

**REPORT OF THE OVERSEAS COMMITTEE**  
**GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2008**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Overseas Committee has been blessed to serve the Body of Christ and be the servant of servants. The methodology of mission may have varied greatly over the years but the message remains the same - God's Good News to all the world. To catch something of the fervour and conviction that has gripped our missionaries consider now what Scripture would teach us, that the God of glory has 'mission' emblazoned on the hem of His garment. He who scattered the stars so wondrously in the heavens has set His heart on 'the sons of men', reaching out redemptively as a loving and compassionate God. His heart is just as affected today by the plight of the nations as it was in the time of Moses, when He said,

*"I have seen the oppression of my people in Egypt  
and have heard their cry." (Exodus 3:7)*

It has been said that God only had one Son and He called Him to be a missionary. Again Scriptures is compellingly clear about the centrality of mission in God's activity:-

- The first message at the birth of Christ was a missionary message. (Luke 2:10)
- The first prayer Christ taught was a missionary prayer. (Matthew 6:10)
- The first disciple, Andrew, became the first missionary. (John 1:41)
- The first message of the risen Lord was a missionary message. (John 20:17)
- The first command of the risen Lord was a missionary command. (John 20:21)
- The first apostolic sermon was a missionary sermon. (Acts 2: 17-39)
- And it was Jesus' very last wish and command that his followers be missionaries (Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15)

When the Committee therefore meets there is a sense in which it stands on 'holy ground', shoulder to shoulder with those who have wrestled with, and responded to God's call. God's call however is not just to individuals but to the Committees of the Church, and the Overseas Committee has often felt the pull of the Spirit, either confirming or redirecting its work.

In bringing this report to the General Assembly it is the prayer of the Overseas Committee that the congregations of the United Free Church will take to their hearts those servants called of God to reach out in faith to the nations of the world and to offer the prayers of the Church for those projects which it has been privileged to engage with and support in various ways.

**THE OVERSEAS PARTNERSHIP SCHEME**

There is a 'home' component to the Committee's work, for true partnership involves balancing both sides of an interesting and sometimes complex equation. This is so with the Partnership Scheme which is now in its third year of operation. It has been a joyful and exhilarating journey for the Committee but also a real challenge. The challenges have been cross-cultural, personal and domestic. There is no doubt that faith has been greatly tested. Partnership requires a keen listening ear and an openness to fresh understanding.

The joint sub-committee set up to facilitate this partnership arrangement involved the Overseas and Ministry Committees. This group continued in existence for the purposes of review and support. It has met annually with each of the three ministers and these have been very worthwhile times, characterised by a spirit of openness and helpfulness. Being the final year of the partnership, it is natural to ask what happens next? This question is currently being addressed by all three appointees and their respective churches with the guidance and support of the review-group. It is too early to release information of progress in these matters. Updates should be possible by the time of the General Assembly.

There has been discussion on the possibilities of a further call to the Executive of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa for more ministers, however this is a matter not only for the Overseas Committee but also for the Ministry Committee and the Church at large to decide as the Spirit leads. There is no doubt that Ministry needs on home soil are critically short with protracted vacancies showing no sign of resolution. In those circumstances the Committees of the General Assembly are taking the matter very earnestly and remain in dialogue on the subject. As the three year appointments draw to a close a more comprehensive appraisal of the experience will be written up.

## **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

### **The Alfred Merriweather Memorial Church at Gabane**

Whilst the building is completed and the official opening has taken place there remains a smaller but no less important matter to be attended to before a line is drawn under this Memorial Project. It concerns the Memorial Room itself. The room is smaller than was first hoped due to financial constraints, none the less it will, when finalised, be home to a collection of photos and artefacts relating to the Doctor's unique testimony in reaching out to those living primarily in the Kweneng district and beyond. It is the mind of the Committee that the Doctor's life is too big a story to be confined to a small room and that, with vision, and dedicated effort, it could be re-told in such a way as to create an educational opportunity in telling the story of Christian Mission to that region. Central to the vision would be its accessibility to the people of Molepolole where the Doctor's life was most notably lived. The vision was cast with the Synod of Botswana and with the Merriweather family, both of whom have warmly responded to the prospect. For the vision to become a reality will require considerable consultation at a local level and for others to find merit in what the Committee foresees.

Commissioners will rejoice to learn that the congregation at Gabane continues to grow under the leadership of Rev. Mosweu Simane who was once a member of Alfred's Bible Class and one of the students whose theological training was sponsored by the United Free Church.

### **Bongani Orphan Care**

It was good to have that personal contact with Thelma and Gastina in 2007. It brought their work amongst orphans and vulnerable young people to the attention of the whole church. Their dedication was inspirational and their professional approach to care evident across every aspect of their programme. It is hard to comprehend how our annual contributions of £5,000 can make a significant difference to thousands of young lives and families, yet it does because of the selfless volunteer work carried out by over 150 adults in the community around Bulawayo.

Please remember in your prayers these 'saints of God' who labour in Christ's name out of a deep love and compassion for their people. Zimbabwe is in a perilous state politically, economically and socially with each day bringing added heartache for the nation.

Let us lift this whole situation up to the Lord and let us as a Church stand shoulder to shoulder with the Church in Zimbabwe.

The information on Zimbabwe provided is to help the United Free Church appreciate something of what the Bongani staff face each day and to enable prayers to be more focussed. Prayer headings are provided below, following the brief outline.

### **Zimbabwe, March 2008**

The situation prevailing in Zimbabwe could hardly be worse yet it continues to spiral downwards.

**The Elections:** President Mugabe, in office since 1980, has been accused of resorting to heavy-handed methods to retain office. Presidential, parliamentary elections are due on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2008. Simba Makoni, the former finance minister who fell out with Mugabe over the economy, was planning to stand against him for the Presidency.

**The Economy:** The economy is in crisis, with rampant inflation, 'de-industrialisation' and shortages of food and fuel. Agricultural production is shrinking rapidly. Prices are doubling every other day for many necessities. Everyone in Zimbabwe is a millionaire! They have to be as a loaf of bread costs a million Zimbabwean dollars! Yet Zimbabweans have found ways of surviving even with 80% unemployment. There is little malnutrition thanks to aid-agencies and family members working abroad sending much needed foreign currency to help them provide food and shelter. There is a mass movement of people over Zimbabwe's borders: approximately 3,000 per day are leaving the country taking with them skills which the country needs if it is to recover.

The annual rate of inflation is officially around 5,000%! Others suggest it may well be over 100,000%!!! Prices can double in days or weeks with no warning so people spend what little they have as soon as they receive it, otherwise its worth plummets in value. Bartering is a common way of paying for goods and services.

**International relations:** Zimbabwe faces increasing international isolation over human rights abuses – this can only add to the misery of its citizens.

**Life expectancy:** 44 years for men and 43 years for women.

**Media:** All broadcasters transmitting from Zimbabwean soil, as well as the its two main newspapers, are state run. The Harare-based Herald and the Bulawayo-based Chronicle are both tightly controlled by the Ministry of Information. All BBC news broadcasts have been jammed. F.E.B.A. operating from Madagascar send out short-wave programmes.

Please pray that: -

- Thelma, Gastina and all the workers associated with the Bongani programme may continue to be strengthened and enabled to maintain their much needed programmes of support and care in their community.
- The necessary funds may continue to come in despite the tragedy of Zimbabwe's economic plight.
- The Lord will guard and protect the Bongani-aided families who look to its assistance as their only hope.
- The United Free Church will be given wisdom concerning its partnership with the Bongani administrators.
- The Elections will be a major step towards a better future for the nation.

- The human rights abuses will be seriously addressed and that international pressure will be effective towards this end.
- The HIV/AIDS intervention work will help restore health to the nation and that essential drugs will be accessible for the people
- The Churches in Zimbabwe will remain strong and united for their nation throughout its crisis.

### **Flying Mission**

It was recognised by the Committee that current support for Flying Mission had abated and the matter was taken up afresh. During a visit to Botswana in April 2007 the Convener met with the leadership team of Flying Mission to explore the possibilities of becoming involved in their work again. From that meeting much was learned about the response of Flying Mission to the tragedy of the HIV/AIDS crisis in Botswana and Zambia. In recent years a significant work has arisen in which the Mission has been pro-active in supporting the establishment of rural community-based Care Centres. Government priorities tend to lie in the larger centres of population leaving the more remote rural, and often the most vulnerable communities, to travel large distances to access the help needed. The Committee felt drawn towards a project which could make a radical difference to the prospects of those in this situation and bring that assistance nearer to their home roots. The Committee is pleased to report that one such community project has been identified, the Rerolthe Care Centre.

It was initially set up in 2004 to reach out to 300 orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) and their families living in remote cattle-posts but it had no running water, the nearest supply being twelve kilometres away along rough tracks! Often the journey was too much for young carers to contemplate. However new rented accommodation has been found and the centre is now better set up to begin reaching out to those most in need. It can accommodate working with 40 children at a time. The Committee is committed to this new work over a period of three years with a three-year budget of approximately £9,500 (or 120,000 pula). John and Yvonne Lubbe, members of the Mission's Executive will visit the Assembly to share more about this recently established work, updating Commissioners on fresh developments within Flying Mission. It is the Committee's hope that congregations and members will take this project to their hearts and give it their earnest prayers, whilst remembering the whole work of Flying Mission which now has a firm base of work reaching out to Zambia as well as Botswana.

### **THE WORK OF THE MISSIONARY SECRETARY**

The work overseen by Helen Sunter as the Church's Missionary Secretary continues to go from strength to strength, however what set out to be a modest 'part-time' appointment has grown to require considerable time and dedication. Helen is passionate and committed about this work, which she counts as a real privilege. The Church is blessed by her sterling work networking with missionaries and local congregations through regular prayer bulletins and personal contacts with the missionaries.

Keeping the Church in touch with missionaries has been a work shared by both the Women's Home and Overseas Committee and the Overseas Committee. Agreement was reached in uniting the task of informing the Churches - this Helen continues to do through the Missionary Prayer Flyers which all congregations receive regularly. A review of the appointment and the breadth of its remit took place and an assessment made of the changing face of missionary activity in the twenty-first century. One notable difference in mission today is the tendency for it to be shorter-termed and skills-orientated thus enabling professionals and artisans to have the opportunity to lend their services.

Helen is not content simply to write to our missionaries, she likes to see their work close at hand and get involved whenever possible. In her globetrotting she has met up with partners from Greece to Australia. These visits give immense insights into the lives of those serving the Lord overseas, helping her appreciate mission from a closer perspective.

Missionary Sunday Packs were prepared this year by the North Presbytery and we are grateful for their work in helping to stimulate interest in our Missionaries - it is a sizeable task for the Office staff too and a large debt of gratitude is due to them for ensuring the materials arrived in time.

It is all too easy to leave the relationship we have with missionaries in such capable hands as Helen's but the real measure of our work will be the degree to which congregations become much more switched on to our missionaries through personal communications.

### **YOUTH GROUP VISIT TO SOUTHERN AFRICA**

The Overseas Committee is excited about the potential of this visit by a youth group in July. The benefits to the young people and the Church at large cannot be measured but they will be considerable. The two projects, one in Botswana and the other in KwaZulu-Natal that they will become involved in will provide excellent opportunities to engage with real human need and with the rich tapestry of African culture. The Committee elected to support this project in the form of assisting costs with orientation knowing how important it is to prepare well for overseas experiences and foreign travel. In this regard the Youth Committee has taken this responsibility very earnestly and the benefits of this will surely shine through. It will be interesting to see what materialises out of this visit in the friendships that will be formed and in the impact of seeing young lives lit up by the hope their visit will bring.

### **SCOTTISH CHURCHES' CHINA GROUP (SCCG) THE SCANDAL OF POVERTY**

Despite media reports received in this country, China's pavements are not quite paved in gold, even if some believe that it is only a matter of time until they are. We repeatedly hear about China's unprecedented economic growth, her increasing influence on world politics, the on going re-development of her main cities, her space programme and preparations for what will be very lavish Olympic Games.

All of the above are true and there can be no doubt the last 25 years have seen unparalleled growth and development. However, that is only a small part of the picture. The vast majority of China's 1.3 billion population live in the countryside and for many people there has been little or no improvement in their standard of living. According to some statistics an average resident living in Beijing will earn around RMB2,000 (approx US\$270) per month while around 135 million people are living below the international poverty line of US\$1 per day, and up to 500 million on US\$2 per day.

While financial poverty does mainly affect people living in rural areas, urban poverty is a growing problem. The One Child Policy and changes to the traditional family unit have left many elderly people with no one to look after them. All education and medical services have to be personally paid for leaving many urban residents within sight of well equipped hospitals but with no means to pay for treatment. The on-going redevelopment of China's major cities has brought an influx of migrant workers from the countryside. However as they have no residency rights within the cities it leaves millions of people unable to access public services, including education for their children.

These are just some of the imbalances within Chinese society which could potentially lead to instability within the country and have led the Government to promote a range of policies in health, education, environment and other fields which will address these social inequalities. With the aim of creating a “harmonious society” the Chinese Government has sought the help of NGO’s like The Amity Foundation to achieve this goal.

The Amity Foundation is a Christian initiated Chinese NGO based in Nanjing and is one of the main partners of the Scottish Churches’ China Group (SCCG). Through local partners The Amity Foundation oversees a wide range of programmes which seek to improve the lives of China’s most impoverished and marginalised citizens.

Four of the Projects we have been working on recently are:-

- Ming Guang Shuang School for the Children of Migrant Workers: The SCCG gives financial and material support to this School which provides a Primary Education to over 800 children who would otherwise receive no schooling.
- The Amity Teachers Programme: There are currently 8 British and Irish Amity Teachers’ Group (BIATG) working in Gansu and Guangxi Provinces. The majority are based at small Teacher Training Colleges teaching student teachers who will return to often remote rural areas upon graduation. The SCCG is Co-ordinating Agency to 6 of those teachers.
- Lishui Middle School Project: This Project provides food subsidies to Middle School students whose family circumstances are only sufficient to fund the children’s education but not their other day to day needs.
- Outwith The Amity Foundation the SCCG is working alongside a Hospice in Shenyang which provides free pain relief to terminally ill cancer patients who are unable to pay for any other care.

Patricia A Johnston (Revd.)  
China Field Officer  
Scottish Churches’ China Group (SCCG)

## **CHURCH TWINNING**

The whole matter of exploring the possibilities of twinning arrangements with congregations of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa was raised. Basically the scheme set out in appendix 2 explains: -

- The purposes of twinning partnerships,
- The initiatives that have to be taken to ensure a solid foundation for entering into a twinning arrangement,
- Other important practical issues for the full benefit of the partnership to be realised as an enduring and effective one.

This scheme will require ratification by UCCSA.

In the name of the Committee

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