

REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2015

'There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.' (Eph 4: 4-6)

INTRODUCTION

Who can fail to be moved by Jesus' agony of heart as the unity of the disciples began to crumble? His prayer to God so wonderfully recorded in John's Gospel has given impetus to the Church to safeguard its fellowship life, recognising that a divided witness has serious consequences for the mission of God. Biblical ecumenism as this report seeks to describe is about the Body of Christ living and witnessing as one family, 'co-habiting' under one roof, figuratively speaking. Paul writes with real conviction concerning unity amongst the believers at Ephesus (4:4-6) but also viewing its attainment as a measure of Christian maturity (4:13).

The Committee seeks to uphold that striving for more visible unity in the Body of Christ is not an option but the most genuine of responses to Jesus prayer (John 17:19-23). Attempts to bring cohesion to the Church's testimony can be traced from the earliest days of Christianity and throughout ecclesiastical history.

The report is set out in three parts providing a broad context for its present work. The opening section looks at historic evidence of ecumenical cooperation. The second section presents some challenging statistics of the world into which Churches are called to serve. The final section reports on the Committee's work and that of its ecumenical partners. This work is undertaken within the described contexts of our Christian heritage and monumental global challenges; these are often lost sight of in the blinding headlamp of inter-Church debate and controversy.

TRACING THE HISTORIC ROOTS OF ECUMENISM

In tracing the origins of ecumenism from its Greek root (*oikoumene*), it simply means *'the entire inhabited world'* (eg, Caesar's decree - Luke 2:1). When the early Church Leaders gathered as the whole (*oikoumene*) Church representative of ALL Christendom such assemblies were considered to be 'ecumenical'. An important stage of development came many centuries later when the Church of Rome called for the 'Ecumenical' Council of Trent in the 16th century. Archbishop Cranmer wrote to Calvin at that time suggesting the Protestant Churches should also meet in similar fashion to oppose, if necessary, any unwelcome claims made by that Trent Council. By the 20th C. these Protestant 'ecumenical' assemblies had grown in number, not just reflecting the geographical expansion of the Church but now embracing a wider spectrum of diverse Christian traditions and cultures.

Ecumenical endeavour at its simplest could be viewed as **'engagement with other Churches in common witness and mission'**; however ecumenical endeavour is much more than that, it is about **'engagement with all that God wills in bringing the world to redemption'**. This point was not lost when the renowned Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 took place. It was a significant moment for contemporary ecumenism bringing together unprecedented numbers of delegates representative of a myriad of nations, cultures and traditions for a unique international multi-denominational event. If 'Mission' was the central theme then it soon moved on to consider the exciting prospect of what could happen in mission if Churches could find sufficient common ground to either more fully co-operate, converge or even merge. Increased communications led to greater networking, leading ultimately to the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 when the world was recovering from the traumas of a global war.

Challenges within WCC were many with attempts to harmonise historic liturgies, variant beliefs and conflicting theologies, most notably problematic for the Eastern and Russian Orthodox Churches, but also a large wing of the evangelical family of Churches. The Roman Catholic Church remains only an observer at meetings of WCC.

With the dawning of a new millennium and a major collapse of many global financial institutions, funding for international ecumenical instruments was seriously decimated necessitating major reviews of staffing, structures and programmes in recent years. It was in some ways a blessing in disguise for old practices and structures were unable to keep pace with, and be sufficiently responsive to, change in a fast-moving world. These factors certainly impinged upon ACTS which is now better equipped and resourced to support local ecumenical initiatives.

Today's Church continues to search for and explore common ground in advancing the Gospel. It has a unique opportunity in the 21st century to re-engage with greater determination a hurting and damaged world at a critical time in human history given its immeasurable resources in Christ.

FACING UP TO A CHALLENGING WORLD

In 1910 two-thirds of the world's Christian population of 600 million lived in Europe. By 2010 the world's Christian population had grown to 2.1 billion with only a quarter living in Europe. It has been a century of dramatic transformation for the Churches in global terms with considerable membership growth in Eastern and Southern hemispheres compared with decline in the West, particularly within Europe.

In human terms no nation or super-power, no global political organisation, neither the United Nations, NATO nor the World Health Organisation can claim as many feet on the ground or possess such resources as the Church of Jesus Christ where so much more could be done with greater, vision, leadership and compassion!

Demographic statistics and projections signal great and urgent challenges ahead for the Church of Jesus Christ as the world population continues to soar.

2 Billion: 1927	3 Billion: 1960	4 Billion: 1974
5 Billion: 1987	7 Billion: 2015	15 Billion: 2100

By 2100 it is thought the annual increase will level out.

(statistics provided by PewResearch Centre)

It is a calling too immense for any one Church to consider but in God's economy all things become possible. Jesus made this clear when commissioning his disciples:

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

(Matthew 28:18, 19)

The question remains – what happens when there is such diversity within the Body of Christ that its full potential is stifled and lost through discord, human foibles and the full gambit of human sinfulness? The Scottish Churches are testimony to such struggles, both spiritual and ecclesiastical. Sometimes these internal struggles have not always advanced the cause of Christ, however they have at other times been an enormous stimulus bringing renewal to the Church and blessing to the nation.

With global conferences regularly attended by thousands speaking hundreds of languages they become a melting pot of high expectation and deep frustration. They can be frequently inspirational but as often hit the buffers when sufficient consensus fails to be achieved. Mercifully such gatherings provide space for confession and repentance. Each failure to find solidarity

impacts on communities living on the edge with the terrors of civil war, political oppression, religious intolerance, poverty, injustice, natural disasters and so much more.

As in the day of Isaiah, so in our times the Lord continues to cry out,
“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8)

Discipleship and servanthood belong together but it takes the Holy Spirit to unlock the human heart's response to the call of God for there is a price to pay in following and in serving God. Jim Elliot, who paid the ultimate sacrifice as a missionary, famously recorded in his daily journal,
“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.”

Who is willing and who is ready to lay down their lives in service to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ? Whilst The Lord awaits an answer so too does a forsaken world!

THE WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

This past year has challenged but also excited the Committee offering opportunity to review and refresh its work. A series of articles were commissioned for Stedfast conveying good stories of local inter-church partnerships resulting in great encouragement to the Churches and a positive witness left in their communities.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Information between both Ecumenical Relations Committees continues to be freely exchanged, recognising that much of the local co-operation and special partnerships of the United Free Church are with the Church of Scotland. The Committee regards it important to maintain a quality of relationship with the Church of Scotland which will continue to encourage and support local ecumenical partnerships wherever these exist between the two denominations.

The following interim report on Covenant discussions between the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland reflects the current position.

COVENANT BETWEEN CHURCH OF SCOTLAND AND THE UNITED FREE CHURCH Interim Report

At the UF General Assembly in 2014 the Report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee included a review of the Covenant between the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland. An *ad hoc* group, from within the United Free Church, had considered the consequences of deferring the Covenant Review in the light of deep concerns over decisions being taken within the Church of Scotland on Ministry and Civil Partnerships. As a result of a subsequent notice of motion the Assembly agreed the following paragraph:

“The General Assembly regretfully agree, in view of the decisions taken by the Church of Scotland, to take steps to bring the Covenant with the Church of Scotland to a close.”

This decision was communicated to the Ecumenical Relations Committee of the Church of Scotland and it was agreed to have a meeting of representatives of both denominations to discuss the situation which took place in September 2014. This gave an opportunity for both denominations to explain something of the background to the decisions taken by their respective Assemblies and of the difficulties which these had caused for the other.

At this meeting an offer was accepted from Rev Dr Chris Ferguson, newly appointed General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, to be involved in helping both denominations explore what it means to move away from the Covenant, both in terms of our understanding of covenant and also in terms of our membership of the WCRC. An initial meeting with Dr Ferguson took place in December with a subsequent meeting in February 2015. It is anticipated another meeting will be held in early May with several more over the coming year. A number of areas have been identified to be explored and the intention is that the aim of the

discussion will be to learn from the past, deepen engagement in the present and build some kind of relationship for the future which will enable cooperation where this is possible and desirable. The intention is that a fuller report on the outcome of these discussions will be presented to both General Assemblies in 2016.

ECUMENICAL REVIEW GROUP

The General Assembly of 2014 called for a fresh examination of the ecumenical life of the United Free Church and how it might be refreshed. A review group was set up comprising of Reverends Andrew McMillan, Colin Brown, Duncan Whitty and Dr David Miller. It has met several times in the interval, meeting with personnel occupying key positions on the ecumenical scene. Its interim report below will be followed by a concluding report to the General Assembly of 2016. The Committee is grateful for this body of work and for the dedication shown by the group in response to its task.

Ecumenical Review Group – Interim Report

Remit: This group was appointed by the Ecumenical Relations Committee to work on what was agreed by the General Assembly: *“The General Assembly agree to ask the Ecumenical Relations Committee to bring a report to the 2015 Assembly on a view of how best to conduct and shape our ecumenical relations both in Scotland and with the world Church.”*

This review is an opportunity to consider and re-evaluate every aspect of our ecumenical commitment. We are members of the World Council of Churches (WCC), World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS). We should consider whether it is appropriate for the UF Church to continue in membership of these various groups and whether there are other groups it might be more appropriate for us to belong to. We need to consider what we are committing ourselves to, how much we are able to be involved, what we can contribute.

Much ecumenical involvement tends to be with the more traditional denominations. Historically, there is a great deal of baggage carried by past disputes, where perceived theological differences have been a hindrance to effective progress. Over recent years there has been a multiplication of New Churches and Para-church groups with a noticeable inter-church vibrancy among new churches. Should we, and can we to relate to other new groupings, which may be suspicious of ‘institutional’ churches.

As a first step the Ecumenical Review Group, agreed to make contact with major ecumenical instruments, Action of Churches Together in Scotland [ACTS] –Churches Together in Britain & Ireland [CTBI] –World Communion of Reformed Churches [WCRC] –World Council of Churches [WCC] and invite representatives to meet with the Committee. Dates and venue for these interviews have already been arranged and we have benefited from the candid and constructive contributions from those we have met with so far.

It was considered that it would also be helpful to have contact with other denominations and Churches including Free Church, Free Church (continuing), Baptist, Evangelical Churches, Pentecostal Churches, African Churches, and Minority Ethnic Christians Together in Scotland [MECTIS]. It was also useful to meet with the Scottish Director of the Evangelical Alliance to speak about the evangelical scene in Scotland. We are aware that in other denominations there are those who are involved in ecumenical partnership and those who have reservations about ecumenical organisations. There are two different philosophies of ecumenism encapsulated within the various bodies where some see the goal as union while others, including those from a more evangelical background, focus more on working together.

The Review Group in its initial discussions was aware that it needed to take cognizance of our Denomination’s past Ecumenical Commitments. Over many years we have had a fair amount of involvement with the Church of Scotland and great amount of work went in to bringing the Covenant about. In the past we were involved with the Multilateral Church Conversations and had

a Basis and Plan of Union with the Congregational Union of Scotland, which was rejected by congregations of both denominations. Should we be looking to explore a possible union in the future to ensure being a viable denomination? Generally there now tends to be more of a covenant model.

For many people in the UF Church, the denomination's wider ecumenical commitments to larger ecumenical bodies means very little, because they are happier to focus on the local church partnership. There it is more productive, with shared local objectives and good working relationships with ministers, church leaders and members of respective congregations in the local council of churches.

The Review Group recognizes that the theology of the United Free Church tends to draw us more to the less formal, evangelical Churches but in terms of structure the fit tends to be with more traditional Churches and although we are small denomination by comparison we have played a significant part in ecumenical initiatives. The questions must be addressed "Where do we actually sit?" "Where do we belong?" We tend to be in the middle ground which others are not interested in. For the Review Group the above is an indication that there is a great deal of ground to be covered in its work and the terrain is uncertain and complicated. This is the time to refocus and explore and discover a valid way forward for the future of our denomination in the changing a complicated church scene in Scotland today.

THE CONGREGATIONAL ECUMENICAL AUDIT

Last year's report provided a range of congregational views shared with the Committee concerning their work with other local congregations. At that time not all returns had been received so a final review took place. Over 60% congregations participated in this ecumenical audit. Drawing significant conclusions from these returns is almost impossible. At best the Committee is only able to catch a flavour of the width of minds on ecumenical relations and to form a sense of the centre ground of the Church. Some congregations are hampered from deep or enduring inter-church relationships and shared commitments not because they have no such aspirations but more from a lack of opportunity occasioned by remoteness in some cases or a reticence within local congregations to be venturesome. Other congregations are more wary of ecumenical engagement where local churches are manifestly liberal in their understanding of the Gospel. Congregations in general tend to view themselves as intrinsically ecumenical even where there is little happening locally. There is an issue recognised within the audit when it comes to a common understanding of what it means to be ecumenical. It is also appreciated that the results of the audit are dependent on how the questions have been discussed and who has provided the answers – was it by a committee, a sub-group or even the minister alone?

Compared to other Scottish Churches the United Free Church is little different for there are only a few dozen examples of congregations in Scotland who have entered into more formal commitments and local ecumenical partnerships.

The Committee maintains the view that it is a desirable thing for local churches to earnestly work together as the Spirit leads and enables, striving for that unity which will honour and glorify God as a witness to their community.

LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS

A series of articles on local inter church activities is currently featuring in Stedfast. These 'good stories' reported by local churches are varied and a real encouragement to their members. Inter-Church co-operation comes in many shapes and forms but invariably is of a loose and informal nature. Occasionally it leads to more formal commitments such as exists at Canonbie where there is an association between the Church of Scotland and UF congregations so that they worship and work together and have only the one building. At Cathcart there is a covenant with the neighbouring Trinity Church of Scotland congregation which includes shared ministry. At

Tayport a rather different arrangement is in place involving the local congregation in Churches Acting Together in Tayport (CATT). Each partnership is unique. Where formal agreements and commitments are drawn up they may be given recognition as Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEP's) and as such able to enjoy the benefits of review and support from ACTS under the newly formed 'Ecumenical Development Group' (EDG), formerly known as the National Sponsoring Body (NSB). Local congregations in partnership arrangements, whether informal or formal, are clear statements of their willingness to pull together in common witness to Christ and in service to their immediate communities. For any congregation considering a deeper commitment to work with another congregation help and advice is available by initially contacting the General Secretary.

THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

The Committee is pleased to report that there has been some communication with officials of the Free Church and that efforts are being made to meet for informal discussion. The Committee is aware that the Ministry Committee has been exploring courses on offer and meeting staff at the Free Church College, now rebranded Edinburgh Theological Seminary. The Committee warms to this approach given the historic associations of the Free Church and the United Free Church.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

With new structures in place and new staff members appointed it is literally all systems go. Adjustments will be ongoing as fresh developments test both new structure and staffing arrangements. Project support work continues unabated but under a new regime where budgets, reporting and accountability will be carefully called for and monitored. Member Churches share responsibility when agreeing to new project work and programmes.

ACTS has been invited to take up a co-ordinated plan of action drafted by Rev. Graham Blount for a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace in response to a call by WCC to give it expression during 2014-17. The Ecumenical Relations Committee, having seen the nature of the proposals, supports the initiative as a great opportunity for common witness to those on the margins of Scottish Society whose voice and cry is often unheard and unheeded.

The future of the properties at Dunblane is reaching a crucial stage with their current tenant, Fusion UK Ltd. now eager to acquire and develop them for conference and hospitality purposes. The Members Meeting agreed in principle to the sale. Subsequently a negotiated property valuation was approved by the Members. It is hoped that the sale might be concluded by June and the proceeds used for the ongoing work of ACTS. A portion of the proceeds of the sale will be set aside for future tendered projects and suggestions asked of Member Churches on how the main bulk of the funds might be utilised. The Ecumenical Relations Committee takes the view that it would prefer these windfall resources to be used primarily in promoting local ecumenical initiatives rather than significant national programmes. A plan on how these funds are to be spread will be drawn up for Member Churches' approval.

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (CTBI)

The 'Good Society Project' launched in May 2014 continues to challenge and stimulate discussion around the subject of the place of faith in the life of the four nations. Its full value is yet to be realised but its appearance in advance of the Independence Referendum last year and the General Election this year is both timely and very helpful, especially to those Churches hosting election hustings.

The publication of resources to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity continues to be well supported. Congregations are encouraged to use them imaginatively as an ecumenical resource for local churches and even schools.

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC)

The Committee will be looking at the text of a major work undertaken by the Faith and Order Commission paper entitled 'The Church: Towards a common vision.' WCC now invite Member Churches to make their response to the document by the close of 2015. It provides opportunity for Christians to explore what they can say together about the Church in order to grow in communion, to struggle together for justice and peace, and to overcome together their past and present divisions. The Committee will look at the document to see what can be learned.

A feasibility study is being made regards the possibility of Glasgow hosting the next Assembly Meeting planned for 2021. Glasgow's City Council's Marketing Department would be keen to present Glasgow as a suitable venue however Churches have been invited to offer their views on such a prospect. This is no more than a tentative notion at this stage but potentially an exciting one worthy of consideration. Glasgow, having held a very successful Commonwealth Games, will be a strong contender ready to demonstrate good success in hosting notable large scale events.

WCC has issued a call to its Members to join in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace during 2014-17 recognising the Church's call to be peace-makers and to stand in solidarity with those on the margins of society whose voice and cry for justice is unheard. (See paragraph on ACTS)

WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WCRC)

Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson took up his post as General Secretary of WCRC in December and found his 'first day at the office' facilitating uncomfortable discussions between officials of the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland following robust exchanges between the two Churches. His wisdom, experience and sensitivity in handling this situation have been invaluable and the commitment of time offered much appreciated.

With the merger of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council in 2010 the World Communion of Reformed Churches came into being. Central to this body is its desire for Churches to experience closer communion and realise the unity for which Christ prayed. However Member Churches do not yet have full agreement on what that means in real terms. This has led to important studies of the subject of 'communion' and the nature of the commitment expected of Churches within WCRC and between its Members.

When the Europe Council Meeting of WCRC took place in February in Belfast Iain Buchanan was able to attend on behalf of the Church and Society Committee. Central to that meeting were its theological reflections on the Church's relationship to nationalist movements in Europe.

REFORMATION CELEBRATIONS IN EUROPE IN 2017

The Protestant Churches of Germany have invited all Reformed Churches to join in celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's Theses, publicly exhibited in 1517, which set in motion the Reformation in Europe and beyond. The Scottish Churches are wary of any celebration that might be insensitive to the Roman Catholic Community but thought will be given to how this important historic movement might be appropriately recognised. Many fruits came through this mighty movement, not just in reformed doctrine but also in the social and educational transformations that resulted. ACTS will explore possible avenues that might give opportunity to highlight this anniversary in a judicious manner.

CONCLUSION

Many seek to travel along the broad path trodden by those eager to journey together exploring their differences in a gracious manner. Equally these conversations may evoke tensions and misunderstandings that remind us that all is still not well within the family of God. Some may

say this broad path is strewn with deceit and compromise, leading to perdition (Matthew 7:13,14) whilst others might view the broad way as a road that offers a sure footing (Psalm 18:36).

It is the prayer of the Committee that the United Free Church will take time to listen to what can be learned on the broad path where ecumenical encounters take place but even more be earnest in listening to what the Spirit is saying along the way for it might be life-changing for fellow travellers.

In the name of the Committee

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