Our Ecumenical Policy

The General Assembly of 2003 requested the Committee on Ecumenical Relations to “review the ecumenical strategy of the Church of Scotland in Scotland”, in light of the rejection of the SCIFU proposals. The Committee offers here more a policy statement than a set of strategies. Part 1 establishes the framework for such a policy.

Part 1 – The Framework for Policy

1. History in overview

1.1 The Church of Scotland, as we know it, had its roots in the 16th century – though the people in Scotland had been evangelised since at least the 4th century. By the late medieval period our forebears were familiar with a widespread organisation of parish churches under the jurisdiction of bishops in communion with the bishop of Rome. According to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the church was confessed to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”, but there were many problems in the realisation of this. Disputes over authority lay behind a major breach between the western and eastern churches by the mid-11th century; and while the church of Rome sought thereafter to consolidate its hold on western Europe, there continued to be obstacles to a unity of purpose, whether on the one hand in terms of reform or sometimes heretical movements or on the other hand assertions of sovereignty by rival monarchs. In the 16th century there came a potent mix of theological stirrings and power struggles. What became known as Protestantism became entrenched through long and bloody disputes and there was theological ferment as to the meaning of those credal marks of unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The Protestant direction of being reformed “according to the word of God” led in fact to many variations not entirely compatible with one another, let alone with the church of Rome.

1.2 In the kingdom of the Scots, the reformed church ultimately became a focus of national identity. However, this “Church of Scotland” emerged from conflict both theological and political. The final legal establishment of this church with a Presbyterian polity was as much a matter of expediency as of faith conviction. While faith played a most significant part through the so-called wars of religion, the settlement of 1689 and 1690 and after was designed to cool down the passions. Yet, there was something incongruous between that settlement and the biblical notion of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). From then until now, there were rival ecclesiastical bodies in Scotland, and the original competition between Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics and Congregationalists of various hues has only been added to, most notably with alternative Presbyterian churches and Pentecostal churches. Wherever lie the boundaries of legitimate diversity, an ecumenical policy in “our” church, ie a determination of “our” direction as we are committed to the salvation of the world wrought by our one Lord Jesus Christ, needs to take account of all of this.

2. Historic roots

2.1 Without beginning to attempt a full narrative, some themes are important to trace historically, not least since the way we read history can affect our present outlooks. Therefore we might assess here the aims and successes of the early generations of reformers; the contours of the Scottish Reformation,
insofar as it was influenced by and was itself a shaping force on Scottish society; and the theology of a reformed, confessing church.

2.2 How successful were the aims of the early generations of reformers?

2.2.1 It is well known, though sometimes rather overlooked, that the establishment in western Europe of Protestantism over against Roman Catholicism was not intended. The Martin Luther who nailed his Theses to the doors in Wittenberg believed in his case, but not in the further break-up of Christendom. John Calvin, a generation on, likewise maintained strongly his desire for there to be visible unity in the church, not two or more rival camps. However, the battle lines were all too quickly set up and so the history of a disunited church has continued, with appeals to authority exercised by the Roman magisterium on the one hand and on the other recourse to more independent readings of Holy Scripture.

2.2.2 In line with those similarly minded in the Europe of the day, the early Protestants in Scotland aimed to renew the church universal, which they perceived to have fallen away from its pristine purity. Thus practices alleged to have been corrupt additions on the faith, scripturally understood, were to be purged; and doctrine was to be renewed, again free of such distortions as had been infiltrated. The authority of the church of Rome came explicitly under attack and its bishop, the Pope, came to be seen as the arch-enemy of the Christian gospel.

2.2.3 Such aims had both negative and positive aspects. Negatively, there was a cleansing operation required – in church architecture and decoration; in the language and music of worship; in understandings of prayer and sacraments; in relation to corrupted servants of the church, whether ordained or not. Positively, there were opportunities to build, for the sake of both worship and education; there were liturgical shifts to manage, using words both spoken and sung; there were to be major changes to be effected in all the rituals of life and death; there was to be a high estimate placed on preaching and evangelism. For those involved, on many matters there was a clear sense of black and white, but on some there was less certainty – notably on the issue of church polity where a range of different positions were able to be taken, theology being only part of the story.

2.2.4 The break with the recent past was dramatic. Sometimes accompanied by violence, for the most part it was a process which moved at an unsteady pace, sometimes very fast, sometimes up against great obstacles. Usually in Scottish history we reflect on the twists and turns of the debates over church polity – Presbyterianism, the ultimate victor, having by no means a smooth ride for the 16th century and more – but at the same time there was no significant turning back in the directing of Scots towards Protestantism. Other nations of the period would experience more switching of directions – England, for example, or France; Scotland from 1560 would be reformed, albeit always with a minority standing out against. Therefore, as the Reformation progressively took hold, definite changes were rung on buildings, praise, rhythms of church life and spiritual leaders. Many of the aims set by the early generations of reformers were thus realised. There came to be a solid tradition of evangelical preaching and administration of the two sacraments evidenced in Scripture, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as also of ecclesiastical discipline, a reinforcement of the aim that the gospel should not only be heard but lived through. The reformers had plenty of work on their hands, simply in terms of the local church (however that was defined), but this was diligently pursued, with those who adhered to “Romish” practices being outlawed.

2.2.5 Did this reordered church life and redefined Christian faith constitute the renewal that was hoped for? Stock had to be taken of the comparatively solid achievements within Scotland not being matched elsewhere, indeed of the reformation movement being suppressed or even ignored in other areas of western Europe; and of course a very immediate issue, given the Union of the Crowns in 1603, was the state of the church in England, Wales and Ireland. Moreover, reformation came within the Roman Catholic Church; and different forms of Protestant reformation clearly asserted themselves. Both the unending controversies over doctrine and polity and realism over the spiritual health of their
people inclined later generations of Scots reformers, like others, to hold back from notions of a perfect reformation. The notion of *semper reformanda*, *i.e.* that the church is always needing to be reformed, came into its own. Historically, it reads almost as a tacit admission that the early dreams in 16th century minds of returning the “one, holy, catholic, apostolic church” to its purity in interim reality as well as in eternal truth were being abandoned. In ecclesiological terms, *i.e.* the doctrine of the church, this arguably marked something of a shift. What was/is the nature of the visible church? In what sense is it one, holy, catholic and apostolic?

2.3 What were the contours of the Scottish Reformation?

2.3.1 The theological ferment of the Reformation period was deeply intertwined with matters social, economic and political. Protestantism came to Scotland second hand as the contests of Martin Luther and his contemporaries with the bishop of Rome spilled out far beyond their local roots and entered Scotland naturally via the ports on the east coast and up from England. Key figures of the Scottish Reformation, John Knox most obviously, were formed through periods of exile as well as through writings. What was most Scottish about the Reformation was thus its history of being initiated contrary to the will of the reigning monarch, Mary Queen of Scots, and the many twists of the story whereby Presbyterian polity and puritan worship came by the late 17th century to be in the ascendancy.

2.3.2 Historical research continues still to unearth more detail of how the Scottish people were turned into Protestants. The processes were many and varied, and never uniform across the country. Political and geographical configurations had a major part to play as well as the doctrine of the Scots Confession of 1560 and the two Books of Discipline. Thus the neighbourhood of England and its Protestants was highly significant, both around 1560 and again from the 1640s; the finances available (or not) for reforming activity counted at all times; the contrasting qualities of the Stuart monarchs were clearly influential; the pan-European strife of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries figured highly in a number of respects, ultimately of course in the post-Revolution settlement under William of Orange. There was no sense in which the course of reformation was predictable.

2.3.3 What happened, however, was that Scots gained a deepening sense of national identity which was bound up with the reformed church. Reflection on the role of the General Assembly matured alongside thinking on the role of the monarch and the national parliament. The expansion of the reach of centralised government into remoter areas was paralleled, and to some extent stimulated, by efforts to extend the impact of reformed doctrine and life: ministers and elders would become prominent local figures. And as the English language was becoming more and more widely spoken, the representatives of the Protestant church were obvious users – while at the same time playing their own significant part in the historical development of Gaelic. The church in Scotland before 1560 undoubtedly had already played a major part in the shaping of culture. The reformers continued that tradition with an effectiveness which reached far and wide.

2.3.4 Despite all the well-known tensions between church and Scottish monarchs, and in some measure because of these, the reformed church assumed a mantle of considerable influence in Scottish society. In the reigns of James VI and Charles I, the nation would be covenanted, as the chosen people of God, and in such terms would indeed go to war, during the latter part of Charles’ reign. The distinctiveness of the Scottish Reformation would outlast all attempts to erase it under Oliver Cromwell and Charles II; there would be special provision made both under William III and in the Union negotiations towards 1707. Altogether it made for a suppression of difference within Scotland, whether in expressions of popular culture and conduct deemed unacceptable to Christian conscience or with respect to the minority who adhered either to Rome or to an Episcopalian establishment. On a more expansive note, it proved to be an inspirational force for educational achievement, broad intellectual horizons and social welfare.

2.3.5 Such facets of the reformers’ story have demanded re-evaluation in today’s world. The movement from reformation impulse to the making of “The Church of Scotland” has had its drawbacks.
The association of Presbyterianism with national identity runs the risk of blunting the cutting-edge of Christian witness: as faith is questioned and/or set against alternatives, the church can be seen more as a social institution than as a pilgrim people of God. The 2001 Census discoveries of where people’s popular allegiances lie, far outrunning active participation in the life of the Church of Scotland, may be a commentary on this, though the results of the 2011 Census redressed this somewhat. On the shaping of culture and conduct, the obvious breakdown from the 18th century both of, say, sexual discipline and of relative homogeneity in intellectual outlook has led to the church being perceived as negative, narrow-minded and possibly unnecessary. Perhaps the extreme political correctness which runs in the direction of silencing the Christian voice altogether derives from this. And on matters ecumenical within the Christian fold, history bears witness to problems as well as strengths deriving from the strong majority position of the Church of Scotland. At worst this has extended to the social oppression of Roman Catholics; it also continues to make for difficulties in ecumenical projects, the smaller partners feeling sometimes with justice that they are being overwhelmed and not treated with respect. And, of course, those potential ecumenical partners whose history is of breaking off with the Church of Scotland have yet further issues needing resolution, both doctrinal and social.

3. The reformed understanding of the church

3.1 The reformed understanding of the church was articulated in the early confessions, hence the distinctive Protestant emphasis on being a “confessing church”. Given inherited assumptions of there being little need for debate, the early generation of reformers in the midst of conflict felt obliged to articulate their perspectives. Without denying the authority of the historic creeds, which were largely focused on the doctrine of God (in an era of Trinitarian controversy), they emphasised first and foremost the doctrine of salvation which they feared was at stake in the controversies with Rome. Within that framework, the church would still be, as ever, the mother of faith, but it mattered to be clear where the church was to be found. The formulations of different confessing groups varied slightly but echoed common themes, namely that the Word of God found within Holy Scripture was to be taught and obeyed and that the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper were to be administered to those who were justified by faith, through grace alone. Both the Scots Confession of 1560 and the Westminster Confession of 1647, adopted by the Church of Scotland in due course as its subordinate standard to regulate faith, explicated such matters.

3.2 The church, therefore, is first and foremost an invisible entity, a single, catholic or universal company of those chosen and called by God. The church is spread out both geographically and through time, including people of all generations who are held in God’s love for eternity. God alone knows the membership of that hidden church, since it is by God’s grace alone that anyone belongs. It is for the sake of witness to that saving grace that the visible church is constituted. In the power of the Holy Spirit, under the sole lordship of Jesus Christ, the people of God are called together to worship and serve.

3.3 The argument was that in visibility, given our own ignorance of our final salvation, and given that others therefore who do not belong may accompany those who are truly called, the church in the local community is an interim arrangement. But how interim is interim? It is a very old question and a variety of answers can be given. Whereas historically, the order of the episcopate had guarded – and, arguably, guaranteed – the bonds of communion between local churches, the matter of church order logically figured less highly in reformed thinking. However, not least because their church establishments were born in an era of intense controversy and in time were consolidating their position over against others, church order became apparently defining! Thus, Scots have so come to think of their national church as Presbyterian that they can be unfamiliar with the term “reformed”, and there have been tendencies to identify connections between local churches in Presbyterian terms more than in terms of the working of the Holy Spirit. Even within this “mother” Church of Scotland, it probably took until the second half of the 19th century for there to be teaching and ruling elders meaningfully throughout the church, ie at parish, presbytery, synod and general assembly levels. However, we might repeat, the problem is not a new one. The historic development of the defence of likewise “evolved”.
The challenge nevertheless remains, how to reconcile differences and divisions in which church polity has become a (too?) central issue.

3.4 Ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, admits no simple fixes. There was and is an appealing power to the classic reformed doctrine, notably in the thinking of John Calvin, which places the highest weight on the sovereign grace of God and the active participation of the Holy Spirit in the drama of salvation to be consummated finally in the eschaton. However, the accompanying doctrine of the election of God’s people can be pressed further than some were or are happy to go. Pride and judgmentalism issued too readily amongst those who considered themselves to be elect and Robert Burns famously parodied it. Likewise, the skewing of balance in what can be said about the visible and invisible church has produced not only debates but some shocking intolerance and conspicuous denials of the grace of God. Or over-emphasis on the hiddenness of the church has introduced doubts on the efficacy of sacraments and words about the Word. In short, especially from the time of the Reformation, a floodgate of possibilities was opened, as people read the Scriptures and wrestled with inherited theologies – and as soon as it was politically achievable, the possibilities attracted their adherents. In the era when to differ could spell condemnation to death, there were martyrs in plenty for their beliefs; and not surprisingly, over time there was a huge expansion in the forms of Protestant church. Thus, as has already been noted, in some respects the original contention of the reformers, to seek unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity around the proper understanding of Christian salvation, has been seriously left behind. Aside from any engagement with the church of Rome, the reality of a plethora of Protestant denominations, some even single congregations answering only to local interpretation of the scriptures, raises many issues. Protestants have shown themselves singularly well qualified at talking amongst themselves.

3.5 Unity implies something in which we share, whether within a small congregation or in common with other Christians wherever they may be. It may not require a unified structure but it does require a considerably greater degree of visible sharing than is the case in our contemporary experience. The ecumenical horizons have been stretching far and wide, but if Christian unity has meaning, are there not limits of legitimate diversity within the church of Jesus Christ?

4. Moving on in history

4.1 Both the way we think about history and the ways in which we are tied into inherited patterns influence us heavily. Yet it is clear that change is possible, not least from the fact that the perspectives of different generations tend to differ: as thought patterns and new traditions evolve, so the range of assumptions and likely courses of action alters. Amongst ourselves, whether at parish level or through the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, there is less inertia than might at first be imagined! However, there is a need to take stock here, to recognise the barriers to change as well as the motors propelling it, and so to be realistic about possibilities.

4.2 Reconciling the differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation

4.2.1 Both readings of the past and lived experience suggest that the split between Roman Catholics and Protestants is not beyond healing. There are still many major issues needing to be addressed but during the 20th century also many significant shifts occurred. On the Roman Catholic side the movement of change which culminated in the Second Vatican Council allowed some redefinition of thinking about the church. Following a vigorous debate within the Council, the point was won that the Roman Catholic Church “subsists in” – and is therefore not exclusively identical with – the church of Jesus Christ. It thus became possible at all levels of church life to encourage at the very least a sharing of prayer with Christians in the Protestant tradition. The Roman Catholic Church became heavily involved in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues; and while the faithful discovered something of church life outside the bounds of their own church, doctrinal progress was hammered out, famously for example, with the Lutheran World Federation, on the doctrine of justification. At the same time there were hands held out in fellowship to the churches of the East, where a largely different set of issues, including obviously
the question of the Petrine ministry, dominate the agenda. On the Protestant side, confessional approaches which had reached as far as naming the bishop of Rome as the antichrist were positively rejected, at least in some churches (including the Church of Scotland), and the currents of liturgical renewal, dialogue work and continuous contact within the parishes – and, no doubt, also secular trends of liberalism – played their part in building bridges.

4.2.2 Thus, in tension with deep-seated prejudices and narrow-mindedness, the possibilities of reconciling the historical differences have opened out. United action may still be most likely where faith and order are not so necessarily at stake, eg on justice and peace issues, yet the will to do more than that is beyond being silenced. There have been too many hopeful signs for the work of the Holy Spirit to be denied in all of this. That said, nevertheless the obstacles to visible unity are still momentous and patience will be a much-needed gift.

4.2.3 The calling of the church to reformation according to the word of God was underpinned by clarity of vision on what that might mean: the Bible was an unadulterated standard, in contrast to church tradition. Such a vision released theological energies and evangelical fervour but could offer no definitive settling of all controversy. The possible lines of theological enquiry simply multiplied, and the missionary drive inherent within Christianity became all the more pluralistic, as churches now so often in competition with one another took the gospel to the ends of the earth. Without doubt no church stands free from being an active participant in interpreting the Gospel and the Church of Scotland carries now its own distinctive tradition, more ancient than some, newer than others. At Montreal in 1963, the Faith and Order movement drew the distinction between Tradition (capital T, ie referring to that which is core and as it were purely from the beginning) and traditions (small t, ie referring to constructions, whether ecclesial or theoretical, of the one Tradition). Will this help in moving us towards a sense of sharing in a common faith, church life and mission? It can be noted how the Roman Catholics build the notion of the church semper purificanda (the need for the church always to be called towards purity), somewhat in parallel to the semper reformanda principle; and Orthodox thinkers though resisting any idea of the church not being perfect – on account of its divine institution – at the same time admit the sins of the people and also various historical accretions to church life which may not be for the best. This would suggest that one major ecumenical task therefore lies in assessing historical developments and lapses, so as to read the histories of the churches as institutions – without necessarily denying their true participation in the missio Dei, ie God’s work of salvation in our world.

4.2.4 Scotland is one context among many. However, though it has not been isolated either historically or at the present day, there is good reason to make locally-focused efforts. Within purely the Protestant fold, the historic tendencies to split and divide have naturally attracted attention, with some reunion work being successful and other manoeuvres on a similar tack less so, such as SCIFU, on which more below. With respect to the Reformation divides, recent work aiming to look outside the walls concentrated first on inter-church marriage questions but has begun to move forward now into the significant area of Christian baptism. The existing degree of recognition of baptism outside particular churches points tantalisingly towards what cannot be agreed without further steps being taken (though how we will move, no-one knows), namely the enjoyment of full communion.

4.2.5 It seems possible to be both optimistic and visionary yet at the same time soberly realistic. Company, common prayer, readiness for reform – such things build hope. At the same time, while the Bible universally anchors Christian faith, readings of the Bible can go in contradictory directions; while the church nurtures that faith, the content as well as the style of the various nurseries are radically different. We are still at odds with one another, however much we have moved on from hastening to burn heretics. And while some plough energies into little by little bringing the ecumenical vision down to earth, others, even in increasing numbers, care little, regarding the energy as wasted. Therefore, as well as the detailed hermeneutical and ecclesiological questions, there is a more basic one for each and everyone to answer. In what sense do we need the church? (Do we believe faith can be sustained in people’s hearts privately? Is it allowable to find the diet of word and sacrament nigh indigestible? Is
there anything more to evangelism beyond marketing the product?) Today’s climate, in the making of which the churches have played their part, allows churches or Christians to negotiate terms. While there may be compromises, there also needs to be integrity and an active sense of *semper reformanda*. Christian unity is not destructive of diversity, indeed it must take its shape from the beauties of diversity; but churches out of communion with one another are a poor witness to the message of reconciliation which we are trusted to give to the world.

4.3 **The establishment of Protestantism**

4.3.1 Since a reforming movement gave way to so-called reformed churches, there have been accompanying shifts in understandings of Christian unity. The approach treasured in the Orthodox or Catholic way of thinking, of a unity above all taking its meaning when people locally come together for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist – local here referring to an assembly held to its formal unity by the bishop, who is in turn bound by his fellow bishops – is painfully at odds with an ever-multiplying range of alternative views. Whereas it may at first sight seem that a common faith in the Holy Trinity is confessed, there are very different emphases on the activity of the Holy Spirit and the worship of Jesus as Lord, and both the internal forms and external relations of churches are obviously affected. Amongst the Orthodox and within Roman Catholicism (though, on the latter, with apparently some room for debate – cf. the controversy over *Dominus Iesus* in 2000), the issue of schism is a very serious problem; but amongst Protestants, it is altogether less pressing, despite the history of modern ecumenism in which some Protestants have most certainly been involved. This dimension of the historical legacy therefore demands attention. It is very possible, as we all know, for people within the Church of Scotland, for example, to see ecumenical commitment rather low down their list of priorities.

4.3.2 Unity depends on the life of the local church, defined at present in so many ways. (For us, is it the Church of Scotland or my congregation or our Presbytery? There are many lines of thought.) Support invested in the independent stance has been a vital dimension of the multiplication of church establishments. While this state of affairs may have been consolidated by martyrs and memories, politics and religion, there remains the challenge of talking outside the box, of interacting with other church communities and their very different understandings of tradition, and furthermore of envisioning how in our particularities we believe also in a universal mission. Historically the tendency has been simply to compete with others doing more or less the same work. While the founding of the modern ecumenical movement was spurred on by the illogicalities of this, such an approach has never yet convinced everyone. Yet, as we seek to appraise this theologically, the latest patterns of change only confirm the need for that to be done. In the west, church consumerism begins to reign supreme and allegiance to denominations in their historical forms is in collapse. Reflecting on the history from the Reformation, might this be the latest indication that humanism is exceptionally strong even within Christianity? We see nowadays a liveliness of enquiries in the so-called post-Christian direction, which would lend some support to that thesis. At the same time, across the board ecumenically, there is an increasing interest in the church of the first millennium. Again without suggesting there are any easy solutions, the likelihood is that this might press the churches otherwise committed to continually reinventing themselves to reflect again on the substance of the faith, as opposed to only the marketing of that faith. And this was the concern of the first generations of Reformers; it underwrites the truth that the church being “one, holy, catholic and apostolic” is intrinsically connected with God’s project for our salvation.

4.3.3 History then should give us food for thought. There is no suggestion that Protestant approaches to church life have been altogether miscued. Rather, there were genuine movements to safeguard apparently fundamental issues; and yet these could be taken in a number of different ways. In the Reformation centuries, the divisions of substance concerned especially the interpretations of the sacraments, but there was a famous lack of clarity here, and freedom of interpretation could prevail over confessional standards. Without a wholehearted commitment to *lex orandi, lex credendi*, ie no fixed liturgy and in due course no official theology, the lines between sacrament and ordinance could be drawn almost wherever it suited. Divisions over orders of ministry again may have had their convinced
proponents on either side of the divide over episcopacy, yet the differing lines on the theology of ministry were more than likely to diverge. Thus the particular callings of bishops or ministers or elders were far from agreed within churches, as well as between them. Another dimension of the history has been the arena of church and state. Both theologically and in practice, there has been a range of possibilities, at times hard fought over, latterly only less defined than ever. And over all these issues named, new denominations have become established, and also of course over issues of faith. The desire to safeguard the purity of the faith, free from corruptions, has had a great capacity of spawning new church groups since the Reformation (as it did before), and in this can be perceived something like an exponential trend. Scotland, for example, with its Reformation from 1560, has gained several brands of Presbyterianism by 2004, and South Korea, its Protestantism newer altogether, can number its brands by the hundreds. Also, given the reassessments in plenty of what it means to be a local or particular church and the regular moves into only loose church families or into no such thing at all, the need for formal bonds of communion has been devalued.

4.3.4 The most recent Scottish history will take our attention below, but in terms of historical legacy it shows no great variations from the wider picture. The Presbyterians won out against the Episcopalians only to head towards secessions and the Disruption and the Reunion; the break-off groups themselves splintered; other new churches came on the scene. Correspondence with the wider world was timed by forces outside the church, like emigration and empire, as much as by anything distinctively ecclesiastical. At home the Church of Scotland consolidated itself in this northern tip of Europe as the victorious option which was never quite true to its nomenclature. There were always others, as Scots, who would regard themselves as being on the outside. The agenda for purity would be pursued through reforming movements both within and outside the Church of Scotland; and perhaps only in church-state relations, and then only in an era now past, would our Church’s claims to an authoritative voice carry weight.

4.3.5 The historical legacy therefore is of visible confusion. Contemporary efforts at church reform are directed to strategies of management as much as to the holding to a universal vision. This is as scandalous as it is strange, given that the gospel of salvation is for the whole world. While there may be common concerns about declines in numbers attending church or taking up formal membership, the perceived solutions separately pursued by the various churches continue to reinforce their separate identities. Sometimes ecumenism has been said to be the straw grasped at only in these latter years of crisis; more accurately, it is seriously under threat as churches worry about the effectiveness of their own mission. Although thankfully there are exceptions to the rule, at the very time that concerted reflection on the fundamentals of what it means to be church is conspicuously needed, our tendency has been to settle for something other than unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. A shift of emphasis is therefore needed. To recall one of Jesus’ parables, in our readiness to emphasise planning and strategies, we need to consider also who is the true Sower and what is the best soil if there is to be a rich harvest.

5. Future ecumenism

5.1 The present Church of Scotland remit arose out of the failure of the Scottish Church Initiative for Union, with its acronym SCIFU, the latest in fact of a long series of strategies within British Protestantism to achieve an improvement in the scenario of church separations. For over 50 years, from the early 1950s, the Church of Scotland has been involved in negotiations aimed at bridging gaps and building visible bonds of communion. Such aims have held out the promise of joint Christian witness, rationalised resource management and an honouring of different gifts and traditions within the Protestant fold. While this has involved many different efforts and a great deal of time and thought, the successes have been very few. As the obvious prelude to a proposal for future ecumenism, something of this story needs to be told.

5.2 The first way of approaching this history is to see a witness, on the one hand, to a lack of conviction that the likely benefits would outweigh the costs and, on the other, a failure of trust between
the respective church denominations – and these two strands frequently tied up with one another. Optimism around the possibilities of major change was at its highest in the 1950s, the period incidentally when the Church of Scotland was near its apogee, confidently Presbyterian and its practice firmly underpinning the theory, and in Scottish post-war society able to boast of its pull on a significant percentage of the population. The most famous scheme of this period set out to solve the historic differences between the national churches in Scotland and England, since while the Empire’s days were numbered, the development of British society and commitment internationally to ecumenical change within the church demanded domestic progress. It was a grand scheme, aiming high and with considerable press coverage – and crashing as dramatically. The simple perception that the people of the Kirk would not sell out to bishops both carried truth and grossly undersold the vision. Acceptance of alternative polities of course needed to be finely handled, because of the historical baggage, but the vision, at least in the hands of the Church of Scotland’s principal spokesman, the Rev Archie Craig, was of a fundamental ecumenical shift. It was about more than Presbyterian Episcopalians burying their hatchets (not to mention Scots-English rivalries); within Protestantism it envisaged a significant step on the journey towards the unity of the church on an even broader front. Realistically it was a high order and the visionaries failed to carry the day. Defensiveness in the Church of Scotland and fears for the future caused the block, and it has been ever thus since, even though notions of stepping forward into something new have been considerably toned down!

5.3 Therefore, again and again, in conversations with Scottish Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists and United Free Presbyterians, schemes have been forged, both bilaterally and multilaterally, with awareness of possibilities elsewhere in the British Isles and further afield, but we note that when these have been brought to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland there has been a holding back from agreement. Consensus on faith has been more agreed than preparedness for change in order. The factor of the relative sizes of the churches within Scottish society has counted as well as theological concerns. Debate over the detail has gone alongside doubts whether Christian witness would be significantly enhanced, or resources justly allocated; and if these were symptomatic of the fear of change, the constant trend of declining numbers in active church commitment has if anything raised the priority of looking inwards. While there may be a fairly widespread readiness – given the progress on the ground, in many places, of informal ecumenical cooperation, stretching indeed beyond the Protestant fold – to acknowledge the gifts and strengths lying within alternative church traditions, this has not readily been translatable into imagining new, all-embracing church life. Ideas of the “broad church” are therefore circumscribed, to the extent that behind any justified fears of uniformity there is also a shirking away from entering into a decisive show of Christian unity. The challenge has long been on the table, to move from co-operation and co-existence into common commitment – that mode of being which would impel common working except in those matters which of necessity must be further devolved – yet in Scotland the progress has been painfully slow. A few local ecumenical partnerships have opened up possibilities and yet have known all the difficulties which unresolved issues at denominational level imply.

5.4 The defence against wide-ranging change, while inevitably focused on issues mainly of order, and therefore historic continuities and preservation of identities, complicated also unavoidably by the relative positioning of the churches vis-à-vis Scottish society, is arguably symptomatic of a crisis of faith. Faithfulness to the legacy and establishments of church life, be it Church of Scotland or that of another denomination, prevails over any sense that the church is in via, ie the pilgrim community with a Christ-led mission of salvation. Responsibility is assumed for proclaiming the gospel and celebrating the sacraments but a unity of witness is not seen in practice to be of primary importance. Lip-service is paid as talk is offered of spiritual bonds of communion which are real but nevertheless do not convert into bonds of mutual commitment; our churches’ priorities will not give space to working through the implications of us being turned towards a common cause.

5.5 It is very clear that breaking with the legacy and establishments of church life would take considerable effort. It would divert energies from much good work that is done even in separation. The
pragmatic arguments in favour of dropping church unity schemes have obvious attractions. What is unacceptable, however, is for this to be masked by talk of, for example, “reconciled diversity”, where there can be all too little wrestling with, say, the pain of duplicated efforts over a small geographical area, or, worse, no attempts to cross over to the other side beyond the established lines of alienation. Where there is only gentle encouragement towards local ecumenism and these repeated failures to make concerted stands of unity at national level (or more widely), the week-to-week dimensions of church life manifest all too little in the way of hope for a fragmented society at large. The occasional ecumenical service as an extra which most of the regular Sunday churchgoers miss is a sorry indication of the state of affairs. Suspicions that religion is a private option rather than public truth are bolstered. Where there should be news of “see how these Christians love one another”, there is weariness of, or apathy towards, or press delight in our internal squabbles.

5.6 It appears that some churches in Scotland are unable to speak to one another, let alone settle their differences. While there are instances of local cooperation and crossover of the people, as opposed to the church leaders, these areas of impasse are at the same time disturbing, viewed from the perspective of Christian faith, and yet apparently acceptable. The lines are so firmly drawn that antipathies are taken to be a fact of life. For over the last 400 years communities of faith have been building churches directly in competition with one another and there is no end in sight.

5.7 The lament cannot mourn everything. The signs of hope should also be named. In God and the working of the Holy Spirit, we might be encouraged to note how there is a breaking of ranks to cross over and out of those drawn lines, and that in customarily surprising ways, despite everything, faith and hope and love have been nurtured. In the local church, where unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are above all to be found, people and the ordained leaders are much more ready than their forebears to open up and revisit historic boundaries. Couples and families coming out of different faith folds have pressed important questions. Common prayer, recognition at least in some degree of baptism in other denominations, some successfully negotiated agreements for intercommunion and common cause on issues of justice and peace – albeit none of these so to speak going all the way, except in rare instances – are pointers to the road to be travelled. The possibilities are beginning to be seized of sharing buildings, preachers and other resources, and it could be said (sanguinely) that the ecumenical movement has as much life here as anywhere. On the denominational scene there are fertile patches, resistant to the intimations of a frozenness setting in. The Church of Scotland commits effort to talks with the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England and in international bilateral and multilateral conversations with many churches.

5.8 The historic drifting apart or more sudden schisms in the Christian household of faith are part of our identity. Amongst Christians there are significant differences in language and in what is familiar. Such diversities and particularities of landscapes carry riches which few wish to turn their backs on – and let us be clear, diversity and particularity are very much in line with our faith, as we worship God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, isolationism is not appropriate. Enmity is not. Even the fixing of boundaries, however much these may be necessary because of sin, is ultimately and perfectly overcome in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Therefore communion, love that knows no bounds, is a fundamental calling and challenge to us all. For us not to be restless in desiring it and seeking to lift the obstacles to it is a failure of love, short change on hope and a judgement on our faith. Though patience and forgiveness and persistence are undoubtedly called for, urgency to achieve the goal is also required.

6. Towards an ecumenical policy

6.1 Part 3 of this paper sets out the terms of an ecumenical policy appropriate to our Church of Scotland at this time. The paths laid out, of “churches together”, may not be especially novel but are rooted in the conviction that as we confess faith in one, holy, catholic, apostolic church and in one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, there is to be a breaking down of barriers, so that, to extend a famous teaching in the letter to the Galatians, there may be “in Christ neither male nor female, Jew nor
Gentile, slave nor free, Protestant nor Catholic, etc.” (cf. Galatians 3:28).

6.2 Our common Spirit-led faith in Jesus Christ as Lord is key to the orientation on the goal of communion. Attentive to the causes of historic division, scandalised by the schism between East and West and the breaches between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and also within Protestantism, we have a task to debate together understandings of ministry and primacy, doctrine and worship. On worship we would anticipate a pluriformity of style and a Trinitarian theology; and doctrine will be the reflection on the worshipping experience, accountable to the church as a whole. On ministry we anticipate an accountability both within the ranks of the ordained and between the ordained and the people – a model, as the famous ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* put it, embracing the personal, collegial and communal and all of these. We will hope that multilateral conversations will in the fullness of time be supported by the dissolution of denominational establishments, albeit including insights harvested across the board. We talk here about a theological task, though most certainly theological work cognisant of many non-theological factors. Inter-faith dialogue will also be an essential part of the work.

6.3 Improvements in understandings between churches, the readiness for dialogue both within and outside the Christian fold, the possibilities of ecumenical formation and worship and impressive demonstrations of advocacy and aid in relation to situations of poverty and injustice give encouragement to press on. Despite all the insularities, there are many pockets of energy and vitality on the ecumenical scene. That said, patience is also part of the equation and the history of recent efforts to create new denominational structures does not make for good reading. It is all too likely that such talks will continue to meet with defensiveness and entrenched positions until the arguments become more or less unavoidable. This would suggest that the brokering of local agreements, *ie* at congregational or regional level, with appropriately flexible support from existing denominational bodies, is an earlier priority. Already working in some few areas, the exchange of ministries and the common celebration of sacraments as well as of the preaching of the word, and other projects in solidarity amongst the Christians of one place or another, deserves every encouragement. The extension of such schemes not merely of cooperation but of common working that leads towards the fullest sharing of resources is demanding on courage and commitment. The obstacles to change are numerous; conservatism, in other words no change, is the easy option. However, localised steps of progress are much to be welcomed. The will for solid, practical results needs strengthening, both within the Church of Scotland and in our partners in mission.

6.4 To name the parish or Presbytery or chaplaincy environment as a primary locus for action is not a sell-out to those who have successfully withstood denominational change. On the contrary, the church is always both local and universal. The notion of catholicity is that the whole, universal gospel takes root where people are. The same interplay between local and universal is evident with respect to the other notes of unity, holiness and apostolicity. We would look for progress where prayer can be answered – where that Spirit-led restlessness for the life and love of God creates something new. Our calling is to move on in our history, so as to walk hand in hand with Christ into the life of the new creation. We can expect the forms of truly ecumenical church life to evolve.

6.5 As a final note in this framework paper, some caution is in place about any notion of fixing precise strategies. The church has its life through the converting grace of God, whose purposes ultimately extend to the “bringing of all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth” (Ephesians 1:10). There is therefore work beyond the horizons of our imagining, and in the interim the truth, in catholic perspective, of the *semper reformanda* principle lies in our responding to the divine voice. We can and should envisage the fruits of grace being ever more fully known, and therefore we ourselves doing all that we can to remove obstacles to that, and the point is that it is for the glory of God, not for the sense of our own achievement. The ecumenical movement – change, education, love in action – depends on God.
PART 2 – THE CONTEXT OF OUR POLICY

7. Scotland Today
7.1 An incarnational faith will always challenge its adherents to ask, “What must we do, now, in the
time and place where we are given life?” What must we, in the Church of Scotland, do now for the
Gospel at the beginning of a century as a new, and much more secular Scotland is being shaped, a new
and hugely secular Europe built and a new ecclesiastical world order breaking through as the leadership
of the voices of the South, where Christianity vibrantly flourishes, is established.

7.2 We, today’s Church of Scotland, are the inheritors, through the great struggles of the past
already outlined, of a church with whose life the identity of our nation has been so bound up that our
forebears were to write: “As a national Church representative of the Christian Faith of the Scottish
people, it acknowledges its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in
every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry.” As is proper in an incarnational faith, the life of
the church is inextricably bound to the life of the people in the land.

7.3 However, despite the evidence of the 2011 census that suggests the Church of Scotland retains
an affection or importance for a still surprisingly large proportion of the population, it is clear that
Scotland today is a much more secular and multicultural society than that for which our forebears
aspired to reflect the Christian faith. We would argue that it is therefore now appropriate to speak of
the Church of Scotland subsisting in that reflection of Christian faith rather than being exclusively
identified with it. Therefore what we must do, what our strategies must reflect, will be in line with the
Lund principle to which we as a church have been committed, at least in theory, since 1952. It states:
“The Churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep
differences of conviction compel them to act separately.”

7.4 If we are to deliver the vision enshrined in our Declaratory Articles we must act alongside and in
partnership with our church neighbours. There will be no quick fixes. There are at least two
fundamental struggles or tensions with which we must live. The first is around loyalty. In all of our
churches there is a faithfulness to the legacy and establishments of church life that prevails over any
sense that the church is in via, a pilgrim people. On the other hand, in the face of what is called “church
consumerism” in the west, allegiance to denominations in their historical sense is in collapse,
precipitating the financial crises with which the churches are now living. The second is between integrity
and compromise and we need look no further than the SCIFU debate to know how real and intense that
struggle has been, is and will be in the future. Without doubt a core question we will return to again
and again will be, what are the limits of legitimate diversity within the church of Jesus Christ? So what
follows is not a blueprint for the future but a path to be charted even as we walk it. Because of both our
passion and our indifference, our vision and our blindness, our courage and our fear, our faith and our
fickleness there will be no smooth walk.

7.5 However, there are significant pointers to help us discern that path. In 2001 the signing of the
Charta Oecumenica (See Report of the Committee on Ecumenical Relations, 2002), signalled a challenge
to the churches in Europe, requiring a commitment to dialogue and commitment in following areas:

- Called Together to Unity in Faith
- Proclaiming the Gospel together
- Moving towards one another
- Acting together
- Praying together
- Continuing in dialogue
- Participating in the building of Europe
- Reconciling peoples and cultures
7.6 The authors of the charter offered it as a basic text to all the churches, to be adopted and adapted in each of their local contexts. It has no magisterial or dogmatic character, nor is it legally binding upon churches, but it does promote a “Churches Together” model of co-operation and commitment to visible unity. This will be the policy framework within which we will engage ecumenically.

PART 3 – A CHURCHES TOGETHER POLICY

8. What is the Churches Together Model?
8.1 The Churches Together model unites in pilgrimage those churches which acknowledge God’s revelation in Christ, confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and saviour according to the Scriptures and in obedience to God’s will and in the power of the Holy Spirit, commit themselves to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, and to fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Its central aims are the pursuit of oneness, growth of understanding and common life and unified action. These aims can be promoted in four fundamental ways, through worshipping together, studying together, serving the community together and proclaiming together. Although the wording is taken from the constitution of ACTS, it describes a mode of relating which is universally relevant wherever churches come together across their divisions.

8.2 This model asks of the churches that they hold out what is important to them in the expectation that this will be respected. Divisions are acknowledged but are not allowed to impede those things that can be done together. Authority lies with the churches and is expressed differently by the churches. In other words it is an expression of the churches’ commitment to one another. In so doing, the churches themselves take responsibility for the agenda. It is the denominations that are responsible for the task of advocating the ecumenical principle, locally, nationally and internationally. They retain their own voice.

8.3 Within the broad ecumenical movement some structures have evolved which are designed to assist the churches in their commitment to one another. These can be local, national or international. For them to work effectively, denominational representatives on the various international or national bodies must be properly briefed and have the appropriate authority of their churches.

8.4 So part of the national scene in Scotland is focused in ACTS. Through this instrument a significant number of the Scottish Churches continue progressively to plan and act together in every appropriate area of their life and witness. They work together through the Members’ Meeting and Task Groups of ACTS.

8.5 In Glasgow and Edinburgh, through the appointment of an Ecumenical Officer (EO) by the Churches Together in each city, a link has been provided between local churches together groups across the cities. Regionally, the formation of the ACTS Ecumenical Development Group will lend momentum to the development of a network of local partnerships.

9. What does this Model require of the Church of Scotland?
9.1 Supporting and Resourcing UK and International Ecumenical Structures:

This will be achieved through:
• Financial contributions and a commitment to participate in conferences, commissions, councils and assemblies.
• Appointment of delegates with appropriate expertise and representational influence.
• Councils of Assembly involvement in bodies or projects which share a common remit.
• Commitment to a rationalisation of European and international ecumenical bodies in terms of their role and function.

Continued funding of those instruments to which we are already pledged.

9.2 **Commitment and Resourcing of ACTS:**
This commitment will ensure that the Programme Groups are empowered to carry forward their given roles and that the expertise of the Church of Scotland is used to further the whole Church in Scotland:

• Through the Members’ Meeting the Church of Scotland will commit itself to sharing in the development of a mechanism for possible responses to the Scottish Executive.
• Through the ACTS Programme Groups, the Church of Scotland will commit itself to supporting special projects or initiatives (eg Ecumenical Audit) which enhance our mutual understanding and our potential for a united voice and shared mission.
• Where instructed by the General Assembly or invited by another denomination, the Church of Scotland will enter bilateral or multilateral discussions and agreements with other denominations, thus striving for unity in areas of common cause or concern.

Through bilateral or multilateral engagement and agreements the Church of Scotland will maximise the use of its resources and thus strengthen its capacity to provide the “ordinances of religion” across the whole of Scotland and strengthen the mission of the Church. Councils of Assembly, as part of their ecumenical remit, will seek opportunities to share expertise and work alongside related bodies in other denominations.

9.3 **Commitment and support of local ecumenism:**
Church of Scotland Presbyteries, parishes and chaplaincy work will commit to furthering active relationships with neighbouring churches for the sake of common witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With legitimate diversity respected and treasured, we shall pray for, believe and seek to become more visibly one, holy, catholic, apostolic church. This will benefit from encouragement and support of the role of presbytery ecumenical contacts.

9.4 **Commitment and support of the Ecumenical Development Group**
The Church of Scotland will promote the development of ecumenism, including the development Local Ecumenical Partnerships throughout Scotland and appropriate to the local history, context and needs. This will involve a commitment of time and expertise to the Ecumenical Development Group and, internally, addressing matters of legislation or practice and procedure which currently make such partnerships difficult (eg appointment and deployment of staff in LEPs, or mechanisms for sharing premises or ministers, and mechanisms for determining allocations to central funds). Such strategies will encourage and enable local ecumenical initiatives to grow.

It will require the commitment of Presbyteries to enable local initiatives and, where appropriate, the appointment (and funding) of part-time Ecumenical Officers to service the area (eg as in Edinburgh and Glasgow). It will require revision of legislation to facilitate a variety of “partnerships” from shared buildings, to shared ministries, to joint funding of outreach and community programmes.

9.5 **Commitment to Ecumenism within the revised central structure of the Church of Scotland**
The future of Ecumenical Relations within the revised structure of the Church of Scotland will become
critical in engaging with a Churches Together Model.

The role of the Ecumenical Relations Officer will be pivotal in connecting with internal and external structures and ensuring that the Church of Scotland is appropriately represented nationally and internationally.

The composition of the Ecumenical Relations Committee and its representation in terms of internal and external committees will hold the key to future direction and policy making throughout the Church. It will be the bridge between internal policy makers, through the Councils of Assembly, and the Churches Together networks and international bodies in which we have an investment. Members of the Committee will formulate ecumenical policy on the basis of their knowledge and involvement in Councils of Assembly and ecumenical bodies, and in turn the Councils of Assembly, in their respective fields will promote the ecumenical principles to which we have signed up ie "to act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately".

10. In the past, one of the consistent criticisms of the ecumenical movement has been that it seeks to be a melting-pot and from such can only come some bland mixture that loses the great strengths and traditions of the denominations without the prize of something new and vigorous. We believe it is important at this point in our history to say unequivocally that we reject the notion of the melting-pot. We believe that it is time to think of the total church life in Scotland in terms of a woven fabric of faith, a cloth for the cradle, a robe for the king. We believe that that woven fabric is best envisioned, for us, in terms of a tartan. As we know, every tartan has one or two basic colours through which strands of other colours are woven, giving to the tartan its unique individuality. We aspire to such an understanding of Scottish church life where each colour, large and small, has its importance in the final design.