

REPORT OF THE OVERSEAS COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2009

INTRODUCTION

“You are salt to the world. And if salt becomes tasteless, how is its saltiness to be restored? It is good for nothing but to be thrown away and trodden underfoot.”

“You are light to the world. A town that stands on a hill cannot be hidden. When a lamp is lit, it is not put under the meal-tub, but on the lamp-stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. Like the lamp, you must shed light among your fellows, so that, when they see the good you do, they may give praise to Your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5 13-16)

The above passage from Matthew, in ‘The Message’, is translated as:
“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt seasoning that brings out the God-flavours of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.”

“Here’s another way to put it; You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hill top, on a light stand - shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

The Overseas Committee gives thanks to the many, many people who, over the centuries, have given of their gifts, time, and sometimes, their lives, to be "salt seasoning that brings out the God-flavours" in different parts of the world. They have responded to God's call in their lives and, trusting totally in Him, have left the familiar and comfortable for the strange and unknown. We give thanks for their commitment and dedication, as do the many Churches, Schools and Hospitals set up by them. It is a deeply moving moment to hear people speak lovingly of the Scots who came to their area and brought the Gospel with them.

However, we live in a different time. It is no less exciting or challenging, but it is different. In our overseas partners, we work with people and organisations who are becoming confident enough to recognise that they too are "salt seasoning that brings out the God-flavours" in different parts of the world. Among our partners there is a growing realisation that they have much to offer their fellow Christians and that is a cause for celebration. It reinforces that we are part of a world wide family serving the purpose of God in different traditions, cultures and styles.

Within this new framework, the work of the Overseas Committee is not only to continue to respond to our partners requests for assistance by offering resources, be they human, financial or practical, it is also to help the Denomination understand its role as a "receiving Church". As a receiving Church we have the opportunity to learn from our partners. We work with partners who worship and witness: -

- in countries where the Church is a thriving witness even though legislation can create a hostile environment.
- in countries where the Church is a thriving witness in the midst of terror and fear.
- in countries where the Church is a thriving witness amongst great poverty and illness.

We give thanks for the opportunity to work alongside and share with and learn from our overseas partners. Let us celebrate our relationships with our current and potential partners that they can now be truly a partnership - both parties giving and receiving.

MERRIWEATHER MEMORIAL CHURCH – HERITAGE ROOM

The Committee would have liked to have been able to report that this Project is now completed; however, that is not the case. Some progress has been made but there is still some way to go. Photographs, documents and artefacts are being identified, with the assistance of Dr Merriweather's family. Progress has still to be made on the custom built displays which will house the materials.

As reported to last year's General Assembly, the Committee has a vision for there to be a larger display of Dr Merriweather's life and work, set within the wider context of Christian mission to that region. It was envisaged that this display may be set within the Museum in Molepolole. This year there have been discussions with Mrs Mary Merriweather, Mrs Joy Crosbie and Rev Segola Keimetswe to seek their views on the viability of such a Project and the Committee is pleased to report that the idea has been favourably received. Mrs Merriweather has also consulted with the Curator of the Museum and he too has added his support.

From the Committee's perspective, the next step would be to appoint a suitably qualified person in Botswana who would oversee the practical work involved in setting up the Room and the collation and cataloguing of all materials. The Committee, however, is mindful of the fact that this Project cannot be their vision but rather, needs to be the vision of the Merriweather family and the people of Molepolole. This is their story and so, we seek to work alongside our friends in Botswana, and their timetable, rather than to lead it ourselves.

As you will see the Committee intends to send two Representatives to the UCCSA General Assembly following which our delegates will meet with a number of partners in Botswana when it is hoped further progress can be made on this and other areas of work.

OVERSEAS PARTNERSHIP SCHEME

We are now at the end of the first 3 year period of the Overseas Partnership Scheme. It has been an exciting and challenging time for many which has required flexibility, adaptability and an openness to new experiences.

The Rev Joey Naika and family decided to return to S Africa at the end of his contract. We are grateful to them for the gifts and talents they brought to Leith: Ebenezer in particular, and the wider United Free Church which they so willingly shared with us. We wish them God's blessing in their continued ministry in S. Africa.

Rev Peter De Villiers intimated his desire to extend his stay in Scotland and continue serving his Congregation in Wishaw. We give thanks for Peter's ministry and the skills and knowledge he now brings to the Overseas Committee.

Rev Patrick Coltman also intimated his desire to remain in Scotland and was recently appointed to Milngavie United Free Church. We give thanks for Patrick's ministry and wish him and Cecile every blessing as they settle into this new Charge.

An initial discussion with UCCSA has indicated they would be willing to allow two more Ministers to come to Scotland under the auspices of this Project. As before, these Ministers could only come from areas where there is a surplus of clergy. Before we proceed

to the stage of inviting applications the Overseas Partnership Group is evaluating the first 3 years of the Project and rewriting the Guidelines in the light of that evaluation.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES' CHINA GROUP (SCCG)

With the focus on the Olympics in August 2008 many people asked why China needed to be given assistance with development projects when it could find the equivalent of US\$20bn to fund the Games. This is a very legitimate question, the answer to which is too complex to be covered in this Report. Perhaps it helps though to understand the challenges faced by the Chinese Government when a senior leader is quoted as saying "There is no problem too big when divided by 1.3bn people. There is no problem too small when multiplied by 1.3bn people".

The SCCG has over the past year been involved in a number of projects. In July and October 2008 Scottish staff were sent to The Amity Children's Development Centre, in Nanjing, on short term placements. The Centre specialises in working with pre-school children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. This is a new area of work in China and the Scottish staff provided invaluable support and training for clients, parents and staff.

The "Exploring China" Education Pack continues to sell with two Education Authorities equipping every Primary School in their area with a Pack. The SCCG China Field Officer has also undertaken a number of visits to schools to offer further training to staff and pupils.

For the first time, support was given to the Dongzhou Village Children's Home, near Xi'an. This Home looks after the children of prisoners. Often these children are traumatised and very vulnerable. While the Home does an excellent job of looking after them and ensuring an education it has no extra funding to provide toys and playground equipment. Through funding from the Barbour Trust the SCCG was able to provide funding to allow each child to choose one particular toy for themselves as well as communal play equipment.

A number of other pieces of work have been undertaken but it would have to be said that work was curtailed due to SCCG Trustees being involved in protracted joint discussions with the Church of Scotland World Mission Council (WMC).

The WMC has indicated it wishes to work directly in China "in a new way" which does not require a China specialist to be in post. At the same time it has also reiterated its commitment to remaining part of the SCCG and its ecumenical approach to working in China. The SCCG Trustees continue to try and clarify the situation.

REROTLHE CARE CENTRE

As reported in last year's report, the Overseas Committee felt drawn to the work of the Rerotle Care Centre. Our expectation was that new rented accommodation would be furnished and equipped to provide care and training to around 40 children at any one time. The Committee confirmed funding for 3 years, totally approximately £9,500. In discussion with the Project Co-ordinator it was agreed this sum would be paid in 3 decreasing instalments, beginning with £4,500. The thinking behind this was that during the first year there would be considerable capital outlay as the new accommodation was equipped. The lower amounts in the second and third years would recognise the decreasing capital investment required and the fact that Rerotle staff would themselves be seeking additional funding from alternative sources.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the new accommodation is still not in use. The First National Bank (FNB), visited the village of Seherelela with the offer of funding a community project. They selected Rerotle which brought to a halt the Flying Mission's joint

venture with them as the Rerolthe staff refocused on a partnership with FNB. The Overseas Committee is following up with Flying Mission on the use of the funds sent in 2008, and further funds will be not sent until we have confirmation the work is progressing satisfactorily.

MISSIONARY RESOURCE & MISSIONARY SUNDAY

We are again grateful to Ms Helen Sunter for assembling a team which produced valuable resources for Congregations to use in February. A number of favourable comments about the material have been received, confirming the value of specific Sundays being set aside for a focus on what "mission" is and our roles both at home and abroad.

We would ask General Assembly to encourage congregations to be active participants in this Sunday by: -

- volunteering to be part of the team which prepares the material.
- indicate if there is a particular aspect of mission they have an interest in which they would like to see the material focus on.
- be active participants by setting aside one of the designated Sunday's to focus on mission.

APPOINTMENT OF MISSIONARY SECRETARY

For over 8 years the United Free Church in general and the Overseas Committee in particular, has been enriched by the work of the Denominational Missionary Secretary, Helen Sunter. Her enthusiasm, hard work and deeply spiritual commitment has taken a job description on a page and developed it into a resource which informs and challenges us all as we learn about the work of mission partners in different parts of the world. She has become a trusted friend of many overseas staff, as well as being a respected voice on the Overseas Committee. It was with great reluctance that the Committee received Helen's resignation from the post earlier this year. We wish to record in this report our grateful thanks to Helen for her selfless dedication to this work. She has always been open to God's leading and this has been an inspiration to all.

At the time of writing there have been a number of positive enquiries as we seek to find a successor to Helen. The Overseas Committee hopes to be able to name the new Mission Secretary at the General Assembly, if not before.

SHORT-TERM PLACEMENTS

At a recent Conference the question was asked as to why there were so few "career" missionaries nowadays, people who spent their entire adult life working overseas for the Church. The reply was that in previous centuries missionaries could spend a lifetime in a particular area establishing the Christian faith. Today there are indigenous Churches in many of these regions who, while remaining eternally grateful for the dedication of the people who brought the faith to their region, no longer want to be "led" by overseas staff, but would rather be "accompanied" on their unique, individual journey. Often that accompaniment takes the form of a short term placement when a specific skill is shared with a view to an indigenous member of staff taking over the role at the end of the placement. Or the short term placement may serve to build the capacity and skills of partner staff.

As part of the vision of the Overseas Committee to offer an overseas experience to as many people as possible in the Denomination, the Committee has produced a Paper which details a range of short term opportunities available through member or partner organisations. Each opportunity is different and the majority can be experienced by people

of all ages. Some require specific skills or experience other are more general. We hope that these opportunities will inspire people as they seek to serve God and His Kingdom.

TWINNING ARRANGEMENTS

The General Assembly Report of 2008 set out the idea of Church Twinning between congregations in Scotland and Southern Africa. We are grateful to the former Convener, Rev Jim Neil, for all the work he did in writing guidelines for this Project. Since then nothing more has been done to develop this initiative mainly because of a number of concerns over the amount of work it will generate. Discussion has focused on matters such as: -

- who would gather information on possible twinning arrangements?
- who would co-ordinate its distribution and respond to enquiries? There is evidence from other Denominations that a considerable amount of time has to be spent in discussion with Congregations as they explore the possibility of a Twinning and then decide upon the nature of the relationship.
- what would be the role of the Overseas Committee? Would it simply coordinate information for distribution to Congregations for them to progress the partnership or would it more actively facilitate such arrangements.
- if facilitator would there be liability if the Twinning ran into difficulties and had to be terminated?

These are just some of the issues which would need to be explored and resolved before this Programme could become active. As the Overseas Committee cannot currently see a way forward which would not increase the already considerable workload of the office staff it has been decided not to take steps to pursue this matter.

ZIMBABWE

The Overseas Committee has for some time been greatly concerned about the situation in Zimbabwe. Last year's General Assembly Report highlighted some of the dreadful situations the beleaguered people of Zimbabwe were facing. It was difficult to imagine how it could get any worse but that is exactly what seems to have happened with the cholera outbreak, food shortages, and out of control inflation.

The Committee gives thanks for the courage of the Churches in Zimbabwe who are standing as a beacon of hope in the face of evil. As a Committee we have regularly held the people of Zimbabwe in our prayers. We have also endeavoured on a number of occasions and by various channels to send a message of support and solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters. We have no way of knowing if these messages have been received but will continue to try and make contact. As the Committee continues to try and make contact with the Synod of Zimbabwe we would as the General Assembly encourage the Denomination as a whole to hold Zimbabwe as a particular prayer focus. Only the power and love of God can transform this situation and take the people of Zimbabwe from darkness and despair into the light and hope of a new future.

BONGANI ORPHAN CARE PROJECT

Those of us who had the privilege of meeting Thelma and Gastina in 2007 marvelled at the provision they made, under very difficult circumstances, for the thousands of orphans in their care. In the face of overwhelming obstacles they trusted in God to provide for them and their charges. In the two years that have passed their plight has become even more difficult and it is hard for us to imagine the challenges they face in today's Zimbabwe. Again, the Committee has held them in prayer and made repeated attempts to contact them as we want them to know there are people outside of Zimbabwe who are aware of their plight and

are offering them support. We have recently received reports that the work is continuing despite the difficult circumstances.

Generally the Committee would not want to foster a culture of dependency and so financial support for a particular project is usually time limited. With the Bongani Orphan Care Project an exception must be made. It is inconceivable for the Committee to consider withdrawing financial support at this time of crisis, although we will review the matter on an annual basis. In the meantime we would again ask the General Assembly to encourage Presbyteries and Congregations to hold Thelma, Gastina and the children and young people of the Bongani Project in their prayers.

UCCSA ASSEMBLY

The UCCSA Assembly will be held in Botswana between 19th - 25th August 2009. In recent years a number of Overseas Committee members have attended the Assembly and found it to be an inspiring and uplifting experience. In order to share this experience with as many people as possible the Committee has decided that, in future, it will send two delegates to each Assembly. One will be a member of the Overseas Committee to ensure the Committee has a continual flow of members who have had the chance to see, experience and learn from, however briefly, the life and worship of one of our main partners. The other might be a representative from another General Assembly Committee or Presbytery Committee who has an interest in or can compliment the work of the Overseas Committee. It is hoped that through this programme there will be an increasing number of people within the Denomination who can share with Presbyteries and Congregations their experiences of the UCCSA Assembly. Since the Assembly is meeting in Botswana, this will also give an opportunity for consultation with a number of people within the Botswana Synod and beyond regarding several ongoing matters and on this occasion it has been agreed that the Convener and Vice-convener should represent the Committee.

PRAYER LETTER

It was the intention of the Overseas Committee to issue a Prayer Letter following each Overseas Committee Meeting. The purpose is to inform the Denomination of the work of the Committee and to bring to everyone's attention specific prayer points. For a number of reasons this has not happened quite as we would have wished. The Committee will endeavour to produce regular Prayer Letters in the coming year.

In the name of the Committee

PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON	Convener
THOMAS IRELAND	Vice Convener
JOHN O. FULTON	Secretary