

Scotland's Ecumenical Context

From 1910 to 2010

Edinburgh 1910 saw the birth of the modern ecumenical movement, but why did it happen in Edinburgh? Scotland, intellectually and culturally, had a strong tradition of internationalism stretching right back to the Celtic missions. This international perspective was promoted by leading Scots theologians and church leaders. This was coupled with the strong missionary ethos of 19th century Scottish Protestantism, which in addition to evangelism was concerned with modifying the economic imperial expansion of the British empire. This engagement in mission led to the churches being willing to support a World Mission Conference, rather than leave it to mission agencies. Finally Scotland was experiencing rapid change in both church and society which stimulated a sense of wider vision in the churches.

In 2000, John Pobee (Ghana) visited Scotland and challenged the Christian leaders to mark the centenary of 1910. Over the next few years an ever-widening circle of mission thinkers and activists recognised that 2010 was an occasion for great potential and that collaborative action was required. In 2005 an international gathering was held in Edinburgh from which key themes for mission in the 21st century emerged. These include foundations for mission; mission in an interfaith context; mission and its relationships to post-modernity and power; forms of missionary engagement; theological education; contemporary Christian communities; mission and unity and mission spirituality. It was also recognised a focal point to the centenary was required and this will be held in Edinburgh from 2-6 June 2010. The work of Edinburgh 2010 is co-ordinated through its website www.edinburgh2010.org

The intervening years

From the 1940's to the present day three particular threads have developed in the ecumenical landscape of Scotland.

Theological Exploration

From the so-called *Bishops Report*, (an Anglican/Presbyterian report in 1956), through nearly 30 years of *Multilateral Conversations* (1967-1994) involving six Churches in Scotland, to the *Scottish Churches Initiative for Christian Unity (SCIFU -1996-2003)* many doctrinal issues were addressed. This has resulted in greater understanding of our different traditions and an increasing discovery that there is much theological agreement between the churches. The fact that this has failed to produce a scheme of union, upon which all could agree, is based not on any antagonism between churches as realising that unity is more than creating some grand plan. It lies in recognising unity as possible within difference.

Practical Co-operation

At national level two bodies emerged in the 1950's producing great energy and vision. By the beginning of 1960 this became enfolded in the opening of *Scottish Churches House* in Dunblane - a Conference and Retreat Centre which "the Churches held in common and where they could begin to learn to grow together to serve Scotland". By 1962 *Scottish Churches Council* was established with most non-Roman Catholic Churches as members and a number of associated ecumenical groups and organisations. This led to many nationally sponsored activities – e.g. Lent courses, youth work, outreach work in communities, soon mushrooming with local councils of Churches throughout Scotland co-operating in joint worship and action. In 1986 a UK-wide Lent course was the catalyst to new 'instruments of unity' which for the first time included the Roman Catholic Church. So *Action for Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS)* came into being in 1990.

The Prophetic Voice

This third thread is the one which is the more difficult one for Churches to live with. Yet without it ecumenism would lose its cutting edge. As Churches grew closer together, ecumenism provided its own prophetic action. *Christian Aid* reflected in its work both the practical expression of compassion for the world's hungry, but also, the prophetic words of protest for justice in the world. The *Iona Community* that has always had a strong ecumenical commitment has openly challenged the Churches and the World on their disunity and injustice. There have been prophetic moments as when in 1982 on his visit to Scotland Pope John Paul II said "Let us walk together as pilgrims hand in hand".

Ecumenism in recent years has widened to an inter-faith context, and to Christian witness in a more secular and multi-cultural society. What its history in Scotland has illustrated is that to meet that challenge we need to hold these three threads in tension. It is not a choice between them. For it is only when they interact with each other that there is created the theology, the co-operation, and the prophetic voice, which lies at the heart of an ecumenical vision.

Tartans are one of Scotland's treasures. Traditionally each pattern was identified with a particular 'clan' or family, but tartans are a living tradition and continue to be designed for many different purposes and organisations. Tartans have a base colour onto which horizontal and vertical stripes are laid. The background text is above, and below we offer a number of horizontal and vertical stripes which share just some of the ways the churches engage between themselves and with wider society.

Horizontal Stripes – churches seeking unity together

The Joint Commission on Doctrine of the Church of Scotland and Roman Catholic Church

This bilateral dialogue has proved to be a rich source of blessing. Its most recent document is entitled "Baptism: Catholic and Reformed" which summarises progress in understanding common baptism, but which also invites further reflection on what this means for the mission of the Church today. The Joint Commission is an example of positive ecumenical theological dialogue, and shows both individuals and institutions are willing to listen seriously to one another. The Joint Commission is currently studying the healing of historical memories and the doctrine of sanctification.

The EMU strand

Following the end of the Scottish Churches Initiative For Union, three denominations made the commitment to explore ways of working, serving and witnessing together. Thus the **EMU** conversations were born. Representatives of the Scottish **E**piscopal Church, the **M**ethodist Church and the **U**nited Reformed Church meet twice a year to discover ways in which nationally and locally we can do those things together that need not be done separately, and are delighted as people with particular responsibilities explore and identify how cooperation can grow, foreexample in education and training. **EMU** is a young, living relationship of great potential.

Developing relations with ethnic minority Christians

In 2007 churches in Scotland marked the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. This became a catalyst in developing closer relationships between the traditional churches and growing number of ethnic minority Christians in Scotland. The Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group now has representatives from African Churches and Asian Christian Fellowships. Minority Ethnic Christians are organising themselves into a body to further relationships amongst themselves and with the traditional churches and ACTS.

Vertical Stripes – the churches engaging in Scottish society

The Churches and Parliament

The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office was born out of the churches' engagement in the process that brought the Scottish Parliament into being. Having found we could work together on this, churches set up SCPO to enable them to engage as effectively as possible with the Parliament and Government in Scotland – not to set a party line, but to ensure that a conversation takes place and that the voices of the churches are heard. Clearly, we are most effective when we can speak with one voice for our vision for the common good of Scotland, but where there are differing voices we are honest and open about that.

The Churches and the National Conversation

Leaders / representatives of twelve of Scotland's Churches accepted the invitation of the Scottish Government to contribute to a 'national conversation' on choosing the future of Scotland.

The group produced the following statement:

"We recognise that the Church is on a journey as well as our nation; all of us are going to struggle to get to where we need to be. But for the Church, as well as for our nation and our communities, we aspire towards these Christian values characterising our common life in Scotland:

- A nation that is shaped by the principles of love for God and for all human beings
- A nation that promotes dignity and justice for all
- A nation that promotes faithfulness in personal and community relationships
- A nation that demonstrates compassion and care for the weak and the marginalised
- A society in which the voices of all can be heard
- A people who are less concerned with their own welfare and more concerned for the wellbeing of others
- A nation that strives for excellence and in which all can experience life in all its fullness
- A nation that welcomes the unique contribution of those who are making the new Scotland
- A state that promotes the well-being of all its citizens without exceeding its authority

For us, these values are rooted in Jesus and have distinctively shaped Scotland's story as it has developed over the years; where they are lived and practised, we find they resonate with people of other faiths and of none."

Street Pastors

Street Pastors is a mission initiative spreading throughout Scotland. Teams of trained volunteer Street Pastors from local churches are available late at night in town centres to offer words of advice and practical support, to people out and about. 'We will meet, talk and engage with the people through listening, supporting and helping in practical ways. This could be walking a girl on her own to a late night taxi; reassuring someone who feels intimidated; or listening to the people who need to know that somebody cares,' said James Duce from the City Church in Aberdeen, the first Scottish city to launch Street Pastors.