

REPORT OF THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND EVANGELISM COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2013

Of all the various pictures, metaphors and images that the Bible uses to describe the People of God, which one would we use to describe the Church in our nation today? It is probably unlikely that the one which speaks of God's people as being fruitful branches on a vigorous vine is not one which we would readily turn to! (John 15) Yet Jesus makes it clear that; *'I am the Vine, you are the branches, it is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.'* John 15: 1 & 8

By the time of Jesus, the Vine had become one of the established symbols of the nation of Israel. Yet, Jesus warns his hearers that unless they are 'fruitful' for God; they will be discarded and thrown into the fire while those who desire to be fruitful are to: *'remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine'* John 15:4

We often hear these words and comfort ourselves in their challenge by telling ourselves that the fruit that Jesus is looking for is to be increasingly Christ-like in our character - to bear the fruit of the Spirit as found in Galatians 5. Others will argue that the fruit that is spoken of here is to be seen in new believers being 'produced' as the Spirit works in and through the lives of God's people.

While both are undoubtedly applicable, in the context of John 15, Jesus has a far more fundamental significance in mind. The fruitfulness of God's People is to be seen in their intimate, dynamic and engaging union with God that produces:

- a righteousness within - see John 15:3 *'you are already made clean'*
- an intimate knowledge of God's will - see John 15:7, 15, *"ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you."*
- a true Love for God seen in a genuine love for His people - see John 15: 12,17, *'This is my Command: Love each other as I have loved you'.*

Such fruit will last - John 15:16. It will be seen in our ethical lifestyle and will be owned and used by God to bring those that He has already chosen - see John 15:16 - to Himself.

Sadly, such a picture of the people of God is not what is always evident within the Life of His Church. Rather, the imagery of branches being fruitless and being cut off from the Vine is often what appears to be the reality of much of the life of traditional mainstream Churches in Scotland. We urgently need to heed the Master's warning and attend to the Master's instructions if such a sad and ultimately God dishonouring picture of the Church is to be changed.

At the heart of such a change will be a genuine engagement with the True Vine through His Word. Only then will we truly begin to know what our Master's business is, and with the sap of the Vine flowing through us, be able to engage in fruitful and God honouring evangelism. Programmes and schemes have their part, but as we have visited a number of Churches over the past year, it is clear that, amongst some, there is a real desire for that intimate, dynamic and engaging union with God that produces 'fruit' that shows to others that we are His disciples, (see John 15:8).

STRATEGY FOR MISSION

Following on from the deliverance approved at last year's General Assembly, a meeting of the Co-ordinating Forum was held in October when the proposals were presented for working towards a Strategy for Mission. A two day retreat was held in January which was an encouraging time of fellowship, prayer and Bible study. This committee had hoped that out of this some quite detailed and specific proposals for identifying key Mission opportunities within our Denomination would have appeared. In visits to congregations, we have seen where some new shoots are appearing or could appear with some encouragement and help. We are also aware of situations where sadly decay has long established itself.

Unfortunately, it would seem that such dear and specific proposals are not going to be presented to this Assembly. The Committee is deeply concerned about this as time is not on our side. Failure to act simply causes the malaise of fruitlessness to spread. A wise and sensitive pruning of the Church needs to take place SO THAT new opportunities for growth can be identified and fruitful engagement with our Nation can happen.

Over the years, this committee and others within the Church have spent much time and attention in producing or identifying materials that might be used to encourage personal and corporate fruitfulness within the life of the Church. Information about Bible reading and Preaching Programmes have been produced and the committee would encourage people to contact Church Office and access this information. We are aware of three Congregations which have followed through the *Tell-it-again* programme, with other congregations accessing some of the material on a more ad-hoc basis. It would be good to hear how this material has proved helpful and where the ideas contained within it have provoked not only much thought - but also some action!

THE LIVING ROOM

The Committee continues to be encouraged to hear of the faithful work of the Living Room in Drumchapel. The needs presented to the team there are great and we are pleased to hear of a Team of young people from the United States who will be coming to visit the folks in Drumchapel in August and we are sure they will give a much needed boost to the faithful witness of that ministry. Members of the Committee met with the Rev Robert Owens and others at Drumchapel to learn more about the valuable work being done and the committee continues to give some financial support to this work.

DUNBLANE EVENT

One of the areas of encouragement has been the Dunblane Event held in August. A good response last year found the ministry of the Rev Willie Black and the wide range of workshops, both engaging and stimulating.

A similar programme is being formulated for 31st August 2013 when the theme will be 'God's Mission & God's People'. Jamie Grant, Vice-Principal of Highland Theological College, will be the key-note speaker helping us to engage with the theme by looking at the Mission of God from the Israelites onwards.

Once again, a wide range of workshops has been organised including utilising drama in worship and evangelism, the whole area of ministry to people's emotional and physical well-being and hearing of stories of church planting and growth. A Quiet zone has also been arranged to allow people to take 'time out' for personal prayer and reflection, as well as an opportunity to engage in Bible Study. The committee would commend the Dunblane Event!

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

It was suggested that to ensure that Eldership Development continues to have a place within the life of the Church, we should turn our minds to some form of Leadership Development Programme. The Assembly may be interested to hear that it is intended to visit the East and West Presbyteries in the Autumn to lead an evening when anyone identified by congregations as being a 'leader' or having gifts of leadership can reflect on both the calling, gifting and ministry of leadership within the Church. While there are many 'models' of leadership debated within the Church today, it is vital that those who hold such positions, or who may be asked to hold such positions, are 'fruitful' in their own life of faith and are supported in their service. It is hoped also to make arrangements to visit the Presbytery of the North.

MORE THAN GOLD

Faced with the many challenges within the Church, it is vital that we remind ourselves of opportunities that present themselves for us to play our part in engaging with our society. The Commonwealth Games to be held in Glasgow next year present such an opportunity, and the committee has been pleased to give modest financial support to this initiative. It was helpful for the committee to meet with Rev Colin Brown who represents the United Free Church on the Board of More Than Gold. He spoke of the various programmes being planned under the headings of Hospitality, Service and Mission. There is a great deal of potential in all that is being planned and there is a need to encourage churches to participate in this.

In the name of the Committee

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