

Yesterday at the General Assembly – Wednesday, June 7

On the second full day of business at this year's General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) meeting in Belfast, matters concerning the public square featured heavily, with members discussing education in the Republic of Ireland, proposals on the Eight Amendment of the Irish Constitution in relation to abortion and the political situation in Northern Ireland.

Republic of Ireland and faith based schools

In January of this year, the Minister of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland set out four possible approaches for changing the rules on school admissions to faith-based schools. Currently when a denominational school is oversubscribed, it may give priority in admissions to children of families of a particular

religious denomination to ensure that the ethos of the school is maintained.

The Assembly discussed the consequences of the four possible policy options, which would either diminish or remove the role of faith in determining admissions to oversubscribed faith-based schools.

As part of their witness and work in the community, Presbyterians have sought to provide a place of education for their children and the wider community. The Assembly heard that options set out by the Minister presented potential problems for minority faith schools in the Republic of Ireland, and so a resolution before the Assembly called upon the Irish Government to ensure the sustainability of schools with a Protestant ethos, which was passed.

Eleanor Petrie, Chair of the Education Sub-Committee of PCI's Republic of Ireland Panel speaking during the debate said, "There has been a concerted effort by groups promoting non-faith education to remove church control of primary schools. These groups have the tacit support of the Minister, who announced a review of the admissions processes of schools around faith.

“The debate centres really around the control by the Catholic church of 94% of Primary Schools. Minority faith schools will be collateral damage. The argument of these groups sounds broadly plausible – replacement of church-run education with a standard state education allowing for faith formation outside school time...

“In our faith schools the ethos of reformed faith runs like a seam – not a 30-minute class that can easily be removed.

“But at its heart, this is replacement of one Truth in the lives of our children – that there is one Trinitarian God and that salvation is achieved through belief in the sacrifice of Jesus – with another: that there is no god.”

Mrs Petrie also pointed out that there was no data underpinning this move by the government. These proposals solve nothing, unless you oppose the existence of faith schools from the outset.

Citizens Assembly & abortion

The General Assembly kept its focus on the Republic of Ireland when it discussed the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, which

acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and the equal right to life of the mother. In April of this year, the Citizens' Assembly recommended a change to the Constitution and significant widening of access to abortion, including abortion on request, proposals that the Oireachtas will now take forward.

Reflecting the pro-life position of PCI, the General Assembly was asked to express deep concern about these proposals, and called upon the Irish Government to provide the best possible care and support for women experiencing crisis pregnancies – which it did.

Very Rev. Dr. Trevor Morrow, Convener of PCI's Republic of Ireland Panel, addressed the Assembly highlighting the current situation, "The ruling of the Supreme Court is that there are circumstances where abortion may be permitted.

"However, subsequent to this, there has been enormous pressure from sections of Irish society to rescind article eight. The Citizens' Assembly has offered propositions that are so radical, it is beyond anything David Steele introduced in 1967 in the UK Parliament with all its implications... It is in fact an advocacy for abortion on demand.

“As such, I would urge this Assembly to express our deep anguish and distress that such legislation and practice should take place on this island in the Republic and to support this resolution enthusiastically,” Dr. Morrow said.

Closing the report of the Council for Public Affairs, Very Rev. Dr. Norman Hamilton said, “As a Council we are very conscious that we live in a fallen world and are a fallen people. I would like to invite you, members of the Assembly and the Church at large, to be in touch with us with your views and opinions because we represent you.

“Finally, specifically in relation to the abortion issue. In the Republic of Ireland it is a constitutional issue, while in the North it affects criminal law and health guidelines. In both jurisdictions it isn’t clear what is being proposed. As a Church we want to maintain a coherent biblical position, yet also be sensitive to the views of our people.”

Northern Ireland political situation

With Northern Ireland having no functioning Executive, the General Assembly expressed its “serious disquiet about the damage being done

to the fabric of Northern Irish society by the current political crisis...”

It also called for “all involved in the upcoming political talks to urgently seek resolution that establishes good government based on good working relationships, that confidence can be restored, instability minimised and major changes (including the Brexit negotiations) faced together.”

Referring to Brexit Dr. Hamilton said, “The Irish government is putting significant political and diplomatic resources into ensuring that the worst excesses of a Brexit are mitigated for the Republic. While they will quite properly be principally concerned with the impact on their own jurisdiction, it is undoubtedly true that the interests of Ireland North and South will often coincide.

“It seems self evident that a good outcome for the South will also be good here in Northern Ireland, and vice versa... Given the uncertainties surrounding Brexit it is essential that we have a working Executive that is actually capable of promoting a well-articulated position, where it matters, at national and European levels,” Dr. Hamilton said.

Professorial appreciation expressed

During the day's business the Moderator, Dr. McNeely, received students accepted for the Ordained Ministry when the Council for Training in Ministry's report and resolutions were brought before the Assembly. This also included the reception of retiring ministers, with special appreciation expressed to Professor Stephen Williams for his work as Professor of Systematic Theology by the Moderator. Professor Williams received a standing ovation from the floor.

“Stephen, 23 years is a long time but we are grateful to have been able to benefit from your service for so long. During that time, you have shaped the thinking of countless students, contributed significantly to the theological understanding of the entire church and humbly modelled what it means to be a follower of Jesus,” said Dr. McNeely. The General Assembly approved the appointment of his successor, Rev. Dr Michael McClenahan.

Leadership in the Crucible

In the week's second special presentation, 'Listening to the Global Church: Leadership in the crucible', the Assembly heard from

representatives from churches overseas, ministering and bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ in very difficult situations.

One minister from the Middle East gave this message to the General Assembly, “When Jesus said to the disciples ‘do not be afraid, I am here, I am with you,’ this encouraged them and it also encourages us.”

During the course of the afternoon, the Assembly also discussed and was asked to adopt the five strategic priorities for the work of the Church’s councils and committees.

Assembly Fringe – Young people and the Church

SPUD stands for ‘Speaking, Participating, Understanding and Deciding’, and this evening they held a fringe event entitled ‘Young People and the Church’. The event included a mix of upfront input and round table discussion, tackling themes such as inter-generational connections and younger leadership involvement, as well as sharing practical stories and examples of good practice in a variety of congregational settings.

Wednesday Evening Celebration

Following the close of business, the Evening Celebration: Everyday Disciples took place in the Assembly Hall.

Everyday Disciples is a key theme running throughout this year's General Assembly, and was the theme of the Moderator's address on the Opening Night. It will also be the focus of the Special Assembly that will take place in Coleraine in August this year.

This evening's programme for the Wednesday Night celebration included a key note address by the well-known author and speaker, Vaughan Roberts, Rector of St. Ebbe's Church, Oxford.

Details of all resolutions and reports to this year's General Assembly can be found at www.presbyterianireland.org/GA2017.

Most of the General Assembly's proceedings are streamed live and can be viewed at www.presbyterianireland.org. Live updates on proceedings can be followed @pciassembly on Twitter using the hashtag #PCIGA17.

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