

**What future for Europe?
Reaffirming the European project as building a community of values**

**An open letter of CEC to churches and partner organisations in Europe and an invitation
to dialogue and consultation**

Response by the Church of Scotland

Times of change and uncertainty

The open letter was published early in June 2016. Since then the circumstances in the UK have changed fundamentally and possibly irrevocably. In a referendum held in the UK on the 23 June 2016 there was a narrow majority in favour of the UK leaving the EU. This led to the resignation of the Prime Minister, David Cameron and the appointment of Theresa May as Prime Minister. She accepted the outcome the referendum and the subsequent months have seen preparations by the UK Government to apply to leave the EU under Article 50 of the treaty of Lisbon. The notice of intention to leave the EU was made in March 2017 and, unless there are unforeseen developments to the contrary, the UK will leave the EU in March 2019.

This has been a divisive episode in UK politics. The majority of Scottish voters in the 2016 referendum wished the UK to remain in the EU, a view shared by the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government and the First Minister who has subsequently argued, unsuccessfully, that Scotland should be offered some special status in the Brexit negotiations to reflect the views of the Scottish electorate. The Scottish Parliament voted for a motion rejecting the UK Government's decision to trigger Article 50 and begin the process of leaving the EU; a vote which has no bearing on the decision of the UK Government, but reveals the deep fault lines that now exist between the two governments. The UK Government has also indicated that it intends to leave the Single Market and Customs Union, a position which runs counter to wishes laid out by the Scottish Government in Scotland's Place in Europe (December 2016). In part as a result of the divisions between the governments, the First Minister has set out her intention of calling a second referendum on Scottish independence late in 2018 or early in 2019.

The most recent General Election (8th June 2017) has created further uncertainty with no party winning an overall majority and the Conservative Party, which secured the most votes and the greatest number of seats, forming a minority government. In Scotland a significant reduction in the number of seats for the pro-independence SNP, has highlighted significant divisions over calling a further Independence Referendum.

These developments have provoked fundamental questions about the relations between Scotland, the UK and other European nations, about Scotland's identity, its economy and

the status of many residents from other EU countries for whom Scotland is home. It is in these tempestuous circumstances that the Church of Scotland responds to the open letter.

Debate of the General Assembly 2017

The General Assembly in May considered a report on Scotland's place in Europe that forms the basis of this response. The report reiterated previous statements from the General Assembly that the Church's established position is that the UK should remain a member of the EU.¹ The report raised concerns about the uncertainty and fear that has resulted from the referendum among members of the Church and wider society, particularly those nationals from other EU countries. One Church of Scotland minister, who wished to remain anonymous, commented as follows.

"The vote to leave the EU has left me and my family with deep sadness. My wife is Scottish and our three children consider themselves as Scottish and European citizens.

"One of the biggest concerns that I have is the rise in intolerance and racism in the aftermath of the referendum. Soon after the referendum my son (who is in the high school) was twice called by one of his peers in the school 'dirty immigrant' - and my son was born in Scotland and lived all his life here."

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has sought to reassure nationals from other EU countries that they are welcome in Scotland, but uncertainty created by the referendum remains, and any suggestion that the right of EU citizens to stay in the UK may be used as a bargaining chip in any future negotiations should be resolutely condemned.

Despondency or hope?

Many people were bitterly disappointed at the outcome of the referendum. While to some it may symbolise a reassertion of British sovereignty, for others it can feel like a retreat into isolationism. Such responses are understandable as is the frustration of many in Scotland who voted for continued EU membership but who are overruled by a larger number of voters in England. However, the Church – despite its own well documented support for continued membership of the EU preceding the referendum – cannot afford to ignore either the very sizable minority in Scotland who voted to leave, nor the very substantial number of people across the UK who voted to remain. Engaging with all parts of the community, however deeply divided views may be, is an important role for the church in the difficult period of change that lies ahead.

¹ *Our Place in Europe*, report to the General Assembly 2016.

This is a time to have the courage to imagine a better future and to encourage others to develop and maintain their dreams and visions. Through the Joint Public Issues Team (an ecumenical grouping involving the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Church of Scotland) the Church of Scotland has contributed to the resource "Conversation Welcome" which seeks to enable congregations across the United Kingdom to consider the future of the UK following the UK's departure from the European Union. The resource, which can be accessed at: <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/eu-referendum/conversationwelcome/>, draws heavily on "Imagining Scotland's Future" (2014), which is a piece of work that the Church of Scotland undertook during the 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence. The Vision laid out in these pieces of work and within Speak Out: 10,000 Voices for Change have set out a clear vision by the Church of Scotland and that vision is not limited to Scotland; it is one we can share with our European partners. The political circumstances in which this vision can be brought about are uncertain. Nonetheless, whatever Scotland's future and that of the wider UK will be, the vision of a country in a world that is pleasing to God must inspire and direct our actions.

In this context the Church of Scotland will play its role as a European church. Its historical roots with other European churches are deep and strong, from pre-reformation theologians and pilgrims to the central role the Genevan Church played in shaping the Reformed Church in Scotland; from the post Second World War partnership with the Reformed Church in Hungary around the life, witness and death of Jane Haining; to the vibrant life and worship of Church of Scotland congregations across many parts of Europe today. We have worked closely with the Conference of European Churches and other European partners and will continue to do so on a range of projects: on refugees; care for creation; tackling poverty and on injustice. The Church of Scotland is part of the community of God's people in every part of the world; it is a church for the people of Scotland but it will also remain a European church which, in collaboration with our sisters and brothers across Europe, seeks to worship God and demonstrate our shared commitment to the Gospel. As the UK prepares to leave the EU, the Church of Scotland is committed to maintaining and deepening its relationships with denominations and Christian institutions across mainland Europe.

What future for Europe ?

We recognise that the political tensions made evident by Brexit are not unique to the United Kingdom but are evident in many countries across Europe, as the open letter makes clear. We also recognise that while disruptive and unsettling, the circumstances in which we find ourselves are not as challenging as in some EU countries in which economic problems, the Euro crisis, high levels of unemployment and, particularly in some Mediterranean countries, high levels of refugees, combine to create very

significant political and social challenges . A sense of proportion and a clear sense of direction to guide us is essential but not always easy in uncertain times. As circumstances develop in future months we will seek to contribute to the debate within Scotland, the UK and Europe with faith to strengthen us and the direction of the General Assembly: 'to make Scotland a fairer , more equal and more just nation in a fairer , more equal and more just world.'²

² http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/speak_out