

## Wake-up call: Scottish Churches House in danger

*'The ecumenical movement in Scotland needs nothing less than resurrection,' writes Ian Fraser ...*

A goodly number of Scottish ecumenists, sacrificially committed, are being crucified by recent developments.

The little houses of Dunblane, donated by Friends of Dunblane Cathedral – as Leighton House was by the Stevenson family – were saved to become a House of the Churches Together. The World Council of Churches dedicated the enterprise, seeing it as a Scottish sign to the world of a way of tackling major obstacles to unity.

Pope John Paul II followed up his visit to Scotland with the choice of the House to be a springboard towards unity for churches prepared to walk 'hand in hand'.

Elsbeth King, of Stirling's Art Gallery and Museum, said in public that the loss of it would be as big a setback as if Iona initiatives closed down. But it is treated as being redundant.

'But it *is* now redundant,' it was argued. 'Churches are now working together in trusting relationship.'

For one thing, that relationship was substantially a product of Scottish Churches House. For another, such trust is wasted if it does not provide a basis for tackling major hindrances to significant unity such as Jesus Christ prayed for: 'That they might be one *as he and the Father are one, that the world might believe in his sending.*' Friendly relationships may be established while churches continue in apartheid development with features unexamined and uncriticised which contradict the unity which Christ prayed for and which will prove quite unlikely to draw the world into belief.

Untackled are: gender disinheritance by male domination; laity disinheritance by clergy domination; disinheritance of the world which God so loved, by churchly preoccupations; disinheritance of youth by aged control; disinheritance of 'deviants', both of homosexuals all made in the likeness of God and of committed Christians from other traditions, debarred from partaking of the sacrament of unity. Secularism is condemned while public status is coveted. I could go on ...

For dealing with such concerns Scottish Churches House was designed. The second of its original objectives addressed *'the need for the Churches to meet honestly and humbly about the things which separate them and the unity in which they may go forward together'*. Weird, is it not, that when the ecumenical field needs to be made fertile, a move is made to sell off the plough?!

As God called us into partnership to be *trustees* and *stewards* of creation, not to be masters and owners, so the original pioneers entrusted the House to successors to be trustees and stewards of the gift, not to act as owners with power to dispose of it.

From the start the officially appointed Ecumenical Committee and the Ecumenical Association of enthusiasts developed, in partnership, the House policy and programmes. These two facets of church have been distanced, though they need one another. The movement without institutionalising can sink into the sand. The institution without the movement can grow hardened arteries. Official appointees have acted unilaterally, as if enthusiasts were not every bit as much church as they are, rejecting partnership.

The House now cannot be afforded? Goalposts have been moved. The House has come to be treated as if it should be self-sustaining – like any centre which takes in ‘religious washing’. It was designed as a unique *instrumentality* to fulfil major ecumenical purposes. The cost of a warden and assistant warden and staff (of whom a proportion are volunteers) is treated as a deficit, while other enterprises are treated as investments. The last genuine annual ‘deficit’ recorded was £25,000, hardly an unattainable amount for a team of churches to retain an irreplaceable asset.

But the House needed to be refurbished for future use! It was laid down that £500,000 had to be raised in a few months to save it. A major Irish fundraiser for charities declared that this was a move to secure failure and leave the House open to disposal. Against the odds, the Appeal target was not only reached but surpassed. Result? The goalposts were moved. There was no written, legally binding commitment to continue the life of the House! When did there have to be a resort to legal enforcement when integrity of conduct demanded theology and love?

The crass top-down way in which all this has been handled can be overcome, but only if resurrection replaces crucifixion. Institution and movement must resume partnership. Major obstacles to the oneness for which Jesus Christ prayed must be addressed and dealt with, no longer sidelined.

The ecumenical movement in Scotland needs nothing less than resurrection. A crucial meeting of ACTS will take place on May 11th.

*Ian M. Fraser*

*Ian Fraser has been a pastor-labourer in heavy industry, a parish minister, Warden of Scottish Churches House, an Executive Secretary of the World Council of Churches, and Dean and Head of the Department of Mission at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham. He is the author of numerous books, including Strange Fire, The Way Ahead, A Storehouse of Kingdom Things, and Reinventing Theology, which is used as a standard theological sourcebook throughout the world. Ian is one of the original members of the Iona Community who helped George MacLeod to rebuild ‘the common life’ and the Abbey buildings on the isle of Iona. Throughout his life Ian has travelled the world, alone and with his wife, Margaret, visiting basic Christian communities. He has walked alongside slum dwellers in India and Haiti; Nicaraguan and Cuban revolutionaries; priests, nuns and catechists facing arrest and/or death in Central and South America; and small farming and fishing communities in the Philippines ...*