

REPORT OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2021

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The outline Order of Business in Appendix 1 details the arrangements for the 2021 General Assembly. Due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic the General Assembly will be held online via Zoom and YouTube. The opening session on the evening of Wednesday 26th May, including the installation of the Moderator, will be held in Milngavie Church with restricted numbers and the proceedings livestreamed. The General Assembly will meet online on Thursday 27th and Friday 28th May and by 1 p.m. on the Friday with closing worship in the last half hour.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2022

The committee recommends that the General Assembly 2022 be held in the Salutation Hotel, Perth from Wednesday 8th June until Friday 10th June.

COVID-19

The pandemic has adversely affected the work of the church with various prohibitions and restrictions being placed on travel, in-person meetings and worship over the past year. The committee has held online meetings and the officials have monitored the advice from the Scottish Government and communicated this to Ministers and Session Clerks as appropriate. The Committee record thanks to the Moderator, Rev John Fulton for his weekly letters and the office staff who have supported congregations throughout this period.

STEDFAST

Mr Alastair Wright continues as Stedfast Secretary and works well with the Stedfast Editorial Team. The Team is grateful to those who make valuable contributions to Stedfast and we continue to commission and request material from within and beyond the Church in its effort to provide a magazine that encourages, supports and advances the life and witness of the denomination. The Committee commended the Stedfast group that despite the various limitations imposed by the pandemic they have consistently managed to produce full editions of the denominational magazine throughout the pandemic. Congregations are, as always, encouraged to give Stedfast their support.

PRAYER UNION

The Committee appreciates the valuable contribution which the Prayer Union continues to make to the life of the church in providing an opportunity for focused prayer throughout the denomination. Mrs Wemyss Billows and her committee are to be commended for the quality and content of the Prayer and Study Guide which is widely used throughout the church.

CO-ORDINATING FORUM

The Co-ordinating Forum, consisting of Committee officials and Presbytery Clerks, has met online to share information on the work of Presbyteries and the committees of the church. The new committee structure implemented last year will continue to encourage committees to liaise and work together where appropriate.

NOMINATIONS TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES

The Committee would again like to express thanks to everyone who has willingly accepted nomination to General Assembly Committees, in particular to those who have agreed to become Conveners and Vice-Conveners of Committees.

OFFICE ARRANGEMENTS

Mr Adrian Rootes took up his appointment as General Secretary in October 2020 and the Clerks continued to work in the office and provide Mr Rootes with an induction until the end of the year.

The Committee expresses grateful appreciation to Mr Adrian Rootes as General Secretary, Mrs Helena Jarvis for the general running of the office and servicing of Committees, Accountant Mr Lawrence Renn and the Principal Clerks Rev Martin Keane and Rev Colin Brown for the work they carried out in the interim period covering the main duties of the General Secretary.

Due to the pandemic, the office has been mainly unoccupied with staff working from home. One positive benefit of this has been the reduction in stationary and postage costs with more correspondence being sent digitally via the internet.

HANDBOOK

The committee has agreed that an internal directory be produced to replace the old style handbook. This document could be password protected and made available to congregational postholders.

MODERATOR

Thanks are expressed to the Moderator, Rev John Fulton, for his willingness to serve for a second year. The visits he made to congregations up until the first lockdown in March 2020 and his weekly messages that have been emailed since then have been appreciated for the encouragement they have brought. The Moderator has also willingly represented the church at a number of meetings and events.

QUINQUENNIAL VISITATION

It is regretted that due to the pandemic no quinquennial visitations have taken place in the past year.

ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

The events of the past year during COVID have reminded us how important human contact is to our proper functioning. This fact permeates every aspect of life, including the work of individual congregations and it severely restricts options for fellowship between churches.

In times of real uncertainty, the natural instinct is to adopt an inward rather than outward-looking focus. Interaction remains an essential prerequisite for ecumenical activity, which explains at least in part the low threshold of tangible progress to report upon at the present time.

The new Ecumenical Relations Working Group has gelled quickly and the members

are co-operating effectively. It was always recognised that making the transition from a full General Assembly Committee would take time, but initial signs are good. The hope is to build on the conclusions of the UF ecumenical review, a process built up over some five years which enabled us to re-evaluate and recalibrate our priorities in relating not only to other denominations but also to the wide range of ecumenical bodies.

The consistent thread amongst many churches under current restrictions in preparing for the post-lockdown future is a sharp focus on grass-roots activity, finding practical ways for Christians to co-operate effectively at local level. This makes the ecumenical process instinctively missional, which has always been a key driver for those who long to see tangible gospel-centred results.

BILATERAL MEETINGS

The Working Group has focused on nurturing bilateral progress with the Church of Scotland (CofS), Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. As noted above, restrictions on meeting in person have severely limited our plans, though we hope to move things forward more efficiently once it's permissible and safe to meet others in person.

It was intended the meeting with the Church of Scotland would have a local focus, i.e. on the basis of trying to identify possible situations on the ground where CofS/UF shared working might be possible. The Group's thinking was to bring together representatives from the three Presbyteries to join the conversation and explore the possibilities.

The Church of Scotland is currently in transition to new Presbytery arrangements, greatly reducing the number of Presbyteries across our country. It will take time for this major change to settle and gain traction, therefore it may be that breathing space is essential before this more pragmatic and mission-focused level of ecumenical discussion can take place fruitfully between our denominations.

Of course, the engagement will continue to review the wider ecumenical landscape in Scotland and beyond. We continue to benefit from a close working relationship with the ER Committee officials representing the Church of Scotland. There is regular sharing of information and contacts behind the scenes, which also remains a key element in the ecumenical dynamic.

Thanks are due in particular to the ER Officer, Rev. Dr. John McPake, for his willingness to work with us both nationally and locally. A practical example of this is the help and resourcing he has given to the local situation in Burntisland and Kinghorn, where ecumenical partnership is being explored by two Church of Scotland Parishes and Erskine UF congregation.

It's been some time since the last bilateral meeting with the Free Church. Efforts are being made to reconnect in a meaningful way which will facilitate opportunity for another in-person contact. Previous gatherings have been helpful, both in the sharing of 'where we are' as denominations and in seeking to identify potential scope for closer co-operation and sharing of resources.

Following the visit made to Belfast in March 2019, it was hoped to extend an invitation to a delegation from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to visit Scotland and engage with us both in discussion and visitation of local UF Churches. The Belfast trip was a profitable one, allowing us access to PCI training courses which Board of Studies is now actively using to prepare our own course material for a new category of ministry. This highlights another example of what can flow practically from a willingness to engage with and learn from other denominations.

ACTION OF CHURCHES TOGETHER IN SCOTLAND (ACTS)

AND SCOTTISH CHRISTIAN FORUM (SCF)

The Working Group would greatly desire to be reporting by now on the initial activities of the Scottish Christian Forum. Unfortunately, we are still awaiting completion of legal formalities to wind-up ACTS, along with the concurrent registration process with OSCR for the new Forum under a SCIO-based Constitution. Following very helpful discussions in advance, ACTS member churches agreed to this course of action officially at a Members' meeting held on 29th October 2020.

It is hoped that some encouraging interim developments will carry momentum forward once the formalities are complete and the Forum is launched. Good work is being done by ecumenical officers to nurture relationships between churches and other Christian organisations in preparation for that launch.

It's very positive to hear that some churches not formally in ACTS membership have expressed a willingness to participate in the work of the Forum. One of the key aims behind the Forum is to broaden connections and make it easier for missional projects to be organised flexibly and organically.

A body giving much-needed voice to the Christian perspective during lockdown has emerged in the shape of the Scottish Church Leaders Forum (SCLF). This group brings together those in key strategic roles on a monthly basis, the United Free Church has been very ably represented from the outset by our Moderator, Rev. John Fulton.

SCLF has liaised with the Scottish Government on policy matters and made representations on behalf of the Christian community. A major study of church activity and response during the pandemic was commissioned by SCLF with results to be published shortly as a core piece of research for lessons to be learned. Matters such as giving mental health support to churches and communities, whilst sharing access to these vital services have been very helpfully discussed.

It's also noteworthy that the weekly ecumenical prayer letter which has done much to bring Christians together during lockdown emanates from SCLF, drawing support from a diverse and growing list of denominations. This expression of visible unity has been a source of blessing over these long months under restrictions. It is a powerful lesson in ecumenical potential to read the list of signatories to each of these prayers.

ASSEMBLIES & SYNODS

The Working Group continues to support ecumenical engagement at national level by means of the invitations received at denominational level to a broad spectrum of Assemblies, Synods and other events. It is a mark of Christian fellowship to accept the hand of friendship when it is offered. This vital form of contact allows us to experience both the similarity of like-minded views and the challenges encountered in theology and practice with which we disagree.

The usual calendar of ecumenical gatherings has been severely curtailed by the pandemic. This situation has impacted our own General Assembly for the past two years. However greater familiarity and confidence in using online platforms for formal church business has led to some significant meetings still being possible, albeit under the obvious limitations of online discussion.

An example of this took place on 13th March 2021, Alexander Ritchie attended the United Reformed Church Synod of Scotland via Zoom. It was positive to hear reports of what's being done to support congregations with plans to move forward after restrictions end. Practical matters for discussion included carbon-offset travel to committee meetings, an initiative to award congregations the status of being children and youth friendly churches, as well as a national strategy to flood our local communities with prayer.

Looking to the future, it's hoped that the intention of our denomination will always be to engage with others and take up any opportunity to listen to and learn from a different perspective to our own. Reciprocal invitations to our General Assembly should be a given of ongoing ecumenical fellowship.

Equally this mindset must encompass the global church worldview and activities of strategic ecumenical bodies, alongside the traditional gatherings of other denominations here in Scotland.

LOCAL CO-OPERATION

The Working Group would encourage UF congregations to seek common ground with others at local level, as many are already doing. This has a direct impact on communities when it is noticed that Christians are actively working in partnership rather than disagreeing over their differences.

It's hoped that once levels of normality stabilise operating conditions for all churches, then the Working Group will be in a position to report on and encourage growing and gospel-driven connections across Scotland.

The Group would request that any congregation involved in a new ecumenical contact makes that known to the Working Group so that we can disseminate creative ideas to others in the denomination.

This year of COVID has presented a myriad of challenges to our congregations, both financial and practical. It might be that the future will bring the joy of unexpected blessings as we learn from each other about the merits of technology, social media and online fellowship as tools for sharing faith in Jesus. These can in no way ever replace in-person contact, but they do offer us greater reach and wider influence than more traditional methods of evangelism can bring.

It is surely more relevant than ever to approach the commonality of problematic issues being faced by all churches with a broad perspective and open mind which is always sensitive to the potential for ecumenical working.

In the name of the Committee,

DOUGLAS I CAMPBELL	Convener
IAN MCQUARRIE	Vice-convener
ALEXANDER RITCHIE	
ADRIAN J ROOTES	Secretary