

**REPORT OF THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY COMMITTEE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018**

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2012 Billy Graham wrote a prayer letter to America in which he wrote:

“Our society strives to avoid any possibility of offending anyone—except God. Yet the farther we get from God, the more the world spirals out of control. My heart aches for America and its deceived people.” Could the same observation and comment not be made about Britain today?

As the church responds to the often difficult and challenging issues that affect society today it is important that God is at the centre of all that is said and done. We can thank God that we have Christ, our Saviour and Lord, as our example and that we are led by the Holy Spirit on a daily basis.

Since the General Assembly in June 2017 the Church and Society Committee has been looking at a range of topics both old and new. The media, politicians and various charities have brought a number of issues to the fore including homelessness, child poverty, refugees, mental health, transgender, loneliness and isolation, to name but a few.

In March the Committee appreciated the opportunity of having a meeting with John Mason MSP when a range of topics were discussed. This will help the Committee as it looks at various issues in the future.

The Committee would be pleased to hear from anyone within the denomination who could contribute knowledge and experience on any of the topics covered in the report or knows of any appropriate resources.

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (Named Person Legislation)

The Committee has continued to monitor developments in relation to the Named Person Scheme. The Children’s and Young People (Information Sharing) (Scotland) Bill was introduced on 19th June last year by the Deputy First Minister John Swinney MSP to amend the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 on the provision of information in relation to the named person service. The Bill has received criticism from a number of quarters and the Committee submitted a written response to the consultation.

Although the Scottish government continues to push for the implementation of the scheme, the continued opposition has meant that there have been more delays. The Parliament has given the Education and Skills Committee more time to consider the Bill by agreeing that the Committee does not have to report on the Bill by a specific deadline.

In the meantime, the Scottish Government has established the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) Practice Development Panel, which is chaired by Ian Welsh (Chief Executive of the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland), to develop the authoritative draft code of practice. The authoritative draft code is not expected to be ready until September 2018 at the earliest. Views on the draft code will be sought from various stakeholders once it is available.

The Church and Society Committee will continue to monitor how this issue is progressed with a view to making a response to the draft code when it becomes available.

The Lobbying (Scotland) Bill

The legislation that increases the transparency in lobbying, which was passed by the Scottish Parliament in March 2016, is now in operation. Guidance has been provided for the registration process and how regulated lobbying is intended to operate. It only covers people in paid positions within an organisation or business and only applies to face to face oral communications – communication by email, letter, phone call, etc. is not covered.

Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill

The Bill to set targets for the ultimate eradication of child poverty, and to make provision for plans and reports relating to the targets, was completed and passed in November 2017. An amendment was included that allowed for the possibility of using the Scottish Government's top-up powers to increase Child Benefit.

The top up to Child Benefit had been called for by the Give Me Five campaign. It called on MSPs to ensure that Scottish Government spending plans included a top-up to Child Benefit of £5 per week. The campaigners said that by increasing Child Benefit by just £5 a week for every child it could lift 30,000 children out of poverty. The Scottish Government, however, rejected the amendment.

Reviewing the Gender Recognition Act 2004

The Scottish Government consulted on making it easier for people to change their legal sex with responses to the consultation having to be returned by 1 March this year.

The Government is proposing:

- Allowing 'self-declaration', removing any need for a medical diagnosis or two years living as the opposite sex;
- Lowering the minimum age from 18 to 16; and
- Giving legal recognition to those who claim to identify as neither male nor female – so-called 'non-binary'.

The Committee did not respond to the consultation as, at the time, the Panel on Doctrine was considering the issue of transgender.

Organ and Tissue Donation and Transplantation

Following the results of the public consultation, it has been confirmed by the Public Health Minister, Aileen Campbell, that the Scottish Government has plans to bring forward legislation on a soft opt out system of organ and tissue donation during this Parliament after 82% of consultation responses supported the move.

The government's aim is to add to the package of measures already in place to increase donation. The Donation and Transplantation Plan, 2013-2020 has seen improvement in organ donation in Scotland with:

- 146% increase (54-133 between 2007/8 and 2016/17) in the number of people who donated organs after their death.
- In 2016/17, Scotland had the highest rate of donors per million of population of any UK country – currently 25.5 donors per million of population.
- 45% of the Scottish population have joined the organ donor register (over 116,000 in 2016).

As yet there has been no details issued by the Scottish Government about the plans for a soft opt out system and how it would operate. The Committee will continue to monitor how this issue is progressed.

HOMELESSNESS

It has been encouraging that the problems facing rough sleepers and homelessness have been highlighted in recent months. The Scottish Government was persuaded to set up a new short term action group which will identify the actions and changes needed to end rough sleeping and transform the use of temporary accommodation in Scotland. It includes a new £50 million 'Ending Homelessness Together' fund which will be used to back the commitment and fund homelessness prevention initiatives over the next five years.

One of the group's immediate initiatives was, along with voluntary organisations, to provide food and shelter for the many rough sleepers out on the streets over the Christmas and New Year period. People who are rough sleeping often have multiple and complex needs such as mental ill health and addictions and we can pray that solutions will be found, which meet all of their needs.

Significantly reducing homelessness in Scotland can only be a long term aim so it will be essential for the Scottish Government to develop an appropriate strategy. To do this the action group has to be able to continue to give direction and drive if anything other than a 'sticking plaster' approach is to be achieved. This will need significant financial resources.

The Committee supports the work of Scottish Churches Housing Action and is grateful to Rev. Ann Purdie as she continues to represent the Committee and takes an active part in the work of SCHA. Mr Alistair Cameron, Chief Executive Officer of SCHA, retired in March 2018 and the Committee would like to record its appreciation of his considerable contribution to the work of SCHA. The Committee appreciated the efforts made by congregations to support Homeless Sunday back in January and for the special offerings taken for the work of SCHA.

The report from Scottish Churches Housing Action is found in Appendix 1.

MENTAL HEALTH

The Church and Society Committee has for some time been looking at the issue of mental health and when the General Assembly met in Perth in June of last year the following motion was put and unanimously agreed:

"The General Assembly are concerned at the slow progress that is being made to improve waiting times for treating people, particularly children, suffering from mental health issues and ask that the mental health strategy is properly implemented and adequately funded."

Following the General Assembly, the Convener wrote to Shona Robison MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, informing her of the General Assembly motion and it was encouraging to receive a response from Maureen Watt MSP, the new Minister for Mental Health and the first in the UK.

The Scottish Government have commitments set out in the new Mental Health Strategy but it remains to be seen how the strategy will work in practice.

Contact has been made with The Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) to explore what the Committee could do that would be constructive and keep the issue of mental health on the table.

The Committee is interested in SAMH's current 'Going To Be' campaign, which focuses on the needs of young people with regard to their mental health. More details about the 'Going To Be' campaign are given in Appendix 2.

GAMBLING

With the increasing number of lotteries and the easy access to gambling online, the Church and Society Committee has been revisiting the issues of gambling and lottery funding as they have an increasing impact on our society.

In 1995 the General Assembly agreed the following deliverance:
“The General Assembly re-affirm their conviction that gambling in any form may have harmful effects both to the individual and to the family unit and urge all Church members to abstain from such activities including the National Lottery.”

This was once again re-affirmed at the 2004 General Assembly following the report from the Committee on Ethics and Current Affairs.

The Committee’s stance remains unchanged with regard to gambling, however, it was agreed to examine this topic and to provide a clear statement that will assist those who serve the denomination on other bodies who obtain grants from lottery funding. It is a matter for regret that increasingly the only sources of funding available to such bodies is money which has been raised through the National Lottery.

The Committee recommends that when a vote is taken in an ecumenical group, etc, regarding lottery funding those representing the United Free Church of Scotland should abstain from the vote or vote against the proposal and register their dissent if the proposal to accept lottery funding is passed.

REFUGEES / SCOTTISH FAITHS ACTION FOR REFUGEES

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees is a project which seeks to co-ordinate and promote action by faith communities in Scotland to support asylum seekers and refugees. The work of SFAR is supported by Action of Churches Together in Scotland, Church of Scotland, Interfaith Scotland, Methodist Church in Scotland, Muslim Council of Scotland, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Scotland, Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society, Scottish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, Scottish Episcopal Church, The Salvation Army – Scotland Office, United Free Church of Scotland and United Reformed Church – National Synod of Scotland. Mr Ian Buchanan continues to serve on this group in an advisory capacity.

A dedicated website (<http://www.sfar.org.uk/>) has been launched for faith groups in Scotland responding to the refugee crisis. It has sections looking at how governments and local authorities are responding through policy, current campaigns, research, refugee stories, resources for different faith groups, plus how individuals can respond themselves.

The Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees (SFAR) report is found in Appendix 3 and the Committee commends the hard work and commitment carried out by David Bradwell, Refugee Co-ordinator, and Sabine Chalmers on behalf of SFAR. David is taking paternity leave from May – October and the Church of Scotland appointed Dr Steve Aisthorpe to take on the role during this period.

The UK Government set a limit whereby 20,000 refugees could be resettled in the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme by 2020. The cross-government Resettlement, Asylum Support and Integration Directorate have consulted as they plan for the future of resettlement to the UK, after the current commitments to 2020. The consultation included the question of resettlement through community sponsorship.

The Committee is very pleased at the success of the appeal launched by the Overseas Committee to assist David and Wilma Lyttle’s work with refugees in Greece.

DEMENTIA

Dementia is an umbrella term for a range of illnesses and disease symptoms, which primarily or secondarily affect the brain, making it harder to remember things or think as clearly as before. Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia are the most frequently occurring illnesses. Dementia can affect every area of human thinking, feeling and behaviour, but each person with dementia is different - how the illness affects someone depends on which area of their brain is damaged.

The numbers of people living with dementia in our communities are increasing and, as a result, many families are struggling to cope. Churches can have an important role in helping to support those in their congregation with dementia as well as their families and carers.

To be a 'Dementia-Friendly Church' is to find ways to minister to people living with dementia so that they know that they are 'held by God' as they are helped to experience life in all its fullness as Jesus promised. There are also practical ways within church buildings that can help those with dementia such as appropriate signage and adapted toilet facilities.

Useful sources of information:

- Alzheimer Scotland is the leading dementia organisation in Scotland. Part of its work is to fund local Dementia Advisors, who support people with dementia, their partners, families and carers. They also work with local communities, including church groups. In some areas they have Resource Workers or other staff who can provide information, advice and support.
- Copies of the resource "A Guide to Supporting People with Dementia in the Local Church" can be downloaded from the website of Dementia Services Development Trust at www.dementiatrust.org.uk
- Methodist Homes (MHA) have produced a range of booklets on working with people who are living with dementia including "Growing Dementia-Friendly Churches: A Practical Guide". (https://www.mha.org.uk/files/3814/0931/8295/Growing_Dementia_Friendly_Churches.pdf)

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

The Convener attended a consultative Conference on 4th October last year at the Church of Scotland office in Edinburgh. This event was run by Faith in Older People, The Church of Scotland and ACTS and its aim was to help the Church identify their role in combatting loneliness and isolation and how to put ideas into practice. It is also the intention to have input into any consultations the Scottish Government has as it forms its strategy aimed at dealing with this issue.

CHRISTIAN AID SCOTLAND

Christian Aid work for and with people of all faiths and none, as well as with churches and other organisations, to promote sustainable development, strive for social justice and pursue their vision of a world without poverty.

In 39 countries, they support poor and marginalised people, whatever their beliefs, sexuality, gender and ethnicity, to lift themselves out of poverty. They do this by tackling both the causes and the symptoms of poverty so that everyone can achieve equality, dignity and freedom.

The Christian Aid report is found in Appendix 4.

WORK PLACE CHAPLAINCY SCOTLAND

Work Place Chaplaincy Scotland aims to offer relevant pastoral and spiritual support to people where they are – in the setting of their daily work and individual lives. Where a chaplain

is invited to serve they are available to all, of all denominations or none, from the managing director to the new-start apprentice.

More about their work and the challenges faced are given in the report found in Appendix 5.

SCOTTISH CHURCHES PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (SCPO), set up in 1999, continues to build a fruitful relationship between the churches in Scotland and the Scottish Parliament, and help them to engage effectively in the political process.

The SCPO Advisory Group is made up of representatives from different denominations and it allows them to consider current parliamentary issues, topical briefing papers, Church responses to government consultations and, on occasions, arrange meetings with MPs and MSPs. The Committee is represented on the SCPO Advisory Group by Ian Buchanan.

The SCPO provides advice and support to individuals, groups and churches and the Committee very much appreciates this continuing support.

The SCPO report is found in Appendix 6.

CONTRIBUTION TO ORGANISATIONS

The following contributions were made in 2017:

Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office	£2500
Scottish Churches Housing Action	£2250
Work Place Chaplaincy Scotland	£1250
Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees	£500
TOTAL	£6500

CONCLUSION

The Committee wishes to thank the Rev J O Fulton, General Secretary and Mrs Helena Jarvis for the enormous amount of work that they undertake on behalf of the Committee throughout the year. The Committee also appreciates the time and effort that Mr. Bill Cairns gives to representing the Committee on the Church of Scotland Church & Society Council. The Committee was sorry to hear of the resignation of the Vice-convener, Rev Eric Worton, and record their appreciation of the valuable contribution he made to the work of the Committee.

In the name of the Committee

IAN D. BUCHANAN Convener

JOHN O. FULTON Secretary

