

## REPORT OF THE OVERSEAS COMMITTEE

### GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2007

#### INTRODUCTION

Mission, and in particular overseas mission, is not for the faint-hearted. Many doors of opportunity may open to the Churches, but with each new challenge there may even be opposition encountered before gains are made. Paul knew this when he took up residence in Ephesus for a while.

*"I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries .....watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love."*

(1 Corinthians 15: 8,9 and 13,14)

2006/7 has been a momentous year for the committee. Plans that had been simmering for some time are now coming to fruition. The frustrations and setbacks on significant initiatives during the last two years have finally found resolution. It is therefore good to be able to report to the General Assembly of real progress and positive advances in the committee's work. It has also been a time to reflect on the appointment of three South African Ministers to congregations in the East and West Presbyteries. These placements have impacted greatly on the life of the Church, not only because they were multiple appointments but because of the quality and experience of the appointees.

Four Appendices following the main report look at:

1. The Overseas Partnership Scheme - gleanings from its first year.
2. The Bongani Orphan Care Programme, Zimbabwe - the visit to Scotland in March by two of its co-ordinators, Thelma Simela and Gastina Mpofu.
3. Stewart and Jean Moulds, serving with WEC International – highlighting movements in their circumstances.
4. The Missionary Secretary's remit – noting the main focal points of this appointment.

#### ON THE MOVE

##### **The Convener's visit to Southern Africa planned for April 2007**

The Convener made arrangements to visit Botswana and South Africa in April to discuss a range of issues and projects with Synod Officers and Members of the UCCSA Executive in Johannesburg. With the Partnership showing signs of new growth, visions beginning to blossom and Southern Africa undergoing rapid change, it was regarded by the committee that the time was ripe to look more closely at the committee's involvements there. The Convener will report to the General Assembly on these meetings and bring an up-to-date account of the committee's work in Southern Africa including impressions of the Alfred Merriweather Memorial Church and news of the latest developments in Flying Mission.

#### SOUTHERN AFRICA

##### **The Overseas Partnership Scheme**

By the summer of 2007 our three South African colleagues will have been with their respective congregations for almost half their appointed terms. Since their 'adoption' into the life of the United Free Church, the denomination has benefited from their natural and gifted ministries. Their contribution to the life of the Church has demonstrated the value of

this new expression of partnership with the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa by:

1. challenging the Church graciously and articulately through articles in Stedfast, offering input and comment at Presbytery level and within the General Assembly.
2. contributing to the fellowship of Ministers and Pastors of the United Free Church, giving encouragement and pastoral support.
3. bringing with them a clear sense of theological conviction enhanced by the experience of their nation's emergence from the Apartheid struggles as well as their personal experiences of life and ministry.
4. giving hope and fresh vision to congregations where long vacancies had prevailed.
5. restoring their congregation's sense of connectedness with their local community.

These gains have come at considerable cost – not least to the South African ministers and their families in answering the call of the United Free Church. The manner in which all three families were immediately embraced by their congregations and communities has strengthened confidence in this exciting opportunity linking Southern Africa with Scotland.

This new role of being a 'Receiving Church', whilst continuing as a 'Sending Church', is an exciting development and has already brought immense encouragement to those associated with these appointments. It may be too early to assess all aspects of the Overseas Partnership Scheme, but so far it has produced very positive reactions from folk who are already asking what lies in the future for this partnership opportunity. It is clear that blessing and joy has followed in the wake of these appointments and an excellent legacy is being created which will enhance future relationships with our brothers and sisters of Southern Africa. Building bridges with overseas partners will ultimately open the way to better understanding between two very different cultures, and it could not be more timely given the global issues and conditions which continue to polarise communities and nations. It is the committee's view that the Partnership Scheme is already showing itself to be one of the denomination's finest investments, in no small measure attributable to our 'pioneer' candidates and their respective congregations who have with faith and zeal launched into uncharted waters to maintain their church's presence in the community.

A review of the appointments took place in November 2006, almost a year after they commenced. It involved committee officials meeting with Reverends Joey Naika, Patrick Coltman and Peter de Villiers to learn from their experiences of a first year in partnership. These have been largely positive. Their experiences and what is being learned as the Partnership matures have been set out in Appendix.1. It has been disconcerting to the appointees to witness the diminished place of children in Church compared to South Africa and the marginalisation of the Church's influence in a secular and materialistic Western Society. As the days pass, the challenge of being the Body of Christ in the Scottish context is being increasingly understood.

The committee included within this review a look at the whole process, commencing in South Africa with applications and procedures, then through the 'selection' process, concluding with the individual arrangements for each settlement. The administrative measures appear to be working well on the whole, though there is need to ensure that costs for this project are closely monitored and a risk analysis made on current arrangements. The next year will be a critical one for both Pastor and People as there will be decisions on the future of each appointment to be made early in the third year. An important element in this exchange experience is to ensure that the lessons learned on both sides are passed on to the Church at large. There is no doubt that the very presence of overseas ministers has stimulated fresh vision within the United Free Church and the prospects for twinning of congregations has been raised with the Overseas Committee. It is also encouraging that the Youth Committee is considering a Youth Exchange visit in Southern Africa through

U.C.C.S.A. These are early days but God has chosen to bless the first bold steps of this new venture. (*Further information is given in Appendix 1.*)

## **BOTSWANA**

### **A Nation in Transition**

Botswana has been a shining star on the African continent. It has known long years of relative stability and its economy has vastly strengthened as it tapped into its natural resources. Today, just as Botswana's economy is on the move, so too is its population. There is a significant movement of the population into the environs of townships and the capital city of Gaborone. This transition from a largely traditional rural way of life to an urban life-style has altered the dynamics of social structures. One consequence of this is that there is greater difficulty responding to the needs of large numbers of orphans who would formerly have been taken into care within extended families in the local community. It is easy to forget in its developing prosperity the dreadful cost of life through HIV/AIDS in Botswana as the Government, Churches, Schools and Charitable Agencies strive to tackle this massive problem together.

In these circumstances it is therefore not surprising that HIV/AIDS has become the focus of many of the projects supported by the Overseas Committee and the Women's Home and Overseas Committee. Projects like Ella Mohammadi's Orphan Care work and Flying Mission's hands-on approach to sexual health education and orphan care require long-term commitments: with the need being so great the response of the United Free Church is all the more valued.

### **The Alfred Merriweather Memorial Church**

Reports on the opening ceremony for the Alfred Merriweather Memorial Church at Gabane will be given in due course. The opening ceremony was set for the 12<sup>th</sup> May by the Synod of Botswana with the Moderator of our General Assembly, Rev. Andrew McMillan, invited to represent the United Free Church at this event. It has been a tortuous journey to bring this building project to where it is, but the committee is grateful to so many who have helped overcome the obstacles along the way to enable this important milestone to be marked.

The Convener plans to visit the Memorial Church to discuss how the Heritage Room will be utilised for the benefit of future generations, for it is not only a Heritage Room but also a facility which will enable this part of Botswana to tell the story of Christian Mission from Moffat and Livingstone onwards.

The Assembly should note that the committee has transferred the celluloid film, "Go. Preach. Heal", which was produced in 1965 and documents Dr Merriweather's earlier work, into DVD format. This will preserve the record of his multi-faceted work for archiving purposes, whilst making it more accessible for general viewing.

### **Flying Mission**

This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conception of Flying Mission, the result of Dr Malcolm McArthur's personal vision of a Christian medical service able to respond to remote and inaccessible communities. Its logo carries the words, "Go. Preach. Heal." Today over half a million miles are flown by Flying Mission and its aviation operations section called Flying Mission Services.

The committee is eager to look at the latest thrust by Flying Mission into Zambia, one of Africa's poorest nations where health facilities are invariably remote and ill equipped. This development takes F.M. right back to its earliest founding principles and mode of

operation, but it will require a whole new base to be established with hangar accommodation and maintenance crews and equipment.

The United Free Church still has an emotional attachment to Flying Mission, having 'flown' with its founder's vision in Dr Malcolm McArthur. In recent years, much of the support for this work has waned as the committee's agenda has widened. It is hoped the Convener's visit will enable the Committee to reassess its position with F.M. in light of its recent developments.

## ZIMBABWE

### **Bongani Orphan Care Programme**

'Programme' – the very word is suggestive of something that is structured and on-going. The Bongani initiative most certainly is all of that, and it has to be, for the scale of deterioration in conditions in Zimbabwe is alarming as orphan numbers increase by the minute. The Committee has worked hard to bring about the visit of two of the Programme's principal co-ordinators, Thelma Simela and Gastina Mpfu. It took over a year to secure Thelma's visa, during which time two leading Cabinet ministers and a number of diplomats were involved in assisting with the application, thus allowing the visit to Scotland. The committee was grateful for the full cooperation and understanding of the three Presbyteries in receiving them. *(A report on their visit is contained in Appendix 2.)*

What was initially seen as a three-year Overseas Committee Aid-Project contributing £5,000 p.a. has developed into a relationship with the Bongani Orphans Care workers. As the Church becomes more acquainted with the challenges facing Zimbabwe through its HIV/AIDS pandemic and spiralling poverty, the more impressed we are with the compassion and practical response by the Church there. Zimbabwe's health statistics alone are almost incomprehensible with life expectancy averaging under 40 years (the lowest in the world) and one-in-eight children not surviving till their fifth birthday. In a country of 12 million citizens more than one million are now living with the HIV/AIDS virus and are too poor to afford the treatment, even it were available.

The committee is committed to on-going support of the Bongani Programme, which is a beacon of hope for those in and around Bulawayo. This support will certainly continue whilst the current conditions in Zimbabwe prevail.

## CHINA

### **The Scottish Churches China Group (SCCG)**

*Report by Rev Patricia Johnston, China Field Officer  
Scottish Churches' China Group, Jan 2007*

The Scottish Executive is in no doubt about the importance of strong business and educational links between Scotland and China. Some schools have taken that message seriously and now include Mandarin in the foreign languages offered. The Scottish Churches' China Group have recently become involved with the Scottish China Educational Network and will assist Kirkcaldy High School by providing people to lead Chinese culture and language sessions during their China Week, which aims to increase pupils interest in the country and its language. In addition an Education Materials Pack developed by the Scottish Churches' China Group (SCCG) will be available to all schools in Scotland in autumn 2007 providing an invaluable resource in the run up to the Beijing Olympics.

### **Shenyang:**

The Shenyang Diocese Social Service Centre, Shengjing Hospital, Shenyang and the Scottish Churches China Group are linked by a common interest in developing palliative care expertise. Shengjing Hospital runs a small Hospice caring for patients with terminal cancer as well as a dedicated palliative care ward, while medically qualified Sisters from the Diocese provide terminal care for AIDS patients. Currently palliative care is not part of the medical curriculum and so the Diocese, hospital and the SCCG are working together on staff training.

### **Local Links**

Polwarth Parish Church and Skene Parish Church continue to support the Ming Guang Shuang School for the Children of Migrant Workers. While a new link between Inverness Parish Church and a congregation in Fujian Province is being developed.

### **China Visit May/June 2007**

On 26<sup>th</sup> May an ecumenical group will leave Scotland for China to meet with SCCG partners in Shenyang, Nanjing and Shanghai. Past experience has shown that face to face visits such as these are invaluable in helping people in Scotland understand the complexities of the Chinese situation and our role in working with local partners. Following the visit it is hoped that delegates will take the time to share their experiences with local congregations and Presbyteries not only to increase their knowledge of the SCCG and our Chinese partners but also to reflect on what Scottish Christians can learn from the nature of the faith of Chinese Christians.

## **OTHER MATTERS**

### **Missionary Secretary - Helen Sunter**

The committee is fortunate to be served by such an enthusiastic Secretary who has moved the work up a few notches since its inception in 2000. Not only has the work of keeping all missionaries in touch with the Committee been undertaken and all churches informed of the very latest from the Missionaries, but also Helen has actually managed to visit some of them in her foreign travels!

Ruby Oliphant and Sam Paul were visited in Australia. Hospitality has been extended to several missionaries at the Secretary's home and Overseas Focus Evenings have been arranged in each Presbytery. The Secretary was privileged to visit projects in China with the Scottish Churches China Group in 2005 and will be returning in June 2007. She has also volunteered to work with the Lyttles in their Mizpah Outreach in August 2007.

Helen has coordinated the preparation of the Missionary Sunday Packs through the East Presbytery this year. These packs are meant to stimulate congregations to take one Sunday in the year to highlight the work of the missionaries and to remember them prayerfully.

The post of a Missionary Secretary has brought blessing to missionaries, congregations and Secretary. The committee continues to look at ways of improving contact with our missionaries and encouraging support by members and congregations  
*(A more complete account of the Secretarial appointment is provided in Appendix 4.)*

### **Churches World Exchange**

The committee finds itself in the regrettable position of feeling the need to withdraw as a Trustee Member, mainly for financial considerations. This is not a step taken lightly as the work of CWE will lose some of the financial support provided in the past. On first reading it might be assumed that this move was down-valuing the work of C.W.E. This would be an

erroneous conclusion. In fact the close ties forged with C.W.E. have done nothing but impress the Convener, as a former Trustee, of the integrity and effectiveness of this ecumenical arm of the Churches in assisting the placement and support of volunteers in every continent in communities where needs are critical. Some of those areas of need have in fact been in Scotland and the Church of Scotland has its own projects attracting overseas volunteers to become involved in 'home-based' needy areas.

The committee has made use of the wonderful accommodation at St. Colm's International House (base for C.W.E.'s work). It has a unique ambiance and is 'home' to a number of international students. This last year it has accommodated the orientation course for the South African families and the Bongani ladies, Thelma and Gastina. The committee will continue to be associated with C.W.E. as a 'Supporting Member' which means there will be a continuing but decreased financial support for this work.

In the name of the Committee

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