

## II.

# REPORT

### OF THE

### COMMITTEE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

#### **Introduction**

The Committee on Ecumenical Relations is responsible for maintaining relationships between the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and like-minded churches and organisations around the world. Such contacts seek to build the unity of the Christian Church, both theologically and organisationally, but above all spiritually, in fulfilment of the prayer of our Lord: “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” (John 17:21). The Committee’s encouragement is that whatever the incremental progress that can be achieved here, this prayer will assuredly be answered in eternity to come.

Much of the work of the Committee is of a very routine nature. This report will restrict attention to a selection of areas of significance.

#### **ICRC / EuCRC**

The Free Church (Continuing) continues its membership of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC), and its European sub-division, the European Conference of Reformed Churches (EuCRC). Neither organisation has met since last Assembly, but, Lord willing, the EuCRC will hold its next meeting in the Netherlands in the spring of 2020. The Convener sits on the Committee of the EuCRC and will participate in the planning of this gathering.

#### **Affinity**

The Free Church (Continuing) continues its membership of the evangelical network Affinity, and is represented on the Council by Rev. T.J. McGlynn. Mr McGlynn brought one issue of concern to the attention of the Committee, over an article published in the Spring 2018 issue of the Affinity theological journal *Foundations*. The article was entitled ‘Overcoming Listlessness: Learning from Evagrius of Pontus’ by Fiona R. Gibson. This article was not controversial in content, being a historical study of early Christian teaching regarding the sin of ‘acedia’ (usually translated ‘sloth’). However, the author was identified as ‘Vicar, three rural Church of England parishes, Bedfordshire’. The Committee did not object to publication of such an article, nor to a female author, but did object to the identification of Fiona Gibson as a ‘vicar’ without any disclaimer that Affinity did not endorse her claim to exercise the ministerial office. The Committee was gratified to find this concern widely shared in Affinity, with a number of brethren on the Affinity Council speaking out clearly on the need for clarity on these issues in an age of much gender confusion. The Editor of *Foundations*, who is solely responsible for the contents of the journal, has subsequently resigned. The Council, in discussing the appointment of a successor, has noted the need to appoint an Editor who will take account of the concerns of the full spectrum of churches represented in Affinity, taking particular note of the issues of concern over journal articles raised by Council members in recent years.

The Affinity Study Conference was held on 13-15 March 2019 in Northampton, and the Convener and Mr McGlynn attended as representatives of the Free Church (Continuing). As the topic of the Conference was ‘Worship’, there were inevitably some views expressed which the Free Church (Continuing) does not share, including a looser definition of the Regulative Principle of Worship that would accommodate the use of hymns and musical instruments in worship. Sadly such practices are almost ubiquitous in England and Wales, and as these countries are where the great bulk of Affinity’s support is located, they were inevitably

reflected in the papers. The Committee were disappointed that no paper was presented from an exclusively psalm-singing position, and this concern was communicated to the Affinity Council by Mr McGlynn. Just three of the approximately sixty delegates present represented exclusively psalm-singing churches. However, the three were very touched that at the prayer meeting on the second night of the conference, which was the only worship component of the gathering, the praise was in the form of unaccompanied singing from the Scottish Psalter, which was explicitly presented as an expression of Christian unity. Other points made at the Conference were more positive, including a robust defence of Sabbath observance by one of the lecturers.

The Convener was invited to attend the meeting of the Affinity Council held during the Conference, which gave a broad overview of the work of the organisation. The Director, Graham Nicholls, has been increasingly successful in obtaining opportunities in the media, especially on radio, to present a Christian viewpoint on current affairs, and to fill devotional slots. The decision has now been taken to formalise his employment on the basis of one day per week (he is also Minister of Christ Church, Haywards Heath), alongside his Assistant, Matthew Evans, who is employed on a full-time basis to manage the administration of Affinity. The Free Church (Continuing) currently contributes the very modest sum of £500 per year to Affinity. Given the new financial commitments of the organisation, this should probably be increased in the next round of budgeting, subject to General Assembly approval in 2020, if the Free Church (Continuing) remains committed to membership of Affinity.

#### **Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (PCEA)**

One very positive new ecumenical contact emerged at the General Assembly in 2018, when a minister of the PCEA addressed the Assembly for the first time since 2000. The Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia is the historic sister-church in Australia of the Free Church of Scotland, being founded in 1846 on the same constitutional basis as the Disruption Free Church. It is a relatively small denomination of 13 congregations and nine active ministers, with a community of approximately seven hundred people. It enjoyed historically close links with the Scottish Church, including federal relations, meaning that ministers were eligible for calls to congregations of either church.

The PCEA reflected a similar spectrum of opinion to the Free Church of Scotland in the 1990s, including on the specific issues that led to the Division of 2000. However, the PCEA managed to prevent these issues from coming to a head and splitting the Church. After 2000, the PCEA suspended federal relations to avoid taking sides in the Free Church division. After some years, the PCEA resumed federal relations with our departed brethren, following a tied vote in the PCEA synod resolved by the casting vote of the Moderator. However, our departed brethren have increasingly departed from the PCEA. The PCEA has declined to shift from the practice of exclusive psalmody in worship, and has introduced new safeguards after the change in worship amongst our departed brethren in 2010, to ensure that ministers must specifically commit to maintain the historic pattern of worship in order to be admitted into the PCEA. The present generation of active ministers in the PCEA appear to share our convictions on issues of worship, and on the orthodox interpretation of Genesis 1–3, in opposition to the views now promoted amongst our departed brethren.

Following the last Assembly, the PCEA wrote to the Committee seeking renewed ecumenical ties, and asking what action was necessary to restore mutual eligibility with the Free Church (Continuing). This question was easily answered. The Free Church (Continuing) is the constitutional continuation of the Free Church of Scotland of the twentieth century, including all its legislation. The Federal Relations Act, Act I (Class I) 1952, has never been repealed, and remains current legislation of the Free Church (Continuing). The only breach in federal relations is that which the PCEA effected by repealing its own legislation in 2000, and it is in the power of the PCEA Synod, without any action on the part of the Free Church (Continuing) General Assembly, to restore such a relationship.

The PCEA invited the Free Church (Continuing) to send a delegate to its Synod meeting in Taree, New South Wales, meeting from 7–10 May 2019. The Committee accepted the invitation on behalf of the Church, and appointed Rev. John MacLeod (Tarbat) to attend the Synod in Australia. God willing, he will be able to bring a report to the Assembly on his attendance there.

The Committee considers the approach from the PCEA highly encouraging, and an indication that churches elsewhere discern the radical change that has occurred amongst our departed brethren since 2000, and a desire in this case to follow a different course. The Committee intends to give every encouragement to the PCEA to renew a sister-church relationship, and seeks the approval of the General Assembly for this course of action. This will in no way alter the extant contacts of the Free Church (Continuing) with other denominations in Australia, such as the Australian Free Church and the Southern Presbyterian Church.

It should be emphasised that a renewal of federal relations does not constitute an automatic right for any minister of the PCEA to be admitted to the Free Church (Continuing), or vice versa. A presbytery has a right, indeed a duty, to investigate the suitability of any minister unknown to them proposed for call to a vacancy, and could decline to moderate a call for a variety of reasons. Mutual eligibility is a streamlined process, which presumes that normally there would not be grounds for objection against the life or doctrine of a minister of the PCEA; it is not a guarantee of acceptance. The ministerial vows and constitutional commitments of the PCEA remain identical with those of the Free Church (Continuing).

The anomaly of a Church proposing to maintain mutual eligibility with both claimants to the heritage of the Free Church of Scotland from 2000 is evident, but is not strictly the business of the Free Church (Continuing). It is highly unlikely that this means will ever be used to move from one “Free Church” to the other. In any case, it would be far simpler for an individual minister, wishing to take this step due to changed sympathies, to make direct application via the General Assembly. Such an application, made in good faith, would presumably be welcomed by the Free Church (Continuing).

### **North America**

The Committee maintain relations on behalf of the Free Church (Continuing) with a number of churches in North America. The Committee was grateful to Rev. Gavin Beers, who represented the Free Church (Continuing) at the 2018 Synods of the Free Reformed Churches of North America, and the Heritage Reformed Congregations.

One interesting contact in the last year was a request for counsel from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, asking their sister churches for advice regarding a proposal to revise their confessional standards with a view to modernising the language. The Committee was grateful to Rev. Henry J.T. Woods, who drafted a clear and courteous letter on behalf of the Committee, counselling against such a step as a potentially dangerous move, setting a precedent which could easily be used as a means to loosen their Church’s doctrinal commitments.

The Committee continue to remember with prayerful interest the discussions taking place between our United States Presbytery and the Presbyterian Reformed Church (PRC) towards closer relations. The PRC is a small, conservative denomination, which originated from Canadian congregations associated with the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The Committee received a letter from Rev. Michael Ives on behalf of the PRC in September 2018, requesting assistance in identifying ‘the potential benefits and difficulties of pursuing formal fraternal relations with the FCC’. The Committee authorised the Clerk to correspond with Mr Ives, and answer his questions on its behalf.

### **Scotland**

Within Scotland, the Free Church (Continuing) maintains contact with the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC), and with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland (RPCS). The Committee was grateful to Rev. William Macleod, who represented the Church at the RPCS Presbytery in March 2019. A

committee of three representatives, appointed by the Committee on Ecumenical Relations, is available to discuss further relations with the RPCS.

### **Other Churches**

The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Restored) (DGK) have initiated contact, seeking to develop fraternal relations. The Committee are currently pursuing further enquiries into this Church's history and outlook. The Free Church (Continuing) continues to maintain relations in the Netherlands with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (CGKN).

The Committee was grateful to Rev. John Keddie, who represented the Free Church (Continuing) at the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland in 2018.

The Committee was sorry to hear of the death of Rev. John Shearer of the Church of England (Continuing), who attended the first meeting of the Commission of Assembly of the Free Church (Continuing) in March 2000 as our first ecumenical contact after the division on 20 January 2000, and was a great encouragement there. Thereafter he frequently attended meetings of the General Assembly as a representative of his Church. The Church of England (Continuing) remains friendly and supportive of our stand to the present day.

ALASDAIR J. MACLEOD, *Convener*  
SAMUEL CAMERON, *Vice-convener*

### **PROPOSED DELIVERANCE**

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the Report of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations and thank the Committee, especially the Convener, Vice-convener and Clerk;
2. The General Assembly acknowledge that the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) has a duty to recognise other true churches worldwide and foster appropriate relations with them where possible, without compromise of God's Truth;
3. The General Assembly note the ongoing involvement of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in the International Conference of Reformed Churches and the European Conference of Reformed Churches, and pray for the work of these bodies;
4. The General Assembly note the ongoing membership of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Affinity and pray that we may be an influence for good within this organisation; the Assembly also thank the Rev. T.J. McGlynn for his faithful work as our Church's representative on the Affinity council;
5. The General Assembly note with pleasure the renewal of ecumenical contact with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, and affirm that the Free Church (Continuing) would welcome the prospect of the renewal of federal relations;
6. The General Assembly note the discussions between our United States Presbytery and the Presbyterian Reformed Church of North America, now including correspondence with the Committee, and pray that these contacts will develop toward closer ecumenical relations;
7. The General Assembly note the ongoing discussions between the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland.