

COUNCIL FOR CHURCH IN SOCIETY

Convener: Very Rev Dr TN HAMILTON
Secretary: THE CLERK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Council for Church in Society 2015/16

1. The report begins with a brief account of the work of the Council over the past year, including actions taken on the resolutions passed by last year's Assembly on receiving the Council's report.

Abortion Task Group

2. The Abortion Task Group's report is designed to assist the General Assembly in setting out their position on abortion. The report focuses in particular on abortion in cases of 'fatal fetal abnormality' and sexual crime, given the recently proposed changes to Northern Ireland's abortion law.

Community Relations and Reconciliation Task Group

3. The Community Relations and Reconciliation Task Group tables a revised version of the General Assembly's Peace Vocation entitled 'Vision for Society' for consideration and adoption. The Task Group also reports on its ongoing work with political parties and others in the public square on the subject of reconciliation.

Dealing with the Past Task Group

4. The Dealing with the Past Task Group set out a proposal for a research project entitled 'How did Presbyterians respond to the Troubles?' The Council believes that this proposal will make a positive contribution to the ongoing societal discussion about how to deal with the past.

Freedom of Conscience Task Group

5. Mindful of the resolution passed by last year's Assembly encouraging gracious and informed discussion about the role of conscience in the public square, the Freedom of Conscience Task Group presents a paper designed to help move the discussion forward.

State Education Committee

6. The State Education Committee reports on the various strands of its work. It also reports on the work of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC).

Republic of Ireland Panel

7. The Republic of Ireland Panel reports on its work since being established in September 2015. The Panel has focused in particular on education but is also seeking to demonstrate kingdom values in other areas, such as health and rural affairs.

REPORT

8. The Council for Church in Society has met four times since last year's General Assembly. Its Task Groups, Republic of Ireland Panel and State Education Committee have also met as required throughout the year, and there is regular engagement with outside groups. The Council's work continues to be very demanding due to the complexity and seriousness of the issues that need to be addressed, and at the outset it is important to put on record the deep thanks of the Council to the many people who have given so willingly of their time, energy and wisdom.

9. Identifying issues that the Church needs to address and developing the Church's thinking in these areas is a major part of the Council's remit. A critical element is to ensure that issues are thoroughly and Biblically explored, so that comment can be informed, rigorous and grace-filled. There is a particular challenge in seeking to bring grace into public debate, when so much attention is given in the media to those whose tone is often strident and demeaning. The papers submitted by the Abortion and Freedom of Conscience Task Groups demonstrate the high-level work of Council members in addressing complex subjects. Over the next year the Council will be proactive in detecting emerging issues and attempting to shape the public agenda. A key ingredient to success is the input of those in our denomination with expertise in areas relevant to public policy, such as medical ethics, health and social care, economics and welfare, criminal justice and legal affairs, and the environment. The Council encourages anyone with such expertise interested in getting involved in PCI's work in the public square to contact the Convener.

10. The initial operating model of working mainly through Task Groups has served the Council well in its first year of operation. Consideration is currently being given to future structures and the establishment of more permanent panels to work on subjects with which the Church is likely to find itself regularly involved over the coming years, such as medical and scientific advances.

11. The Council continues to build relationships with those in government and others in civic society. The Council Convener and Public Affairs Officer have accompanied the Moderator and the Clerk in representing the denomination at meetings with parties of the Northern Ireland Executive. To date, meetings have been held with Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party. At these meetings, PCI emphasised the need to tackle poverty, promote reconciliation, improve the quality of public debate and provide adequate support for refugees arriving in Northern Ireland. The Convener also addressed the annual SDLP Party Conference, speaking on the theme of reconciliation. In the year ahead, the Council will continue its engagement in the public square, working particularly hard to establish new contacts in the Oireachtas. Journalists and others working in the public arena have expressed the opinion that the Council's name does not make its role entirely clear to those operating outside Church structures. The

Council is therefore asking the General Assembly to change its name to the Council for Public Affairs.

12. A strategic objective for the Council is to equip members of PCI and others to think Biblically about important issues facing society. To this end, the Council continues its partnership with Union Theological College in organising events under the theme of *The Church in the Public Square (CIPS)*. ‘Economic Hope: a Biblical Roadmap for a Just Society’ and ‘The Future of Our Past: Remembering and Reassessing 1916’ were successful conferences addressing topical issues. The latter conference in particular attracted a large crowd of over 350 people and much media attention. A seminar series on ‘Being Human’ and a major conference on education are the next events planned in the CIPS programme in October/November 2016 and early 2017 respectively. Material from CIPS events is made available online at www.presbyterianireland.org/publicsquare. The Council is aware, however, of the need to further develop how it communicates with and provide relevant and useful resources to those in Congregations. In this regard, accessible materials will be produced relating to the five CIPS conferences held to date.

13. In addition to responding to consultations (see below), the Convener, Secretary and Public Affairs Officer work closely with the Press and Web Officer to ensure that the Church’s voice is heard in the public square. Throughout the year, the Convener has taken part in radio discussions and has written articles which have appeared in various media publications. Whilst the Convener should and will remain a key spokesperson for PCI on public policy issues, it is hoped that a wider team of spokespeople representing the diversity of, and expertise within, PCI can be built up over the years ahead.

Consultations responded to

- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety’s draft consultation on ‘Co-operating to safeguard children and young people in Northern Ireland’.
- Draft Charities (Accounts and Reports) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.
- Department of Employment and Learning’s ‘The Higher Education Big Conversation’.
- Department of Employment and Learning’s Consultation on Part-time and Postgraduate Student Finance.
- Shared Education Bill (through the TRC).
- Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill (through the TRC).

14. The Council also made a written submission and gave oral evidence to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on Jo-Anne Dobson MLA’s Human Transplantation Bill. The Bill sought to move Northern Ireland away from the current ‘opt-in’ system of organ donation to a form of ‘soft opt-out’ system with family safeguards. The Bill also sought to place additional duties on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to promote and increase awareness of transplantation. In responding, the Council emphasised that organ donation is a profoundly Christian act. The Council also urged legislators to affirm and uphold life as a gift. Ultimately, the Bill’s sponsor did not move it forward; however, the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which at the time of writing is awaiting Royal Assent, places

new duties on the Department of Health to promote transplantation. The Council believes that the Church must play its part in increasing the opportunities for the gift of life to be given through organ and also blood donation.

Action relating to 2015 Resolutions

2015 Resolution	Activity
<p>That the General Assembly affirm their commitment to civil and informed political discourse; acknowledge that fractious and poor quality public debate damages community relations and weakens confidence in political systems; and urge all those who speak in the public square to do so with conviction, knowledge and civility.</p>	<p>The need for civil and informed political discourse has been raised in meetings with political parties and in various press releases and opinion pieces by the Council Convener. The Council will continue to raise this issue at every appropriate and available opportunity.</p>
<p>That the General Assembly encourage the Council for Church in Society to develop partnerships for the common good with other Churches and organisations, whilst maintaining its distinctive voice in the public square.</p>	<p>The Council Convener, Secretary and Public Affairs Officer have met regularly with those of other Churches and organisations. The Public Affairs Officer has made contact and built relationships with his counterparts in various organisations.</p>
<p>That the General Assembly encourage gracious and informed societal and political discussion across Ireland, north and south, about how to develop the concept of reasonable accommodation in law for matters of conscience.</p>	<p>Freedom of conscience has been raised in meetings with political parties and by the Council Convener through the media. The Council's Freedom of Conscience Task Group has produced a paper on conscience which discusses the concept of reasonable accommodation. It is hoped that this comprehensive paper can be further distilled for wider use in the public square.</p>

ABORTION TASK GROUP

The Very Rev Dr Norman Hamilton reports:

15. The Task Group was established to assist the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) in reviewing its position on abortion. A report on abortion was last presented to the General Assembly in 1981 and the following resolutions were passed in 1982:

That the General Assembly declare:

- (a) their opposition to abortion on demand for purely social reasons, or as a means of birth control;
- (b) that in exceptional cases, where medical abortion might be necessary, the most stringent safeguards should be provided to prevent abuse;
- (c) that much greater emphasis should be placed on the provision of adequate care by Church and State for those with unwanted pregnancies, and for the infants when they are born.

16. This is PCI's current position. Although these resolutions were agreed over a generation ago, the theological and ethical issues surrounding abortion remain basically unchanged. Nevertheless, the task of Biblical, theological and moral reflection is an ongoing one and we have to be attentive to changing circumstances in medicine, law and society.

17. The report presented here is occasioned by developments in relation to abortion law in Northern Ireland. Against the background of a consultation on amending the criminal law on abortion launched by the Department of Justice in 2014, the High Court of Justice in Northern Ireland ruled on 30th November 2015 that NI abortion law breaches Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, by failing to provide an exception to the prohibition on abortion in cases of 'fatal foetal abnormality' (FFA) and pregnancies due to rape and incest ("sexual crime").¹ Appeals have been lodged against this ruling. Subsequently, on 10th February 2016, amendments to the Justice (No. 2) Bill designed to legalise abortion on grounds of FFA and sexual crime were voted down by the Northern Ireland Assembly. On 25th March 2016, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published Guidance on the termination of pregnancy, following its approval by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Guidance states that '[t]he law in Northern Ireland does not allow interventions that have as their sole purpose the ending of the life of the fetus'. Rather, any intervention must only be carried out to preserve the life of the mother, which has been interpreted by the courts as including protection against 'real and serious' and 'permanent or long term' physical or mental health issues.² This is for a medical practitioner to assess on a case by case basis.³ The Guidance further states that

[f]etal abnormality, including an abnormality which inevitably means that the fetus will not survive, is not in itself grounds for a termination of pregnancy in Northern Ireland. However the impact of fetal abnormality on a woman's physical or mental health may be a factor to be taken into account when a health professional makes an assessment of a woman's clinical condition and recommends options for her ongoing care.⁴

1 The Court ruling cannot be reduced to this, of course, but this was at its heart and is our present concern. The full judgement and a summary are available at www.courtsni.gov.uk.

2 Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, *Guidance for Health and Social Care Professionals on Termination of Pregnancy in Northern Ireland* (March, 2016) pp.3, 5, 6.

3 *Ibid.*, p.5.

4 *Ibid.*, p.7.

18. At the time of writing, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has begun the process of establishing a working group to consider and make recommendations regarding FFA.

19. The paper attached as Appendix 1, we do not address the legal question before the courts, which is the relationship of the provisions of the abortion law in NI to the stipulations of the European Convention on Human Rights. Rather, it is confined to theological and moral reflection, with the aim of helping PCI to set out its position on abortion, particularly in relation to the proposed changes to NI law mentioned above.

20. It is important to make three observations from the outset. Firstly, although the paper does not discuss General Assembly declaration (c) above this is not a sign that it is comparatively unimportant.⁵ On the contrary, a Church which emphasises theological reflection and makes personal care secondary is scarcely worth listening to. We cannot emphasise too strongly how futile it is to express our views on abortion if our Churches do not strive to be communities of love. In its contributions in the public square, PCI has sought to emphasise the importance of comprehensive care in the perinatal period for women facing crisis pregnancies. As a denomination, we have stressed that ‘a key issue...is the provision of comprehensive care in every part of Northern Ireland for every woman facing a pregnancy crisis’ and ‘if we truly want Northern Ireland to be a place that affirms life, wellbeing and human dignity, then providing excellent perinatal care services, including practical, emotional and spiritual support, must be a top priority.’⁶ We recognise and commend the medical personnel, charities and voluntary organisations that work to make this vision a reality. We also acknowledge the support provided to women and their families by Churches both directly and through the funding of local pregnancy support services. There is, however, a perception that Church and State can and must do more. Whilst it is not within the remit of this Task Group to address the question of the provision of support for women, this is an issue that warrants further consideration.

21. Secondly, although it is our responsibility to reflect dispassionately on the issues involved, not a line of our paper is written in a spirit of detachment. We are well aware of the deep human pain and tragedies with which we are concerned and what we say is said with that constantly in mind.

22. Thirdly, and connected with this, we believe that our paper will be cogent only if the reality of abortion and the stories of women who have gone through or refrained from going through it are heard and heeded not as a kind of appendix to theological reflection but as a context for it.⁷ These include stories of male pressure on women to have an abortion. Indeed, it has been argued by some feminists that a liberal abortion policy is a means by which men can exploit and

5 We recognise here that although declaration (c) of 1982 refers to ‘unwanted pregnancies’, we must be mindful of our phraseology, as in many cases a pregnancy will have been ‘wanted’ but an abortion is ultimately sought due to, for example, the distress caused by the unborn child being diagnosed with a life-limiting condition.

6 www.presbyterianireland.org/News/Article/2015/High-Court-ruling-on-Abortion

7 One resource for these stories is www.careconfidential.com

manipulate women.⁸ We are well aware that this is only one perspective, but in a cultural climate where the abortion debate is so often publicly presented in terms of a collision between women's rights and religious perspectives, it is important to bear it in mind.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND RECONCILIATION TASK GROUP

Mr Edgar Jardine, Convener, reports:

23. As the twentieth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaches, it is hard to deny that our society has in many ways changed for the better. Yet one only has to look at the demeaning and scornful language often used in public debate to see the distrust and animosity that remains between those of different political traditions. Some in the public square have spoken of the need for 'reconciliation', and over the autumn and winter months the Task Group has been considering what this might look like in theological and political terms. This work is ongoing. The Task Group's actions to date can be divided into three strands:

24. First, if the Church is to speak on this issue, the Task Group felt it important, useful and appropriate that PCI reaffirm its commitment to building a more peaceful society. The Task Group is therefore bringing to the Assembly a revised version of the 1994 Peace Vocation entitled 'Vision for Society' (attached as Appendix 2), which it is asking the Assembly to accept as a basis for action in the public square by the denomination, Presbyteries and Congregations. The Task Group believes that the statement will send a strong and positive message to political parties and others that the Church is committed to playing its part in helping to build better relationships in civic life and in local communities. Without being prescriptive, it is hoped that Presbyteries and Congregations will also reflect on the statement and take appropriate steps that are open to them in their situation.

25. Second, the Task Group has sought to identify opportunities for the Council to speak on the issue of reconciliation in the public domain. Members of the Task Group have worked closely with the Council Convener in preparing articles for publication in various media outlets and his speech to the SDLP Party Conference in November 2015. Discussion has taken place about reconciliation with representatives from different political parties and it is hoped that this work can be further developed over the year ahead.

26. Third, the Task Group is considering the possibility of organising several civic forum events at venues across Northern Ireland to open up discussion about how to 'make Northern Ireland work for the common good'. It is envisaged that this could be beneficial in bringing people with different constitutional aspirations together to discuss mutual values and hopes for the future. This idea is at a rudimentary stage and, at the time of writing, the Task Group is consulting those with expertise in community relations work to establish the potential contribution, usefulness and feasibility of such events.

8 See John Wyatt, *Matters of Life and Death: Human dilemmas in the light of Christian faith* (Nottingham: IVP, 2009) 146-147.

DEALING WITH THE PAST TASK GROUP

The Rev Tony Davidson reports:

27. The failure to find a consensus on dealing with the past as part of the Fresh Start Agreement exposed again the continuing hurt and pain of many people affected by 'The Troubles', and the reality that in Northern Ireland we still have sectarian memories as well as sectarian communities. Not only is there no agreement in the public space about what happened during the Troubles, there is also no consensus about how we can go about finding a shared history. Recent conversations around what occurred one hundred years ago in 1916 have further highlighted the lack of agreement in this regard.

28. As a Church we are called to be peacemakers in the place and time where God has called us. We have one Lord, one King and Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. All our memories should be interpreted through his life, death and resurrection. Moreover, as Christians we have a future when God will establish a Kingdom of peace, justice and truth in his new creation. We are called by grace to work for and in that new Kingdom. Therefore, will we wait for others to make progress in dealing with the past? Or will we take the risk of prophetically and pastorally examining our own history, and offering what emerges for the benefit of our Church, the wider Church and the common good?

Proposal: A research project, coordinated by the Council for Church in Society, to address the question 'How did Presbyterians respond to the Troubles?'

29. The project aims to uncover a wider story about Presbyterian responses to the Troubles than has to date been available, to recognise that which is good, and to identify and reflect upon the times when we failed to be faithful peacemakers. Doing so will enable us to contribute more effectively to the wider societal discussion on dealing with the past.

30. The Task Group believes that the Council's first priority should be given to those who are connected to our Church and who have first-hand experience of being victims and survivors of the Troubles. Those who have been bereaved, injured, or post-traumatically stressed often provide the most valuable insights into the pain and suffering of Jesus. Experienced members of the Council for Church in Society, and of the denomination generally, will be identified who can listen carefully to victims and survivors of the Troubles, after having been given some guidance on to how best to do so. Listening offers our denomination an opportunity to see where further energies can be placed to respond to need, and also to see its own shortcomings in care and response. The Task Group is open to suggestions as to how the Council might make contact with victims and survivors in such a way that they will be encouraged to tell their stories within the fellowship of our Church environment. The Council will, of course, also discuss with victims and survivors how best they want their stories to be recorded, and whether they wish those stories to be in the public domain.

31. Secondly, the Task Group knows that many Ministers were involved in pastoring victims and survivors, engaging with paramilitaries, visiting in hospitals and prisons, and in peacebuilding work that often held back violence. Beyond these stories are those of many other Presbyterians including health

and social care workers, members of the security services and those who were involved in paramilitary organisations. These experiences are often overlooked in the way in which the past is addressed. Recording these stories will enable PCI to see its own history, successes, failures and participation in both peacemaking and sectarianism. If this material is gathered, it will also contribute to the proposed archive of the Troubles, enable PCI to self-reflect and build trust in the public square, and help our wider society to address the legacy of the past. Urgency is needed if this task is to be taken forward, for whilst many with first-hand experiences are still able to communicate them, memories will fade and may soon be lost forever.

32. Individual responses will include stories gathered from many Presbyterians, including:

- Ministers;
- Chaplains;
- Youth Workers;
- Health and social care professionals, others who worked in other emergency services, and first responders;
- The security services i.e. RUC, UDR, Army;
- Prison Officers;
- Politicians;
- Members of the Loyal Orders;
- Those involved in paramilitary organisations; and
- Others who might be identified.

33. There will be a wide geographical base, ensuring that the experiences of Presbyterians from the border areas and those in the Republic of Ireland are included.

34. To enable PCI to fully reflect on how Presbyterians responded to the Troubles, people outside the denomination will also be listened to i.e. those critical friends who are able and willing to share their perceptions of our response.

35. Through these listening and recording exercises, and using other relevant and appropriate sources, a coherent historical record will be produced as the basis for the publication of a book, and for other 'conference type' events. Individual and denominational responses will be included. Denominational responses will include the work of the former Church and Government Committee and other Committees, and formal statements such as the Coleraine Declaration and the Peace Vocation.

36. The Council for Church in Society will seek the help of sympathetic local academics to help shape the interview questions and provide ongoing analysis on the emerging stories. The Task Group also believes that within the Church there are those who can be called on to help write the core narratives and analyses that are needed, and the Council will be asking others to help in this task.

37. Apart from the costs of publishing the book, the costs involved in this project are very minimal, and book sales should minimise even this outlay. The aim is to complete the work within 18 months. With sensitive listening, writing and editing, the Task Group believes that much of the material gathered could be made available to the Church and wider public, which will help all to identify areas for change and celebrate that which is good.

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE TASK GROUP

The Rev John Kirkpatrick, Convener, reports:

38. At different periods in history circumstances have arisen that call for reassertion and restatement of core Christian values. The day in which we are now living is such a time. What once we assumed as normative values and principles are now being challenged, questioned and in some cases removed altogether. While this should not surprise nor alarm Christian people, as it has ever been so in the flow of history, it has exercised the minds of those charged with engagement in what has been called the public square.

39. Regularly the Church must define what it believes in new contexts. This is needed to give encouragement and assistance to those who find themselves in direct conflict, or potentially so, with societal norms. As our society has recently debated the place of conscience in public life, PCI has been given the opportunity to speak out on this important issue. As our denomination encouraged a comprehensive and grace-filled discussion about how to manage the moral and religious diversity of contemporary society, we needed to further develop our own thinking on these matters. The Council for Church in Society established a Task Group to help the Church to do so.

40. The Task Group met on several occasions from mid-2015 to March 2016 and produced a paper on 'Freedom of Conscience' (attached as Appendix 3). It is the Task Group's prayer that the paper will be of help to the members of the PCI and others who are seeking to think Christianly about the big issues facing us now and in coming days. It is also hoped that the paper can be distilled to create further resources for use by the Church in its communication with others in the public square, and for consideration by Church members.

STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

41. The State Education Committee (SEC) has met formally on three occasions since the last General Assembly, with sub-committee meetings held to expedite responses to government policy consultations.

42. The work of the Committee has been within three broad areas:

Issues to and from the Transferors' Representative Council (TRC)

43. Mr Andy Brown (SEC Convener), Mr Gavin Norris (Public Affairs Officer), the Rev Trevor Gribben (Clerk), the Rev Dr Colin McClure and Mr Uel McCrea have continued to contribute to the work of the TRC Executive throughout the year. The TRC continues to represent the policy interests of PCI, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church, and has considered the following issues throughout the year:

- Support for the delivery of Religious Education in schools;
- Training and support for Transferor Governors;
- Areas of mutual interest with representatives of Roman Catholic education, including Jointly Managed Church Schools;
- Transfer to post-primary education;

- Educational disadvantage and underachievement, with particular reference to Protestant working-class boys;
 - The roles and work of the Controlled Schools' Support Council and the Education Authority, and selection of the Churches' nominees to the above and to the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland;
 - The increasing difficulties faced by teachers, principals and governors regarding the role of the Christian faith in education;
 - The role of collective worship in schools.
44. The TRC responded to two consultations:
- In its submission to the NI Assembly Committee for Education on the Shared Education Bill, the TRC suggested the potential for much good in terms of educational outcomes, efficient and effective use of resources, and the promotion of good relations and community cohesion. However, concern was raised at potential of the inclusion of socio-economic factors in the definition of shared education to limit the effectiveness of its primary aim. The submission also highlighted the absence of any reference to bodies which support schools, such as the Controlled Schools' Support Council, and reminded the Committee for Education of the important role that such bodies play.
 - In commenting on the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill, TRC welcomed the introduction of the Bill and reiterated the need for schools to be places of safety and welcome for all children and young people. The submission sought some clarification around the roles of governors, asked for detailed guidance to be issued, and considered that more work was needed on how to address bullying through social media and other electronic communication.

Further and Higher Education (FE and HE)

45. The SEC believes that it is of great importance that PCI has a clear and strong voice in the debate over FE and HE, and has therefore placed this area as a standing item on its agenda.

46. In its response to the Department of Employment and Learning's (DEL) consultation on part-time and post-graduate student finance, the SEC challenged the somewhat narrow references to HE in economic terms, highlighting the importance of HE in sustaining, developing and renewing communities through the transfer of knowledge, encouragement of examination and critique, and promotion of moral and ethical virtues. The Committee also outlined the Church's view that part-time and post-graduate provision is a matter of social justice, extending to the disadvantaged the substantial benefits that a university education can provide. Furthermore, the response cited research suggesting that high numbers of students bear severe financial worries and impressed upon DEL concerns over the normalisation of debt.

47. A sub-group of the SEC met to discuss and submit a response through the Council to the DEL Minister's *Big Conversation*, in which concern was expressed at the potential 'brain-drain' which could result from further disinvestment in the FE and HE sectors. It called for a more strategic, coherent and long-term approach to policy, citing the loss of key university departments and a lack of joined-up thinking with other government departments. The response recognised the flexible

nature of the FE sector and the potential, if adequately funded, to further deliver skills so clearly needed by the local economy. The response also stressed the importance of access to FE and HE, especially through Widening Participation, and reiterated its concern about current and future levels of student debt.

48. The SEC is committed to developing its understanding of the important issues and building a network of relationships in this area of public policy. Accordingly, senior officials from the FE and HE sectors will be invited to brief the Committee over the next year.

Issues from Members

49. As representatives appointed from across PCI with a range of expertise and experience within the field of education, the members of the SEC have been instrumental in raising areas of importance which are relevant to the Committee's work. Some of these have formed the bases for future meetings, with the Convener and Public Affairs Officer sourcing appropriate resources in the form of documentation and presentations to facilitate discussion, whilst some have been taken on for discussion at the TRC. Issues considered by the Committee and/or TRC in this regard include:

- Equality of access to education: Dr Brian Cummins of the A3 Centre at Stranmillis University College gave an engaging presentation on widening participation, speaking of the need for a broader strategic framework and approach, and of greater parental involvement, positive male role models and a multi-agency approach. He emphasised the need for mind-set change in communities away from the belief that achievement is impossible;
- The roles and responsibilities of PCI Ministers within local schools;
- The roles and responsibilities of PCI members who act as Transferor Governors;
- The delivery of Religious Education in schools, with particular reference to the primary sector;
- Educational disadvantage in Protestant communities: Following an approach from the Progressive Unionist Party, the party's Deputy Leader, Dr John Kyle, addressed the Committee on their paper *Firm Foundations*, which highlights the issue of educational disadvantage and underachievement in Protestant working class communities;
- The ethos of state education: In addressing this issue, there was much discussion around the introduction of the new Controlled Schools' Support Council. Members are keen to be well informed about the work of the CSSC and, at the time of writing, have arranged for its Chairman to give a comprehensive briefing to the Committee at its next meeting on the role and work of the body, particularly with regard to ethos.

50. The SEC is conscious of its role as part of the Council for Church in Society, which has been tasked by the General Assembly with building partnerships for the common good. The Committee also wants to ensure that education remains a high priority on the public agenda. Therefore, at the time of writing, the Committee is in the early stages of planning a *Church in the Public Square* conference for early 2017 focused on education.

51. It is a key element of the SEC's strategy to build relationships with others working on education issues in the public square. The Convener recently attended a conference in Leicester on Collective Worship in Schools, has been a panel member and workshop facilitator at a Scripture Union NI conference on Schools' Ministry, and delivered the address at the opening service of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers National Conference in Liverpool. The Public Affairs Officer has attended a number of briefings and events, and has also appeared in front of the NI Assembly Committee for Education to give evidence on the Shared Education Bill. The Convener and Committee wish to record their warmest thanks to Gavin for all of his work for and on behalf of the SEC.

52. God is definitely at work in NI education at this time, with a number of conversations, discussions, reports, conferences and events all happening concurrently between a range of Christian stakeholders. He is moving people with a heart for education to keep Him at the forefront of their life and work and it is our prayer that the work of the State Education Committee has and will continue to contribute to this in a faithful and effective manner.

ANDREW BROWN, Convener

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND PANEL

The Very Rev Dr Trevor Morrow reports:

53. Presbyterians are a small minority in the Republic. We have islands of strength around the border counties of Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan and in the greater Dublin area but in Munster and Connaught our numbers are few. Nevertheless, we are honoured as having had a distinctive influence by our presence and witness. The Panel is seeking to build upon that historic acceptance by making credible witness to Christ and his kingdom in an increasingly secular context. Our love for our neighbour and our call to bless them has been the driving influence. The Panel has met on three occasions since its establishment in September 2015. It has chosen a number of areas in which the values of the kingdom of God can be demonstrated as being beneficial not only to followers of Christ but to civil society.

Education

54. An Education Subgroup has been established made up of members with a professional background and/or academic interest in education. At the time of writing, the Subgroup is working on a number of projects, including:

- developing the idea of an 'Education Sunday' to highlight the importance of education, and to show and celebrate the involvement of Church members in education;
- encouraging prayer for students, teachers and schools throughout the year; and
- developing a well-produced video on the theme of Christian faith in education.

55. Mr Johnston Reid also produced a paper for the Subgroup and Panel entitled 'A Presbyterian Ethos', looking at the importance of Christian ethos in school life.

Health

56. A discussion about how to bless others in the area of health led the Panel to focus on the needs of older people. At the time of writing, the Panel is actively exploring, with the Council for Social Witness, the possibility of a new sheltered housing project in the Republic.

Agriculture

57. The Panel is aware of some of the difficulties facing those in rural communities, particularly those who farm. With Ireland, north and south, heavily dependent on food exports, the impact of international developments such as the Russian import ban and economic slowdown in China can take its toll. Extreme weather and rural isolation also pose significant challenges. In early April 2016, the Panel arranged for the Moderator to visit Ballyhaise Agricultural College in County Cavan to hear first-hand from farmers and other rural community representatives about the challenges they face. Following this visit, the Panel is better informed and hopes to raise appropriate issues with government in due course following further consideration. A project to emphasise the value of food and look at food sustainability is also under consideration by the Panel.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

58. The Panel is aware of the desperate situation facing many who have come to our shores, particularly those who have spent many years in holding centres. At the time of writing, the Panel is seeking the advice of experts to help to determine what action can be taken to bless those affected.

APPENDIX 1**ABORTION****The question of abortion: principles**

1. The report submitted to the General Assembly in 1981 included a survey both of Biblical principles and the historical position of the Churches before considering the argument for abortion (a) where the mother's life was in danger unless it was performed, (b) in the case of rape and (c) in the case of fetal abnormality. On the basis of a report presented to the General Assembly on the 'Government Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology', a resolution was also agreed in 1985 '[t]hat the General Assembly accept the position that human life begins at conception and therefore believe that from that moment the human embryo should be treated in a manner in accordance with full human dignity'.

2. Obviously, attitudes towards abortion within Presbyterian Churches, as within other Churches and wider society, have developed over the last three decades. There is a diversity of viewpoints within our Churches today. However, it would clearly be wrong to allow the fact of diversity to determine the position of

the Church on any matter of principle. No Church can credibly allow its position to be determined by the whole range of views expressed by its members at any given point in time. These views are frequently in conflict with each other, so a Church steered by the views of its members could hold no definite position at all on abortion. We believe that it is our responsibility to try to set forth a coherent, persuasive, Biblically and theologically faithful account of our position.

3. Our basic theological conviction in PCI, as expressed above, embraces both a principle and an inference on the basis of the principle. The principle is that human life begins at conception. The inference is that the human embryo should be treated 'in a manner in accordance with full human dignity'. In this report, we proceed to take these two things separately. Firstly, can we maintain the principle that human life begins at conception?⁹ In answering this, we note the fact that some argue that this is primarily a scientific, and not a religious, question. The biological fact is that when the male sperm fertilises the female ovum, a new organism is conceived, the zygote formed and the genotype established. From conception, the new organism has the innate capacity to develop into adulthood. However we describe the relation between scientific and religious explanations, we believe that Biblical and scientific perspectives on the beginning of life are entirely harmonious. Although Biblical writers lacked our biological knowledge, this does not affect either the validity or the relevance of what they say. When the psalmist said that the Lord had 'formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb' (139:13), he was referring to that which was in the body of the mother. What he thought exactly did or did not happen inside her body does not matter. Contemporary science refers in biologically specific terms to the entity to which the psalmist was referring in more general, but still perfectly concrete, terms. The Bible makes occasional mention of children in the womb: Jeremiah 1: 5 and Luke 1: 44 are amongst the texts often cited in this connection and, of course, the miraculous conception of Jesus refers to his intra-uterine life. However, the Biblical writers do not deal with abortion. The celebrated reference to miscarriage caused by physical conflict in Exodus 21:22-25, whether read in its Greek (LXX) or Hebrew version, informs us about the penal code at an early stage in the life of ancient Israel and we cannot infer from it a general principle about the status of the child. We do not enter here into the history of Christian thought on abortion and the status of the unborn child, which includes a range of material from strong condemnation of abortion in the early Christian centuries to medieval speculation about when the soul enters the body of the fetus, to which differing answers might be given, dependent on whether it was a male or female child.

4. In describing the being which or who is in the body of the mother, sometimes our language needs to be precise; sometimes, not. If we wish to be precise, we must be cautious about the way in which we speak about the fertilised ovum. Living human beings can do what the psalmist did and trace their beginning back to their conception. We project backwards from the point of view of a developed human life. However, not all fertilised ova are implanted in the womb and proceed to further human development. Many fertilised ova are flushed out of the mother's body soon after fertilisation without her being aware of it; indeed, it is possible for menstruation to proceed uninterrupted after the

9 'Conception' and 'fertilisation' are not distinguished in this report: the union of sperm and ovum may be described in either way.

fertilisation and subsequent loss of the ovum. In such a case, it surely places a strain on our language if we refer to the fertilised ova flushed out as 'persons'. Furthermore, a fertilised ovum can divide into two (or more) and this results in identical twins. It would be strange to speak of one person becoming two persons. Again, much of the tissue of which the early embryo consists does not enter into the later composition of the fetus. For these reasons, we should question the appropriateness of speaking unreservedly of the fertilised ovum as 'a person' or 'an individual human being'. Although we shall later have occasion to ask about the theological significance of this, at this juncture our point here is essentially semantic. This is of the first importance. We do not subscribe to those ways of making a distinction between embryos and proper persons which deny that, from conception, we are dealing with human life. We definitely reject the position that, in order to count as a person, certain faculties, such as a formed brain, have to be in place and to be functional. In this respect, we reject the distinction between human life and personhood. Questions of biological classification or taxonomy are complex. Nevertheless, it remains broadly true to say that in our working understanding of the world, we think in terms of different *kinds* of things of which the world is made up – rivers and trees, cats and apes.¹⁰ The heading under which the fertilised ovum belongs is that of 'humankind', whatever then takes place after fertilisation. To be begotten of human parents is to partake of human form. It is inaccurate to describe the fertilised ovum as *potentially* human because it is *actually* something and that something is properly described as an embryonic form of human being. We conclude that the principle adopted by PCI that 'human life begins at conception' is consistent with both a Biblical perspective and biological science.

5. The more demanding task, to which we now turn, is the task of asking what is involved in treating the being which has been conceived 'in a manner which is in accordance with full human dignity'. We noted above that the position of PCI is that there are circumstances in which abortion may be permitted and that this is compatible with treating the embryo 'in a manner which is in accordance with full human dignity'. These circumstances were not specified in the relevant Assembly resolution. Circumstances are mentioned and discussed in the 1981 report, but neither the resolution adopted at the 1982 Assembly nor the later resolution adopted in 1985 committed it to all the views expressed in the 1981 report. In referring to these, we are not assuming that the Church must always remain bound to its past: clearly, it is always our responsibility to think and re-think in the present, whatever positions have traditionally been adopted in PCI. Our reason for alluding to the official position of PCI is to indicate the continuity between the substance of its official position and the matters which occupy us today.

6. The present call for provision for abortion in NI to be extended to cases of (a) FFA and (b) rape or incest makes no reference to the question of abortion in situations where it is widely accepted, that is, where the life of the mother is under threat.¹¹ There is provision for abortion in that event in the current

10 Although the account of creation in Genesis uses the language of 'kind' (e.g., 1: 11), the meaning of the Hebrew word cannot be assimilated into standard biological or philosophical meanings.

11 Fatal fetal abnormality (FFA) is sometimes called 'Lethal fetal abnormality' (LFA). It is a sub-set of 'Serious malformation of the fetus' (SMF).

legislation in NI which permits it both where ‘it is necessary to preserve the life of the woman’ and where ‘there is a risk of real and serious adverse effect on her physical or mental health, which is either long term or permanent’. Here, we must counter a popular supposition. The supposition is that, when maternal life is under threat, we are confronted with a situation where it is one life or another. With that in view, it may be argued that, along with the physical ability for us to make a choice in this situation, we should accept that there exists also a moral right to choose to take the life of the unborn child, because life may be taken in order to preserve a life – the tragic circumstance has arisen where the progress of the unborn child unwittingly endangers the life of the mother to which the child owes his or her existence.¹² In clinical reality, the situation is different. It is only extremely rarely a case of *either* mother *or* baby dying. It is a case of *either* mother *and* baby dying or the baby alone dying. In that situation, direct action with the intention or foreseen effect of taking the life of the unborn baby is justified.¹³ While this is not currently at issue, we mention it as an ‘exceptional circumstance’ where we judge abortion justified. The cases of fetal abnormality and sexual crime (rape and incest) are the judicially and politically relevant cases in NI at this stage and it is to these that we now turn.

Fatal fetal abnormality

7. The public debate on abortion in NI and the rest of Europe is shaped largely by notions of human rights. It is true that attitudes towards abortion are often described in terms of ‘compassion’ and those who address abortion in terms of ‘rights’ generally assume that compassionate instincts will help to steer our ideas about rights.¹⁴ However, it is the collision between the perceived right of a woman to have an abortion and the current restriction on abortion provision under NI law which shapes the present discussion. Some voices warn us that the contemporary vocabulary of ‘rights’ stands in tension with a Christian outlook.¹⁵ We sympathise with this. Certainly, to talk of the relative or competing rights of a mother and child can reflect the breakdown of a sense of organic family and social unity; we have become atomised individuals related to each

12 In this situation, we should not be saying that the life of the unborn child *must* be taken in such a situation, as though it were an obligation, only that it is permitted.

13 Arguments here often take into account relatively complex questions surrounding the distinction between intention and foresight, introducing the principle of ‘double effect’. See, e.g., Teresa Iglesias, *The Dignity of the Individual: Issues of Bioethics and Law* (Dublin: Pleroma, 2001) chapter 6. To avoid unnecessary complexity at this point and allow for different points of view, we adopt the formulation ‘intention or foreseen effect’ in our text.

14 If we had space to expand on this, we should note the broad, but definite, shift in the language used over the years by those who advocate a liberalisation of laws in relation to beginning and end of life issues from appeal to ‘compassion’ to an appeal to ‘rights’.

15 See Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, ‘The Concept of Rights in Christian Moral Discourse’ in Michael Cromartie, ed., *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997). For wise caution and discussion of human rights as ‘an emergency measure’, see Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, volume 2: *Politics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) 232.

other through legal mechanisms.¹⁶ It misrepresents the way in which the large majority of mothers perceive their relationship with their unborn child, with their deep instincts of care. ‘Rights’ language is singularly inappropriate here; we are unnaturally pitting a mother’s interests over against those of the child by the use of such language. At all events, the language of rights should never marginalise the language of responsibility, whether we are speaking of the responsibilities of the mother or of the State with respect to the unborn child. It is under these conditions that we grant the propriety of ‘rights’ language, bearing in mind that secular and religious uses may overlap but not be identical in light of our belief that human rights are God-given. Those who both accept that ‘rights’ language is appropriate and oppose extending abortion to cases either of FFA, rape or incest appeal to the rights of the unborn child or fetus. While Christian thought must clearly be governed by Christian principles, we should challenge those who leap to the conclusion that our beliefs about the rights involved in abortion depend entirely on whether we proceed from a religious or a secular point of view. There are two reasons for this challenge. Firstly, where people with a religious conviction object to mothers claiming the right to abort on the grounds that they have the right to do what they want with their own bodies, they insist that it is not a matter of religion, just a matter of scientific fact, to say that the fetus is not a part of the mother’s body. Obviously, no one is disputing the biological facts of the intra-uterine mother-child connection; equally obviously, the fetus has a brain and circulatory system. Secondly, there are secular, non-religious feminists who oppose abortion. Both religious and secular perspectives may be adopted in more or in less informed ways, unthinkingly or thoughtfully. While it is our responsibility in this report to assist PCI in setting out its position on controversial questions surrounding abortion, it would be a mistake to regard our perspective as merely or exclusively ‘religious’. A Christian perspective on abortion both takes into account the uncontestable scientific facts and seeks to reason rightly and wisely.

8. In Christian perspective, human rights are ultimately God-given rights, since God is the universal Creator. ‘The Christian respect for life is first of all a statement, not about life, but about God.’¹⁷ Some argue that, unless we believe that there is a Creator, no coherent or convincing account of human rights is possible; where that belief is absent, human rights amount to no more than the product of human constructions, lacking any objective grounding in the true nature or value of humans, including unborn children. It is not a debate into which we enter here. The belief that human rights are bestowed by God, the Creator, underlies the following considerations, even if many of the points that we make will command the agreement of some who do not subscribe to this belief and even if we bear in mind the qualification of ‘rights’ language mentioned above.

9. In holding together both (a) the principle that the human embryo should be treated from conception ‘in accordance with full human dignity’ and (b) that there are exceptional cases in which medical abortion may be permissible, PCI accepts the obvious fact that calling someone ‘human’ does not always resolve the question of rights. This is obviously a general truth, whether or not we are

16 See Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 171.

17 Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 226.

dealing with matters of life and death. A ten-year old child is human, but it does not follow that it has the rights of an eighteen-year old to vote; here we correlate rights to *stage* or *capacity*. In matters of life and death, those who (rightly or wrongly) condone capital punishment do not question the humanity of the person convicted of capital crime, but they deny that his or her right to life is absolute. Here, a right is related to *desert* or *behaviour* rather than to stage. These examples are not completely irrelevant digressions. They remind us that calling the embryo, fetus or unborn child a human being cannot be translated immediately into an absolute right to life *just because* of the humanity. We must argue cautiously. However, the purpose of this reminder is simply to encourage us to avoid loose talk. Obviously, neither example directly promotes a case for abortion. A right to vote is not the same as a right to life, the latter being the ground of all other rights. In the case of capital punishment – whether or not we support it – we presume guilt; in the case of the unborn child or fetus, its innocence is axiomatic. Abortion is the taking of innocent human life.

10. The criterion currently legislatively proposed for regarding a given case as a case of FFA is the inability of the fetus to survive independently of the mother beyond an indefinitely short while after she has given birth. In the Consultation mentioned at the beginning of our report, the Department of Justice emphasised that its consultation pertained only to ‘a very narrow range of cases’, these cases being ‘illustrated by the condition of anencephaly’. The phrase ‘illustrated by the condition’ is potentially awkward, for the anencephalic condition may exhibit unique features. For this reason and because of the high profile given to anencephaly in current discussion in Northern Ireland, we add a special word about it in the form of an ‘Added Note’ at the end of this paper. At this point, our discussion is concerned with FFA, as generically understood. Our conviction that human life begins at conception entails that the unborn child in a condition of FFA has the same rights as do other children without FFA and that our responsibility towards the child with FFA is one with our responsibility towards any unborn child. We recall here what we said at the beginning of the report about its emotional underpinning: it goes without saying that we are dealing with an agonising situation for the mother. Yet, we hold that the taking of a child’s life in general cases of FFA cannot be justified. Of course, we accept the propriety of medical intervention which has the foreseen effect of shortening life when the intention is the alleviation of pain. This is a general moral principle which applies across the board, including to unborn life. The unborn child for whom we are responsible comes before us not only in his or her individuality as the child that he or she is, but also as a member of the human race, conceived in solidarity with it, an unwitting and tragic bearer of the rights (if we choose to use that word) belonging to its kind.¹⁸ In refusing to take the life even of the child doomed shortly to die, simply on the grounds of its serious or fatal malformation, we pay proper homage to our co-humanity, honour its Creator and respect the sadly malformed creation. It is true that the process of giving birth is often arduous and we appreciate the *prima facie* force of the argument that abortion should be permitted in order to obviate the need to give birth in a case where the child will not survive. However, whatever the rights of the mother, they reach

18 If we occasionally use a word like ‘its’ for the unborn child, it is to avoid excessively using the phrase ‘his or her’ and not because of any doubt about its full humanity.

their limit when it comes to taking the life of the child. From the outset, we must accept that the decision to try to have a child or to continue the pregnancy should not be taken only on condition that the fetus possesses or lacks certain attributes.

Sexual Crime

11. In the cases of rape or incest, both (a) the circumstances of the sexual act that leads to pregnancy and (b) the legality of conception raise a distinct set of questions. Where incest is presumed to be consensual, a legal issue arises with respect to the consenting parties, but the illegality of the action does not logically affect the morality of the abortion. Despite the nature of incest, it cannot constitute an independent ground for abortion, simply by virtue of its illegality. Therefore, the question we address is the question of abortion in the case of rape (which, of course, may be incestuous rape). Two closely-associated factors distinguish this situation. The first is that the activity which resulted in pregnancy was non-consensual. The second is that there is a form of violence involved which, in the majority of cases, is intensely traumatising, constituting an attack on the mental and emotional health and not only on the physical body of the victim. Does this constitute an exceptional situation in which abortion is permitted?

12. Quite obviously, discussion of this question must attend to the realities surrounding rape and these include the question of what is or what is not possible in reporting it soon after it has occurred and the legal question of determining and proving whether rape has, in fact, occurred. The moral issue is whether abortion should be allowed on the *presumption* of rape. It may appear that the principles of our discussion up to this point rule out rape as an exceptional circumstance which permits abortion. The argument for categorically ruling it out would go like this. The horror of the offence of rape does not detract from the fact that a human being has been conceived and its rights are unaffected by the circumstances in which it came into existence. The fetus is as innocent as is the mother and it is our responsibility to give every support to the mother and encouragement to carry the pregnancy to term and, if she so wishes, help to make arrangements for the adoption of the child. Although we may agree that the mother bears no moral responsibility for the upbringing or nurture of the child, that does not equate with the right to take the life of the child. Dreadful as the offence has been, the mother's right cannot be extended in these cases to include the right to take the life of the child. Is that not the only position consistent with the approach which we have taken so far? That is certainly a judgement that we could make. The following paragraphs (15-17) represent an alternative line of reasoning which we also believe to be consistent with our theological position.

13. In answering this question, we need to dwell on the reality surrounding heterosexual rape, a reality which men are unable to comprehend properly. Rape is not only criminal; it is a heinous act of intimate violation of a woman's body. It is a flagrant breach of the law of God. A child is formed in the womb in explicit violation of God's command.¹⁹ Of course, this may be the case in

19 This in no way diminishes God's care for the child. On the contrary, when children learn of the circumstances of their conception – whether by rape or a one-night stand – it is vital that we tell them that they are claimed, owned, embraced and loved just as they are by God the Creator. The general question of the relation of God's will to God's command is too big for us to enter into here.

pregnancies where there is no rape, where coitus was consensual but outside the moral boundaries of God's law. (Incest is included here.) It is also true that all sin, whether or not connected with sexual activity, is contrary to that law. However, in the case of rape, we are dealing with a situation where the victim, bearing no responsibility for the outcome of the violation, is violently forced into coitus.²⁰ The woman now has to bear the child in her body; the child, as it is sometimes put, embodies the attack.

14. In this case, it is important that we look more closely at the stages of the unborn life, whatever conclusions we proceed to draw. The argument against taking even the earliest post-coital abortifacients (whether or not we want to use that word) is that this risks taking human life; it is not known whether or not conception has taken place, but it may have.²¹ The combination of sexual violence with uncertainty as to whether an ovum has been fertilised or proceeded to implantation compels us at least to consider a different way of reasoning. We do not for a moment assume that the victim of rape is expected to reason coolly in the following terms and to act immediately in accordance with the reasoning. We simply seek to understand the moral dimensions of this question. Is the following obviously mistaken? 'I am not certain whether there has been conception and, if there has been conception, whether there will be implantation. I do know that I bear no responsibility for any conception that may have or has occurred in violation of the command of God. Uncertainty under *these* circumstances mean that I am, before God, prepared to take responsibility for taking life prior to implantation.' It will be clear to some but not clear to others that Scripture or informed theological reasoning enjoins a sanctity-of-life principle which absolutely forbids anyone to reason in this way. The question is whether we can be sure that the innocent being should *under no circumstances* be deprived of life on account of the father's wrongdoing. Does human life have an unconditional right to protection at *any* stage after conception irrespective of the circumstances of conception? Different answers to this question are consistent with PCI's position.

15. Lest there be misunderstanding, we want to underline that all we are doing here is noting the view that there appears to be no definitive *theological* reason to take steps to ensure the non-implantation of an ovum that may have been fertilised in the case of rape. Women's experience may determine our minds one way or another, particularly when we take into account the sense that some women have of abortion as a violation of their motherhood which compounds the initial violation of rape. The question raised in these two paragraphs was whether reasoning simply on a sanctity-of-life principle resolved all the issues before us. We are well aware of the danger that, if we refuse to foreclose the answer to this question, our reasoning in relation to sexual crime may open the door to 'liberal' positions on abortion which collide with our theological principles. Even if the

20 It is not relevant here to discuss various scenarios, including those where it is difficult to draw the line between consensual sex and rape.

21 We acknowledge that 'abortifacient' is a controversial term because it apparently assumes pregnancy. However, 'contraceptive' is also controversial. If human life begins at conception, there is a moral distinction between taking steps to prevent the fusion of sperm and ovum and taking steps to ensure that, if an ovum has been fertilised, it does not implant.

logic of those who take steps to prevent implantation in the case of rape can hold its ground, have we not made our ground harder to hold and left ourselves open to its occupation by cultural forces which move in an entirely different direction from what we believe to be right with respect to abortion? We feel the force of this objection and underline that, since we are dealing with innocent human life, there is no suggestion here of the propriety of taking life beyond the stage of implantation on the grounds that a sexual crime has been committed.²²

Conclusion

16. We acknowledge that in this paper we have not entered into the debate about women's rights. The reason that we have omitted reference to them is that (a) what is at issue is the right to take human life and (b) the fetus is a human life and not part of a woman's body. This sets limits to the rights of any person, female or male – limits which we standardly acknowledge in the case where a child is born. However, no one should conclude from our report that the well-being of women is irrelevant. On the contrary: not only have we appealed to the place of women's experience, but also we are aware of what often goes under the name of 'post-abortion syndrome', the devastating effects on women in later life of an abortion performed earlier.²³ The way in which women suffer from abortion ought to be foregrounded in this debate. If we have not done so in this report, it is because we have sought to balance the emphasis placed on women's rights in the court judgment which occasions our report with a proper emphasis on the rights of the unborn child.²⁴

17. Although it is necessary for the Church to set forward its position on the social and public issues of the day, a report such as this can convey the wrong impression of Christianity. It is not a system of ideas, principles and arguments. It is a proclamation that the one God who made the world in which we live has entered it in the person of Jesus Christ in order to rescue it from its wrongdoing and misery. The gospel is not the imposition of a set of moral laws on the world, but a revelation of the reality of God, humanity and creation and an announcement of the path to life. Only by the response of repentance and faith, obedience and joy do humans flourish. This conviction undergirds and pervades our report.

18. We recognise that the proposed change in legislation does not aim to open the door to abortion on demand. Yet, it is in order to remind ourselves that when Christianity entered the world, it was distinguished, among other things, by its treatment of the weak and the vulnerable, including children in the womb. It endorsed on its own, distinctive basis a medical tradition going back to Hippocrates which stood firmly against abortion and forged the essentials of a code of medical practice which has informed Western medicine through the

22 In this connection, we commend the sensitivity of such treatments as those of Helmut Thielicke in *Theological Ethics*, volume 3: *Sex* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) 246. The whole question of borderline situations in ethics is important: see Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, volume 1: *Foundations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979) chapters 29-31.

23 See, e.g., reference to the 2011 study in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, cited in Robertson McQuilkin and Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom*, 3rd edition (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014) 377.

24 Sometimes women's rights are described in terms of 'the right to privacy'.

ages.²⁵ Gilbert Meilaender refers to ‘the long and arduous history in which we have slowly learned to value and protect...those who are “least” among us.’²⁶ In recent decades, practices of abortion have been introduced and legalised in the West which have increasingly undermined this tradition and this has gone hand in hand with the growing public conviction that there exists no God who is the giver of human life and the accompanying responsibilities and rights. We commonly decide when and how to dispose of human life without reference to God as its creator. This opens the door to a culture of death.²⁷ Christians are rightly ashamed of the way in which the Christian Church, over the centuries, has often capitulated to the lure of power and control and itself been the agent of violence and oppression. If it summons anyone to penitence and faith, it summons itself in the first place.

19. Northern Ireland has witnessed the abuse and public discrediting of religious belief on a large scale and the Churches can take no pride in it. At the same time, it has preserved standards in the protection of the unborn child which mark it out for good from the rest of the United Kingdom. It should strive to retain those standards and, in this report, we have both sought to explain what we believe those standards should be and to indicate why their preservation matters.

Added note on anencephaly

20. Clinical and scientific difficulties arise here which complicate discussion of this sad question. ‘Anencephaly’ in fact embraces diverse conditions and this is, at least potentially, morally relevant. Let us first take the situation where anencephaly is straightforwardly conceived as an effective condition of brain absence; the anencephalic child might possess a brain stem, but we have no grounds to suppose that there is any cerebral functioning or awareness. Neither sentience nor consciousness nor the capacity for them is present. In such a case, we might legitimately ask whether this constitutes a truly exceptional case which could count as an exceptional ground for abortion. Sentience and the capacity for it are fundamental to our humanity, the brain and the respiratory system being the co-ordinate sources of human life. Anencephaly so described is not rightly bracketed with other cases of FFA where sentience or the capacity for it exists in some form. The anencephalic child is unquestionably human. The question is whether it follows from this that we are correct to speak of its absolute right to anencephalic life or our absolute responsibility to preserve it to the point of birth. We should have to ask precisely what is involved for the mother in carrying the pregnancy to term. The experience of women who have

25 See Nigel Cameron, *The New Medicine: the Revolution in Technology and Ethics* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991). Reference to the Western medical tradition is not meant to demean traditions of Eastern medicine. It is merely a recognition of the context in which we are operating. If space permitted, we should discuss the whole question of the need for the medical profession to retain its own code of ethics in a pluralist society.

26 Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997) 33

27 Many decades ago, Karl Barth, in the context of discussing abortion, felt compelled to speak of ‘what one might almost call the secret and open mass murder’ in which civilization was getting caught up, *Church Dogmatics* III.4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961) 417.

or have not brought to term an anencephalic child; the relevance or otherwise of 'post-abortion syndrome' in such cases; the risks associated with giving birth – all these must contribute to our decision on the propriety of abortion in these particular circumstances. Women's experience might lead us either to a firm or to a tentative conclusion one way or another. Particular weight must be given to the natural response of most mothers to their born anencephalic child, which is to hold and express love as they would in the case of any other child. This tangibly expresses the very basic truth that this is, indeed, a human being which may be unable to experience the mother's love but which is rightly its recipient. The deep responses of women are vital to our theological understanding. Nor should we forget the corresponding response of the father.

21. For these reasons, we might formulate our position in one of two ways. We might say (a) that it is difficult to justify an absolute prohibition of the abortion of an anencephalic child solely on the grounds of a theological sanctity-of-life principle, but that this does not amount to a justification for abortion because the experience of women has to be taken into account. Alternatively, we might say (b) that the experience of women who have brought to term an anencephalic child convinces us that a sanctity-of-life principle which precludes justification for abortion in other cases of FFA holds good for the particular case of anencephaly too. Into our thinking on all this, we should need to factor into consideration end-of-life issues: if we give theological weight to a condition where both actual and potential sentience and consciousness are missing, what impact does our reasoning have on our treatment of those who are in some form of 'vegetative state'? What we wish to underline here is the need to take into account the range of experiences which women (and others, including members of the medical profession) have had in connection with anencephalic children.

22. Up to this point, we have specified a particular form of anencephaly. However, there are both cases of anencephaly where all the cerebral tissue is absent and cases where there is some residual tissue. Complex clinical judgements may be involved. It is commonly held that there can be no awareness when there is no functioning cortex and subcortical connections. Yet, can we be sure of this? Anencephalic babies may cry or grimace when there is a stimulus, suck, swallow or open their eyes. There is an informed opinion, although at present a minority one, that this probably indicates some degree of awareness accounted for by deep brain structures without the presence of the cortex. In such a case, we are presumably witnessing a developmental stage in the fetus which, in the normal course of events, is overtaken when cortical activity takes over. Quite obviously, PCI is in no position to make judgements on such questions. It is, however, important to reflect on the limits of scientific confidence. Many will conclude that, if PCI is to reflect consistently on abortion, the question of the unborn child's awareness or otherwise is irrelevant. Others, as we have indicated above, will wonder whether the sanctity of the life of a child in an anencephalic condition, if awareness is categorically impossible, categorically rules out abortion. However, where awareness is possible, the anencephalic child is in the same situation as that of others who are victims of FFA.

APPENDIX 2**‘Vision for Society’ Statement****WE, MEMBERS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND,**

saved by grace
and called by God to grace-filled relationships,
in the power of the Holy Spirit
as ambassadors of Christ’s Kingdom
in a broken and divided world;

BELIEVE that the Good News of Jesus Christ
challenges and equips us
to develop radically new attitudes and relationships
with our neighbours throughout the whole of Ireland.

WE CONFESS our failure
to live as Biblically faithful Christian peacebuilders
and to promote the counter culture of Jesus
in a society where cultures clash.

ACCORDINGLY, WE AFFIRM Christian peacebuilding
to be part of Christian discipleship
and reassert the Church’s calling
to pursue a peaceful and just society in our day

WE SEEK a more reconciled community
at peace with each other,
where friend and foe,
working together for the common good,
can experience healing
and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

APPENDIX 3**FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE****Preamble**

1. Managing moral and religious diversity is one of the most important and difficult challenges facing our society. The legal landscape has changed significantly over the past fifteen to twenty years, and recent high profile cases

demonstrate how the law can come into conflict with religious beliefs.²⁸ These cases have also raised fundamental questions about religious freedom in a pluralist society, and in particular, the extent to which people should be able to exercise freedom of conscience – the freedom to act in accordance with their beliefs – in public life.

2. In 2014, Lady Hale, Deputy President of the UK Supreme Court, stated that in matters of religion and belief, the law may not yet have found a ‘reasonable accommodation’.²⁹ Some argue that a hierarchy of rights exists by which the freedom to manifest one’s beliefs in the public square is almost always trumped when it conflicts with other considerations. Others contend that the law already strikes the right balance in providing for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience, and that no change is needed. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland continues to encourage gracious and informed discussion about how to fairly manage the moral and religious diversity which characterises our contemporary society. The purpose of this paper is to advance that discussion by examining the cultural context in which it takes place, setting out what we mean by ‘freedom of conscience’ from a Christian perspective and making some suggestions on the way forward.

3. In the societal and legal context we have briefly outlined, accusations of persecution have developed. It is important for us to state that whilst it may be becoming more challenging to live as a Christian in the UK and Ireland, Christians are not persecuted here. To suggest that we are minimises the suffering of Christians across the world who are oppressed, imprisoned and murdered because of their faith.

4. We also recognise that questions of conscience and religious freedom are relevant to those of all religions and none. Examples³⁰ of cases involving atheists, Muslims, Jews and others serve as a stark reminder that it is not only Christian consciences that are challenged in countries around the world. Notwithstanding, everyone will approach these questions from a particular worldview, and here we attempt to offer some reflections from a Christian perspective.

5. Finally, we must acknowledge the limitations of our work. Phrases like ‘freedom of conscience’ and ‘freedom of religion’ conjure up complex webs of issues and ideas, and it would be unhelpful if not impossible for us to address them all. Our hope, however, is that this paper will contribute to a richer debate about the role of conscience in public life.

The societal context

6. In the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche trumpeted the Death of God and the rejection of Christianity as a source of moral principles, but said

28 See, for example, *Eweida and Others v. The United Kingdom* [2013] ECHR 37; *Bull v. Hall and Preddy* [2013] UKSC 73; *Greater Glasgow Health Board v. Doogan & Anor* [2014] UKSC 68; and *Lee v. Ashers Baking Co Ltd & Anor* [2015] NICty 2.

29 Lecture to the Law Society of Ireland, 13th June 2014. www.supremecourt.uk/docs/speech-140613.pdf

30 See, for examples, ‘Atheism, belief and persecution: The cost of unbelief.’ *The Economist*. December 2014; and the European Court of Human Rights Factsheet on Freedom of Religion (September 2015), available at www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Freedom_religion_ENG.pdf

it would take a long time before the consequences became apparent in society. Globally, Christianity is today one of the fastest growing worldviews. However, the process of secularisation continues apace in Western Europe.³¹ Through this process the values of secularism increasingly predominate. Because of it, our contemporary world increasingly resembles the worldview diversity of New Testament times. The crucial difference is that we live in countries with a Christian heritage dating back more than 1,500 years. Christian values still influence our laws and our culture. On the island of Ireland, this tradition remains strong. Yet the Christian faith no longer occupies the position of influence it once did. Globalisation and increased freedom of movement have made our society more plural, with a broader spectrum of religious and other philosophical beliefs. Whilst respect for diversity is preached, those wanting to participate in certain areas of public life are expected to abide by secular norms. Secular humanism, which in practice trumps all other worldviews, religions and belief systems, is diffused through the media and general culture, and through a humanistic understanding of human rights.

7. 'Religion' is widely regarded as irrational and subjective, based on claims that cannot be proven. It is therefore unsuitable to give guidance in public life. In contrast, secularism is seen to embrace science, logic and reason alone, providing objective knowledge with which to order society. Secularism therefore becomes equated with neutrality and is understood as a solid foundation from which to manage public affairs in the midst of an often problematic pluralism.³² As Frederick Gedicks observed:

Liberal government...treats religious beliefs neutrally – as subjective value preferences restricted to private life, rather than as objective knowledge proper to public life.³³

8. With the growth of secular influence, believers in divine revelation are expected to refrain from basing their political positions on religious convictions. The philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff notes that, when it comes to politics, religious people,

are to allow their religious convictions to idle. They are to base their political decisions and their political debate in the public space on the principles yielded by some source *independent* of any and all of the religious perspectives to be found in society.³⁴

9. The prevailing concept of a modern liberal democracy is built upon a number of key ideas and assumptions, including the state's neutrality with respect to religion and belief. The separation of Church and State, and the privatisation

31 Here we apply a wide definition of secular as 'not connected with religious or spiritual matters'. In a public context we are talking about a philosophy that denies the existence and/or relevance of the divine to public affairs. It is manifested in the attempted removal of religious influence from the public sphere and public institutions.

32 Williams, S. 'Reason, law and religious freedom'. *Ethics in Brief*. Summer 2015. Vol. 20, No. 5.

33 Quoted in Williams, S. 'Reason, law and religious freedom'.

34 Wolterstorff, N. 'The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues'. In Audi, R. and Wolterstorff, N. *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) p.73.

of religion are championed as manifestations of this neutrality. Conscience, regarded as a similarly private and subjective, albeit not necessarily a religious phenomenon, is also relegated to the private sphere.³⁵ Therefore, where religion and secularism are seen to stand in relation to rationality has a major impact on the exercise of freedom of conscience in the public square.

10. Recently, the rationality of religious belief has been the subject of much debate. It is important to note that many people, including atheists, having reflected carefully and thoroughly on scientific discoveries, questions of meaning, the nature of the universe and the mystery of human life consider it entirely rational to believe in God. For many it is belief in God as the authoritative and supreme Creator and Sustainer of all things which provides a foundation for rationality and morality. Furthermore, whilst science and empirical research can provide useful data to help us make decisions, deciding what we *ought* to do often requires us to make moral judgements based on our understanding of basic moral principles. These principles cannot be found under a microscope; we cannot determine good and evil or prove inherent dignity of human beings through scientific observation. Rather, these are immaterial and transcendent claims, and any worldview, religious or secular, that makes such claims functions as a belief system.

11. In light of the above, we must look again at claims of secular neutrality and their effect on the place of conscience in the public square. In highlighting the ‘unexamined ways and preferences’ of the West, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd writes of the traditions of secularism:

They are widely held to be neutral and natural starting points for public deliberations on the subject of religion and politics. They are neither neutral nor natural. They are political settlements and not uncontested dictates of public discourse.³⁶

12. Relatedly, Jonathan Chaplin has written that ‘the religious “neutrality” of the secular state ‘will always be a neutrality “from the standpoint of” some particular, contested political vision’.³⁷

13. The reality is that all worldviews, religious or secular, will be constructed around conceptions of right and wrong, and what ought to be done. Recognising that our actions, including those of the state, will always be influenced by certain values and ethical commitments requires us to take the public role of conscience more seriously.

14. For many people, grounding their public conduct in the truth-claims of their faith is a key part of their religious commitment and, therefore, any form of liberal democracy that prevents them from doing so is seen as profoundly illiberal. This is true for many Christians, for whom Christianity is not only relevant to private life but is also ‘public truth’ which ‘offers a story which is the story of the whole world’³⁸ and serves the common good.

35 Williams, ‘Reason, law and religious freedom’.

36 Hurd, E. S. *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2008) p.131.

37 Chaplin, J. *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (Theos, 2008) p.23.

38 Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, 1992) pp.41-42.

What is conscience?

15. Having made a case for the place of conscience in the public square, we now turn to look in more detail at what we mean by that term. As Christians seeking to promote freedom of conscience, we cannot do so in a vacuum; we must recognise the reservations of others. Appeals to conscience are certainly open to abuse and we do not want a society in which everyone is given *carte blanche* to do whatever they want. At the same time, we have argued that questions of conscience should not be marginalised or dismissed as trivial. The proper place of deep moral convictions in public life must be seriously and carefully considered.

16. In seeking to make a contribution in this regard, we want to set out what we mean by conscience from a Christian perspective, for it is only by creating understanding of each other's views that we can hope to move public discussion forward. Like many in our society, we believe the conscience bears witness to our norms and values, making its presence felt often through our emotions by giving us feelings of anguish, guilt or relief. Crucially for Christians, the conscience exists to point us towards real and objective moral truths. Comparing the conscience to a telescope, Jon Thompson writes that

the conscience is an instrument that is valued for what it helps us to see, and not for its own sake only. A telescope can be out of calibration, and it can be rendered unhelpful by misuse or abuse. But it remains a potentially illuminating guide to the stars. Similarly, the conscience is designed to be looked *through*, to discern a moral situation as it actually is...the concept of conscience formation entails the idea that the conscience should point towards some objective moral law. Otherwise, the idea of forming one's conscience would be analogous to trying to tune an astronomical telescope in a world without starry nights.³⁹

17. There are two supplementary points worth making here.

18. First, we believe that God has revealed His truth to us, and we have responsibilities and obligations to Him as beneficiaries of unmerited grace, whether that grace is common grace, which is available to all people, or particular grace, given to all those who, by faith, rely on the promise of salvation offered to all who believe. Our response to every issue must be underlined by this premise.

19. Second, that the Bible is the ultimate arbiter of what is mandated for faith and practice. The Biblical model of what is required of us is found in the synopsis of the commandments expressed by Jesus to the Pharisee in Matthew Chapter 22, and elsewhere, namely to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

20. Ironically, for Christians, the 'freedom' of conscience we speak of is not freedom or liberty as commonly understood, but rather the ability to accept the constraint that everything we do must conform to Biblical requirements for faith and practice. It follows that freedom of conscience is not a licence to do what an individual may, subjectively, feel compelled to do. Indeed, a misplaced 'vision' cannot justify a clearly evil act perpetrated on the basis that its commission was dictated by 'conscience'.

21. As Christians in the public square, we must look at every issue through the prism of what that Biblical model requires. This means that we cannot endorse anything which is contrary to the clear demands of the law of God, as revealed

39 Thompson, J. *Here I stand: Conscience and the common good*, Cambridge Papers, June 2015, p.3.

in Scripture, because to do so would negate our obligation to love God. Nor can we do anything which demeans the God-given value accorded to others, as that would negate our obligation to love our neighbour.

22. There is not, and cannot be, any tension between these two principles. As Presbyterians we believe that there is a Divine plan, fore-ordained in eternity, which governs what lies in the future, just as it does what lay in the past. The exercise of freedom of conscience is only, and can only be, served by the implementation of that fore-ordained Divine plan. Its details are known only to God, and so our responsibility, in exercising freedom of conscience, is to seek to appreciate His will, and to take steps to implement it. But we do know that its implementation lies in our acknowledgment of our 'chief end', namely to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.

23. We are obliged to use our reason to ascertain the Divine will as revealed in Scripture for us to achieve our chief end, and to refuse to subject the exercise of conscience to anything other than the authority of Scripture. As the Westminster Confession has it,

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship.

And therein lies a paradox. For us freedom of conscience is not a right to follow, unfettered, what our own individual will dictates. Rather it is the obligation to know, follow and bear witness to the will of God as revealed in Scripture.

The Christian, the state and conscience

24. It is clear that Scripture places much value and importance on the exercise of conscience. However, does this extend to permitting conscientious objection to laws and policies, given the Apostle Paul's assertion that government is ordained by God and every person is subject to the governing authorities?

25. Government is indeed instituted, authorised and limited by God.⁴⁰ The state is His institution, regardless of whether those in political leadership recognise Jesus as Lord. However, this does not mean that every ruler or government can claim divine endorsement of their policies and behaviour. Rather, it is the vocation of government that is ordained. Political authority is delegated to government by God and rulers are to seek His will. The functions of the state are grounded in a divinely-given remit to fulfil specific tasks, not in any absolute power of its own.

26. The Christian vision of the state is a positive one; that it will administer justice by promoting what is good and punishing those who do wrong.⁴¹ The order created should enable citizens to live in Godliness and peace.⁴² Christians are therefore called to submit to the governing authorities, praying for those in leadership, obeying the law and paying taxes. We are not free to submit out of personal preference, but must do so on the grounds of *conscience*, in the knowledge that government is of divine origin and not simply a human device.⁴³

40 Romans 13:1-7.

41 Romans 13:4.

42 1 Timothy 2:2.

43 Romans 13:5.

However, the fact that conscience is invoked by Paul in his letter to the Romans demonstrates that there is a limit to what can be demanded by any ruler, in that what is against one's conscience should not be done.

27. Indeed, once we accept that governing authority is delegated by God, the requirement to submit cannot stand in situations where wrong actions are commanded. That rulers are 'God's servants' certainly gives them special position but also emphasises that this position is a subordinate one. It is unsurprising, therefore, that we see the call to 'obey God rather than men'⁴⁴ lived out through civil disobedience in Scripture, when believers refused to follow the instruction of governing authorities to murder,⁴⁵ worship other gods⁴⁶ and cease preaching the Gospel.⁴⁷ The diversity of Biblical material clearly demonstrates that there are instances when Christians can and should conscientiously object to laws and policies.

Towards 'reasonable accommodation'?

28. If there is Biblical justification for conscientious objection, then what provision, if any, should political authorities make for the exercise of conscience in public life? And as Christians called, first and foremost, to honour the name of Jesus, what should our attitude be when we find the requirements of our faith in conflict with what is expected of us in the public square?

29. In approaching these questions we must exercise wisdom by trying, as far as possible, to live at peace with everyone, whilst not making morally unacceptable compromises.⁴⁸ Thus, in cases involving direct coercion to act contrary to one's conscience, it may be that civil disobedience is the only option. In other circumstances, a wider variety of responses may be available. The key question that every Christian must ask is what course of action will best serve the work of the Gospel.

30. At the same time, accepting our call to be peacemakers does not negate the appropriateness of Christians asking important questions about the place for dissent and freedom of conscience in society. Indeed, we are mindful of Romans 14, in which Paul appears anxious to ask how Christians should accommodate each other's point of view. The political principle of reasonable accommodation⁴⁹ has been promoted as a mechanism which could provide a better balance of freedoms under the law. In Northern Ireland, it does not appear that we have yet found a way to strike a proper balance.

44 Acts 5:29.

45 Exodus 1:17.

46 Daniel 3 & 6.

47 Acts 4:18-20.

48 Romans 12:17-18.

49 Reasonable accommodation recognises that the characteristics of some individuals, such as their religious beliefs, may prevent them from performing tasks or accessing employment, services or other activities, and that an accommodation of the environment in which they operate could help them to avoid any comparative disadvantage. See Bribosia, E., Ringelheim, J. and Rorive, I., 'Reasonable Accommodation for Religious Minorities: A Promising Concept for European Anti-discrimination Law?' (2010) 17 *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, p.138.

31. Questions of conscience are complex, with a wide variety of possible scenarios and no easy solutions. Notwithstanding, there are notable examples from other jurisdictions where a greater degree of flexibility and accommodation appears to have been exercised, albeit in different legal and constitutional contexts.⁵⁰ With this in mind, Northern Ireland would benefit greatly from a thorough and gracious discussion involving stakeholders from across our society and further afield about how those with reasonable and deeply held convictions can express them in a reasonable way in every sphere of life.

32. Our society must move beyond incomprehension and distrust to consider how to fairly manage the moral and religious diversity which exists. Competing worldviews and perspectives should be held in creative tension for the benefit of everyone. Freedom of conscience should not to be a let-out option for any and every preference, nor a licence to unfairly discriminate. At the same time, it is important that the law is not naturally and unquestioningly regarded the optimal standard of morality, and that those with a conscientious objection are not seen as the morally weak who have to be granted concessions by a tolerant democracy. As we argued earlier, the public square is a diverse place and the moral norms upheld by the state will always be biased in favour of certain values. In this context, the curtailing of religious freedom should be carefully scrutinised and strictly limited, whilst freedom of conscience should be the norm, not the exception.

RESOLUTIONS

1. That the General Assembly encourage Church members to join the Organ Donor Register in their jurisdiction, advising their families and close friends of this decision, and ask the Council for Church in Society to liaise with others in the promotion of blood and organ donation.

2. That the General Assembly:

- (a) Reaffirm the position that human life begins at conception and that from that moment the human embryo should be treated in a manner in accordance with full human dignity.
- (b) Restate their opposition to abortion on demand for purely social reasons, or as a means of birth control.
- (c) Recognise that while the termination of pregnancy may be morally preferable to any alternative when continuation of the pregnancy would involve a serious risk to the life of the mother, the most stringent safeguards should be provided to prevent abuse.
- (d) Believe that the provision of readily accessible and appropriate care in the perinatal period for every woman, child and family should be a high priority for society, and ask the governments of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to ensure such provision.
- (e) Welcome the report on abortion as a considered and cogent theological and moral reflection on the issue.

3. That the General Assembly welcome and adopt the ‘Vision for Society’ statement and that:

⁵⁰ For example, Ontario Human Rights Commission v. Brockie [2002] O.J. No. 2375 (Ont. Sup. Ct.).

- (a) 1,500 copies of the 'Vision for Society' statement be printed for distribution to Congregations as a charge on the Incidental Fund.
 - (b) Congregations be encouraged to display a copy of the 'Vision for Society' statement in a prominent position on the Church premises.
 - (c) Presbyteries, Kirk Sessions and Congregations be requested to reflect upon the 'Vision for Society' statement and actively explore how to live out its principles in local communities.
4. That the General Assembly approve the proposal by the Council for Church in Society's Dealing with the Past Task Group (see Pars 29-37).
5. That the General Assembly commend the paper on 'Freedom of Conscience' and encourage the Council for Church in Society to facilitate engagement and discussion within the Church and in the public square on the issues raised.
6. That the Report of the Council for Church in Society be received.