

# **FORTY YEARS OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF ST THOMAS**

**Address for the Annual Celebration at St Mary's,  
Dunblane**

**Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> September 2013**

## **INTRODUCTION**

To celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary we are looking back and looking forward. As always, we look back not to feed nostalgia, but to give thanks to God and to learn. I shall not try to give a general survey of the history of the Fellowship, describing its influential personalities, noting its ups and downs and its developments. I have been privileged to be in fellowship with remarkable people and would like simply to pay tribute now to all the office-bearers who have been devoted to the service of the Fellowship and the Lord.

I shall concentrate rather on describing the beginnings of our Fellowship, then summarizing its objects and the ways they have been put into practice.

## **BEGINNINGS**

**1. *The Idea:*** In our August 2013 Newsletter Dan O'Connor traced the idea of our Fellowship back to a conversation on a plane in 1970. Dr William Stewart and Provost Edward Luscombe had attended the inauguration ceremony of the Church of North India in Nagpur in November 1970. Dr Stewart had been Principal of Serampore College 1959-1966 and had been involved in the later stages of the negotiations for that union. Provost Luscombe was sent to the inauguration as an Episcopalian representative. The two of them sat together on a flight back to the UK and 'resolved to "do something ecumenical", that is, to bring the new Indian reality to bear on church relationships in Scotland.'

**2. Initial Meetings:** Around two years later, in late 1972, an informal meeting took place in the Lecropt manse, Bridge of Allan. Dr Stewart was the minister of the Lecropt Church. (A memorial window to him and his wife Wilma was dedicated there in 1990.) Dr Stewart and Provost Luscombe invited Dan O'Connor and Miss Katharine Ramsey to join them.

The next meeting took place on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> April the following year (1973) at Scottish Churches House, Dunblane. The minutes, no doubt by Katharine Ramsey, are headed 'Proposed "Friends of the Churches of the Indian Sub-continent in Scotland"', but during the meeting Dan O'Connor proposed the name 'Fellowship of St Thomas'. This was unanimously adopted 'as a very concise way of summing up the link with so many different Churches overseas'. In our August 2013 Newsletter Dan O'Connor reflected: 'The name has worn well, and is, I think, more embracing and says a bit more than "Friends of this" and "Friends of that", rooting us in an apostolic history which will find its fulfilment in India, and in Scotland, in God's good time.'

**3. Fellowship:** The word 'fellowship' has such rich associations. It denotes our sharing together in the Holy Spirit, our partaking together of God's whole salvation, both in this life and in the next.

In 1975 Dan O'Connor submitted a prayer to the AGM, which was adopted as the Fellowship Prayer. It was used at the start of meetings. It reads:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who to Thy holy Apostle Saint Thomas didst reveal Thine incarnate Son in his risen glory, we thank Thee for St. Thomas, for his apostolic labours and his martyr's death; we thank Thee for our fellowship with him and with Thy whole Church; we pray with thanksgiving for Thy Church today in these same lands in which he preached the Gospel, that its members may bear the same

faithful witness, and lead all those amongst whom they are sent, to love and serve Thee in newness of life; through the same Thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with Thee, O Father and Thee, O Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

That prayer again illustrates the wisdom of the choice of the word 'Fellowship' for our name. It implies that we have fellowship with St Thomas, that we are part of the Fellowship of the Saints, the Communion of Saints, of which we sing in the moving climax of Samuel Stone's great hymn:

Yet we on earth have union with God the Three in One,  
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.

There are many of our fellow saints for whom we give thanks as we look back. Despite the pain of separation we are still in fellowship with them.

**4. *Objects and Means:*** Seven people were at the meeting in April 1973 at which our name was established: three Episcopalians and four from the Church of Scotland. Representatives of other denominations sent apologies. The meeting felt unable to form the new body adequately with only two denominations present. However, it did set out the objects of the Fellowship:

1. To promote an informed interest in the Churches of the Indian sub-continent.
2. To encourage private and corporate prayer for and with these Churches.
3. To learn from and share with the Churches of Scotland, the experience of these Churches in the search for Unity.

These objects are to be achieved by such means as –

- a) Welcoming visitors from these overseas Churches.

- b) Providing a Press service for the editors of Church periodicals in Scotland and encouraging subscriptions to the magazines of overseas Churches.
- c) Other suitable means as may from time to time be determined, and in particular the annual celebration of Holy Communion according to the Liturgy of the United Churches.

In our Constitution today we have four **objects** and six **means of achieving these objects**. In the revisions there are differences of emphasis and some additions, but there has been no radical change.

**5. Further Preparatory Meetings:** This meeting in April 1973 planned for a meeting of representatives of all Churches and missionary societies linked with Churches in the Indian Sub-continent on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July in Scottish Churches House, Dunblane. This was to meet the Deputy Moderator of the Church of North India, Bishop Bhandare of Nagpur.

A further preparatory meeting took place at the Lecropt Manse, Bridge of Allan, hosted by Dr and Mrs William Stewart, in the afternoon of 10<sup>th</sup> September.

At this meeting twelve people became founder members by paying 50 pence as an initial subscription and they thus constituted the Fellowship and enabled the meeting to accept a constitution. The 'twelve apostles' were: Rev. E.O. Shaw, Rev. Gavin Martin, Mrs Agnes Martin, Dr W. Stewart, Mrs Stewart, the Very Rev. L.E. Luscombe, Dr R.B.T. Holland, Mrs Andrea Holland, Rev. D. O'Connor, Miss K.M. Ramsay, Miss Ishbel Maclellan, Miss Mabel Small. Six women and six men!

**6. First Full Meeting:** The meeting went on to make plans for the first meeting of the whole Fellowship, to be held on St Andrews Day, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1973 at St Nicholas' Church, Dalkeith, in the evening.

Communion according to the rite of the Church of South India was conducted by the Rev. Roy S. Macnicol, formerly of Madras Christian College, assisted by Dr H.B.T. Holland and Dr Frank Khair Ullah, both of the Church of Pakistan, and Miss Katharine Ramsay, formerly of the Church of North India.

The sermon was preached by Dr Stewart, who had attended the inaugurations of the Church of Pakistan and of the Church of North India. He said:

On November 1<sup>st</sup> 1970, in Lahore, the Church of Pakistan was constituted. Four weeks later in Nagpur, a procession which entered the place of worship under the banners of Baptist and Brethren, Church of India and Disciples, Methodists and the already united Congregationals and Presbyterians, filed out again under one banner, 'The Church of North India'.

He also referred to the inauguration of the Church of South India in Madras in 1947. His text was 1 Corinthians 3: 22-23: *'...all are yours; and Ye are Christ's and Christ is God's.'* All the rich traditions of the separate denominations now belonged to all. Their co-operation rested on a unity which was not a laboured achievement, but acceptance of God's gift.

He explained the adoption of the name 'Fellowship of St Thomas', admitting that the facts about Thomas's mission in India were scarce. He quoted Nehru, who wrote, 'that it is a legend so established as to constitute a fact that transcends history.'

He was frank about the imperfections of the united Churches. He expressed the hope for unity in Scotland, though in cautious terms:

Through the Fellowship of St Thomas, we shall bear these Churches in our hearts, for in Christ we are one with them, and also we shall seek to share with the Churches in Scotland some of their experience and dedication. Of course Scotland

is different, and no solution of problems can be transplanted full grown to our situation. We cannot be spared the patient toil needed to find how in our territory our oneness in Christ is to be expressed. But if we are Christ's and are within the Holy Catholic Church, then we shall know that their adventure is for our sakes too. All things are yours, including the Churches of South Asia, for you are Christ's and Christ is God's.

The second part of the meeting was held in the Parish Hall, where the first office-bearers and committee were elected and Dr Frank Khair Ullah gave a short address on the spread of Christianity in South Asia and the situation of Christians in Pakistan.

The meeting was attended by 55-60 people, mainly from Edinburgh.

**7. Development of the Fellowship:** The membership of the Fellowship grew rapidly. In July 1974 it was 80, by December of that year it had risen to 114. By the end of 1976 it reached 133 and a year later 149.

A notable meeting in Edinburgh on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1974 was addressed by Lesslie Newbigin on 'The St Thomas Tradition in South India and the 19<sup>th</sup> Centenary Commemoration of His Martyrdom, as celebrated by the Churches in Madras in 1972'.

The Annual Celebration of Holy Communion that year was held in the Renfield Church Centre, Glasgow, with the CSI liturgy. A pattern emerged of holding the AGM in the spring and a Celebration of Holy Communion in the autumn. Both were evening meetings and in both in the second part of the evening there was at least one address. The venues for the AGM included the Augustine-Bristo Church Hall or Library and later Bristo Baptist Church Hall, both in Edinburgh.

As the Friends of Serampore became incorporated in the Fellowship, in the early years a joint meeting was arranged to hear a speaker give an address with relevance to the College.

For the 1978 Celebration a new policy was adopted. The event was transferred to a Saturday and Dunblane was chosen as the venue, with a programme very similar to the one we have now. In that year the service was in the Cathedral and the lunch in Scottish Churches' House. The opportunity for leisurely fellowship in the beautiful setting of the Cathedral was much appreciated, but some felt the Cathedral was rather cold. The following year (1979) St Mary's Episcopal Church was used for the first time, with the full approval of Canon Symon, and this has been the usual venue since then, apart from a couple of years in Perth in the late nineties and back to the Cathedral here in 2010-2012. Sometimes the date was the third Saturday in September, but in recent years the last Saturday has become firmly established.

Dr Theo Skinner served as secretary from March 1981 until his death soon after the AGM in April 1988. Shortly afterwards the decision was made to combine the AGM with the Annual Celebration, so that for many years we have had one main meeting in the year, though with local meetings from time to time, mainly in Edinburgh.

## **OBJECTS AND ACTIVITIES**

How have we fulfilled our objects? We have shared two things: fellowship and information.

**1. Fellowship:** We have shared fellowship across the cultures and across the Churches. We have fulfilled two of our objects in this way: to welcome visitors from South Asia and to encourage links between Christians in Scotland and Christians in South Asia. In particular we have made efforts to contact students who have come to study in Scotland.

The foundation of our fellowship as we meet at our Annual Celebration is Holy Communion. In our present Constitution this takes first place under 'Means of Achieving the Objects'. This is remarkable. Our fellowship is fostered by a sacrament of unity. Most of us are members of churches in Scotland that do not have a fully structured written liturgy. Some of us are members of churches that hold Communion only infrequently. There is a wide range of views among us of what we are doing and what actually happens as we celebrate communion. None of this has proved any barrier to our unity in Christ as we have followed his command. It seems that those well used to the liturgies of the united churches wished to share that experience with an ecumenical Scottish fellowship.

**2. Information:** A bewildering amount of news from South Asia has been disseminated among us and through us. This has come particularly through a wide range of addresses at our meetings and careful reports of them. It has come through the Christian magazines published in South Asia, to which we are encouraged to subscribe. In recent years it has come through the Newsletter. And now it comes through emails and through our website. Information has gone out through the press service supplied to denominational journals.

What have we done with all this information?

*Firstly* it has greatly increased our own awareness of the variety of situations in South Asia: the different needs, the encouragements and the frustrations.

*Secondly* we have been able to give the wider Christian community in Scotland a more intelligent understanding of the churches and needs of South Asia.

*Thirdly* we have used it as a basis for prayer. The second object in our Constitution is: 'To encourage corporate and private prayer for and with these churches.' Special points for

prayer have been included in annual reports and are now a feature of our Newsletter.

In the nineties we compiled and distributed a book of Indian prayers, which is still available.

*Fourthly* information has led to discussion. This is in our Constitution as one means of achieving our objects: 'By providing a forum for the discussion of issues arising out of the life and witness of the Churches in South Asia.' This we have done in our meetings and in particular through hosting in Scotland the St. Thomas of India Unity Lecture every three years.

*Fifthly* information has led to practical action. The Fellowship is not a registered charity and raising money is not one of its objects, but we have supported many known needs through our offerings and have sometimes made special donations. We have sought to encourage those serving in South Asia by circular letters, especially at Christmas and Easter.

*Sixthly* I have left our first object to last! It is: 'To learn from the experience and insights of the churches of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka) and to share these with the Churches in Scotland.' The phrase 'the churches of South Asia' refers, of course, to all the churches. Our concern is not only with the united churches. We rejoice when we hear encouraging news of vibrancy and growth in any church group or Christian movement in the subcontinent. We grieve and pray when we hear of problems, setbacks and persecution among any group of Christians.

There have been occasions when comparisons have been made between situations in the subcontinent and at home. No doubt when we face up to justified contrasts with what is done well in South Asia we can learn salutary lessons.

However, the prominence of this object in our Constitution is due to the original euphoria following the successful formations of the United Churches. People really did think this was just the beginning of a worldwide movement towards organic unity. There was to be disappointment. The firm hope of many in Scotland in the 1970s was that here too our separate denominations would find a way of coming together into one for the sake of the Gospel. It was not to be. As long ago as 1983 Duncan Forrester reported to us at Dunblane on the World Council of Churches Assembly in Vancouver. He highlighted the Assembly's awareness of the suffering Church and the delegates' experience of worship together. He commended the Lima Document ('Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry'), which he described as a challenging document particularly relevant to Scotland, where 'the ecumenical road seems at times to be disappearing into the desert'.

In the following year, 1984, an appeal went out from Iona to the churches in Scotland 'to walk together in increasing unity'. Our Committee wished to identify with that and authorized a statement to be sent to *Life and Work* and to *SCAN*, indicating that 'the Fellowship of St Thomas offered such a way'.

No doubt there are various views among us about how our Churches should fulfil the Prayer of the Lord: 'that they may all be one', but none of us would doubt the importance of that quest.

## **CONCLUSION: 'MISSION AND UNITY'**

Theo Skinner used to write descriptive accounts of our meetings. He captured the ethos and significance of them. Here are the first part and the last part of his account of our Dunblane meeting in 1985. It was the 'monsoon season' in Scotland. He wrote:

It didn't matter that the rain was pouring down (as it had done for the past month), that the West was flooded as never before, that the North was threatened, and the East just wet – from all the airts they came, joyfully discarding waterproof garments as they entered the warm welcoming hall of St Mary's church, Dunblane, to relish a much appreciated cup of hot coffee – 75 members and friends.

Then at the end:

All too soon the session had to end. Miss Mary Ruth Young expressed the thanks of all to our guest speakers and all who had participated, with special gratitude to the Rector of St Mary's and Mr and Mrs Edie whose most careful preparation made everything run smoothly.

The meeting closed as hands joined together around the hall we said the Grace.

Tea was served and members seen off for train or bus or car. Inevitably some left an umbrella, or took the wrong raincoat, or dropped important documents, but the excellent church officer gathered them all and in due time all were restored to rightful owners.

We have yet again 'shared insight into mission and unity given to the churches of South Asia', it is now for us to communicate such to the churches where we ourselves are.

Edward Burrows