

REPORT OF THE OVERSEAS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2014

INTRODUCTION

During the past year the work of the Committee has been one of practical decision making in relation to the projects and agencies we support and a time of prayerful reflection as to the future direction of the work of the Committee.

Building up effective project working, partnerships and relationships takes a great deal of time and energy. Very often this investment is required over a period of years. With that investment there is always the danger, after a period of time, of stagnation. Some projects and partnerships may be continued not because they are productive or meet the stated criteria of each organization but because they are historic, comfortable or it is just an easier option that avoids potential hostility towards any change.

Good practice calls for times of reflection; a close examination of current work and partnerships to ensure that they are the best use of resources and are productive and fulfilling for all parties involved.

We give thanks for the work being done in many of the projects we support. They continually bring to us insights into the daily challenges many of our partners face in procuring even the basics that so many of us in the west take for granted.

As always, the Committee has viewed its work as a two-way process of giving and receiving which has great potential to enrich the witness of the United Free Church of Scotland in our local communities.

FUTURE DIRECTION

In last year's General Assembly Report the Committee raised the question of looking for new partners to work with. This discussion arose from an increasing sense that, perhaps, both partners in the United Free Church of Scotland/ United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) partnership had outgrown the relationship and it was now time to move on.

The work in Africa began with the decision of the General Assembly of 1930 to accept the offer from the London Missionary Society that we take over their work in the North Kalahari area and beginning at Molepolole. Rev Dr Peter M Shepherd was serving in Calabar in 1929 at the union of the Churches but decided to stay with the United Free Church. He arrived in Bechuanaland in 1931 and supervised the erection of the Scottish Livingstone Hospital which was opened in 1934.

Rev Dr Alfred Merriweather arrived at Molepolole in 1944 to continue this wonderful work in Bechuanaland, now Botswana. He was not only the focus of the United Free Church's work in that country but also the bridge between the Denomination and the Synod. When the Synod of Botswana became one of the five Synods making up UCCSA the partnership moved from a one Synod/country focus to a five Synod/country focus.

Over the years some very valuable programmes have been established with UCCSA, including our support for the Bongani Orphan Care Project, the building of the Alfred Merriweather Memorial Church in Gabane, the establishment of the Merriweather Memorial Scholarship and our support of the Kuruman Mission House of Formation. These are just some of the areas of partnership where the United Free Church and the UCCSA have very successfully worked together and for these and many more we give praise and thanksgiving to God.

However, in recent years there has been an increasing sense of frustration within the Committee at some of the difficulties encountered as we have sought information or to respond to requests for support from UCCSA. One example was the request from UCCSA that the Overseas Committee work with the Synod of Mozambique to raise English language levels among Church staff. As English is the medium used for UCCSA meetings increased English language ability would enable the staff from the Synod of Mozambique to participate more fully in them. Currently only one senior member of staff from the Synod has the English language level that allows him to participate in UCCSA meetings, in all other cases a translator has to be used.

The initial proposal for this project was that the Overseas Committee would seek to identify, and then appoint, a couple who could go to Mozambique for a period of one year to work with Church staff. Further consideration led the Committee to decide that a more effective way of working would be for the Synod of Mozambique to identify a suitable candidate who would then come to Scotland to undertake intensive English language study. While in Scotland they would also, informally, be attached to a UF Church where, it was hoped, there would be a growing understanding between both parties as to the realities of Christian witness within our respective communities. On their return to Mozambique the staff member would then be in a position to run English language classes for a wider constituent within the Church. This would have been a fully funded project including the Overseas Committee paying the salary of the staff member, on their return to Mozambique, for a period of one year while they organised and ran the English language classes.

Despite numerous communications being sent to the UCCSA Executive outlining our proposal there was no response from either the UCCSA Executive or the Synod of Mozambique.

In the section of this Report that deals with the Bongani Orphan Care Project there is another example of an issue we have had to deal with.

Sadly, these are just a few examples of the recent trend in this partnership and it is this situation that has led the Committee to reflect on whether it is time to make some difficult decisions as to our future together.

As part of this reflection the Committee has recognised that the challenges facing UCCSA are extensive and require considerable resourcing, resourcing which is beyond the budget of this Committee. Understandably, for historical and practical reasons UCCSA is now working with much bigger agencies such as Global Mission to try and address many of the issues it is facing. The Committee cannot match the funding and staff support the larger agencies are able to offer and we respect and understand the investment of UCCSA in these partnerships which may be part of the cause of the diminution of involvement with United Free Church of Scotland.

With this in mind the Committee has decided not to seek further development of the partnership with UCCSA. All of the projects currently funded will continue to receive our support until 2016, unless there is a serious change in circumstances, when there will be a further review but no new work with UCCSA will be undertaken.

Following on from this decision there are two further stages:

- a. Discussion with UCCSA over the Memorandum of Association in light of the decision not to seek any new areas of work.
- b. Discussion and reflection on who and where the Overseas Committee may now seek to develop partnerships with. As per previous instructions from General Assembly the Committee has used a considerable amount of its resources in supporting the work of partners and decisions now need to be made as to the best use of diminished resources – how can the money we

have available make a real difference in people's lives. Should the Committee seek to partner with some of the bigger agencies like Christian Aid where projects benefit from "matched funding" or should we seek to work alongside a smaller, similarly sized organisation.

These decisions will require considerably more prayerful reflection and consideration.

FLYING MISSION

It is with sadness and concern that the Committee continues to hear of the ongoing difficulties within Flying Mission. We are still unsure as to what exactly the issues are but it goes without saying that core difficulties within any organisation greatly reduce its effectiveness and capacity, and that certainly seems to be evident within Flying Mission. We understand that none of the planes in Gaborone are currently airworthy and to restore them to full flight capability will require substantial funding, well outwith the budget of the Overseas Committee. It does appear, however, that some Flying Mission staff are able to undertake their duties fully, e.g. oversight of Rerothle and the Bible distribution.

There seems little doubt that Flying Mission is currently in a very precarious state which may impact on its future viability. The Overseas Committee can do little other than to offer financial support, where we can, and our continued prayer support.

HOSIPTAL BIBLE DISCRIBUTION

In November 2013 the Committee sent the sum of £1,500 to Flying Mission for the purchase of Bibles to be distributed in the Princess Marina Hospital. Subsequently, the Committee were delighted to hear that the Hospital had received a consignment of Bibles from an alternative donor which were duly distributed through the clinics. Flying Mission then requested that the funds be used to purchase Bibles for distribution to other projects. The Committee readily agreed to this and over 300 Bibles were purchased. The Bibles were in Setswana, English and Children's versions. To date, over 250 have been distributed to patients across 6 Anti-retroviral Clinics in Gaborone which provide specialist treatment for patients with HIV and AIDS. Twelve Children's Bibles are earmarked for Rerothle.

REROTHLE

The Committee continues to receive invaluable insights into the work at Rerothle through the reports sent back to us by the Flying Mission staff who oversee this area of work. Rerothle continues to support orphans and vulnerable people from 6 remote settlements. More than 38 children are registered with the project. One meal a day is provided. This is served by 11.30 as, without sustenance, the children are too hungry to concentrate. Besides the feeding programme Rerothle also provides outreach services that include HIV and AIDS Education, community mobilization and counselling.

Flying Mission and Rerothle staff would like to increase the services the projects provide e.g. they would like to offer the children 2 meals a day. In response to this the Committee has increased the funding it will be giving in 2014.

Although the Committee is the principal funder of this project it also receives some support from other sources and this is to be encouraged.

BONANI ORPHAN CARE PROJECT

We give thanks to God that this project continues to provide such full support to so many children and young people affected and infected by HIV and AIDS. That

they are able to do so in very difficult circumstances is testimony to the staff and volunteers' commitment to serving God through their work in this project.

As donor funding dries up there is an increasing reliance on income generating projects. Rain has been plentiful enabling the planting of maize, beans and other small crops which will go some way towards feeding the children and young people.

An ongoing concern is the difficulty the Synod appears to be having in recruiting someone to replace Gastina. Appointments have been made but, for a number of reasons, these have not lasted and Thelma remains the sole full time staff member. Given the numbers that this project serves and the challenges in overseeing the different sites, fundraising, ensuring an education for school age children as well as finding sufficient food, medicines and fuel the Committee has a pastoral concern for Thelma's wellbeing.

To further complicate the situation the second half of the 2013 Grant, from the Overseas Committee, was mistakenly transferred to the UCCSA account in Johannesburg in November. As soon as the mistake was realised the Johannesburg office was contacted and a request made for the funds to be transferred to Zimbabwe Synod. Despite this request the funds had still not been transferred by mid-February causing considerable financial hardship to the Synod, where the staff themselves have not been paid for a few months. Further requests for the transfer to be made have been lodged and acknowledged and we await confirmation from the Synod that they have been received.

MERRIWEATHER MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

After repeated requests the Committee has now received an update on how the Scholarship is being spent.

Three students Mr. Ivan Mankgane (2nd Year), Ms. Thito Motshipi (2nd year) and Mr. Matlhogonolo Ndlovu (Final Year) have benefited from the Scholarship. All come from rural communities and all have considerable experience of service.

Two of the students are in their 2nd year of study while one student has now graduated and is currently working with the Congregation at Mahalapye. All students attended the Kuruman House of Ministerial Formation.

Botswana Synod has seven students in training but has serious funding issues as the Synod has been unable to secure additional funding from other donors. The Committee is open to considering further requests for financial support.

KURUMAN HOUSE OF MINISTERIAL FORMATION (KMHF)

There are currently 18 students at KMHF, 11 men and 7 women. The students come from Zimbabwe Synod (3), S. Africa Synod (11), Botswana Synod (3), Mozambique Synod (1). There are no students from Namibia.

The emphasis at KMHF is on formation rather than training requiring the student to balance academic study with developing a new spirituality that grows from an ever increasing self-awareness.

The UCCSA's Curriculum includes the study of Polity, Congregationalism, Homiletics, Counselling, Communication Skills and Evangelism. A team of peripatetic lecturers and ministers deliver the Curriculum and the fresh insights and diversity of perspectives this provides is seen as being invaluable. Courses on Conflict Resolution and Mediation have also been offered to 3rd year students.

Among the plans for 2014 KMHF is seeking to improve the quality of the

library and would like to provide computer and internet access for all students.

A 3 year funding commitment has been made by the Committee to KHMF.

YOUTH VISIT

The Committee is greatly encouraged by the Youth Committee's desire to arrange a further overseas visit for the young people of the Denomination. The life changing impact that this can have on the participants cannot be underestimated. The Committee will seek to support this Visit once final details are confirmed

MR & MRS CRAWFORD

It was with pleasure that the Committee learned of Famie and Sandy's calling to serve with WEC International at their US Sending Base in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. Famie is working in the Finance Office while Sandy is involved in much needed maintenance of the properties on site. Both will also have the opportunity to be involved in outreach work to the poor and homeless in neighbouring Philadelphia. Hannah is attending a local private Christian school. At present they plan to be in the USA for one year.

The Committee is pleased to be able to offer prayer and financial support to Famie, Sandy and Hannah in this calling.

MISSION SECRETARY

The Committee would like to thank the Mission Secretaries for their work on developing links between Mission Partners associated with the United Free Church and local congregations.

The remit and role of the Mission Secretary has not been reviewed for some time so with Mrs Crawford's departure to the USA it was felt the time was right to begin a conversation with Mrs Currie on these topics. The Committee Officials, the General Secretary and Mrs Currie have met to begin looking at the needs of the Denomination in terms of overseas work, links with Mission Partners and awareness raising.

MISSION SUNDAY

Mission Sunday generally continues to be observed in February with materials being sent out to every Congregation well in advance. This year Feedback Forms have been enclosed and it is hoped that Ministers/Pastors/Preachers who use the Pack will take the time to feedback their thoughts and comments. We can only know how useful the Pack is in meeting congregational needs if we receive feedback from users.

Alternatively, the Committee and Mission Secretaries can be contacted directly as we always welcome ideas for themes, suggested layouts for the materials and ideas for Children's Addresses.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES' CHINA GROUP (SCCG)

There have been a number of encouragements for the SCCG in the past 14 months. These have included:

- a. Participation in the 130th Anniversary of the founding of Shengjing Hospital, Shenyang by Scottish Missionary Dr Dugald Christie. All he ever wanted to do was serve God by serving the people of northern China. Little could he have known how God would bless his work.

- b. Renewed links with China Christian Council (CCC) and future involvement in its church run projects for children and the elderly.
- c. The development of Spiritual Care in the Palliative Care Ward and Hospice based in Hua Xiang Hospital, Shenyang. The staff now see spiritual care as being central to 'person centred care' of patients and families. Further training will be provided by the SCCG as Chinese colleagues have expressed a wish for spiritual care to be more widely available throughout the hospital.
- d. Exciting exchanges of personnel between Scotland and China. The SCCG are particularly pleased at the links now being developed between the SCCG, New Struan School, Alloa and the Children's Development Centre, Nanjing.

CONCLUSION

Much valuable work has been carried out over the past year and the Committee would like to thank its many partners for their cooperation. 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 much harder.

In the name of the Committee:

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| PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON | Convener |
| GARY J. A. BARCLAY | Vice -convener |
| JOHN O. FULTON | Secretary |