

## **REPORT OF THE ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE**

### **GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2019**

“Be still, and know that I am God!” (Psalm 46.10, NLT).

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15.5, NLT).

The Lord’s call to stillness brought to us by the Psalmist, follows a tumultuous period of upheaval and uncertainty. In so many ways a mirror image of current political uncertainty, economic and social division across a fragmented world. That sense of reflective calmness stems not from our human activity or initiative, rather it emerges from a clear grasp of God’s identity and nature.

Equally Jesus reminds us that we are wholly dependent upon him as the sustaining vine, however high a value we may place upon our own activity in terms of strategies, discussions or initiatives. The lesson is a sobering but normative one for us: without Christ at its heart, it’s going nowhere. If we are in the true vine, only then shall we become its fruitful branches-both amongst ourselves and in relationship with others.

The Committee cannot report that the current scene is settled, rather we live in days of ecumenical reconfiguration. It can however invite our denomination to give thanks for a robust process of review now completed and encourage the Church to draw spiritual encouragement from the way God has led us in unity to this point.

It is the Committee’s prayerful hope that the United Free Church of Scotland will now reap the benefits of such a significant review process, enabling our ecumenical relations to stabilise, develop and mature. The present landscape is still fluid and multi-faceted but, as in the Biblical wisdom offered by the rhythm of time and season, eventually the distortion of reconfiguring yields again to the stability of settled relationship. We hope this next phase will be the latter, not least as it will allow the denomination and our ecumenical partners to co-operate effectively and practically within a gospel framework.

Many common themes have emerged in our discussion with others, all of us facing the same issues on different scales. One recurring shibboleth is the notion that, rather paradoxically, the more we are sure of our own theological and doctrinal stance, the more (not less) likely we are to reach out confidently to engage with those with whom we may not naturally agree or sense a context of like-mindedness. That stands as a real challenge to all Christians, if the future for ecumenical engagement in Scotland is to remain a viable and productive one.

### **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

A context of positive relationship continues to define our interaction with the Church of Scotland. It is planned that our annual meeting with representatives from Church of Scotland Ecumenical Relations Committee will take place in Church Office on Tuesday 7 May 2019. This has consistently been an opportunity for open discussion and helpful exchanges of view.

The Convener has attended statutory meetings of the Church of Scotland Ecumenical Relations Committee during the year. It has been eye-opening to get some sense of scale in their ecumenical remit and breadth of contacts. However, not only has a warm welcome always been forthcoming, but comment on agenda items is welcomed and participation in any decision-making process both valued and appreciated.

The Committee would again acknowledge the invaluable link role between our denominations, certainly at national level, played by the Church of Scotland Ecumenical Officer, Rev. Dr. John McPake. He consistently shows a willingness to engage directly with us and always demonstrates a genuine warmth towards sharing with the United Free Church of Scotland.

## **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

At the time of writing no date has been set for our annual discussion with the Free Church. It's hoped that this important conversation can be organised shortly. We still maintain good levels of communication and co-operation with the Free Church.

This manifests itself in personal contact with Rev. David Meredith, but also in wider aspects of church life and ministry. It is hoped that this will be further evidenced by shared participation in upcoming events such as our September in-service ministry training conference at Drymen.

## **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND**

The Committee has long been aware of the call to explore a more meaningful relationship with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This strategy fits well into our promotion of strong bilateral relationships, whilst at the same time offering the spiritual possibilities of missional partnership and evangelical projects. It was often said that geographical factors militated against a close working relationship, though in our online age with a plethora of ways to communicate electronically and share resources, really frustrates that outmoded argument. Transport links are now swift, efficient and frequent.

David Miller & Alexander Ritchie visited Belfast on 8 March 2019, spending a very productive and engaging day with a number of representatives working in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Scale is important in that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland has more than 500 congregations and well in excess of 200,000 members.

Our interaction covered general ecumenical relations, training for ministry and issues surrounding congregational revitalisation and church planting. There was a clear willingness to share resources with us such as the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's well-established and recognized 'Accredited Preacher' training programme ([www.presbyterianireland.org/Utility/Training/Accredited-Preacher-Scheme.aspx](http://www.presbyterianireland.org/Utility/Training/Accredited-Preacher-Scheme.aspx)).

The valid suggestion was made that it would readily be feasible for us to send people across to Belfast to take part in this intensive week-long course by way of solid preparation for our Reader candidates. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland also runs a variety of other courses, aimed both at lay church members and those actively training for a ministry role. Options for exchange, either in ministry roles, organised training or between teams of young people were also discussed.

At the same time one current Presbyterian Church in Ireland slogan is the idea of developing "fruitful congregations" and we were shown a whole range of revitalisation resources they've developed, which are of high quality and readily transferable to energise God's people spiritually anywhere. It is hoped that we can take up some of these rich ideas in the future. Certainly the door is open now to create a working relationship with tangible gospel benefits. It was suggested that consideration could be given to a pairing arrangement, matching congregations of similar size across the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and United Free Church as denominations.

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland shared openly on their planting strategies, both in areas where initiatives have succeeded but also candidly (they act fast to learn lessons and process strategic changes) about situations where they've not. It seems clear that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland wrestles with the same issues of church decline and secularisation, though certainly on a

different level but also on a different timescale, in that, church status in society still has a strong residual presence in their setting.

The Committee wishes to thank the Presbyterian Church in Ireland for their welcome, wisdom and warm hospitality. The willingness of David Miller to add his wide academic experience and spiritual insight to the visit was greatly appreciated. It is our prayerful hope that the United Free Church of Scotland will take steps without undue delay to deepen this potentially fruitful relationship.

## **LAUSANNE AND LOCAL ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIPS**

In its 2018 Report, the Committee flagged up the gospel priorities inherent in the rich resources of the Lausanne Movement. It was our hope that we would have some positive stories of congregational involvement to share in 2019. Sadly to date the Committee is aware of no direct account that this ecumenical activity is taking place at local level and/or producing tangible results.

The Committee encourages all congregations to become actively involved in local ecumenism. These connections are not only a clear witness to communities but they foster Christian connections which can build deep trust towards implementing gospel priorities.

The formalised arrangements at Cathcart, Canonbie & Tayport continue to operate progressively and the Committee would commend these congregations for their shared endeavours. Cathcart United Free Church and Trinity Church of Scotland revised their covenant in August 2018, reaffirming their gospel priorities but also creating new means of engagement, drawing on representation from both Kirk Sessions. One of their recent discussions involved the exciting area of developing shared congregational vision.

At Canonbie the united congregation remains stable, but still without a minister. An ecumenical spirit has drawn members to our annual Dunblane event and Presbytery meetings, whilst there has also been an input from United Free Church folk leading their worship. The Committee invites the denomination to pray for all United Free congregations currently involved in close connectivity with their local, ecumenical partners.

In Montrose a solid working relationship continues to develop between the United Free and Methodist congregations. This exists both in terms of shared worship services and initiatives under the auspices of Montrose Churches Together, leading to a strong identification between the two groups. It is hoped that a verbal update on arrangements will be provided during our Assembly.

## **ACTION OF CHURCH TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND AND THE SCOTTISH CHRISTIAN FORUM**

The completed review of ACTS by *Theos* is now a gradual process of transition into the Scottish Christian Forum (SCF). Members' meetings in November 2018 and February 2019 have approved the formation of a Transition Group to carry out this process. It involves a two-pronged approach, both to complete the legal and practical steps necessary to move the identity and assets of ACTS across into the Scottish Christian Forum and also (crucially) to prepare for the Forum's first phase by engaging with denominations and groups currently out with the rather limited ACTS set-up of only nine members.

Greater clarity was provided for the process of transition at the February 2019 Members' Meeting. The Transition Group produced a "Terms of Reference" document, setting out its remit to work in consultation with ACTS members to forge the Forum's "working basis" in terms of structure, finances and participation. The Transition Group has committed to a timescale of quarterly reviews, drafting of an implementation plan by 31 December 2019 with a final all-encompassing report to follow.

The structures are now taking shape with a central hub of Forum members surrounded by satellite groups representing ecumenical officers and church leaders. It might be that matters such

as the previous fund-awarding and task group components of ACTS could similarly be integrated into this new configuration.

The Committee remains fully in support of the current process, although delays and distractions have, to some extent, hampered its progress. Undoubtedly some feel the pace of change should be much faster, yet at the same time things must be done methodically, sensitively and well. Issues of charity law etc. require good advice and careful planning. This is a marker for all parties that if the transition proceeds without the correct legal framework, then the fledgling steps of Scottish Christian Forum will necessarily either be delayed or perhaps frustrated altogether.

At the same time all members have expressed the prayerful hope that the Forum emerges quickly and operates effectively so that the ecumenical scene in Scotland may be energised going forward. This will require a significant commitment, input and contribution from Forum members. It is widely acknowledged that in these times of ecumenical reconfiguration, both human and financial resources to invest in projects are limited. At the time of writing the next ACTS members meeting is scheduled for 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019.

The Committee would request prayer support for all current staff members of ACTS, not least our own Rev. Ian Boa in his remit as Interim General Secretary. We acknowledge again the good work and wise input of Rev. Jim Neil as an ACTS trustee. Jim's contribution is always thoughtful and based on his long ecumenical experience.

## **CHURCHES TOGETHER IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND (CTBI)**

The Deliverance from our 2018 General Assembly Report included the following Paragraph:

“The General Assembly instruct the Committee with regret to explore the possible impact of taking steps to end membership of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), whilst expressing thanks for fellowship gained and assuring CTBI of our ongoing prayers.”

The Paragraph was carefully drafted, allowing the Committee some flexibility in terms of a mandate to approach CTBI in order to explore our options for future (and realistic) ecumenical engagement with the body itself-of which ending our current membership is one possibility.

The Committee agreed to implement the Paragraph by contacting Rev. Bob Fyffe, General Secretary of CTBI. He very graciously offered to meet with us at our March 2019 meeting in order to present a series of approaches for our relationship with CTBI. The United Free Church has always recognised the good work being done through many programmes under CTBI initiative, but it has been strongly felt that our direct participation has always remained rather remote.

CTBI's Statement of Purpose reads, “Churches Together in Britain and Ireland believes that ecumenism is an urgent evangelical imperative. It is time we cease projecting the image of a dismembered Body of Christ, which is a counter-witness to the Good News we proclaim. The ecumenism we seek is dynamic and responsive not a monolith resulting from one powerful church swallowing others, but a mega-community composed of churches (local, national and international) that complement one another, each with its own historical identity, its unique tradition, its own doctrinal emphasis, and its particular worship form; in short a Pentecostal communion of communities that understand and speak one another's language.”

The Committee was impressed to hear of the current range and diversity of CTBI's activity. Beyond its well-known role of drafting study materials for Lent and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the body deploys its “convening power” to forge early contact with refugees & asylum-seekers, assist peace initiatives between Jewish & Palestinian groups, reflect on environmental issues-and pursue a new initiative to look at serious youth violence and knife crime in our communities. It was also noted that CTBI may well have a strategic role to play in the process of reconciliation after the

final Brexit outcome is known. All of these issues are presented in ways which seek to mobilise churches and find ways to allow Christians at both local and national level to get involved effectively.

Bob Fyffe conceded that CTBI has struggled in the past to communicate well with its members. However the plan is to re-introduce an annual Four Nations Forum, starting in November 2019, which will allow churches to share ideas, ecumenical priorities and discussion. It was stressed that the body wants to hear the voice of each denomination, big or small, with a view to members setting CTBI's agenda, rather than simply being informed of its content.

The Committee asked questions as to how the United Free Church of Scotland might contribute meaningfully to CTBI in the future. It was suggested that our denomination should engage with the Four Nations Forum, allow our distinctive evangelical voice to be heard and try to contribute directly to those initiatives which have a social impact in places where our local congregations are.

It is the Committee's view that there is real value and substance in current CTBI initiatives, which poor communication has failed to identify. Even as a small denomination we could think about channelling these ecumenical projects in the direction of our Committees, such as Church & Society, with a view to exploring not only their intrinsic worth but also how we might get involved in shaping and disseminating the gospel values underpinning them.

The proposal agreed by the Committee is that the United Free Church takes positive steps to engage afresh with CTBI, before coming to a final decision on our membership in two years' time.

### **EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE (EA)**

The Evangelical Alliance continues its gospel task of assisting Christians across a diverse membership that is either individual, Church or organization, based. It works to produce distinctive resources in the area of public policy & national life (such as Brexit), as well as promoting mission and the training of Christian leaders to be "transformational" in their roles. Resources are also available to engage from a Christian perspective with trending social issues such as transgender and sexual identity.

The Committee encourages our congregations to take a close look at their website ([www.eauk.org](http://www.eauk.org)) to explore the richness of their ecumenically broad activities.

### **WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCC)**

A final decision has been taken to hold the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe (Germany) during 2021 with a projected attendance of 775 delegates, most likely gathering in September. Strategic discussions are now in progress with regard to keynote theme and logistics, even this far out from the conference itself. The lofty & audacious theme is, "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity", with the hope that this Assembly will be electronic and app-based to facilitate the eco-sharing of information with everyone involved.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/general-secretary/olav-fykse-tveit-in-karlsruhe-februar-2019>.

Whilst still in its early stages, the Committee has already given tentative, initial thought to the possibility of sending a United Free Church delegate to Germany in 2021, not least because of its proximity to Scotland.

The Committee would again affirm its support for our membership of WCC, not least as a very strong conduit for what is known as 'conciliar ecumenism'. This phrase encapsulates the advocacy role of WCC very well and it remains important, even for a small denomination like ourselves, to be connected meaningfully into the global Church. WCC membership now stands at 350.

For example, at the time of writing this Report, WCC acted very swiftly to express outrage at the mosque attacks perpetrated in Christchurch, New Zealand (March 2019). The expression of strong condemnation was supported with a call for peaceful engagement between all faith communities. Equally media comment came not only from WCC officials, but also from New Zealand Christians who are part of the WCC structures. This confirms the truly global reach and impact of WCC.

The Committee has invited Miriam Weiybe to attend one of our meetings to update us more fully on current initiatives within WCC. Miriam has much ecumenical insight and inside knowledge, acting both as Church Relations Officer for the Scottish Episcopal Church and also being a member of the WCC Central Committee. Our hope is that we can receive Miriam's personal input soon, though the Committee is in regular receipt of her helpful email updates on WCC activity.

## **WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES (WCRC)**

Following last year's General Assembly decision to take steps to withdraw formally from membership of WCRC, our General Secretary communicated that clear outcome to the ecumenical body. A significant delay ensued, but eventually we received a letter (dated 29 January 2019) from Rev. Dr. Chris Ferguson, WCRC General Secretary, noting our decision and informing us that the appropriate Committee had now officially accepted it.

However the letter also invited us to consider "associate" membership, allowing a significant channel for ecumenical contact to remain open but (to quote the letter), "without the binding nature of a full communion relationship." Article V of the WCRC Constitution states that associate members share general fellowship and involvement with WCRC programmes, but without a vote on matters of governance. Perhaps the key and rather ambiguous phrase states that associates "participate on a reciprocal basis", and later in Article V it is clearly stated that WCRC sets a financial contribution requirement for all associate members.

The Committee is always open to informal relationship with WCRC going forward, but our view is that a different category of membership still frustrates the decision of the 2018 General Assembly. This would place the United Free Church of Scotland in the unenviable position of having even less input to formal decision-making by the Communion, whilst still being bound by these outcomes as an associate member of the ecumenical body. In essence, the Committee's reading of the situation is that associate status still amounts to a form of membership, rather than obligation-free connection.

It should be noted that the WCRC Europe Council is scheduled to take place in Edinburgh from 2-4 May 2019.

## **CONCLUSION**

This year's Report is deliberately shorter and far less evaluative than those brought to the last two General Assemblies. The Committee strongly feels that the sweeping process of ecumenical review is now concluded, allowing us an indulgent opportunity not only to facilitate the basics of useful engagement with others but also the time to explore more spiritually fruitful projects-such as missional contact with the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. We encourage Presbyteries and local congregations to play their part in active ecumenical work, so that the Kingdom of God can be extended more extensively and pervasively in our communities. If that is not happening with like-minded Christians locally, then the Church is failing to realise a core outworking of her *raison d'être* to gospel witness.

These are undoubtedly times of fluid ecumenical reconfiguration, with detailed reviews being undertaken by almost every major denomination. The old system of static inter-church relations is

breaking up and must adapt to the changing times. As denominations look at themselves afresh in a different age, so inevitably their view of those around them begins to alter simultaneously.

Although the formal Ecumenical Relations review has ended, the Committee will continue to exercise a watching brief not only in terms of developing bilateral contacts, but also in terms of potential multilateral connections such as with the World Reformed Fellowship (WRF) and Global Christian Forum (GCF). These were both highlighted in last year's Report.

The Committee would invite our denomination to be still before the Lord now and seek to know him as he truly is, through Jesus Christ. The wisdom of knowing more of Christ, and our dependence upon him in all things, offer all the resources we need for effective, gracious, fruitful and gospel-focused ecumenical relationships.

## **THANKS**

The Committee extends its warmest wishes for retirement to Rev. John Fulton, General Secretary. We will sorely miss his wise and gracious insights, practical advice and unstinting service. The Committee looks forward to engaging closely with Rev. Colin Brown as he undertakes this role for ecumenical relations. Indeed the transition has started smoothly and we have already benefitted from his long observation of ecumenical matters. The Committee would, as always, offer genuine appreciation to Mrs. Helena Jarvis for her constant endeavours and helpful support to the Committee and its work throughout the year.

In the name of the Committee

ALEXANDER RITCHIE	Convener
ANN DEACONS	Vice-Convener
COLIN C BROWN	Clerk