

An Ecumenical Audit

Summary Report



**Commissioned by
Action of Churches Together
in Scotland**



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Introduction

In the midst of changing patterns and structures of church and the challenges this presents locally and nationally, an ecumenical audit was commissioned by Action of Churches Together in Scotland to discover and reflect upon the nature of ecumenical engagement in three distinct areas of Scotland and to identify current insights, opportunities and needs on the ecumenical journey.

Focussing on these three areas of Scotland (Paisley, Inverness and St Andrews) in 2005, and working through the local Churches Together Groups, people in local churches were asked to engage in workshops, interviews and a postal questionnaire to describe and reflect upon their ecumenical experience.

This generated information on the nature of ecumenical activity, the challenges at local level, resources and support required from a national level.

What insights, needs and opportunities on the ecumenical journey?

An early discovery – particularly in the workshops - was the range and fluidity of the definition of “ecumenism” and what it means to engage ecumenically. On the one hand, some participants felt their church was engaging ecumenically by allowing anyone to participate - advertising their weekly church service times in the local paper (therefore anyone could come along), and deemed attending church events of the same tradition as themselves in the neighbouring town as ecumenical activity. Others were firm in their belief that ecumenism was about intentionally relating to and engaging in mission with those from other Christian traditions. Some felt strongly that ecumenical working should include interfaith relations, since all were part of the whole inhabited earth.

It was not the purpose of the audit to offer a “correct” meaning for the term, merely to note the differences of understanding and be aware of the impact these have for partnership and collaboration.

1. Why do people engage ecumenically – what is valuable about this?

Overall, the most common four reasons given by people (within the questionnaire) for what is valuable in working and worshipping ecumenically were as follows:

- ◆ increases understanding and breaking down barriers
- ◆ enriches relationships and community
- ◆ fulfils bible teachings and faith imperative
- ◆ presents visible Christian unity to the world.

2. What enables / is important for building good local ecumenical relations?

Questionnaire respondents prioritised the following as vital or quite important for building up good ecumenical relations:

- ◆ Addressing needs of local community together (90%)
- ◆ Socialising with other churches (83%)
- ◆ Worshipping with other churches (80%)
- ◆ ‘Shared bible study & discussion about faith (79%)
- ◆ Agreeing on issues of doctrine (34%)
- ◆ Having a formal agreement (19%)

Perceived challenges preventing churches working together ecumenically differ from one area to another, and are comprised of generic factors (time, apathy, limits to shared vision and commitment) and the particularly local (communication issues, historical prejudice).

Within the full version of the audit report, there is included a local ecumenical profile for each research area and the issues pertinent to each local area, which emerged from the interviews, and reflection thereon.

Emerging themes

By the end of the whole audit process, nine recurring (and overlapping) themes emerged as pertinent to ecumenical working. These form a window through which we can discuss issues, resultant conclusions and potential ways forward.

Nine themes emerged pertinent to the above which are discussed in the main results section.

- The Ecumenical Journey is a slow build up of trust based on experience
- Doing things together (not just talking about it)
- Ecumenism is an issue of identity and belonging.
- Socio-economic factors in ecumenism
- Focussing beyond ourselves and beyond our church structures is vital
- The Clergy / Lay tension
- New Models for working together
- Living the gift
- A question of theology and education

Conclusion

The audit forms part of a process of discernment for a way forward in reassessing the roles of local and national ecumenical groups in re-invigorating local ecumenical movements, which are at a crossroads. It is acknowledged that this is not simply an ecumenical agenda, but the responsibility of the whole spectrum of church as it seeks to work out gospel priorities within limited resources.

Far from being an end point, this ecumenical audit should be viewed as the opening of a door, necessitating reflection on deeper questions for reweaving local & national work and relationships.

It was the intention that the process itself (and not just the outcome) would be an educational one for the three local ecumenical structures as well as for ACTS. All three areas have made a commitment to further reflection upon publication of the results.

Clearly the impetus to respond to this audit comes from the denominations in Scotland as well as the ecumenical bodies in which they are represented. As such, there are numerous needs and possibilities that can be discerned from this report, not all of which can be addressed by any one group.

In addition to the responses of those receiving the report, here are, in outline, some potential ways forward.

Potential Ways Forward

1. Maintain relations with the three participating research areas as they discern what directions they take in the future.
2. There is a need to further explore and map out with those at grassroots level how people are working ecumenically in Scotland, and the insights available from this. The process of this audit will offer learning points as to how this may or may not be embarked upon.
3. There would seem to be merit in engaging in reflection with ecumenical organisations (as well as denominations) how the above might be shared and encouraged.
4. Actively encourage denominations and ecumenical organisations to collaborate in providing ecumenical learning initiatives (lay and ordained), so that local congregations might be encouraged to work together.
5. Continue to connect people at regional, national and international gatherings which enable people from the diverse range of churches to meet one another, share stories, resources, vision and good practice, as well as sharing issues and concerns.
6. Make known across the ecumenical networks the existing resources for worshipping together, as well as working together. The latter could include focussing on particular joint projects in different areas that merit celebration.

Fuller discussion on all aspects of the audit is available in the full version of the ACTS Ecumenical Audit Report.

Grateful thanks are recorded to all participants who shared of their experience, to Ruth Harvey and Stephen Smythe (ecumenical reflectors), to ACTS staff – in particular Lindsey Sanderson, and to the Local Ecumenical Audit Reference Group who oversaw the research.

Mairi Munro
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Interview themes



A selection of stories and reflections from interviewees.

“Shared worship is important. Sometimes it gets tiring trying to ‘do’ one another’s traditions. During worship at the Graz European Ecumenical Assembly in 1997 everybody was saying the Lord’s Prayer in their own language at the same time. You couldn’t understand what the next person was saying, yet you knew. We were held together by that shared worship experience. So many people worshipping God together in their own languages . It was overwhelming, yet very uplifting to feel part of a bigger movement. I found that very moving”

Eileen Nish, Fairtrade Campaigner & University Chaplain, Paisley

“Our church is very central to the town. It is used as a venue for ecumenical events and occasions – for example the Urban Mission Conference, Christian Aid Week events for all the churches, and the Scottish Episcopal Church Synod met there last year. But within our congregation there is a mixed response to ecumenism.”

Eileen Nish, Fairtrade Campaigner & University Chaplain, Paisley

“I had very positive experience in an Urban Priority Area where I worked in South Yorkshire. Our backs were against the wall much more than those in leafy suburbs. There was a lot of honesty, and people were willing to work together. This radically changed my own ideas and methods.”

Alex Gordon, Provost Episcopal Cathedral, Inverness

“It is a scandal that we are divided. It’s not the way it should be. There’s been a lot of sin in getting to the point that we are. When we come together, for whatever reason, at least for a moment, there is a glimpse of the kingdom in it. There is a sense in which we can’t shake off our history, as if it didn’t matter, but at least for a moment we can go beyond the scandal of the sin and actually see there is more to it than the very fragmented and partial experience that most of us have had.”

Alex Gordon, Provost Episcopal Cathedral, Inverness

“I worked in Sutherland in themed 80s. I had grown up there years before, and coming back I saw huge changes in ecumenical relationships. The Episcopal congregation met in the Church of Scotland building. We occasionally worshipped together however opportunities for study and doing things together were far more important.”

Alex Gordon, Provost Episcopal Cathedral, Inverness

“A high point for me was the East Easter Ross Interchurch Group, which was very lively. This got underway with the Episcopal Church in Invergordon and Tain and had drawn huge numbers of people. We had monthly meetings with study groups, social events, projects and discussion. There was also participation by the Roman Catholic Church. It was the time when the World Council of Churches document on one baptism had just come out. I found it a very valuable experience.”

Alex Gordon, Provost Episcopal Cathedral, Inverness

“I think the perspective of the serving cleric is very important in enabling ecumenical participation.”

Jim Alexander, architect & Ecumenical Officer for Inverness Presbytery.

“Disregard the institutional barriers which are there to people generally. I’d like to see dispelling of fear of crossing barriers into other denominations. The Spirit is there to challenge us and make us think.”

Jim Alexander, architect & Ecumenical Officer for Inverness Presbytery.

“Things have changed in Inverness. There is a diversity and richness of Christian observance and worship in this area that was closed until comparatively recently. It has not happened overnight, but has been building up slowly.”

Jim Alexander, architect & Ecumenical Officer for Inverness Presbytery.

“I think the hospital chaplaincy is the most ecumenical thing in Inverness. They hold Sunday services – lay people go and fetch folk from the wards. Ex patients also attend. Now the chaplaincy is doing weddings, funerals and baptisms. It is a particular model of church meeting a spiritual need. People will back loose affiliations and commit to one off events.”

Alistair Younger, Inverness Presbytery Clerk.

“There has been a sea shift in thinking, which the church hasn’t caught up with yet. Two generations are not at home in the church. Building real relationships is what is important. We’re too busy managing things and talking to ourselves within the walls. People need to meet each other where they are. The reticence has to go. Think what we could do with this time and energy if we were to release it!”

Alistair Younger, Inverness Presbytery Clerk.

“People often want nodding acquaintances, not intimacy – just to share the occasional project. Most people don’t catch an international ecumenical vision. So, let people do things differently and find their own level. It’s a description of where things are at in this stage of the ecumenical process.”

Willis Jones, Ecumenical Outreach Worker, Crown Church, Inverness.

“We haven’t yet gotten to grips with what it means to be a divided body. For centuries we’ve slipped into acceptance of division which is theologically dreadful. Persuading people out of this black hole can only happen by nurturing local projects not by joining at a top level. We need to keep on pressing for a sense of vision – what we’re about is Christianity, not denominationalism. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with loyalty to a denomination, but I’m restless with only that.”

Peter Donald, minister at Crown Church, Inverness.

“The church can be a catalyst to bring pressing social issues to public attention. In Inverness, it started with a night shelter for homeless people at Christmas. We knew more was needed, so with some money and a lot of effort there was a day / night shelter throughout the year. Local churches and the city authorities were working alongside each other. The project gained public funding and this displaced the need for churches to be active in it. What was interesting in terms of ecumenism, was that the local church people discerned the need and participated in addressing it. Thanks to a few people who were catalysts, churches caught the vision and took significant action. It was done ecumenically right from the start.”

Peter Donald, minister at Crown Church, Inverness.

“Unless you’ve really got dedicated lay individuals, I think ecumenical impetus all comes from the minister. People are subjected to the theological preference of their leadership. The ecumenical scene changes with ministers – if you get someone with wider vision, they take part. It’s a barrier to ecumenical engagement. It comes from training of church clerics. If an ecumenical perspective isn’t part of their training or ethos, they’re not going to pass it on to their flock. “

Patricia Moore, Inverness

“Christian Aid has been a great visible example of churches working together. All Christian Aid stuff for the Inverness areas is delivered to our house Each church collects what they need. The Christian Aid committee has reps from many churches. In the past they’ve run coffee mornings and

fundraising events, door to door collections, we've taken a shop for a week and people from different churches staff it, and our Lenten hunger lunches were joint with the then Inverness Open Meeting (forerunner of Inverness Churches Together). We don't do as much now. Quite a few people have gone on to be involved with Jubilee 2000, Drop the Debt and Make Poverty History.”
Patricia Moore, Inverness

“Being involved ecumenically at a national level gave me a wider perspective. I was able to pass on information locally about the work of ACTS and bigger event and activities. Involvement beyond the local has been very important for me. It's too easy to get set in your own way of doing things and you don't imagine anything different. It's good to know what others are doing and share ideas. . However initiatives should come from the grassroots up and not be imposed from the national level. “

Patricia Moore, Inverness

“How can we expect people in the world to love one another if Christians don't seem to love one another and don't embody what they preach?”

Patricia Moore, Inverness

On Palm Sunday, churches got together and organised a procession with a donkey from one place to the next. People were watching out from the Roman Catholic Church down the road and waiting for us to arrive. I think they expected a small group.

200 of us processed to meet them. As we approached the message went out “the Presbyterians are coming!” and they began to sing psalm 100 to welcome us. People gave up their seats in church and the building was full. The ministers spoke and refreshments were served. This created a social and liturgical experience which resonated with the scriptural story and the season. It was a tremendous demonstration of liturgical hospitality which I found very moving. “

Willis Jones, Ecumenical Outreach Worker, Crown Church, Inverness.

“A new image of church is needed. We must work on relationships, not isolation. It's more difficult for those who are tied to buildings. “

John Brown, Leader of Eden Fellowship, St Andrews

“In the past, visits to Scottish Churches House in Dunblane for conferences, spoke to our condition. These broadened our sense of church, and our sense of possibilities at grassroots. The gatherings and conferences were vehicles that allowed stories to be shared.”

Gill Conacher, ACTS liaison person St Andrews.

“ACTSA holds lunches for the week of prayer for Christian Unity in January each year. There used to be rota – 2 churches each day together provided lunch and we'd rotate the hosting church. Then one key organiser died. Others took over but found it too much for them. We decided to try something more manageable with rotating the churches. This became established after 2 years and now the church which hosts provides everything. It works very well and is more sustainable. People still travel between churches and services are led by folk from different churches.”

Gill Conacher, ACTS liaison person St Andrews.

“I spent years as part of an ecumenical prison chaplaincy team. It was remarkable. There was a mix of people – Mormons, Muslims, Pagans. It taught me about meeting people where they are – on their ground – not necessarily where you are. I had previously been part of the Gideon movement. It was a broadening experience, working with people from other churches. The receivers of bibles weren’t in the slightest bit worried about what denomination you came from. It’s about getting on with the job and meeting their need.”

Stuart Holdsworth, ACTSA Chair, St Andrews

“People are afraid of what change might mean. In churches we have a problem utilising gifts of lay people and communicating. New people will be attracted to ecumenism by the example of other people. In one sense everyone is an evangelist. Until we get the laity wanting to bring people we’ll never revitalise the ecumenical movement or the churches.”

Stuart Holdsworth, ACTSA Chair, St Andrews

“All too often we’re afraid to talk about our faith. In fact sometimes we are unsure what faith is. The educational issue keeps recurring.”

Stuart Holdsworth, ACTSA Chair, St Andrews

“I feel an increasing number of people are going out from St Andrews to village churches because they like the atmosphere. We’re witnessing a new model – where people congregate in churches and communities because they feel they ‘fit’, not out of denominational loyalty. “

Ian Bradley, St Mary’s College Chaplaincy Team & Lecturer, St Andrews

“The Inasmuch project has been important for us. For years about 70 people were involved each summer. It provided a very tangible focus. If you stand and stir soup with somebody you find that they are quite human, even if they come from a different Christian tradition from your own”

Margaret Macgregor, St Andrews

“I feel the Families First project in St Andrews is a good initiative. It was not generated within ACTSA (Action of Churches Together in St Andrews), and support for it is from individual churches, not through ACTSA. But ACTSA supports it even though it isn’t tied to it. It is a significant ecumenical activity. The purpose of our churches together group is getting people to do things together – it’s a tool and a forum for sharing information.”

Roy Macgregor, ACTSA Treasurer, St Andrews