

REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2014

“My prayer is not for believers alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17: 20-23 NIV)

Introduction

This last year has been a real challenge to the Committee with important issues and developments in the Church’s ecumenical partnerships. It is therefore disappointing that the work of the Committee has been hindered by a lack of members in developing a qualitative report indicating real progress and a better understanding of its relationship to other Churches.

However the Committee has been enriched and better informed through the faithful attendance and reports brought to the Committee by the Rev. Alison McDonald, now Convener of the Church of Scotland’s Ecumenical Relations Committee. Engagement of this nature is reciprocated and is seen as part of the expression of the Covenanted life of the two Churches.

Despite these difficulties in meeting, a substantive *‘in-house’* reflection on the Covenant with the Church of Scotland took place through the *ad hoc* group appointed by the Committee. A challenging report from the Rev. Nathan Owens following his visit to the 10th World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan, South Korea, has kept the Committee occupied in reflecting both on its content and responses from church members.

The Committee’s report seeks to lay bare its grave concern that the calling of Christ’s Church to be bearers of Good News and agents for justice, peace and reconciliation, has been and continues to be grievously hampered in its proclamation and ministry. This is not simply a consequence of a shrinking membership, as might be the case with the United Free Church, but is the hard reality of the scandal of a Church divided by strife since its inception. It is incumbent upon the Church to uphold truth and righteousness: it is equally incumbent upon the Church to preserve that truth as credible ambassadors united in Christ. Unity is not the goal of the Gospel but it is a key element for Churches when collective action and collaboration is required to tackle the scale of need now evident in today’s world. However true unity comes as the outworking of reconciliation; this is the coal face of ecumenism and where the hard work is done in bringing communities and churches together.

CONTEXT OF THE REPORT

A CHURCH UNITED IN GOD THROUGH HIS MISSION ‘THAT THE WORLD MIGHT BELIEVE.’

If the United Free Church is not deeply moved and challenged by Jesus’ impassioned prayer heading this report, then all members of the United Free Church should be. Why was Christ so pained at the thought of a divided flock? His prayer tells it all - disunity is a major obstacle to a credible and authentic witness by the Body of Christ in fulfillment of its commission to go and make disciples of all nations (John 17 and Matthew 28). The example of the unity of the Godhead, testified to by Christ, was critical for Him to meet the challenge of the Cross, there to fulfil His own calling as Lamb of God and Saviour. Had He turned away at that supreme moment of testing all would have been lost.

The unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit has to be the spur that goads Churches into seeking the unity for which Christ prayed. He invested heavily in bringing the Church into

being. It was not perfect then, yet by the grace of God and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the early Church laid a foundation upon which successive generations could build. The United Free Church is but a small element within that succession. The Body of Christ over many centuries has developed to become a great spectrum of witnesses in which each has its story to tell of how the Holy Spirit has guided and blessed. However the less-than-glamorous side of the story of the Church has been its many short-comings where human sins, foibles and contentions have stood in the way its proclamation. If it is a challenge for any one denomination to exercise a godly and united expression of faith, consider the monumental challenges facing the Church Universal as together they aspire to be a Church of one Faith, one Lord, one Baptism.

For some the ecumenical movement at best should only lead to a 'confederated co-operation with no ambitions towards organic unity. For others, such as the Eastern Churches, unity already exists and is found within the exclusive limits of their own communion. Within the Protestant and Orthodox Churches the unity of the Church is more difficult to establish when its statements of faith and life are divergently held across its many traditions. Some would hold the view that 'the Church Invisible' is known only to God and it becomes the task of the Churches to discover the unity that already exists in the sight of God.

The quest for unity, as testified to in John 17, is what spurs the Churches to work together in response to Jesus' heart-cry. Paul reminds the Church that God has committed to it the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19) and is accordingly subject to that same reconciliation for the sake of the Gospel of salvation.

Stephen Covey, a renowned business and life motivational writer and speaker, passed on his oft-quoted advice when he said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing". In the context of Jesus ministry, there is no doubt what was the main thing for Him. His focus was not simply local or national; God's mission given to Him was intentionally universal and his ministry sought to establish a team that would carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. John's Gospel made this clear from the start recording that Jesus was the true light for all people (John 1:9) and that He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Jesus clearly looked to this weak and vulnerable embryonic Church to deliver His Good News on a global scale. Jesus saw these flaws in the ambition of some to become the top cats (Mark 10:35-40) and in the distrust of Judas as a thieving treasurer (John 12:6). Jesus was heard to counsel his critics, '*If a house is divided against itself that house cannot stand.*' (Mark 3:25). Mission and Unity are therefore inextricably linked and as such much more needs to be done in pursuit of a more visible unity which the world can recognise.

The Committee holds the view that the unity of the Church is not simply to be found in the joining of common minds and hearts as regards the true nature of the Church. The Church's calling is to grapple with those things that so easily beset its divided witness for there will always be a power at work to undermine its mission and ministry. Paul speaks of creation *waiting in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed*, and, of the whole creation groaning as in the pains of childbirth (Romans 8: 19,22). This portrays a Church that is frustrated but actively striving to come into a knowledge of things hidden - a glory yet to be revealed.

CONTENT OF THE REPORT

COVENANT WITH THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

The Covenant Review Group met in September 2013. These meetings continue to be cordial and offer a valued forum for briefing each Church on the mood of the moment. Concerns raised at the 2013 Assembly were fully communicated to the Church of Scotland representatives and a number of potential areas where problems could be foreseen were identified.

An *ad hoc* group was formed, from within the United Free Church, to consider the consequences of deferring the Covenant Review in the light of deep concerns now being raised at the possibility of the Church of Scotland deciding to admit, train and induct those in civil partnerships, whilst ostensibly maintaining its historic position as officially unchanged. The *ad hoc* group met twice, following which a comprehensive paper was produced detailing the history of the Covenant and the nature of the dilemma now facing the United Free Church. (The full script is printed in Appendix 1).

The decision by the Church of Scotland at their 2013 Assembly is viewed by the Committee as both incomprehensible and deeply unsettling, bringing into question how it can be possible for the Covenant to continue. The position of the Church of Scotland is yet to be decided and it is anticipated that such a proposal will require to be considered by Presbyteries under the Barrier Act before a final decision is taken. Extending delays in reviewing the Covenant can only intensify tensions within the United Free Church over this contentious issue.

The Panel on Doctrine communicated to the Church of Scotland's Special Commission in 2009 the position of the United Free Church on Human sexuality which concluded, "*that homosexual acts are incompatible with the Bible's teaching on the physical expression of one's sexuality and is therefore sinful,*" whilst stressing that the homosexual community is greatly valued in God's sight.

The *ad hoc* group take the view that 'the ground has shifted significantly since the Covenant was drawn up in 2006' (see Appendix 1). It is therefore difficult at this stage to see how the Covenant can continue if the acceptance of ministers in civil partnerships stands. Of even greater concern is the place of Scriptures as authoritative in determining the standards and life of the Church. If the Covenant is abandoned, it would be a matter of much regret to the United Free Church, particularly when its position within the Covenant has remained consistent. Just when the two Churches were beginning to put their fractured histories behind, significant issues in the present have arisen. Looking to the future, these may expose serious questions over the mutual recognition of ministers.

It is of great importance to the United Free Church to affirm its commitment to its ecumenical partners as it seeks alongside other Churches that elusive unity so meaningful to Christ. In an age of broken communities and international stand-offs, the collective voices and presence of Churches working effectively together can offer much to help communities re-connect, but it has to example that in its own life.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE FREE CHURCH

It had been hoped to arrange a further meeting with representatives of the Free Church of Scotland but this has not yet taken place.

EXPLORING OTHER ECUMENICAL RELATIONSHIPS - THE IRISH DIMENSION

It was suggested at the General Assembly in 2013 that consideration might be given to exploring links with Presbyterians in Ireland. This was discussed by the Committee at its first meeting. It quickly became apparent that the practicalities of any meaningful engagement with the Church had to take account of the geographical divide in the form of the Irish Sea. To involve clergy in such a partnership would mean either expensive travel or overnight stays when time constraints are already heavy upon ministers attending meetings. Despite these reservations the Committee will continue consideration of this matter.

LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS

Where these exist, they have been positive experiences which tend to vary in their nature and development as they respond to changes within congregations and communities. The Committee is kept briefed on those congregations involved in various types of partnerships and agreements, but would be encouraged to see more progress in this

direction, for where they exist the witness of local churches is enhanced and made more visible to their respective communities. Partnerships are currently operating at Canonbie, Cathcart and Tayport.

THE CONGREGATIONAL ECUMENICAL AUDIT

The audit followed on the heels of that conducted by the Church of Scotland. In their case well over 70% congregations responded. By comparison 60% congregations of the United Free Church have responded.

Why conduct an audit of this nature?

- The Church of Scotland recognised that to meet the spiritual needs of the whole nation in accordance with their Declaratory Articles, presented major challenges. It was regarded as reasonable to establish what links and relationships existed with other denominations and to consider if it might be possible to share with other Churches in caring for the spiritual needs of the nation.
- The audit carried out by the United Free Church was conducted from a different point of view where the focus was on the local ecumenical scene, rather than the bigger picture of the nation, in the hope that it might prompt congregations and Kirk Sessions to look more keenly how best to develop their witness and, where appropriate, to work alongside other fellowships to strengthen their arm through shared activities.

There is an apparent inherent resistance in many congregations to cement inter-church relationships and engage more deeply together in common witness and worship with local congregations (See Appendix 3 on the Ecumenical Audit). In England there are around 450 recognised Local Ecumenical Projects, whereas in Scotland there are about 24. Does this suggest a reluctance on behalf of the Scottish Churches to work more closely together compared to our British counterparts?

The Committee has still to fully analyse the returns of those 36 congregations who made submissions but early indications suggest most congregations regard themselves as ecumenically minded; however few have a strong enough basis or desire to consider more formal agreements or partnerships. When the review is completed, its findings will be shared with the whole Church.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

The last year has seen some major changes within ACTS, the latest being the appointment of its new General Secretary, Rev. Matthew Ross, who commenced his appointment on 1st April, following the retirement of Brother Stephen Smyth. Matthew comes to this post at a time when ACTS is on the threshold of major changes in its structure and operation. He brings considerable ecumenical experience to this challenge having worked ecumenically in Scotland and Europe as well as his work as a parish minister.

Under a new mode of operation, the work of ACTS will move from networks to project-based work with more focussed and time-defined goals. There will be greater accountability as churches are invited to take ownership of work ascribed to them. Its field of vision will encompass three principle areas: Faith & Order; Church & Society; Local Ecumenism. A Programme Group, nominated by member churches, will commission, oversee and receive reports on work undertaken by Task Groups consistent with ACTS constitution. Task Groups will be appointed to undertake identified projects, with powers to co-opt appropriate expertise.

Under these new processes to be set in motion the ACTS Members Meeting will become more pro-active in seeking where greater co-operation is possible and commissioning new work to churches. The work of the National Sponsoring Body, hitherto affiliated to ACTS, will now be encompassed within ACTS.

It should be emphasised that ACTS has no power or authority other than that given to it by the Member Churches. ACTS seeks to widen its associations with other agencies and has developed close cooperation with The Evangelical Alliance and Global Christian Forum, both offering greater contact with evangelical and independent churches as well as the emerging churches bridging diverse cultures.

Scottish Churches House in Dunblane is now leased to a private company and operates as a hotel and restaurant, with conference facilities. The Chapel in the rear gardens is being renovated. The present leasing arrangement would lead to the eventual outright purchase of the House and all proceeds will be used by ACTS to support ecumenical project work.

A new publication by ACTS, 'Values for Scotland', appears at a poignant moment and is a valuable aid to discussion around the themes emblazoned on the Mace of the Scottish Parliament - Justice, Wisdom, Compassion and Integrity. It is intended that this Bible study guide will encourage people to consider those values they would like to see underpinning Scottish Society following the Referendum in September. The Guide is also a useful tool offered for Lenten study groups. It comes highly recommended for congregational, small group and personal use and can be downloaded from www.acts-scotland.org.

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (CTBI)

The Committee continues to be represented by the Convener at its Annual Meeting. As with all the other ecumenical instruments, national and international, it has been under much internal re-structuring along the lines of ACTS. CTBI has been a major contributor over the years to important theological and practical publications. It produces materials for special Sundays (eg, Racial Justice), World Day of Prayer, Lent and Advent worship and reflection resources. All are easily accessed from their website.

The importance of CTBI in the coming years may gain considerably on account of the Scottish Referendum no matter its result for it is a 'game changer'. The political landscape is changing and wounds of social and economic injustices have become open sores. As tensions surface in an unequal society the role of Churches in mediation and pastoral care may become areas where its input and experience might be welcomed.

THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

'God of Life, lead us to justice and peace'

This was the theme for the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) held in Busan, South Korea. It could not have been held in a more tension-filled setting where the eyes of the world were focused on two 'great powers' vehemently opposed in a tragically divided Asian peninsula.

Amongst our current ecumenical affiliations, WCC probably receives the most attention next to ACTS. Since the Assembly met in October/November 2013 in Busan, South Korea, it has been even more in the spotlight through our delegate Rev. Nathan Owens. It was always going to be an Assembly with controversy given the religious and political divisions within that nation, coupled with the realities of meeting only every seven years when world events and key issues move so rapidly between its Assemblies. The venue was purposively chosen in order to offer the Korean Church solidarity and fellowship from Churches round the world at this critical time in their nation's history. A highlight for many delegates was their visit to a Korean congregation to experience their worship and ministry. Many human stories and experiences were shared during the Assembly - these were powerful and inspirational, leaving a deep impression on the delegates.

A major work was presented to the Assembly in the form of the Report, *'Together for Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes'*, the fruit of lengthy and difficult conversations. It is well worthy of study and raises questions of faith, sacraments and ministry, diversity and moral discernment.

A further report, 'Towards a Common Vision', attempts to highlight where unity exists and what has still to be achieved. Member churches have an opportunity to add their voice and experience before the end of 2015. This report by the Faith and Order Commission will be responded to by the Members' Meeting through ACTS.

The Report submitted by Rev. Nathan Owens as the Church's delegate conveyed his excitement and sense of privilege in being invited to attend the Busan Assembly in Korea. It afforded him the opportunity to see and hear something of the extraordinary nature of the Korean Church scene which is witnessing remarkable growth. However his experiences in the main brought to him much pain and dismay. We thank Nathan both for attending the WCC Assembly and for his frank and heart-felt reports which were communicated to the whole Church through Stedfast. His concerns have not been taken lightly by the Committee who have sought to establish if these concerns and observations of the WCC Assembly are commonly held.

Around a dozen representatives of Churches in Scotland attended this Assembly and it is interesting to note that each came away with quite different impressions, a number of whom shared some of Nathan's concerns whilst others were both excited and concerned by their experience of the Assembly.

There is much that WCC has accomplished over the years in very trying circumstances where diversity of outlook and faith within Member Churches has arisen on account of their vastly differing racial, cultural, traditional and theological backgrounds. WCC has seen a monumental shift away from the dominance of Western hemisphere Church culture and theology to that of the Eastern and Southern hemisphere Churches. The Committee would uphold the great strides made by WCC in the last 15 years in the face of these major changes. Though these changes present seeming impossible challenges, major advances are being made to break down the wall that divide and address their historic and theological differences.

The Committee also uphold WCC as a global Christian fellowship striving to work together against all the odds in seeking to become a fellowship where Christ is truly glorified. The Committee would acknowledge that it has missed many opportunities to speak out where error is evident but holds to the belief that WCC is the most comprehensive and representative body in which to strive for the unity Christ prayed. It is highly regarded by the United Nations and the World Health Organisation which see its strength in its diversity, but it is a diversity that is supremely challenging to manage as Churches grind together their doctrinal issues and theological differences.

(A synopsis of the basis and work of WCC is offered as information in Appendix 2.)

WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WCRC)

WCRC is the consequence of the union of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council. Its members include Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed, Waldensian, Uniting, and United churches with an estimated combined membership of 80 million people. The Committee received its reports and follows the out-workings of this major Reformed Protestant organisation

Its stated aims:

Called to communion ... Committed to justice

Its shared statement:

We believe that when churches overcome the differences between them and pray together, the faith life of their members is strengthened.

We are 229 Churches (denominations) in 108 countries committed to better understanding each other's theology and to working together on issues of common concern.

We act together to make a difference on issues that affect our daily lives.

Examples of its diverse work undertaken:

In Indonesia, theology students from around the world learn what it means to be Christian in a majority Muslim country.

In the Caribbean, churches provide chaplaincy and rights protection to migrant workers.

In Switzerland, church women honour Korean feminist theologians for their work on peace and reconciliation issues in the Korean peninsula.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

The report this year carries background information to those major ecumenical partners who provide valuable reports for the Churches and who seek to offer a forum for Ecumenical engagement. Their work is challenging and often undervalued when Churches can be more engrossed by their own internal challenges. These organisations deserve the prayers and support of their Member Churches at a time when there is much re-shaping of their task in a fast-moving world .

In the name of the Committee

JAMES D NEIL	Convener
ANN DEACONS	Vice-convener
JOHN O FULTON	Secretary

Appendix 1

Ad hoc group reflection on the Covenant Agreement with the Church of Scotland

The Ecumenical Relations Committee of the United Free Church decided that in view of the continuing suspension of the review of the Covenant between the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland, it would be helpful to consider the current position of the Covenant and how matters might move forward. An ad hoc group was formed for this purpose.

Background to Covenant

In 2002, the General Assemblies of both the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland, independently of one another, made decisions which led to an initial, informal meeting taking place between representatives of the two Churches.

The Church of Scotland: *The General Assembly of agreed a paragraph 'instructing the Ecumenical Relations Committee to make contact with other Presbyterian Churches in Scotland to discuss the things that are currently concerning and enthusing us'.*

United Free Church General Assembly: *'Following discussion, the General Assembly agreed that an approach should be made to the Church of Scotland seeking an informal meeting with a view to 'exploring how together we might more effectively fulfil our common concern to serve the Christian good of Scotland'.*

A small group was set up to begin discussions and brought a report to the General Assemblies of 2003 when both agreed to the setting up of a working group with 5 members from each denomination. This group produced an interim report in 2004 and in 2005 brought a Draft Covenant brought to both Assemblies which Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions were invited to comment on.

That reported included reference to 'our Presbyterian heritage'. It went on to say "This means that our two Churches already have a great deal in common. Recognition is given to 'the issues of principle which meant that not all of the United Free Church was able to enter the union with the Church of Scotland in 1929'. However it is now felt that the time is right 'to resolve from here on to seek ever closer unity for the sake of the Gospel and of greater effectiveness in mission".

The motivation behind the proposed Covenant and the issues raised in this paper is that desire for 'ever closer unity' so that we may serve Christ more effectively in Scotland today.'

The Covenant was agreed by both General Assemblies in 2006 and signed at Dunblane Cathedral in September 2006.

In local congregations, Canonbie entered into an Association with the local Church of Scotland congregation in 2003 and a Covenant was agreed between the UF and Church of Scotland congregations on Westray.

2006 onwards

Since 2006 the Covenant Group has met once or twice each year and reports have been given to both General Assemblies. In local congregations a Covenant was signed at Tayport in 2006 regarding cooperation between the Parish Church and the United Free Church congregations and there continues to be good cooperation there. In Glasgow, a Covenant was signed in 2010 between Cathcart Trinity Church of Scotland and Cathcart United Free Church and this involves shared ministry arrangements and close cooperation in a number of areas of the work. Apart from that there have been no formal agreements in local congregations.

There was disappointment that when Presbytery Plans were being drawn up within the Church of Scotland, despite the intention that these should include an ecumenical dimension, in practice such links were largely ignored. In at least one place, this damaged the good cooperation which had gone on for many years between the Church of Scotland and United Free Church congregations and prevented further development.

There have been occasional links between Councils and Committees at General Assembly level, notably in the areas of Church & Society and Ministry, but there has been no substantial progress. There have also been some contacts between Presbyteries but this has been limited.

Planned Review of Covenant

The intention was that the Covenant should be reviewed after 5 years and a report was due to come to both General Assemblies in 2012. However, developments within the Church of Scotland raised difficulties for many within the United Free Church.

2009: The Church of Scotland General Assembly agreed to set up Special Commission on Same-sex Relationships and Ministry with a report coming to the General Assembly in 2011. The United Free Church of Scotland was invited to make a submission to the Special Commission and Rev M C Keane, Senior Principal Clerk to the General Assembly, wrote as follows:

Dear Mr Graham

Special Commission on Same-sex Relationships and the Ministry

I am writing in response to your request for information regarding the practice of the United Free Church of Scotland with respect to 'openly gay clergy living in partnership.'

The General Assembly has approved two reports from our Panel on Doctrine regarding the issues arising from homosexuality and the introduction of 'Civil Partnerships.' The focus of these reports was not specifically the conduct of ministers but how the Church responds to these matters.

The conclusion was that homosexual acts are incompatible with the Bible's teaching on the physical expression of our sexuality and therefore sinful.

While no case has come before the Courts of the Church with respect to ministers engaging in homosexual acts, in the light of the decisions taken by the General Assembly the position of the Church as it stands is quite clear.

It was agreed by the General Assembly this year to pass the contents of these reports to the Church of Scotland Special Commission to allow the Commission to be aware of our position. I will arrange for these to be available to you.

Copies were submitted of the Panel on Doctrine Report on Homosexuality which was accepted by the General Assembly of 1995 as a clear statement of the Church's position from the Biblical and Christian standpoint and the report on Civil Partnerships in 2005 which was approved by the General Assembly and accepted as a statement of (our) pastoral and theological position.

It may be helpful to note the conclusions come to in both of these reports. The 1995 report concluded:

'In rejecting the view that it is 'compatible with the Christian faith not only to love another person of the same sex but also to express that love fully in a personal sexual relationship', the Panel wishes to re-affirm its belief that homosexual people are as valuable to and valued by God as those who are heterosexual in their orientation and practice, and that the church, as a Christian community, has a major pastoral responsibility to all who find themselves in that situation.

The 2005 report concluded: 'The panel believes it would be incompatible for persons entering into (a Civil Partnership) to be members of the United Free Church of Scotland.' However the report goes on to say: While being of the view that such a partnership is incompatible with the Christian faith as understood by the United Free Church, the value of the person(s) in the eyes of God is in no way compromised. Persons in such partnerships should be shown both the respect due to all men and women made in the image of God and the friendship which Christ himself offered and for which he died.'

2011 Following the report of the Special Commission and the decision of the Church of Scotland General Assembly to set up a Theological Commission, the United Free Church General Assembly agreed in view of 'recent decisions taken by the Church of Scotland to consider further the issue of same- sex relationships and the ministry to suspend the review of the Covenant between our two churches pending the outcome of their consideration of the matter'.

2013 Following the report of Theological Commission and the subsequent decision of the Church of Scotland General Assembly, the United Free Church General Assembly agreed "The General Assembly ask the Ecumenical Relations Committee to communicate to the Church of Scotland, in the light of the covenant between us, its deep concern at the decision made at its recent General Assembly to permit those in civil partnerships to be selected for training, ordained and inducted into charges at the discretion of individual Kirk Sessions. In the light of the implications of two different standards of conduct for ministers in our two

denominations, it further asks the Committee to communicate to the Church of Scotland that such a practice is highly likely to undermine the ability of our two denominations to remain in covenant with one another."

When it was agreed by the United Free Church General Assembly in 2011 to suspend the review of the Covenant, it was not anticipated that several years later the matter would still not have reached a conclusion. As we understand the situation, it is now anticipated further proposals will be brought to General Assembly in 2014 but, if these are accepted, the Barrier Act will require them to be sent to presbyteries for consideration so that a decision will not be reached till 2015 at the earliest and it could continue beyond then.

Position of United Free Church The position of the United Free Church is unchanged from what was set out in the letter to the Special Commission in 2009 when it was stated that '*The conclusion was that homosexual acts are incompatible with the Bible's teaching on the physical expression of our sexuality and therefore sinful.*'

The concerns within the United Free Church are not restricted to the issue of Same-sex relationships but stem from the fundamental matter of the authority of Scripture and the way in which Scripture is interpreted and applied in determining the Church's position on such issues.

Our understanding is that the official position of the Church of Scotland is as set out in article 1 of the Articles Declaratory that it '*receives the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as its supreme rule of faith and life*'. The position of the United Free Church is that she '*acknowledges as her supreme Standard the Word of God as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments*'. Despite these apparently similar official positions, decisions taken by the Church of Scotland General Assembly in recent years suggest that in practice our positions on the authority of Scripture are increasingly divergent.

The position of the United Free Church is that homosexual practice, including Same-sex marriage, is contrary to what we find in the Bible. The Church of Scotland has already agreed that Ministers who were in same-sex partnerships prior to 2009 can continue in ministry. During consideration of the report of the Theological Commission in 2013 the decision of the Church of Scotland General Assembly included: '*Affirm the Church's historic and current doctrine and practice in relation to human sexuality; nonetheless permit those Kirk Sessions who wish to depart from that doctrine and practice to do so.*' The two parts of this decision appear to contradict one another.

Such decisions indicate a fundamental difference between our two denominations, not only on Same-sex relationships but on how we regard and interpret Scripture.

Concerns re Covenant

This has led the United Free Church to carefully consider the affirmations and commitments given in the Covenant which our General Assembly was willing to approve in 2006. In looking at the Covenant, it is clear that 'the ground has shifted' since it was drawn up.

- Affirmation 1 refers to 'divisions of the past' but does not recognise divisions in the present. That may have been the case in 2006 but sadly is no longer so.
- Affirmation 2 says that 'differing emphases.. are not sufficient to impede our progress'. We now find ourselves in a situation where the differences are impeding progress. Again this is a reflection of changes which have taken place since the Covenant was drawn up.
- Affirmation 7 speaks of 'our mutual recognition of each other's ministries, including the

Ministry of Word and Sacrament.’ However such mutual recognition is not possible if we apply different criteria in deciding who is suitable to be a minister of word and sacrament.

The situation also raises significant difficulties with the commitments which were agreed.

- Commitment 1 commits us to take up the ethos of cooperation...’ but this is not possible if we disagree on fundamental issues.
- Commitment 3 & 4 commit us to encourage local linkages and covenants but this is not possible when there is uncertainty over the suitability of any future minister.
- Similarly commitment 5 is also affected by the different understanding of those who are suitable for ministry.
- Commitment 6 is affected by our differences in the interpretation of scripture and in those who are suitable for ministry. It saddens us that at a time when the challenges affecting the Church in Scotland would make it particularly helpful for us to work together, we are unable to do so.
- In the light of the above and our current difficulties over the review process, commitment 7 is no longer possible for the United Free Church.

Conclusion

All of the above raises serious and fundamental questions for the United Free Church of Scotland about the future of the Covenant. It was agreed that if what is likely to be proposed to the Church of Scotland General Assembly is agreed in 2014 or subsequently, then the Covenant could not continue since much of what is in the Covenant would no longer reflect the situation between our two Churches. It would not be honourable for us to continue with a Covenant which we can no longer subscribe to.

If the Church of Scotland General Assembly accepts the proposals being brought from the Legal Questions Committee, there would also be a need for us to consider the issue of mutual eligibility of Ministry when there are different criteria for the selection of Ministers.

We come to these conclusions with sadness and regret, recognising that the position of the United Free Church of Scotland has not changed on any of these issues since the signing of the Covenant.

Despite all of the above, we want to make clear the desire of the United Free Church of Scotland to continue good relations with the Church of Scotland and a willingness to explore what form these relations might take in the changed circumstances in which we now find ourselves.

Appendix 2.

The World Council of Churches

What is the WCC?

The basis of the World Council of Churches is set out clearly in the first article of the Constitution and Rules, “The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seeks to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. So WCC is no universal authority dictating to Churches nor is its basis creedal in nature. Instead it is more a foundation within which its nature is defined and its limits of membership clarified.

The WCC holds within it a wide variety of traditions, cultures, languages, and political contexts (said to be the most representative gathering of Christians in the world).

It is the responsibility of the member Churches to define their own ecclesiological self-understanding and to commit themselves to the basis of the WCC. Equally, it is integral to the ecumenical vocation of the WCC that member Churches call each other to account on theology (Faith and Order), witness (Mission and Evangelism) and service (international development work and international affairs). The WCC undertakes this work with member churches through its Commissions. Major pieces of work which have been produced by these Commissions include: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982, Faith and Order), The Church: Towards a Common Vision (2012, Faith and Order), Mission and Evangelism: an ecumenical affirmation (1982, Commission on World Mission and Evangelism), Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Contexts (2013, Commission on World Mission and Evangelism), An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace (2011, Churches Commission on International Affairs).

Who does the WCC work with?

In addition to the work of the Commissions, the WCC has a highly trained Secretariat based in Geneva and New York working in programme units that range from Education and Formation to Inter-religious dialogue and Co-operation. It is the member Churches who set the agenda and areas of work of the WCC through governing body meetings. The highest governing body is the Assembly to which every member Church is invited to send a delegate (who in turn is encouraged to take a full part in the business sessions of the Assembly).

The WCC also has a number of international dialogue groups with Churches and traditions who are not full members of the WCC, but who are committed to the search for visible unity. These groups include the Joint-Working Group with the Roman Catholic Church and the Joint-Consultative Group with the Pentecostals. Both groups have equal membership drawing representatives appointed by both sides of the dialogue together.

In addition, since 2006, the WCC and the World Evangelical Alliance have begun to work more intentionally together. The senior leadership from both organisations meet regularly, attend each other’s Assemblies (with the opportunity to address the Assembly) and have collaborated recently on two major pieces of work: The Edinburgh 2010 Centenary celebration of the World Missionary Conference and the publication of *Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* (2011). The latter also involved the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (and was adopted by the governing bodies of each organisation).

How does the WCC work?

In past decades, the WCC has been criticised for being too Western (in the Cold War era), too Protestant (by the Orthodox member churches) and too liberal (by fundamentalist American preachers).

The policy document, *Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of*

Churches (1997), addresses these and other concerns and noting, “limitations, setbacks and failures call the ecumenical movement and the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches to repentance and conversion, renewal and reorientation as a new millennium approaches” (1997, p. 7). The document builds on the “Toronto Statement” (1950) reminding the fellowship of churches that the WCC is not and must never become a super church, while affirming that the Bible and the Church as one underpin the life of the fellowship (1997). The 1997 document sets out an understanding of the ecumenical movement that “seeks to foster co-operation and sharing, common witness and common action by the churches and their members.

It is committed to the search for visible unity, not as an end in itself but in order to give credible witness ‘so that the world may believe’” (1997, p. 11). It goes on to say that, “the mutual commitment which the churches have established with one another through the WCC is rooted in the recognition that they are related to one another thanks to actions of God in Jesus Christ which are prior to any decisions they may make” (1997).

The Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC (2002) develops more fully how the churches are to relate to each other in the WCC. Its work responded to concerns amongst Orthodox member churches (and others) about the structure, style and ethos of the WCC. The major change incorporated into the life of the WCC was consensus decision making. This was to address four principal concerns:

- (1) to enhance participation of all members in the various meetings;
- (2) to preserve the rights of all churches... especially those who hold a minority opinion;
- (3) to provide a more collaborative and harmonious context for the making of decisions;
- (4) to enable representatives to have more “space” to discern the will of God for the churches (2003). In all discussion and work of the WCC, it is now possible to have minority opinions registered and it is possible to remove any items from the agenda if any church can identify a contradiction with its own ecclesial self-understanding.

Impact of the WCC in Scotland

Since Porto Alegre, the churches in Scotland have been highly engaged with the programme work of the WCC and with the governing bodies. In 2007, the WCC general secretary (Samuel Kobia) made an official church visit to Britain and Ireland. This was followed-up by a senior staff group visit from the WCC secretariat in 2009. Senior staff from the Church of Scotland met to discuss potential shared programme work. In addition, other church leaders in Scotland met the staff group.

In 2010, one of the major global gatherings of Christians met in Edinburgh to celebrate the Centenary of the World Missionary Conference. The churches in Scotland led the way in the planning, leadership and implementation of this complex international gathering. In the latter part of 2010, the WCC Executive Committee was hosted by ACTS in Edinburgh. Again, the Scottish churches and their leadership had opportunities to engage with leaders from the WCC (staff and church leaders) and to share with the WCC some of the ecumenical story in Scotland from Scottish Churches House to the churches together model.

In addition to this list, there are the regular ecumenical visits to Geneva by Scottish Church leaders, wide participation of Scottish church representatives in the work of Commissions and Committees of the WCC, the Scottish staff in the Secretariat and the students of theology who benefit from study at Bossey (offered through Scottish universities). Scotland has made a significant contribution to the life of the WCC since its inauguration in Amsterdam in 1948. The WCC remains the largest and most representative gathering of churches in the world seeking to respond to Jesus’ biblical prayer for Christian Unity.

Learn more from:-

Keum, Joosep (ed). *Together towards Life: mission and evangelism in changing contexts*. Geneva: WCC Publications. 2013:

Potter, Philip *et al.* *What in the World is the World Council of Churches?*. Geneva: WCC

publications. 2013:

Programme Book WCC 10th Assembly. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013:

The Church: towards a common vision. Geneva: WCC Publications. 2013:

The Ecumenical Review. The Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC. Vol 55. No. 1. Jan 2003:

Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the World Council of Churches. Geneva: WCC Publications. 1997.

Appendix 3.

Gleanings from the Ecumenical Audit

The bullet points below are brief extractions from submissions made by churches completing the ecumenical audit. They reflect the varied experiences and circumstances of those who made their returns. The Committee is available to advise any congregation seeking to develop its ecumenical life. However the natural starting point is for Kirk Sessions to offer space for ecumenically minded believers to evaluate what opportunities exist locally and to identify others who share that vision.

The following was gleaned from the return forms

Examples of cooperation:

- Sharing with local churches in support of food banks
- Sharing special occasions and worship celebrations as churches together
- Exchanging venues for fellowship meetings as acts of common witness
- Local Committees acting as Churches Together
- United choral efforts and shared holiday clubs
- Shared pastoral work amongst local ministers
- United prayer gatherings
-

The blessings found through ecumenical partnerships and working together

- Maintaining awareness of presence of UF Church
- Occasional meetings provide fellowship, understanding, encouragement and support
- Improved sense of worship with larger numbers
- 'Feel good' factor when exchange visits take place
- Unified witness to the local community
- Understanding, fellowship friendship and service.
- Fellowship & encouragement
- Joint services tend to be better supported, praise is better,
- Mutual awareness can lead to mutual cooperation other in difficult times.
- Enhanced Holy week worship and celebration
- Joint youth work, joint Sunday School, Joint Services
- Finding common ground, working on planned initiatives and seeing the fruit of it
- Being visible and united as God's people together can be very powerful.
- Cooperation with other denominations, increases success.

Hindrances to working with other denominations?

- Insufficient interest or commitment from neighbouring church
- Largely an elderly or infirm congregation
- Theology plays a part in our decision. Some members came away from local churches
- Ecumenical endeavour has simply run out of steam in a community where it ought to prosper.
- Different ethos in local church
- Minister too stretched to develop local partnership
- Historical hindrances and an unwillingness on all sides to move forward ecumenically
- Difficulty in getting clergy committed to joint endeavours
- Vacancy in one C of S, no other church within 2 miles.
- Location; we have tried to establish relationships with other denominations but to no avail.
- Worship styles and faith differences too great to be compatible
- Limited resources of people and finance
- Protracted vacancy and lack of communication places us on the fringes
- Remoteness