Welcome back to the “Together” newsletter.

Ecumenical relations are about the quest for unity (not to be confused with uniformity) amongst the followers of Jesus. In John 17:21, Jesus prayed that his followers “may be one” – thus making unity a Gospel imperative. Sharing news, building cordial relations and good communications is an essential part of making this happen. Please do get in touch with the ACTS office to share information – particularly from local ecumenical groups around Scotland.

The ACTS office moved from Alloa to Stirling in October. The new arrangements are working well; the new ACTS office is located within the headquarters building of Volunteer Scotland – just a few minutes’ walk from Stirling’s bus and railway stations.

ACTS is currently developing a new strategic plan for work over the next few years. Inspired by the World Council of Churches’ Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, it envisages effective working between the member churches and co-operation with other ecumenical organisations (such as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland). It is hoped to finalise the plan by mid 2016.

Would you like to contribute to the worship resources and liturgical materials produced by ACTS? Please get in contact if you are interested.

Prayerful good wishes,

Matthew Ross
General Secretary, ACTS

Lent 2016

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) have produced a study course for Lent: “Each week, we are invited to gather in groups for reflection and spiritual conversation around a series of themes drawn from the overarching title of 'Pilgrimage'. The idea is that we embark on a spiritual journey through Lent, both alone and in company, sharing with others our personal reflections, stories and insights. The notion of 'Pilgrimage' is presented in the form of collections of sayings, images, wisdom and prayers from a variety of sources, which are gathered into a pack of seven conversation booklets suitable for personal and group use.” The material can be found at http://www.lentpilgrimage.org.uk

Prayer

We believe in God
the maker and shaper of our pathways;
who sent Jesus to show us the narrow way, and
who is the beginning and end of our travelling.

We believe in Jesus Christ
the sharer of our flesh;
who entered and experienced the human journey,
and who walks beside us on the road.

We believe in the Holy Spirit
the midwife and nurturer of our potential;
who drove Jesus out into the desert,
and who calls us now to cast off from the shore.

We believe in Father, Son and Spirit
the shaper, sharer and stirrer of our journeys;
and we recommit ourselves
to following their Way.

Pat Bennett
‘Bare Feet and Buttercups’
Scottish Churches Anti-Human Trafficking Group

One of the key areas of work for the Anti-Human Trafficking Group is to raise awareness of the plight of those who are sold into prostitution or forced labour in agriculture, fishing, the construction industry or domestic homes. If you were in George Street or the Pleasance during the 2015 Edinburgh Festival you may have come across two large walk-in sized boxes that looked like two huge brightly wrapped presents. These, in fact, were the UN GIFT Boxes that we brought to the city to provide information about this heartless trade. They also gave passers-by an opportunity to sign Stop the Traffik’s petition against the use of forced labour in the fashion industry. We brought further attention to the issue in a dramatic piece of street theatre, performed next to the boxes.

Last autumn the Scottish Parliament passed the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act. This strengthens previous legislation, ensures increased support for victims so that they can have the opportunity to recover and regain a sense of self-worth, and raises penalties for perpetrators to a maximum of life imprisonment. It should therefore send a strong message to those who cruelly demean others by treating them as mere commodities for profit and their own selfish purposes. We are pleased to have been invited to join the group which will oversee the government’s strategy for implementation of the Act.

Human trafficking, of course, does not stop at our shores. Acknowledging the global reach of this illicit trade and the opportunities that we have as one body in Christ, in October we brought together representatives of international partner churches in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Europe to pool knowledge and expertise in a supportive global network to learn how, together, we can all play our part in tackling human trafficking. We held a two-day symposium with our international partners, followed by a one-day conference for members of congregations and civil society from across Scotland.

We are also developing a series of resources that can be used in worship or bible study that we hope will soon be available on the ACTS website. We hope you will find them inspiring and useful as God continues his work through us to eradicate this evil crime.

To find out more information about the work of the Anti-Human Trafficking Group, please visit the ACTS website: http://bit.ly/1Vjocs5
Scottish Churches’ Rural Group

The Royal Highland Show attracts more than 200,000 people as agricultural families, communities and businesses come together at Ingliston, on the outskirts of Edinburgh, from 23-26 June in 2016. As well as being a wonderful celebration of rural life, a huge boost to the Scottish economy and a chance for livestock breeders and others to promote their skills, it’s an opportunity for the Christian Church to engage with Scotland’s people, at the Churches in Rural Scotland Stand, close to the main East Gate.

ACTS is the parent body to the group who arrange for the churches being represented at RHS where Christian resources suitable for rural congregations are displayed, church folk and others enjoy fellowship and conversations in which concerns, innovations, good-news and prayer is shared.

Last year more than 1000 people took the opportunity to stop at this stand to express thoughts, listen to speakers, pray, ask for advice, meet Bishops, Moderators, church-folk and ACTS staff, join in games with Scripture Union, and find out more about Street Pastors and other organisations.

The winter of 2015/16 has been an extraordinarily hard time for rural Scotland enduring harsh weather, the effects of flooding and financial changes resulting from new government policy. Some of our own committee were evacuated from homes when they were flooded. For this reason ACTS representatives have been working closely with Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution to try to establish a similar pastoral care and support service to farming families in Scotland as Farming Community Network (FCN) does south of the border.

FCN will be with us again at the stand this year, when we’ll also be asking Show visitors what they believe should be the priorities of the Christian churches in Scotland. With Internet connection and experts on hand to display online-resources, appropriate websites and greater space to meet with the public over a cup of coffee, 2016 is already looking exciting.

If you could enjoy representing the church, and your denomination, at the Royal Highland Show for a day, we’d love to hear from you.
Email: ecumenical@acts-scotland.org

If you are coming to the Show, then please call in on us, and don’t forget there is an opportunity to worship on the Sunday morning in the President’s tent with Show Chaplain Rev Jamie Milliken of Troon. If you would like to stay in touch with us and get more news go to our Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/churchesatrhs
Scottish Churches’ Children’s Group

The Scottish Churches’ Children’s Group will organise a day conference on Thursday 10th March 2016 in Glasgow:

The sexualisation of culture: a biblical response

Thursday 10th March 2016, 10.30 - 15.30. Venue: Salvation Army, 1 Houldsworth Street, Glasgow, G3 8ED. Houldsworth Street is a continuation of Argyle Street. Nearest railway stations: Anderston, approximately ½ mile or Central, 1 mile.

The conference will aim to address what impact is increased sexualisation having on our children. Stuart Weir (National Director of CARE for Scotland) will facilitate the main sessions.

The conference is aimed at those working with families with children who want to present a positive view of sexuality from a Christian framework but also to deal with the negative implications of living in an increasingly sexualised society.

The conference organisers want to start with the question; ‘Who do we want our children to become?’ and will seek to critique the influences on our children from a biblical standpoint. The theme will be tackled through input from Stuart Weir as well as through case studies, input from practitioners, roundtable and panel discussions.

To register online for the conference: http://bit.ly/1Wp90Kr

Teas and coffees throughout the day and lunch will be provided on a donation basis – suggested donation £5. For more information please contact: andy.bathgate@suscotland.org.uk

Local Ecumenism

The Ecumenical Development Group supports and reviews Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs), and engages with local expressions of ecumenism, such as Churches Together Groups.

Over the last several months, ACTS has been visiting groups around the country, learning about the ecumenical work going on locally.

Glasgow

Glasgow’s annual services of events and services have been well attended. The first anniversary of the Queen Street Tragedy was marked with a special service in Glasgow Cathedral in December. The GCT website http://glasgowchurches.org.uk/ has details about past and upcoming events.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh Churches Together has been active in organising a number of events, including a discussion panel on funeral poverty and a multi-cultural cabaret in support of the Court Chaplaincy Project. Please see Facebook if you’d like to find out more about activities in Edinburgh at http://on.fb.me/1POqziY

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
18th – 25th January 2016

Ecumenical groups around the country celebrated the week with the CTBI ‘Salt of the Earth’ material, and it was wonderful to hear the stories of the variety of services and events taking place in Scotland.

Churches Together Groups

Miriam Weibye, Programme Officer for ACTS, is keen to keep in touch with Churches Together Groups in Scotland. If you belong to a Churches Together Group, Miriam would welcome receiving contact details of your group. Please email: ecumenical@acts-scotland.org
News update

Scottish Churches House Legacy Reserve
The Scottish Churches House Legacy Reserve aims to enable Scotland’s churches and Christian organisations to resource new ways of ecumenical working. Between 1960 and 2011, the former Scottish Churches House in Dunblane was a centre for ecumenical encounter, sharing, challenge and development – the Legacy Reserve aims to continue this ethos. Applications are invited for the funding of projects; completed application forms must be submitted no later than 5\textsuperscript{th} January or 5\textsuperscript{th} August in any year. Property schemes (such as repairs or purchase) are not eligible. Further details and application forms are available from the General Secretary of ACTS.

Place for Hope
Aided by a grant from ACTS, Place for Hope is currently training additional mediators to help with their work. See: www.placeforhope.org.uk

Luther 500
31\textsuperscript{st} October 2017 will mark the 500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg. ACTS will work in partnership with the University of St Andrews on commemorating this seminal event in ecclesiological and European history, in a Scottish and ecumenical context. More information will be published in due course.

Farewell to Mervyn
Mervyn McCulloch, Executive Officer of the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Inter-church Meeting, will be leaving his post in 2016 to move to Sri Lanka, working as a mission partner with the Methodist Church. He was the guest speaker at the joint ACTS/Church of Scotland conference in October 2015. We wish him and his wife Raing well as they move from Belfast to Columbo. Website: www.irishchurches.org

Scottish Elections 2016
The Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office (SCPO) has published its resource paper for the Scottish Elections in May 2016. This includes a collection of topical briefings designed for Scottish church groups who are planning an election meeting/hustings event, and a ‘How To’ guide to help equip groups to organise such an event. Website: www.actsparl.org

Scottish Church Census
Every one of the 4,000 local churches in Scotland will be invited to take part in the most comprehensive survey ever undertaken of churchgoing in this country! This is a comprehensive survey of all denominations and every local church in Scotland. It will measure trends in churchgoing, and also explore certain factors which are thought to lie behind some of the recent changes in churchgoing patterns. For more information please see www.scottishchurchcensus.com

About ACTS
Founded in 1990, Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) is a joint initiative of the Church of Scotland, Congregational Federation, Methodist Church, Religious Society of Friends, Roman Catholic Church, Salvation Army, Scottish Episcopal Church, United Free Church of Scotland and United Reformed Church. ACTS aims to bring Christians of different traditions in Scotland closer to one another in their shared faith in Jesus Christ by meeting, praying, learning, reflecting and acting together on matters of common concern.

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Action of Churches Together in Scotland is registered in Scotland (at the above address) as a Charity (no. SC00295) and as a Company limited by guarantee (no. SC348236)