

# GENERAL COUNCIL

## SECTION 1

**Tuesday afternoon – 2pm**

Convener: Very Rev Dr J.N.I. McNEELY

Secretary: THE CLERK

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. On behalf of the General Assembly, the General Council has been conducting its business through eight General Assembly committees and fifteen task groups. The Council normally meets three times between Assemblies however in the past year an additional meeting took place on 21 June 2018.
2. At the June meeting of the Council it was agreed that the Moderator in accepting an invitation regarding the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland should attend on the occasions that were outlined in the Supplementary Report to the General Assembly, these being namely, to be present at a State Reception and the Saturday evening 'Festival of Families' event in Croke Park.

#### **Task Groups formed 2018-2019**

3. The Council at the June meeting addressed the remit from the General Assembly, "that appropriate training be offered to Kirk Sessions on the theology and practice of the Church's understanding of a 'credible profession of faith' and the pastoral guidelines on homosexuality". An Implementation Task Group was appointed and directed to put together a resource with a clear pastoral tone to be used by kirk sessions. The task group, in order to inform its work, conducted a successful Presbytery Consultation Dday in January 2019 and is proposing to present a resource on 'credible profession' and pastoral guidelines for consideration at the 2021 General Assembly (see pages 21-24).
4. Following last year's report of the Doctrine Committee and the decision of the General Assembly to no longer accept an invitation to the Moderator to attend the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, there was considerable reaction across the church, some of which attracted the interest of the news media. Over the summer months the Moderator, Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen and the Clerk of the General Assembly were required to respond to many queries, and cope with the huge pressure of dealing with the many forms of correspondence and electronic communication they received. The Council recognised the

stress this created for the Moderator and the Clerk and acknowledged the wisdom and discernment demonstrated in how they dealt with the tensions and demands made of them.

5. The General Council at the October meeting, having received a report of the matters arising from the 2018 General Assembly, which had been in the public domain, and of the extent, contents and tenor of subsequent correspondence, agreed that there was the need for a group to support and assist the Moderator and the Clerk. The Council appointed an Overview and Coordination Task Group to continue to take an overview of the evolving situation since 2018 General Assembly and act in a coordinating role, taking any necessary decisions (as appropriate) between meetings of the General Council (see pages 19-20).
6. Correspondence to the Clerk from kirk sessions and presbyteries regarding reports and decisions of the General Assembly demonstrated there was general confusion across the church related to their standing and authority. There was also ambiguity being expressed about what can be discussed in the public domain and what scope there is for expressions of disagreement on policy adopted by the General Assembly. The Council accepted that clarification was necessary regarding the issues of decision making and dissent within the church. A Decision Making and Dissent Task Group was established to draw up a report on 'Presbyterian decision making and the place of dissent' (see pages 24-30).
7. The Deputy Clerk indicated at the March 2019 meeting of the Council that he intended to retire from his post in September 2020. A Deputy Clerk Task Group was formed to consider the arrangements for the appointment of a successor to the position held by Rev Jim Stothers (see pages 89-94).
8. One of the highlights of the year, that has had its difficulties, was the completion of the visitor exhibition in the reception area of Assembly Buildings. The Council is grateful to the members of the Property Services Panel for the creation of an exceptional display incorporating historical artefacts and multimedia presentations. It is hoped that this exhibition will create interest and attract many into Assembly Buildings.

### **Debate on General Council Business**

9. The report of the General Council to the General Assembly is the longest of the Annual Reports and to facilitate the ordering of business in the Assembly it will be taken in four sections. The General Assembly Business Committee will however report in its own right at the beginning and the end of the Assembly (10.30am on Tuesday and on Friday respectively). This year the Business Committee will also have a part of its report considered in Section 4 of the main General Council report. The separate sections of the report are as follows:

**Section 1 (2pm on Tuesday 4 June):**

- Executive Summary
- Memorial Record
- Overview and Coordination Task Group
- Implementation Task Group
- Decision Making and Dissent Task Group
- Dialogue and Resources Task Group
- Human Identity Task Group

**Section 2 (3.30pm on Wednesday 5 June):**

- Guysmere Centre Task Group
- Church Relations Committee
- Priorities Committee
- Moderator's Advisory Committee
- Doctrine Committee
- Theological Engagement Task Group

**Section 3 (8pm Thursday 6 June):**

- Support Services Committee
- United Appeal Committee
- Holding Trustees Task Group
- Charity Registration Task Group
- GDPR Task Group
- Engagement and Consultations Task Group

**Section 4 (Friday morning 7 June, approx. 10am):**

- General Assembly Business Committee (Second Report)
- Nominations Committee
- Deputy Clerk Task Group
- Voting Membership Task Group
- Historical Archiving Task Group
- Central Prayer Coordination Task Group
- Ad-Hoc Business:
  - Finance and Staffing Commission (2019)
  - Council for Global Mission Structures
  - Peacehaven Transfer
- Reports of bodies not under the General Assembly
  - Presbyterian Children's Society
  - Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland
  - Old Age, Women's, and Indigent Ladies' Funds

10. In conclusion, the General Council has been efficiently served and judiciously guided by Rev Trevor Gribben, the General Secretary and Rev Jim Stothers, Deputy General Secretary. The Council is indebted to both of them for their devotion to their jobs and the wise council they provide to ministers and members throughout the church. In the past year the demands upon them have been immense and they have put in many extra hours in serving the church. The staff in the General Secretary's Department are also recognised for the systematic administration and reliable support they provide for the Council. The Council also recognises the wise advice and measured statements conveyed to the media by the General Assembly Press Officer, Mr Mark Smith, during the past year.

## **GENERAL ASSEMBLY BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

### **INITIAL REPORT**

**Tuesday Morning – 10.30am**

1. The Business Committee has continued to review the work and arrangements of the General Assembly.
2. A **Draft Order of Business for 2019** was agreed and approved by the committee. This includes the following:
  - (a) As on previous occasions a Friday morning has again been included.
  - (b) Again there will two evening business sessions, Tuesday and Thursday as well as the Evening Celebration on the Wednesday. The assembly business will start at 10.30am on the Tuesday morning and there will no business session on Thursday morning, instead starting after lunch with business followed by worship. The General Council business is split over four sessions.
  - (c) There will be 'alternative presentations' on Tuesday evening and Thursday afternoon featuring, respectively, the Council for Congregational Life and Witness, and the Council for Public Affairs.
  - (d) 'Listening to the Global Church' will again feature on Wednesday afternoon.
  - (e) Attendance at the Tuesday communion service has been growing each year and so in addition to the ground floor, communion will be served in the central section of the gallery.
3. The **Arrangements Panel** has appropriate matters in hand and a budget of £20,000 has been agreed for recommendation to the Assembly.

4. **Registration Procedure:** the committee acknowledges the work of the IT Department in enabling the electronic registration of Representative Elders' Commissions and also the registration of 'under 30' persons.
5. The **Wednesday Evening Celebration** will be addressed by Rev Glen Scrivener and, at the invitation of the Moderator, he will also speak at the Wednesday and Thursday afternoon worship sessions.
6. **Youth Assembly:** the Youth Assembly plans a Wednesday teatime event.
7. **Appointment of Delegations to other Assemblies etc.:** delegates have been appointed to other church assemblies and meetings:
  - (a) Church of Ireland Synod in May 2019: the Very Rev Dr Noble McNeely and a local elder.
  - (b) The Methodist Conference in June 2109: the Very Rev Dr Charles McMullen and a local elder.
  - (c) The annual meeting of the Society of Friends in April 2019: the Rev Alastair J Dunlop.
8. The Committee recommends that the Rt Rev Dr William Henry and his wife be appointed to attend the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Wales in July 2019.

ROY PATTON, Convener

## INITIAL REPORT – APPENDIX

### Reports from other Church Assemblies etc.

#### **Methodist Conference 2018 Report**

*The Very Rev Dr Noble McNeely reports:*

1. The Methodist Church in Ireland Annual Conference met in Londonderry from 13th to 17th June 2018. The business meetings of the conference were conducted in Kilfennan Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland was represented by Dr Noble McNeely and Mr David McClean, an Elder in Kilfennan Presbyterian Church. Mrs Florence McNeely also attended as a guest. Mr McClean is on the staff of the Clooney Hall Methodist Church and as the local person he acted as host to the Conference and must be thanked for his contribution towards the smooth running of the arrangements in Kilfennan Church halls.
2. The opening service for the constitution of the Conference was held in Carlisle Road Methodist Church and included the election and installation of the President for 2018-19 and Lay Leader 2018-2020. The Rev William A Davison, BD, addressed the Conference as President on his theme for the year of office, 'Living with Gospel Focus'. Mrs Lynda Neilands was inducted as the Lay Leader of the Conference.

3. The Conference began each morning with worship and Bible study. The guest speaker was Rev Keith V. Garner AM, Superintendent/CEO, Wesley Mission, Sydney, and a minister of the Uniting Church of Australia. Keith Garner is recognised for his evangelistic and welfare ministry and he chose 'Calling and Compassion' as the theme for his addresses.
4. The Conference recorded its appreciation of the service of Dr John Stephens as Secretary of the Conference who unexpectedly had to step aside from his office due to illness. Rev Thomas R. McKnight served as Secretary to the Conference for 2018 and Rev Dr Heather Morris was appointed as Conference Secretary Designate for 2019-2020.
5. Restructuring of the District system of the Methodist Church was agreed to take effect from July 2019. The previous eight Districts have been rearranged to form three districts identified as Southern District, North Western District and North Eastern District.
6. Generally the reports were uncontroversial and delivered in a fashion to encourage the church. There were some very passionate speeches made to challenge its ministers and lay leaders to mission and prayer. It was recognised that the church is reducing in membership but it was emphasised that the perceived decline was not to be feared but to be responded to with enduring faith.
7. It was reported that new material was being provided to inspire Bible study and local emphasis on 'Discipleship, Mission and Prayer.' It was hoped that the congregations would use the material and that people of all ages would make greater commitment in these areas of ministry.
8. Dr Heather Morris delivered an impassioned speech introducing the Connexional Year of Prayer. A candle was made available for every society which included a pledge to be prayerful. Districts were also instructed to set aside a month for concentrated prayer. The emphasis was on intergenerational prayer and the Conference was asked to consider the question, "What does the call to prayer mean in your place?"
9. The Faith and Order Committee reported on the district conversations on issues of human sexuality using the material, 'Sexuality: Developing Good Conversations on Difficult Questions.' An appeal was made for a wider response to the discussion material to be conveyed to the committee.
10. The Council on Social Responsibility proposed a project on the theme: 'How can we face the future if we are bogged down in the past?' This is to be a multi-faceted process over a period of two connexional years 2018-2020. The process will include (1) Listening Process of victims/survivors in Methodist congregations, (2) Pastoral Process, to provide emotional support and counselling, (3) Policy Development Process considering what has been learned from the listening and pastoral approaches.

11. The Conference held the election for the President of the Conference for 2019-2020. The President elect is the Rev David H. Nixon, superintendent in the Dublin North Circuit. The 2018 Conference ran very smoothly and all business was conducted in a very congenial and amicable manner.

### **The Society of Friends**

*The Rev John Faris writes:*

1. It was a great honour and privilege to represent the Presbyterian Church in Ireland at the Ireland Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends held in Limerick for the first time in July 2018. The Limerick Meeting, although small in numbers, made careful, detailed arrangements which seemed to go well in all aspects.
2. This was my second time to represent PCI at the Yearly Meeting and I was again struck with the friendliness of the 'Friends', not least, but not only, some former Presbyterians, including the daughter of a minister of Limerick Presbyterian Church and sons of two previous Moderators.
3. The commitment of Friends to justice and peace was again evident. One speaker passionately wanted to make the Republic a 'country of peace' building on its neutrality, but another speaker drew attention to serious social inequalities which also need to be addressed.
4. The Yearly Meeting agreed to the holding of same-sex marriages in Quaker meetings for worship, currently legal in the Republic of Ireland. If any Quaker Meetings, solemnisers or members do not wish to participate in meetings for worship for same-sex-marriages as a matter of conscience, there is no obligation to do so. The diversity of views held within the Society was acknowledged.
5. The Annual Lecture 'Living our Faith Daily: the practice of testimony' was given by an English Quaker scholar, Ben Pink Dandelion. (<https://quakersireland.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/ben-pink-dandelions-public-lecture-iy-m-2018.pdf>) This was a fascinating overview of Quakerism from its origins, with its distinctive identifying marks in dress and speech and specific dos and don'ts, to a more privatised individualistic version in our day.
6. The lecturer concluded: "When we lose our sense of being a worshipping community, when we lose our spiritual connection, nothing works as it should. We are left with reason, fear and mistrust. We become contractual and not covenantal. We develop fortified lines and stop listening or hearing. We need to try and hold to the line of Spirit-led space, and continually keep moving towards it. Always we need to see our worshipping community as our central focus and resource which supports all else, rather than see Meeting as the optional add-on to a personal spiritual life, if we are to avoid the destructive singularities of individualism."

7. One example he gave was of his meeting deciding on the relocation of their meeting house, by asking a question “that took our own preferences out of the picture. Asking whether we should move or not put the focus on us, on our preferences and dreams in the here and now, and we couldn’t find unity. When we asked what was best for the future of the Quaker community in the area, we experienced a truly gathered meeting, a deep sense of unity that it was right to move.” There are resonances here for any Christian community.
8. Quakerism arose in the post Civil War ferment of the 1650s, as one expression of the radical Reformation, whereas Irish Presbyterians identify with the confessional Reformation (Westminster Assembly of Divines met in 1646.) It was good, however to meet across that difference and not least with a significant number of Irish Quakers who identify as evangelical and share our commitment to the Scriptures.

### **Presbyterian Church of Wales – Eglwys Bresbyteriaidd Cymru**

*The Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen writes:*

1. The 2018 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Wales (PCW) was held in the Capel y Groes, Wrexham (9–11 July). From the moment we arrived, we were very impressed by the warm welcome and generous hospitality. There are many links of friendship and family between our two churches and we had the strong sense of being among kindred spirits – part of a denomination grappling with many similar issues to our own. The intimacy and relaxed atmosphere of the Assembly was very striking. Overall, PCW has a membership of approximately 20,000, located in 60 churches with 45 serving ministers.
2. After the opening act of worship and the reception of visiting delegates, one of the first items on the agenda was a Christian Aid presentation noting that £203,000 had been raised as a result of Typhoon of Love, a church-wide appeal focusing on bringing storm relief to the Philippines and helping some of the poorest in the region, especially in isolated rural areas and city slums.
3. Much of the Assembly was about routine business, including General Data Protection Regulation. It sounded familiar that training sessions had been organised later in the year to support churches, but what was different was the mention of the difficulties being experienced because of the lack of official Welsh terms. We were given the benefit of a bilingual booklet extending to over eighty pages. I have passed my copy on to our own General Secretary’s Department!
4. The Welsh Church has also been reviewing its structures. Rev Meirion Morris, the General Secretary, noted in his written report the ‘congregationalist’ inclinations of a number of churches which had seemingly divorced themselves from presbytery, association, department or Assembly. He voiced the frustrations of those who set time aside to travel only to discover either that the work had already been done or, at the other extreme, meetings that were long and arduous. He spoke of directing the work in a manner which is alive to today’s context:

“Our wish is to ensure a trellis which will facilitate this, to release those who have been called in each church to engage in ministry, to announce Jesus and call people to a relationship with him....How do we encourage ownership of the process?”

5. The most contentious item of business was whether or not PCW should accept money from the National Lottery Fund. Part of the dilemma was having to maintain empty buildings, some of which had been listed, and graveyards. There was never any doubt which way the debate would go with the vast majority of speakers wanting to draw the very clear distinction between God and mammon, stressing how the lottery led to poverty and the need for teaching in their churches on tithing. What was surprising was the manner in which the matter was referred down to the various courts for further discussion, the rationale being that a greater number of members would own the arguments.
6. Although I do not fully understand the mechanisms, the Welsh Assembly is divided into three associations – North, East and South. These seem to function like our old synods, but carry more weight and have the advantage of ensuring that any potentially difficult or controversial business has been well aired before it suddenly reaches the floor of Assembly. While this might appear to slow down the passage of resolutions and be therefore frustrating, there are lessons to be learned.
7. The Assembly met for seven sessions altogether. Much of that time concentrated on worship. It has been said many times that Welsh is the language of heaven and there was a certain unmistakable cadence and fervour when it came to the wholehearted praise. The Tuesday evening service was very moving as the ceremonial preaching robe was passed from the outgoing to the incoming moderator. The Rev Brian Huw Jones was thanked for his year in office as Rev Brian Matthews succeeded him.
8. Part of the Assembly is given over to the annual Davies Lecture, which this year looked at the life of Richard Williams Morgan (1815-1889), ‘Historical romanticist and ecclesiastical politician’, who campaigned tirelessly for the use of the Welsh language in schools and in 1861 published ‘St. Paul in Britain’ or, ‘The Origin of British as opposed to Papal Christianity.’ Morgan’s thesis was that the Apostle Paul himself had evangelised Britain, thereby establishing an apostolic succession independent of Rome. Historical lectures are informative and give the opportunity to evaluate the influence of ideas or events on our own understanding of Christian faith.
9. A particular highlight was a devotional and deeply moving address given by the Rev Dr Robert Cunville of North-East India. A member of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, he spoke of his close personal association and friendship with the late evangelist, describing him as a man of complete humility and total integrity. He mentioned Billy Graham’s commitment to the Bible, his meticulous preparation before preaching and the simplicity of his message. There was his influence as

an ecumenical leader, reaching out to various denominations with a big heart for preachers around the world. Billy Graham took a courageous stance against racism and apartheid. He also embraced his family with unconditional love. When asked about his death, Billy noted that he was merely changing his address.

10. Also at the Assembly from India was the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of India, Rev Lalramliana Pachuau. PCW is seen as the mother church and there are very deep bonds of love, affection and loyalty.
11. My wife Barbara and I very much enjoyed and were enriched by our time in Wrexham. I had the impression of a denomination conscious of its decline, but nevertheless in good heart, seeking to consolidate itself and looking at various outreach initiatives. There are deep similarities between our denominations, which are essentially conservative in theology and outlook. I couldn't help but reflect on the fact, however, that PCW has chosen to maintain its relationship with a large number of ecumenical agencies, including the World Council of Churches, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. This is reflected in the election of Rev Marcus Wyn Robinson as the next Moderator, who as a former forces' chaplain and serves as the Assembly's Ecumenical Officer.
12. Overall we gained the sense of a denomination in good heart as it seeks to consolidate itself and look outward in fresh new ways to win souls for Christ.

## MEMORIAL RECORD 2019

*The Very Rev Dr Donald Patton reports:*

The Rev Margaret Louise Johnston, MA, Dip.Th, Minister Emerita, Fortwilliam Park, Belfast, died on 23 August 2018, in the eighty-seventh year of her age and the thirty-first year of her ministry. She was born at Buckna, County Antrim, on 28 April 1932, the second of three sisters, to the Rev John Worthington Johnston and his wife, Mary, née McFadden. Both of her grandfathers were presbyterian ministers; the Rev Dr John Corry Johnston, Abbey, Dublin, and the Rev Jackson McFadden, Badoney and Corrick, Co.Tyrone. The family moved to Belfast in 1935 when the Rev John Johnston was installed as Minister of Townsend Street congregation on 28th March of that year. In her early adult years Ms Johnston became a choir member and Sunday School teacher in the congregation. She was educated privately in her childhood years and, later, attended Victoria College and Richmond Lodge, Belfast. She proceeded to St Andrews University, Scotland, in 1950, to study History and graduated MA with honours in 1954. This was followed by a year of study at Mount Holyoke College for women, Mass., USA, as a Fulbright scholar. On returning home, in 1955, she was appointed an Assistant Archivist in the Public Record Office,

Belfast, and a year later she entered the Northern Ireland Civil Service to embark on a successful career at management level. She served in the Departments of, Home Affairs, Education and Finance, and Economic Development where she was appointed Assistant Secretary with responsibility for managing a large staff and budget. During these years she worshipped, firstly, in Malone congregation, Belfast, where she became a member of the Congregational Committee, and, in 1971, on moving to reside at Killinchy on the shores of Strangford Lough, she joined Killinchy congregation where she was elected and ordained an elder in 1975 and served as Clerk of Session from 1982 to 1986. Further promotion was open to her in the Civil Service but she chose to study for the ordained ministry and entered Union Theological College, Belfast, in 1985, graduating Dip.Th. in 1987. She was licensed by the Presbytery of Down on 28 June 1987, and continued as Assistant to the Minister of St John's, Newtownbreda, the Rev Wilfred Orr, to whom she had been assigned in her final student year. She was ordained by the Presbytery of East Belfast on 17 January 1988. In April 1990 Ms Johnston returned to the USA as a Mission Specialist with the Global Mission Unit of the Presbyterian Church, USA, where she sought to present a more positive picture of Ulster and the church than the 'Troubles' portrayed. The vacant congregation of Fortwilliam Park, Belfast, issued a call to her to become their new minister and she was installed there by the Presbytery of North Belfast on 8 March 1991. Ms Johnston's experience, organisational skills, drive and commitment, were devoted unreservedly to the service of Christ and His Church. She was conscientious in preparation for pulpit ministry and, with a warm pastoral heart for her people, she was attentive to visitation especially of the lonely and vulnerable, supplemented by a lay pastoral visitation team which she organised. The central Church benefitted from her talents through her membership of several boards and committees, in particular, the Union Theological College Management Committee, of which she was convener 1992-1999. On her retirement on 19 July 1997, she settled again at Killinchy and renewed her active membership with the local congregation among her many friends in church and community. Beyond church ministry Ms Johnston pursued a variety of other interests. She had a fine contralto voice and had the opportunity to train with Helen Olheim, the Principal Mezzo Soprano, Metropolitan Opera House, New York, and, later, with the local and well-known singing teacher, Frank Capper. She was a Concert Singer, a Vocal Adjudicator at Music Festivals, a Choral Conductor, and Chairperson of the Belfast Music Festival from 1974. She was a member of the RUC Part-time Reserve, 1973-1976; Chairperson of the Killinchy Residents Association; a member of the William Keown Trust Awards Committee for the Disabled 1976-1985; Joint Chairperson of the Irish Council of Churches' group which published 'The Church in the Technological Age'; a Cruise Bereavement Care Counsellor; National Vice President, the Girls' Brigade, Northern Ireland. She listed as her hobbies, swimming, sailing, gardening, painting, and bee-

keeping, becoming President of the Western Beekeepers' Association. Ms Johnston lived a full life, generously sharing her gifts, humanity, and Christian faith with many, and all in the service of her Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. She survived her two sisters, Professor E.M Johnston-Liik and Mrs Elizabeth Ann Attridge, who also had distinguished careers in academia and the British Civil Service, respectively. We give thanks to God for her life and ministry and assure her family circle of our sympathy and prayers.

The Rev David Cyril Scott BA, Minister Emeritus of Cremore and Tyrone's Ditches congregations, County Armagh, died on 27 December 2018, in the eighty-fifth year of his age and the sixtieth year of his ministry. He was born on 25 May 1934, the eldest of five children, to David Herbert Scott, a grocer, and his wife Margaret, née Faith, of Tullyear Terrace, Rathfriland Road, Banbridge. The family worshipped in Scarva Street congregation, Banbridge, where the children grew up in the Christian faith, and received their secular education at the Abercorn Primary School in the town. The death of their father in 1944 placed a burden of responsibility on Cyril, aged only ten years. He later attended Lisburn Technical College, 1947-1949, and Shaftesbury House Tutorial College, University Street, Belfast, 1949-1951. The Minister of Scarva Street at this time was the Rev William Moore who encouraged Mr Scott in his studies and perceived his potential for ordained ministry. Responding to the call of God, he followed the well-trodden path of preparation, to train at the Magee University College, Londonderry, successfully graduating BA from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1955. He pursued his theological studies at New College, Edinburgh, 1955-1956, and the Assembly's College, Belfast, 1956-1957. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Banbridge on 9 June 1957, and assisted the Rev Ronald Craig, Minister of Woodvale congregation, North Belfast, from 1956 to 1959. The congregations of Cremore and Tyrone's Ditches gave him a unanimous call, and he was ordained and installed there by the Presbytery of Newry, on 30 October 1959. Mr Scott served these two congregations for forty years, establishing a strong bond with the people which lasted through retirement until his decease. He never married – his congregations were his family. He was a constant visitor and faithful pastor often joining families at meal times, and, sometimes, as a late-night visitor being left 'to turn the light off' before he went home. He had a wide circle of friends, and was also a hospitable host – one student remembers being invited to the manse for a substantial tea. The gloomiest day would be lightened by his infectious laughter. He was committed to the old presbyterian tradition of unaccompanied metrical psalm-singing in worship at Tyrone's Ditches. A knowledgeable man, with a keen eye for detail, he contributed to the wider committees and meetings of which he was a part – Newry Presbytery and the local clerical club, Poyntzpass Historical Society, Markethill Festival Committee – often giving others pause for thought with incisive comment or question. He

was a regular attender of the lectures and meetings of the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, and contributed to the business of the annual meeting. He died suddenly at his home in Markethill, and is mourned by his people, and friends far and wide. To all these we extend our sympathy, and, most especially, to his sisters Velma and Margaret, and brothers Herbert and Rodney, giving thanks to God in Christian faith inspired by the ‘great cloud of witnesses’ of those who have reached ‘the better country – a heavenly one’ and join in the praises of the ‘Lamb upon the throne’ (Hebrews 12:1, 11:16; Revelation 7:9,10)

**The Rev Robert Harkness BD BA**, Minister Emeritus, Sinclair Seamen’s congregation, Belfast, died on 2 January 2019, in the ninety-first year of his age and the forty-third year of his ministry. He was born at Belfast, off the Shankill Road, on 29 September 1928, the eldest of eleven children, to Alexander Harkness, a foreman in the Sirocco Engineering Works, and his wife, Anne, née Farmer. He was educated at Glenwood Primary School and Belfast College of Technology. He left school at age fourteen for a job in the machine shop of the Sirocco Engineering Works, but, after a few months, he moved to James Mackie and Sons Engineering. Later, he took up a five year apprenticeship, as a joiner, at the Belfast Shipyard, followed by spells at several of the major shipyards in the UK. In 1950 he emigrated to Australia, where he worked at different jobs in several places, before returning home in 1952. A year later, he met Mary Baillie Wilson Dunlop, who lived nearby, and romance blossomed, leading to their marriage on the 5th April 1958. A son, John, was born in 1959, and a daughter, Ann, in 1962. Mr Harkness had been churched in early years and attended Sunday School and Church Boys’ groups, but it was in 1960 that he gave his life to Christ in response to the witness of a Christian workmate – Mary followed a few months later. They were members of the Shankill Road Mission congregation where Mr Harkness gave service as a Bible Class leader, a member of the congregational committee, and then as an elder. The minister, the Rev Ivor Lewis, encouraged Mr Harkness to believe that he had the qualities and ability to become a minister. Being convinced that God was in this, he applied to be accepted as a mature student for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the age of forty, and studied for five O-levels at the Belfast College of Technology. Then followed several years of further study, at the Queen’s University, Belfast, 1968 to 1970, Stranmillis College, 1970-1971, and the Assembly’s College, Belfast, 1971-1974, graduating BD. During his studies, from 1970, he assisted in the congregation of Mersey Street, and on completion of his course, he was licensed by the Presbytery of South Belfast on 23 June 1974, and, on 5 January 1975, he was ordained by the Presbytery of East Belfast in Megain Memorial, Newtownards Road, as Assistant to the Minister, the Rev James McAllister. The following year, this city man, was called to the country congregation of Muckamore, where he was installed on 30 March 1976 by the Presbytery of Templepatrick. As well as diligently

attending to his pulpit and pastoral duties, he studied for a BA degree with the Open University, graduating in 1983. After seven years he moved back to Belfast to be installed in Belvoir Park congregation on 31 March 1983 by the Presbytery of East Belfast, where he remained until 1986, in which year he was installed in Sinclair Seamen's on 17 January, by the Presbytery of North Belfast, ministering there until his retirement on 30 June 1995. In these three spheres of ministry, Mr Harkness evidenced a deep-seated devotion to His Saviour, to the Word of God, and to his passion to witness to the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He gave service to the wider church as convener of the committee overseeing the work of the Shankill Road Mission, a place and a people he knew and loved so well. Throughout these years he was fully supported and assisted by his wife, Mary, and to her, their children, John and Anne, their six grand-children, and surviving siblings, Ruby, Lucy, Charlie, Joe, and Tommy, together with the wider family circle, we extend our sympathy, as we thank God who called our brother into His service and has called him to the home prepared and assured through the Word he loved so well.

The Rev James Walker Neilly, BA, Dip.Ed, M.Phil, Minister Emeritus, Immanuel, Belfast, died on 31 January 2019, in the eighty-ninth year of his age and the sixtieth year of his ministry. He was born at Belfast, on 22 April 1930, to William Ernest Neilly, an estate agent, and his wife Margaret, née Walker. He was raised in the congregation of Seaview, Shore Road, where he came to faith in Christ as his Saviour. Following Primary School education, he attended the Belfast Royal Academy. Being convinced of a call of God to the ordained ministry, he studied at the Magee University College, Londonderry, and graduated BA from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1954. This was followed by theological study at the Assembly's College, Belfast. On 25 May 1956, Mr Neilly was licensed by the Presbytery of North Belfast and served an assistantship in the congregation of Nelson Memorial, Shankill Road, with the minister, the Rev Robert Milford. He was called by the congregation of Tobermore, and ordained there by the Presbytery of Tyrone, on 29 April 1958, and he, and his new wife, Margaret Florence Weir, whom he married on 15 April, 1958, settled to manse life in this rural setting. He pastored his people through the varied experiences that life brings, and was committed to an evangelical theology. He preached conversion to Christ as Saviour and Lord, and sought to nurture new Christians in their faith and daily living, an emphasis he continued throughout his entire ministry. Six years later, with their two sons, they moved to Lisburn, where Mr Neilly was installed in Sloan Street congregation, by the Presbytery of Dromore, on 16 September 1964. Here, his third son, Mark, was born. Mr Neilly served in this busy urban pastorate, while also ministering as presbyterian chaplain to the Lagan Valley Hospital, until he accepted a call to Immanuel congregation, Shankill Road, where he was installed by the Presbytery of North Belfast, on 21

June 1973. These were difficult and demanding times as the violence of the ‘Troubles’ took their toll, political opinion polarised, and communities became divided and alienated from one another. So, when it was realised that the World Council of Churches was sympathetic to violent ‘freedom’ movements in South America, strongly influenced by Liberation Theology, a movement spread in the wider church to persuade the General Assembly to withdraw from membership of the WCC. Mr Neilly was very active in this, as a founder member of the Campaign for Compete Withdrawal (CCW) movement. The issue crystallised when six Elim Pentecostal missionaries in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), some from Northern Ireland, were murdered by guerrillas in June 1978. In that year the Assembly decided to suspend membership, which was confirmed by the Assembly of 1979, and withdrawn altogether by the Assembly of June 1980, by 448 votes to 388. Mr Neilly remained in Immanuel until his retirement on 30th September 1995. Outwith the Church, Mr Neilly served as a member of the Northern Ireland Council of the Lord’s Day Observance Society, now known as Day One Christian Ministries. Over the course of his ministry, he continued to study, qualifying Dip.Ed. during the 1960s, and achieving his B.Th. in 1971 (Queen’s University, Belfast) and M.Phil. (Queen’s University, Belfast) in 1996. Mr Neilly is survived by his wife, Florence, and two of his sons, Rev Stephen Neilly, and Rev Mark Neilly. His third son, Dr Paul Neilly, Consultant General Surgeon, died in February 2004. We extend to these, their families, and the wider family circle, our prayerful condolences, confident in the faith that looks to Christ, ‘the resurrection and the life’ (John 11:25)

**The Rev David McKee BD**, Minister without charge (retired), died on 11 February 2019, in the ninety-fifth year of his age and the fifty-sixth year of his ministry. He was born at Lissue, County Antrim, on 12 March 1924, one of a family of six, to John McKee, a factory worker, and his wife, Isabella, née McKee. He was educated at the local Primary School, 1930 to 1936, then Lisburn Technical College, 1936 to 1938, and became a joiner. He served with the RAF during the Second World War, from 1943 to 1946, in England, and India where he was converted to personal faith in Christ in 1945. Responding to the call of God to full-time Christian service with the Faith Mission, he trained at the Faith Mission Training Home and Bible College, Edinburgh, from October 1947, and graduated in June 1949. He engaged in evangelistic work in southern Ireland between July 1949 and June 1950. His experience in India never left him, and he had a burning desire to minister the Gospel there. He later said “I saw my Saviour as the Good Shepherd looking for servants who would go to the ‘other sheep’ and bring them into his fold.” So, he resigned the Faith Mission and sailed to India, in the autumn of 1950, to join the Dipti Mission. While at language school there, he met Berti Hofer, from Sonnenfeld, Switzerland, who was working with unwanted children in an orphanage, and they

married in 1951. After several years of ministry in various parts of India, Mr McKee returned home with his wife and three girls, to train for the ordained ministry of the Presbyterian Church at the Assembly's College, Belfast, from 1960 to 1963, graduating BD. He assisted the minister of Ballysillan, Belfast, the Rev John Llewellyn Wynne, and was licensed and ordained as a missionary to India by the Presbytery of North Belfast, on 30 May 1963. The General Assembly Annual Reports 1963 indicate there had been fifty-one retirements from the work in Gujarat in the previous eight years, and lamented "not a single man from Ireland to take the vacated places. Where are our new recruits? Does God no longer call?" The McKees answered this call and sailed for Gujarat later that year, where they served at Anand, Ahmedabad and Broach (Bharuch). They returned to Ireland in 1967 and Mr McKee was installed in First Lurgan, by the Presbytery of Dromore, on 22 February of that year. After a short ministry, in the autumn of 1970, he went to his wife's home country of Switzerland, to minister in the Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche, firstly at Biel-Madretschat, and, from 1973, at Lyss, both in the canton of Bern. In 1976, he returned home, and was installed in First Saintfield by the Presbytery of Down on 6 May. He was not afraid to speak into the violence of those times, warning, in 1976, following a bomb explosion in nearby Downpatrick, "It is not too late to find a way out of our problems, but there may not be much time left before the sinister powers who manipulate the young, undisciplined, unthinking hooligans of both sides, attempt to take effective control of our land." He stayed for two years until moving to Rostrevor to minister at the Christian Renewal Centre, alongside its founder, the Rev Cecil Kerr. In 1980 he returned to Switzerland to minister in Twann, on the shores of Lake Biel, until 1989, when they retired to Ireland. Mrs McKee predeceased her husband in 2002. We give thanks for Mr McKee's evangelistic gifts which were widely used throughout the land, and across the world, in services, missions, and personal witness. We assure his daughters, Esther, Joy and Rachel, his surviving siblings, Jack, Ethel and Jacqueline, and their wider family circle, of our sympathy and prayers, as we pay tribute to the life and ministry of our brother, who now beholds the Saviour face to face, in whom he trusted, and whom he faithfully declared to so many.

**The Rev Robert (Bob) Lockhart, BA**, Minister Emeritus (Released), Elmwood, Ballymacash, Lisburn, died on 13 March 2019, in the eighty-third year of his age and the forty-fifth year of his ministry. He was born at Newtownards on 4 June 1936, the eldest of two brothers, to Robert Lockhart, a career soldier, and his wife, Isabella, née, Bennett. Raised in a loving home, he was educated at the Model Primary School, and Regent House Grammar School. While at Regent House, he joined the Air Training Corps (ATC) which gave him the opportunity to attend the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. On leaving school, he joined Berkshire International (UK) Ltd., a hosiery company, where he qualified as a Purchasing Officer, and worked for twelve years.

In 1957 he attended a tent mission, and that night the whole course of his life and career changed. He was challenged by the preacher's text, Joshua 24:15, "Choose now this day whom you will serve..." He gave his life to Christ and began the journey which was to lead him into the ordained ministry. He matured in his faith through fellowship and service in the congregation of Greenwell Street. Among the many new friends he made was Betty Clarke. Love blossomed and they were married on 3 October 1963. They settled to married life at Newtownards and were blessed with two children, Fiona, and Niall. Over these years a sense of call to full-time ministry strengthened, and led to his decision to study at the Queen's University, Belfast, with a view to becoming a minister of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This was a courageous decision, having a growing family to provide for, which was eloquent testimony to his commitment to his Lord and Saviour. A growing sense of call to full-time ordained ministry led Mr Lockhart to study at the Queen's University, Belfast, 1966-1969, graduating BA.

This was followed by theological study at the Assembly's College, Belfast. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Ards on 9 June 1974, and assigned as assistant to the Rev W.J.A. Bell, then Minister of Knock, Belfast. He was ordained by the Presbytery of East Belfast on 12 January 1976, and, on being called to church extension work at Ballymacash, he was installed there on 2nd May of that same year. The parish was carved out of the bounds of Railway Street congregation. New housing developments were being built, and many families were moving in. There was no physical church building at that time, though the foundation stone had been laid early in 1976. Mr Lockhart had to set about gathering a congregation from scratch, which meant knocking doors and establishing a network of contacts and relationships with businesses and community groups in the area. He was well qualified for such work. His experience in the business world, his maturity, and his organisational skills, came into their own. Mr Lockhart was a people person. He was blessed with a warm, outgoing, personality, ready laughter, and a gift for friendship, which drew people to him. A church building was opened and dedicated on 22 January 1977, and, by the end of 1979, there were 280 families connected with the congregation. A new suite of halls was built to accommodate a wide range of activities and organisations, opened on 26 September 1981. The success of the work was recognised by a service of full erection to congregational status on 15 January 1984, followed by the installation of Mr Lockhart, who had been formally called as Minister, on 8 February 1984. Mr Lockhart talked of Christ to people in their homes, and preached Christ to them on a Sunday. Faithfully calling men and women to put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, he also taught them to live out their faith in the routines of everyday life – in the home, the workplace, and the local community. He was a great encourager, guiding many into service for the Master. He was Chairman of the Board of Governors of Pond Park Primary

School from 1981 to 2009. He took an active interest in The Leprosy Mission. After twenty-seven years of steady and fruitful ministry he retired on 30 April 2003, but continued to serve, especially as Pastoral Assistant in Railway Street congregation, until his health declined. Throughout these years Mrs Lockhart was by his side, supporting and encouraging him, and playing her own part in the life and ministry of the congregation. In 2017, following a diagnosis of vascular dementia Mr Lockhart became resident in Nicholson House Nursing Home in Lisburn. Now in a season of weakness and growing incapacity witness, and indeed ministry, continued. We remember Mr Lockhart's family as they mourn his loss, especially Mrs Betty Lockhart, daughter Fiona and husband Clarke, the Rev Niall Lockhart and wife Zarina, their children. We give thanks to God for the fellowship and witness of our brother who has entered into the eternal rest secured and promised through Christ the resurrection and the life.

**The Rev Arthur O'Neill BA**, Minister Emeritus (Released) of Fintona, Ballynahatty & Creevan linkage, died on 25 March 2019, in the eighty-sixth year of his age, and the fifty-fifth year of his ministry. He was born at Belfast on 12 October 1933, one of nine children to John O'Neill, a spinning master at Ewart's Mill and, later, Brookfield Mill, and his wife Sophia, née Dyer. The family belonged to Woodvale congregation, and Mr O'Neill began his early education at Woodvale Primary School. During the 1940s the family moved to Temple, outside Carryduff, to escape the Blitz, where he attended Carric na Veigh and Glenwood schools. On leaving school, he worked for a furniture company, and, when his father died in 1948, the family moved to Finaghy, where they joined Lowe Memorial congregation. Like his older brother William (Bill), and encouraged by the minister the Rev Alfred Martin, he was accepted for the ministry of the church, and he prepared by studying at Shaftesbury House School, Belfast, and from 1957, at Magee University College, Londonderry, and Trinity College, Dublin, from which he graduated BA in 1961. He took his theological course at the Assembly's College, Belfast, and was licensed by the Presbytery of Belfast South on 15 December 1963. He then served an assistantship in the congregation of Strand, Belfast, with the minister, the Rev Dr William Chestnutt, where he was ordained by the Presbytery of East Belfast, on 5 July 1964. Later that year, on the 24 October, Mr O'Neill married Beate Bierbrauer whom he had first met in 1954 during a youth exchange visit to Belfast from the Evangelische Kirchengemeinde, Essen, West Germany. He was called to the congregation of Fintona, in the Presbytery of Omagh, and was installed there, on 23 February 1966. A few years later the united congregations of Ballynahatty & Creevan were linked with Fintona, and Mr O'Neill was installed as minister on 12 November 1969. Mr and Mrs O'Neill settled to manse life in a rural setting, and their family soon grew with the birth of their daughter Nicola. Mr O'Neill was a

thoughtful preacher and an assiduous pastor, caring for his flock in all the vicissitudes of life, faithfully supported by his wife in the life of the church. They operated as a team, and together they greeted their people at the church door after each service. In this way she enabled him to overcome the deafness that he had lived with over the course of his life. Being a competent organist and singer, he brought a musician's appreciation of the power of praise and the beauty of worship to the Sunday Services he conducted. During his ministry he started a Boys' Brigade company and, being a keen sportsman and holder of a Trinity Blue for hockey, he encouraged sports organisations. In his capacity as a teacher of RE at Omagh Academy, he influenced the lives of many young people in the district, including one Charles McMullen, who was elected Moderator of the General Assembly in 2018. As an extension of his pastoral role, he acted as Presbyterian Chaplain to the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, near Omagh, and, as a member of the Executive Committee of the Northern Ireland Healthcare Chaplains Association, he served as its treasurer for many years. In the life of the wider church he served on the Board of Studies and the Youth Committee of Irish Churches, and was Moderator of the Synod of Derry and Omagh, 1995. After thirty-four years of consistent ministry, Mr O'Neill retired on 31 July 2000. He remained a keen golfer, and kept up his interest in sport, and enjoyed fellowship with colleagues from across the denominations as members of Friends of the Way, a group of clergy – and later some Church members – who meet monthly for worship and study. We extend our sympathy to his wife, Beate, daughter Nicola and husband Jim, grandson Killian, and his surviving siblings – brothers William, Jim, Stanley and Kenneth – together with the wider family circle, in the faith that is anchored in Christ, the believer's sure and certain hope of eternal life.

## OVERVIEW AND COORDINATION TASK GROUP

1. The General Council formalised the appointment of an Overview and Coordination Task Group on 11 October 2018 (the group having met informally over the summer period) with the following remit and membership:
  - (a) **Remit:** To continue to take an overview of the evolving situation since the 2018 General Assembly and act in a coordinating role, taking any necessary decisions (as appropriate) between meetings of the General Council.
  - (b) **Membership:** Moderator and Clerk (Convener); Very Rev Drs Noble McNeely, Frank Sellar, Ian McNie, Rob Craig, Stafford Carson, Norman Hamilton and Alastair Dunlop; Messrs David Thomson, Edgar Jardine CB, and James Livingstone.

2. At the time of writing, the task group has met twice, in November 2018 and February 2019, and at each meeting heard updates from other task groups regarding a variety of matters, including:
  - (a) Dialogue and Resources Task Group
  - (b) Implementation Task Group
  - (c) Decision Making and Dissent Task Group
  - (d) UTC Review Task Group (relating to matters concerning the relationship between UTC and QUB)

(Note: The first three of these task groups will be reporting separately to the General Assembly as part of the General Council report, with the last one reporting through to the UTC Management Committee and the Council for Training in Ministry)
3. The task group also gave guidance to the Clerk and the Moderator regarding correspondence etc.
4. At the meeting of the task group in November 2018, the following points were noted:
  - (a) There is a need to set the tone for potentially controversial/sensitive General Assembly debates in advance.
  - (b) There is a challenge with GA Reports being available to the press/public before the Assembly debate. Is PCI in charge of our own debate?
  - (c) Does PCI need to 'put up people' for media in advance? (Danger of debate happening in media before the Assembly considers the matter.) Or just afterwards?
  - (d) Need to promote what we believe and why we believe it. Danger of agenda being set by others. (e.g. Need to promote marriage as a positive things rather than simply react to others agenda regarding a redefinition.)
5. At the meeting in February 2019, the task group invited the General Assembly Press Officer, Mr Mark Smith, to outline the media strategy in relation to the General Assembly. Mr Smith also outlined a number of suggested developments that he would desire to implement for the 2019 General Assembly. During a full discussion, the task group affirmed the Press Officer's proposals.
6. The task group will continue to meet as required, maintaining an overview, offering advice and seeking to coordinate responses as appropriate.

## IMPLEMENTATION TASK GROUP

1. The Implementation Task Group was formed by the General Council in response to the 2018 General Assembly resolution: “That appropriate training be offered to Kirk Sessions on the theology and practice of the Church’s understanding of ‘a credible profession of faith’ and the pastoral guidelines on homosexuality.’ The remit agreed by the General Council is to put together a resource to be used at Kirk Session level, with a clear pastoral tone.” Membership includes the Moderator and Clerk, representatives from the Dialogue and Resources Task Group, the Doctrine Committee and the Council for Congregational Life and Witness, and others from different pastoral contexts within PCI.
2. The task group reported on its initial work to the stated General Council meeting on 11 October 2018. At that meeting it was agreed that it be given permission to present a different set of pastoral guidelines while staying true to the original concept and that the remit be broadened to include training on a general approach to ‘a credible profession of faith’ as well as the specific issue of same-sex relationships.
3. The task group has met on five occasions. Two sub-groups were formed – one to work on a resource on ‘a credible profession of faith’ and the other to work on updating the current pastoral guidelines on homosexuality. While work on both drafts is making good progress, neither will be ready in time for the 2019 General Assembly.
4. To inform the work, the task group organised a Presbytery Consultation Day held on 17 January 2019 to which six representatives from each presbytery were invited. Other invitees included members of the General Council (including 38 members coming directly from presbyteries), the Implementation Task Group, the Overview and Coordination Task Group, the Doctrine Committee, the Dialogue and Resources Task Group and the Human Identity Task Group. Approximately 200 were invited of whom approximately 150 were directly from presbyteries. Approximately 190 attended on the day. The task group is grateful to all who participated. While the purpose of the day was both to give an opportunity for a greater number to have an input to the work of the task group and for the task group to hear and consider the views of a wider group, the spirit in which participants engaged with the themes and with one another was constructive and helpful. The format of the day was structured around three twenty-minute presentations. Each presentation was followed by facilitated discussion around tables for forty minutes. Each table facilitator also recorded feedback which was forwarded to the task group for reflection. The following is a summary of the presentations and subsequent feedback received during the Presbytery Consultation Day.
  - (a) The first presentation was titled “Position of PCI re ‘the question of homosexuality’” and was delivered by Rev Prof Stephen Williams. He introduced his presentation by saying that, while the membership of PCI embraces a range of positions on same-sex relationships, the position set out in the documents of PCI is that

- (a) sexual relationships are properly ordered to the institution of monogamous, heterosexual marriage, (b) there is a moral distinction between same-sex practice and same-sex orientation, (c) homophobia, like same-sex relationships, is incompatible with Christian discipleship. He noted that while the basis for PCI's position is that the Bible is clear and permanently applicable on this area of Christian teaching and practice, critics of this position will challenge this interpretation of the Bible's application in the contemporary world. He highlighted the dynamic that while in 'church circles' the question of homosexuality is often addressed as though it were a question of morality, it is experienced by many as a question of identity.
- (b) Feedback following Rev Prof Williams' presentation included the following comments and insights. Many considered his point about morality and identity useful. What he said about the distinction between orientation and practice generated much discussion about what constitutes sin in terms of both thought and behaviour. This highlighted a need for clarity on this subject. It was acknowledged that kirk sessions find it difficult to talk about this issue. Widening the remit to help kirk sessions talk about other sins such as co-habitation of opposite sex couples was suggested.
- (c) The second presentation was titled "Position of PCI re 'credible profession'" and was delivered by Rev Dr Martyn Cowan. He drew attention to documents of PCI defining 'credible profession' and then described the difference between 'rigorism' and 'indifferentism'. He used Matthew 13:24-29, 36-43 to highlight the reality that the church is a 'mixed multitude' and the danger of rigorism that can result in uprooting the genuine crop. He used Matthew 18:15-17 to highlight the danger of indifferentism, which is to treat sin as relatively inconsequential. He emphasised that church discipline is not incompatible with the church being a community of grace and mercy.
- (d) Feedback following Rev Dr Martyn Cowan's presentation included the following comments and insights. It is clear that there is inconsistency in approach across the church in approach by kirk sessions. However, church discipline does occur for a range of sins such as adultery and non-attendance. It was also observed that in some congregations decisions on sacramental discipline are left, wrongly, to the minister with the kirk session not taking full responsibility as it should. Further training was suggested for elders-elect on the responsibility they will have in this area. It was noted that in sacramental discipline it is better when, after a conversation, the person themselves realises they are not ready or, in the case of church discipline, chooses to withdraw from the Lord's Table without the kirk session having to take action.

- (e) The third presentation was titled “Position of PCI re ‘pastoral guidelines’” and was delivered by Rev Bobby Liddle and Rev Mairisine Stanfield. Rev Bobby Liddle outlined the need to update the pastoral guidelines on homosexuality adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. He described the changed context, including that same-sex marriage is now legal in the Republic of Ireland. He said it is intended that the updated guidelines will include more biblical content and remain in line with PCI’s stated position. He highlighted the need for the church to be a loving community. Rev Mairisine Stanfield shared stories of real situations that demonstrated the need for the church to be a community of radical love.
  - (f) Feedback following Rev Bobby Liddle and Rev Mairisine Stanfield’s presentation included the following comments and insights. It was observed that, while it is important for a church to be loving community, often pastoral care is confidential which limits the response of the church to the individual concerned. It was noted that if church discipline is required, it takes extra effort on the part of minister and elders to show love to the person because of the awkwardness of the situation. The importance of a sensitive and inclusive approach in congregations towards singleness generated extensive discussion and this extended beyond those who choose to be single because of same-sex attraction.
  - (g) All the feedback from the Presbytery Consultation Day was received by the task group and has been used to inform the group’s discussions and further shape the resources.
5. It was noted in discussion that there appears to be considerable variety in the vows used within PCI at admission both to baptism and to full membership. In view of this the task group asked the General Council to recommend that the General Assembly take steps to clarify the vows to be used at admission to baptism and to full membership.
6. The task group has spent some time discussing how and when to communicate its work. At the 2018 General Assembly there was a perception among some that the church had produced a theological report without an accompanying pastoral one, so the task group considers it important that both aspects of its work, the pastoral and the theological, should be communicated together. Consideration was given to requesting the 2019 General Assembly to send material down to presbyteries for comment, but the task group believes it is better to send final drafts down rather than half-finished material. It also believes it is important that Presbyteries have the opportunity to give feedback on the proposed material before it is presented to the Assembly for approval. Therefore, it is planned to request that the 2020 General Assembly receive final drafts of both the ‘credible profession’ resource and the pastoral guidelines and send these to presbyteries for comment,

with final consideration being given to the resource and guidelines at the 2021 General Assembly.

ALASTAIR DUNLOP, Convener

## **DECISION MAKING AND DISSENT WITHIN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TASK GROUP**

### **(A) INTRODUCTION:**

1. The Decision Making and Dissent within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland Task Group was appointed by the General Council at its meeting on 11 October 2018 as follows:
  - (a) Purpose of Task Group:
    - That a task group be established to draw up a report on ‘Presbyterian decision making and the place of dissent’. Reporting to the General Council for transmission to the General Assembly and most likely ‘sent down’ to Presbyteries for discussion and feedback.
    - That the task group’s remit be as follows:
      - (i) To draw together relevant material from the Code, Assembly reports etc.
      - (ii) To outline how decisions are made in PCI’s Presbyterian system of Church government;
      - (iii) To outline what dissent formally means and how other forms of ‘dissent’ can be expressed;
      - (iv) To outline how decisions of the General Assembly can be changed.
  - (b) Task Group Membership:  
Moderator and Clerk; Convener of General Council (Convener); 2 Clerks of Presbytery (Robert Herron and Tom Conway); 2 people with ‘institutional memory / experience’ (Dr Sam Hutchinson and Dr John Lockington); 2 people with ‘conciliatory skills’ (Joe Campbell and Avril Heenan); 2 representatives from the Doctrine Committee (Prof Michael McClenaghan and Prof John Gillespie).
2. The task group has to date met on three occasions, on 12 November 2018, 3 January and 15 February 2019 and has during wide-ranging discussions has sought to scope out the remit given to it by the General Council.

**(B) CONSIDERATION OF SOME RELEVANT BACKGROUND PAPERS**

1. The task group considered a number of papers tabled by the Clerk of Assembly, namely:
  - The 1981 Doctrine Committee Report re ‘Subscription to Creeds and Confessions’;
  - The 1974 Report re ‘A Brief Statement concerning Faith and Order’;
  - The 1990 Report of the Judicial Commission re ‘Liberty of Conscience’
  - The 2014 Report of the General Board re ‘Freedom of Individuals to Express Opinions’
  - Extracts from the General Council Report of June 2018
2. The following two key points were noted:
  - (a) **PCI is a Confessional Church** – the Rule of Faith (Code Pars 10-14) states:

10. **The Word of God** as set forth in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and the supreme standard of the Church.

11. **It is the privilege, right and duty of every person** to examine the Scriptures, and each individual is bound to submit to their authority. Having formed a definite conviction as to what the will of God is upon any subject, it is each person’s duty to accept and obey it. In exercising this God-given right of private judgment, individual Christians are not to set their reason above the Word of God, or to refuse light from any quarter. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they are to use their reason to ascertain the divine will, as revealed in Scripture, and are to refuse to subject conscience to any authority except that of the Word of God. In the words of the Westminster Confession “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 or worship.”

12. **The Presbyterian Church in Ireland**, as a witness for Christ, has adopted subordinate standards. In these are found what the Church understands the Word of God to teach on certain important points of doctrine and worship. These subordinate standards are a testimony for truth and against error, and serve as a bond of union for members of the Church.

13. **The Confession of Faith** (as approved by the Church of Scotland in her Act of 1647), and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, prepared by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, are the subordinate standards of the Presbyterian

Church in Ireland. Accepting these subordinate standards, the Church holds that civil rulers must be obedient to Christ in their own area of authority, yet they ought not to attempt, in any way, to constrain any person's religious beliefs or intrude upon their rights of conscience.

14. **The Church alone** has the right to interpret and explain her standards, under the guidance of the Spirit of God.

(b) PCI is a Presbyterian Church:

- Key decisions are made by ministers elders meeting together in 'representative gatherings' (Code Par 19): 19. (1) The Presbyterian Church in Ireland shall be governed by presbyters in representative assemblies, otherwise known as the courts of the Church. These courts comprise Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries and the General Assembly.
  - The Kirk Session is the meeting together of minister(s) and elders of the local congregation (Code Par 34): 34. The Kirk Session is the governing body of a congregation in its Christian calling and as such has the rights and duties set out in this section.
  - Presbytery is the coming together of ministers and representative elders from a particular region (Code Par 69): 69. (1) The Presbytery is the body primarily responsible for corporate oversight of the congregations and causes assigned to it by the General Assembly, and of the ministers and elders connected with it, and the advancement of Christ's kingdom generally within its bounds.
  - The General Assembly is a coming together of ministers and representative elders from every PCI congregation (Code Par 104): 104. (1) The General Assembly is the supreme court of the Church, representing in one body the whole Church, including all subordinate courts and particular congregations, and acting as its supreme legislative, administrative and judicial authority, in dealing with all matters brought before it.
3. The task group also noted the following additional points:
- (a) Not every 'policy', or even doctrinal statement, has the same 'standing'. Some matters are part of PCI's subordinate standards; some matters are set out in PCI's constitution (the Code); and some matters are policy or statements agreed by the General Assembly, often following on from a detailed report and debate on the underlying biblical principles involved. Some policy matters or doctrinal positions may be outlined in all three of these

ways – a sort of ‘triple lock’ of Scripture, Confession and Code. For example, in regard to PCI’s stated position that marriage is exclusively between one man and one woman – this is defined in the subordinate standards, is stated as such in the Code and has been affirmed on a number of occasions down the years by the General Assembly following reports presented to it on the bible’s teaching on marriage.

- (b) There is a difference between members having freedom to hold/promote a range of views and elders/ministers having the same freedom – the latter having ‘subscribed’ and taken on the responsibility and constraints of leadership, the former having not.
- (c) There are some areas that PCI has however decided that its ministers and elders can hold a different belief than that stated in the WCF e.g. the role of civil magistrates (in the Code); the view of the Pope (by GA resolution); certain liberty of conscience regarding the ordination of women (Judicial Commission report and GA resolutions). Certain other areas of the subordinate standards may no longer be deemed to be binding on ministers and elders, though the General Assembly has never formally stated so e.g. material on Sabbath observance.
- (d) Both the 1974 Report to the General Assembly re ‘A Brief Statement concerning Faith and Order’ and the 2014 Report of the General Board re ‘Freedom of Individuals to Express Opinions’, are somewhat limited, though perhaps deliberately so.
- (e) In today’s media / social media driven world, a small number of people (some who may be Church members and some who may not) can seek to influence PCI policy outside of the normal structures and indeed can seek to create the impression (or reflect the reality) of wide-spread discontent with PCI policy.
- (f) ‘Informal groupings’ have always been in existence and have often sought to influence/change policy at General Assembly level.

**(C) AREAS IN WHICH GREATER CLARITY IS NEEDED AND WHERE THERE IS ‘ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT’**

1. The process of bringing reports and recommendations to the General Assembly for decision:
  - (a) Consideration of how remits (especially with potentially controversial/significant issues) are given to committees/panels/task groups – are remits too narrow at times?
    - (i) With what a Council considered to be potentially controversial/significant issues, should the Council be encouraged to check progress and amend a remit if deemed appropriate to do so?

- (ii) Should the committee/panel/task group have the right to refer remits back to the Council for consideration and amendment if deemed appropriate?
- (b) The role of Councils in overseeing committees/panels/task groups as they carry forward their remits, especially where these are potentially controversial / significant. What should be the nature and purpose of interim reports to Councils? For instance, should they clearly indicate the nature of discussion and the direction of travel etc.
- (c) The task group would suggest that there needs to be more use of a 'green paper stage' for controversial/significant issues – giving background, scoping out the issue etc. From relevant experience this at times could be usefully considered by a wider 'conference style' meeting of representatives from presbyteries, or even formally sent down to presbyteries for consideration, prior to proposals for policy being brought forward to the General Assembly. Does a group, presumably under the General Council, need to be tasked with recommending what issues should follow this more consultative format and which should not?
- (d) When reports come to the General Assembly, especially where these are potentially controversial/significant, should some form of 'big picture assessment' be included for the recommendations or options suggested? For instance, consideration of the impact on wider issues.
2. The process of consideration of reports during the General Assembly:
- (a) How to enable wider and fuller participation during the General Assembly – is it a 'cold house' for elders generally, for younger people and for women? Can the Assembly operate in 'round table discussion mode' for some issues?
- (b) What is the appropriate role for retired ministers?
- (c) Should more items of business be conducted in private session to allow freer debate, especially when potentially controversial/significant matters are under discussion?
3. The place of General Assembly decisions once taken:
- (a) There is a need for affirmation and explanation of the role and authority of the General Assembly. For instance:
- What decisions are binding that must be followed?
  - What is in the form of guidelines that should be followed apart from in exceptional situations?
  - What is in the form of guidance which is advice that should be taken into consideration?
- (b) How are decisions and policies are communicated:
- Within PCI – to leaders and to members. Do summary papers highlighting significant decisions need to be sent

to all ministers and clerks of session as soon as possible after each General Assembly? How are key decisions best communicated to members of congregations?

- Outside of PCI to the media / social media? Do a range of spokespersons need to be prepared in advance?
- (c) How do we to keep key decisions, policies and guidelines before the Church?
  - (d) How can ministers and elders legitimately express ‘dissent’ from specific decisions of the General Assembly? What are the types/categories of issues on which it is legitimate for ministers and elders publically to differ from the stated PCI position?
  - (e) When does the issue of discipline come to the fore for ministers or elders who publically differ from the stated position of PCI in an area where this is not legitimate? How are such areas identified? How is such discipline to be exercised?
4. How General Assembly decisions can be changed:
- (a) How can General Assembly decisions be changed? How can such debate be entered into, especially with reference to points 3 (d) and (e) above?
  - (b) Does there need to be a simpler process for triggering a review of General Assembly policies? Does the process of ‘memorials’ need to be renamed, updated and explained?

#### **(D) SUMMARY**

1. A significant ‘task of education’ is necessary with regard to a number of issues – e.g. decision making within PCI; subscription and its implications; the standing of different types GA decision; how legitimately to express ‘dissent’ from specific decisions and work to change those decisions. This ‘task of education’ is needed both internally (amongst both leaders and members of PCI) and externally. Some specific material could be prepared outlining the basics of decision making and church governance within PCI – this could be presented in a diagrammatic form.
2. There is need for greater clarity on a number of matters – e.g. the standing of different types of GA decisions; the types of issues on which it was legitimate for ministers and elders publically to differ from the stated PCI position.
3. Alternative and improved decision making processes should be explored – how remits are drawn up; consideration of how wider discussion can be encouraged within PCI’s structures (e.g. possible ‘green paper’ stages); how the GA itself is facilitated in its engagement especially with issues that are controversial / significant; how GA decisions are communicated to PCI congregations/members and in the ‘public square’.

**(E) NEXT STEPS**

1. The General Council agreed to recommend to the General Assembly that the report of the task group be sent down to presbyteries (along with focussed questions to be drawn up by the task group) for discussion, with comments being returned to the Task Group Convener by Monday 9 December 2019.

NOBLE McNEELY, Convener

**DIALOGUE AND RESOURCES TASK GROUP**

1. The Dialogue and Resources Task Group (DRTG) was established by the General Council in October 2015: its membership, namely, Very Dr Rob Craig (Convener), Very Rev Dr Stafford Carson, Rev Chris Kennedy, Rev Bobby Liddle, Rev Mairisine Stanfield, Avril Heenan and Joe Campbell.
2. Having been given a brief, but no name, the first duty of the group was to find a suitable name which would convey its three-year task. In arriving at the name Dialogue and Resources the members of the task group set around fulfilling their twofold purpose of enabling a dialogue to take place safely within PCI and to provide pastoral resources around the area of same-sex attraction (SSA).
3. The programme of the three years unfolded as follows:
  - (a) Year 1 2015-16: in the first year the members of the task group sought both to inform and equip themselves on the theological and pastoral issues which were presenting themselves around SSA. Significant conversations were opened with Rev Vaughan Roberts (Living Out) and with Jonathan Berry and Rob Wood (True Freedom Trust). A channel of conversation was also opened with Padraig O'Tuama (Corrymeela).
  - (b) Year 2 2016-17: in the second year a series of workshops was offered to all active teaching elders within PCI. These workshops were held on an area basis, drawing ministers from several presbyteries together. Sam Allberry (author of *Is God anti-gay?*) was the invited speaker and facilitator. In addition, during his visits identical workshops were offered both to full-time PCI youth workers and licentiates and students for the ministry.
    - (i) Alongside the workshops, the task group provided a sheet of recommended resources (websites and books) in keeping with the stated position of PCI on homosexuality. The resource sheet is attached.
    - (ii) Also, during this year and into the third year a series of three meetings took place with Padraig O'Tuama and others whom he invited. Initially, the purpose of such meetings was to read and discuss two books which had been recommended by either group and which presented different arguments and

conclusions around SSA. Members of the task group found these meetings helpful as they listened to the stories and appreciated the vulnerability of those who spoke honestly of their experiences; however, it was apparent that there would never be a meeting of minds without a letting go of deeply held convictions on both sides.

- (c) Year 3 2017-18: in the third year a further series of workshops was offered to ruling elders on the same geographic basis as the workshops for ministers. On this occasion Rob Wood from True Freedom Trust was the invited facilitator.
4. At the General Assembly of 2018 the task group requested a one year extension to continue its work. The belief within the task group being that there was need for a similar programme to be offered to the leaders of church youth groups and their young people. However, the proposed work of the task group was overtaken by the reaction and response to the decision of the 2018 General Assembly to receive the report of the Doctrine Committee regarding same-sex attracted people, the sacraments and church discipline. As a result, the task group was of the opinion that its work be suspended to allow the work of the task group offering pastoral advice to kirk sessions to take precedence.
  5. Conclusions / Lessons from the Experience of DRTG:
    - (a) **Gracious Confidence** – early in its life the DRTG ‘chanced’ upon the expression gracious confidence which became a much repeated mantra. The members of the task group gained the perception that, in the contemporary climate with its emphasis on diversity and inclusion, it is easy for Christian people to feel intimidated and in the process lose either their gracious spirit or their confidence in the Gospel.
    - (b) **Tone** – closely related to the need to have a gracious confidence in the Gospel is the tone in which we affirm the truth and teaching of the Scriptures on matters related to sexuality. Listeners hear not only what it said but the way in which it is said.
    - (c) **Confusion** – whilst those on the extremes of this debate are very clear both in their understanding, their message and their agenda for the church, there exists in-between these extremes both much confusion and the need for a clear affirmation of the church’s teaching about human sexuality and relationships.
    - (d) **Marriage and Singleness** – From our celibate, same-sex attracted friends a fresh appreciation was received about the gifts of marriage and singleness; and also, about the tendency within the church to exalt marriage as the goal of life to the detriment of the many single Christians.
    - (e) **Agenda** – the impression was received that many who, in their minds, have reconciled the teaching of Scripture with a loving same-sex relationship, want the church to follow suit.

6. The task group was thanked and discharged at the March meeting of the General Council, which also agreed that the resource list in the appendix be forwarded to the Council for Congregational Life and Witness.

ROB CRAIG, Convener

## DIALOGUE AND RESOURCES TASK GROUP

### APPENDIX – RESOURCE LIST

Introduction: Since 2015-18 many new publications on the subject have been printed. This list, while not exhaustive, is the basis of the resource sheet made available at all the workshops which the task group organised.

#### Some Websites/ Organisations:

Presbyterian Church in Ireland [www.presbyterianireland.org](http://www.presbyterianireland.org): Type in ‘Homosexuality’ into the search box for a number of articles and resources written by and for members of our denomination in recent years.

Living Out [www.livingout.org](http://www.livingout.org): Not an organisation as such, simply a website resource for church leaders and individuals either struggling with same-sex attraction personally or wanting to encourage those who do. Features video stories of people talking about their experiences. It may be useful for elders or in a broader congregational setting.

The True Freedom Trust [www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk](http://www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk): UK based evangelical organisation for whom Rob Wood works. This website has a number of helpful resources for individuals dealing with gay/lesbian issues personally. There is also a number of particularly helpful articles for professing Christian parents with children who are facing these issues.

True Freedom Trust, 75 Albion Street, Birkenhead, CH41 5LS, UK or phone on +44 (0)151 653 0773.

Rosaria Butterfield’s website [www.rosariabutterfield.com](http://www.rosariabutterfield.com): Includes a free PDF. Study guide based on her *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, as well as other articles and videos.

Website in connection with Wes Hill’s work [www.spiritualfriendship.org](http://www.spiritualfriendship.org): A website which provides a blog providing “Musings on God, Sexuality and Friendship”.

#### Some Books on homosexuality:

Jonathan Berry and Rob Wood, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: A future and a Hope for Same-Sex Attracted Christians* (IVP, 2016). Written from a personal point of view by today’s speaker.

Glynn Harrison, *A better story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing* (IVP, 2016). “This book is my attempt to say why I think traditional Christian teaching on sex, marriage and human relationships is good news for today.” Very accessible.

Sam Allberry, *Is God anti-gay? And other questions about homosexuality, the Bible and same-sex attraction* (The Good Book Company, 2013). Written from the point of view of one who faces these issues personally.

Rosario Butterfield *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey Into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2012) A biographical account of her conversion to Christ and move out of a Lesbian lifestyle.

Wes Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 2010). Biographical in tone, and disarmingly honest, with a strong emphasis upon God’s grace and forgiveness.

Ed Shaw, *The plausibility problem* (Leicester: IVP, 2015). “Ed Shaw experiences same-sex attraction, and yet he is committed to what the Bible says and what the church has always taught about marriage and sex. In this honest book, he shares his pain in dealing with these issues – but, at the same time, shows us that obedience to Jesus is ultimately the only way to experience life to the full.” Well written and challenging.

## HUMAN IDENTITY TASK GROUP

1. Since its formation in autumn 2017, the task group continues to work on the challenging and hugely complex issues regarding gender identity both in society and in PCI congregations. The most significant action of the task group to date has been making copies of the book, *Talking Points: Transgender* by Vaughan Roberts with a forward by Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen, available to every congregation.
2. Rev Prof Bill Addley convened the group in its first year and thanks are expressed to him for getting the work underway. Rev Daniel Kane agreed to fulfil the role of acting convener in the interim and was appointed to this role on a permanent basis by the General Council at its March 2019 meeting.
3. The task group welcomes the new booklet, ‘Transformed’, on gender identity issues released by the Evangelical Alliance in autumn 2018. It believes, however, that a need remains for a specific resource providing guidance on theological understanding and pastoral care for those in PCI congregations who struggle with gender identity and their families.
4. The task group is working on such a resource and plans to release it in the first half of 2020. It is envisaged that the resource will mirror the tone and approach taken by the updated resource on pastoral care and same-sex attraction. Input to this resource will come from experienced

pastoral practitioners and medical professionals involved in this field. It is planned that the resource will draw on anonymised personal stories of those who have sought pastoral care because of struggles with gender identity and their families.

DANIEL KANE, Convener