



Being Ecumenical in Scotland Today¹

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Whether or not you are ecumenical in Scotland today depends on where you are, where you come from, your life experience of people in other church traditions, and probably the attitude of the minister or priest in your congregation.

There are a number of things that affect the ecumenical landscape of Scotland.

1. There is our history of bitter division from the sixteenth century cemented with blood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
2. There is the effect of sectarianism particularly as manifested in the West of Scotland, though not without its influence elsewhere.
3. There is the dominance of the Church of Scotland and, in more recent years, the twin dominance of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church, both churches that are in principle committed to ecumenism but in practice find it very hard to do.
4. The two biggest factors affecting local ecumenism is the attitude of the local clergy – particularly in the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church – on the one hand and the denominational superstructures on the other.

On the surface all of these are all negative but closer examination reveals that they are also the points of opportunity. Ecumenical activity is born when the light of the Gospel is seen to shine in precisely those situations of bitter memory or ingrained indifference.



1. Our history of division

It is a mute question whether it was theological principle or political expediency in the need for peace in the United Kingdom that played

the greater part in the settlement of Presbyterian government for the Church of Scotland. Both certainly played their part, but the bloodiness of the centuries that followed the Reformation in Scotland left a lasting legacy which still influences attitudes to this day. That period was marked by a see-sawing between Presbyterianism and Episcopalianism with almost every change of monarch until the matter was settled in 1690.

Throughout much of the twentieth century the Church of Scotland was engaged in union talks of one kind or another. First there were talks with the Church of England, then Anglican-Presbyterian talks with the Church of England, the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church of England, then talks with the Congregational Union of Scotland and then the Methodist Church. When bilateral efforts were seen to fail, and following the suggestion of the Nottingham Faith & Order Conference of 1964, there began the Multilateral Church Conversation which was to feed into the most recent talks, the Scottish Church Initiative for Union (SCIFU), an initiative that was effectively killed in the Church of Scotland in 2003 and buried by the Scottish Episcopal Church the following year. With the exception of the talks with the Congregational Union (as it was then) the responses from Church of Scotland presbyteries in each of the other sets of talks were obsessed with bishops. When the SCIFU process chose to use the term ‘bishop’ even some of the most ecumenically-minded people in the church admitted that it was the *word* that stuck in the throat, not the role. And behind the word lies the spectre of seventeenth century prelacy which has long been confined to history and not least within the Scottish Episcopal Church itself.

Irrespective of whether you think talks on structural union are a good thing or not, the fact remains that the Church of Scotland has a huge problem with personal leadership beyond the local congregation and so is perpetually in a weak position when it comes to relating ecumenically at regional and national levels. The evolution of Synod Moderators in the United Reformed Church filled a gap that is still gaping in the Church of Scotland. The same could be said about the lack of a General Secretary. Where that role is seen to be most

effectively exercised it is where the task is clearly restricted to one of pastoral care and visionary leadership within the denomination as a whole.

It may be the case that it is easier for a non-episcopally ordered church to evolve a personal ministry of leadership at regional and national level when the cultural background is Anglican. Nevertheless, the Church of Scotland is not doing itself any favour, it seems to me, when it clings to a model that is inefficient in its ability to engage with the other churches in Scotland, many of which are churches organised on a UK basis and/or are part of major world-wide communions.

The Church of Scotland's delegate to the General Synod of the Scottish Episcopal Church in 2004 was somewhat stung by the response she received from the Convener of the Inter-Church Relations Committee. She had said that she loved Episcopalians. In fact, she said, she loved them so much she did not want them to change any more than she expected to have to change her Presbyterianism to suit them. The convener responded by saying that in fact the Scottish Episcopal Church *had* changed.

The Church of Scotland is changing but it is an internal exercise without any real consideration of how such change will affect other denominations. The changes in the Scottish Episcopal Church, for example bishops in council, ordination of women to the priesthood, the creation of a permanent diaconate, were all changes that were seen as aiding ecumenical relations, although ordination of women to the priesthood did have negative implications for relations with the Roman Catholic Church.

But the point stands. These were areas that were identified as stumbling blocks to union in the Multilateral Church Conversation. Compare this with the Church of Scotland. In 1968, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland received a report of the responses from Presbyteries to the preliminary proposals for union with the Congregational Union of Scotland. The report stated:

*Some Presbyteries showed a keen and sympathetic understanding of the point of view of the Churches of the Congregational Union; others appeared to consider the matter entirely from the point of view of the Church of Scotland.*²

Exactly the same could be said about the responses to the SCIFU proposal thirty-five years later. Could it be that one of the reasons why there are so few Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) in Scotland is not just the size and self-sufficiency of the Church of Scotland in particular, but its uncompromising attitude and fear of diluting its Presbyterianism? The dogged defence of Presbyterianism in many a Church of Scotland parish inhibits good ecumenical relations in too many places. And with the defence comes an arrogance. We in the Church of Scotland have the weight of history behind us. If others want to work with us all they need to do is to join us and do it our way!

But, of course, our history is also the jumping off point for positive developments in ecumenism. It is precisely this history that has encouraged clergy and laity alike to make contact across denominational boundaries in towns and cities across the country: joint services are commonplace; Lent Study Groups are a recognised part of the Christian year; all kinds of informal contact is being made and in some places formal covenants are now emerging. As people have had to come to terms with an increasingly secular society, and Scotland has become more consciously a multi-faith society, and the churches themselves have become smaller, so the divisions of the past have become increasingly irrelevant. We are Christians together with a common calling. We have come to realise that what we share is more than what divides us. And so when asylum seekers and refugees arrive in Scotland it is unthinkable that church groups set up to give them support and advice would be anything other than fully ecumenical. There is a growing conviction that to tackle the depth of poverty that exists in Scotland, the churches must work together and also in partnership with other bodies. When Christians work together it very soon becomes obvious that they need also to pray together. The two cannot be separated.



2. Sectarianism

Part of our history is what has been described as “Scotland’s shame” – the scar of sectarianism that persists, now often in a less visible form than previously. Around in some sense since the Reformation it took on a particular form when Irish immigrants, forced out of their homes by poverty and the potato famine, settled in Scotland. The Church of Scotland accepted reports in the 1920s and 30s which helped nurture a sectarian attitude. As the twentieth century went on these became buried in the books of Assembly reports and were largely forgotten until recently. As Catholics became fully integrated into Scottish society and were to be found in all echelons of Scottish life it was common both in church and in society to say that, apart from on the football terraces, sectarianism had ceased to be a problem in Scottish society ... until James Macmillan, the Scottish composer brought the subject once again into the public domain and forced the Scottish people, and among them the churches, to take the matter seriously.

One example of the unconscious legacy of an anti-Catholic past is the continued use of phrases like ‘the Catholic religion’, ‘the other faith’. There must be few places where inter-faith dialogue is understood as an inter-Christian dialogue – and Scotland is one of them.

But again, the very shame of our history can be the catalyst for ecumenical initiative. The Church and Nation Committee brought a report to the General Assembly of 2002 in which it confessed the Church of Scotland’s part in the sectarian past with specific reference to the reports that were written between 1926 and 1934 when the Committee campaigned vigorously against Irish immigration, a racism that contained sectarian implications. Happily, by 2002 relations with the Roman Catholic Church were such that it was possible to discuss the issue of sectarianism in an atmosphere of trust. Over a twenty-year period relations with the Roman Catholic Church had been improving at all levels of church life, not least in Glasgow and Lanarkshire, often through the determined leadership of ministers, priests and bishops. People had been to each others’ churches, they had talked about the faith they shared. Perhaps they had become involved in groups helping

asylum seekers and so on. The world had moved on. The Roman Catholic Church was a full member of Action of Churches Together in Scotland (ACTS) and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and many local Churches Together groups. All this meant it was possible to make the confession without fear that it would re-open old wounds and breathe new oxygen onto the embers of sectarianism. Not that sectarianism has disappeared. But there is clear evidence that so far as the churches are concerned they are engaged together in helping to rid Scotland of this blight – including the residual attitudes that remain in some church people and clergy even to this day. It is now not uncommon to find the Moderator and the Cardinal appearing together at events that make it clear to all that sectarianism is no longer to be tolerated.



3. The dominance of the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland³

Where the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church are prepared to open their resources – material and personnel – to ecumenical use much can happen. The Churches Together philosophy was welcomed by the smaller churches in Scotland as offering them the opportunity of access to resources, to research, to contact with civic and political structures that they did not otherwise have or offering access to wider ecumenical issues in a way that was sometimes more immediate than through their denominational access south of the border. It was to give them a Scottish context within which to operate. Through the networks of ACTS, and the Commissions before them, information could be shared and joint work undertaken.

The Church of Scotland has been very generous in terms of financial support of the ecumenical instruments from the beginning. When ACTS was directly funded the proportion of its budget that came directly from the Church of Scotland was enormous and that was not healthy and it has its dangers. To begin with it makes the instrument very vulnerable to any change of policy or tightening of the financial belt. It could have, though to my knowledge it never has, led to an attempt to manipulate the work of the instrument – he who pays the

piper ca's the tune. Although the figures remain the same, the effect is not so obvious now that funding for all the instruments is done centrally through a CTBI common pot, thus ensuring appropriate sharing not just with smaller churches but also with the smaller national instruments.

However, the story of the Scottish Churches Open College demonstrates the vulnerability of ecumenical bodies that are overly dependent on funding from one source. The College was set up by the Church of Scotland but with collaboration with other denominations who contributed according to their means. Financial problems in one of the smaller denominations which led to unilateral action created the first crisis, but nothing compared to the crisis when the Church of Scotland decided to withdraw its funding because it wanted to do its adult training differently. Sadly, with the tightening of the financial belt in the Church of Scotland in recent years there has been a tendency to retrench. This has affected the extent to which its ecumenical commitment is followed through. There is some resentment about the amount we make available to other denominations for apparently little return.

There are several issues here:

- If the Church of Scotland is the main funder to what extent do the other denominations really feel they own the work?
- Do their representatives make attendance at management meetings a priority?
- Can the Church of Scotland be brought to accept that its history, size and comparative wealth means it will inevitably be the major funder of most ecumenical endeavours in Scotland and it should accept that as its privilege and its responsibility?

As finance tightens there is a temptation to resist using money, as it is seen, to “support” other churches. The Church of Scotland is not alone in this. There is generally a loss of the conviction from the 1990s that committed ecumenism is a way of conserving resources.

Denominational preciousness has meant that this theory has not been tried and found wanting. We have not trusted it enough to really try it.

And it's not just on financial issues. The Church of Scotland has not always been so generous with its sharing of access. It is too easy for the Church of Scotland and for the Roman Catholic Church too to do their own things with no collaboration, and just sometimes an invitation to others to participate that comes too late in the process. And then they go all huffy – 'We asked them but they didn't accept our invitation ...'. It takes less time to use the well-oiled wheels of denominational procedure than to do the necessary preliminary consultation to enable something to be owned by all. And while that is a criticism of the large churches, it is not confined to them, by any manner of means. If people are not on board when the train leaves the station, as it were, there can never be a sense of ownership or mutual responsibility.

Another aspect is evident in the way in which the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church support the ecumenical bodies. If they do not send their key people to ACTS and CTBI meetings or those appointed do not make attendance a priority or, once there, are not in a position to facilitate a greater degree of ecumenical co-operation, then the whole ecumenical enterprise at national level is jeopardised. The initial structure of ACTS did not command the confidence of the two larger churches. However, there is some evidence that the revised structure is working better. It will be interesting to see what emerges from the anticipated ACTS review.

The Church of Scotland, again because of its size and its history, has for many decades kept the Scottish voice heard in ecumenical circles in the UK and Ireland, Europe, and the world. It has sought to have a place on the Central Committees of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) and on the Executive of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). It has at times seconded staff to these organisations and many others have been directly employed. It is only in recent years that a new voice is being heard which says what is important is not that there is

a Church of Scotland person but someone from Scotland, irrespective of denomination. Work has been done on ensuring proper feedback to all the churches involved and more work needs to be done on sharing the cost of travel and accommodation for meetings. Scotland is valued well beyond its size in the wider ecumenical scene where it is recognised that we often have a distinct voice. Participating today in the international scene requires new attitudes and a willingness to co-operate.



4. A Growing Field of Ecumenical Engagement

Around ACTS and CTBI have gathered a number of ecumenical groups that relate to the churches and may be funded in whole or in part by them and which allow for an ever-expanding field of ecumenical engagement. These groups each have a particular focus. They range from organisations like Christian Aid and SCIAF, the Iona Community, Scottish Churches Housing Action, the Network of Ecumenical Women in Scotland (NEWS), and committees to do with education, healthcare chaplaincy, industrial mission, ministry among children, eco-congregations, the parliamentary office, racial justice, interfaith relations, and to a very limited extent ministerial formation. The list is long and the activities are varied, but these bodies in association and the associated ecumenical groups show where energy lies. Some, like Christian Aid, are linked into international ecumenical alliances engaged in emergency relief work, advocacy and development. NEWS has a link to the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women, a body associated to the Conference of European Churches. And so on. Each of these bodies keeps alive a vision of Christian discipleship and witness and continues to put pressure on the churches to do more of their routine work together.



5. Being Ecumenical locally

Here history, geography and theology all play a part. If you live in the Western Isles and the Northwest of Scotland then your main interest is likely to be in relations with the Free Church and the Associated Presbyterian Churches. There may be Scottish Episcopalians and

Roman Catholics around but it is the Free Church that dominates. Very gradually, there is evidence of an increasing amount of contact with the Free Church and the possibility in some places of joint prayer meetings is being explored. There is also some joint work with young people. But it is all extremely sensitive.

There are some places where the Church of Scotland is the only church in a village, with perhaps long distances across land or sea to another denomination. ‘We have no-one to be ecumenical with’ we are told. In such circumstances we have been trying to encourage an attitude that takes an interest in the ecumenical mix within the congregation so that people learn more from each other about the different church traditions, though that too has its difficulties. People can have weird and wonderful ideas about their own tradition! A lack of interest in the central structures of the churches can mean people operate with an out of date understanding of their tradition as it was when they grew up or when they trained.

Although SCIFU failed, the principle behind the maxi-parish has emerged in the Church of Scotland in the guise of parish groupings. We hear stories of some congregations asking that their grouping should be ecumenical. The possibility of working with the resources produced by the Scottish Churches’ National Sponsoring Body (NSB) for Local Ecumenical Partnerships has been opened up, and it is to be hoped that there will begin to be more ecumenical agreements in the future. As the NSB approves more guidelines, it should become less tortuous for congregations to draw up such agreements.

Listening to the responses from presbyteries to the SCIFU report, the message was that a lot is happening at local level. And that is undoubtedly true. But what is it that is happening? There was more than a hint that people have not progressed beyond the four or five ecumenical events a year, with perhaps a larger town or regional gathering from time to time. But there does not appear to be much of a genuine exchange, a getting to know one another at a deeper level. It is evident that there is a huge amount of ignorance both about other denominations and not infrequently about one’s own. Those of us who

are engaged in enabling the development of ecumenical relationships have singularly failed to communicate, far less kindle interest in what can happen. People are unaware of the extent of co-operation and commitment that is possible. Ministers hide behind their congregations – ‘they wouldn’t like it’ – and won’t risk a journey together. But where that risk is taken – the rewards are immense.

Livingston is a swear-word in some quarters of the Church of Scotland – the experiment that failed. It is held up as a warning to others who might want to follow suit. And yet anyone who actually takes the time to engage with Livingston cannot but be impressed by the energy and commitment of the people, by their determination to hold onto and develop the ecumenical vision that set them up back in the 1960s. Recently, when the Church of Scotland failed to rise to the challenge of a rapidly expanding population by first seeking a site for a new church to be built and then having to say that there was no money to proceed, the people of Livingston planted their own new church, using a community hall, in an expanding area of the town.

From Canonbie in the south to Westray in the north where clergy have encouraged their congregations to journey gradually towards a new vision of church life there is energy and excitement. One concern my colleagues in the other churches and I share is that we know that there are places – we don’t know how many – where co-operation is good and there may even be a loose covenant agreement, but we know nothing about it. The reluctance to engage with the structures means we only hear a fraction of what is happening. Sometimes we find out by accident. What many take for granted as part of their church life can be of interest and encouragement to others – if only we know about it!

If I’ve given a mixed picture, that is how it is. Ecumenism in Scotland today is alive, but it limps a little. Denominational insecurity in a time of change hampers ecumenical co-operation, despite the rhetoric. People feel they need to get their own house in order before they can engage with others. There is no sense that others can help us change. The demographic spread of the churches across the country makes

it impossible to have a uniform pattern of engagement. And we are obsessed by numbers which ensures that there is a competitive edge that is barely concealed.

But time and tide wait for no one and the tide has turned for the churches. We can no longer assume the place at the table we once had in our society and we each face similar problems. After seventy-five years the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church are to enter a covenant as a sign of their willingness to do more things together and put the past behind them. The Scottish Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church continue to meet to see what is the way forward for them post SCIFU. The Church of Scotland is in an awkward position. Its ecumenical commitment was found wanting when it became clear that it had agreed to be part of the SCIFU process but had no intention of agreeing any proposals that might emerge.

And yet the Church of Scotland has restructured and every department has an ecumenical dimension to its remit. How that will be worked out remains to be seen. It is early days. But what is quite clear is that whatever the Church of Scotland does, it has implications for the ecumenical health of Scotland. Being ecumenical in Scotland may be patchy, but it is far from being absent. The scenery has changed in the last twenty years and there is no going back.

- ¹ Revision of a paper given at the conference ‘Becoming What You Are – The Challenge of Christian Unity in Britain Today’ held in Iona Abbey, 9-15 October, 2004.
- ² *Reports to the General Assembly* (Edinburgh: The Church of Scotland, 1968), 423.
- ³ In rough terms, the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church have between 500,000 and 600,000 adult members. The next in size is the Scottish Episcopal Church with around 50,000 members.