

II.

REPORT

OF THE COMMITTEE ON ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This past year the Committee have begun to take a somewhat different approach from the past. It has tried to take a radical look at where we are ecumenically as a Church, where we are going, and where we should be going. Discussion papers were prepared on the principles of Christian unity and on the practical outworking of these principles.

Jesus prays 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). Indeed, five times in this prayer Christ pleads that His church may be one. The amazing pattern for this unity is the Trinity. There is only one true Church of Christ, that which He has purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). There will be only one Church in heaven. The visible Church on earth is an outward expression of the invisible Church. It is our duty to do all we can for the unity of the Church of Christ on earth. Pictures used in Scripture such as the vine and the branches, and the body and the members emphasise this unity.

Yet sometimes separations are necessary for the sake of truth and righteousness. It must be a unity in the truth and in obedience to the commands of the Head. Those who depart from the truth and ignore the commands of Christ and His directions given to His Church are the ones who are guilty of breaking the unity.

But should there not also be unions for the sake of the body and the glory of Christ? Every effort should be made to ensure that nothing keeps us from uniting with our brethren but the truth of God's Word. If we exert ourselves with all diligence towards Christian unity then the sin of schism cannot be laid upon us.

The Ecumenical Movement is wrong because it strives for unity at all costs. It is unity which involves compromising the truth. It says, 'Let's come together and worship and forget about doctrine which only divides'. But God is truth and loves the truth and gave us the truth so that we would value it. He gave us a law so that we would show our love to Him by keeping His commandments. He lays down how He should be worshipped. Christ is the Head of the church and alone has the right to decide how it should be governed.

On the other hand we must beware of denominational pride which views our denomination in something like the way supporters view a football club: 'We're the greatest!' There can be a pride in our fathers, our history, our achievements, our present success, our faithfulness in times of declension, etc. Our first concern should be for the good of the whole Church of Christ. We must beware of party spirit.

While learning from history let us be careful that our history is not allowed to put unnecessary barriers between ourselves and brethren who believe essentially what we believe. It is essential that we guard against demanding that others today acknowledge that the stand taken by our fathers 14 years ago, 114 years ago, or 121 years ago, or 324 years ago was right. More than anything else this will keep us forever apart even from those who essentially believe and practise the same as we do.

The essentials are that we hold to the inerrant Scriptures, we adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith as our great ecumenical confession originally devised to unite churches, we have the law of God as the rule

for church discipline and we have the biblical Psalms as the great ecumenical hymnbook which the Holy Spirit gave to the church. Around these we should seek to unite and stir others to unite with us.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

The Committee recognise that true Churches do exist outwith the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) and that it is our duty to relate to other Christians insofar as we can do so without compromising our fundamental beliefs regarding worship, doctrine and practice.

If we were not as a Church and as individual Christians to seek to relate to all true Christians, we would be acting as a sect.

The sort of relationship we can have with other Churches will clearly vary according to the nature and extent of the differences between us.

Ascertaining these differences is often more complicated than would appear on the surface – sometimes even where doctrine, worship and practice may be very similar, there can be local cultural elements, traditions, and interpretations and applications of Scriptural principles which limit the closeness of practicable relationships.

The Committee, over the past year, have commenced a long-term project to examine the nature of our relationship or potential relationship with other Churches, defining and setting down the areas which appear to limit the closeness of the relationship appropriate with those churches.

The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) is a member of the International Conference of Reformed Churches and through that membership have contact with a large number of Reformed churches worldwide. A number of our ministers have preached in the congregations of some of these Churches, and a number of their ministers have preached in our Churches.

The International Conference of Reformed Churches has a major international conference every four years. In 2013 that took place in Cardiff, hosted by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England & Wales and it has been reported by our representatives to have been a very profitable exercise. The International Conference of Reformed Churches at their 2013 meeting considered minor changes to the wording of their constitutional documents. Our representatives at that meeting saw no reason to object to the proposed changes, but it is expected by the ICRC that they be laid before the General Assemblies, or equivalent, of member churches. These documents are available in electronic format from the Assembly Clerks' Department and copies will be available to enquirers upon request at the General Assembly.

The European Conference of Reformed Churches, while an off-shoot of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, is a less formal regional conference attended by a wider range of Reformed Churches and groups. Whilst it is less structured than the International Conference of Reformed Churches it provides a useful forum for matters of common interest and provides contact with many smaller Reformed groupings across Europe, from Russia to Spain.

Affinity, formerly the British Evangelical Council, is a group of which the Free Church of Scotland was a founder member. Affinity includes in its membership many different evangelical groups, congregations and denominations in the UK. The Committee believe that the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) representatives on Affinity have been able to act as a stabilising influence doctrinally among the Evangelicals of the UK

The Committee, as a Standing Committee of Assembly, meet at least three times in the year and review the denomination's wider church relationships and contacts.

They consider each of these contacts under a number of headings:

Scotland	Ireland
England	The rest of Europe
North America	South America
Africa	Australasia
Asia	

In many instances these contacts take the form of Churches with which we have a direct formal relationship. This is an area of more importance than some realise, in that for some churches it is not possible for any of our ministers to preach in their congregations without such a relationship existing. From among the ranks of such Churches have in the past come support and indeed manpower for our own mission work in Zambia.

In other instances the relationship is not at that level of formality, but nonetheless valuable. A number of ministers from Churches in that category have provided keynote addresses at recent General Assemblies and have conducted services in our congregations.

Some contacts have led to ministers of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) being asked to provide help, assistance and advice in countries where sound teaching is at a premium. In an age when long-term visas can be difficult or impossible to obtain and in which we are unable to send missionaries in the traditional manner, such opportunities open up a tremendous opportunity for witness.

It is humbling when hearing from new contacts, and when travelling among contacts which have existed for a very long time, to realise that our witness and our stand for sound doctrine, worship and practice is widely recognised in so many different parts of the world.

The work of the Ecumenical Relations Committee affords opportunity to the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) to encourage and assist other like-minded churches and groups outside of Scotland and to be encouraged by other Reformed Churches worldwide.

Rev James Gracie and Rev. Murdo A.N. Macleod attended the third meeting of the 'Reformed Churches Forum' which met in Inverness in November 2013 and which included brethren from the Free Church (residual), the Associated Presbyterian Churches, and the International Presbyterian Church. The Forum was chaired by the Rev Ian Hamilton.

At the previous meeting in March 2013, it had been agreed to place before the Courts of the respective denominations a proposed Statement. It was reported to the November meeting that:

The Associated Presbyterian Churches had wholeheartedly adopted the Statement at its Synod in May 2013.

The 2013 General Assembly of the Free Church (residual) had endorsed the Statement, and subsequently its Ecumenical Relations Committee had adopted it 'enthusiastically'.

The International Presbyterian Church had not considered the Statement in detail, but they were supportive of James Torrens' ongoing involvement in the forum.

The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) had not discussed the Statement at their General Assembly as their Ecumenical Relations Committee had not considered it. The Free Church (Continuing) brethren were aware of the danger of simply 'rubber-stamping' such a Statement. It was also noted that the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) brethren had continuing concerns

about unresolved issues with the Free Church (residual), leaving them with reservations about the Statement.

At the meeting in November, little headway was achieved. While we should always be ready to meet with brethren, it was the opinion of our two representatives that there was little likelihood of progress being made as there was no sign of repentance on the part of the Free Church (residual).

It is recommended that the Statement be noted by the General Assembly.

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

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive the Report of the Ecumenical Relations Committee and thank the Committee, especially the Convener;
2. The General Assembly note the importance of maintaining contact with true Churches outwith the bounds of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing);
3. The General Assembly note the consideration being given to defining and setting down the areas which appear to limit the closeness of the relationships appropriate with other Churches;
4. The General Assembly approve the changes proposed to the constitutional documents of the International Conference of Reformed Churches as set forth at ICRC Cardiff 2013;
5. The General Assembly note the usefulness of the forum provided by the European Conference of Reformed Churches;
6. The General Assembly note the influence of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) on *Affinity*;
7. The General Assembly note and commend the careful regular consideration given by the Ecumenical Relations Committee to wider Church relationships and contacts;
8. The General Assembly note the importance of formal relationships with some Churches and note with gratitude the way in which formal relationships have provided benefits through assistance on the mission field;
9. The General Assembly note that while some Church relationships have not been on a formal basis, they have nonetheless proved to be valuable;
10. The General Assembly note that some contacts have led to opportunities for the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) to provide help, assistance and advice in countries where sound teaching is at a premium and where it is difficult or impossible to obtain long-term visas for mission work;
11. The General Assembly note with gratitude that the witness of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) is widely recognised in many different parts of the world;
12. The General Assembly recognise the opportunity 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 by other Reformed churches worldwide;
13. The General Assembly note the statement of the Scottish Churches Forum dated 23 March 2013.

APPENDIX

At a meeting of the Scottish Reformed Churches Forum on 23 March 2013, the three churches in attendance (Free Church of Scotland, Free Church (Continuing), and the Associated Presbyterian Churches) agreed to present the following statement for the approval of their respective church courts.

Recognising that our several ecclesiastical bodies are authentic manifestations of the church of Jesus Christ, with a shared commitment to the teaching of the catholic and universal church as expressed in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, we commit ourselves to renewed endeavour to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We lament the fractured state of the Reformed church and our sinful involvement in her divisions. What we have broken, we cannot repair, but seeking to return to the LORD that he may heal us, we pledge to pray for all our churches and make the following commitments as steps towards restoration.

Local Unity

First, where there is duplication of ministries and multiplication of congregations, we will encourage expressions of local unity.

- a. When vacant charges or distance make it difficult to provide pastoral care for members of our churches, we will urge ministers and interim-moderators to seek the assistance of their colleagues in any of our churches.
- b. If two or more congregations in one place become vacant and plan to call ministers, or if two separate congregations are too small to support and call ministers, we will encourage local office bearers to meet and discuss the possibility of worshipping together under a single ministry, whether or not that would lead to immediate union as a congregation in one of our churches.

National Unity

Second, conscious of our obligation to establish churches where there are none, and by our oneness to bear witness to Christ's oneness with the Father, we will encourage expressions of national unity.

- a. When we consider planting churches, we will strive to act as one body. This will mean sharing information about plans, seeking to avoid establishing new congregations in close proximity to another of our congregations, and exploring how members of our churches might cooperate to establish new Reformed congregations in needy areas.
- b. As a public expression of our hope for a more united Reformed church, we will set a date sometime in 2014 for a united meeting of our churches. This will allow our people to worship together, listen to preaching related to the subject of Christian unity, and to get to know one another better.

To bring these commitments into effect, we hope that the representatives of each church on the Scottish Reformed Churches Forum will work through the relevant channels in our churches.