**GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

**Speech by Rev Alison McDonald**

**Convener of the Ecumenical Relations Committee**

**To be delivered on Wednesday, 24 May 2017 at 9.30 am**

**Moderator,**

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*. There’s nothing like a bit of Latin to start the day. Before you wonder if the Committee is proposing that we revert to our ancient common language to ease ecumenical understanding, let me reassure you.

In this year of reformation anniversary, these words give shape to our report because of the ecumenical vision they contain. ‘A reformed church is always requiring to be reformed. ‘

That is how we expressed our identity as a church in 1986. General Assembly made another significant statement that year. We disassociated ourselves from sections of the Westminster Confession which condemn the Roman Catholic Church. In doing so, we opened up the way for a new phase in the relationship between our churches. Those able to look back 30 years will recognise how far we have travelled. Who would have thought that in 2016 Pope Francis would honour a Church of Scotland minister, former moderator and ecumenical officer by making her a Dame of the Order of St Gregory the Great? A richly deserved, personal recognition for Sheilagh Kesting, and one which reflects that ecumenical journey.

*Semper reformanda*, not a dusty, dead phrase, nor one calling us to introspection, but which as a reformed church, ever attentive to the word of life, urges us outward, towards our brothers and sisters in Christ, as Martin Luther said “not by force, but by the Word”. *Semper Reformanda,* a lively phrase which summons us to seek the healing of divisions through the reconciling power of the Spirit, and to discover our common calling as participants in the mission of God, within the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches holds *semper reformanda* before us through the prayer which will guide its General Council: “Living God, renew and transform us”. Delegates from around the world will gather in Leipzig, mindful not only of the Lutheran quincentenary but of the reforming movements which shaped the protestant church; acknowledging, with both gratitude and humility, the blessings received and the fractures which still run deep. As the Council unites in prayer, it will affirm that re-forming does not belong to the past alone but is the ever present prompting of the Spirit, leading the church from brokenness to unity, that the world might believe.

As an expression of its commitment to seeking that unity, the Council will travel to Wittenberg, home of a famous church door*.* During an ecumenical service, the World Communion as a body will join the World Methodist Council in associating with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, agreed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. The Committee has conveyed its concerns to the World Communion over the inadequate process of consultation leading up to the decision to associate. That said, the Committee sees the potential association may offer for developing relations between worldwide ecumenical bodies. As this particular reformation anniversary is marked ecumenically in Scotland, as well as across Europe, the committee invites the General Assembly to pray that the work of the General Council will bear fruit, as we too say “Living God, renew and transform us”.

We may make that prayer our own but we cannot pray for ourselves alone, nor even only within the reformed church family. We pray it in the company of the whole church of Jesus Christ, as we seek to be faithful servants of the Gospel.

As we respond to that prayer together, we are pulled by the Spirit towards deeper insights, awakened to new possibilities and, as a consequence, find our understanding being reshaped and our ways of engaging together challenged. Such a moment has arrived for Action of Churches Together in Scotland. The review of this Committee, as reported by the Council of

Assembly on Saturday, took note of a changing ecumenical landscape in Scotland. This now includes an increasing number of Orthodox, minority ethnic and independent churches. While local relations are often vibrant and diverse, our national ecumenical body brings together most, though not all of our historic denominations in Scotland. ACTS was formed over 25 years ago and, while the good work done and positive relationships built up have been affirmed, the Members Meeting agreed that the time had come to ask how we best carry out our common mission in Scotland today. To help us consider that question, it was agreed that a thorough and independent review of ACTS should take place. The ACTS Trustees have unanimously decided to invite the think tank Theos to conduct that Review. Theos is currently working with Churches Together in England. It is a sign of the trust and understanding which has developed between member churches that we are able to ask such critical questions together. The Committee fully supports the review and invites the General Assembly to take note of it.

Sometimes that process of exploring possibilities, and discerning with one another where energy and resources are best invested, leads to a decision not to venture down a particular path. The Committee reports that Churches Together in Britain and Ireland has been considering whether to make a bid to host the next General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Glasgow. The potential of such a gathering to energise our working together and expand our common vision was welcomed with enthusiasm by Glasgow Churches Together. However, the CTBI Trustees heard concerns, particularly over the financial investment required, and concluded that this was neither the right time, nor the most fruitful, unifying focus for the energies of British and Irish churches over the coming years. The Committee recognises the disappointment felt in Glasgow as we report that the Trustees recently took the decision not to proceed.

If there are times when ecumenical vision is tempered by necessity then there are also times when necessity releases and enlivens our ecumenical vision. Where is that impetus found today? Surely, not in our own survival but in our calling to participate in God’s mission, to proclaim the Word of Life. Such a task does not belong to any one part of the body but to the whole. That calling is at the heart of all our bilateral conversations where we begin with what unites us and consider how we might deepen that unity making it even more visible as we serve God in our land. Locally, wherever we live and serve*,* we discover how faith is enriched and God’s love made known through praying, worshipping, sharing resources, conversing, and serving with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Such encounters do not leave us unchanged. They challenge us to reorientate and reshape for the mission of God. One inspiring example of this is found across the border in Cumbria, the first ecumenical county in England. Partners and companions, including the Border Kirk, are developing strategies together for ministry, outreach, buildings. The aim is that every person in the county may have the opportunity to discover God’s love. During the Council of Assembly’s review consultations, the Committee heard a desire for greater support and encouragement of local ecumenism. We will be considering how that might best be done as we review the Church’s Ecumenical Policy.

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.* We are always requiring to be reformed, for we do not yet reflect the God given unity to which Christ calls us as his one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. As his body on earth we are called to grow ever closer to one another, allowing ourselves to be reshaped into Christ’s likeness, not for our own sakes but that the transforming life and love of God might be made known.

Living God, renew and transform us.

**Moderator**, I present the Report and move the deliverance, as well as the additional deliverance in today’s daily papers.