Sectarianism

Definition
The Church of Scotland defines sectarianism as a complex set of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures at personal, communal and institutional levels, which involves religion and typically involves a negative mixing of religion and politics. It arises as a distorted expression of human needs, especially for belonging, identity and the freedom of expression of difference, and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating.

In Scotland the modern story of sectarianism between different Christian traditions really began with immigration from Ireland in the first part of the 20th-century. The Church of Scotland at the time played a significant and shameful part in stirring up hatred against Irish migrants, though these views have long-since been repudiated.

Church Relations
Relations between the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Scotland, and between congregations and parishes at a local level, are very good. In 1990 many British and Irish Churches agreed a declaration which said that historical theological issues that underpin differences are no barriers to fellowship and to commitment to one another. The Churches acknowledged that there are differences of opinion on a range of theological, ecclesiastical, ethical and moral issues, which create tension and are not easy to live with, nor can they be dealt with quickly.

In Scotland Churches co-operate on many levels, from a high level recognition of each others’ baptism to working on issues of global peace and poverty alleviation, education in Scottish schools, to being involved in local churches together groups. The Church of Scotland believes that the animosity of the past is now history and that the Churches working together can be seen to be part of the solution rather than the problem.

Church Action
In 2002 and 2012 the Church of Scotland General Assembly received reports on sectarianism, including on its manifestations as well as how churches are responding. The Church committed itself to continued work to tackle sectarianism, and highlighted some of the good work which is taking place. Here are just a few examples:

Can you hear the bigots sing? This is a project of the Iona Community working with young and adult offenders to provide learning as well as a positive change in attitude, producing an ability to tolerate diversity and promote citizenship. 63% of participants showed a more positive attitude around issues of sectarianism in HMP Addiewell and 58% in HMP Barlinnie. As a result of the success of the pilot project further funding was awarded by the Scottish Government to enable the programme to be offered in a greater number of prisons between August 2010 and March 2011.

CAOS (Community Arts; Open Space) is an arts project in Clydebank: “It allows people to communicate with one another in a safe environment who may otherwise not do so because of their faith or beliefs. The Catholic primary school and the non-denominational school are at opposite ends of the estate. Every morning the children walk in opposite directions from one another... CAOS brings the families and the young people together breaking down religious and cultural barriers that have existed for generations.”

Larkhall Churches: There are regular ecumenical events including an Easter Parade where Catholics and Protestants march united in faith which was widely reported in the press as a unique ecumenical event in a community which had developed a reputation for being the most sectarian town in Scotland.

Two Lochs Project, Lochaber: The Two Lochs Project began about eight years ago when the two Church of Scotland ministers and the Catholic Priest and the Episcopal Priest got together and began to fundraise to employ a Christian Youth Worker: “We wanted to show Christ’s love in action and make no religious demands on the young people – well, it would be hard to encourage them to go to one church when we are all involved – the Salvation Army are also involved now.”

Government Response
The Scottish Government has responded to sectarianism, especially since a flare-up of violence in the 2011-12 football season. It has:

- Given more money to community and educational organisations seeking to respond to sectarianism.
- Established an expert advisory group, which is due to make its final report in the autumn of 2013.
- Created a new criminal offence relating to offensive behaviour at football and threatening communications.

The Scottish Government has given financial support to the Tackling Sectarianism Together pilot project run by Faith in Community Scotland, which works closely with the Church of Scotland on anti-poverty campaigning in local communities, and to A Place for Hope, a conflict resolution project established by the Church of Scotland.

The attitudes which gave rise to sectarianism formed over generations – it will take many years of joint effort to see them effectively eradicated from Scotland.
Questions for Reflection
Read John 4:1-42 (Jesus and the Samaritan woman). Old Testament laws included some requirements for purity and separation. Jesus’ encounter with this woman confounded him, but he came to the realisation that God has a plan for all people, not just his own.

• How does Jesus respond to different people?
• How do we respond to different people?

The Old Testament also had laws that required aliens to be cared for and given the same rights as widows and orphans – the most vulnerable in society.

• Who do we consider to be ‘alien’?
• How do we and our society treat migrants and aliens?

What does Christ’s encounter with the Samaritan woman in the stories suggest that the Church needs to be doing today?