

ECUMENICAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Moderator,

Listen to a pilgrim story. A woman on a hot, dusty, Middle Eastern road makes her way to a well. When she arrives she sees a man sitting there, taking a break from his journey. To her astonishment, he asks her for a drink. A conversation begins about water, the past, the present and many things which she does not fully understand, nor had ever thought to explore. At the end of it, the woman is transformed. With head held high, she shares her experience with others, inviting them to join her on a transformational journey, discovering and following the one who brings life.

You will recognise this paraphrase of the Gospel of John Chapter 4. That passage was at the heart of our worship and reflection during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year. As the World Council of Churches invites member churches to join a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, the passage directs us onto a pilgrim way of ecumenical encounter, conversation and transformation – a path which is at the core of the work of the Ecumenical Relations Committee and of our Report.

Jesus' journey begins, as all journeys do, with a choice of route. The safest road from Judea to Galilee avoided Samaria. Jesus does not walk that way. Instead he chooses the route which leads to the well where two strangers from two divided communities meet. On the surface, they have nothing in common; however they discover their mutual need of water: Jesus for that which quenches thirst, the woman for the life-giving kind only he can provide.

The Church, following Christ's footsteps, is called deliberately to choose the path on which we are bound to meet fellow travellers. Ecumenically, that means coming alongside our sisters and brothers from other denominations who, like us, draw life-giving water from the wellspring that is Christ; discovering the joy of knowing that we are not alone, realising that, despite our differences, we are bound together through the grace of God, grasping hold of our dependence on one another, so enriching our faith and fulfilling our calling.

Such encounter does not simply happen of its own accord. The Ecumenical Relations Committee is responsible for facilitating our participation, as a denomination, in international and national ecumenical bodies. These bodies compel us to take account of our travelling companions, who both inspire and challenge us on the way. They draw us into dialogue, and unite us in mission, so helping us to discover and live out the essential unity of the Church.

The body closest to us is Action of Churches Together in Scotland, which celebrates its 25th birthday this year. ACTS has identified local ecumenism as one of its three core priorities and appointed Miriam Weibye, an elder in the Church of Scotland, as its new Programme Officer with this particular remit. Through her work, ACTS seeks to encourage and support congregations as they journey together locally. Our annual conference, held jointly with ACTS in the autumn, brought together different generations, ministry candidates, and local representatives to explore what it means to be pilgrims together now.

The pilgrim path is one of intentional encounter. It is also one of engaging conversation. To return to the well, had the woman met Jesus and parted without exchanging a word, their meeting would have had little significance. It is through their dialogue that change and

challenge, insight and revelation dawn. Its hallmarks are honesty and deep searching, discovery and learning, where the past is faced, and the present embraced. Their conversation is not straightforward; it unfolds in stages, every phase bringing new understanding. Such conversations are not only at the heart of our relationship with God, they form the basis of all meaningful ecumenical encounter, whether in Churches Together groups, in ecumenical partnerships, between denominations, within ecumenical instruments. This pilgrimage of conversation lies behind our report. For example, it has taken us on a journey of mutual discovery and learning with the Church of England. This has led to the Church of Scotland being added to the list of churches formally recognised by the Church of England. This makes it possible for Church of Scotland ministers to conduct worship and preach in the Church of England when invited to do so and enables the setting up of Local Ecumenical Partnerships. It is hoped to bring a common statement arising from our bilateral Faith and Order talks to the Assembly next year.

Years of discussion with the Roman Catholic Church in the Joint Commission on Doctrine have led to ever developing good relations. The Committee welcomed most warmly the invitation to the Moderator for an Audience with Pope Francis. In that meeting, Pope Francis said, "The present state of ecumenical relations in Scotland clearly shows that what we, as Christians, hold in common is greater than all that divides us. On this basis, the Lord is calling us to seek ever more effective ways to overcome old prejudices and to find new forms of understanding and cooperation."

In particular, the Committee draws your attention to the current conversations with the United Free Church of Scotland. At its General Assembly last year, the United Free Church instructed its Ecumenical Relations Committee to take steps to bring the Covenant which had been agreed by our General Assemblies in 2006, to a close. In response, our Committee considered it vital to continue in conversation with the United Free Church, especially given our common membership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. We welcomed an offer from Rev Chris Ferguson, General Secretary of WCRC, to facilitate our on-going discussions. Both Ecumenical Relations committees intend to bring a joint report to our respective General Assemblies next year. Just as Jesus' conversation with the woman is searching and honest, enabling her to reach a new relationship with him, so the group sets about its work in faith, aware that it has much honest searching to do, yet trusting in the one who calls us to follow, and is hopeful of emerging into a new relationship, founded on our relationship in Christ. The Committee asks the General Assembly to commend this action.

The Committee also draws your attention to the convergence document from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches entitled *The Church: towards a Common Vision*. This springs from many years of conversation, and draws on responses of Member Churches to previous documents. It aims to promote thoughtful reflection and encourage discussion on what we understand by the Church, to affirm common ground and help us develop a Common Vision. The document will inform discussions at the ACTS Members' Meeting. Churches Together in Britain and Ireland has commissioned a study guide to aid conversations among churches. The WCC requested member churches to respond to the document and so the Committee decided to bring together a small group from our Councils, with the appropriate theological expertise, for the task. Their response, along with the full text, can be found on our website. The Committee asks the Assembly to approve this process.

There is more to all our encounters and conversations, however, than simply meeting and talking. They lead us forward on a pilgrim path of transformation. The woman's encounter with Jesus brings new, deep, spiritual insight. She is drawn closer to God than ever before as

Jesus reveals himself to her. No longer thirsty, given a new lease of life, she goes out into her community to share that transforming life with others.

The World Council of Churches brings together 345 member churches, representing over 500 million Christians worldwide. The 2013 Assembly in Busan, called on members to move together in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Our report shows how we are already travelling that road as a Church through our involvement in the work of ecumenical bodies and organisations in Europe and beyond. The WCC invites us to move forward on that path with renewed vision and energy, as a vibrant expression of our unity in Christ and shared faith in the transforming power of the Gospel.

The Committee asks the Assembly to encourage Presbyteries and Kirk Sessions to take up this invitation too. This Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is not only to be lived through structural organisations, nor left to others to walk on our behalf. Just as the woman returns to her community, her life changed, and becomes a channel through which life giving water flows, so we are called to make visible Christ's transforming life in and through the communities where we live and serve. The WCC has launched a website offering resources to help congregations discern their particular path in this pilgrimage and a forum to encourage sharing and learning from each other's experiences. We do not, and indeed cannot, walk that way alone. We are part of the one body of Christ, summoned onto the same path of faith as our neighbours in Christ, people, called as one, to worship God, in spirit and in truth.

In the week of Prayer for Christian Unity, people of faith leave familiar ground behind and gather at that deep well where we draw from Christ, our one common source of living water. Worship and prayer are at the heart of our ecumenical relations all year round. It is the channel from which every encounter, conversation, meeting or project springs. Through worship and prayer we are drawn into the unity which God has given us in Christ and to which Christ continually calls his church, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in worship together that we are inspired, changed, challenged. It is from worship that we are sent out on our pilgrim way, bearing the good news of Christ's transforming life, as we work together for justice and peace.

Moderator,

I present the Report and, as I am not a Commissioner, ask the Principal Clerk to move the Deliverance.

Rev Alison McDonald
Convener
Ecumenical Relations Committee
May 2015