The Overseas Committee is in a privileged position to witness this reality, yes, and to contribute to that diversity! We Scots may utter the oft-repeated saying, "Wha's like us?" but the truth of the matter is that probably very few in the world are quite like us! The Church in Scotland has significantly evolved over the centuries responding to historical, theological and social influences, not to mention the many schisms and unions. In our present times a whole new generation of independent churches is springing up like new shoots through a winter-hardened soil to add their own contemporary story of mission to the whole.

In a broad look at the world Church you will see or hear:

- A Cathedral's evensong with choir-boys and robed processions, contrasting with the simplicity of the Quakers' silence.
- A football stadium used to house a congregation of enthused worshippers.
- Thousands squatting under a thatched tent in India listening to three consecutive sermons.
- Huddles of a few muted believers in an inconspicuous room in places like Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. They don't ask the names of others. (Officially they just happened to meet that afternoon, for fear of being found out by the authorities who would summarily execute them).
- Church buildings made out of all sorts of materials – brick, glass, canvas, mud or thatch.
- Massive pipe organs to lead worship, and, in contrast, guitars and keyboards leading the praise.
- Churches noticeably absent of young people whilst in other cultures children forming the bulk of the congregation, some even suckling openly from their mother's breast.
- Churches with congregations who arrive on foot after hours of walking; yet in other places worshippers arriving by boat or bus: some even attending drive-in services, never leaving their car.

- Believers linked by broadcast Christian programmes and services (TV and radio).
- Worshippers with feathers and tattoos, as in Papua New Guinea, or, elsewhere, strict dress codes and uniforms where conformity of dress is an absolute requirement as members for worship.

There is really no end to the diversity of the Christian Community and we should be aware that to other eyes our ways are just as unusual, or even bizarre, within the world Church family. Increasingly the voices and presence of the Church in the Far East and the Southern hemisphere are raising their profile: these voices, often new to us, cannot be ignored for they are authenticated as Christian by their passion for Christ, their compassion for people and their instinctive praise of God rising to challenge the world's poverty, injustice and inequality in a way often lacking within the Western Church.

BUILDING UP AND REFRESHING OUR PARTNERSHIPS

Much of the work of the Overseas Committee in recent years has required increased levels of communication with its partners in order to maintain a common understanding. It is a mutual learning experience involving patience and listening skills as relationships develop. Practices and perceptions vary from culture to culture. For instance, in decision-making, most committees and Assemblies reach a common mind or understanding through discussion followed by a show of hands or a motion, whereas in other Christian circles a consensus decision is realised through debate and prayer leading to the discerned will of God. Such differences need to be appreciated within any partnership. Listening and learning is 'an art-form' the Committee is seeking to learn through consultation, reflection, and even confession, in order to strengthen those partnerships and develop a heart for them.

The Committee was pleased to learn that the United Free Church was represented by Rev C C Brown at the World Council of Churches Ninth Assembly meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Where better to witness this diversity and learn from it? The Committee await with interest reports from this Assembly.

EMERGING FRUIT

Southern Africa

A. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa

Our re-written partnership with UCCSA was approved by both Assemblies last year but such Partnership Agreements remain simple statements of intent unless positive steps are taken to turn 'languid or loquacious talk' into 'living testimonies' in order to confirm and consolidate the journey being shared. It will be the intention of the Committee to be proactive in this area encouraging ways in which the Partnership might be developed to enrich each of the Churches. The Guidelines for travellers (see Appendix 2.) was in part prepared with this in mind as an enabling document for individuals or groups travelling overseas intent on building relations with overseas partners.

The Committee was pleased to be represented by the Vice-Convener, Rev Patricia Johnston, at the UCCSA Assembly when it met at Inanda Seminary, Durban, in September 2005. During the Assembly the Overseas Partnership Agreement was adopted by our Partner Church.

An interesting appointment has been that of the Rev. Prince Dibeela, of the Synod of Botswana, as General Secretary of UCCSA. We bid a fond farewell to Rev Steve Titus, the out-going General Secretary, who served us efficiently in the last four years. We can expect a time of fresh vision from Prince Dibeela who holds a bold spirit in addressing issues such as nominalism, poverty, racial divisions and HIV/AIDS which he highlighted in his opening letter to the UCCSA.

The Committee continues to monitor plans for the development of Theological Seminaries in Southern Africa, a desire hampered not least by financial limitations. The Committee is ready to cooperate in this development at a more appropriate stage should the way open up for the Church's involvement.

B. Synod of Botswana

As the Church expands and spiritual growth is being witnessed throughout the Synod so the need for trained ministers and pastors increases. The United Free Church has departed from its earlier commitment to bring overseas candidates to Scotland for training in ministry. However it has not departed from its desire to engage in this important work of theological training. By offering financial help to ministry students and pastors in Botswana to train on home territory, the Committee's funds are being more efficiently utilised. Facilities for doing this are improving all the time and it is hoped that in the future Botswana, along with the other nations of UCCSA, will establish regional Theological Seminaries.

C. The Bongani Orphan Care Project: Zimbabwe

Financial aid first began through the Easter Scheme of our young people who raised a very creditable £5,000. Following this initiative from the Youth Committee support for a further 2 years was given by the Women's Home and Overseas Committee and this Committee. However it became apparent even a three-year undertaking was insufficient to enable the work to continue in a land that was spiralling into a deep abyss through poverty, political upheaval and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The Overseas Committee, impressed with this project, decided to extend its support for a further two years at £5,000 p.a.

In order to bring home to our Church the value and appeal of this noble work the Committee has invited two of the Bongani Orphan Care Project managers to visit Scotland. Arrangements have been difficult as a result of the political and human conditions in Zimbabwe but the Committee is hopeful that the visit will go ahead. Presbyteries have been given advance notice of the planned visit despite the lack of confirmed arrangements.

D. The Overseas Partnership Scheme:

It is exciting to be able to confirm the successful translation of ministers from South Africa to Scotland. The appointments of the Rev. Joey Naika to Leith, the Rev. Patrick Coltman to Stonehouse and the Rev. Peter de Villiers to Wishaw have been a special joy and privilege for the United Free Church. Some have suggested it is a historic move signalling a reversal of direction in Christian Mission. No one would deny that Scotland needs this ministry more than ever. These men and their families have made an immediate impact upon the Church and given real encouragement to those congregations where they have happily settled.

The Committee is thankful to the Lord that such able and experienced servants of the Church in South Africa have answered our Church's call; hopefully the experience gained will be absorbed into the life and witness of the United Free Church and that their ministry will blossom in Scotland. All three congregations have risen with great commendation to the challenge and are enthusiastic about their settlements.

The Overseas and Ministry Committees arranged a three-day orientation programme at St. Colm's International House for the manse families with some preliminary preparation

given to each of the congregations as they set out under new ministries. Initial support was put in place for each of the ministers to help establish them in their new fields of service.

OTHER ONGOING INTERESTS AND PROJECTS

The Alfred Merriweather Memorial Church:

It is heartening to be able to report that this project is finally underway with the 'cutting of soil' early in February and an expected completion date in July of this year. The project has not been without its difficulties, however the Committee is grateful to the General Secretary for his vigilance in monitoring much of this work as it progressed. As a result of the appeal launched in 2005 supporting the project the gratifying sum of around £10,000 was received.

It will require skilled and knowledgeable people to develop the Heritage Room within the new Church, people who can assess and display the contribution of the doctor's life to the spread of Christianity in the region he served and within the nation as a whole. The project has required much trimming to enable costs to be kept down. The Synod of Botswana has set up a fund-raising committee to help meet building costs.

The Scottish Churches China Group:

Three Committee members took part in a visit to China in 2005 to mark the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Amity Foundation. The Foundation was intended by Chinese Christians to serve those in need regardless of their faith. It aims to build friendship with those at home and abroad. Two members of the group visited Ningxia Province and the remainder visited Yunnan Province. The visit was led by the Rev. Patricia Johnston, Field Officer of SCCG. During their stay they were able to learn of the work of the Amity Printing Press which has now produced 37 million copies of the Bibles since its first press began printing in 1988. Through SCCG the United Free Church is able to work alongside the Chinese Church as it reaches out to its own people through projects promoting health, education, social services and rural development.

The visit also afforded the group an opportunity to travel off the tourist track to appreciate something of life in the heartland of China meeting with local people and witnessing the work of the rural Churches, all of which stands in stark contrast to the mushrooming cities of a modernising China. Eyes were opened and hearts were touched.

(NB: It should be noted that the Committee paid the equivalent of one place in the above visit! The Committee is grateful for the commitment and interest shown by Committee members in this unique visit.)

The current three-year commitment to support the work SCCG has been ongoing since 2004 and a review on continuing support is due before the year is out.

(The broader work of SCCG is set out in Appendix 1.)

The Work of the Missionary Secretary: Helen Sunter

The meticulous care and consistency of Helen's efforts in networking with our overseas partners has enhanced not only the Committee's work but added much to the witness of the United Free Church well beyond its boundaries. The quarterly prayer fliers have brought the work of the missionaries right to the heart of the local congregations.

This is the third year Missionary Sunday has been observed. The East Presbytery rose marvellously to the challenge, preparing much of the material in the congregational packs. Once again the Committee is indebted to the office staff and other helpers for compiling the Missionary Sunday folders for circulation. The Committee would value any feedback from Churches using the materials.

Scottish Churches World Exchange

This is the first year we can truly say that we have engaged with SCWE at a deeper level. The Convener has represented the United Free Church as a member of SCWE Trust. When the Committee was looking for help with an orientation programme for our South African colleagues the natural place to turn for experience was SCWE who pulled out all the stops to make the orientation a very special experience for our friends and their families. The Committee is grateful for the time given by Rev. Robert Anderson visiting the congregations to help them be aware of the cultural differences involved with their call to their South African ministers. Also to Lynn Whitehead and the staff of St. Colm's International House who did much to contribute to the success of the orientation course, and to ministers of the UFC who helped in the course provided.

The work of SCWE is primarily in recruiting, preparing and supporting 20 volunteers who work for a year in church-based community projects overseas. They also arrange and support reciprocal church visits abroad: of late SCWE has been invited by 40 Fife schools to make presentations on suitable twinnings. Their most exciting work at present is in developing the Likhubula Outdoor Centre in Malawi: this has involved collaboration with the best of Scotland's Christian Outdoor Centres and has attracted significant funding from the Scottish Executive. SCWE has recently extended their programme, with funding from the Church of Scotland, by recruiting youth workers from partner churches to work as advisers to churches in Scotland.

St Colm's College 80th anniversary as a Women's Missionary College will be celebrated in 2009 (foundation stone laid by Dr Laws of Livingstonia in 1908). St Colm's International House is now the base for SCWE's work. Its staff have had to work tirelessly to maintain it as a financially viable Centre providing accommodation for international students and as a focal point for international fellowship through meetings and conferences.

In 2006 it is likely that proposals will be advanced for the incorporation of SCWE as a Limited Company. This will improve governance and provide limited liability for Trustees and their Churches. The United Free Church is expected to continue to use the services of SCWE and St Colm's International House, and contribute to discussions about these developments as an associate member.

Flying Mission

The vision and work of Flying Mission figured large in the United Free Church's interest, particularly in the early years as that work gathered momentum and as the vision expanded to meet the needs of remote settlements of the Kalahari region and the work of medical mission. Under its founder, Dr. Malcolm McArthur, and with a team of dedicated and skilled technicians, it has continued to work effectively, safely and always within God's provision over long years.

2007 will mark the 30th anniversary of the founder's vision and it is the Committee's desire to identify and connect with a project related to the current work of the Mission, which now has plans to expand and develop its operations into Zambia where the needs and conditions found there are as critical and compelling as those found in the early days of the Flying Mission in Botswana. The Mission is more than simply operating mercy air-flights.

The pilots and their support teams are committed to ministry, both spiritual and practical and have taken seriously the cry of Africa's heart for the multitudes lost to the HIV/AIDS virus. The Committee commends this noble work and the expanding vision to reach out to Zambia.

A FRESH INITIATIVE

Guidelines for Groups and Individuals visiting projects abroad

It was heartening to hear the excitement generated within the Lossiemouth Group on return from their visit to Romania. The experiences gained and the overseas friendships made will no doubt remain fresh in them for years to come. Such visits are becoming more common across the full spectrum of the Church. The Committee is anxious to enable those experiences to be maximised both for individuals making the trips and for the Church as a whole. To that end it has prepared Guidelines as an enabling tool to help folks prepare for their ventures.

Without proper briefing-preparation and de-briefing much of the investment-value of the trip can be lost. The Committee would commend these Guidelines to would-be project travellers. The Committee encourage notice of such visits abroad to be shared with them so that they too benefit from any insights gained. The Committee is equally happy to offer its experience where appropriate, whilst plans for overseas visits are being drafted. The guidelines will also provide pointers on 'Risk Assessment', so essential in the world of the 21st century!

(The essence of the guidelines is set out in Appendix 2.)

In the name of the Committee

JAMES D NEIL	Convener
PATRICIA A JOHNSTON	Vice Convener
JOHN O FULTON	Secretary