



*The*  
United  
Reformed  
Church

## **A Brief History of the United Reformed Church**

part of

*AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE*

*on the*

*United Reformed Church*

**for those training as  
Elders, Lay Preachers, Local Leaders,  
Ministers of Word and Sacraments  
and Church Related Community Workers**



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## **The ecumenical movement and the formation of the United Reformed Church**

The United Reformed Church came into being on 5 October 1972. It was a noteworthy occasion. This was the first union of churches of different 'families' in England since the Reformation. There had been unions of Presbyterians (in 1876) and Methodists (principally in 1932) before, but never a union of such different bodies. The union was a considerable achievement. Church historians sometimes label the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'the ecumenical century'. It has certainly been a century of ecumenical endeavour. The roots of union are long. They reach back into the formation of international bodies and alliances which were such a feature of 19<sup>th</sup> century church life, and beyond that to the creation of the modern missionary movement at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and (of course) to the New Testament and the teaching of Jesus himself. However, the modern ecumenical movement is conventionally considered to have begun with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, for from its continuation committees came some of the constituent bodies, which were to form the World Council of Churches in 1948.

Many British Christians, including prominent members of our traditions, were involved in that work. Although ecumenism developed rapidly internationally, progress in Britain was slow. There were many reasons for that, not least the fact that denominational divisions in Britain were the children of social and political events as well as the products of theological difference. The Edinburgh conference stimulated the minds and consciences of the churches, and many consultations and conferences were held in its wake. The views of the British churches clarified, and as they clarified, the issues which divided the various Christian communions were laid bare. Anglicans and the Free Churches worked hard at the questions of ministry and episcopal ordination, but with little concrete result except a deeper understanding of their mutual positions. The Congregational Union of England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England began talks about co-operation and possible union in 1932, but they decided in 1935 that full union was impossible. During the 1930s the main intellectual energy of British ecumenists was focused on the possibilities of creating a united church in South India. That did not mean that the scene at home was ignored - the Free Church Federal Council was created from the fusion of two national Free Church bodies in 1940, and the British Council of Churches came into being in 1942.

The following year the Presbyterian Layman's Conference petitioned the General Assembly to recommence conversations with the Congregationalists, and a Joint Conference was called as war ended in 1945. They worked quickly and presented a scheme to the churches in 1947. Once again, the churches opted for co-operation rather than unity, and the two churches entered a formal covenant in 1951. Although a Joint Advisory Council was created, it produced little impact on the lives of the churches. That was partly because wider ecumenical discussions in England overshadowed the discussions between the two churches. In 1946 Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher challenged the English Free Churches to take episcopacy into their system. That had a profound effect. It set in train two sets of discussions. One, between the Anglicans and Methodists, resulted in a union scheme in 1966. It was accepted by the Methodists, but rejected by the Church of England. The other involved the Church of England, the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of England. That meant that during the 1950s English Presbyterians directed their energies there rather than to the possibilities of union with the Congregationalists. The scheme ran aground in 1957 when it was turned down by the

Church of Scotland.

Another factor in the ecumenical equation which received little comment at the time was that, alone among the mainstream traditions, the Congregational Union of England and Wales had been continuously ordaining women since World War One. Constance Todd was ordained in September 1917, beside her fiancé Claud Coltman, and the couple were married the next day. Vera Finlay (married name Kenmure) was ordained in November 1928 at Partick Congregational Church in Glasgow. Although the Presbyterian Church of England accepted the principle of women's ordination in 1921, it was not until 1956 that its first woman minister, returned missionary Ella Gordon, was ordained. In 1964 Margaret Taylor was the first woman to be both trained and ordained.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the English Presbyterians were faced with a dilemma which had recurred many times in their history. Should they seek closer relations with the Church of Scotland, or direct their energies to the English scene? Matters were further complicated by the union of Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists to form the Church of South India in 1947. The English Presbyterians eventually decided that they should renew their conversations with the Congregationalists, and discussions began in 1963. They were to result in the formation of the United Reformed Church in 1972. The discussions began in great optimism for yet wider union in England, but by 1972 the United Reformed Church found itself surrounded by ecumenical wrecks. The Anglican-Methodist scheme failed in 1968. In 1964 the British Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission called the English churches to unite by 1980. Five years later that seemed like a triumph of hope over experience and events proved it to be so. At the uniting service of the United Reformed Church the new denomination invited all ecumenical partners to join it in the quest for wider organic unity. The Churches of Christ responded, and conversations began which resulted in the union of 1981 and the formation of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. Hopes for wider union were invested in the Churches Unity Commission. It produced Ten Propositions for Unity, and suggested the creation of the Churches Council for Covenanting. Formed in 1978, it worked quickly (it had to because of limited funding), but its work was doomed to failure. The General Synod of the Church of England rejected its work in 1981, and organic unity in England seemed to have reached an impasse. In Wales, events took a different turn with the signing of the Welsh Covenant between the Church in Wales, the Presbyterian Church in Wales, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, and some Baptist Churches in 1975. The joint work of these Churches was overseen by Enfys (rainbow in Welsh).

The magnitude of the achievement of those who created the United Reformed Church in 1972 and the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom in 1981 is heightened when seen against that background. Bringing together three such diverse bodies into a single church was a remarkable work, indeed a triumph of God's grace. It was a sadness though that both unions were incomplete, for not all Congregationalists felt able to join the United Reformed Church in 1972, and some Churches of Christ congregations preferred to retain an independent witness in 1981.

And the ecumenical pilgrimage goes on. On 1st April, 2000, a further union took place, in Glasgow, between the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom and the Congregational Union of Scotland, forming the United Reformed Church. The Congregational Union of Scotland has a proud history going back to 1812, though some of its congregations date back to 1797. With the union came a new way of working which recognises the growing consciousness of national identity in both Scotland and Wales. New national Synods of both Scotland and Wales speak with a distinctive voice for the

whole Church in their national contexts and represent the United Reformed Church within the national ecumenical bodies of ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland) and Cytun (Churches Together in Wales). Enfys has now been incorporated into Cytun. This has occurred following a consultation in 2004 the outcome of which was the belief that the work of the Covenanted Churches should be part of the wider ecumenical scene. The non-covenanted churches in Cytun were willing for this to occur.

## **The four traditions**

All four of the traditions, which have come together in the United Reformed Church could legitimately be called 'churches of the reformation'. That is to say, they all trace their origins to the ideas and structures, which were born in the ecclesiastical explosions, which shattered the unity of the Western church between 1500-1550. Historians refer to these events as 'the Reformation'. That is a useful label, but like all labels it can mislead. Reforming ideas swept across Europe, but they produced many varieties of ecclesiastical structure as they interacted with the political and social structures of the nations of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. There were many reformations rather than one. In some of the city states of what is now Germany and Switzerland reformation was dramatically rapid. In England and Wales the process was an extended one, beginning in the 1530s when Henry VIII (1509-1547) severed the ties between the English church and Rome because of his desire for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon. It continued apace in the short reign of Edward VI (1547-1553) when Protestantism was forcibly established by the government, was reversed during the reign of Edward's Catholic half-sister Mary (1553-1558), and given permanent form during the reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603).

Congregational and Presbyterian ideas about the structure of the church first became significant factors in church life during Elizabeth's reign, although they had been seen in mainland Europe for several decades. Presbyterianism is associated particularly with the work of John Calvin (1509-1564), the great Genevan reformer. Presbyterians believed that churches should be governed by interlocking councils of presbyters (ministers). Most Presbyterian churches were national churches, created by rulers and governments - the Church of Scotland is the prime example. Congregationalism did not look back to one founder. Its roots are to be found in the soil of the so-called 'radical reformation', those reformers who felt that the state imposed reformations of Europe were not radical enough. It was inherently dissenting. For Congregationalists the church was to be found in the gathered saints of God meeting together to discern his will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each individual congregation was autonomous, and although congregations respected each other and worked together, any associations and councils of churches were advisory fellowships rather than authoritative controlling bodies.

Congregationalists and Presbyterians both believed they were re-creating the primitive church of the New Testament. In that they are at one with the Churches of Christ, a small body whose origins are to be found in the 'restorationist' movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Like the Congregationalists, the Churches were not created by one 'architect'. Their roots are to be found in the work of the Campbells, Thomas (1763-1854) and his son Alexander (1788-1866), presbyterian dissenting ministers who sought to heal the divisions between presbyterians in Ireland and America, the Scotch Baptists, and some other tiny groupings in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. They were united by 'restorationist' ideas - the attempt to 'restore' the primitive church of the New Testament, and by so doing to reform and renew church life. The Churches of Christ never intended to become a denomination. They sought rather to be a catalyst in the re-unification of the divided body of Christ.

## (a) The Congregational Church in England and Wales

Historians of Congregationalism disagree about the origins of Congregationalism in England. Some argue that the history of English Congregationalism should begin in Elizabethan England. Elizabeth sought to establish uniformity in the English church with the Act of Uniformity of 1559. It defined the government of the church as episcopal, with the monarch as Supreme Governor. Its worship was to be according to the Prayer Book of 1552, with slight catholic revisions. A significant number of Elizabethan Christians felt that this was at best a half-way house in the quest for a properly reformed church. Most of them were content to work for reform from within the structures of the church and parliament. A small minority felt compelled in all conscience to force the pace, and separate from the church - hence the name 'separatists'. The most notable were Robert Browne (c.1550-1633), John Greenwood (d 1593) , Henry Barrow (d 1593) and John Penry (1563-1593). They came to the notice of the authorities in the 1580s, and in spite of imprisonment and harassment, they produced a notable body of literature which set out congregationalist ideas in English for the first time. These were dangerous, uncertain days. Elizabeth had been excommunicated by the pope in 1570, and the threat of invasion from Spain seemed imminent until the Spanish Armada was scuttled in 1588. Anyone who departed from the national church was viewed as a potential traitor. Barrow, Greenwood and Penry were executed in 1593. Browne recanted and returned to the ministry of the Church of England.

Although the Elizabethan separatists produced the first coherent congregationalist ecclesiology in English, they were effectively and efficiently obliterated by the use of church courts and the heavy hand of the law. It is impossible to trace any continuity of personnel with the next flowering of Congregationalist and independent churches which occurred in the extraordinary days of the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1642-1659). The English Republic was a period of remarkable toleration when all kinds of sects and ideas, political and religious, suddenly proliferated, including recognition for the leadership gifts of women as preachers, prophets and writers. As far as there was a national church, it was Presbyterian, but freedom prevailed, and parish churches adopted many forms of behaviour and government, some continuing to use the Prayer Book, others becoming Presbyterian, yet others independent. In Wales, the first Independent congregation was formed at Llanvaches in 1639, to be followed the next year by one in Wrexham.

In some ways this was the greatest age of Congregationalism. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) himself favoured independent ideas, although it is hard to define his religious allegiance in more detail. During this period congregationalist ideas flourished, and its finest theologian, John Owen (1616-1683) served as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Two of the greatest writers of the period, John Milton (1608-1674) and John Bunyan (1628-1688) had independent sympathies, although neither could be termed orthodox Congregationalists. The freedom of the Republic seemed like anarchy to many, and congregationalism by its very nature was wary of structures and organisation. However, these decades saw the publication of many important works of congregationalist theology, and the production of such confessions of faith as the *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* of 1658 which was significant for the way in which it wrestled with the relationship between local independence and catholic order.

In 1660 the republican experiment ended, Charles II was recalled from exile and a national church re-established under the terms of the Act of Uniformity of 1662.

Congregationalism wanted no truck with any such settlement, and most Congregationalists who were serving parish churches withdrew from their charges before the Act became law in 1662. 194 Congregationalists in England and Wales can be identified amongst the ejected of 1660-1662. 108 (55%) left in 1660.

Congregationalism as an identifiable and separate phenomenon is clearly observable from 1662 onwards, which is why many histories identify that as the denomination's starting point. However, it is clear that it cannot be properly understood without the pre-history of the reformation, the Elizabeth separatists and the classical period of 1640-1660.

The restoration settlement of 1662 significantly narrowed the band of what was acceptable within the national church. To those 'nonconformists' (those who would not conform) outside, times were harsh. Imprisonment, swingeing fines, exile and sometimes death were the lot of dissenters. However, persecution varied in intensity and geography between 1662-1689, and congregationalism survived into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Act of Toleration of 1689 allowed dissenters the right to worship as they chose, but at the expense of some of their political and civil rights. It introduced a form of 'social apartheid' into English life, and Congregationalists became second-class citizens. For all that, Congregationalism developed its own form of life and organisation. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) gave English Christianity one of its most important forms of devotion - the hymn. Chapel life was simple, and in some cases elegant. Its worship was centred on the reading and exposition of Scripture, flowing out of and into the home. The sense of the fellowship of the covenanted community of believers was a source of profound strength, worked out through networks of care and commitment. It demanded much from all chapels and all ministry had to be supported from the giving of the members. Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707 – 1791) was the great lay patroness of the Evangelical Revival. By 1790 there were 64 chapels in her connexion and she also founded the theological college at Trevecca in Wales.

By the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Congregationalism was a force to be reckoned with in English life. That was partly because it was mobile and free. With the Methodists and the Baptists, Congregationalists were able to respond quickly to the movements of population which were the result of the industrial revolution. Some express this by saying that nonconformity 'baptised' the industrial revolution. The skills of debate and organisation learnt in Church Meeting translated easily into commercial and political life, and Congregationalism expanded rapidly alongside the industrialists and entrepreneurs who both created and exploited new forms of urban and suburban living. Although its early statistics are notoriously unreliable, in the period between 1715 and 1851 Congregationalism experienced more than 10-fold growth. The 1851 religious census showed 655, 935 Congregationalists in church on census Sunday - accounting for 3.88% of the total population. Nonconformists as a whole made up 17.02% of the population.

It was clear that such an influential body of people could not continue to be treated as second class citizens. The history of Congregationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is part of the story of nonconformity as a whole - fighting for the abolition of the civil and religious disabilities which hindered them from taking a full part in the life of the nation, and at the same time establishing themselves and their institutions as respectable and reputable. Both parts of that agenda were notably successful. Nineteenth century Congregationalists also put great energy into what was seen as the great endeavour of missionary work. The setting up of separate fund-raising and educational committees for women had the added benefit of allowing women to organise themselves, handle money, run meetings, speak in public and hear women missionaries speak. All these moves towards public acceptance



and recognition were complemented by the growth of a national structure. The Congregational Union of England and Wales was created in 1833 and its first yearbook, published in 1847, included both Welsh and English language churches. In 1872, however, a separate meeting of Welsh speaking churches formed the Union of Welsh Independents. At first the Union had little impact on the life of local churches, but by the end of the century many found it hard to imagine how they had coped without it. Congregationalism was a force to be reckoned with - it had penetrated the heartlands of political power, created its own college at Oxford (Mansfield), and through the ministries of the truly great like RW Dale of Carr's Lane, Birmingham and Joseph Parker of the City Temple, affected the hearts and minds of countless thousands.

The numerical decline of nonconformity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was in part due to social and cultural changes which affected all parts of British Christianity - the rise of secularism, intellectual difficulties about reconciling scientific insight and Christian doctrine, the development of privatised life-styles, the growth of the state and so on. It was also caused in part by its very success. Nonconformity's history of 'second-classness' meant that it was inclined to define itself negatively - not Anglicans, not 'establishment'. By the outbreak of the First World War nonconformists preferred the more positive title of Free Churches. That in itself was indicative of a shift of identity. Their successful campaigning for religious and civil freedom had made them an 'alternative establishment', and there was a slow drift from nonconformity into the Church of England - Michael Ramsay was not the only Anglican bishop who grew up in a Congregationalist home.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century attention switched to a different agenda - ecumenism. Congregationalism's contribution in personnel and thought was considerable. It was partly in pursuit of this end that the Congregational Union became the Congregational Church in England and Wales in 1966.

### **(b) The Presbyterian Church of England**

Presbyterianism presents a very different history from Congregationalism. If congregationalism was inherently dissenting, then presbyterianism was not. If congregationalism placed its emphasis on the local, gathered community of believers, presbyterianism concentrated on a national structure of councils. If Congregationalism's origins were diverse, presbyterianism looked back to one founder, John Calvin.

Presbyterian ideas were first propounded in England by a Cambridge theologian, Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) in 1572 in a series of lectures on the Acts of the Apostles. The principal difference between Elizabethan presbyterians and the separatists was that the presbyterians looked for reform of the national church from within. They were moderates. They did not wish to rock the boat. The term 'Puritan', when used in an Elizabethan context, refers principally to presbyterians, and by that term it means those members of the Church of England who wanted the church to be more fully reformed. The Elizabethan government and church establishment effectively quashed all expressions of presbyterianism. Although the presbyterians were not as severely persecuted as the separatists, they gained no ground. However, the ideas generated would not go away, and they were to recur in Jacobean England, and (with strong support from Scotland) were an important factor in the advent of the civil wars in 1642.

Historians debate whether the civil wars were England's 'wars of religion'. It can be said with certainty that religion was an important element in the events which led to the civil wars, but by no means the only one. Once parliament had established its political

supremacy in 1642, it set about re-designing the Church of England. The task was entrusted to a commission of divines and politicians, with the aid of commissioners from Scotland, in 1643. It was called the Westminster Assembly because it met at Westminster Abbey. The scheme which it produced in 1645 was for a national presbyterian church. Parliament accepted their recommendations, with the crucial alteration that the supreme court of the church was not to be an Assembly, but parliament itself. If a presbyterian system is to work, it needs a series of church councils or courts, both local and national. Unfortunately the scheme was never put into practice properly. Only a handful of local councils were created, and the whole religious settlement during the 1640s and 1650s was a mess. Presbyterians and Congregationalists / Independents disagreed at the Assembly, and once Cromwell came to power in 1653, Congregationalist ideas of toleration came to the fore and a range of ecclesiastical options existed across the country. So, although it is true to say that as far as there was a national church during the 1640s and 1650s it was presbyterian, it was in fact never properly implemented.

The Westminster divines also produced a Confession of Faith - the Westminster Confession of 1644, drafted largely by the vicar of Boston, Anthony Tuckney - two Catechisms and a Directory of Public Worship. Although they were accepted by parliament, they never established themselves in the life of the English church. They did, however, become the subordinate doctrinal standards (after the Bible) of the Church of Scotland.

When Parliament recalled Charles II from exile in 1660 after the death of Cromwell, it was mainly composed of Presbyterians. Their hope was for a generous ecclesiastical settlement which would move the national church in a more presbyterian direction than it had had under Elizabeth and James. The king shared their hopes, and initially the signs looked propitious. Unlike many Congregationalists who quietly left their charges between 1660-1662, presbyterians spent those years trying to ensure a wide religious settlement. Parliament had different ideas though, and the Act of Uniformity of 1662 forced over 1800 presbyterians or 'mere Puritans' (as they called themselves) outside the national church. Among them were some of the finest minds of English Christianity, including the great Richard Baxter (1615-91) who was the most significant devotional writer of the century. They went with reluctance and sadness.

Presbyterianism never established the kind of conciliar structure which is of its essence following the Restoration. Its churches were much like Congregational churches, with the crucial difference that power lay with small groups of trustees rather than in Church Meeting. That meant that there was little control over the theological opinions of its clergy. The history of presbyterianism in England between the Toleration Act of 1689 and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is one of a drift into Unitarianism. The reasons are complex, and the interpretation of evidence is difficult. Part of the difficulty is that 'presbyterianism' soon became a label of 'advanced' unitarian views, and congregations who wished to display their orthodox credentials adopted the label of 'congregationalist' or 'independent.' However, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century presbyterianism had all but disappeared.

It re-emerged in English towns and cities from the 1780s onwards as Scots moved south to take up jobs in commerce and industry, in medicine and engineering. Modern English Presbyterianism south of the border was a Scottish export, part of the Scottish diaspora which brought about presbyterian churches in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and many other countries. It took two forms. There were congregations which were in communion with the Church of Scotland, and there were those who owed allegiance to presbyterian dissent in Scotland (the Church of Scotland had split over patronage disputes in 1733 and

1761). The former became a Church of Scotland Synod in England in 1836. The latter came together in 1847 to form the United Presbyterian Church. They created a separate English Synod in 1863.

In 1843 the Church of Scotland was rent asunder by a further dispute about patronage (the right of a patron to introduce a minister against the will of the people) when that right was upheld by Parliament. The Disruption of 1843 divided the Church of Scotland into two - the continuing establishment and the Free Church of Scotland. The vast majority of English congregations sided with the Free Church, and in 1844 declared their independence, creating the Presbyterian Church in England. In 1876 they united with the English Synod of the United Presbyterian Church to form the Presbyterian Church of England. Although it was an English church, the Presbyterian Church in England and then Presbyterian Church of England were never emotionally part of English dissent in the same way as English Congregationalism. It had a decided Scottish (and occasionally Irish) accent, and for much of its history considered itself an alternative establishment - cross the Tweed and it was the establishment! The dilemma of whether to be part of English dissent or the Scottish establishment in exile marked its life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it struggled with the politics of disestablishment, and was to be seen again in the 1950s when it was faced with the possibility of either continuing discussions with the Congregationalists or joining in the ill-fated Church of England - Church of Scotland discussions.

### **(c) The Churches of Christ**

The third strand of the United Reformed Church was the Churches of Christ. As mentioned above, they were part of an early attempt to heal some of the divisions within presbyterianism. The Churches never wanted to be a denomination. They understood themselves to be a movement devoted to the ecumenical task of re-uniting the divided body of Christ. They were never a large movement in England. They were numerically far more significant in America where they are still known as the Disciples of Christ.

Although a relatively modern movement, their various founders adopted the same theological method as the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century - 'restoring' the nature of the primitive church. It was that attempt which led to the significant features of the Churches' witness - communion as the normative act of Christian worship, believers' baptism, the ministry of settled elders and itinerant evangelists (who later became ministers) and closed communion (i.e. only those baptised as believers could communicate).

It was inevitable that they should become a denomination, and like all denominations they developed and changed. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they had 176 churches in Britain with a membership of just over 11,000, experiencing rapid growth between 1861-1892. Their centre of gravity was to be found in the Midlands, Lancashire and Cheshire. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Churches theological self-understanding developed, most notably under the guidance of William Robinson (1888-1963), the Principal of Overdale College (the Churches' theological college in Selly Oak, Birmingham). He sought to show how their distinctive contribution to British church life was to be a church which was neither Protestant nor Catholic but Christian. The essentials of Protestantism - freedom, an emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, personal faith in Christ and the centrality of Scripture - were united with the fundamental aspects of Catholicism - a hatred of schism, the centrality of the eucharist and a respect for reason and tradition. That in turn led the Churches to re-evaluate the issue of closed communion and believers' baptism and to admit those baptised as infants in other denominations to their communion celebrations. The way was thus prepared for them to respond to the British Council of Churches 1964

challenge to British Christians to covenant together for unity in 1980, and to act as observers in the Congregational and Presbyterian conversations from 1966. It was a natural step for the Churches to respond to the United Reformed Church's invitation to join in unity discussions in 1972. The result was the formation of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom in 1981.

#### **(d) The Congregational Union of Scotland**

Scottish Congregationalism in common with the rest of Christendom derives from the early Church - the foot of the cross and Pentecost. Contrary to a popular assumption it is not an import, but as native as tartan. With the rest of the Scottish Church it shares the heritage of Ninian, Columba and the Celtic Church, and that church's later translation to an Episcopal, Roman model.

Scotland's Reformation was as confused, messy and complex as that of any nation. It was born during forty years of struggling regency. Protracted arm-wrestling between Kirk and Crown on the issues of Presbytery-versus-Bishop and Church-versus-State turned the visionary, Presbyterian Church of the Scottish Reformation by the time of the Civil Wars into an intolerant one. The time was not ripe for a Scottish Congregationalism. Cromwell's New Model Army did attempt to hard-sell Congregationalism to Scotland, during its eight-year occupation, but these efforts barely survived the Restoration.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century voices dissenting from the Kirk could be heard in Scotland. The Glasites, the Old Scots Independents and the Berians, three indigenous forms of Congregationalism, came and went as movements concerned to synthesise the primitive New Testament Church. Their example however was still in currency when a more dynamic movement began.

In 1798 Robert and James Haldane with others founded The Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home. Its purpose was evangelical revival, and it used lay catechists and preachers as well as ordained. Sunday Schools for adults and juveniles were part of the agenda which was ecumenical in vision, driven by mission and more concerned with promoting faith and spirituality than founding a new denomination. Excluded from Presbyterian pulpits they established tabernacle preaching stations, which would become Congregational Churches. Ten years later a schism occurred when the Haldanes became Baptists. Greville Ewing gave leadership to the on-going Congregationalists, and was instrumental in founding the Theological Academy in 1811. The Congregational Union was formed the next year with the twin aims of mission and church aid.

In the middle years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hard-line Calvinism was being questioned by James Morison in the Secession Church and by John Kirk in the Congregational Union, both of whom moved steadily towards Universalist doctrines.

Morison with others who had been expelled from the Secession Church formed the Evangelical Union in 1843, and John Kirk and others from the Congregational Union who had been disassociated soon joined them. It formulated a Doctrinal Declaration to explain its position to other bodies, but treasured freedom of conscience and never required a credal affirmation from its membership. From 1843 until 1896 Scotland had two unions of voluntary, independent churches with similar membership standards and an aversion to creeds. At first they were alienated by theological differences but, as decades of more liberal theology came in, the small print of Calvinism lost much of its importance to both bodies. Negotiations lead the two Unions to a Uniting Assembly on 1st October 1896.

In the weaving trade, a tartan is defined by its thread count. The numbers and arrangement of the threads on the loom determine the blocs of colour in the ground together with the lines, which give it its distinctive character. In the story of Scottish Congregationalism certain colours stand out.

The first is mission. It has been one of our *raison d'être*. Mission drove the Haldanite revival and the theology of Greville Ewing. It motivated both Unions in their engagement with the social issues of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Inspired by the World Missionary Conference of 1910 in Edinburgh, the recently united Union was constant in its support of the London Missionary Society and in its participation in the Council for World Mission. There were also in the 20<sup>th</sup> century three periods of planned church extension, and at least three periods of soul-searching and reappraisal in which commitment to mission was reaffirmed. In 1993, after the last of these periods, we took on the working practices of a church and built mission into our structures, from local to national.

Ecumenism also runs broadly through our history. The Society for Propagating the Gospel at Home was originally intended to serve the whole Church in Scotland. The founders of our two parent Unions were excluded from their original churches, and the form of church government chosen by each was a principled but pragmatic response to their exclusion. The Union formed in 1896 played its part in the formation of Scottish Churches' Council in the 1920s. It made an Ecumenical Committee part of its structure in the 1940s in a period of ecumenical enthusiasm which saw the founding of the Church of South India and the World Council of Churches. From recognition that the visible disunity of the Church was hampering mission and squandering resources, there came a growing commitment to what became known as the Ecumenical Imperative. Between 1965 and 1988 the Congregational Union of Scotland explored unity with the Church of Scotland, the Churches of Christ, the United Free Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom. Although the proposals from the latter won in our Assembly a 65% vote in favour of Union it fell short of the legal requirement. We reaffirmed our commitment to the Ecumenical journey in 1991 and in 1996, having survived schism, and having set our house in order, we concluded that Christ was leading us to approach again the United Reformed Church.

If mission and ecumenism are the two background colours of the CUS tartan, the pattern is completed by the lines which cross it.

Education is the first. From its beginnings, the Congregational Union was at the heart of the Sunday School movement for teaching adults and children. Both parent Unions were founded with theological training institutions up and running, and the priority of education was reclaimed most recently in the new structures of 1993.

Church Aid - the second line - was a founding aim in the formation of the Congregational Union and, from sharing the financial responsibilities of ministry and mission to mutual empowerment and dealing with outside bodies, interdependence was being constantly rediscovered.

The third is perhaps more of a loose thread than a line. In 1928 the Revd Vera Kenmure became the first woman ordained to the ministry in the CUS as well as Scotland's first woman minister. In 1951 she became the first of six women who would be called to the presidency of the denomination. Women in the ministry and in leadership have been part of the Union's life since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Six presidents in fifty years with never a woman in the chair, however, makes 'the community of women and men' unfinished

business at the dawn of a new century.

The achievements of the Congregational Union of Scotland did not come painlessly. The early Scottish Congregationalists had experienced schism before the Union was founded. Controversy, healthy and otherwise, seems to be one of the ways in which we have grown up. As recently as 1993 we haemorrhaged about a third of our member churches in a time of divergent visions, differing agendas, and fear, suspicion and mistrust. Adopting the working practices of a Church, reasserting our commitment to the Ecumenical journey, and achieving the unanimous vote in Assembly that brings us to this point of Union have all been costly, but it has been the price of faithfulness - faithfulness to a vision and an imperative to which there was no honourable alternative.

So the tartan that is the Congregational Union of Scotland is offered today, a little frayed, slightly bloodstained, but guaranteed colourful and hardwearing.

## **A history of the United Reformed Church's international relations**

It is essential to the ethos of the United Reformed Church that it sees itself as part of the world church. Although its own boundaries and the boundaries of its predecessors have always been within the British Isles, its history includes significant moments in the spread of the gospel and the development of the church around the world, and it greatly values close partnership now with similar churches internationally.

Key leaders of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries moved back and forth across Europe spreading ideas and practices, and fleeing restrictions. The Pilgrim Fathers (Independents, on the ship 'Mayflower' in 1620) and many others took the developments to the 'New World' of North America. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Great Awakening in America and Evangelical Revival in Britain had key figures in George Whitefield and John Wesley who both had transatlantic experience and influence. Their work encouraged not only a great revival but also the development of Congregationalism and Methodism respectively. By the end of the century the revival led to the establishment of missionary societies and other agencies for Christian work.

Prominent amongst these was the one founded in 1795, which became the London Missionary Society. Prompted by the reports of James Cook's discoveries, its first missionaries were sent to the Pacific Islands. It was founded by people of several denominations who pledged to send no particular form of church government but the "glorious gospel of the blessed God to the heathen". However within a few years Methodists and Anglicans formed their missionary societies, and in 1847 amidst the formation of Presbyterian Churches in England the English Presbyterian Mission was set up, leaving the LMS supported largely by Congregationalists. In 1836 the Colonial Missionary Society was formed "in connexion with the Congregational Union of England and Wales" to work amongst British colonists rather than the peoples of the lands colonised, though it did that by the end of the century, and its name was changed to Commonwealth Missionary Society in 1956.

The different missionary organisations frequently co-operated over the years, and with the moves towards church unity the LMS united with the CMS to become the Congregational Council for World Mission in 1966. It then incorporated Presbyterian work, as the Council for World Mission, in 1972. The structure of CWM was radically revised in 1977 to take account of the spread of autonomy amongst churches around the world, and it still has a fairly unique role as a partnership of churches supporting each other in mission. It

operates through the mutual exchange of missionaries, money, information, experience and prayer support, and each member church has equal status in decision-making about these things.

CWM had 22 member churches in 1977. This has grown to over 30. The number fluctuates slightly, for example when the Congregational Union of Scotland joined the United Reformed Church in 2000. The other member churches in the European Region are the Congregational Federation, the Presbyterian Church of Wales, the Union of Welsh Independents, and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

Through its Churches of Christ heritage, the United Reformed Church is one of the churches in “the global family of Christian Churches, Churches of Christ, and Disciples of Christ” which extends over 165 countries. Since 1930 this group has held a World Convention usually every four years, the United Reformed Church being co-hosts with the Fellowship of Churches of Christ for the 16th Convention in Brighton in 2004. The Conventions are not business meetings or a council of churches, but are open to any individuals who want to participate in a programme of inspirational talks, Bible studies and news of church life around the world.

In the Reformed tradition the United Reformed Church is a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which links more than 75 million Christians who share that heritage. The Alliance of Reformed Churches throughout the World holding the Presbyterian Order (known as the Presbyterian Alliance) was formed in 1875, and the International Congregational Council first met in 1892. Both these events took place in London. In 1948 when the World Council of Churches was formed, the Presbyterian Alliance moved its office from Edinburgh to Geneva to be alongside the WCC, while the ICC adopted a constitution and set up an international office in London. The two organisations united into the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1970 at a meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, with 114 member churches from 70 countries. This has since grown to more than 200 churches in over 100 countries. To further its links with some of these Reformed churches the United Reformed Church has given scholarships to personnel from those churches to study in Britain, has brought leaders to participate in General Assembly, has sent and received people to ministerial and other appointments, and engaged in exchange visits.

The aims of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches are “to strengthen the unity and witness of Reformed churches, to interpret and reinterpret the Reformed tradition, to work for peace, economic and social justice, human rights and the integrity of the environment, to promote fully inclusive community, and to further dialogue with other Christian communions and other religions.”

Issues of poverty and justice in the world have been a major concern of the United Reformed Church since before its inauguration. For example the 1% Appeal has been commended since 1967. That is 1% of take home pay to be given regularly for Third World development, to put pressure on governments to achieve the United Nations target of 0.7% of Gross National Product for overseas aid. In 1992 the 1% Appeal was incorporated in the new Commitment for Life programme, to be the church’s main way of supporting Christian Aid and the World Development Movement. It was re-launched in 1996, with ‘action for justice’ through worship, education and campaigning, as the other main thrust. Local congregations were asked to focus on one project from a choice of four partner churches or agencies, and to learn and campaign about a related development issue. In 1995 over £250,000 was given; by 2002 that had more than doubled, and over

one-third of all United Reformed churches were participating. Witnessing to God's requirement for justice and compassion for the poor and oppressed is part of the tradition deriving from the Reformers' reading of the Scriptures.

A feature of being part of the world church which has not easily gained recognition in the United Reformed Church and its predecessors is the importance of welcoming people of other races and cultures, both in local congregations and in the ways that the denomination organises its life. A history of the struggles, efforts and achievements is given in the "Annual Reports, Resolutions and Papers" for General Assembly 2005, in the Racial Justice & Multicultural Ministry report, pages 93-96, and the following Appendices:

- 2 United Reformed Church Proclamations against Racism
- 3 The Vision of Multicultural Ministry
- 4 Multicultural United Reformed Churches
- 5 Guidelines for Receiving Migrant Churches.

The paragraph on the history of Multicultural United Reformed Churches is particularly worth quoting here:

"Multicultural United Reformed Church congregations have been a feature of the United Reformed Church since its beginning in 1972, but the number of such congregations has grown steadily since that time. The most significant minority ethnic group in the early days were from different Caribbean roots (e.g. Jamaica, Guyana, St Kitts, Barbados, Trinidad etc). There were in fact a few people of Caribbean roots in Congregational churches pre 1950. Many people who came from the Caribbean in the Windrush era and tried to settle in churches went through many painful experiences. People naturally looked for church of the same or similar tradition to the areas they were familiar with in the Caribbean, but were met with a cold reception or ignored or told that they would surely be happier down the road where there was a black church (usually a Pentecostal one). This kind of situation was also experienced by West Africans trying to worship in Churches of Presbyterian tradition in the 1960's, 70's and 80's. However there were a few Congregational and Presbyterian Churches that did warmly welcome people from the Caribbean and other places in the early days (e.g. [St James'] Church in Sheffield, now a United Reformed Church and same now United Reformed Church congregations in London). Between the 1970s and 1990s there has been a steady increase in the number of people from Caribbean and West African roots joining United Reformed Churches. The majority of the people of West African roots are from Ghana. Some church congregations also include people of different Asian and European roots."

Together with other churches around the world the United Reformed Church is a partner in God's global mission. In 1998 the *Belonging to the World Church* programme was created to enable lay people and ministers of the United Reformed Church and its international partners to realise their parts in this mission. It provides international experiences for people worshipping and working in local churches through both individual and group opportunities. Through exposure to international partners *Belonging to the World Church* aims to: stretch the imagination and vision of people in the United Reformed Church, enabling them to find new ways of being church, to become a more multicultural church embracing the full range of ethnic diversity in Britain, and to take a stand in solidarity with partners on the pressing issues of the day.