

REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2016

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.” (Rev. 2.7, NIV).

That first statement is the imperative given to each of the seven churches in Revelation. It is Jesus’ repeated command to faith communities in their divergent circumstances. What is God’s Spirit saying to the Church today? By definition that should trigger in us a deeper engagement with God’s Word and brokenness before the Lord in prayer to discern his will.

On Friday 12th February 2016, Pope Francis shared with Patriarch Kirill for a brief two-hour meeting at Havana Airport, Cuba. The leaders signed a joint declaration amidst the potent symbolism of a face-to-face meeting between Eastern & Western traditions, for the first time in one thousand years. *Inter alia*, they agreed to efforts for unified witness in the gospel of Christ.

These events may seem remote from us as a small Presbyterian denomination in 21st Century Scotland. However they remind us of the complex and frustrating context within which the ecumenical project still continues to survive. History and theological difference often conspire to divide us, yet the simple act of listening and sharing can serve as a powerful catalyst for restored relationship and the often surprising recognition of common understanding amidst ongoing diversity. This dynamic stands at the heart of true ecumenism.

2017 marks the 500th Anniversary of Reformation in Europe. What is the place and role of the United Free Church in today’s ecumenical scene? Are we here to survive internally or contribute externally to the wider body of Christ? Perhaps we need to re-evaluate who we are ourselves, and indeed how we are perceived by others, before we can answer these profound questions. What is God’s Spirit saying to us about our ecumenical relationships looking to the future?

As we strive for the unity prayed for his people by Jesus which has become such an ecumenical inspiration (John 17.20-26), the simple thought that should guide our direction of travel is that the substance of the gospel in Christ Jesus must be the guiding principle that drives the process, content and shape of every ecumenical engagement.

This Report falls into two constituent parts. The first seeks to update the denomination on the well-trodden paths of ecumenical engagement and in which we have participated over many years. The second aims to raise the complex and nuanced issue of the trajectory our ecumenical strategy should take as the United Free Church of Scotland for the years to come.

PART ONE: ONGOING ECUMENICAL CONNECTIVITY

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Last year’s final decision to bring our Covenant with the Church of Scotland formally to an end was not taken lightly. Face-to-face discussions were held in May & September 2015 between representatives from both denominations. Space for telling each side of the Covenant story was given and those present were invited to reflect on their understanding of covenant. This has been facilitated with patience, grace and wisdom by Rev. Chris Ferguson, General Secretary of WCRC. A process of listening and speaking, sometimes painful but always open and frank, has allowed both denominations the opportunity to

suggest what our relationship might look like in the future. It was agreed at the September 2015 meeting that a gap of one year should pass before we plan to meet each other officially once again.

The following joint Report to both General Assemblies has been agreed:

Following the decision of the United Free Church's General Assembly in 2014 to take steps to bring the Covenant between the two churches to an end, the two churches have been engaged in a process of discussion facilitated by the General Secretary of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Rev Chris Ferguson. The third of these meetings took place at the beginning of May 2015. Each Church spoke about how it understood the situation while the other listened. The representatives each commented on the depth of pain and the concern for the peace and unity that was present in each context. It was agreed to meet again in September 2015.

In the meantime both Assemblies took place. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland received a report in which the majority of Presbyteries had supported the report of the Legal Questions Committee which endorsed the traditional understanding of same-sex relations while permitting kirk sessions, at the beginning of a vacancy and before any candidates were heard, to decide to hear people who were living in civil partnerships. The Assembly voted narrowly in favour of extending this provision to those who were in same-sex marriages but agreed to send this back down under the Barrier Act.

In response to the decisions of the Church of Scotland's General Assembly, the General Assembly of the United Free Church agreed formally to end the Covenant. It also agreed to 'support the [Ecumenical Relations] Committee's endeavour to maintain positive relationships with the Church of Scotland upon which a brighter future for Christian witness in Scotland can be secured.'

The two churches reported on their Assemblies when they met in September. The United Free Church also reported that it was in the middle of a review of ecumenical relationships and a report was expected to come to their Ecumenical Relations Committee in January.

With the Covenant ended, the question was what more might be meant by the desire for 'positive relationships with the Church of Scotland' that might be distinctive of the relationship between the two churches. It was acknowledged that there is a sense of kinship between the two churches which carries warmth, emotion and respect. It was hoped that the two Moderators might be able to do things together.

With various possibilities aired, it was agreed to wait until the United Free Church review had reported and the direction proposed had been taken to the General Assembly for endorsement. The Church of Scotland would continue in the process it had set which would answer some of the still unanswered questions. In the meantime contact would be maintained through other channels where the two churches are involved together with others.

It was agreed to come together again following the General Assemblies of 2016.

It is hoped that open channels of communication will be sustained with the Church of Scotland at a denominational level. The Committee is also keenly aware that longstanding relationships exist on the ground between UF and like-minded Church of Scotland congregations. Some of these are formalised as local ecumenical partnerships, some exist organically and involve strong links, shared support and joint initiatives. The Committee would encourage congregations to sustain and develop these positive relationships wherever possible.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FREE CHURCH

Two meetings with the Free Church of Scotland have taken place. In September last year representatives from both denominations met in Edinburgh and engaged in a candid, open and helpful dialogue. We shared details of our current position and future plans, agreeing that if and where possible we should seek to co-operate and work together in local contexts. The Free Church still adheres to its Reformed, Presbyterian and confessional roots, whilst also developing new models to connect church with community. Positive developments include numerical growth and revitalisation, church planting, more candidates for ministry and the fruitfulness of the former Free Church College, now re-branded as Edinburgh Theological Seminary (ETS).

A second meeting took place with members of our Ecumenical Review Group in November 2015. Those present from the Free Church gave a helpful insight into their ecumenical mindset, now seeking to nurture wider links with groups such as the World Reformed Fellowship (WRF) and the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC). Good relationships also exist with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) and other Reformed and dynamic denominations around the world.

It is essential for us to consider how we can work more closely with the Free Church. Options might include ministry training (using the resources of ETS), youth work (the Free Church runs an excellent programme of camps and youth conferences), as well as looking at effective grass-roots co-operation in local communities across the areas of church planting and revitalisation. The Committee would encourage congregations to identify and act upon any possible avenues to working alongside Free Church congregations in their local areas, even at basic levels of reciprocity - making contact and keeping in touch.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

The 25th anniversary of ACTS was marked in November 2015, its stated objective still to work towards the unity prayed for by Jesus himself in John 17.21. ACTS would stress a visible unity amongst its member churches, rather than a strict uniformity.

Two Members' meetings have taken place (September 2015 & February 2016), and the Committee is deeply indebted to Rev. Jim Neil for his willingness to attend both on our behalf and represent us at these important gatherings.

Topics for discussion amongst the nine member churches included the WCC Common Vision document, the refugee crisis in the Middle East & Europe and potential uses of the Scottish Churches' House Legacy Fund to support local ecumenical initiatives.

A new ACTS vision document/ strategic plan for 2016 - 2021 is also in process of discussion and revision. Its terms of reference seek to actualise Jesus' prayer in John 17.21 under the following five strategic objectives-strengthening ecumenical relations, working together, building trust and understanding, facilitating space for spirituality and reflection and communicating effectively. Further the vision is to clarify and refine the working remit of ACTS to three core areas-church & society/justice, faith & order and local ecumenism. The document also strives to re-organise the structures within ACTS, seeking to make these more effective across the key areas of administration, policy making, communication and internal responsibility.

It cannot be an easy task for the ACTS Secretariat to combine internal governance alongside fruitful engagement with nine member churches as well as maintaining links with other Christian groups and ecumenical bodies. It has been pointed out during meetings of the Committee in the course of this year that ACTS can only be as effective, involved, connected and fruitful ecumenically as the sustained willingness of its member churches firstly to be all of these things themselves-together.

The Committee is delighted to report that Rev. Duncan Whitty agreed to represent us at an organised ACTS visit to Brussels from 5-7 April. Its purpose was to allow delegates from member churches to reflect firsthand on the workings of EU institutions, including the European Commission & Parliament. This visit is very timely in light of the EU Referendum to be held in the UK on 23rd June 2016.

LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS

The Committee would again encourage congregations to seek creative ways of working together at local level. The ecumenical trend favours pragmatic, non-formalised patterns of engagement and this can operate on an ad hoc basis where local churches are themselves the natural arbiters of what is reasonable, desirable and sustainable in their relations.

The formalised relationships at Canonbie, Cathcart and Tayport represent good examples of the way congregations can share buildings, resources and ministry to engage more effectively where they are. Like-mindedness, trust and common vision are key components in these situations. The formalities of opting for LEP status bring the clear benefits of introducing support network, such as ACTS, into the ecumenical equation and these can open up much wider possibilities for co-operation. Equally the pragmatic approach is more flexible and less binding in terms of specific obligations that are imposed.

The Committee would greatly welcome information about other local co-operation from our congregations on the ground. We are aware of situations where good ecumenical co-operation is happening such as amongst the churches in Balbeggie and Croftfoot and through meetings of Edinburgh Churches' Together-attended by Rev. Duncan Whitty. We try to monitor these situations informally, but still as effectively as possible. These could be communicated to the wider denomination through Stedfast and/or other media, thereby offering encouragement to our congregations perhaps to follow these examples of fruitful outcomes.

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC)

WCC's website states that the organisation has 345 member Churches. Recent discussion over our continued membership stems from genuine concern about theological difference regarding Gospel centrality. However it may be that we need to continue engagement with that diversity, across many different traditions and denominations, in order to keep a clear focus on our own evangelical position. The point of ecumenism is surely not just to partner with those we agree with, but also to meet and engage with those we may profoundly disagree with, thereby deepening our perspective and being better equipped to understand the views of others.

The Committee has taken steps during the year to engage with WCC's vision document, "The Church-Towards a Common Vision" and is grateful to Mr. John Wilson who undertook to review it on our behalf. Rev. Jim Neil also informed us that a very helpful session took place on the document at the ACTS Members' meeting in September 2015.

It extends to some 46 pages, labelling itself as a 'convergence text' which attempts to outline the theology of Church as the unified body of Christ in God's plan and in unified missional witness to a broken world. The text delves into the nature of the Holy Trinity, the vital importance to Church unity of the sacraments, as well as reflecting on the interaction all of this means the body of Christ should have with our world. The text laments the lack of unity in the Church for a variety of reasons and invites the body to use this vision as a means of working towards greater unity. It is vitally important to point out the document is NOT a blueprint for a unified body, rather it aims to direct the Church towards deep reflection on why unity doesn't exist and how strategies to deal with this might be discerned.

The Committee agreed not to submit any comment on the document to WCC, although the deadline for submission of such input has been extended till December 2016.

It is perhaps worth reflecting on the fact that ecumenical initiatives on this scale require large amounts of time to digest the contents and arrive at any kind of constructive response. Having said that it is good for us as a denomination to be aware of what is happening, even at this level of theological and practical reflection on the life and witness of the body of Christ.

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (CTBI)

CTBI continues to be involved in projects and initiatives building bridges between churches & communities both across the UK and overseas. In September 2015, a CTBI delegation report was produced outlining a visit to one of the focal points for the current refugee crisis, Idomeni, on the border between Greece and Macedonia. Links were forged with local Greek denominations and meetings held with UNHCR and other agencies. This represents a constructive example of the way Christian input can be organised ecumenically in terms of both a theological and practical response to major humanitarian, social justice and conflict situations around the world.

Again CTBI continues its strong output of prayer and other resources. A course for Lent 2016 has been produced on the theme of *Pilgrimage*, envisioning sessions on the notion of journey away from and back home in terms of our personal and collective Christian walk.

The Committee feels that, whilst the work of CTBI is effective, relevant and offers real potential for ecumenical co-operation, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the United Free Church to find a point of access into its projects in terms of being equipped and resourced to make a meaningful contribution.

WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WCRC)

WCRC has more than 225 member churches around the world, with a shared heritage in Reformed confessions and Calvinism. Its ethos is rooted in the theology of *koinonia*, relationships based on oneness and communion together in Christ and with one another.

WCRC Europe hosts a variety of themed events and conferences. Topics this year have included human trafficking, the theology of justification in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, and "Migration and Aggression in Europe" which explored the current refugee crisis partly from the theological perspective of Calvin's own "refugee" status in the 16th Century. The organisation's Europe Council meeting took place near Zurich, in Switzerland between 3-5 March 2016. Unfortunately it was not possible for the United Free Church to be represented.

Undoubtedly we share the Reformed history and ethos of WCRC. However it is becoming increasingly problematic for the United Free Church to participate practically in these events across Europe or to contribute meaningfully to ongoing ecumenical fora for discussing these social, political and economic movements of global significance. It is essential for the Church to form a strategy on these issues and seek to make sense of seismic changes in our world from a theological point of view. What is the Church saying, and perhaps more importantly, doing?

The Committee would suggest that the United Free Church still needs to be aware of what is taking place at this level of ecumenical exchange. However the question of the resources we have to contribute effectively to, or perhaps in this context, be in communion with, these vital initiatives is now becoming more problematic.

PART TWO: REVIEW OF ECUMENICAL ENGAGEMENT

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 (General Assembly 2014).

The Committee considered how best to deal with this remit and agreed to form an Ecumenical Review Group to explore the whole matter and report back. The group appointed consisted of Revs. Colin Brown, Andrew McMillan, Duncan Whitty and Dr David Miller along with Rev. John Fulton. The group held its first meeting in November 2014.

The Committee owes a real indebtedness to the Ecumenical Review Group for their hard work and direct engagement with a wide-range of Churches and organisations. Our prayerful hope is that as their conclusions are now examined by the denomination, we will be able to discern a God-centred, Christ-focused and Spirit-led strategy for our ecumenical relations in future.

INTRODUCTION

The United Free Church has been a member of the following national and international groups since their inception: World Council of Churches (WCC), World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) (previously World Alliance of Reformed Churches), Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS). The United Free Church is also a member of the Evangelical Alliance.

It is worth noting that since 1929 the United Free Church has been open to involvement with other groups and this has resulted in a variety of ecumenical participation. This has partly stemmed from a recognition that as a small denomination we are dependent on other churches. It was agreed in 1973 to establish an 'Inter-Church Relations Committee' (prior to that there had been a sub-committee) and this was seen 'both as an acknowledgement of the increasing complexity of this particular aspect of church life and an indication of the Church's desire to make a worthy contribution to it.' In the 1970s it is interesting to note that the UF Church considered an approach from the Church of Scotland to explore the possibility of 'reunion', accepted an invitation from the Baptist Union of Scotland to meet to discuss 'whether there are common areas of witness and fellowship in which closer co-operation would be possible or desirable' and was part of the 'Multilateral Church Conversations'.

One Assembly Committee Report from the 1970s has this statement, 'The Committee continues to act as a channel of communication between our own and other Churches and as a stimulus to closer cooperation with these Churches at the local, national and international level. The existence and work of the Committee are a constant reminder that our denomination is part of a larger family whose combined witness and experience are a source of enrichment to all its members.'

In 1968, at the invitation of the Church of Scotland, there began three decades of doctrinal discussions known as the 'Multilateral Church Conversations'. Six Churches took part: The Church of Scotland, the Churches of Christ (which became part of URC), Congregational Union of Scotland (later to become part of URC but with some moving to the Congregational Federation), Methodist Church in Scotland, Scottish Episcopal Church and United Free Church of Scotland. The original goal had been to draw up a basis and plan of union but it was recognised that a number of doctrinal issues had to be addressed and several reports were issued over the years including *Worship and Sacraments* (1974), *The Faith of the Church*, (1978) and *Christian Unity: Now is the Time* (1985). By 1990 it was recognised that the church scene in Scotland had changed greatly but by 1995, all except the United Free Church had agreed to draw up a basis and plan of union. The other five

Churches went on to set up the Scottish Church Initiative for Union which continued until 2003.

This brief history reflects the United Free Church's willingness to be involved in a number of ecumenical initiatives over the years and to belong to various ecumenical agencies. However through it all there has been a desire to be faithful to Scripture and to ensure that the involvement was with a view to furthering the work and mission of the Church.

MEETINGS

The Group recognised that there are non-ACTS member Churches as well as para-Church organisations with whom it would be very useful to meet. Meetings were arranged across the diversity of the wider church scene in Scotland and with several who have links with the Church in Europe and beyond:

- Rev Ian Boa, Assistant General Secretary of ACTS, former Convener of our ER Committee who represented the UF Church at the Uniting Assembly of WCRC
- Rev Fred Drummond, National Director of Evangelical Alliance, Scotland
- Rev Jim Neil, former Convener of UF Ecumenical Relations Committee
- Very Rev Dr Sheilagh Kesting, Ecumenical Officer, Church of Scotland
- Rev Sandy Horsburgh, Europe Secretary, World Communion of Reformed Churches
- Rev Graham McGeoch, Church of Scotland, who served on the WCC Central Committee 2006 – 2013
- Rev Alan Donaldson, General Director, Baptist Union of Scotland
- Rev Francis Alao, General Secretary, MECTIS
- Rev David Meredith, Mission Director, Free Church of Scotland
- Rev Fergus Macdonald, World Reformed Fellowship
- Mrs Elspeth Davey, Ecumenical Officer, Scottish Episcopal Church

Everyone readily agreed to meet with us and, whenever arrangements were made away from Church Office we received warm hospitality. A summary of comments made about the various ecumenical agencies is given below. All our meetings took place in an informal atmosphere and no direct attribution of particular views expressed will be given. Most of the detail below came as a similar comment from more than one source.

ACTS: The member Churches are Church of Scotland, Congregational Federation, Methodist Church in Scotland, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Roman Catholic Church, Salvation Army, Scottish Episcopal Church, United Free Church of Scotland, United Reformed Church. ACTS speaks of bringing together nine Churches who share a desire for:

- Greater oneness between churches, as Jesus prays in John 17.21
- A growth of understanding and common life between churches
- Unified action in proclaiming and responding to the Gospel in the whole of life.

ACTS encourages and resources encounters between Churches in which each learns from the other, where difference is explored and respected and where division is healed. Dealing with the future of Scottish Churches House in recent years has led ACTS to initiate a review of the way it expresses itself and enables working together ecumenically. Programme groups are being set up as work groups and Churches are asked to send appropriate people to these groups. Every member denomination is represented at the Members' Meeting. It is for each Church to say if it wants to work ecumenically on a particular matter and then ACTS is willing to help, including giving possible financial assistance. There are 22 Local Ecumenical Projects in Scotland, and over 800 in England. ACTS hopes to build stronger links with Churches Together groups.

The point was made to us that some within ACTS who are more liberal theologically are keen to see those with a more evangelical perspective on board because they recognise

this is an important strand of theological opinion within the Church, from which constant input is valued.

CTBI: According to CTBI, “there are many different Christian Churches and denominations, but all have the same basic calling – to worship God, to share the good news about Jesus Christ and to work for the good of all people.” So Churches often need to work together, as well as co-ordinate with one another on the work they each do separately.

Being Churches Together means commitment by each Church and denomination to deepen its fellowship with the others, without losing what makes each distinctive, thereby working towards a greater visible unity.

Supported and facilitated by a skilled and committed staff team, it networks specialists across the churches, arranges regular meetings of church representatives and links the churches into a wide range of inter-church organisations. As the successor to the former Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, and before that the British Council of Churches, it has a long history.

However in the view of some we spoke to, CTBI has become almost invisible because much more resources are put into Churches Together in England. The Church of Scotland has always argued the need for a four nations’ instrument partly because then they are not the largest player. CTBI does offer a valuable channel to approach the UK Government on issues.

WCRC: WCRC considers it important for Churches to meet annually within Europe. It is a very supportive body, especially of smaller Churches, not so much an ecumenical body as a family because all are close relatives. The financial contribution from member Churches is calculated based on national GDP and size of membership. There is a wide range of member Churches and they are keen to ensure a broad representation. It contains a diversity of theological views but has avoided touching on really ‘hot issues’ such as human sexuality because of the range of views within WCRC. The German *gemeinschaft* used in naming WCRC can be translated as ‘communion’ or ‘community’. ‘Communion’ is more an aspiration than the expression of reality – we are called to take ecumenical steps towards it.

It is good to be in a body where we have people with very different voices which we need to hear. It gives a channel through which we can share concerns, prayer, resources. WCRC also offers support to Churches in 180 countries – and is good for smaller Churches in areas where there is persecution etc. The structure is conciliar and every 7 years there is a General Council whose decisions are implemented by the Executive Committee – decisions are not normally binding on member Churches. There is a Theological Institute which meets every 2 or 3 years. Having a forum for church dialogue is vital to the process of effective ecumenical engagement.

WCC: Membership is genuinely global and includes Orthodox Churches (Eastern and Oriental), as well as African Instituted, Anglican, Assyrian, Baptist, Evangelical, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Moravian, Old-Catholic, Pentecostal, Reformed, United/ Uniting and Free/ Independent Churches, Disciples of Christ and Friends (Quakers).

Involvement in WCC is part of our response to Jesus prayer in John 17, it is an ecclesial issue as we seek how to embody being Church. WCC tries to bring together Churches of different sizes and ecclesiologies to help them grapple with these issues. It is a place where Churches hold each other accountable. Faith and Order seeks to develop agreement between Churches on a multilateral basis and address outstanding ecumenical issues. WCC recognises it is not the only way to do ecumenism yet is a unique forum to bring groups together. It is a 20th century institution trying to rebalance the Global North/ South. Today is a transition time, as European and American Churches have less power, but still some, and other focal points for wielding influence are emerging. In one meeting we

can engage with almost 350 other Churches. WCC only communicates with representatives and head offices.

The General Secretary can have influence in a social and political sense and is listened to by governments. He meets with global figures and has civil/ diplomatic status. Persecution of Christians in the Middle East is very much on the current agenda and the Coptic Church is very strong in highlighting this. Encountering ecumenical diversity is a key feature of membership.

WCC now has a budget of 9 million Swiss Francs (\$6million) and a staff of about 110 – in the past with 500 – 600 staff members that budget was \$40 million. The Assembly is now partly funded by the host Churches.

Evangelical Alliance: EA is growing across the UK despite fragmentation in some evangelical groupings, a growth largely due to the influx of African Churches. In Scotland there is also some fragmentation among evangelicals with a number of smaller 'post evangelical' groups. There are networks of like-minded people. The middle ground is growing from a reasonably conservative position and it is encouraging to see various 'unity' movements across the country. Some have seen unity as part of God's calling on their life but it is slow and time consuming and the demands of the church can take all our energy. Maintaining structures can exclude time to look up and build unity. There is a perceived divide between being evangelical and ecumenical.

There is the big question of what is the point/ goal of ecumenism? Groupings such as ACTS, CTBI, WCRC, WCC have visible Church unity as a goal so that ecumenism is an end in itself. Evangelical Churches are more concerned with missional activity and work together with others who share that vision and for as long as that vision is shared.

OBSERVATIONS & REFLECTIONS

John 17: What is the goal of ecumenism? Most will refer to Jesus' words, *'My prayer is not for them 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'* (John 17.20-21). Jesus prays that his people may be one so that the world might believe and we consider it important to hold the two aspects together. Unity is sometimes seen as an end in itself, but Jesus very much ties it to mission. On the other hand there is the danger that we focus on our concern that the world might believe but ignore his prayer for his people to be one. It is vital to hold these complementary strands together. The comment was made to us that when you look at the Church in Scotland today and the state of our society you would think it should encourage us to share resources and work together but as we become more threatened, we become more denominationally-minded.

Place of UF Church: We also recognised that Christian growth and vibrancy are often found more in newer evangelical and charismatic churches. In some ways we are closer theologically to more evangelical churches (including the newer and growing ones), but structurally we are much more similar to the traditional and declining denominations where the theological ethos is more mixed. It may be we need to consider where we sit structurally and theologically within the Scottish church scene today, rather than relying on models that are now obsolete. For denominations such as the UF there is the challenge of how we nurture a culture of respect for difference, but also preserve gospel truths and authentic practice with great care.

Ways of working together: It is evident that across the Churches in Scotland there is little appetite today for formalised arrangements between Churches in the form of covenant etc. In future it may be that informal talks and ad hoc partnerships are more common. Ecumenical cooperation seems to work best when it is focussed on a particular task or a particular area of work. Mention was made of the excellent cooperation which took place

through *More Than Gold* in connection with the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. This brought together a very diverse group of Churches and other agencies who were able to work well together over that period. The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office is another example of ecumenical cooperation which is broader than the membership of ACTS and works well in facilitating Christian links to the Scottish Parliament. Other examples include eco-congregations as well as workplace and prison chaplaincies.

Consideration needs to be given to ways in which working ecumenically might be helpful to us and enriching for us. One suggestion was to look at ways in which during their ministry training, candidates might have the opportunity for time spent working in an ecumenical setting or at conferences when candidates from various denominations could meet and discuss issues together. We need to educate our future leaders through ecumenical formation so they know what we are signed up to. We need to implement what we have agreed to implement. Participatory ecumenism is important. Only a Church in dialogue with another Church is going to develop ecumenically. The United Free Church cannot become isolated, by design or default.

We have to look at where we can engage and this needs to be looked at across the Churches. We have convictions and should not compromise them when we meet with people who think differently. It would be helpful to identify principles to guide us in the future. Perhaps we should set out our values and say we are prepared to work with those prepared to work with us. Should we identify criteria for how we decide which partners to connect with? How do we understand mission? Can we have use ecumenical links to do more effective mission together?

Future involvement with ecumenical agencies: Some have observed that there are a number of ecumenical bodies which are more reformed than WCRC – including the World Reformed Fellowship and the International Conference of Reformed Churches. However when we made initial approaches, it became clear that both of these bodies are open only to strictly confessional denominations. Although we acknowledge the Westminster Confession of Faith as our 'subordinate standard', we have our Declaratory Acts which allow 'liberty of judgement' and we would therefore not presently qualify for membership of these bodies.

There are unique features about WCC which can speak up for Christians globally as it addresses social and political issues. With WCC we are not asked to sign up to a confessional statement. Both WCRC and WCC address social and political issues – should we consider withdrawing from one? WCC would acknowledge that evangelical Churches have a valid contribution to make as part of the worldwide body of Christ. The WCC document 'Called to be the One Church' (9th Assembly 2006) includes a list of fairly searching questions which it would be useful to have in the background to this discussion.

Matters to consider: Some fear that in ecumenism the gospel will be lost but the danger is we can become arrogantly exclusive and such views should be challenged. We need ecumenical fora in which different views can be freely expressed. Within any denomination there will be a range of theological views and it is possible to be divided on some issues but still remain one Church. We must consider how to handle diversity and cope with deep-rooted divisions.

There is a need for us to ask some basic questions and discuss them in an open and respectful way where we are mindful of the distinctively different view of others. The Committee would suggest the following as a starting-point:

- What are our ecumenical priorities?
- How would we define the nature of relationship and fellowship with others?
- What criteria should determine our ecumenical involvement, locally and denominationally?
- Is it appropriate to connect ecumenical activity with mission and outreach?

CONCLUSION

This Report seeks to inform and assist the ecumenical choices now facing the United Free Church of Scotland. It should be noted that we are far from being alone in this process and, as in other spheres of church life, many of the issues being addressed are identical for others.

Similar themes have emerged across both parts of this Report. The Committee believes that the time has come for us to scrutinise not only the memberships, affiliations and partnerships we currently have across the ecumenical spectrum at every level, but also the underlying principles and justifications we use to inform those choices. A previous rationale may no longer apply, or at the very least, it may be time to examine its terms of reference with critical openness.

There is no doubt that our history and ethos identify the United Free Church as a clearly Reformed and evangelical denomination. That spiritual DNA is going to impact the kind of ecumenical choices we make. A natural affinity will inevitably be present when looking at denominations similar in outlook to our own. Whilst allowing this aspect of our engagement to flourish, and indeed to serve as one of its driving forces, we cannot close the door on other types of relationship, simply because they make us feel less comfortable or settled. One of the keys to effective ecumenism is to consider the way we are ourselves viewed by those we encounter, seeking to understand and work within the boundaries of theological diversity and historical difference.

It is not unreasonable to label that as a big ask for any church in these difficult days. Christian witness everywhere continues to face the challenges of secularism, postmodern ideas and a profound lack of commitment to any fixed set of core values at every level of society. At the same time it is becoming increasingly clear that Christians themselves want to relate to each other in new ways also, which are less formalised and more flexible yet still profoundly Christ-centred, potentially fruitful and practically effective in missional terms.

Perhaps it's a not unfair criticism of ecumenical relations over the years that we've become more focused on endlessly tweaking theological formulae and administrative structures than we have been at channeling ecumenical energies into powerful means of sharing the Gospel on the ground in local communities - where the Church is called to be and where real people really are!

In short we cannot allow the well-meaning pursuit of a perfect mechanism or theological precision between churches and groups to outweigh the whole *raison d'être* of Church - which is to share Christ at every possible opportunity.

Today's ecumenical scene finds itself in uneasy transition very simply because the body of Christ is itself undergoing fundamental change. We need to be flexible ecumenically, having an appropriate set of tools to engage with different and often nuanced situations. That can still be done whilst holding fast to who we are as a Reformed and evangelical Church. Our identity is not going to be lost or compromised by seeking creative ways to connect both with those we have natural theological empathy with us, and with those with whom we may fundamentally disagree. The reality may be that taking the risk to engage sharpens our sense of who we are.

Formalised ecumenical relationships seem to go against the current trend, which looks more to favour issue-based connections and flexible affiliation rather than organised covenant. Perhaps this model can assist us as a medium for relationships with other churches, both on the ground and at denominational level. Grass-roots partnerships often have missional, outreach drivers and these must be nurtured creatively. A single-issue local working together may be the seedbed for something richer, deeper and more long-lasting over time. Every relationship has to begin somewhere, and in these challenging times for all parts of the body of Christ, surely the need has never been greater for partnership (*koinonia*) in the gospel (Philippians 1.6).

Fora for ecumenical discussion, dialogue and reflection must be maintained. All of those currently operating, whether we are a member church or not, have structural flaws and suffer from perhaps rather misguided and unfair criticisms. It is always going to be easier to pass judgement from the touchline, yet to go down the route of wholesale detachment and/or withdrawal would serve only to isolate us further from what is happening.

That said we need a reality check in terms of what the United Free church is currently capable of contributing to the wider, global and regional ecumenical stages. An honest discussion may bring us to the point of streamlining our memberships, thereby allowing us to target limited ecumenical resources more effectively. Whatever we decide to do, an open door and at the very least a watching brief across the whole range of ecumenical perspectives should be sustained.

New affiliations are possible, we may find these to be refreshing, a blessing that yields fruit for everyone. Flexibility is surely their inherent strength and this may offer us a new paradigm for ecumenical connectivity on an ad hoc or single-issue basis. The Committee's intention now is that space be given for an open discussion of our ecumenical future as part of this year's General Assembly, specifically tailored to allow a full opportunity to discuss, engage and share openly our concerns and vision for the ecumenical path of the United Free Church of Scotland.

THANKS

The Committee would wish to record its indebtedness to Rev. John Fulton and Mrs. Helena Jarvis for their unstinting support and assistance during the year. The Convener would wish to thank the members of the Committee for their patience during this first year of accelerated learning in ecumenical matters, and also the General Secretary for his willingness to assist in preparing the second part of this year's Report.

In the name of the Committee

ALEXANDER RITCHIE	Convener
ANN DEACONS	Vice-convener
JOHN O FULTON	Secretary