

REPORT OF ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008

INTRODUCTION

The United Free Church of Scotland understands itself as a particular expression of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. For this reason the church has always been willing to articulate its ecumenical commitment, beginning with the acknowledgment that *"The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord. It is also a means by which that unity is achieved."* The Church understands the relationship between the Church's God-given unity and its obvious division in a way that motivates ecumenism.

Ecumenism should never be an abstraction; ecumenical work always prods the Church to make specific decisions about distinct proposals. The decisions of a particular Church are not general responses to theoretical possibilities. Distinctive elements of ecumenical proposals elicit decisions that grow out of a Church's theological identity; they may also remind the Church of neglected aspects of its theological identity. Recent ecumenical decisions of the denomination provide insight into the relationship between our ecclesiastical identity and ecumenical decisions – what we say being consistent with what we do. While divisions into different denominations do not destroy this unity, they do obscure it for both the Church and the world. The Ecumenical Relations Committee in its work over the past year seeks to affirm its commitment to maintain communion and community with other branches of the Church.

JOINT IMPLEMENTATION GROUP

The Joint Implementation Group with the Church of Scotland met in August 2007. The group is responsible for monitoring developments both at local and national levels. Information had been given on a number of places where congregations are engaged in a variety of forms of cooperation. It would be helpful to the Church of Scotland to be aware of which of their congregations our United Free Church congregations were close to and which they felt themselves most related to. This would enable Presbyteries to give encouragement to those congregations within their bounds to develop a covenant relationship.

There was discussion on cooperation between councils and committees of our denominations. We have been given a place on the Ecumenical Relations Committee of the Church of Scotland. We in turn, with the advice of the Principal Clerks, invited a representative of the Church of Scotland to be appointed as a corresponding member to our Ecumenical Relations Committee. Other Assembly committees will also be offered places on the Church & Society Council and the Mission and Discipleship Council. It had also been recognised there could be value in closer links between the Ministries Council and our Ministry Committee.

QUESTIONNAIRE ON LOCAL COOPERATION

The Committee sent out a questionnaire as a fact finding exercise. Thirty-five congregations had responded to the questionnaire. All returned questionnaires showed that a great deal of working together is taking place in one way or another, i.e., Holy Week Services, Christmas Services, Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Local Churches Together events. Congregations which expressed reservations did say that they were in good relations with others locally in joint services and outreach.

When asked what steps had been taken locally as a result of the Covenant there

were very few who had been proactive. People in both denominations were unaware of the Covenant and the Committee wondered how the profile could be raised. Changes in local circumstances within the Church of Scotland e.g. parish readjustments and associated parishes meant there was a lot of movement and it was difficult to work together as the congregations concerned had to work on their relationships with each other as well as with those in other denominations. Communication was not always easy. Something would require to be done to raise the profile of the Covenant. Presbyteries in the Church of Scotland had appointed Ecumenical Facilitators in each area. It was felt that the Covenant meant more to our denomination; as we see it as a way forward because of our smaller size and manpower shortages. All questionnaires showed a willingness to work together locally. However, the Committee was concerned to get across that the Covenant was a tool / framework to be used so that situations can be built upon. An annual assessment of what is happening within congregations of our denomination would be helpful so that the Committee could be kept informed of how things were developing.

The Ecumenical Relations Committee was aware of the important part the committees of the General Assembly, as well as Presbyteries could play in maintaining and developing the work and vision of the Covenant. Therefore we ask them to be aware of the value of working ecumenically where possible.

VISIT TO GENEVA

Rev I A Boa was one of the 10 Scottish Church representatives to Geneva in April. There had been 4 from the Church of Scotland, 2 Episcopalians, 1 from ACTS, 1 Salvation Army, 1 URC and 1 UF. Over the weekend they had visited the city including the Cathedral, the Auditoire de Calvin and Museum of Reformation. This had been followed by meetings at the Ecumenical Centre with representatives of WCC (World Council of Churches), WARC (World Alliance of Reformed Churches) and CEC (Conference of European Churches).

Within WCC the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance deals with issues related to HIV/ Aids and there was a view that in many places the church is responsible for important information not being circulated. The group also visited the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey where the focus is on the chapel and seeking to break down barriers through worship. It was good to have the opportunity to engage more deeply in conversation with such a wide range of representatives.

EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL ASSEMBLY

It was our intention to send a delegate to the 3rd European Ecumenical Assembly. However, we discovered that we were not members of CEC. Information has been sought about membership of the Conference of European Churches. We received reports through ACTS from those who attended from Scotland.

BRITISH / IRISH REFORMED CONSULTATION

This consultation takes place every four years and met in Cardiff from 8th to 10th January, when the theme was National Identity. Through the good auspices of the Church of Scotland we were able to send Rev Ian Boa as our representative. The lectures were of a very high standard on 'Identity' and 'Theological Reflections' followed by workshops on 'Migrant Workers & Migration', 'Language' and 'Political Engagement'. The next consultation is in Edinburgh in 2010.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (A.C.T.S.)

ACTS' agenda is set at a national level by the denominations through their representatives on the Scottish Churches' Forum. The Forum meets three times a year, one of these meetings being residential to allow for an input on a broader ecumenical theme than the business of the Forum.

Core items on the Forum's agenda include opportunities for the Churches to share items of denominational and ecumenical significance and to raise issues of concern from their particular understanding of the Gospel.

The Forum also receives reports from ACTS Standing Committees and the four ACTS Networks on Church Life, Church and Society, Faith Studies and Mission. The Networks are the vehicle through which project funding applications come to the Forum. Proposals for pieces of joint work must be approved by the Forum and the Forum has an ongoing role in overseeing the work.

Ideas for pieces of work may come from individual member Churches, Associated Ecumenical Groups and Bodies in Association. These are brought to the relevant Network for discussion and scrutiny and if supported by the Network are forwarded to the Forum for final decision.

This model of working attempts to take seriously the principle of Being Churches Together and indicates the level of trust and flexibility that has emerged within ACTS during its fifteen years of partnership.

This year the Committee invited all those who represent the U F Church on ACTS' Networks etc. to attend and give a report or to submit a report in writing. This was a very valuable exercise for the members of the Committee and those who represent us on the Networks.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES HOUSE

Scottish Churches House was founded in 1960 as 'a place that the churches hold in common and from which they develop their ministry and mission together.' This ecumenical 'intention' remains its purpose today. Trustees hold it in the name of the nine churches of Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS). In addition to its published programme, the House is used by a variety of church groups and secular organisations for their own retreats, conferences and courses, as well as being available to individual guests for retreats and holidays.

The House now needs a property fit for purpose to support its inspirational programme and other activities. It was founded in 1960 on the Golden Jubilee of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, from where ecumenical, inter-church cooperation in Scotland started. Its own Jubilee will coincide with the Centenary celebrations of the 1910 conference. The Scottish Churches will help endow a refurbished House as a visible symbol of working together in the run up those celebrations.

The refurbishment will provide the bedrooms with en-suite facilities update catering provision and transform key conference capacity. A public appeal was launched on Wednesday 16th January; the Jubilee Appeal was hosted by Provost Margaret Brisley for Stirling Council at a luncheon to mark the 90th birthday of Rev Dr. Ian Fraser, the first Warden of Scottish Churches House. The target of the appeal is to raise the £500,000 necessary to allow improved residential and conference facilities to be provided for guests in coming days.

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (C.T.B.I.)

CTBI Networks have replaced Commissions with the intention that greater accountability and governance can be exercised. The new proposals work to ensure representation across the various categories of membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. The balance of input and outcomes for each Network is sought from the National Ecumenical Instruments and the Churches, with an additional emphasis on clear lines of reporting back to parent bodies. The following has been agreed by the Trustees of CTBI, and will be presented to representatives of the NEI's and the Churches for endorsement at the next Senior Representatives Forum in May 2008.

Remit:

1. To take forward the work of CTBI in order to resource the full visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ.
2. To focus on the Network agenda agreed by CTBI.
3. To be accountable to CTBI Trustees and to feed back to their appointing bodies.
4. To identify/initiate/plan/co-ordinate/monitor/assess/budget/timeline/agree milestones.
5. To work in 3 year cycles

The role of National Ecumenical Instruments, Churches, Bodies in Association:

1. To take forward the work of CTBI towards the full visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ.
2. To appoint appropriately skilled and experienced members to enable the work of the Network.
3. To establish support and feedback mechanism so that they can "talk with confidence" on behalf of their appointing body.
4. To pay due regard to the overall Network balance: eg lay/ordained, male/female, age, denomination, ethnic origin

FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Meeting of Free Church & United Free Church Representatives.

A very productive initial meeting took place between two representatives of the Free Church of Scotland and two from the United Free Church of Scotland.

Areas of interest and need where we can cooperate were identified. In the area of public questions it was agreed there could be sharing of information and cooperation. There might also be scope for cooperation in youth camps and in evangelism and these areas could be considered further.

Both Churches participate in the work of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Officer, It would be helpful – perhaps through consideration of public questions issues – to identify issues of common concern on which we could make a joint approach to the Scottish Government etc.

It was agreed that as well as looking at practical ways of working together, it would be valuable to arrange for a small group from both denominations to meet together to look at doctrine and it would be good to start by looking at Gospel doctrine, what is said and what this means for us today. It is valuable to begin with this core teaching where we have much in common. This is something which could be considered further by both committees with a view to identifying those to serve on such a group.

It was felt it had been very useful to be able to discuss these issues together. We would seek to move forward with some of the practical suggestions and ask our respective committees to take necessary. In addition, the Committee recommends to the General Assembly that the Panel on Doctrine be asked to oversee the discussions with the Free Church of Scotland on doctrinal issues and to appoint the UF representatives to participate in the joint group considering such issues. Another meeting of representatives will be arranged as appropriate.

WORLD ALLIANCE OF REFORMED CHURCHES

The WARC Executive Committee met in Trinidad and Tobago from 18th – 28th October where it was agreed that WARC would unite with the Reformed Ecumenical Council. The proposed name for the new group could be World Communion of Reformed Churches. The WARC Executive also agreed on a definition of the word “communion” in the new name. The new name and definition will go first to REC and then, if agreed to, to WARC’s member churches for their input.

“Communion is an expression of our being together in the body of Christ as we move towards that oneness which is the gift and calling of God, fully expressed in the Trinity. Our desire to enter into communion signifies the commitment of our Churches, in the richness of diversity, to mutual caring, respect and service of one another, as witness to our common calling by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.”

VISITS TO OTHER CHURCHES

The Committee wishes to acknowledge the visits undertaken by the Moderator of the General Assembly on our behalf and thanks members of the Committee for their willingness to represent the denomination at various national events of Assemblies’ and Synods etc. as well as working committees for ecumenical purposes.

Especially at this time we thank the Rev S J W Mathews who has represented the denomination for a number of years at the United Reformed Church Assembly. The committee is very grateful for his willingness to attend these Assemblies in various cities in England. He brings back a full and interesting report that is valued by the Committee. Stephen has served the Committee as Convener in its former title as ‘Overseas & Inter Church Affairs’ and over the years represented us nationally and internationally. He has been a conscientious and hardworking member who brought a great breadth of experience. We would like to record our appreciation of his work for the committee and wish him well in his retirement.

During the past year the Moderator represented the United Free Church at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Rev A McMillan represented us at the Synod of the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church Synod of Scotland. Rev S J W Mathews represented the Church at the Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Assembly of the United Reformed Church and the Assembly of the Baptist Union of Scotland.

CONCLUSION

The future is not guaranteed, rediscovery of the partnership of ministers and elders in ministry of the Word and sacrament could lead to new relationships with others. Renewal of engagement with its deep theological understanding of the Church’s life could cultivate meaningful relationships rather than bureaucratic approaches to ecumenical structures. Reinvigoration of the confessional nature of the Church could encourage genuinely theological ecumenical exploration of the apostolic faith of Scripture. Diluted identity leads to

weak decisions, whether a church adopts or rejects an ecumenical proposal. When a Church embraces its deep distinctive identity, it may discover resources that enrich ecumenical conversation, deepen ecumenical commitment, and create new ecumenical possibilities.

In the name of the Committee

ANDREW McMILLAN
IAN A BOA
JOHN O FULTON

Convener
Vice -convener
Secretary