

REPORT OF A VISIT TO BRUSSELS IN APRIL 2016 BY A GROUP FROM THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND



From left to right: Sheilagh Kesting, Elizabeta Kitanovic, Richard Frazer, Alison McDonald, Martin Johnstone, Fr Heikki Huttenen, Doris Peschke, Peter Pavlovic

During the last week in April, Alison McDonald (the Ecumenical Relations Committee Convener) and Sheilagh Kesting (Committee Secretary) accompanied the in-coming Convener and Secretary of the Church & Society Council (Richard Frazer and Martin Johnstone) on a visit to Brussels. Alison McDonald is also a member of the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches. The purpose of the visit was to enable an in-depth conversation of issues related to the work of the Church & Society Council which involve a significant European dimension.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC)

The visit began with a meeting in the CEC offices. We were fortunate to be able to meet with the new General Secretary, Fr Heikki Huttenen, and to hear from him an overview of the work of CEC. Discussion with other CEC members of staff opened up issues related to a future for Europe and matters of human rights. Already points of contact were being identified which would strengthen the Church of Scotland's participation as a member church in the life of CEC.

The Churches' Commission on Migrants in Europe (CCME)

Next, Doris Peschke of the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) gave us a full update on the refugee catastrophe and how CCME seeks to work with churches in addressing the both the humanitarian and political responses to the flow of migrants into Europe. It is clear that this migration is challenging the very basis of the European project, weakening the central commitment of shared responsibility that has lain at the heart of that vision. The work of David Bradwell here in Scotland on refugees and asylum seekers, which is both across denomination and across faiths, was of great interest. The Church of Scotland is committed to becoming a full member

of CCME so that we can be thoroughly engaged in the wider European picture in which churches seek to find a common voice.

Eurodiaconia

Heather Roy, herself a Scot from Inverness, is the General Secretary of Eurodiaconia, a church-related membership organisation dealing with a wide variety of societal issues. Models of best practice are shared across the organisation, analysis of the causes of social injustice is carried out and all this is done with an explicitly Christian value-based ethos which marks Eurodiaconia as distinctive from other organisations that seek to influence policy at European level. The Church of Scotland has been a member of Eurodiaconia for many years. Responsibility for our membership has recently passed from the Social Care Council to the Church and Society Council. Once again our engagement with Heather opened up ways in which our participation in Eurodiaconia can be strengthened to our mutual benefit. There was an interesting exchange on 'genuine occupational requirement', the recognition of which has allowed CrossReach to restrict its care staff to people with a live Christian commitment, and how this is envied by Church-based social care providers in other countries – this at a time when CrossReach is reconsidering this requirement. Clearly there are grounds for a continued dialogue.

The European Commission and NGOs

Through the offices of Eurodiaconia and a generous amount of staff time, two days were spent engaging with representatives from the European Commission and other NGOs. We visited Scotland House and met with Ian Campbell, the representative of the Scottish Government in Brussels and Lynne Ross of Scotland Europa (Scottish Enterprise in Brussels). We heard about the Youth Policy and Erasmus + programme of the European Commission and the opportunities this offers young people across the EU, public health strategies, legal migration and integration policy, homelessness, and communicating with citizens. In all of these encounters our colleagues in Church & Society found synergies that will enhance the work of the Church of Scotland in the vital work of building a more just and equal society. One of the most interesting aspects was to see how officials responded when churches come with something important and distinctive to offer which can enhance the work they are trying to do to build a better Europe for all its citizens. The level of engagement in the conversations we had was very high.

The European Parliament

We met and later enjoyed a happy and engaging evening with Catherine Stihler, Scottish MEP. With MEPs like Catherine, Scotland is well-served in the European Parliament.

What has the UK done for the EU?

Our last visit was with Ian Forrester, the UK Judge appointed to the General Court of the European Court of Justice and his wife, Sandra, an expert in European law. It was a lively session that might be described as 'What the UK has done for the European Union'! It was not the first time in our visit that the focus of discussion was on the up-coming EU Referendum and the possibility of a 'Brexit'. In each conversation we were able to share the Church of Scotland's stated position and the summary that is to be brought to the General Assembly this year – not to tell people how to vote, but to

ensure that something of a wider picture is fed into the debate which politicians on all sides have narrowed to a single focus on economics.

A European Church in a Wider World

The visit was very much about seeing part of the bigger picture in which we work as the Church of Scotland, demonstrating again how important it is to understand the Christian Church as a movement across borders – the theme of the Ecumenical Relations Report to the General Assembly this year. These were meetings that rooted the European church and political agendas into the life of Scotland and its people. They were a reminder, if we needed one, of the long history of the Church of Scotland as a European Church within a wider, global world, a world that is knocking on the frontiers of our Continent in ways that are testing not just the nature of our faith but also our common sense of humanity. And they demonstrated again how much stronger our witness can be when we commit to work with others in order to give a distinctively Christian, faith-based dimension to discussions that an impact on the well-fare and well-being of our human community and the environment in which we are placed.