

REPORT
OF THE
COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE

The Communications Committee had its usual meetings this past year. Although such meetings occur regularly we are aware that we are dealing frequently with matters that occur in a fast-changing society, changes that are often difficult to understand and complicated to explain. One area of such change is that of technological development. We are familiar with technological advances in medicine, in electronics and in communications, with activities occurring today that only existed a few years ago in science fiction literature. Where could these advances take society? Read our report on Transhumanism, written by Rev Roddie Rankin, in answer to this question.

We are also aware that we live in a society with large and, at times, disastrous problems. Many reports would have been written had we focused on all such problems, but for this year we decided to provide a report on one of the major traumatic features of contemporary society, that of suicide. The Committee is grateful to Rev Robert Macleod, Chaplain in the Forth Valley NHS, for writing this paper.

The Committee is also aware that parents are naturally concerned about the education of children. Again, this is a wide area, but since we had been approached about the subject of sex education in Scottish schools, we have produced a paper outlining the current situation. We are thankful to former Director of Education in the Western Isles, Mr Murdo Macleod for preparing this paper.

Within the remit of the Committee, there are several means of conveying the biblical message on a wide range of topics. We have summarized below how the website, magazines and bookshop contribute to this. We would value the prayers of the Church for those means and hopefully what we have provided will enable our congregations to pray intelligently about such matters.

As we began the work of the past year, we did not anticipate that we would be losing the Editor of *The Record*, Rev David Robertson, because of other commitments. The Committee is aware of the great amount of work put in by the Editor and wish to acknowledge its appreciation for what he has done in providing stimulating and helpful articles on a wide range of topics over the last few years.

(A) WEBSITE

1. Website The Free Church website continues to be accessed by a large number of interested parties as well as being our main source of internal news and information. It has recently undergone a slight facelift as well as some modifications which include the replacement of blogs with articles of general and specific interest. This adjustment should make for more interesting reading.

2. Assembly Reporting The site is at its busiest at Assembly times with a live up to the minute report being generated as the Assembly happens. This facility has been hugely popular and feedback has been positive. In like manner the debates at the Plenary Assembly were reported on the site and this information was accessed by interested parties all over the world. Again feedback was largely encouraging. The Media Officer was disappointed, however, at the suggestion that the reporting was somewhat biased towards the case for change. He wishes to assure the Assembly that he made every effort, irrespective of his own position, to give accurate and unbiased information as to what was being argued from both sides.

3. Future Development Despite its potential, the website has run on three cylinders since the departure of the Communications Officer. The Committee continues to consider how best to provide this function perhaps by other means.

(B) MEDIA

Media interest during the past year has centred largely on the Plenary Assembly, its decision and aftermath. On the whole, press coverage has been fair and if it has been negative, the blame lies with us for poor publicity rather than with the media. It is highly important in today's world to think of how our decisions impact the perception which the world has of the Free Church. That perception is driven by and largely dictated by the media. A large proportion of the Media Officer's work is to educate the media towards a more accurate portrayal of us. This is not made easy by internal but public conflicts which give the appearance of a church disengaged from the real world. This in turn has a negative impact on our attempts to evangelise where the public have such a predetermined view of our church.

(C) THE RECORD

The Record is a team effort – involving a significant number of people. In addition to the Editor, David Robertson, the team includes Al McInnes (who does the design and layout), Malcolm Maclean (Book Review editor), Janet MacPhail (Gaelic), Charles and Daphne Douglas (From the Frontiers), Alison MacDonald (WFM Editor) and DaySpring MacLeod (Proof-reading and Prayer Diary).

1. Circulation The circulation at the end of the year (2010) was 2993 congregational subscriptions (in 2009, it was 3244), and 387 individual subscriptions (in 2009, it was 404), giving a total of 3380 (3648). This continued decline has been a little discouraging, although the Committee realises that this trend is happening with other religious magazines as well.

2. Website The website subscription service has not yet been set up. This should be a matter of urgency for the new Editor.

3. Content The content of the magazine continues with a mix of Bible teaching, cultural, historical, interview, church related, Gaelic, missions, apologetic, evangelistic and news articles. Thanks are extended to Barbara Cross, David Meredith and Iain D Campbell who were regular contributors as well as to all others who contributed material in the past year, including those who sent letters and e-mails connected to articles in the magazine.

4. Future Plans Demands on the Editor's time required him to resign as editor of *The Record*. Two factors in particular led to his decision. On the one hand, he spends a great deal of time fund-raising in connection with the redevelopment of the St Peters building; on the other hand, the opportunities to engage in evangelistic work throughout Scotland through Solas CPC are expanding. The Committee is encouraged by the development of Solas CPC and commends David Robertson's work with Solas to the prayerful interest of the church.

Concerning *The Record*, Mr Robertson comments, 'I would have liked to have developed *The Record* further and it was with a great deal of reluctance that I felt compelled to give up the editorship. I have greatly enjoyed the challenge and hope that it has proved of use to the Lord's people. I pray that the new Editor will know the Lord's blessing and guidance and I would like to assure him, and the Assembly, that I will do everything I can to assist him in the transition.'

***5. Record Editor** Rev David Robertson indicated in late January that he intended to resign as Editor of *The Record* at the March Committee meeting. The Committee sought nominations from Presbyteries of suitable Free Church Ministers or Elders for the position of Editor in line with Act XXX., 2007. A sub-committee was formed at the March Committee to receive the nominations, contact candidates and arrange interviews. Presbyteries nominated as follows:

- *Edinburgh and Perth*: Rev. Dr David Ford, Rev. Dr John Ross, Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean, Rev. Dr Iain D. Campbell, Rev. Alasdair I. Macleod, Rev. Iver Martin, Rev. Angus Macrae, Rev. Colin Morison, Rev. David Meredith.
- *Glasgow and Argyll*: Rev. Iver Martin, Rev. Alasdair I. Macleod, Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean
- *Inverness, Lochaber and Ross*: Rev. Dr David Ford, Rev. Dr John Ross, Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean
- *Northern*: Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean

- *Skye and Wester Ross*: Rev. Dr Iain D. Campbell, Rev. Alasdair I. Macleod, Rev. Dr. Malcolm Maclean
- *Western Isles*: Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean
- *Great Lakes and Western Canada*: Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean
- *Prince Edward Island*: Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean, Rev. David Meredith, Rev. Neil MacMillan

The discrepancies in numbers nominated by different Presbyteries resulted from the tight timescale, and different methods Presbytery clerks used to obtain nominations. All but Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean, Rev. Dr John Ross and Rev. Dr David Ford withdrew their names when informed of their nominations. Rev. Dr John Ross later withdrew his name owing to his heavy workload this autumn at Dumisani, and the fact that he would not be able to give full attention to the responsibilities of Record editor until the end of the year. The sub-committee had considered whether it would be possible to have temporary editing arrangements in place were his name to be recommended to the Assembly, but such arrangements proved impractical to organise. After interviewing the other two candidates, the sub-committee decided to recommend Rev. Dr Malcolm Maclean to the General Assembly as sole nominee for the post of Editor of *The Record*. They wish to record their gratefulness to the men who were willing to allow their names to be considered, and who gave stimulating presentations to the sub-committee at their interviews.

(D) FREE

It is now almost five years since the present Editor of *Free* took up the post. The years have passed swiftly and Mrs Nicolson notes that it has been a pleasure and a privilege to be involved in this work. The contact with the Church's young people has been especially enjoyable, and many of those who have contributed articles and assistance have become good friends. Working from home in Caithness, Mrs Nicolson reports that it has been wonderful to be involved in the work of the wider Church, when sometimes the distance can seem quite far. Nearing the end of her five-year appointment, the Committee wishes to reappoint Mrs Chris Nicolson as *Free* Editor for a further period of five years.

1. Production The past year has seen a move from the regular printer, Woods of Perth. Hit by the recession, Woods suddenly went out of business at the start of last year, but our contact there, Grant Hamilton, moved to J. Thomson Colour Printers and *Free* went with him. The changeover was seamless. Catherine Pearson, the Church's former Communications Officer, came back to work freelance on *Free* at the end of her maternity leave and designed two issues; however, she felt that this wasn't for her and we returned to Dufi-Art, where new employee, Johnny Sherlock, took over responsibility for *Free*. Dufi-Art does a very professional job and the Editor has an excellent working relationship with the firm.

2. Content *Free* has some excellent steady and supportive contributors. Mary Louise Stone and Colin Ross continue their columns, while David Kirk has produced some excellent articles on popular Christian music and has also put in place the format for a series on the Psalms, for which one off contributors will be sought from time to time. DaySpring MacLeod is about to start a series on prayer, and Free Church Camps continue to feature on a regular basis through the year. The Editor finds it useful to write a number of regular features herself, but would really welcome contributions from across the Church. Please consider contributing one-off articles on topics pertaining to young people. These would be very welcome.

3. Circulation and Readership The print run has recently been reduced to 1150 copies per issue, to reflect the steady drop in circulation, to about 1050. It would be easy to feel despondent about this – and the Editor does at times – but having spoken to former colleagues who are still involved in publishing, we know that *Free* is not alone. The magazine industry as a whole is suffering a decline, possibly to do with the rise of the Internet and people getting information online and spending much more time occupied that way. The drop seems to come from congregations – the individual subscriptions have remained steady – and the Editor would encourage congregations to look beyond the young people in their church to the outside community and consider where they could distribute copies: after-school groups, youth clubs and so on. Speak to ministers from different denominations and ask them to consider taking it for their own youth work, and please encourage older readers to take the magazine, to keep in touch with the young people in the Church and their interests. We know from feedback that *Free* appeals across a much wider age range than it is intended for. There really doesn't seem to be another magazine

like *Free* available anywhere.

4. Promotion Is there someone out there who would be willing to take *Free* on as a special project and promote it throughout the Church and beyond – someone with marketing ability? The Editor feels that she does not have the ability, the time, the contacts or the location, to effectively do this work, but is sure there is someone out there who would be perfect for the job and feels this could make a tremendous difference to circulation.

The Editor would like to say how much she enjoys working on *Free* – even after five years: ‘When I sat down to plan my very first issue, I suddenly thought, ‘So *this* is what that training all those years ago was for!’ I am very grateful for the support of everyone involved the magazine. From those across the Church, young and older, who provide articles, to the office staff in Edinburgh and the Communications Committee members, to those who send encouraging emails of support or come over to say ‘hello’ at various times – and to Fiona MacArthur, the wonderful proof reader and friend who adds valuable insight and advice, I have to say a massive thank you. I have a very real sense of God being in control and believe that what goes in each issue has been provided by Him. There have been times when He has provided right at the last minute – and the fit has been perfect. It’s a great relief as Editor knowing that *Free* is in His hands, not mine.’

(E) BOOKSHOP

1. Sales The shop did fairly well in 2010, although once the final adjustments are made there will be a small loss. Sales of books at the Island and Spring conferences and camps were encouraging. Sales of psalm stock are good and the shop continues to provide books for students of our own college and of New College. The new sign on the wall in front of the bookshop has brought in new customers.

One of the main highlights in 2010 was the bookstall at the Edinburgh conference which celebrated the 100th anniversary of the 1910 mission conference. Sales were good and there was positive feedback.

2. Future The development of 16 North Bank Street is an exciting prospect for the future. The plan for Saturday opening of the café will make it easier (from a security point of view) to open the bookshop as well. It will also provide new opportunities to display stock. The Committee recently discussed proposals for an online bookshop. It is hoped to progress this once a secure online payments system is in place.

(F) END OF LIFE ISSUES

The 2010 Assembly considered the Free Church’s response to the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill which was going through the Scottish Parliament at that time. In September 2010, Rev. Professor Donald MacDonald, who authored the Free Church response, was asked to give oral evidence to the End of Life Bill Committee at the Parliament. This was a great opportunity to articulate our objection to the Bill from a Christian standpoint and to point out its many weaknesses. The Bill was debated in parliament on 1 December at the end of its first stage; MSPs voted against the general principles of the Bill resulting in it proceeding no further. We are thankful to God for this answer to prayer but are mindful that this issue has not gone away and other attempts are likely to be made to legislate to permit some form of assisted suicide and euthanasia. We therefore intend to continue to monitor the situation through our membership of Care Not Killing, which was so effective in opposing this Bill.

(G) KJV ANNIVERSARY

The 2010 Assembly instructed the Committee to look at how the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible should be celebrated. Recognising that other organisations such as The King James Bible Trust and the Trinitarian Bible Society are planning a series of events, the Committee agreed that it should not duplicate these efforts. The Committee decided to arrange two conferences on the Bible for later in the year. One will be held in Greyfriars Free Church, Inverness, on Saturday, 3rd September; the speakers will be Nigel Anderson, David Meredith, and Fergus Macdonald; the conference will be held in

the afternoon, so enabling speakers and audience, should they wish, to travel there and back home on that day. Further details about the Inverness Conference will appear in *The Record*. It is hoped that a similar conference will be arranged for the Western Isles; details of it are not available at going to print, but will be made public once they are confirmed.

(H) PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Over the past year the Committee has responded to various matters of concern. As noted above, among them was the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill. We are grateful to those who helped in all our responses, including those who provided the three following papers on (1) Suicide, (2) Transhumanism, and (3) Sex Education in Scottish Schools.

1. SUICIDE

1. Introduction and context Malcolm Chisholm, minister for Health and Community Care at the launch of the Scottish Executive's Choose Life campaign in 2002 said: "*Suicide touches the lives of many people and is a devastating event. Many of us will know of someone who has attempted or completed suicide. Preventing suicide and reducing the rate of suicide in Scotland is therefore an urgent public health issue.*"¹

The authors of LivingWorks' Suicide Intervention Handbook and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training [ASIST] maintain that suicide is one of the most underestimated community health problems in the world. It is believed more people die from suicide than in all of the armed conflicts around the world and about the same or more than those dying from road traffic accidents. For every person who dies from suicide there are as many as 100 times more people who injure themselves from non-fatal suicidal behaviours.

When considering suicide data, it is conventional to combine deaths classified as intentional self-harm with those of undetermined intent, as the majority of the latter are probable suicides. Doing so protects against under-recording and provides a more accurate figure and usually three year rolling averages at a national level, five years at NHS board and local authority level, smooth out annual fluctuations.

2. World Demographics Every year almost one million people die from suicide, a world mortality rate of 16 per 100,000, or one death every 40 seconds. In the last 45 years worldwide suicide rates have increased by 60%. Suicide is among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 in some countries, and the second leading cause of death in the 10-24 age group; these figures do not include suicide attempts which are up to 20 times more frequent than completed suicide.² Within USA [2002] suicide accounted for 31,655 deaths (11.0 per 100 000 per year) representing a human tragedy and estimated \$11.8 billion in lost income.³

Suicide rates vary widely ranging from less than 1 in 100 000 persons per year in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon to more than 40 in 100 000 in some Eastern European countries. The reason is not known but in the late 80's Hungary held the highest reported rate in the last century.⁴ In the industrialised world a number of nations across Asia are at risk of increasing rates of suicide due to the economic conditions and worldwide recession. In 1997, with currency devaluation, suicide rates rose 40% among men and 20% among women in Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong. In 2009, the number of suicides in Japan exceeded 30,000 for the twelfth straight year.⁵

2.1 UK Demographics There are large differences in suicide rates between countries and regions of the UK according to analysis published in Health Statistics Quarterly by the Office for National Statistics. The UK rate for men peaked in 1998 but has since fallen, whilst the suicide rate for women remained stable in the period 1991–2007 although increasing to 5.4 per 100,000 in 2008. In 2007 there were 5,377 reported suicides in adults aged 15 and over, 177 less than in 2006 (5,554) and 940 less

¹ Choose Life Initiative, www.chooselife.net

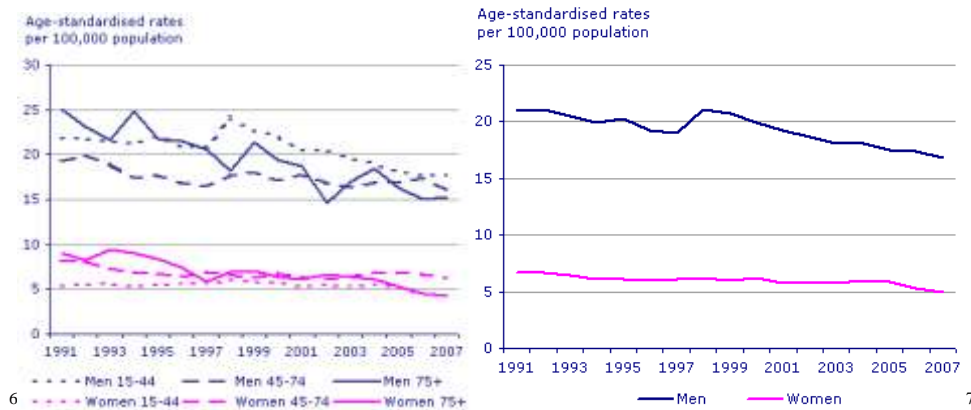
² World Health Organization – Suicide Prevention Programme (SUPRE)

³ Goldsmith S K; Pellmar T C; Kleinman A M; Bunney W E [2002] *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative*.

⁴ Mann, J. J [2002] *A Current Perspective of Suicide and Attempted Suicide*

⁵ [Suicides in Japan top 30,000 for 12th straight year may surpass 2008 numbers](#)". *The Mainichi Daily News*. Dec. 26, 2009.

than in 1991 (6,317). Three-quarters of the suicides in 2007 were men, and this proportion has remained fairly constant throughout the same period.



2.2 Scotland In Scotland, suicide is seen a leading cause of mortality among young people and continues to have the highest rate of the constituent countries of the UK. In the period 1991 – 2004 that rate for men was 50% higher than the rate for the UK as a whole. For women the rate was almost double that for the UK - 15.9 compared to 8.2 for England and Wales and 8.5 for Northern Ireland. An international comparison reveals the suicide rate for males is higher in Scotland than for most other European countries, except Finland and Poland. The rate for females is also high in Scotland compared to the rest of Europe – and of the countries included in the comparison only Finland had a higher suicide rate for females.

3. National Strategy Choose Life, a ten year national strategy and action plan to prevent suicide in Scotland set a target to reduce suicide by 20% by 2013. An evaluation of phase 2 [2006-08] of the Choose Life strategy, commissioned by the Scottish Government noted that the main achievements were seen in relation to:

- Awareness-raising both amongst professionals and the wider community
- Wide uptake and availability of suicide-prevention training
- Improving knowledge and evidence base on suicide risk and prevention
- Improved reporting of suicide in the media⁸

Some question the robustness and appropriateness of the 20% reduction target and suggest a lower or non-quantitative target is preferable. Others would argue that having an “*aspirational*” target has led to a concentration of resources on suicide prevention.

Considering the evaluation report it is worth noting the key points released by the Information Services Division [ISD Scotland] in August 2009 which were:

- 843 deaths by suicide in Scotland in 2008 equated to an age-standardised rate of 16.1 per 100,000 of population. 630 were males and 213 females.
- Based on the three-year rolling averages there was a 10% fall between 2000-02 and 2006-08. These rates have shown little change since 2003-05 although rates amongst men increased marginally in the latest three year period.
- In 2008 the suicide rate for males continued to be around three times that for females.
- Suicide rates increased with increasing deprivation, with rates in the most deprived areas of Scotland significantly higher than the rate for Scotland generally.

⁶ Suicide rates by sex, UK – 1991-2008 National Statistics Online, www.statistics.gov.uk

⁷ Suicide rates by sex and age-group, UK – 1991-2008 National Statistics Online, www.statistics.gov.uk

⁸ Russell, P. Lardner, Clare. Griesbach, D. Johnston. L Health and Community Care Research Findings No. 98/2010 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>

- Between 1999-03 and 2004-08, the suicide rate decreased in 13 of the 14 NHS boards and in 26 of the 32 local authorities.
- 2004-2008 rates amongst men were significantly higher in Greater Glasgow, Clyde and Highland NHS Boards and significantly lower in Lothian and Forth Valley NHS Boards. For the same period rates in women were higher in Greater Glasgow and Clyde NHS Boards and significantly lower in Forth Valley and Grampian NHS Boards. Within local authorities rates were higher in Dundee City, Glasgow City and North Lanarkshire and significantly lower in Falkirk, Clackmannanshire and Perth & Kinross.⁹

Looking at the UK national figures which in 2008 revealed a 6% rise over the downward trend of previous years, Stephen Platt, Samaritans' Trustee and Professor of Health Policy Research at the University of Edinburgh, stated that it could turn out to be a normal fluctuation but nevertheless on strong evidence, he saw a link between economic recession and suicide. He said: *"it is also possible this is the start of an upward trend which could continue until there is an improvement in economic conditions."*¹⁰

4. Suicidal intent-risk factors Risk varies from person to person. What can be said from research is that it involves trying to block out unbearable pain and hurt. Many times the attempt is a cry for help. Reaching the point of contemplating suicide finds a person so distressed they are unable to rationalise alternative options or see a way out. *"Suicide is not chosen; it happens when pain exceeds resources for coping with pain."*¹¹

Every person confronts stressful situations and traumatic events and generally, ways are found both to cope and resolve them. However, sometimes, stresses build up over a period of time that has individual coping strategies pushed to the limits. These limits vary from person to person: Rape and abuse survivors are vulnerable as they deal with all kinds of memories, flashbacks, depression, relational and trust issues on top of everyday situations. There is evidence that people living in the idyll of rural communities can be at risk because there are fewer resources, isolation and, sometimes, economic pressures.

Research from Oxford University [1991-1993] found the key explanatory variables in 84 suicides to be the presence of mental illness, low rates of treatment, lack of a close confiding relationship, work, financial problems and the availability of firearms.¹² Grappling with questions around sexuality as a young person can propel them into the risk category – the why questions, sense of isolation and fear of discrimination. Prison inmates, particularly following sentencing, may be vulnerable as they confront shame, fear and drug misuse. Mental health disorders increase the likelihood of self-harm or suicide through sadness, apathy, self-blaming, hopelessness and loss of interest in everyday activities. Lifestyle: drug and alcohol misuse are also regarded as significant risk factors. Other factors include age and gender, marital status and those within minority groups - particularly due to the stress of acculturation and of isolation. Interestingly, religiosity would appear to have a protective effect against suicide. Research suggests higher percentages of individuals without religious affiliation have correspondingly higher suicide rates. The suggestion is that religion may well provide social support systems, the ability to cope with stressors, purpose and/or the conviction that suicide is not the solution. In addition, there is lower misuse of drugs/alcohol and divorce rates which are significant risk factors.¹³

5. Warning signs This is not an easy question to answer and again varies from person to person. Usually by the time a person gets to the stage of thinking about suicide as an option they are not able to evaluate objectively. If they weren't in such great distress many would choose a different option. A lot of suicidal people give out warning signs in the hope that they will be rescued. Most just want an end to the never ending emotional pain and hurt - not to die. Research suggests there will be more than one particular sign - often several clues will be apparent. Further, just because one or more of these clues may be noticeable, it does not necessarily mean that someone is definitely contemplating suicide. Some warning signs or signals a suicidal person may give are:

- Depression but not necessarily suffering clinical depression

⁹ <http://www.isdscotland.org/isd/5997.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1246863/Suicide-rate-rises-time-decade-recession-blame.html#ixzz0sGcSACjD>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Organization. (2004). *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Contemplating Suicide?* www.metanoia.org

¹² Centre For Suicide Research, Oxford University: <http://cebmh.warne.ox.ac.uk/csr/resfarmers.html>

¹³ http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_php?tpe=doc@id=13737

- Recurring suicidal thoughts dreams or fantasies
- Showing signs of sadness and hopelessness
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Loss of energy
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Changes in behaviour
- Change in sleep patterns
- Negative self-image: comments about being hopeless, helpless, worthless
- They may have made previous suicide attempts.
- They may talk, write or hint about suicide.
- Purposefully putting personal affairs in order
- Clearing the air from past personal incidents
- Giving away personal possessions
- Checking and putting in order wills or insurance policies
- Having a 'death wish': putting themselves at risk
- Self-destructive behaviour: alcohol and drug misuse or self-harming
- Saying things like "it would be better if I wasn't here" or "I want out"
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye

These signs are not exhaustive. Some people may not show any outward signs, even though they are feeling suicidal. Some may show many of the signs but are coping. The only real way of knowing for sure is to **ask**.¹⁴

6. Myths around suicide There are many myths around suicide – some examples:

MYTH: You have to be mentally ill even to think about suicide.

FACT: Most people have thought of suicide from time to time and not all people who die by suicide have mental health problems. However, the majority of people who kill themselves do have such problems, typically to a serious degree. Sometimes this has been recognised before the person's death and sometimes not.

MYTH: People who talk about suicide aren't really serious and not likely actually to kill themselves.

FACT: People who kill themselves have often told someone that they do not feel life is worth living or that they have no future. Some may have actually said they want to die. Whilst it may be the case that some people talk about suicide as a way of getting the attention they need, it is very important that everyone who says they feel suicidal be treated seriously.

MYTH: Once a person has made a serious suicide attempt, that person is unlikely to make another.

FACT: People who have attempted to kill themselves are significantly more likely eventually to die by suicide than the rest of the population.

MYTH: If a person is serious about killing themselves then there is nothing you can do.

FACT: Feeling suicidal is often a temporary state of mind. Whilst someone may feel low or distressed for a sustained period the actual suicidal crisis can be relatively short term. This is what makes timely emotional support so important.

MYTH: Talking about suicide is a bad idea as it may give someone the idea to try it.

FACT: When someone feels suicidal they often do not want to worry or frighten others and so do not talk about the way they feel. By asking directly about suicide you give them permission to tell you how they feel. People who have been through such a crisis will often say that it was a huge relief to be able to talk about their suicidal thoughts. Once someone starts talking they have a greater chance of discovering other options to suicide.

MYTH: Most suicides happen in the winter months.

FACT: Suicide is more common in the spring and summer months.

¹⁴ www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

MYTH: People who threaten suicide are just attention seeking and shouldn't be taken seriously.

FACT: People may well talk about their feelings because they want support in dealing with them. In this sense it may be that they do indeed want attention in which case giving that attention may save their life.

MYTH: People who are suicidal want to die.

FACT: The majority of people who feel suicidal do not actually want to die; they do not want to live the life they have. The distinction may seem small but is in fact very important and is why talking through other options at the right time is so vital.¹⁵

7. Impact of suicide Suicide, along with the many other deaths where the cause is 'undetermined', [some considered 'hidden suicides'] and suicide attempts are a major cause of death and morbidity worldwide.¹⁶ The impact is significant. For every person who ends their own life there are family, partners, friends, colleagues, neighbours, support workers and others who are affected.¹⁷ Anecdotal evidence affirms that nothing can prepare people for the news that a loved one has taken their own life. A poem by a father says it all:

... "we feel bad that, on that day,
you didn't tell us, what you had to say,
you decided just, to end it all...
our days have changed from, full to aimless
the song is wrong: Suicide's not painless."¹⁸

The impact initially is shock and disbelief followed by questions from others and from those immediately affected: why did they do it, should it not have been predicted or prevented? Even if a note is left, because of the distress in the person, it may not properly express the problem or cause. Sometimes part of the impact is that the reason may never be known. Although society has moved from condemnation of suicide to an emphasis upon trying to understand it; there remains a stigma. It is a hidden or taboo subject with many. Denial, secrecy and avoidance remain common.

Theologian and writer Frederick Buechner relates that it was in adulthood he faced his grief and guilt surrounding the suicide of his alcoholic father when he was ten years old. He and his brother were surrounded by an imposed conspiracy of silence. It had a profound effect on their development and their relationships with other family members. He would say: "*We are as sick as our secrets... finally, I suspect that it is by entering that deep place inside us where our secrets are kept that we come perhaps closer than we do anywhere else to the One who, whether we realize it or not, is of all our secrets the most telling and the most precious we have to tell.*"¹⁹

8. Role of the Church The lives of individuals who contemplate or commit suicide are complex and their emotional pain substantial. A Christian perspective on this issue must begin by affirming that such does not separate us from the love of God. The words of the apostle Paul speak of the power of divine love to transcend and overcome the discordant realities of our human existence, including suicide: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height, nor death, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." [Romans 8:38-39]

8.1 Unfortunately, history evidences that the church has taught the opposite and that some still view suicide as an unforgivable sin. Consequently, sometimes, out of good motive to prevent suicide, the church has been condemnatory, even punitive of victims and families through stigmatization and social penalties. Churches have denied funerals, memorial services to bereaved families and victims' remains have been banned from cemeteries. Does that explain why the churches' response has been judged as dismal by some and not seen as a place of refuge; nor pro-active in its social responsibility?

8.2 The Roman Catholic Church views suicide as a grave sin but there are clear indications that it is moving towards a greater understanding of the issue, recognising that mentally ill people who kill themselves are not fully aware of the consequences and that God does not condemn them. Bishop

¹⁵ www.samaritans.org

¹⁶ Mann, J. J. [2002] A Current Perspective of Suicide and Attempted Suicide *Annals of Internal Medicine* 136[4]: 302-311

¹⁷ See: McDougall, S [2004] *After Suicide*. Copies available: www.samh.org.uk

¹⁸ Campbell, G. [2007] *Suicide is Painful*

¹⁹ Buechner, F. *Telling Secrets: A memoir* Harper San Francisco 05/92 ISBN: 0060609362

Bernard Longley [2009]: “when a person commits suicide, they are generally so clouded by confusion and despair as to be no longer in full control of their mental faculties. God does not condemn anyone not fully aware of what they are doing - His mercy is without end.”²⁰

8.3 In 2009 Rev. Ian Galloway, Convener of the Church of Scotland’s Church and Society Council, urged the Church to listen as well as talk when it comes to supporting those considering suicide. His call came in support of the Scottish Government’s Choose Life programme. “It is commendable that help is being provided to train ordinary people to spot suicidal tendencies.... While such a complex issue as suicide can most effectively be tackled by professionals in many cases just having someone to talk to can help, at least initially. In times of economic crisis with high levels of unemployment and a gradual disintegration of family values and community life...anything that can be done to help in tackling the social and economic causes that make life difficult for young people is to be welcomed and perhaps we in the church need to learn to listen a bit more as well as talking.”²¹

8.4 Professor Sheila Hollins [2009] is quoted as saying: “often in Church settings people think that praying is going to be enough; that people don’t need to seek professional help. Community leaders including clergy are very important gatekeepers to accessing the appropriate professional help through daring to ask if somebody is experiencing suicidal thoughts. A trusted parish priest is just the sort of person who might be able to persuade someone that is seeking professional help that it is not a sign of weakness, but of strength.”²²

8.5 A 2005 study which explored the role of the Church as a voluntary organisation in deaths by suicide in Highland, had ministers from different denominations interviewed about their own experiences of death by suicide and what they understood to be the key aspects that might contribute towards the Church offering protection and solace. That study was conducted upon clear ideas that are evidenced within literature:

- Mainstream religious groups are likely to provide some protection against suicide. Most prevalent when congregations have the greatest interaction with one another and can respond in a crisis and counsel against suicide.
- Internal religious beliefs as well as public expression of religion are important in their own right
- Mental illness is one of the mechanisms for over-riding these protective factors in people with religious affiliations.
- Overall levels of religious belief in a community appear to provide some protection against suicide in men in Western countries, perhaps both by regulation in relation to advice against suicide and by integration with routes by which support can be accessed.
- Faith communities can provide a counter-cultural view of the world and an alternative set of values and criteria for being human and living humanly. As such they are in a position to reframe the expectations and value systems of adherents.

8.5.1 The Highlands study highlighted the issue of ‘disconnection’. Prof. Norman Sartorius [2003] has said “suicide is a fundamental breakdown of trust between individual and social environment.”²³ Mowat et al [2006] introduced their findings concurring: “suicide is a challenge to normative values. It lays bare social deprivation, poverty, mental illness and attitudes to mental illness. Suicide and deliberate self-harm affects individuals, families, communities and society. This most tragic of deaths confronts us all with questions of meaning, hope and social cohesion and challenges us to acknowledge the possibility of suicide for each of us in particular circumstances.”²⁴

8.5.2 Suicide was seen to have a relationship to the spiritual and religious and that where a lack of understanding, listening, friendship and sense of belonging existed, so the likelihood of suicidal behaviour increased. ‘Disconnection’ was expressed in terms of isolation, not fitting in with the main social groupings and being dislocated from what would be described as the ‘normal’ range of social life available in the area. ‘Disconnection’ triggers could be marital breakdown, lack of affection, difficulty

²⁰ www.archive.catholicherald.co.uk/articles/a0000590.shtml

²¹ www.christiantoday.com/article/church.urged.to.listen.to.people.contemplating.suicide/25675.htm

²² Professor Sheila Hollins . [2009] <http://www.archive.catholicherald.co.uk/articles/a0000590.shtml>

²³ Sartorius N,[2003] Old age and suicide in Eastern Europe International Psychogeriatric Association Biannual Conference: Chicago

²⁴ Mowat H, Stark C, Swinton J, and Mowat D [2006] Religion and Suicide: An exploratory study of the role of the Church in deaths by suicide in Highland, Scotland. Mowat Research Ltd., ISBN 0-954 9901-1-0

with relationships, which in some cases might run across generations. Alcohol and drug misuse exacerbated the problem. Other factors unique to Highland were the 'tourist economy' and 'retirement culture' that gave rise to the presence of a disproportionate number of transient or 'uncommitted' populations that in turn contributed towards superficial and transient relationships. Additional factors were pockets of deprivation and the issues of transport and employment.

8.5.3 The Highland experience is sociologically and spiritually fascinating. The study rightly asks whether the Highlands were any different to other places in the country. That said, factors that mitigate in suicidal tendency are prevalent within the geographic area where the Free Church of Scotland is historically strong. Subsequently, the denomination's experience [and that of other denominations] should not only be about meeting the spiritual needs but also this significant area of social need.

8.6 Martin Luther once wrote: "the church is the inn and the infirmary for those who are sick and in need of being made well." That metaphor remains valid as we are called to be a community of grace and healing – mutually bearing each other's burdens. Every suicide statistic represents a wasted life and a death that leaves behind inestimable hurting, sometimes traumatised people. Enter the website of any survivors of suicide support group and tearfully you read the reality and feel the pain as expressed in words like: *"I am broken in pieces, brittle sharp and small. Shattered into fragments – don't feel like me at all. We were going on holiday, I bought a brand new dress, and then you went and left me, my life is now a mess...the dress that I bought for our holiday, I wore to your funeral instead" [or] "there are days when I hear a tune, visit a place, go to a function or just have a thought; and the pain returns."*²⁵

8.7 There is no shame in having suicidal thoughts or asking for help. When life's difficulties and disappointments threaten to overwhelm people's desire to live, the church must recognise that it is strategically placed to make a significant difference and be our brother's and sister's keeper. The demands will be significant, perhaps frightening and some might wish to minimise the matter. The inclination might be to shy away because there is a sense of inadequacy or that matters might be made worse but regardless there remains a challenge to learn, listen and encourage people away from suicidal inclination towards appropriate help. We live in a broken and hurting world and often, the wounded still reach out to the church for help.

8.8 What is evidenced in other countries has parallels in Scottish society. Ministers and religious leaders can play a significant role in the provision of education about suicide and mental health, can foster hope, purpose and meaning which are protective factors against suicide, initiate and build infrastructure and forums that support prevention efforts, support survivors after suicide and are often pastorally placed to be in a position to refer to professional help. Ministers and leaders of all faith groups have credibility and influence and sometimes their words are the first public words following a suicide within a community which in turn can carry influence with respect to comfort, support and education.

8.9 A [2005] clergy workgroup on suicide prevention highlighted some of the challenges and barriers church leaders face in preventing and responding to suicide:

- Lack of knowledge, particularly regarding identification of suicidal risk and in assisting suicidal individuals
- Lack of knowledge regarding prescription medicines for depression and related mental/emotional concerns which can sometimes lead to suicide
- Stigma around suicide and the fear that talking about it will lead to suicidal behaviour
- Lack of access to members that might require support
- Time-competing concerns and often "reactive versus proactive" approach to suicide
- Issues about the church's perspective on suicide
- Lack of knowledge about how to respond to survivors, unclear expectations from church members after suicide and uncertainty around when to intervene with survivors.

That same report identified some of the priorities essential for training in suicide prevention and the care of survivors:

- Relationship between suicide and mental health
- Warning signs
- Handling suicide-related emergencies e.g. directing people to appropriate treatment
- How to approach the issue and related mental illnesses as more than just a 'spiritual problem'

²⁵ http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk/poetry_and_prose.htm

- Process/protocols of mental health services and referrals
- Relationship between suicide and other high-risk behaviours [e.g. domestic violence, substance misuse]
- Suicide prevention resources to share with members of congregations
- Survivors grief experience and stigma
- Exploration of one's own attitude to suicide
- Cultural differences and how to address these²⁶

8.10 A report like this raises questions of the wider Church and religious leaders: do we provide sufficient education in training of ministers, youth leaders and even Sunday school teachers? Is enough consideration given to this issue within 'In Service' training programmes? Do Presbyteries ever discuss ways this issue could be addressed within their boundaries? Has *The Record* ever carried an article or series on the subject? Interestingly, the 2011 'In Service' training programme of the Free Church of Scotland delivered papers on: Pastoring People with Mental Health Issues; Pastoring and the spectre of Euthanasia – each of which impinges on the issue.

Churches and faith communities have outreach programs, educational forums [seminars, bible studies, other ministries, networks of support] that are invaluable in assisting education about health issues.

8.11 In the Free Church of Scotland there are Road to Recovery Groups in various localities that are working directly with people at potential risk. Is the denomination doing enough to encourage and promote such work or providing facilities for others groups such as Alcoholics, Narcotics or Gamblers Anonymous? Are there any local 'Survivors of Suicide' groups that could be supported or established? Are we engaging in dialogue with groups who have implemented outreach training in this area so as to learn? Have we considered building a network of 'advisors' who could be consulted in the event of a completed suicide in terms of appropriate church response?

8.12 Further, Church leaders across the denominations surely have a duty to make known and promote the work of the Scottish Government in its public suicide prevention policy 'Choose Life'.²⁷ This is a significant piece of social policy that merits promotion. How many know of its existence? Are there literature and promotional materials distributed and on display? Does the Church adequately familiarise itself with national and local resources that could enhance pastoral care?

8.13 Responsibility and good leadership call for the Church not to ignore and refuse to address this significant social problem. It is not good enough to embrace the common sentiment sometimes felt by survivors of completed suicide: "*just get over it and move on!*" If only the problem was so simple! For people in risk a call and compassion must reach them which will challenge behaviour. Solomon said: "*do not be a fool: why die before your time?*" [Ecclesiastes 7:17b] The reality of life is that at times it does hurt and for some it can become unbearable and precipitate suicidal inclination. However, let the Church remind society that life is a most precious gift and having the chance to be alive and play a part in the grand scheme of God's eternal plan is a privilege.

8.14 For survivors of suicide it is not that they are obsessed with their grief or cannot move on. It is that too many have experience of the church failing them. For many, their concern, is no different from that of those who have a loved one with Alzheimer's or had a child killed by a drunk driver – they wish to experience the same comfort with which God has comforted us. It can also be argued, that simultaneously they seek to educate those not touched by such a unique loss, that there should be cognizance of the need/reality and an appropriate Christian response.

Senator and Mrs Smith, Oregon, lost their son to suicide aged 21 [2003]. In a book 'Remembering Garrett' he writes: "*Lastly, there is one more thing that, if I could, I would give to all. It has sustained me throughout my wandering in mortality's mist. It is the glue that held me together in grieving for Garrett. It does the same for others. That one thing is, simply, faith.*"²⁸ Clearly, the Church can speak to that reality! In addition, there is veracity in the comment: "*the Church is called to proclaim the gospel of grace and, in its own life, to embody that gospel. It embodies that gospel when it is particularly*

²⁶ Marshall, D S [2006] Clergy Workgroup on Suicide Prevention and Aftercare Suicide Prevention Resource Centre [SPRC] USA

²⁷ Scottish Executive [2004] Choose Life: the national Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent Suicide in Scotland Scottish Executive Publications.

²⁸ Smith, G [2006] Remembering Garrett: One Family's Battle with a Child's Depression

*solicitous of those within its number who are most troubled, and when it reaches beyond its own membership to such people who stand alone.*²⁹

Important Contacts and Links

NHS 24: 08454 24 24 24

Childline: 0800 11 11

Crossline Scotland: 0845 6580045

Samaritans: 08457 90 90 90 [24 Hours]

Choose Life National Implementation Support Team

www.chooselife.net

The Scottish Association for Mental Health

<http://www.samh.org.uk>

Breathing Space

<http://www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk>

The Samaritans

<http://www.samaritans.org.uk/>

Papyrus

<http://www.papyrus.org.uk>

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide [SOBS]

<http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk>

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

<http://www.crusescotland.org.uk>

Quiet Waters Counselling

<http://www.quiet-waters.org>

2. TRANSHUMANISM – SALVATION BY TECHNOLOGY?

1. Eve Eve is a nine-year-old living in Inverness. 'She' will live forever. Her father owns a Model T Ford, which he lovingly maintains long past its original life expectancy. When Eve is fifteen she will wonder why she can't live forever, like the Ford. This seed thought will mature during her studies in Life Extension Technologies at the Google Multiversity and will lead her into research. She will pioneer, by auto-experiment, the implantation of computer chips which monitor vital signs and organ function. This data will enable tailored real-time drug therapy which will optimise her health and cognition.

In 2040 she will receive gene replacement therapy which will entirely remove any genetic predisposition to illness or ageing. In 2067 she will develop cancer. While it is treated, she will receive by transplant a vastly superior set of synthetic major organs. To eliminate further disease, repair-nanobots will also be injected into her bloodstream. A life threatening injury in 2090 will necessitate the transplanting of her brain into a machine body, with capabilities hugely superior to her former biological body. In her new, exhilarating cyborg existence she will now interface with multiple sensory and super-consciousness devices, and participate in the over-class, served by unmodified humans.

In 2147 her brain wiring will be uploaded to a newly developed deep-space craft. She - that is her cloned intellect and self-awareness - will become the craft. Her computer brain will vastly augment her intelligence. The cyborg will be 'taken out of service'. The craft will depart from earth on a millennia long trajectory to populate another part of the galaxy, manufacturing life forms using her on board

²⁹ <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=frLJK2PKLqF&b=6331673&ct=4206833>

molecular assembler. She will narrowly miss the wholesale destruction of earth by a malevolent artificial super-intelligence. Eve will survive to create life in her own image.

2. *What is transhumanism?* Transhumanism refers to the enhancement and augmentation of our present human condition by the application of technology. It is often denoted by *H+* while *Human 2.0* denotes its interim objective. Transhumanists routinely imagine life trajectories like Eve's, leading to an immortal, cyborg future which they characterise as 'posthuman'.

A cadre of present and future technologies is enlisted to fulfil the objectives of the transhumanists:

- Cryonics. Low temperature preservation of the body intact after death, in the hope that it may be revived, and the person awakened, at a future date when technological advances allow.
- Virtual reality. Coupling vivid computer generated environments with sensory 'suits' worn by the participant, out of the body capacities and experiences may be realised. This transhuman route does not alter the subject bodily.
- Genetic modification. Transhuman goals which may be realised through this approach include the elimination of congenital diseases and defects, the enhancement of the capacities of the human body and the elimination of gender.
- Neuropharmaceuticals. Transhumanists seek to improve mental function or even create alternative consciousness through designer drugs.
- Nanotechnology. Small scale devices may, for example, be carried around the blood stream repairing organic damage or may operate in the environment to maintain ecological balance.
- Robotics and bionics. Machines under the motor control of human minds may enhance or even displace the human body.
- Information technology. Artificial intelligence may greatly enrich human opportunity. Additionally, the human mind may be scanned and recreated within a computer. The machine would think as the mind, and may therefore be self-conscious. This is another route to cloning the human person, or enabling ubiquity, in transhuman science.

These technologies are sometimes gathered together under the rubric NBIC - nano, bio, info, cogno.

2.1 The future scenarios anticipated by transhumanists are far from inevitable. They require the consent of society, the avoidance of technological apocalypse and, critically, the successful development of the requisite technologies. Most of these technologies only exist in seed form at present; some belong entirely to the realm of science fiction. That is not to say they can be discounted. Did Graham Bell's or even Logie Baird's wildest visions hear rumour of the iPhone?

The pace of technological development is presently relentless. Measured by criteria like Moore's Law (the rate of progress is such that the number of transistors possible on a silicon chip doubles every two years), it projects a future of unimaginable complexity and potential. Current human intelligence is the most obvious limitation to progress. The transhuman vision therefore drives research into enhancing cognitive capacity and developing artificial intelligence. Should this be fruitful the spectre of a technological 'singularity' looms, where increasingly smart people or machines design even smarter models in an exponential progress leading to godlike beings that had better be benevolent towards humanity! It is this exponential scenario which allows the rapid transformation of Eve in the conjecture above. Alternatively, the express train of progress may hit the buffers of unforeseen absolute limits in the very fabric of nature, which would frustrate this vision.

3. *The influence of transhumanist thinking* Given how speculative the transhuman forecasts of the future are, we might expect the devotees of transhumanism to be fringe members of the scientific community with little influence. This is not necessarily the case. Transhumanism has a distinguished history with roots in the writings of such figures as J.B.S. Haldane and Julian and Aldous Huxley. Its ideas have entered popular consciousness through authors of the pedigree of Isaac Asimov, Margaret Atwood, Arthur C. Clarke and Iain M. Banks. Today its proponents are often simply known as futurists and their predictions frequently elevated to oracular status. The most prominent from a British perspective include the following:

- Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil is an American inventor and entrepreneur who has written extensively on transhuman topics. He is probably the most influential figure in the field and originated the idea of the singularity.
- Nick Bostrom. A Swedish academic teaching at Oxford, Bostrom's interest is in the philosophy and ethics of futurist technologies and in the risks they pose to humanity.
- Kevin Warwick. Professor of Cybernetics at the University of Reading, Warwick is best known for pioneering chip implants to interface between the human nervous system and machines, and has been dubbed the first cyborg!
- Aubrey de Grey. A Cambridge researcher in the field of gerontology, de Grey pursues what he calls 'strategies for engineered negligible senescence' (SENS). His goal is the capability to repair age-related bodily decline.

While these thinkers may not be household names, the ideas they generate are so striking and suggestive that they have arced into the popular imagination through films, documentaries, television interviews and magazine articles, thereby raising an expectation of how the future will look.

4. *Transhumanism and government policy* At the level of national governments transhuman technologies have received considerable endorsement. There may be various reasons for this:

- Politicians are as susceptible as the rest of us to populist visions of the future, which may in turn inform research funding policy.
- The demonstration of superior technological capability may give one country a psychological edge over another, as in 'space race' type scenarios.
- History shows how wars are won by the forces with the more advanced weaponry. So, for example, America invests heavily in drug therapies to increase the concentration and endurance of soldiers, exoskeletal aids to bolster strength, and military hardware that can think for itself.

4.1 The default assumption in government policy across the developed nations is therefore that technologies, including those we might label 'transhumanist', are ethical and desirable.

This positivity towards technology is not universal. Critiques of the transhumanist vision have been more forthcoming at the academic level. Professor Nigel Cameron, director of the Chicago based Center on Nanotechnology and Society, writing from the British and American perspective warns, "from where I sit, I see nothing so significant as the rapid development of these technologies, and nothing so troubling as the near absence of healthy public engagement with their social and ethical implications". Again he observes, "particularly in the United States, but also in other jurisdictions the transhumanists have made considerable progress in instantiating some of their fundamental assumptions about the purpose of technology and the nature of human existence in policy and civil service contexts which will be hard to dislodge, partly because of the lack of public debate and democratic accountability for the discussions of technology policy over which they have begun to exercise considerable influence".

4.2 Other writers' caution is based on the law of unforeseen consequences. Thomas Glessner, a member of the bar association for the U.S. Supreme Court has written about this in the biotech context. He shows how the 1973 *Wade vs. Roe* Supreme Court decision legitimated a far wider range of technological outcomes than envisaged at the time. The *Wade vs. Roe* ruling was that abortion was a fundamental constitutional right. Glessner argues that this aegis allowed foetal tissue research, selective killing in multiple foetus pregnancies, sex-selection abortion, the RU-486 abortion pill, human cloning, partial birth abortions, and what Glessner terms 'transhumanism and the redefining of humanity'. In his view a permissive and uncritical attitude to technology can open a Pandora's Box. In all of this we should think not only of Western nations. Japan, for example, has a highly developed research programme in machine augmentation, while many expect China to become the global centre of gravity for emerging technologies in the near future.

5. *Academic critiques of transhumanism* Thinking beyond government policy, academic reservations towards transhumanism are pitched at several levels. It is viewed as...

- Escapism. It diverts energy and creativity from finding solutions to the host of problems presently blighting humanity.

- Unrealistic. The technical know-how to accomplish the vision will simply not materialise. Human 2.0 is hype.
- Dehumanising. Human dignity is brushed aside in pursuit of goals which are eugenic in nature and in which mere humans will be an underclass. Already technology is mastering us, not we it.
- Dystopian. In the Brave New World of the future the power conferred through extreme technological superiority will deliver dreams to a few through the nightmares of many.
- Dangerous. The annihilation of humanity is a real possibility: self-replicating nanoscale devices may devour flesh, or genetic tinkering may unleash fatal pathogens, or intelligent robots may usurp human mastery.

Francis Fukuyama, Professor of International Political economy at John Hopkins University, is a prominent opponent of transhumanism, perceiving it as a devastating threat to political order. He has called it "the world's most dangerous idea" and is on record saying "transhumanists are just about the last group I'd like to see living forever"!

6. *The transhumanist ethos* With such trenchant denunciation, and a vision that is far from being fulfilled, what is it that drives the transhumanists? What qualities and ethos characterise them? To be sure they are creatures of their time. They have drunk deeply from the philosophical wells of consumerism, materialism, individualism and evolutionism. The human phenomenon is entirely explicable in material terms. There is no soul, as Christians have traditionally understood that term. Evolution has brought us to an unprecedented stage, where we can now participate in our own development; choose what we want to become. The body is a commodity we may trade in for a better model. Indeed, it is our right to indulge in misanthropy towards our soon to be obsolete body as we eye the next must-have: Human 2.0.

Unsurprisingly, most transhumanists are agnostic, if not atheist. Their ideology certainly dovetails with the New Atheism. The future is humankind's to conquer. A naive optimism concerning man's moral nature, coupled with an ethical imperative to pursue perfection, gives transhumanism a pragmatic, compelling feel. What man wants, man shall have. Technology will yield satiety.

A Christian Response

7. *Transhumanist religion?* Trawling through the websites and blogs devoted to the subject often feels like an encounter with a novel, scientific religion for modern humans. Faith, hope and love are in plentiful evidence. Religious concerns are addressed. Technology will be our salvation from the body of death. The good works of science will secure immortality, and resurrection if necessary. The damaged environment will be restored, and space colonised. There will be a new heavens and a new earth. Righteousness will dwell there, as all genetic predispositions to criminality and addiction will have been engineered away. There will be no more suffering, tears or death. Our love for what we've become will be boundless; like Narcissus we will delight in our own image. For we shall be as gods, omnipotent, super-intelligent, limitless.

7.1 Nick Bostrom's *Letter from Utopia* encapsulates this eschatology. In the *Letter* the reader's future post human self addresses us: "You could say I am happy, that I feel good. You could say that I feel surpassing bliss. But these are words invented to describe human experience. What I feel is as far beyond human feeling as my thoughts are beyond human thought. I wish I could show you what I have in mind. If only I could share one second of my conscious life with you! ... The challenge before you: to become fully what you are now only in hope and potential. New capacities are needed if you wish to play on my level."

7.2 The dream of this secular 'religion' is seductive and intellectually beguiling. If "we have the technology" who would not want to be, in the opening words of the 1970s series *Six Million Dollar Man*, "better, stronger, faster". Little wonder that transhumanism is viewed by some Christian writers as a kind of heretical gospel. Dr Brent Waters of Garrett Theological Seminary has discerned the following aberrations in the transhumanist account:

- Nihilism. Man's meaningless existence will be made meaningful by the creation, through technology, of the superman. The old values of humanity must be destroyed to make way for this superior 'free spirit' who embodies the new beauty and values.
- Pelagianism. Man is free to choose good over evil, perfection over anything less. In pursuing the transhumanist vision he is exercising the will to perfection.
- Manichaeism. A dualistic worldview in which salvation is escape from the body. Technological advance allows us to effect this escape into an upgraded or alternative physical frame.

It is possible that theological justification for transhumanism may have been given by the Catholic priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who was a colleague of the scientist Julian Huxley. De Chardin taught that man is evolving from individual to global consciousness and beyond to the Omega Point. The Church censured his views.

8. A Christian view of humanity In attempting to evaluate transhumanism from a Christian perspective we must first recognise that the human body, Human 1.0, is worthy of our honour and delight. As genetically determined in the womb by God we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14, Jer. 1:5). Christ himself took a human body and thus affirmed human life from conception to grave. Our bodies enable our creativity and industry, exploration and experimentation, sport and artistic expression, individuality and intimacy. It is in our bodies that we swim with dolphins, play the violin, enjoy fine wines, savour our first kiss. With our bodies we serve God. Nevertheless it is not the perfect body of God's original plan, but is sinful and under God's judicial strictures. As Paul's term *flesh* (which is functionally equivalent to *body* in many passages) indicates, it has desires which oppose God's will (Rom. 7:18, Gal. 5:17) and enslave us self-destructively (Eph. 2:3). It is also subject to pain, suffering, sorrow, sickness and death.

8.1 What then is the humanity that God intended? Is it the "very good" body of the pristine creation, or the earthly body of the sinless Christ? To find what true humanity is in its perfect expression we must raise our eyes to God's throne, to his Son seated at his right hand; to the glorified man, Christ Jesus. There is our true omega point. The goal of God's redemptive program is that we should be with Christ where he is, and see him as he is, and be like him (John 14:3, 17:24; 1 Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). Our resurrection bodies will be imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual (1 Cor. 15:42-44). This is a truly inspiring hope, and one which has been given substance and certainty by the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The Christian gospel includes God's offer to glorify humanity in the image of the exalted Christ. This is not the image transhumanists have in mind.

9. God given limitations Meantime we know life-in-the-body to be an existence of limitedness, much to the frustration of the transhumanists (and the rest of us!). The very parameters which transhumanists would seek to overcome are often those which Christians teach have been set by God:

- Mortality. Death is certain. While variable life spans are evident in biblical history there seem to be upper limits. Psalm 90:10 speaks of 70 or 80 years, although it was composed by Moses who lived 120 years!
- Sanctity of human life. No-one should destroy that which is human from fertilised ovum through to adult, even in the cause of 'life improving' research.
- Gender differences. Those physiological, emotional and role differences which distinguish male and female.
- Family roles. Husband and wife, parents and children each have their own distinct status and responsibility.
- Equality. Notwithstanding role differences and headship - submission relationships, each person has equal dignity and value.
- Work. Our environment will only sustain our lives through the "sweat of our brow".
- Intelligence. Even Solomon does not know the mind of God. The physical parameters of our brains constrain our memory and cognitive powers.

- Rest. Our bodies have limited stamina, and require daily sleep and a weekly day of rest to perform optimally.
- Genetic integrity. Man is not an animal and is forbidden to have intercourse with the animals (Lev 18: 23, 19: 19). He must preserve his uniqueness "according to his kind".

9.1 There can be no doubt that transhumanism is about removing limitations. One challenge for Christian reflection about transhumanism is to determine which limits we are divinely permitted to cross, and which can only be crossed by partaking of 'forbidden fruit'. If we consider the 'Eve scenario' with which we began, we find that the technologies she utilises in her journey to the stars frequently blur or remove the lines of what Christians consider to be God-determined humanity. Immediately we see her efforts to escape mortality. The untold story is of how many sacred embryonic or foetal human lives are manipulated *in vitro* and discarded in the process of researching life extending technologies. Again, elements of her new genome may be animal or entirely novel creations. In the course of her transformation Eve becomes effectively asexual and renders familial roles obsolete. At the same time she consents to a society whose inequalities vastly exceed those of slavery in its worst expressions, and her powers completely redefine what we know as work or rest, intellectual capacity or consciousness. Many divinely ordained boundaries have been set aside. She is ultimately post-human in every sense.

10. *The Church's position in practice* Does the 21st Century Christian Church have a thoroughly worked out position on where the lines and limits are? Is the Church awake to the high ethical stakes raised by emerging technologies? Is it ready to meet the challenges ahead? Given that our lives are dominated by technologies which have gained prominence within our lifetimes, are our preachers regularly relating the Bible to this new challenge? It may not be unfair to represent the present situation as one of:

- Assimilation. Christians are as likely as other consumers to be 'early adopters' of new technology. The addictiveness and kudos of possessing the latest gadgets may cause questions about how the technology is changing us and altering our values to be suppressed.
- Confusion. Navigating the evolving technoscape demands deep thought. Even biblically literate Christians often find scripture difficult to apply. There is no Levitical case law or apostolic command to fit many situations; or at least how to apply these is not obvious. There is no black and white, only many shades of grey. There are few books or sermons on technology themes, so that we cannot really speak of the church having a 'Christian mindset' or consensus in its approach to technology.
- Fixation. Such current debate as there is tends to stall on bioethics issues which have been around for decades. While abortion, assisted dying and the like require a robust Christian response, they could turn out to be but the first snowflakes of winter.
- Myopia. For most Christians the present is challenging enough. We are reactive, not proactive; followers, not leaders; insufficiently prescient when analysing trends and permissive legislation.

10.1 Nigel Cameron and Joni Eareckson Tada highlight these points through the example of reproductive technology. They caution, "because the evangelical church has uncritically absorbed *in vitro* techniques, millions of Christians have learned the wrong lesson at the outset of the biotech century. For *in vitro* contains the seeds of what is coming next:

- a willingness to hazard early human life
- experimental use of embryos
- 'quality control' before implantation so that only desirable human beings reach the womb
- sale and purchase of superior gametes that have eugenic appeal, and
- babies conceived so their tissue can be used in later life for transplants."

They continue, "already, Christian parents have deep-frozen thousands of their embryos. These and worse practices amount to what ethicists call an 'instrumentalisation' of the human person - that is, treating people as things to be used for our purposes." If this example is typical it is not encouraging.

10.2 In fact, we are often content with the rest of our society to cast off God-given limitations without pausing to ask why divine wisdom first placed them there. Long since we accepted that the afflictions God imposed in Genesis 3 could be circumvented by technology: mechanisation replaces the 'sweat of our brow', anaesthetic alleviates the pain of childbirth, and medical advances boost life expectancy. We have also embraced a technology enhanced Sabbath. Maintaining our electricity, telecommunications, industry, transport and leisure infrastructure has become a 'work of necessity' which we expect countless employees to maintain for us on the Lord's Day as on any other. Even if we are not asserting that we have gone too far, it is clear that we have crossed many lines which make subsequent protest more difficult.

10.3 There are many other examples of how challenging it is for Christians to decide if a technology legitimately strengthens or culpably distorts their humanity. Here are some:

- *Genetic modification.* Ever since we began using cosmetics we have been happy to modify our bodies. There have been dissenting voices along the way. When Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine (derived from material taken from a cow suffering cowpox) many Christians objected. They were troubled by the spectre of chimeras and scripture prohibitions against liaisons with animals. Today no Christian would object to diseases being eliminated by immunisation, except on the basis of animal welfare where animal experimentation is involved. We have come to accept thereby the modification and enhancement of our humanity.

Will the same process of gradual acceptance be followed with regard to genetic disease? If we could eliminate Huntington's disease, cystic fibrosis or polycystic kidney disease through postnatal therapy, would it not be acceptable to achieve the same outcome through modification of the human genome prior to foetal development? If this could be accomplished without the need for experimental 'Frankenstein' embryos along the way, perhaps by investigating the effects of altering DNA sequences using computer simulation, should we embrace it?

Then, if the computer simulation can also show how GM can enhance our humanity with greater or novel powers, would we be transgressing if we welcomed those? Many scientists see GM as the most rapidly advancing of the potentially transhuman technologies. We are progressing along a continuum whose trajectory is mind bending, having accepted the crossing of many boundaries already.

- *Machine augmentation.* Again we are on a continuum. This one began with the first tools and may lead to the cyborg. D. Gareth Jones in *Designers of the Future* highlights this when he says "cyborgs are generally viewed as fitting far more into the world of science fiction than do clones, and so people are not as fearful of what they might mean for us. To me, this is a short-sighted response, since it shows we are unaware of how much the artificial already intrudes into our lives". We accept prosthetics with ever more sophisticated brain interfaces. We are grateful for pacemakers, cochlear implants and several other internal electromechanical devices. These are therapeutic. Will we continue to adopt coming technologies as readily? Will the chip-implants which Kevin Warwick has experimented with become ubiquitous, or the bloodstream nanobots we have been promised by futurists soon be coursing through our veins? And in times to come will we be glad to incorporate into our bodies inventions which not only restore or sustain health but give us new capacities? Could machines ultimately supplant our bodies?
- *Cognitive enhancement.* Society has already accepted that caffeine can improve concentration and stamina, and a generation of students is growing up widely accepting the routine use of more powerful drugs like Ritalin to give them a competitive edge in examinations. There are of course dangers (even with caffeine!) from side-effects and from what happens when we boost one function at the expense of others, but further research may eliminate these. Might mind enhancing designer drugs of the future become acceptable to Christians if they do not carry a behaviour degrading payload?

We are also familiar with an ever growing mental arsenal of apps and other IT which enable us to appear knowledgeable and accomplish multiple tasks often in collaboration with a virtual community. How powerful might these tools become? We already interface with the brain using skullcaps - might we also reach into the brain and connect directly? What heights might machines and brain plasticity enable our consciousness to attain? Transhumanists even speak of 'uploading' our minds into a different substrate in the future. Will future Christians countenance

what to us may seem grotesque assaults upon the integrity of the human race, if change comes in small increments?

- *Life extension.* In the developed world, life expectancy has doubled since pre-industrial times. It has been estimated that the upper limit on lifespan achievable through modern medicine, supplements and anti-ageing drugs like Resveratrol is around 120 years. To move beyond that the mechanics of ageing will have to be modified. We have already alluded to this as a transhumanist goal. Christians have so far not objected to the principle of life extension. Would that remain the case if people continued to be hale and hearty at 150 or even indefinitely? Have biblical principles which should have been observed at an earlier point in the debate been laid aside on the assumption that life extension *per se* is a good thing? Puritan objections to the smallpox vaccine included the argument that use of the vaccine was 'fighting with the Most High' because the disease was believed to be a punishment for sin. In seeking to postpone physical death (which we believe to be one aspect of God's judgement on sin), is there a point at which we find ourselves opposing God's will? Prof. D. Gareth Jones in a 2007 address in Edinburgh to the annual conference of the American Scientific Affiliation cites one source which spoke of "the impiety of seeking to wrest out of the Deity's hands such rights as the bestowal of smallpox" and went on to ask "how much worse would everything be if such matters were put into the sinful hands of men?" While we may not agree with the argument, the latter question surely needs asking when man attains a level of sovereignty in imposing his will on the parameters of his humanity.

11. A Christian response to transhumanism in a secular world It was philosopher Martin Heidegger in his 1954 essay *The Question Concerning Technology* who warned of the dangers of seeing technology as something passive which humans simply use to achieve ends: "we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral". Perhaps this is a pitfall which society has fallen into, becoming enamoured of and enslaved to technology by degrees, redefining our humanity.

As a subset of the technological society, rather than an alternative society, the odds are stacked against the church shaping the technology debate or bringing redemptive help to the slaves. For the church, as for others, liberation is as likely to come from broken dreams or costly mistakes as from applying biblical thinking. That is not to say that we should abandon involvement in the marketplace of ideas. History demonstrates too often how societies decline when Christians retreat from salt and light engagement and privatise their faith.

11.1 We must begin with theological education. Christian leaders must be trained to reflect upon the challenges of technology and transhumanism, so they can teach the whole body of Christ, and be involved in national policy debates. In the process the church must surely declare the following convictions:

- The wonder and glory of all of God's creation including *homo sapiens*. It is an unspeakable privilege to live, move and have our being in the presence and plan of God.
- Human nature will frequently handle technology inappropriately. We must bear what Stephen Monsma of Calvin College calls a "prophetic witness to a technicistic society". This includes a "condemnation of technicism", which is an idolatrous overconfidence in technology as society's benefactor. Technology in the hands of men will not serve man's highest good in the way that men in the hands of God will.

Again, C.S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*, shows how those who use technology to wield control in society (the 'Conditioners'), are themselves conditioned by their human impulses. Thus technology enables corrupt human nature to enslave humanity. He says, "at the moment, then, of Man's victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely 'natural' - to their irrational impulses. Nature, untrammelled by values, rules the Conditioners and, through them, all humanity. Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man."

- Legislative control of technological development is essential. This derives from the previous point. There must be legal sanctions against research into dehumanising technologies to constrain the unscrupulous. If we think of the example of human cloning, we see both the difficulty of the issues and the strength of opposition to an outright ban under many legislatures.

The result is a confused situation with very few countries banning all forms of cloning; some, like the UK, allowing therapeutic cloning, while many also allowing reproductive cloning. It remains to be seen what the consequences of unregulated experimentation in this area may be, but if results so far in animal cloning are anything to go by the path ahead may be strewn with tragic and harmful blunders.

- The motive for seeking a technology should be examined. Although, as we have shown, the ethics surrounding technology can seem labyrinthine, a clear view of whether a technology is desirable can often be gained through asking why its proponents want it. Will it benefit the whole of society, or is it for the benefit of an elite few while the rest suffer? In the biotech sphere profit is often the true motivator, with the large players in the industry even seeking to patent the human genome and every life form created through synthetic biology.

In addition academic reputations and ploys to attract research funding are in play. The Baconian notion of disinterested scientists pursuing knowledge for the sheer pleasure of discovery is remote from the reality of much modern research.

- Christians can bring realism to society's view of technology. The church, with its sober view of human nature and its future grounded in Christ, can expose the limitations of technology to fulfil human needs, and debunk the more fanciful visions of technological utopia. Nicholas Wolterstorff in his classic *Lament for a Son* brings this realism when he writes: "When we have overcome absence with phone calls, winglessness with airplanes, summer heat with air-conditioning - when we have overcome all these and much more besides, then there will abide two things with which we must cope: the evil in our hearts and death. There are those who vainly think that some technology will even enable us to overcome the former. Everyone knows that there is no technology for overcoming death. Death is left for God's overcoming."
- The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only 'technology' which can guarantee a sympathetic and life enhancing transformation of human nature. The church must not be distracted from proclaiming it as the trustworthy hope of our age. We must harness all appropriate technologies to assist with this task. The gospel is the yeast which can work through the dough of society to produce a wholesome worldview for the benefit of future humanity.

11.2 In addition to these convictions the influence of the church would be greatest if agreement could be reached regarding a Christian view of technology.

12. A Christian approach to technology It may be questioned whether a consensus on the Bible's teaching in relation to technology may be reached, or even if it is necessary. However, "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1); nothing lies outwith His sovereign rule. Even if the details of individuals' approach to technology must be left to the command to love God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves, yet there are some principles we believe can be discerned. These are listed below:

- We must define our use of technology like the rest of our activity as something we do under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus Stephen Monsma defines technology "as a distinct human cultural activity in which human beings exercise freedom and responsibility *in response to God* by forming and transforming the natural creation, with the aid of tools and procedures, for practical ends and purposes."
- The Christian is not anti-technology. It is possible to find very negative and pessimistic views of technology within the church. But we are not to be Luddites; we do not yield to populist knee-jerk type reactions to certain technologies, such as those seen in response to the sowing of genetically modified crops. Also, while we may admire the simplicity of the Amish lifestyle, we do not hold it up as especially virtuous. Godly attitudes to technology are possible without the need to exclude all developments past a certain date, or to allow only some classes of innovation.
- The Christian is not blindly optimistic about technology. We have already demonstrated that above. We seek a middle ground between the extremes.
- We affirm science, engineering and the development of technologies as God given endeavours. We understand the commands to rule and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28), while implying environmentally sensitive dominion, require the application of progressive mechanical, industrial and electronic know-how for their fulfilment. We recognise technological progress throughout

the timeline of the Bible story, and witness its use, most importantly, at the bench of the Carpenter (*tektōn*) in Nazareth.

- We reject the idea that technology should develop in an unbridled, unregulated manner, like a garden left to itself. That is to revisit Babel, where technology usurps the place of God and the destiny of man: "nothing they plan shall be impossible", nothing unthinkable.

When technology seeds where it pleases it imports its own virtues. Instead of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal. 5:22f), comes convenience, accessibility, efficiency and satisfaction.

C.S. Lewis calls for a rethink akin to re-landscaping the garden: "It might be going too far to say that the modern scientific movement was tainted from its birth: but I think it would be true to say that it was born in an unhealthy neighbourhood and at an inauspicious hour. Its triumphs may have been too rapid and purchased at too high a price: reconsideration, and something like repentance may be required".

Pastor Vernon Pierre of Roosevelt Community Church, Phoenix, in a 2009 sermon, "The 21st Century Christian and Technology" calls for Christians, in recognition of the subtle dangers of technology, to major on the importance of:

- being physically present (e.g. in fellowship), when technology tends to us being only virtually present;
 - self-forgetfulness, when technology fosters self-centredness;
 - sustained, undivided attention to God and people. He encourages us to employ "techno-fasts";
 - words, especially God's words. Technology gears us to the medium of images;
 - gaining wisdom and understanding. Technology has exponentially grown our access to information in every category. Possessing this information is not the same as achieving good character.
- The priority for applied technology is to tackle the causes of human suffering, not satisfy scientific curiosity. While searching for the Higgs boson or establishing a research base on Mars are laudable pursuits, there are far more pressing objectives for the tens of billions of dollars involved to be spent on. Technological solutions are required for the multiple problems associated with human disease, water supply, over-population, environmental degradation and resource depletion.
 - Again, the priority for applied technology is to increase equality, not to raise up a technological elite. Therapy precedes augmentation; repair has primacy over enhancement. The whole population should participate in the boons and benefits of progress.
 - The image of God in man must retain its integrity. Hybridisation involving the human species, or tampering with man's bipartite sexuality are examples of where technology could introduce chaos.
 - Destructive experimentation on human life should be avoided, and ways to achieve research goals which do not require this should be found. The present stem cell debate encapsulates this principle: is it necessary to destroy human embryos in order to harvest stem cells for research into cures? Does the putative end justify any means? With the increasing power of computer modelling the need for physical experimentation will decrease and hopefully obviate the pressure which drives research on embryos.

Of course there have been monstrous regimes which have sanctioned experimentation with sentient human subjects. Our regard for all human life should never bring us even remotely within the proximity of such horror.

- We recognise that what may be unthinkable to present Christian sensibilities may nevertheless become accepted by the church if the journey there involves many small steps and ethical compromises. We may think for example of a cyborg future in this way. While we are still relatively clear-sighted we need to ask where our trajectory will take us and decide now whether we want to begin the steps which will take us there.

12.1 Are we then to relate to developing technology with enthusiasm or caution? Undoubtedly both.

In the hands of sinful people technology is always going to be a two-edged sword. Humanity may benefit or suffer. Nicholas Carr in his milestone 2008 essay in *The Atlantic*, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" considers the example of Gutenberg's printing press. He says that its invention "set off another round of teeth gnashing". He continues, "The Italian humanist Hieronimo Squarciarico worried that the easy availability of books would lead to intellectual laziness, making men "less studious" and weakening their minds. Others argued that cheaply printed books and broadsheets would undermine religious authority, demean the work of scholars and scribes, and spread sedition and debauchery. As New York University professor Clay Shirky notes, "Most of the arguments made against the printing press were correct, even prescient. But, again, the doomsayers were unable to imagine the myriad blessings that the printed word would deliver."

12.2 The potential for "myriad blessings" is unimaginable, as technology enables humanity to flourish at new levels. As those levels become ever higher, the cost of mistakes becomes greater. At the time of writing, the news reels are full of pictures of Japanese helicopters dumping water on the unstable reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility. Questions are being asked about the quality of safety planning, and the lack of foresight in locating the plant on low-lying ground beside the sea in a tsunami-prone region. Such hindsight wisdom can be applied to the transhumanist project. Should we follow a path to where the consequences to humanity of mismanagement or technological meltdown may be very grave indeed?

13. Conclusion We have attempted to describe the nature of transhumanism and to offer a critique of its worldview. This has led us to consider what true humanity is, and to find ways that the church can relate to technology which harmonise humanity with the rest of Creation and with God. It is the tendency of transhumanism to corrupt our relationship with God, ourselves and the Creation which presents its greatest challenge. Perhaps we can apply to ourselves the moral of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

*Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.
He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*

May God help us to love His creation and our humanity as He does and to serve Him with a view to the glorious consummation of that humanity. Then, when God's purpose is complete, His people shall be:

*"before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.
Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Revelation 7:15-17*

Short Bibliography

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SENS Foundation, www.sens.org
Ray Kurzweil, www.kurzweilai.net
Nick Bostrom, www.nickbostrom.com
Kevin Warwick, www.kevinwarwick.com

Christian responses to Transhumanism on the web:

Society, Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland, www.srtp.org.uk/srtpage3.shtml
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The definitive symposium with both Christian and other contributors:

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3. SEX EDUCATION IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

1. **Introduction** This report outlines the key issues with regard to Sex Education in schools and includes guidance on what the Free Church's corporate response, and individual members' responses, should be where there are concerns about what children are being taught.

2. **Legislative Background** Current legislation concerning this matter arises from Section 56 of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act, 2000. At that time Scottish Executive Ministers had appointed a Working Group to review the range of curricular advice and support available to teachers on Sex Education, specifically in the light of the controversial repeal of section 2A of the Local Government Act 1986 which prevented the promotion of homosexuality in Scotland's schools.

At that time it was concluded that the package of safeguards already in place was adequate and robust as were existing curriculum guidelines. However, it was also concluded that it would be helpful to complement the guidelines through the development of additional material to support teachers in formulating their programmes and consulting with parents. All of this resulted in the issue of Circular 2/2001 by the then Scottish Executive which sets out guidelines on the conduct of Sex Education in Scottish Schools.

3. **Observations** As can be seen from the factors detailed above the Scottish Executive's approach to this matter was underpinned by two main elements:

- a) The provision of *Guidelines for Education Authorities*. These guidelines provide the setting and basic curricular outlines, advice and basic information.
- b) The development of *Support Materials for teachers*. This was to take the form of textbooks and other materials as is the case with all subjects when filling out the necessary programmes of study.

3.1 Subsequent experience has shown that it is the second of those elements which has proved, in some instances, to be problematic. Materials deemed to be of dubious content have been included in the list of resources for use in class and, unfortunately, there have been many instances when the lists of materials for use for Sex Education and the actual Guidelines on Sex Education have been confused as being the same thing.

3.2 The reality, however, is that the Guidelines on the Conduct of Sex Education in Schools are robust and do give substantial degrees of control to Local Authorities, who are obliged to seek the input of Parent Organisations and indeed Faith Communities concerning the materials which are to be used in schools. However, for this to be effective, all parties must be aware of the potential influence afforded to them by the Guidelines and be prepared to exercise this influence vigorously as there is currently no guarantee that meaningful and extensive consultation takes place. Parents can take up the matter with schools, school councils and elected representatives. Churches can contact Directors of Education and also use their own representatives on Education Committees. It is extremely important that such channels

be used as new materials tend to emerge from time to time. The need for vigilance by all concerned parties cannot therefore be overemphasised.

4. *Free Church of Scotland's Current Position Statement* The Free Church's official Position Statement on this matter dates from 2001 and is set out in the 'Summary of National Advice' which was produced by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) for the Scottish Executive. It is stated as follows:

- The Free Church is clear that Sex Education should not take place in a clinical manner in which moral and social issues are sidelined. We would oppose any treatment of this significant subject that deals with sex in terms of human physiology without significant reference being made to the moral, spiritual, emotional and social context in which all human relationships take place.
- In our approach to sex and human reproduction the Free Church recognises the authority and the continuing relevance of the Bible. We affirm the moral framework of the Judaeo-Christian tradition with the Ten Commandments at its core as the historical basis of our social values. We look to the detailed teaching of the Bible to discover principles for sex and relationships.
- These principles begin with a positive and affirming attitude to sexual desire. The Church has best reflected this Biblical teaching when it has affirmed sex as a gift from God that is of great value when used correctly but capable of causing great sorrow when used in defiance of the will of God. We recognise that the proper context for the expression of sexual desire is within the security and intimacy of a committed and faithful lifelong partnership.
- As Christians we do not accept that our sexual urges are too powerful to be controlled. To concede this would be to demean humans to the level of instinct-driven animals; it is human to struggle with temptation. However, we offer the hope that God will provide the ability to gain self-control to all those who seek his help. The Christian ethic demands that we honour God with our body.
- We would expect marriage to be referred to in the curriculum not merely as an option but as the natural setting for the expression of human sexuality and as the most fitting basis for the cohesion of stable family and a healthy society.
- Since sex is integral to the creation of the family unit and forms part of its core values no attempt should be made by schools or education authorities to instruct our children in sexual matters without first consulting the wishes of parents.

5. *Position Statement still valid* The above statement was, and indeed remains, an appropriate response to the national consultation exercise which took place when the guidelines were being drawn up. It is also important to note that some of the concerns expressed by this denomination, and several other faith communities, were subsequently accommodated and, therefore, the potential for influence which the guidelines provide should be used. Consequently, the advice which the Church issues must highlight this point. The following key factors in particular must be noted:

- Sex Education is not always a discrete subject in the curriculum. It is but one element of Health Education, set within the even wider context of Health Promotion and Personal and Social Education (PSE).
- Parents have a right to be consulted about the content of Sex Education Programmes and the materials to be used, and they should exercise this right. They can bring the matter up with the Parent Council. They can approach the Head teacher. They can ask for sight of the materials to be used.
- Local Authorities are required to have arrangements in place to respond promptly and fully to any concerns which parents and carers may have about the content or conduct of sex education programmes. If parents are not satisfied with the response they get from schools they can take the matter up with the Education Authorities who have procedures in place for dealing with such concerns.

- The guidelines explicitly state that the education provided must reflect the cultural, ethic and religious influences within the home, the school, and the community. Parents and Churches can influence this through direct approach to Schools, School Councils and Education Authorities.
- There is no statutory requirement for participation in such programmes. Parents and carers have a right to withdraw children. However, providing that the programmes of tuition are sound, cases of withdrawal will be rare.

6. *Conclusions*

- The guidelines on Sex Education issued by the Scottish Executive in 2001 remain robust and give parents, and Faith Communities, substantial influence over what is taught.
- Parents and Faith Communities should use this influence, both through Parent Councils and direct contact with schools to ensure that unacceptable materials are not used.
- Religious interests have a statutory entitlement to representation on Local Authority Education Committees and Christian parents should use this facility to ensure that the materials used in the Sex Education element of Health Education are acceptable.
- Despite the liberal approach promoted by many agencies in the present day, it is likely that the demand for robust standards by Faith Communities will find favour with most parents in Scotland.

Relevant Background Papers

- Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000: Section 56
- Scottish Executive Education Department Circular 2/2001: `Standards in Scotland `s Schools etc ACT 2000: Conduct of Sex Education in Scottish Schools`
- Sex Education in Scottish Schools: Summary of National Advice.
- Sex Education in Scottish Schools: A guide for Parents and Carers
- Sex Education in Scottish Schools: Guidance for Schools and Local Authorities on Effective Consultation with Parents and Carers

(N.B. The last three documents were published by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) on behalf of the Scottish Executive www.LTScotland.com or email:enquires@LTScotland.com.)

MALCOLM MACLEAN, *Convener*
RODDIE RANKIN, *Vice-Convener*

PROPOSED DELIVERANCE

1. The General Assembly receive and adopt the Report of the Communications Committee and thank the Committee for its work, especially the Convener, Vice-Convener and Clerk (Mrs Heather Akroyd). The General Assembly thank the Vice-Convener for his contribution to the work of the Committee during the last four years.
2. The General Assembly thank Rev. David Robertson for all his work as Editor of *The Record* and

commend his ongoing work for Solas CPC to the prayerful interest of the Church. The General Assembly also encourage the congregations of the Church to pray for his successor as Editor.

3. The General Assembly thank the Committee for its work in searching for a new Editor of *The Record* and note that the Committee recommends Rev Dr Malcolm Maclean as suitably qualified and sole nominee for the impending vacancy as Editor of *The Record*, in line with Act XXX, 2007.
4. The General Assembly thank the Editor, Mrs Chris Nicolson, and those who help her, for their contribution to the production of *Free* and reappoint Mrs Nicolson as Editor for a further period of five years in accordance with the terms of Act XIX, 1996.
5. The General Assembly encourage people of all ages in congregations to read *Free*, to keep in touch with the young people of the Church and to promote *Free* to groups and individuals within and outside the Free Church. The General Assembly also thank the various persons who contributed to *The Record* and commend both magazines to the prayers of the Church.
6. The General Assembly thank Rev Iver Martin for his work in connection with the Free Church website and also as Media Officer. The General Assembly encourage congregations to use the website to promote local information and events.
7. The General Assembly thank Mr Charles Douglas for his running of the Bookshop and note potential new opportunities for the bookshop in connection with the redevelopment of 16 North Bank Street.
8. The General Assembly note that the General of Assembly of 2010 instructed the Committee to look at ways to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. The General Assembly note that the Committee plans to organise two conferences on the Bible later in 2011 in Inverness and the Isle of Lewis.
9. The General Assembly thank Rev. Professor Donald MacDonald for his valuable and timely contribution to issues connected to Public Questions.
10. The General Assembly note, with gratitude to God, that the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill was soundly defeated at the end of its first stage in the Scottish Parliament on 1st December 2010. They instruct the Committee to remain vigilant concerning further attempts to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia and to continue its support for Care Not Killing. The General Assembly reiterate its support for the extension of Palliative Care services and enjoin our people to pray for all who are involved in this important work.
11. The General Assembly commend the United Kingdom and Scottish governments to the prayers of the Church and encourage our people to make their voice heard on issues of biblical morality.
12. The General Assembly encourage the congregations of the Free Church to pray regularly for the work of the Communications Committee.