

**REPORT OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMITTEE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2005**

INTRODUCTION

This year's report to the General Assembly shows that we are informed and concerned about the life of our Nation. When we have been concerned about certain issues we have sought to bring a Christian influence and the dignity associated with the Gospel to bear on these matters.

This year's report has a slightly different format to previous years in that the various parts of the report have been compiled by the committee members who have researched the topics presented.

RISKS ARISING FROM THE USE OF MOBILE PHONES

A notable feature of the twenty-first century has been the remarkable development in personal communications provided by mobile phones. The advantages of this to the lives of individuals and to businesses are fairly obvious but inevitably there is also a downside. Mobile phones work by use of radio-frequency electromagnetic radiation of relatively short range, which in turn requires a large number of transmitters to provide a countrywide service. This inevitably means that most of the population is now exposed to this radiation and we must consider any possible risks to health.

It is known that excessive levels of this radiation can produce harm to people due to thermal effects from absorption in tissue. Guidelines governing the design of phones and the siting of transmitter masts are in place and provided these are adhered to there will be no risk arising from thermal effects. However concern remains on two points. First, we do not have sufficient knowledge of possible non-thermal effects and further research is required, and second, the guidelines are worked out for the average person and we must also consider any groups who may be extra sensitive, such as children. Recognising these concerns has led the EU into recommending that a 'precautionary principle' be applied in any new developments. The essence of the precautionary principle is that where the perceived risk associated with a new development is uncertain and possibly greater than that assumed in determining the current safety guidelines, then the new development must be viewed and treated with extreme caution.

Hitherto most attention has been directed at the design of the phones themselves and it has been suggested that parents should try to minimise the use of phones by younger children (while recognising the desirability of knowing where they are!). More recently attention has focussed on transmitter masts themselves, which have been proliferating at a great rate and are likely to do so for some time to come. While the guidelines should prevent any serious damage, if adhered to, the precautionary principle would seem to suggest that sites close to schools and residential accommodation should be avoided.

Network companies seeking new transmitter sites have approached some congregations with a view to installing transmitters in church buildings. Annual rentals can be a temptation to hard-pressed treasurers. However any congregation faced with this situation should remind themselves of the precautionary principle, especially if there is work with young people ongoing in the building, and also should be sensitive to the views of local people who may well perceive a risk even if there is not one.

STUDENT DEBT

Higher education that is open to everyone, everywhere throughout the United Kingdom, is under threat. New funding policies are based on the premises that:

1. Students as beneficiaries of a higher education should pay more for their studies.
2. Graduates should make a contribution towards the cost of higher education once they are earning and can afford to do so.
3. Loan repayments should be based on ability to pay.

This has brought about funding practices which:

1. Influence student numbers.
2. Restrict movement of students.
3. Increase financial burdens.
4. Influence intake.

The consequences of which are that students in higher education will:

1. Borrow more.
2. Embrace debt.
3. Repay later and could become debt dependent in the longer term.

The following recent piece from the financial pages of a national newspaper highlights the state of affairs developing today:

Question: "I am halfway through my second year at university and, in order to supplement income, I have been using credit cards. My total debts are in the region of £20,000. This excludes my student loan which I believe I will have to pay back once I start working. I am considering bankruptcy proceedings. Will the student loan be included?"

Answer "You will not have to pay back your student loan received prior to you becoming bankrupt. This is different from the position in England where student loans are not written off, but the Scottish Executive is contemplating bring Scotland into line with England in the next year or so."

Although this may be or may not be an extreme case, the committee will endeavour to influence the policy makers and funding bodies to:

1. Devise student funding policies that act as an incentive to enter higher education rather than a disincentive.
2. Change current student financial support arrangements so that higher education students have enough money to meet essential needs and are able to undertake their studies without excessive financial stress.

PALESTINE

During this last year the Committee has devoted time to a consideration of what has been termed "The Palestinian Crisis". The discussion was prompted by Reports produced by Christian Aid, though our discussion ranged beyond those Reports.

The tragic circumstances of the latter half of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first have developed out of a seedbed created by past decisions, decisions for which the international community bears some responsibility. There is also a responsibility to be borne by nations and leaders whose policies have inflamed passions which in turn have stimulated violent action and reaction against many ordinary people who have simply wanted to get on with living their lives.

Within Palestine it is easy to point the finger at one side or the other. From the time of the Balfour declaration in 1917 when the British Foreign Secretary declared support for a Jewish national home in Palestine there was a growing resentment among Palestinians for whom Palestine had long been home. The resentment grew with the growth of Jewish immigration in increasingly larger numbers as Jews fled from a Germany under Nazi control. Following the Second World War as many more Jewish refugees sought security in Palestine and with the establishment of a Jewish State in prospect resentment gave way to

increasingly violent action. Extremist groups engaging in terrorist activities were unyielding in their opposition to a national home for Jews in Palestine. Nearby Arab states have in the past sought the eradication of Israel and some guerrilla groups are still committed to such a solution. We should also bear in mind Israel's experience and fear of anti-Semitism which stills exists and which in some parts of the world is on the increase. The Christian Aid Report, *Facts on the ground: The end of the two-state solution?*, acknowledges that "Israeli security fears are motivated both by physical attacks and concerns that the Jewish population will become a minority group within Israeli borders".

Attention must also be given to the enormity of the humanitarian crisis currently facing Palestinians (the main purpose of the Christian Aid Reports). The Gaza Strip, 12 km at its widest point and 45 km long, and home to more than 1.3 million Palestinians, is encircled by a fence and 'security zone'. Permanent roadblocks divide the narrow strip into three sections. Living in one part of Gaza and working or studying in another makes for long and difficult journeys. Closures of road blocks are frequent and unpredictable. Israel's control of Gaza's borders has been described as "creating a big jail". The construction of a separation barrier round large parts of the West Bank, affecting an estimated 280,000 Palestinians in 122 villages, will result in the loss of farmland and orchards and the strangling of local economies. A total of 49,959 people in six communities are trapped in enclaves almost completely surrounded by the barrier. Some communities have been cut off from wells, other water sources or irrigation systems, and members of families have been cut off from each other. A Palestinian with West Bank identity papers will have the utmost difficulty in visiting a relative with Jerusalem identity papers. The creation of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and West Bank has seriously contributed to the restrictions on Palestinians living there. We note here that successive United Nations resolutions have condemned Jewish "settlements" as illegal, and that the International Court of Justice has supported this view. This being the case it follows that segments of the wall being built to protect the settlements are also in violation of International Law.

Our discussions took place at a time when prospects for peace were improved by the election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the Palestinian National Authority. At the time of preparing this part of our Report we note the following developments, mainly encouraging but including worrying elements:

- (a) The Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Mr. Abbas attended a Mid-East summit and announced a truce which has brought about a reduction in violence.
- (b) While Palestinian militants have held to the informal ceasefire agreed by Mr. Abbas two groups, *Hamas* and the Syrian based *Islamic Jihad*, have made it clear that they are not bound by the truce. The ultimate aim of both remains the establishment of an Islamic state on the whole of Palestine.
- (c) Israel has freed 500 Palestinian prisoners to bolster the ceasefire deal and has promised to make the freedom of a further 8,000 prisoners a top priority.
- (d) The Israeli government has agreed to remove Jewish settlers from Gaza which is to be handed back to the Palestinians. At the same time, however, there is evidence of plans to build more homes for Jewish settlers in the West Bank, a move condemned by Palestinians as being in breach of the agreed "road map" to peace.

By the time Commissioners read this Report we may have a better idea as to the prospects for peace, whether there is a possibility of replacing violent, bloody and short-term solutions with peaceful, life-saving and long-term solutions, i.e. whether Israeli and Palestinian men and women of peace will prevail or the men and women of violence.

Precisely because Jesus was a Jew, because his first disciples were Jews, because the Christian Faith was born as it were in the cradle of the Jewish Faith, and because Jews and Christians alike share the Old Testament Scriptures as the Word of God, Christians have a natural affinity to Jews and feel a particular responsibility to love them for Christ's sake. This natural affinity should not blind us, however, to injustice wherever it is found.

Christians have a responsibility to love the whole world for Christ's sake and to share Christ with the whole world. Moreover, Christians will have a place in their concerns and prayers for Arab Christians living in Palestine who suffer as a result of violence.

It is clear that most Palestinians and Israelis desperately want an end to violence. Peace is a top priority for them. But peace and justice are inseparably bound up together. We might paraphrase Isaiah 32.16,17: "For the effect of justice will be peace, and the result of righteousness, security and trust for ever." Moreover, God requires the people of all nations "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly" before him (Micah 6.8). The one thing every Christian can do is to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (including Jewish and Arab residents) and to pray more generally for the peace of Palestine.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES HOUSING ACTION

Jenny's story highlights a new project that the Scottish Churches Housing Action has launched this year.

'Jenny grew up in care and when she was sixteen she moved out of her children's home into supported accommodation. Not long after moving into this accommodation she had a row with one of her flat mates and was unhappy with the support worker "interfering" in her life. She then left this house and found a private let. Jenny was always late in paying her rent as her work was irregular and the landlord became so fed up waiting for his money that he turned her out after six months. She went to the council, but the temporary accommodation that they had was full up and she had nowhere else to turn to. Could she stay with a friend for a few days until she finds new accommodation?'

To mark its tenth anniversary the Scottish Churches Housing Action has launched a project called 'BY MY SIDE' which will recruit volunteers to befriend people like Jenny and stand alongside them while they search for accommodation. East Ayrshire and Fife have been selected as likely areas to pilot this new scheme. In both these areas homelessness has increased considerably in the past year.

The Scottish Churches Housing Action also recognizes that one reason for homelessness is that there is not sufficient affordable housing for rent. The organisation has asked member churches to make land available for housing development in the situations when church buildings become redundant or property is under-used. This could make a crucial contribution to making more affordable housing for rent available at a local level.

An example of such a contribution is what is happening at Duke Street United Reformed Church in Leith. The congregation has moved out of their church building to allow the Port of Leith Housing Association to demolish their building and construct a new building which will include a church and hall on the ground floor with twenty one affordable flats to rent above the church. The congregation will have a new purpose built church and an increase in their capital fund.

DENOMINATIONAL APPEAL FOR THE MAXIE RICHARDS FOUNDATION

One of the greatest curses of our modern society is drug addiction which not only destroys the life of the addict but that of their family and friends. Restoration of the drug addict to a life free from addiction is an arduous and tortuous journey which many addicts fail to complete.

At the 2003 Assembly in Perth many of us were deeply moved by the life stories of the young people who accompanied Maxie Richards. Maxie Richards and her Foundation seek not only to help young people rid themselves of drug addiction but to bring the blessing

of the Gospel into their lives. We heard and saw for ourselves at the Perth Assembly how this approach can radically change lives.

It is the intention of this Committee to seek the Assemblies approval to launch a Denominational Appeal on behalf of the Maxie Richards Foundation. This appeal is aimed at providing additional resources to the Foundation, helping in the ongoing rehabilitation work amongst drug addicts. The Appeal will be launched early in 2006 and last until 2007. The appropriate information and details will be sent out to Congregations early in the new year.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES COMMUNITY TRUST

The Scottish Churches Community Trust continues to give assistance to a number of community projects around Scotland. Three examples are:

- **Govan Ecumenical Youth Association:** Funding was given towards the salary costs of a project co-ordinator to develop after-school clubs and evening youth work in Govan. The project involves several churches in Govan with the support of other local community organisations
- **Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre:** Funding was given towards the running costs of providing out of school care for children in the Orbiston area of Bellshill. The service is one of many provided by Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre, an initiative of Utheo Ltd, set up by Orbiston and St Andrews churches to serve the community.
- **Mid Craigie Parish Project:** Funding was given towards the running costs of this community project providing a range of services for older people and unemployed people in the North on Dundee. The project is a joint initiative of mid Craigie Church of Scotland and St Ninian's Scottish Episcopal Church and involves a wide range of other community organisations.

During the year the committee was concerned about the possible consequences of the Gambling Bill being considered by the UK Government. The committee made representations to the Scottish Parliament and was disappointed that by the use of a Sewell Motion it was decided simply to accept the UK legislation. Representations were also made to Westminster over the number of 'super casinos being proposed and also legislation which allowed children to use fruit machines. Many aspects of the legislation have now fallen due to the decision to hold a General Election but it is likely the committee will be involved in further representations on this issue over the coming year.

RACIAL JUSTICE

At the end of 2004 the Churches in Scotland were alarmed to learn that it was the intention of the UK Government to deport Pastor Daly and his family back to Angola. Pastor Daly and his family had narrowly escaped death when they fled from their native country which has a poor human rights record. Since his arrival in Scotland Pastor Daly, who speaks seven languages, has been active in helping other asylum seekers integrate into the Glasgow community.

The Churches in Scotland together with other organizations have rallied together to call on the Home Office to allow Pastor Daly and his family to stay in the UK on humanitarian grounds. At the time of writing this report the Home Office have deferred a decision on their deportation pending a re-examination of the case.

During the past year the Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group has sought to develop its work by involving other churches and by continuing to op up new areas of work. The Churches are among the main agencies offering support to asylum seekers, particularly in Glasgow. Changes in legislation mean that the number of destitute asylum seekers has

increased. Locking up asylum seekers and their children has continued to be a normal practice. The Group's work has included assisting asylum seekers, representing the views of the churches in policy development, supporting ethnic minority churches and Christian groups and giving training on racial justice to people in churches. Following the example of Jesus, Churches are called to stand alongside the disenfranchised and vulnerable in society, to support them in whatever way we can, to speak for them and to seek justice for them.

INTER CHURCH RELATIONS

In the last nine months the Convener has been pleased to represent the United Free Church on the Church and Nation Committee of the Church of Scotland as part of the two denominations initiative in working together. The way this committee functions is that it forms sub-groups to deal with and comment on the issues before it. He was able to join the sub-group on prisons under the very able Convenorship of the Rev. Colin Anderson who has been a Prison Chaplain for part of his ministry.

During the group's study of the Scottish Criminal Justice System it emerged that:

- Overcrowding is the most important issue confronting the Scottish Prison Service in Scotland. Scotland has one of the highest per capita prison rates in the European Union.
- There was general agreement that short prison sentences were of little benefit and have been shown to have little effect on reoffending rates.
- Many in prison have mental health problems and addiction problems.

The report from the group will recommend alternative practices:

- Exploration of possible alternatives to short prison sentences i.e. appropriate community benefit duty and a more effective system of administering fines.
- More rehabilitation centres in the community to treat addiction.

However, the most encouraging suggestion was the proposal to introduce the Community Chaplaincy project. This project will recruit volunteers from the Churches who will under the direction of the Community Chaplain begin working with prisoners before release and then carry this work on when the prisoner is released into the community.

Both the Community Chaplaincy and the By My Side projects are possible areas where our Congregations can become involved in bringing the influence of the Gospel to our communities.

CONTRIBUTION TO ORGANISATIONS

The following contributions were made in 2004:

Scottish Churches Community Trust	£ 1,000
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office	£ 1,000
Scottish Churches Housing Action	£ 1,000
Scottish Churches Racial Justice Officer	£ 500
Society, Religion and Technology Project	£ 50
VASHTI	£ 50
Mediawatch	£ 50
Christian Institute	£ 50
CARE	£ 50
TOTAL	£ 3,750

CONCLUSION

This report reflects the significant contributions that members make to the committee throughout the year and thanks are expressed to all who have contributed to this work.

Thanks are also expressed to the General Secretary for all his hard work, wisdom and sensitivity in liaising with the various organizations outside the Church that the Committee has to deal with. We are also deeply grateful for all the work that Mrs. H. Jarvis undertakes for us.

In the name of the Committee

DONALD J. MACDONALD	Convener
IAIN S. SMITH	Vice-Convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary