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## **Yesterday at the General Assembly – Thursday June 8**

On the third and penultimate day of business at this year's General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), members of Assembly discussed a range of topics yesterday (June 8) that involved the Church's relationship with other denominations – including the Church of Scotland.

### **Relationship with other denominations**

Members of Assembly discussed a detailed framework and recommendations that set out the principles by which the Church will seek to relate to other denominations, mission partners and inter-church bodies, both locally, nationally and globally.

Speaking in the debate about the recommendations, the Very Rev. Principal Stafford Carson, one of the authors of the report said, "We have tried to state the essential attributes and marks of the church as a brief and helpful reminder, and as a foundation for

considering this important matter of relationships with other denominations.”

In recommendations regarding the Church of Scotland, members of Assembly agreed some practical steps towards mutual reform. One such move was for PCI to ‘clearly and graciously state its own position in regards to human sexuality and marriage – for the benefit of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland as a denomination and the integrity of PCI’s witness.’

It was also recommended that the authors of the report hold informal discussions with those within the Church of Scotland, who ‘are working for its reform and renewal, and coming from the ‘traditionalist view’, in order that PCI might offer constructive support.’

The recommendations also included a demonstration of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland’s commitment to reform by being open with the Scottish Church where PCI ‘has been less than faithful to the Scriptures in pursuit of justice or in the practice of grace.’

In submitting the Report, Rev. Trevor Gribben Clerk of Assembly and PCI’s General Secretary said that the Task Group that presented the report to the General Council and the Council

itself, “are very clear in their view that the Church of Scotland has departed from the clear teaching of Scripture on the matter of same sex relationships, both with regard to the ordained leadership of the Church and the direction of travel towards permitting Ministers to marry people of the same gender.

“We would want both to state this clearly and I hope graciously and at the same time stand and identify with those in the Church of Scotland who continue to seek to uphold biblical truth.

“We also recognise that we in PCI are not without sin and in those areas in which we have been or are less than faithful to Scripture, we should be open to similar gracious biblical correction.

“This issue, of how we relate to the Church of Scotland, should not be rent us asunder as the PCI, as the presenting issue has done in many areas and congregations of the Church of Scotland. PCI has a clear position...We should not let another denomination’s move from what we believe to be the clear teaching of Scripture cause needless divisions in this Church.”

Unlike previous years, there was no recommendation before the General Assembly

to nominate the Moderator to attend the Scottish Assembly in 2018, having resolved for the last two years not to send the Moderator. In an amendment that would have sent the Moderator to Edinburgh, many members of Assembly spoke on both sides of the issue, including former Moderators. The amendment however was lost 139 votes to 221.

At the start of the debate, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Rt. Rev. Dr. Derek Browning also spoke. Dr. Browning said, “We hear your concerns, we feel your upset, we hear your pain. The Church of Scotland has been wrestling with these issues for many years...We want to hear you and see you face to face...We don’t ask you to agree with us, just simply to be with us, agreeing to disagree together.”

With regards to the Free Church of Scotland, the Assembly agreed to ‘encourage the development of a formal fraternal relationship’ with the church.

In another area of inter-church engagement before the Assembly, after some debate it was agreed to enter into discussions with the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland around the contemporary understanding of the Doctrine of Justification. This will be the first time in recent

memory that PCI will formally enter into church-to-church theological dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

### **Supporting the persecuted church overseas**

Following on from Wednesday's special presentation 'Listening to the Global Church: Leadership in the crucible' - which involved representatives from churches ministering and bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ in very difficult situations – all ministers and congregations were urged to 'stand with and learn from persecuted churches' in a variety of ways.

In a separate resolution the Church was encouraged to 'facilitate prayerful support' and 'meaningful engagement' with key issues and its partners dealing with the huge challenge and consequences of 'divisive and devastating' conflict, which has resulted in the displacement of people.

Addressing the Assembly, Rev. Dr. Liz Hughes, Convener of the Council for Global Mission, said, "The number one reason given in the UK for not believing in God is something like 'how could a God of love allow so much suffering in the world?' Yesterday in the Global Church Presentation: Leadership in the Crucible, we

discovered just how much we have to learn from those suffering for Christ's sake in various parts of the world – not least the importance of developing a theology of suffering.

“Persecuted believers teach us that the Christian faith has suffering right at its heart in the cross of Christ with a resulting call to follow –sometimes in miraculous deliverance and more often in faithful endurance.”

Focusing on mission overseas, the Church was also asked to continue to develop its church-planting strategy, especially in the Western European context.

Rev. Uel Marrs, asked those present to consider what place PCI should give to church planting, whether locally or globally, and whether it is the mind of the Assembly to encourage this endeavour?

“In the early pioneering years of mission PCI planted churches, whether in India or China... Even during this era of partnering, as opportunity has arisen, we have continued to engage in church planting. Take for example the church planting undertaken in recent years in partnership with the Presbyterian Church of East

Africa in remoter areas of Kenya, amongst the Samburu, the Masai and or at the Kenyan Coast.

“It is however, not just about these remote and hard places, the challenge to church plant is closer to home, right here in Europe, as we see the great need for re-evangelisation of post-Christendom Europe.

### **Major review of PCI's Home Mission**

In terms of mission in Ireland, the Assembly heard and discussed the findings and recommendations of an important root and branch review into the Church's Home Mission. There are 72 Home Mission congregations out of the denomination's 539, established and supported directly by the central church.

This review of the Home Mission is the first of its kind in living memory; seeking to look forward and provide a platform to reconsider 'what it means to be church' and how best this can be done within the contest of Home and Urban Mission congregations across Ireland.

Mission of another kind also featured greatly today – Chaplaincy, in terms of the Church's involvement in prisons, healthcare, universities and colleges and Forces. The increasingly difficult challenges in terms of providing valuable

Gospel centred and compassionate ministry, especially in an increasingly secular Ireland were also discussed.

Rev. David Bruce, Secretary of CMI, reminded the Assembly that chaplaincy is done in various settings and how this can create a genuinely missional presence beyond our own circles. However, he also described how the Council has had to respond to a challenge from the atheist lobby, which questioned the appropriateness of money from the public purse being used to pay for chaplaincy provision in universities.

He said, “This primarily related to Colleges in the Irish Republic, but the question has been raised in other ways in Northern Ireland as well. It poses the question: Who should pay for chaplaincy? The Church’s critics may well be saying to government and to us: ‘If you want to have a chaplaincy presence in public institutions, you must pay for it yourself – and not only so, but in doing so you must agree to abide the policies of the institution in the areas of equality, inclusion, inter-faith cooperation.’”

However, positively, Rev. Bruce shared that, “... while the debate is happening, we have been able to continue working – and most public institutions who have chaplaincy as part of their



culture deeply value it, and do not want to lose it because the benefits to them are measurable.”

Assembly members also heard of plans to develop chaplaincy at the rapidly expanding campus at Ulster University in Belfast and a pilot scheme for rural chaplaincy, made urgent by the increasing isolation often felt by those working on farms.

Rev. Ben Wilson, Convener of the Strategy for Mission Committee, told the Assembly how this committee has been considering the issue of rural chaplaincy/mission, “In Matthew Chapter 9 we read of Jesus going through the cities and villages, teaching, proclaiming the gospel, healing affliction. We are committed to the strategy of reaching cities... but a city strategy is never to be to the detriment of those who live rurally.

“We note that in our own context, in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, over a third of the population is described as rural – over 2.25 million people.

“One particular group that has come to heart and mind as we have considered rural mission is the farming community. Farmers often work alone and struggle with the issues of isolation

and financial stress...With the compassion of Christ we would seek to provide pastoral care for farmers and into this rural economy. Pastoral care with gospel intentionality, for we believe that chaplaincy is missional and that the best we can give to farmers (or anyone) is to see them personally embrace the good news as it is found in God's Son Jesus," he said.

During this session, the Moderator, Rt. Rev. Dr. Noble McNeely, received some of the denomination's chaplains who serve in the Army, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, reserve and cadet forces. For the first time, those presented will be in uniform.

Chaplaincy was also the focus of the Assembly's third alternative presentation entitled 'Chaplaincy as Mission.' Chaplains of various kinds, working on the ground, were interviewed on stage and invited to share their personal experience of chaplaincy. Joanne Dunlop, Deaconess and Hospital Chaplain said, "My great passion is that people will encounter a living Jesus... my heart is that people will know Jesus in this life."

Graham Stockdale, Prison Chaplain, quoting a prisoner who attended an Alpha Course he ran in HMP Maghaberry: "I came as an atheist, I came to argue, but I come away with an

openness to the possibility of a relationship with God.” A former prisoner, who returns to visit those in prison told the General Assembly, “God uses prisoners to minister to other prisoners... The Lord has restored what I lost, ten times over.”

Describing the impact of these voices of our individual chaplains about the passion they have what they do, Rev. David Bruce said, “To understand it as portal to frontline mission with tens of thousands of people who might otherwise pass us by... to look at this traditional role through missional eyes, we have been struck at the potential for making gospel connections almost everywhere you look.”

Details of all resolutions and reports to this year’s General Assembly can be found at [www.presbyterianireland.org/GA2017](http://www.presbyterianireland.org/GA2017).

Most of the General Assembly’s proceedings will be streamed live and can be viewed at [www.presbyterianireland.org](http://www.presbyterianireland.org). For live updates and comment proceedings can be followed @pciassembly on Twitter using the hashtag #PCIGA17.

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