

REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2013

INTRODUCTION

'What a difference a day makes.' This well known cliché may be exponentially amplified in re-phrasing it, 'What a difference a year makes' as we consider the changing landscape of our Nation, Society and the state of the Church in Scotland since this Committee last reported to the General Assembly. Where does the Church sit amidst these changes and how does the Church respond to what it is witnessing both within society and within its own confines?

The Ecumenical Relations Committee is charged with a responsibility of focusing the whole denomination on Christian mission as Churches working together through dialogue and dynamic activity. To be true to the Gospel this means mirroring the works of Christ and ministering with the heart of our Lord to touch communities empathetically.

The relentless march of secularism and the increasingly strident and confident voices of atheism have all but come of age in our land. Certainly at a political level the impression often given is that these are the voices and influences Parliaments and Council Chambers are more prone to listen to. The outcome is that historic changes have taken place in Scotland and abroad that a generation hitherto could not have conceived, certainly not in their life-time. Most recently the issues have ranged from the embryonic stages of life through to end-of-life-choices and much in between. As Churches speaking forth collectively there is opportunity to make a difference in public debate. It is not only in the sound-bites uttered jointly that we may present a Christian perspective on the affairs of our nation but in the manner of conduct in which Churches live and witness together as brothers and sisters. The litmus test of this ecumenical life is in respecting diversity whilst contending for the Truth and striving for a Testimony that will shine forth like a beacon in darkened times.

It is difficult to conceive where the next year ahead will carry the nation, be it as an unchanged United Kingdom or as an independent nation. Matters like a constitutional review and possible reforms for a new independent nation could impinge significantly on Christians, as well as other faiths if this change came to pass. It is therefore all the more important that the current rounds of re-structuring in Church bodies like ACTS, CTBI, WCC and others, nationally and globally, partner with the Churches in being better prepared to reach out to a world which in large measure reflects that of Jeremiah's day,

*“My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.
(Jeremiah 2: 13)*

Such mighty words were directed at the people of God and not the world at large. It is the desire of the Committee to play its part in articulating a voice alongside other Churches in helping to restore life-giving waters to our nation, but also to ensure that our own cisterns are secure so that this can happen.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

Review: As reported last year, it has become apparent that the current approach of ACTS will not be able to produce the level of commitment that is needed to advance the ecumenical agenda in Scotland. There is a need to deepen our relationships, to explore the language that we use and to move on from the Inter-Church approach of the past. At the annual residential

Members' Meeting in October 2012, attended by representatives of all the Churches which are members of ACTS, considerable time was given to reflecting on the current position. It was agreed that the four Networks are not the most effective way of responding to the current ecumenical situation and that there is a need for the Members' Meeting to become a more productive and fruitful body. This group has spent much of their time in receiving reports of what others are doing rather than having a direct input themselves to what is being done ecumenically. It was also agreed that ecumenical priorities would focus on three areas: Faith and Order, Social Justice Issues, and Promoting and Supporting Local Ecumenism. This need for some restructuring within ACTS will affect the four Networks as well as the National Sponsoring Body for Local Ecumenical Partnerships and other groups connected with ACTS. A small group was given the task to come up with specific proposals.

This group reported to the Members' Meeting in March and proposals are due to be brought to the Annual General Meeting in June. Proposals include:

- A small group be set up to serve the Members' Meeting by bringing proposals for the programme elements of the agenda taking account of the prioritised areas
- The four Networks will gradually be phased out and their agenda taken up as required by specific tasks authorised by the Members' Meeting.
- The members' meeting will regularly monitor ongoing and future ACTS' priorities

A number of matters, including the role of ACTS staff, have still to be addressed.

Scottish Churches House: Following extensive discussions, Scottish Churches House is being leased for ten years to Fusion Group UK, a Hospitality Company. They plan to provide a restaurant, conference and events space, office accommodation, B&B and holiday letting. It may well be feasible for church groups again to be able to make use of the facilities. It will be marketed as 'Old Churches House'. Leighton House, situated across from the main house, is not included in this arrangement and remains on offer for sale or lease.

Staff: Rev Lindsey Sanderson, who served as Assistant General Secretary, resigned in September to take up a pastoral charge within the United Reformed Church. Rev Ian Boa was appointed on a temporary basis to the position of Assistant General Secretary pending the outcome of the review.

National Sponsoring Body: The National Sponsoring Body (NSB) for Local Ecumenical Partnerships continues to meet twice a year and give support, advice and encouragement to churches which are involved in local ecumenical partnerships. Meetings of the NSB are normally held in one of the partnerships and over the last year these have been in Barrhead and Falkirk Grahamston. The Church of Scotland has engaged in an audit to ask congregations about cooperation which is taking place locally. Other denominations have been invited to share in this.

The committee gave consideration to this and agreed it would be helpful to undertake a smaller scale survey of ecumenical cooperation within the UF Church.

CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Covenant Group: Representatives from the United Free Church of Scotland and the Church of Scotland met during the year. The areas of the Covenant that would require review had previously been agreed. The changes are minor and with a view to updating some of the detail which is no longer relevant. However, the subsequent decision of the 2011 United Free Church of Scotland General Assembly to suspend the review of the Covenant, has resulted in this being delayed. It is hoped that a timetable for such a review can be agreed, otherwise there is a danger that the Covenant will fall.

LOCAL COOPERATION

The Local Ecumenical Partnerships at Canonbie and at Cathcart continue to go well although there have been changes in personnel in both places. Rev Steve Fulcher left Cannonbie & Liddlesdale to move to a new charge in Argyll and Rev Iain Morrison left Cathcart Trinity to take up another position. The committee is grateful to both of these men for the encouragement they have given to ecumenical working.

It is disappointing that in some places where it was hoped local cooperation would develop further, little progress has been made and sometimes cooperation has declined. This has been generally due to circumstances beyond the control of the local congregation.

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (CTBI)

The CTBI Senior Representatives' meeting took place in Glasgow in May 2012 when there was an opportunity to hear about community groups which are working ecumenically in different parts of the UK. It was reported that the Churches Together Connect website is not being used to a great extent and there was discussion on this. There is a concern that following the restructuring of CTBI, which was done partly to reduce expenditure, it seems to have become less relevant for the Church.

THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC)

Work continues towards the 10th Assembly of the WCC which takes place in Busan, South Korea from 30th October to 8th November 2013 under the theme 'God of life, lead us to justice and peace'. With a population of more than 4 million people, Busan is the second largest city in the country. Korea was selected to host the assembly because of the unique ecumenical "horizon" that the witness of the Korean churches offers the wider ecumenical movement. The churches have grown enormously, especially following the Korean War and Korean churches have sent thousands of missionaries around the world. The vibrant church scene will enrich the Assembly.

Four major statements are to be presented: *The Church - Towards a Common Vision*; *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*; *God's Creation and Our Unity*; and *Just Peace*. The Assembly programme will include:

- **Prayer** at the beginning and end of each day will provide the opportunity to be united in faith, to share liturgical gifts and to ground the assembly in the theme, "God of life lead us to justice and peace".
- **Bible study** (daily) in small home groups will focus on moments in Biblical history where life was threatened, yet justice and peace prevailed, through God's grace.
- **Thematic plenaries** are large scale events presenting global challenges the churches must face together. They will highlight how churches and ecumenical partners are working together to address these challenges.
- **Ecumenical conversations** are designed to promote in depth discussion on issues of common concern. Each conversation focuses on a unique topic and provides four 90-minute sessions for sustained dialogue.
- A special madang programme (based on the Korean concept of a meeting together in a courtyard for discussion, celebration and fellowship) will promote the exchange of gifts and experiences among participants through workshops, exhibitions and side events.

The Committee is delighted that the United Free Church of Scotland will be represented by Rev Nathan Owens and it is anticipated he will have an opportunity to meet with other

delegates from Scotland and possibly with those from the UK in advance of the Assembly. Such meetings are a useful preparation for the Assembly.

The Committee draw attention to the website for the Assembly which offers a variety of materials to enable congregations and individuals to share in the themes being taken up in Busan and this can be found at www.wcc2013.info. This includes study materials, reflections and songs.

THE WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WCRC)

It was noted that the office of the World Communion of Reformed Churches is to move from Geneva to Hanover in January 2014. The move comes in response to concerns about the cost of running an organisation in Switzerland. WCRC is in the process of appointing a new General Secretary who will serve as the Chief Executive Officer.

VISITS TO OTHER CHURCHES

The Committee wishes to acknowledge the visits undertaken by the Moderator, Rev Ian Lloyd to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and the Assembly of the Baptist Union of Scotland. Rev J P Coltman represented the denomination at the Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church in 2012, Rev C C Brown represented us at the United Reformed Church Synod of Scotland, Rev Martin C Keane represented us at the Synod of the Methodist Church in Scotland and Rev J. D Neil represented us at the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland.

CONCLUSION

These are challenging days for the Church in this part of the world including for those who seek to work ecumenically. Yet there is a sense that if we are to make an impact on the world around then there is a real need to seek to work together whenever that is possible.

The Committee would like to thank all who have represented the denomination on ecumenical committees and as delegates to the other denominations' Assemblies.

In the name of the Committee

JAMES D NEIL	Convener
JOHN O FULTON	Secretary