

CHURCH UNITY COMMISSION
REPORT FOR MEMBER CHURCHES - APRIL 2012

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is compiled earlier than usual to accommodate the change in date of the UPCS Assembly planned for June 2012. It was felt that it was important to reflect the new directions that are envisaged for the Church Unity Commission to enable full discussion at the annual meetings of the Member Churches. It is also the first report compiled since the retirement of Revd. Alastair Rodger and the appointment of Revd. Keith Griffiths as Secretary General.

Questions of church unity are often seen in terms of the detail of the way in which different doctrinal issues might be reconciled. However, the underlying question that must be addressed is the way in which member churches regard the principle of church unity. Is it considered to be something of the being of the church, of the essence of what it means to be the church in the world, or is it regarded as something of the well-being of the church, an optional extra which can be added to the lengthy list of important issues to be discussed by the leadership of the churches when they gather?

For a number of years the focus of the work of the CUC has been on the movement towards Full Communion and Organic Union. Without detracting from that important work, it has become evident that there is a need for the CUC to be a real force at local level to help ministers to develop relationships among those who work together within communities. A number of Trajectories of Unity have been identified and need to be developed to initiate, stimulate and support this work. It has been recognised that the role of the Secretary General will be vital in those developments.

2. ROLE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL

The immediate focus of the Secretary General is envisaged as moving from a primarily administrative function towards that of an active Public Relations officer both among CUC member churches and beyond that into the broader ecumenical movement.

Such a change will need the support of the leaders of the Member Churches within the structures of the denominations, as well as the direct involvement of clergy and members of congregations in the support of activities that will enable the Church to play its proper role in the community. This approach will be an encouragement to projects already operating effectively, as well as helping to develop others that will be able to address the needs of the communities in which the churches are active.

It will be an essential part of the new approach that the church speak and act directly into the needs of the poor and those who remain pushed to one side in society. It will be important to positively develop Ubuntu as a social imperative and promote projects that support nation building.

All of the above will need to be clearly set out in a marketing strategy that will draw into the process leaders and members of the participating churches in a way that will grow the support base for the CUC. This might require a rebranding, and even a re-naming of the CUC to reflect the new direction and the impact that it is hoped will flow from that approach.

Part of the responsibility of the Secretary General will be to engage directly with the leadership of the member churches at their national meetings to promote the projects that are developed and to be available to respond to the questions and concerns that might be expressed within the member churches.

3. ONGOING DISCUSSIONS ON FULL COMMUNION BETWEEN EPC, MCSA, UCCSA, and UPCSА;

Flowing from a motion adopted by the Executive Committee of the UPCSА, a committee has been established under the chairmanship of Revd. Paul Verryн, with representatives of the four churches who felt able to proceed to Full Communion, to continue ongoing discussions regarding that possibility. The committee has been empowered to co-opt such members as might be able to help with such discussions. The ACSА will maintain contact with these discussions through an observer at such meetings.

4. TRAJECTORIES OF UNITY

During the past year, the Central Committee has engaged in a series of discussions on the Trajectories of Unity as representing the core work of the Commission. These have been conveyed to the Member Churches for discussion and are summarised here. Champions are to be appointed to facilitate and encourage the development of each of these trajectories.

- Co-operation in ministry and mission at local level
The initiatives that have already been started at local level for congregations to engage fully with the communities in which they serve need to be shared with the wider church in a way that will encourage others to respond to the needs identified in their own communities. Such projects can benefit from the active participation of other member churches who are present in that community.
- Development of common Preaching and Liturgical Resources
The publication of 'Word and Worship' in November 2011 is an example of a resource developed through the co-operation between writers from member churches and others that has provided material for preachers and worship leaders.
- Co-operation in training of students and post-ordination training
Ekklesia is an example of co-operation between member churches and others in providing continuing ministerial formation. In the light of the limited teaching resources available, it is imperative that such ecumenical opportunities are encouraged while at the same time respecting the particular needs of each tradition.
- Developing and strengthening Centres of Hope
This initiative needs to be co-ordinated with the SACC in a way that will encourage closer co-operation between the two bodies and developing projects that will be seen as providing real hope to those who struggle within our society. It is felt that there are such projects already in place in a number of United Churches and that it would be good to identify such projects and churches so that these can be set up to meet the needs of other communities.
- The ministry of oversight.
Consensus between the different expressions of the ministry of oversight within the member churches remains a difficult aspect of the work of the Commission which requires further discussion and resolution.

5. CONSULTATIVE SYNOD

A Consultative Synod with representatives from the Member Churches, Observer Churches and United Churches is planned to provide a forum for the sharing of the principles set out in the above trajectories. Such consultation would allow for the sharing of ideas and projects that are already revealing the possibilities of the impact that is possible where churches work together in serving their community. It is hoped that this would stimulate the development of stronger co-operation by churches at a local level through the launch of projects that would serve the particular needs of their communities and to share other opportunities for closer co-operation within all of the trajectories.

A timetable was tentatively suggested for the planning of the Consultative Synod which envisaged it being held in May/June 2013 to avoid clashing with the other major meetings of the individual churches.

6. UNITED CHURCHES CONFERENCE

In the light of the planned Consultative Synod, and of the attendance of a number of representatives of United Churches at that meeting in 2013, it was felt that the United Churches Conference could best be held immediately after the Synod in 2013 to allow for a fuller discussion of the impact of the Synod on United Churches, or alternatively to plan the Conference for 2014 which would allow for discussion papers from that Synod to have been considered fully within the United Churches and thus feed into the focus for the Conference which would consider the outreach work of United Churches.

It is hoped that this Conference will help the United Churches to focus on the very positive role that such churches can play in providing a focus for the ecumenical movement in the way in which they are able to flourish in themselves and serve their own communities.

7. TIES WITH THE SACC;

The Central Committee has noted that the representative from SACC who should be attending CUC meetings has not been with us in recent years. The link is most important for strengthening the focus of each body and for clarity on the different aspects of ecumenism that each body can fulfil. Contact is to be made to correct this.

8. CUC WOMEN'S COMMITTEE

Following the retirement of Mrs Jenny Frye, Mrs Elizabeth Barnes has been elected to lead the CUC Women's Committee. Mrs Sheryl Howard has been appointed to the Central Committee from the Women's Committee. It has been noted that the attendance at meetings by representatives of the different organisations has declined over the past year, a situation that is being addressed by the committee. It is hoped that the organisations would be stimulated by the focus on the trajectories and the need for local co-operation between churches and organisations and would find representatives who shared the ecumenical vision.

Mrs Frye will continue to develop the August prayer leaflet that is a very helpful resource that offers sufficient flexibility to the organisations.

9. OBSERVER CHURCHES AND WIDER MEMBERSHIP

The Central Committee remains hopeful that a number of the churches that at present retain Observer status will feel encouraged to seek full membership and begin to play a more active role in the Commission.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The Chairperson noted during the March meeting that often huge difficulties and wonderful opportunities confront organisations at the same point in time. It was agreed that the discussions regarding the Role of the Secretary General, the Trajectories for Unity and the planned Consultative Synod together provide an opportunity that should not be missed.