From the General Secretary

Welcome to the latest edition of the “Together” newsletter.

In April, ACTS organised a visit to Brussels for church leaders and senior representatives. This was an invaluable opportunity to learn more about the work of the European Union, particularly given the UK’s membership referendum on 23rd June. A report from the ACTS Convener is contained within this edition.

ACTS Programme Groups continue to be busy. More information on coming events will be available soon; please check the ACTS website regularly for information.

Looking ahead, please note some of the forthcoming events – such as the Scottish Churches tent at the Royal Highland Show (23-26 June), the CTBI conference on visible unity (22-23 November) and the annual joint ACTS/Church of Scotland day conference, which will be at Nicolson Square Methodist Church, Edinburgh, on Saturday 8th October. More information will follow.

The work towards a new strategic plan for ACTS is ongoing. I had hoped that it would be complete by now, but is taking more time. The importance of getting such a document right (rather than rushed) is paramount.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish the Very Reverend Dr Sheilagh Kesting, Ecumenical Officer of the Church of Scotland since 1993, a long and happy retirement. Sheilagh will retire this autumn and will be greatly missed; I thank her for all her work in furthering ecumenical relations.

Prayerful good wishes,

Matthew Ross
ACTS General Secretary

Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)
Historic ecumenical agreement between the Church of Scotland and Church of England

This account is based on news reports from the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church

In May 2016, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland unanimously backed a landmark agreement to enter into an historic ecumenical partnership with the Church of England.

The Archbishop of Canterbury the Most Rev Justin Welby made history when he took part in a debate on the issue at the General Assembly Hall on the Mound in Edinburgh.

Under the terms of the agreement, both denominations would welcome one another’s members into congregations and ordained ministers would be allowed to exercise ministry within the existing discipline of each church, though only within England and continental Europe.

Speaking after the vote, the Reverend Alison McDonald, Convener of the Church of Scotland’s Ecumenical Relations Committee, said: “I am delighted that the General Assembly has accepted the report and the Columba Declaration this morning. It is the end of what has been a very long process up to now, but it is the beginning of looking forward to new work examining how we will implement the Columba Declaration.”

The Archbishop of Canterbury said: “I am absolutely delighted with the result and hugely grateful for the support of the General Assembly.” He added that the most significant part of the Columba Declaration was both denominations formally recognising each other as Churches. “It is a huge step and once you have done that there is a massive impulse to develop it into a deeper and deeper relationship, not only in the UK but internationally with Presbyterian churches,” he added.

Ms McDonald said the Kirk had build up partnerships not only within the Reformed Church family but across denominations. “So while within Scotland our Anglican neighbour is the Scottish Episcopal Church, in England, and mainland Europe, places where the Church of Scotland has congregations, it is the Church of England,” she added.
The Archbishop said: “We are united in witness to Christ as churches called to share the gospel with the whole world, as we have done in the past overseas, now facing common challenges together. The report is about growing in communion through and for partnership in mission, taking us back to the roots of the ecumenical movement. But more than that is about the call of Jesus Christ to visible unity, so that he may be known. We know there are serious issues to be faced in our relation with you [the Church of Scotland] around recognition and reconciliation of ministries. We know too that while in facing common challenges we have so much we can learn from one another, and so much we can do together.”

The Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Most Rev David Chillingworth, said: “We are grateful to the General Assembly for extending an invitation to the Scottish Episcopal Church to appoint a member to the contact group being created to take forward this agreement between the Church of Scotland and Church of England. That will give us the opportunity to be actively involved in future developments. Our representative [the Scottish Episcopal Church’s] at the Assembly this year, the Rt Reverend Mark Strange, Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness, was able to express our common desire to move forward in furtherance of the Gospel of Christ and expressed our thanks for the gracious apology given by the Archbishop of Canterbury during his address to the Assembly.”

Royal Highland Show
Please come and visit the Churches in Rural Scotland tent at the Royal Highland Show, Ingliston, 23rd - 26th June 2016
“Called to be One”: CTBI conference, Edinburgh, 22-23 November 2016

This conference will aim to explore current understandings of what is meant by “visible unity”. Hearing from those involved in local contexts, new developments in inter-Christian co-operation, as well as recent ecumenical agreements.

The conference will be organised by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and will take place in the Holiday Inn Edinburgh City West, 107 Queensferry Road, Edinburgh. See the CTBI website: www.ctbi.org.uk

Local ecumenical groups

Please do share your news with Miriam Weibye at the ACTS office.

Annual Conference

The joint ACTS / Church of Scotland ecumenical conference will be on Saturday 8th October at Nicolson Square Methodist Church, Edinburgh. Details to follow on the ACTS website.

ACTS visit to Brussels, 5-7 April 2016

By the Rev John Butterfield, Convener of ACTS

In early April a group of eighteen church leaders from Scotland visited Brussels on a study tour organised by ACTS. The purpose was to understand better the workings of the European institutions in preparation for the looming referendum. The two-day programme included presentations on the work of the European Commission, meetings with MEPs at the European Parliament, a briefing at the Scottish Government’s Representation in Brussels, a meeting with the Irish Commissioner and a discussion with the staff at the offices of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME). The visit was supported and facilitated by the European Commission’s Office in Scotland.

The visit took place just days after the bombings in Brussels – resulting in our inbound flight being diverted to Antwerp. Maalbeek Metro station – where 20 died – is directly opposite the hotel where we stayed. The visual image of the candles and flowers
of remembrance was deeply poignant.

Flowers at the Bourse, Brussels, 8 April 2016

On entering the Commission visitor centre you are greeted by a display outlining the priorities of the EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. These can basically be summed up in the phrase “Trying to do fewer things better.”

Our programme looked at the major issues facing the EU today with migration being at the top of the agenda. The priority of the Commission in this area is to prevent loss of life at sea. The way to tackle this is to reduce the incentive for migration, to save lives and secure borders, to develop a common asylum policy but also to continue to allow legal migration as young workers are needed across Europe. This is a highly complex area. Even when leaders agree a strategy, many states have a problem “selling” the deal to their people. Of the many pledges made, few have been realised. Migration has been described as the biggest moral issue facing Europe at the present time. We learnt the wise words from the German church “Integration policy must not produce losers either in refugees or in local community”.

Another hot issue is the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). There has been opposition from some quarters to this proposed comprehensive trade deal. Following a presentation on TTIP and the many safeguards and the various levels of approval necessary, including approval by national parliaments, we were reassured that this would not have the dire consequences that many critics have suggested.

The single market is another important area being continually developed to make it deeper and fairer. One recent initiative is breaking down barriers is in the digital sharing economy – for example Uber is banned in some European cities and AirBnB is illegal in Berlin. The Commission has been successful in preventing discrimination for example by stopping Euro Disney charging higher prices to people from the
UK than those booking from France.

Finally the group spent a couple of hours at the offices of the Conference of European Churches at the heart of the political centre of Brussels. Here we heard of how CEC is continually working to influence the EU on matters such as human rights, migration, human trafficking, Roma people, and sustainable development goals.

The General Secretary of ACTS Rev Matthew Ross summed up: “This has been a very worthwhile trip. We have been briefed by experts from the European Commission on the major issues facing Europe. This will help to ensure that the churches are properly informed about the issues before the forthcoming referendum.”

**Meeting of General Secretaries from across Europe**

The General Secretaries of national ecumenical organisations from across Europe met in Lisbon, 30 May – 3 June. This annual meeting, facilitated by the Conference of European Churches, is an important opportunity for the General Secretaries to meet and discuss issues. The meeting was held at St Paul’s Cathedral, Lisbon – the Cathedral of the Lusitanian Church (the Anglican Church in Portugal) at the invitation of the Portuguese Council of Christian Churches (COPIC).

![Cardinal Manuel Clemente, Patriarch of Lisbon, addressing the meeting](image)

Presentations relating to the ongoing refugee crisis were given by the Rev Alfredo Abad Heras (Spain), Vice-Moderator of the Executive Committee of Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, and Cardinal Manuel Clemente, Patriarch of Lisbon. Cardinal Clemente took a special interest in the group and offered a personal guided tour of the historical treasures of the Monastery of São Vicente de Fora. He engaged the group in an
open and powerful dialogue on the need for churches to act and speak out on behalf of migrants and refugees in Europe. Participants also learned about the situation in Portugal from Dr Rui Marques, President of Platform for Refugee Support (*Plataforma de Ajuda aos Refugiados*).

Religious freedom and trends in religion in Portugal were also featured on the agenda. CEC Study Secretary Peter Pavlovic led the group in a discussion of EU economic governance, and introduced the work of the European Christian Environmental Network in advance of its upcoming assembly in Helsinki.

On behalf of the General Secretaries gathered in Lisbon, COPIC President Bishop Sifredo Teixeira wrote to CTBI and the National Ecumenical Instruments in the UK (including ACTS) in advance of the forthcoming referendum on EU membership: “Please be assured of our prayers and good wishes at this momentous time of decision. We believe that peace and reconciliation lie at the heart of the European Union, particularly given the legacy of past conflicts.”

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**Think, Pray, Vote**

Resources for churches regarding the EU membership referendum on 23rd June 2016 from the Joint Public Issues Team are available online: www.jointpublicissues.org.uk

**Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees – conference**

Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees will hold a conference at St Andrew’s and St George’s West Church, George Street, Edinburgh, on 21st June. For more information please visit the website see: www.sfar.org.uk

ACTS is pleased to support the Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees and has awarded a grant of £12,000 from the Scottish Churches House Legacy Reserve to help with their work.

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**Visit the ACTS website**

www.acts-scotland.org
GETI ’17 is an ecumenical theological initiative for education and encounter for advanced theology students from all over the world who are studying in Europe. It will take place in Berlin, 19 May - 1 June 2017. The opportunity for encounter and joint studies will aim to contribute to a European network of contacts and strengthen the mutual perception of European and migrant churches. Participants shall study and experience horizons of ecumenical theology and ecclesiology. The approach of GETI ’17 can be summarised under three headings: Reforming Theology - Migrating Church - Transforming Society. Full details are available online at: www.geti-17.de