Written submission from the Evangelical Alliance Scotland and Highland Theological College UHI

The Evangelical Alliance Scotland and Highland Theological College UHI welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the committee on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. The Evangelical Alliance is the largest grouping of evangelical churches, organisations and individuals in the UK with some 3,500 member churches across numerous denominations and many diverse communities. Highland Theological College UHI (HTC) is a partner college of the University of the Highlands and Islands, and as such has strong connections with students and churches in communities across the Highlands and Islands, many of which are directly affected by the Land Reform proposals. Together we represent churches in communities across the length and breadth of Scotland.

Our submission is not exhaustive but rather makes reference to the areas of the bill that have an impact on what we believe to be the three guiding principles that should underpin the ongoing land reform discussion.

These are:

- Stewardship and use of the land’s resources
- Communities (and the Common Good)
- Justice

As groups often engaged in the day to day work of community development and promoting social justice through many social care initiatives in rural communities, we hope to bring a positive Christian contribution to this national debate over the coming months. We would be happy to give oral evidence to the committee or answer any further questions the committee may have.

Introduction and Background

The discussion of Land and environment is a core discussion of the Christian faith dating from the opening chapters of the Bible to the present day. This has been most recently picked up by Pope Francis in his recent encyclical on the environment, where he entreats all readers (whether people of faith or not) to participate in ‘a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.’¹ The Evangelical Alliance Scotland has also done recent work in this area as part of the environmental pillar of the What Kind of Nation? initiative engaging with last year’s independence referendum.²

² What Kind of Nation? (2014) was the Evangelical Alliance Scotland contribution to the referendum debate consisting of a visionary policy manifesto along with referendum debates around Scotland with some of the key figures on both sides of the debate. Key participants included Nicola Sturgeon, Roseanna Cunningham, Alex Neil, Dave Thompson, Annabel Goldie, Jim Murphy, Murdo Fraser and Willie Rennie. What Kind of Nation? can be found at http://www.eauk.org/scotland/what-kind-of-nation.cfm
An important local expression of this dialogue regarding the shape of our planet is of course the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill currently under discussion in the Scottish Parliament. As Pope Francis points out, all of humanity has the right to speak into the debates that most profoundly impact the future of our shared home. To that end, a Christian voice regarding land use in Scotland is one that should be heard alongside all the other perspectives that very legitimately come into play.

It would be simplistic to say that there is a singular Christian response to the current proposal. However, three aspects of Christian theology speak most clearly with regard to the current parliamentary debate and these form our response to the national Land Reform conversation.

1. **Stewardship:** From a biblical perspective, the earth is *entrusted* to humanity rather than *given* to us (Psalm 24:1). A trust automatically implies a purpose and the clear intent of the grant of the earth to humanity is one of *care* rather than *exploitation* (Genesis 2:15). Humanity constitutes the pinnacle of creation and is, accordingly, set the task of caring for the whole of the created order (Psalm 8).

2. **Community:** An aspect of the biblical picture of land and land ownership is the strong connection between location and community, land and people. For example, in the Old Testament, within Israel the land was divided into tribal parcels. Each parcel was given for the benefit of ‘the tribe’—that is, the extended family or, effectively, with the passage of time what becomes the local community. If any part of the land were lost to repay a debt, then it was the responsibility of the head of the family to repay that debt and reclaim the land so that the community (or common) good did not suffer (Leviticus 25). The land has primacy not as an object in itself but because of the benefit that it brings to the people. Both theologically and practically, land and community are inextricably linked and each should benefit the other.

3. **Social Justice:** In announcing her party’s agenda for the new session of the Scottish Parliament, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon declared a desire to ‘balance the search for social justice with pursuing economic growth’. Such aims resonate strongly with biblical images regarding land use. For example, considerate land ownership is encouraged because otherwise the land will lie dormant and unproductive and, accordingly, will be of no benefit to the community. Yet, at the same time, land owners are constantly encouraged to think about the socially and financially disenfranchised in their use of the land. The example of Christ and the universal voice of Scripture combine to encourage the church *always* to work for the good of the poorest in society. This consid-

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4. The creation commission to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28) implies a process of bringing order out of chaos, so that the land will bring benefit to the people.
5. For example, land owners were to instruct their harvesters not to gather the whole crop but to leave grain around the edge of the field for the benefit of the poor (Lev. 23:22). Nor were they to go back and pick up the grain that had fallen to the ground in the process of harvesting. This too was to be left for the needy to collect (Lev. 19:9–10).
eration, therefore, must be a factor in any Christian response to the proposals for land reform in Scotland.

In short, whilst the Bible does not give a singular answer to the question of how Scotland should make use of its land and does not speak directly to questions of who should own land, how much a single person should be able to own, nor the specifics of how that land should be put to use, it does provide guiding principles with regard to the use of land from a Christian perspective. These precepts revolve around:

- Right stewardship of the gift that has been given us;
- Proper use of the land for the benefit of the community as a whole; and,
- Generous provision for the most vulnerable in society in the way that land is used – social justice

**Specific Policy Comments**

**Part 1 – Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement**

We welcome the inclusion of this statement and its broad aims, however we hope that the committee will consider the need to make reference to the land being used for the benefit of the community that inhabits the land as well as the common good of wider society. We feel this could be strengthened from the original draft in the original Scottish Government consultation. Similarly a responsibility to make best use of the resources of the land would be helpful, taking into account the balance required from sustainable development.

**Part 2 – Scottish Land Commission**

We welcome the broad principle of the Land Commission but there is a need to ensure not community consultation but genuine community involvement in the ongoing work of the commission. There can often be a danger that any agency of the state can take a top down, rather than community up approach and we hope the committee will consider ways to avoid this in its scrutiny of this proposal.

**Part 3 - Transparency in Land Ownership**

We strongly welcome the proposals to increase transparency of land ownership. This is essential not only where issues of bad land stewardship arise but also in the fostering of good community relations between those who own the land and the communities based in and around it.

**Part 4 – Engaging Communities in decisions relating to land**

We strongly support this provision and whilst full scrutiny of this will take place after the publication of guidance it is important that the Scottish Government is required to produce such guidance. Ongoing engagement with local communities is a fundamental requirement of building strong relationships between land stakeholders as well as helping to ensure just decisions are made on use and development of land.
Part 5 – Right to Buy to further sustainable development

We welcome this provision as a backstop provision where there is danger of harm to land and community. We also welcome the intention of the provision that is to ensure sustainable development whoever owns the land and also the provision for mediation prior to right to buy being enacted. We believe responsible landowners should have nothing to fear from this provision.

Part 10 – Agricultural Holdings: Rights and Responsibilities over Land

We will not comment extensively on Part 10 other than to say that we broadly welcome the provisions on Tenant Right to Buy, sale where Landlord is in breach and the provisions for improvements by tenant or landlord. Whilst these proposals rightly need more scrutiny by the committee it seems as if these measures help develop the crucial relationship between tenants and farmers enabling a just relationship of partnership to develop rather than one where one side has all the power in the transaction. Taken with the provision for the Tenant Farming Commissioner we believe these proposals actually have the chance to not only improve social justice on agricultural land but actually improve relationships between tenants and owners with both having rights but also responsibilities towards the other, with legislative backing if either party reneges on its responsibilities.