

## REPORT OF THE OVERSEAS COMMITTEE

### GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2012

#### INTRODUCTION

*“This is how we know what love is: Christ gave His life for us. We too, then, ought to give our lives for our brothers and sisters! Rich people who see a brother or sister in need, yet close their hearts against them, cannot claim to love God. My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action.”* 1 John 3:16-18

It seems that the Report of the Overseas Committee always begins with a recounting of the joys and frustrations of overseas work. Such is the reality of this undertaking and 2011/12 has been no different. While communication with some partners is very open and constructive with others it remains a source of disappointment as e-mails and letters go unanswered and work grinds to a halt.

In addition this past year has seen the Committee grapple with some serious questions centred on the nature of partnership. How do we partner with organisations and countries that are very dissimilar to our own and whose norms differ widely from our own culture and traditions? These questions engage us in dialogue which requires us to examine our own perspectives and values. They also invite us to rise to the challenge of working from a basis of mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance. This has not been easy but any partnership requires openness and compromise and those relationships that the Committee are involved in are no different.

As always the vast majority of the projects and programmes supported by the Committee are with church based, historical partners. Many receive recurring annual grants. This is the preferred method of working as it allows for longer term planning by partners.

#### UCCSA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Mary Macintyre and Patricia Johnston were privileged to represent the United Free Church and the Overseas Committee at the 36<sup>th</sup> Assembly held in Matola, Mozambique. This is the first time the Assembly has met in that country and the organisation of such a major event proved to be a considerable undertaking for the Synod. Although one of southern Africa's poorer countries the cost of food and accommodation is disproportionately high and providing both for one week, for over 200 delegates, required considerable planning and financial management.

The theme of the Assembly was “Christ is calling us: Participating in Suffering and Struggle”. The missional thrust of the UCCSA is “its search for a society where justice flows like a river.” Repeatedly throughout the Assembly discussions focussed on the question, “How can we be a justice church if we allow/don't stand up for/speak out against.....?”

There is no doubt that the diversity within the 5 Synods that make up the UCCSA presents the church with particular challenges. For example, this Assembly had a further discussion on the setting up of a common fund from which all ministers' stipends would be paid. The ultimate aim is for every UCCSA minister, irrespective of where they serve, to receive the same basic stipend which can then be supplemented by the local congregation if they so choose or are able. The inherent difficulty in achieving this aim became obvious when research showed that the highest paid UCCSA ministers received 40,000 S. African Rand (approx £3,337) per month, while the lowest paid received 400 S. African Rand (approx £33) per month. Although such discrepancies do not sit comfortably within a “justice church” framework, the proposed changes did not receive universal support.

Besides recognition of justice issues within African countries, there was considerable discussion around the agendas of foreign agencies and governments, much of which made for uncomfortable listening. While there is no doubt that western countries have, historically, perpetrated many injustices within the African continent, the Overseas Committee delegates felt that little recognition was given to western organisations and charities that seek to address these, nor to the political issues facing many western countries. It was also felt that there was little attempt to understand the frustrations and concerns expressed by international development agencies for transparency while readily accepting vast sums of money in aid.

It is impossible for us to understand what many of our partners have suffered through apartheid and imposed political structures which do little to address the issue of poverty but this culture of blame, which permeated many of the Assembly discussions, contributes little to a constructive partnership based on mutual respect.

Among the other topics discussed were:

- The need for continued professional development among clergy.
- Ministry to the elderly.
- HIV and AIDS.
- Concern over the number of UCCSA clergy who are going directly to the courts of law rather than follow Denominational processes to resolve a dispute.
- Issues around the length of time it takes to implement Assembly Resolutions within a Congregational framework.
- Poverty and addictions.
- Concerns about government policies in Botswana.

The Delegates are very grateful to the Overseas Committee for providing them with this opportunity and experience.

## **UCCSA DIALOGUE**

As a result of:

- Some of the issues raised at the Assembly
- The close of the Overseas Partnership Scheme
- The need for reflection on the two Youth Visits already undertaken

the Committee decided it was now an appropriate time to enter into dialogue with the UCCSA Executive on the nature and status of our partnership. Given the considerable differences between our two denominations and the societies within which we live and work the Committee felt it was now time to review the partnership and have requested a discussion with members of UCCSA Executive. Questions to be looked at include:

- What are the key issues for both Denominations?
- Is there a role for each side in contributing to the goals of both Denominations?
- Is the partnership still beneficial to both sides?
- If not, has it now run its natural course?
- If yes, how do we take it forward to a new phase of joint work?
- If yes, how is UCCSA going to help the United Free Church understand the historical legacy of racism and apartheid without attributing blame?

It is hoped that initial discussions can take place this year with the UCCSA General Secretary while he is travelling overseas.

## **MERRIWEATHER MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP**

This Scholarship was set up as an alternative to an Exhibition on the life and witness of Dr Alfred Merriweather when it became obvious that the practical difficulties surrounding the original project were insurmountable. The decision was approved of by the late Mrs Mary Merriweather. Since this decision there has been correspondence with the General Secretary of UCCSA and the Synod Secretary in Botswana explaining our desire for the money to be used to assist students for the Ministry of UCCSA who come from rural Botswana with the suggestion that the Scholarship cover up to 75% of costs. We sought their views on the best way for the money to be handled and information on how many students might come from such a background. The Scholarship has been welcomed by the UCCSA Executive and they have encouraged us to discuss the detailed arrangements with the Synod Secretary. To date, no awards have been made but the Committee hope that arrangements can be finalised within the next few months as there are currently 3 candidates from rural Botswana who may be eligible.

## **MRS MARY MERRIWEATHER**

It was with great sadness that we learned in early August 2011 of the death of Mrs Mary Merriweather. We were aware of her failing health over a period of time so the news was not unexpected but it was, nevertheless, still received with a real sense that this was the end of an era. From the time she arrived in Botswana Mary Merriweather set about not only supporting her husband in his invaluable and wide ranging work but also in using her own skills to develop programmes which were complementary to Alfred's. She taught in Sunday Schools and then set up the Shepherd School, seeking to bring a well rounded curriculum to, particularly, church workers' children.

In addition Mary truly understood the meaning of Christian hospitality. She was a very gracious hostess and enjoyed the company of guests from many countries. Her life was one of selfless witness and service and we give thanks for her faithfulness to her Lord and Saviour.

We would like to thank the Moderator, Mr George McRobb, for being willing, at short notice, to travel to Botswana to represent the Denomination at the Service of Thanksgiving for the life and witness of Mary Merriweather.

## **FLYING MISSION**

The past 12 months have been a time of re-adjustment for Flying Mission. John Lubbe has been re-appointed as Interim Chief Executive Officer until a new appointment is made. This time of uncertainty has impacted negatively upon our partnership. The Committee was hoping to make some short term appointments to Flying Mission but has been informed that the organisation is not in a position to receive anyone until the senior management situation has been resolved. We would encourage continued prayer support for all those in Flying Mission as they seek to settle these issues.

Following her visit to Flying Mission in October 2011 Miss Mary Macintyre organised a collection of knitted garments for pre-school age children. The Committee was very grateful to all who responded so quickly and so generously. The items were then sent to Botswana where they were gratefully received for distribution by Flying Mission staff. The Committee would like to thank Miss Macintyre for her work on this initiative.

## **REROTLHE**

The Rerotlhe Project continues to develop as more and more children become involved. The Day Care Programme is taking shape with one volunteer now enrolled in the Flying Mission Early Childhood Development Programme. This is a 15 month course leading to a National Certificate. On completion of the course the volunteer will return to Rerotlhe and share her skills with other volunteer teachers.

The old primary school kitchen is used to prepare meals for the Day Care children. Numbers vary according to the season but approximately 20 boys and 35 girls are involved, 28 of whom are orphans or vulnerable children.

In July 2011 the President of the Republic of Botswana, His Excellency Sertese Khama Ian Khama visited the project and was briefed by the Board on its work.

One priority is to appoint a new Project Co-ordinator. The former Co-ordinator resigned when she had the opportunity to undertake further study. Retaining staff and volunteers has been a recurring issue for Rerotlhe.

The Committee has granted annual funding for 3 years after which there will be a further review.

## **BONGANI**

The Bongani Orphan Care Project continues to look after 10,000 children in 8 different centres. The situation in Zimbabwe has improved slightly providing foreign currency is available for purchases. This does not include medication, however, and the overall health of the children remains a concern. Issues around income generation have eased a little with a successful project to resell second hand clothes purchased or donated from neighbouring countries.

During the UCCSA General Assembly the Committee became aware of tensions between the project leaders and the Synod of Zimbabwe. These appear to centre around who has ultimate responsibility for the running of the project and, therefore, the handling of the Committee's annual grant. Clarification was sought from the UCCSA Executive and the initial response from the General Secretary was that he would be travelling to Zimbabwe and would seek to resolve the situation. The Committee was then a little surprised to learn that Johannesburg had paid the grant directly to the Synod offices. While the Committee would not wish to interfere in an internal matter within UCCSA, we have serious concerns that this change will have a negative impact on the invaluable work carried out over many years by Thelma and Gastina and their team of volunteers. We are unsure as to whether or not these concerns were confirmed when shortly thereafter we received news that Gastina had decided to retire from her post as Co-ordinator. Whether this is related to the change in governance is unknown, however the Committee has been assured that the grant given will still be used to pay staff costs and a replacement for Gastina is being sought. The Committee has sent a card to Gastina acknowledging her commitment to and work for the children and young people of the Bongani Orphan Care Project. She has been a quiet inspiration to many and we give thanks to God for her service to Him.

## **TRAINING FOR MINISTRY**

The UCCSA is committed to training for ministry and on-going professional development. Any one of the 5 Synods may send candidates for training at the House of Formation, S Africa. A recurring issue is that a number of Synods have candidates but no funds to support their training. In response to a request for assistance, the Committee has

agreed to £3,000 per year being paid to UCCSA for the next 3 years to assist with training for Ministry. Courses are either full time or block release and the Committee agreed to the UCCSA Executive deciding how best the grants could be used.

To date we have had no further update on how the first year grant has been spent, the number of students that have been supported and stage and status of training being undertaken. This is an on-going frustration and we continue to seek feedback.

### **WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (ZIMBABWE)**

This is a new project being supported by the Committee. For a number of years now the UCCSA Assembly has been committed to structures which make it easier for women to participate in, and influence, the decision making bodies of the Denomination. At the Assembly in 2011 it was agreed that women would make up one third of the membership of every committee, at all levels of the church. This is an ambitious target and will require more than a Resolution at Assembly to ensure its implementation. As part of its recognition of the role of women in the church, the United Theological College has set up a new series of training courses aimed at empowering women in roles of leadership. The Rev Sifiso Mpfou, Principal of the College, offers the following explanation, "The programmes that are aimed at empowering women have generally become a must in community development since women constitute a bigger part of the population. It is also crucial to empower women because from a traditional society, women have suffered marginalisation based on a male centred society. In this regard it has become imperative that we build a capacity of women to liberate themselves from certain social-injustices in order to enable them to be their own liberators."

The Course titles are:

- Community Empowerment and Leadership Development
- Religion, Gender and HIV and AIDS Management
- Religion, Justice and Rights Issues
- Religion, Economic-justice and Development
- Religion, Conflict Prevention, Management and Transformation

After further discussion with the Principal, the Committee agreed to an initial grant of £6,205 (approx) to sponsor the Community Empowerment and Leadership Development Course. The Committee will decide on further support once it has received feedback on how successful the first round of Courses has been and how the learning is being worked out in local churches and communities.

### **VISIT FROM TRINITY CHOIR**

The Committee is working with 35 members of the Trinity Church Choir, Gaborone, who plan to visit Scotland from 13<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> June 2012. This trip is primarily being funded by the Choir members and we have simply been asked to help arrange accommodation, transport and to set up some concert venues. The Choir is planning on giving a number of concerts as well as singing at Church Services. They will have the opportunity to sing in St Giles Cathedral, St George's Tron Church, Glasgow, and the David Livingstone Centre.

This is an extremely accomplished Choir and the Committee would encourage all who have the opportunity to go along and hear them.

### **MISSION SECRETARIES**

The Committee is very grateful to the Mission Secretaries for the work they continue to do in raising awareness within the Denomination of the work of associated mission partners in various locations overseas. To date day conferences have been organised within

the Presbyteries of the East and West with two in the North at the planning stage. The purpose of these conferences is to support Mission Contacts in promoting the work, within their own congregations, of the mission partners.

Mission Sunday was once again observed and feedback on how the materials were used is now being analysed.

The Committee would like to thank Mrs Crawford and Mrs Currie for their commitment and hard work.

### **SHORT TERM PLACEMENTS**

Two short term placements have been undertaken, both in China. In October 2011 Rev Margery Collin returned to Shengjing Hospital to provide more in depth training on Spiritual Care. A month later Mrs Sally Boa, along with Dr Joan Murphy, returned to the Hua Xiang Branch Hospital, Shenyang, for the second phase of the "Talking Mats" training. This was particularly successful and the third and final phase, Accreditation Training, will take place in Stirling in 2012.

The Committee also received an invitation from Jean and Stewart Moulds for members of the United Free Church to join a WEC summer team who would be working in Indonesia. Unfortunately, by the time sufficient information was gathered about the trip it was too late to recruit participants for 2012, however, it is planned to do this in 2013.

### **OVERSEAS PARTNERSHIP SCHEME**

The Overseas Partnership Scheme has now come to a close. Rev Peter de Villiers has already returned to S. Africa and Rev Patrick Coltman will travel back in the summer of 2012. A full evaluation of the Scheme will now be held with all parties being asked for feedback.

We would like to thank the UCCSA for releasing three of their most experienced ministers to participate in this programme. We greatly appreciate the willingness of the ministers and their wives to leave family and friends in order to serve here in Scotland. This was not an easy undertaking for anyone and it is appropriate to acknowledge the contribution they have made to the work and witness of the United Free Church and to the wider Church community in Scotland. We assure them of our prayers as they continue their ministry in South Africa.

### **SCOTTISH CHURCHES CHINA GROUP (SCCG)**

The main focus of the Scottish Churches' China Group's work in 2011 has been to bring medical staff to Scotland for specialised training in treating Spinal Cord Injuries and Rehabilitation Services. One of the participants in the rehabilitation programme, Professor Zhang Zhiqiang, sits on the national consultative committee, in Beijing, that decides on the future direction of rehabilitation services throughout China. He spoke warmly of the benefits of his visit to Scotland.

Within the Committee there have been substantial discussions around the nature of the United Free Church's involvement in China, via the SCCG. These have centred on whether support should be offered to organisations working with the unregistered churches and arose from a specific request. The policy of the Committee is not to support specific projects unless they have some connection to the United Free Church as there are many Christian agencies involved in a wide variety of work and it is impossible to assist with each one. However, the request for support did highlight the question of supporting work which,

while very valuable, is contrary to the laws of a particular country and whether or not the Committee could commit the Denomination to such a course of action.

The Christian situation in China is too complex to deal with in this Report but it may suffice to say that as brothers and sisters in Christ it is up to us to accompany our Chinese friends as they seek to resolve the issues in their country, it is not up to us to lead these changes as they are far too often associated with the imposition of western culture.

As for the work of the SCCG we seek to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ through healthcare and education projects. By building up relationships which are based on mutual respect the SCCG is now given permission to work in sensitive areas, such as spiritual care training, which has been denied to other organisations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Much valuable work has been carried out over the past year and the Committee would like to thank its many partners for their commitment to our ongoing partnerships. The Committee would also like to thank the General Secretary and Mrs Helena Jarvis for their unstinting support and encouragement, without which the task would be far harder.

In the name of the Committee:

PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON	Convener
THOMAS IRELAND	Vice -convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary