

**REPORT OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMITTEE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2007**

INTRODUCTION

This report from the Church and Society Committee will only deal with five of the many issues that the committee has considered since the last Assembly. Unfortunately we lost the Rev. T. Ireland from the committee. We, as a committee, acknowledge not only his faithful service to the Church through this committee but his enthusiastic involvement in the work of the Scottish Churches Housing Action.

CLIMATE CHANGE DUE TO HUMAN ACTIVITY

We have spent some time examining the problems arising from the increasing use of fossil fuels by man since the industrial revolution. A report produced by the committee can be found in Appendix 1.

The release of the gas, carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere has resulted in a greenhouse effect leading to climate change which if not checked could lead to catastrophe for the biosphere and the human race in particular. We welcome the growth in public awareness of the situation and commend the Government for taking a lead in seeking a solution. However it has often appeared as if our leaders listen more to the shrill voices of pressure groups rather than to the reasoned arguments of science. This could lead to policies which fail to resolve the problem and might indeed increase the burdens borne by the more disadvantaged in society. It seems to us that, as Stewards of a Loving God, that a true solution to the problems facing us must start from the proposition that God loves all His children and in His bounty will make provision for all of them. Hence actions to reduce the effects of climate change must consider the welfare of all people, both in this country and across the globe.

Looking at necessary actions we believe that the initial and urgent first step must be to switch use of energy from polluting coal, oil and gas to electricity. The electricity must of course then come from a non-polluting primary source. The magnitude of present and future demand is such that all suitable sources must be utilised. Practically this implies that the major part of the load in the immediate future must come from nuclear and probably also, coal with carbon capture and storage.

Transport, which currently depends on oil and yet which is essential to maintaining a vibrant economy, poses a more difficult problem. However provided our primary sources are converted to environmentally friendly forms at an early stage we buy time to solve the problems associated with transport. Meantime much can be done to improve the fuel efficiency of vehicles and aircraft and use of bio-fuels will also help. But research into environmentally friendly transport forms based on hydrogen or electricity should be stimulated.

The Convener and the Committee acknowledge the major contribution that Mr. Fergus Henderson has made in compiling this part of the report and the paper entitled 'Global Warming — A Strategy for Energy' contained in Appendix 1.

ECO-CONGREGATIONS

The previous part of the report has focussed on the fact that mankind may be in the process of destroying this wonderful world that God has given us. When God entrusted the world to Adam and Eve, He not only gave them the authority to rule over it: God *blessed*

them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the ground" -Genesis 1 v 28 but also commanded them to care for it: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" Genesis 2 v 15. So the concept of ecological conservation is not a new one but has been with us from the beginning of human life itself.

As a Church we are calling on the Government to think through this issue and make plans based on the scientific knowledge available to us to make changes to the way our energy is provided in order to minimise the detrimental effect of the use of fossil fuels in the past. However, we as individuals and congregations can help to minimise carbon dioxide emissions by how we manage our church buildings. We need to perform an energy audit on our church buildings so that we can assess whether:

- a) We are using the minimum of energy for lighting. Do we need to convert our lighting to low energy bulbs?
- b) Our heating is as efficient and economical as we can make it.
- c) Our building is insulated against increased heat loss.
- d) Recycle whenever practicable.
- e) Church grounds are eco-friendly.

We can also help with the wider aspects of reducing carbon dioxide emissions by ensuring that we encourage the use of Fair Trade products whenever possible.

Further information on the Eco-Congregation Scheme which is supported by ACTS and the 'Fair Trade Church' scheme which is a UK wide scheme can be had from Church Offices.

2007 BI-CENTENARY OF THE PASSING OF THE ACT ABOLISHING THE SLAVE TRADE

This year marks the Bi-centenary of the Bill to abolish the Slave Trade and we as Christians remember this event of two hundred years ago with thanksgiving as it is part of the Christian heritage of our Nation.

The movement led by William Wilberforce, sprang from deeply held Christian beliefs based on the fundamental Scriptural tenant that man was made in the image of his Creator and therefore slavery was an intolerable evil. History tells how remarkable this movement was, that at a time when communications were not comparable with what we have today, a few committed people were able to mobilise a great many people to support the movement by signing a petition to Parliament and by boycotting sugar produced slave owning sugar planters. Britain led the world by example and was able to persuade many other nations in the Western world to discontinue this evil trade. The abolition of the slave trade in Britain provided the impetus for many other social reforms from the democratic franchise, the abolition of child labour, vote for women together with the campaigns against prostitution and drinking.

Our Nation and its Churches should celebrate the role that it played in bringing to an end the oppression of slavery but we must also remember that new forms of slavery still exist in the world in the form of forced or bonded labour, prostitution and the trafficking of men, women and children. We commend the Christian men and women who are already working to combat these evils and call on the people of this Church to find practical ways to support their efforts.

GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION

This year two pieces of Government legislation have given us great cause for concern.

First, the 'Sexual Orientation Regulations (SOR)'. This legislation has been introduced both in Northern Ireland and the UK. Originally, this legislation was seen as a major infringement on our religious liberty and the committee responded by communicating our misgivings about this legislation to Government (see Appendix 2). Thankfully, exemptions have been provided for religious organisations. In summary the exemptions of Regulation 14 of the SOR allow Churches to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation

- (a) by restricting membership of the Church
- (b) by restricting participation in the activities undertaken by the Church
- (c) by restricting the provision of goods, facilities and services in the course of activities undertaken by the Church, or
- (d) by restricting the use or disposal of premises owned or controlled by the Church.

It is important to note that the restrictions listed above are only permissible where:

- 1) it is necessary to apply the restriction 'in order to comply with the doctrine of the Church' or
- 2) the restriction needs to be imposed 'so as to avoid conflicting with the strongly held religious convictions of a significant number of the religion's followers'.

However there are three key areas in which the Churches will not be exempt:

- A) When Churches provide goods, services, facilities or exercise public functions (e.g. run soup kitchens, family centres or crèche facilities) which are funded wholly or in part by public money.
- B) When Ministers teach their congregations that they should follow the Bible's teaching on sexual morality, the Minister will have no protection under Regulation 14 (preaching is not covered by (a) to (d) above).
- C) When a Minister preaches that homosexual practices are sinful, there is a slight possibility it could constitute a 'practice' which would be 'likely to result' in unlawful discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

The committee has been advised that Ministers will not be required to officiate at Civil Partnership Ceremonies nor will they be required to give communion to or baptise practising homosexuals and Churches will not be required to hire out their halls to groups promoting homosexual practices.

The committee believes that this Bill has been rushed through the legislative process with undue haste and there is concern, not only amongst Christians, but amongst the general public that these SORs impact on freedom of conscience. We communicated our concern to a number of Scottish MP's prior to the vote in Parliament and asked that the following two anomalies within the Regulations be redressed:

- 1) protection of ministers should they teach their congregation to follow the Bible's teaching on sexual morality
- 2) protection for individuals to guarantee their freedom of conscience so that they will be able to benefit from the religious exemption covered by (a) to (d) above.

We have had a response from two of the Scottish MP's that we wrote to and the Bill on Sexual Orientation Regulations has been approved by the UK Parliament.

The second piece of legislation that concerned us was 'The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Bill' which for the first time allows homosexual and unmarried couples to adopt children. In our letter to the MSPs in the Scottish Parliament, see Appendix 3, we have

challenged them to explain why this legislation, which seeks to introduce changes in the way parenting has been done for thousands of years and has been rejected by the majority of those consulted, is being allowed to become law.

APPEAL FOR MAXIE RICHARDS FOUNDATION

The launch of the appeal for the work of the Maxie Richards Foundation was a highlight of the 2006 General Assembly. It was moving to hear from Maxie Richards and from some of those being helped by her as they spoke openly about their experiences.

The special packs were circulated to ALL congregations and we are encouraged that some have already responded to the appeal. By the end of March £2,685 had been received although £1,500 came from one congregation! We know that others have arranged opportunities for Maxie to speak about the work.

The committee would ask all congregations to take an interest in this valuable work and to encourage support for it through interest, prayer and giving.

As was said in last year's report: 'The committee's intention in launching this appeal is that we as a Denomination become partners with Maxie Richards and the Foundation in their work of helping those whose lives have become impoverished by drug abuse'.

TRIDENT REPLACEMENT

We, along with other Churches in Scotland, have opposed the replacement of Trident on the basis that it is unnecessary as a deterrent in maintaining peace amongst the nations of the world and it is wasteful of our countries resources. A copy of the letter sent by the Churches to every Scottish MP is contained in Appendix 4.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Most of us have been involved in some form of conflict at some time in our lives. Resolution of conflict is often a major undertaking for us and may be a painful experience. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, taught us that we must be prepared at all times to resolve conflict: *Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God - Matthew 5 v 9.*

The Rev. J. Naika has a vast knowledge and experience in this field and we are grateful that he is prepared to share his knowledge and insight with us in the articles he has written in Stedfast.

CONTRIBUTION TO ORGANISATIONS

The following contributions were made in 2006.

Scottish Churches Community Trust	£ 1,000
Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office	£ 1,400
Scottish Churches Housing Action	£ 1,000
Scottish Churches Racial Justice Officer	£ 600
Society, Religion and Technology Project	£ 100
Mediawatch	£ 50
TOTAL	£ 4,150

CONCLUSION

The Convener wishes to express his gratitude to each member of the committee not only for their contribution to the work of the committee but for making the proceedings of the committee so enjoyable. In particular, the convener wishes to thank Dr. Iain Smith and the General Secretary Rev J O Fulton for all their help while he was undergoing treatment earlier this year. The committee is grateful to Mrs Helena Jarvis for the enormous amount of work she undertakes for the committee throughout the year.

In the name of the Committee

Donald J. Macdonald	Convener
Iain S. Smith	Vice-Convener
John O. Fulton	Secretary