

## II.

# REPORT

### OF THE

### COMMITTEE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

#### **Introduction**

Over the past year the Committee has continued to look at where we are ecumenically, especially here in Scotland. We have considered the beliefs, practices and idiosyncrasies of other presbyterian and evangelical churches. We have attempted to draw up a list of matters which divide us from those whom we consider our brethren in Christ. In ecumenical relations nothing happens quickly.

We have also continued to relate to and correspond with somewhat similar churches in other lands.

We thank God for all the churches who wish to recognise us and have fellowship with us in any way whatsoever. We believe firmly in the essential unity of the church of Christ and the duty which is incumbent upon us and others to seek to express that unity in a tangible form. Our Lord Jesus prayed for His church, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me"(Jn.17:21). Unlike the Ecumenical Movement we do not believe in unity at all costs. A unity which involves compromising Reformed doctrine, Reformed worship and Biblical church discipline, we firmly reject. Christ is the head of the church and He alone has the right to decide how it should be governed.

#### **Work of the Ecumenical Relations Committee through the year to 2015**

##### **Principles in Ecumenical Contacts**

The Committee have attempted over the past year, as over previous years, to foster, maintain and develop appropriate relationships with other Christian bodies. In some instances these relationships may be of a very tentative recent and informal nature, but in others the relationship is much closer and of longer standing.

Clearly where worship, doctrine, government and practice are almost identical to our own, the relationship poses fewer difficulties, but the reality is that it is not easy to draw up a simple set of rules for degrees of formalised relationships; other churches which have attempted to fit into a very small number of rigid categories of relationship all the churches with which they have some connection have found grave difficulties in implementing such categorisation.

##### **3. Contacts through membership of other organisations**

Affinity provides opportunity for contact with a number of evangelical churches within the United Kingdom. It also provides us with the opportunity to bring to bear within that forum a Reformed influence.

The International Conference of Reformed Churches has provided extremely valuable contact with a wide variety of Reformed Churches from around the world, including many with whom it is improbable that we would otherwise have had contact. The ICRC meets in major gatherings every four years. While it is undoubtedly the case that the major value of such conferences is the contacts made and renewed at a personal and denominational level and an insight into the situation, strengths, weaknesses and needs of the Churches in whatever geographical area the Conference may be held, the discussion papers prepared for and considered at these conferences are often useful and the discussion very revealing about where other churches stand on issues of importance and mutual interest. Such conferences also provide a useful

opportunity for semi-formal meetings with churches with which we have a close relationship.

The ICRC also holds regional conferences. In the past year we were unable, because of other commitments of personnel, to have a representative present at the European regional meeting (the European Conference of Reformed Churches), but our commitment to the concept of such meetings is undiminished.

#### **Direct contacts with other Churches**

The Committee carry out a review of their contacts with other churches at least three times a year. This review is carried out on a geographical basis.

Within Scotland the Committee have limited contact with other Reformed bodies, one of which is frequently represented at our General Assembly.

Within the wider British Isles the Committee have varying levels of contact with a wider range of churches, all with a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture. These contacts have led to invitations to several ministers from within those churches to preach within some of our congregations. They have also led to visitors from the congregations of those churches attending some of our congregations when on holiday in Scotland.

Widening the geographical circle further, the Committee also monitor contacts with Churches on mainland Europe. Contacts in Spain are a new and welcome development, but not directly under the Ecumenical Relations Committee. The main focus of the Committee's attention is the Netherlands, where the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) have formal relationships with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland and the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt). Both these church federations have had relatively-recent meetings of their three-yearly general synods – in November 2013 and March 2014 respectively. The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) was represented at both of those Synods and, though they did not take place within the past ecclesiastical year, they have provided much food for thought. In particular, first-hand experience of the manner in which their general synods are conducted has been profitable. It has also proved valuable to see the manner in which congregations running into thousands of members are operated. Possibilities have also arisen to make closer informal links between individual congregations in the Netherlands and this is being further investigated. There have also been tentative contacts with other reformed bodies in the Netherlands, but these have not resulted in any active ongoing developments.

In North America the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) has a number of longstanding relationships with other Churches and some much more recent relationships. The vast size of the North American continent and the waves of immigration over more than three hundred years have led to a very fragmented situation ecclesiastically, with churches of Scottish origin often having a large proportion of people of Scots origins in their congregations and churches of Dutch origin often having a large proportion of people of Dutch origins in their congregations. This is particularly marked in Canada where there was a dramatic immigration of Dutch families following WW2, but is changing somewhat in more recent years and indeed one of our own ministers has become a minister within the Free Reformed Churches of North America. We have welcomed a number of ministers from North American Churches to Scotland and a number of our ministers have preached there.

South America is an area in which contacts are developing, but have not yet reached the stage of ongoing formal relationships.

We have contacts, both formal and informal, with a limited number of Churches in Africa and the Committee are mindful of the opportunities that may arise from informal contacts, not least in the area of short-term visits by ministers of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) giving assistance in theological

education. Covenant College, in Zambia, has benefited from help provided by contacts in South Africa. Asian contacts are at a very unstructured and unofficial level, but the Committee are mindful of the existence and value of those contacts.

Australia provides active contacts with four Church bodies and in spite of distance, the Committee are glad that it has been possible to have representatives from most of those bodies present at General Assemblies in Scotland.

There is no active formal contact with any New Zealand churches, though the 2009 ICRC meeting in Christchurch has yielded informal individual contacts which are still active.

The Committee have sought, as in previous years, to ensure that the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), as part of the worldwide family of Reformed Churches, should recognise and relate to other true churches in an appropriate manner and at an appropriate level.

WILLIAM MACLEOD, *Convener*  
ALLAN MURRAY, *Vice-convener*

### PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the Report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee and thank the Convener;
2. The General Assembly note the importance of maintaining contact with true Churches of Christ outwith the bounds of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and commend the attempts of the Committee to maintain contact with like-minded churches worldwide;
3. The General Assembly note the work being done to develop a better understanding of the distinctives of Churches with which there has been, or could potentially be, a relationship, and commend the consideration being given by the Committee to the level and nature of the relationship appropriate with each such body;
4. The General Assembly recognise the opportunities afforded to the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), through the work of the Ecumenical Relations Committee, to encourage and assist other like-minded churches and groups outside of Scotland and to be encouraged and assisted by other Reformed Churches worldwide;
5. The General Assembly note in particular the value of church contacts which have led to ongoing opportunities for the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) to provide assistance in areas where there is a need for teaching assistance but where there are visa restrictions on long-term residence;
6. The General Assembly note the value of the influence of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) within Affinity;
7. The General Assembly note the usefulness of the forum provided by the European Conference of Reformed Churches;
8. The General Assembly note the value of the International Conference of Reformed Churches not only in its conferences but also in the understanding it promotes through opportunities for becoming acquainted with Reformed Churches in other parts of the world and the developing, at no cost, of contacts already made;
9. The General Assembly commend to the prayerful concern of the Church the work of the Ecumenical Relations Committee.