

COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Convener: Very Rev Dr TN HAMILTON, OBE
Secretary: THE CLERK

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Council for Public Affairs met on five occasions since the 2016 General Assembly to receive reports from its Committee, Panels and Task Group; to consider responses to public consultations; and to discuss its wider strategy of engagement on issues of public significance.

2. The **State Education Committee** considers matters of state education in Northern Ireland. The Committee reports developments in relation to support for controlled schools, jointly managed church schools and educational underachievement. The report also refers to work done by the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC), through which the Presbyterian Church in Ireland works with the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland on matters of education policy in Northern Ireland.

3. The **Peace and Reconciliation Panel** handles matters of public policy that are relevant to peacebuilding and reconciliation. The Panel reports on a submission to the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition and plans for its future work.

4. The **Republic of Ireland Panel** is responsible for matters of public policy in the Republic of Ireland. The Panel reports on developments in education and ongoing debate about the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution of Ireland.

5. The **Dealing with the Past Project Task Group** is responsible for taking forward the project agreed by the 2016 General Assembly to record and examine Presbyterian responses to the Troubles. The Task Group reports on the significant progress it has made to date.

CONVENER'S INTRODUCTION

6. The work of the Council for Public Affairs remains extremely demanding due to the spectrum of complex public issues that call for Christian reflection and input. Upon its establishment in 2015, the Council sought to address a broad range of issues through a variety of task groups. This initial operating model served the Council well in getting its work up and running, though the need for greater prioritisation soon became clear. The Council's structure has now been streamlined into the Committee, Panels and Task Group that report below. The Council plans to establish two further panels: a Life Issues Panel which would deal with matters such as the beginning and end of life, and a Social Justice Panel to address issues such as poverty, social security and housing.

7. The Council continues to build relationships across civic society. Throughout the year the Council Convener, Public Affairs Officer, Clerk and Moderator have taken opportunities to engage with elected representatives, officials from government departments, parachurch organisations and others.

8. A strong partnership has been maintained with Union Theological College in organising events under the theme of *The Church in the Public Square* (CIPS). A series of six seminars ‘On Being Human’ were held in the autumn of 2016, exploring a range of issues from gender and sexuality to the ethics of improving human nature through applied science. All seminars were well attended and demonstrated the Church’s willingness to create space for rigorous and informed discussion of topical issues. Equipping members of the PCI and others to think Biblically about issues facing society remains a key priority of the Council and, at the time of writing, planning for future CIPS events is underway. Materials from past events (including audio and video recordings) are available at www.presbyterianireland.org/publicsquare.

9. Since the 2016 General Assembly the Council has responded to the following public consultations:

- Ecclesiastical Exemption from Listed Building Consent, Department for Communities, written submission.
- Programme for Government Framework, The Executive Office, written submission.
- Proposals for the provision of strategic support to the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland, Department for Communities, written submission.
- Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill, Committee for Communities, written and oral submissions.
- Citizens’ Assembly’s call for evidence on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland, written submission.
- Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision – ‘Providing Pathways’, written submission (through the TRC).
- Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition’s call for evidence, written submission.
- Regional Child Protection / Safeguarding Policies and Procedures, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, written submission.

10. Public Affairs has benefited from close working relationships with other Councils, particularly the Council for Social Witness, and is grateful to the staff of other Councils who have willingly given of their time to help draft consultation responses and assisted the Council for Public Affairs in various ways. It is hoped these relationships can be further strengthened in the year ahead.

11. As this report was being finalised, a snap General Election in the UK has been agreed by Parliament for Thursday 8 June (during General Assembly week). This adds to the political uncertainty around the talks in Northern Ireland designed to restore a devolved administration. In this highly unpredictable situation, further council resolutions will be included in a Supplementary Report to the General Assembly.

STATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

12. 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. The work of the Committee has been within four broad areas:

Issues to and from the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)

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

- TRC representation on the Education Authority;
- TRC representation on the General Teaching Council;
- The relationship between TRC and the Controlled Schools' Support Council;
- Christian ethos in education;
- Fair Employment and Treatment Order (FETO) teacher exemption;
- The Certificate in Religious Education;
- Teacher stress;
- Support for the delivery of Religious Education in schools;
- Training and support for Transferor Governors;
- Areas of mutual interest with representatives of the Catholic Trustees, including jointly managed church schools;
- Transfer to post-primary education;
- Educational disadvantage and underachievement, with particular reference to Protestant working-class boys;
- 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.

14. In September 2016 the TRC briefed the NI Education Committee on its role and work. In December 2016 the TRC made a written submission to the consultation on the Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision – 'Providing Pathways', which called for a holistic approach to planning involving health, social services, youth provision etc. The submission also highlighted the need for capital investment to encourage and support imaginative solutions, and stressed the importance of small schools to many isolated and vulnerable communities.

Controlled Schools' Support Council

15. Following the 2016 report to the General Assembly, the Committee received a presentation on the Controlled Schools' Support Council from its Interim Chair, Mr Uel McCrea. This was a most useful meeting, allowing members to be better informed and providing a forum for questions to be addressed. The discussion considered the place of religion and the growth of other religions in schools; the pressure for secularisation; the success of the controlled

sector in sharing and integration; the purpose and value of ethos; and the need for congregations to engage in a real sense with education in local communities.

16. The vision of the CSSC is to support controlled schools, 'in providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together within the values of a non-denominational Christian environment'.

17. A support body for controlled schools was strongly advocated for over many years by the TRC and the establishment of the CSSC on 1st September 2016 ends a longstanding deficit in the education system and puts in place a body tasked with effectively meeting the needs of controlled schools. Inter alia, the CSSC will provide a representational and advocacy role for controlled schools; work with schools within the sector to develop and maintain its collective ethos; work to raise educational standards; assess ongoing provision within the sector; and participate in the planning of the schools' estate.

18. In January, the Conveners of the Council for Public Affairs and the State Education Committee wrote to all PCI ministers, urging them to use their influence with school governors in their congregations and local communities to encourage uptake of CSSC membership amongst local controlled schools, and to encourage local controlled schools to give careful and prayerful consideration to nominating a potential Director and to send representatives to the CSSC AGM.

19. The inaugural AGM took place on 8th March 2017 and was an historic event, with representatives and greetings from partner organisations joining with members to launch the new organisation. Tributes were paid to those who had worked so hard to bring the CSSC from idea to reality and this report wishes to acknowledge the particular contribution of the Clerk, the Rev Trevor Gribben, for his significant leadership in this regard. The AGM elected its Directors, ratifying the PCI nomination of the Convener of the SEC as one of the three TRC representatives on the Board. The SEC is pleased to report that since the CSSC became operational on 1 September 2016, almost 90% of controlled schools have already taken up membership.

Jointly managed church schools

20. In the past few years, interest has been expressed from some controlled and maintained schools in establishing jointly managed church schools, in which both the representatives of the Transferor Churches and the Catholic Church working together have a joint and balanced role in the management of the school. The Department of Education has been working closely with the TRC and representatives of the Catholic Trustees to consider how this might be implemented. Such a school would likely come from the amalgamation of former controlled and Catholic maintained schools, but may also be an entirely new school.

21. The ethos of the school, arrangements for worship and approach to RE must be agreed prior to any proposal being brought forward. It is the expectation that the ethos would be within a Christian framework which respects both the religious ethos of the Catholic Church and Transferor Churches and where neither ethos would predominate. The school's ethos should contribute to the wider goals of the school and be clearly defined and understood by parents, pupils, staff, governors and the local community. It should also be consistent

with a commitment to promote equality, good relations and diversity within the school and its community.

22. The TRC has set up a Jointly Managed Church Schools Working Group with representatives of the Catholic Trustees to consider what such an ethos would look like. In the course of these deliberations, each denomination has been active in the scrutiny of a Draft Ethos Statement, with the SEC holding a meeting specifically to discuss the statement and recommending the document to the Council for Public Affairs, which fully discussed and endorsed it.

Social disadvantage and educational underachievement

23. At the time of writing, planning is underway for a round-table event for education representatives of the main Protestant denominations on the issue of educational underachievement, particularly in areas of social disadvantage. The event will consider the response of the churches at TRC, denominational and local level to tackle these issues, and provide a forum to discuss best practice in terms of raising standards and highlighting the value of education in local communities.

Further comments

24. As a committee of the Council for Public Affairs, the SEC is keen to build and consolidate relationships with others working on education issues in the public square. As reported, the Convener is now a Director of the CSSC, and remains active in a variety of other bodies. He is engaging with others keen to see faith at the core of education and will be delivering a seminar on ethos and values in education at the Christianity and Culture Summer School at Stranmillis University College. The Public Affairs Officer – as the PCI’s de facto ‘Education Secretary’- has provided support to the SEC and TRC throughout the year, drafting papers and consultation responses, preparing for meetings and committee appearances, and representing both bodies at meetings with various stakeholders in education. The Convener and Committee wish to record their warmest thanks to Gavin for all of his work for and on behalf of the SEC and TRC.

25. 2016/17 has been another busy year in education: as always for pupils and students it has brought its successes and disappointments, and for parents it has brought joy and pain. For schools, governors, principals and teachers, however, it has been extremely challenging and it seems that the teaching profession has become even more beleaguered over the last twelve months.

26. It is our prayer that those involved in the educational provision for our children and young people will know God’s blessing and be assured of the support of PCI and its State Education Committee in championing their efforts. We pray that God will continue to call many Christian people into the profession and that He will impress upon them the value, honour and privilege of serving Him in the field of education.

ANDREW BROWN, Convener

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION PANEL

27. The Peace and Reconciliation Panel was established in the autumn of 2016, replacing the Task Group on Community Relations and Reconciliation. The establishment of a Panel reflects the importance placed on this area of work by Council members.

28. Few a year ago would have anticipated the political convulsions locally, nationally and internationally of recent months. The breakdown of our own political institutions after ten years of relative stability will have come as a major disappointment to many in the community. But we are a people of hope; and it was in times of turmoil and uncertainty that Jeremiah was encouraged by God “to seek the peace and prosperity of the city”.

29. And so the Panel was encouraged to see the roll out of the “Vision for Society”, drafted by the Panel’s predecessor Task Group last year and adopted by the General Assembly in 2016. The Rev Stephen Johnston, on behalf of the Good Relations Panel of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness, has led on making the Vision and associated resources available through the PCI website and, as our political leaders seek a way forward, the Panel commends these for the prayerful consideration and action by Presbyteries and local congregations.

30. The Panel has engaged with the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition which was established following the Stormont House Agreement in 2015. The Council for Public Affairs subsequently responded to an invitation from the Commission to provide an initial submission to inform their deliberations. In addition, members of the Panel met with an MLA who was planning to bring forward a Private Members Bill on the regulation of flags.

31. The Panel acknowledges the importance of ensuring that the Christian perspective on reconciliation is promoted in the public square. The Council Convener has taken a number of opportunities in public fore to explain the scriptural understanding of reconciliation and how this relates to civic reconciliation.

32. The recent inter-party talks have highlighted a range of outstanding issues which continue to frustrate political progress. The Panel will continue to identify, prioritise and seek to develop positions on those which are viewed as most relevant for the PCI.

EDGAR JARDINE, Convener

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND PANEL

33. Though a small minority in the Republic of Ireland, Presbyterians are honoured as having had a distinctive influence by our presence and witness. As its name suggests, the Panel is responsible for addressing issues of public policy in the Republic of Ireland. It has met on two occasions since the last General Assembly. Its work has been focused on possible changes in the education system and the ongoing debate in Irish society about the future of the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution.

Education

34. The Panel is blessed to have an Education Subgroup made up of members with a professional background and/or academic interest in education.

35. Section 7(3)(c) of the Equal Status Act 2000 allows faith based schools to make preferential provision on admissions for children of their faith – i.e. where a school is oversubscribed, the Board of Management may afford a priority to children of families of a particular religious denomination in preference to others. The rationale is that if, for example, an oversubscribed Protestant school is prohibited from using religion as an admissions criterion, it would be difficult for the school to maintain a Protestant ethos among the school community or to remain, to any significant extent, a school of that religion.

36. In January 2017, the Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Richard Bruton TD, set out four possible approaches for changing the rules on school admissions to faith based schools which, if enacted, will diminish or remove the role of faith in determining admissions to oversubscribed faith based schools. The approaches outlined are:

- (a) **Catchment Area:** This would prohibit religious schools from giving preference to children of their own religion who live outside the catchment area over non-religious children or children of other faiths who live inside the catchment.
- (b) **Nearest school rule:** This would allow religious schools to give preference to a religious school only where it is that child's nearest school of that religion.
- (c) **Quota system:** This would allow a school to set a certain proportion of places for children of its own religion.
- (d) **Outright prohibition:** An outright prohibition on faith based schools using religion as a factor in admissions, which would mean that all places would be allocated based on other factors.

37. The Minister subsequently announced a consultation process to hear views from education stakeholders. Given the impact of these proposed changes for schools under Presbyterian and Protestant patronage, the Panel and its Education Subgroup felt it important to make a submission to the Department. The Subgroup drafted a response for consideration by the Panel and the Council, and this was submitted in March 2017. In formulating the response the Panel and Subgroup were mindful of the 2014 General Assembly Resolution: *That the General Assembly express thanks to those who fulfil demanding responsibilities in the oversight of the small but significant number of schools in the Republic of Ireland under Presbyterian Patronage and call upon the Government to ensure that its policy protects minority rights and enables ongoing access to, and the sustainability of, schools with a Protestant ethos.*

38. The following key points were made in the Council's submission:

- (a) As part of their witness and work in the community, Presbyterians have sought to provide a place of education for their own children and the wider community.
- (b) The idea that a School under minority patronage might be forced to abandon their policy of admitting those who belong to their own faith must be anathema in any society that wishes to respect a minority community.

- (c) The possible changes outlined do not address the major problem of an absence of capacity within some areas of high population growth.
 - (d) The Presbyterian community in the Republic of Ireland is a dispersed one, therefore educating children in a school of the desired ethos has often been costly and has required considerable sacrifice by Presbyterian families.
 - (e) To deny any pupil of any Protestant denomination access to a school specifically set up to accommodate such pupils, on the basis that it is 'fairer' to accommodate instead a pupil of the majority faith (for whom there are a wide variety of schools available already) or to a pupil (or family) of no faith is simply not acceptable.
 - (f) A 'Catchment Area' or 'Nearest School Rule' may work for some minority faith schools, but the boarding system espoused by many minority schools effectively extends their catchment area to the entire island.
 - (g) A quota system would undermine rural schools completely, and would further undermine those schools that are currently oversubscribed with students from minority faiths.
 - (h) The Department notes that change "*would also require exemptions for Gaelscoileanna and special schools.*" If such exemptions are to be justified on the basis that the very purpose of such schools is to serve the communities for which these schools are set up, then this equally applies to minority faith schools. Prioritising Protestant applications when there is over-subscription is a must for Protestant schools, as is prioritising Irish-speakers for *Gaelscoileanna*. These are not discriminations but foundational principles.
 - (i) The status quo which has existed to this point – the ability of a school of faith to grant places to those of that faith under the Education Act 1998 and the Equal Status Act – is the only way in which minority faith schools can continue to serve their communities unhindered.
39. At the time of writing it is unclear how the Minister will proceed. However, a meeting has been requested with him to follow up on the Council's response.
40. The Panel anticipates further debate in the coming months and years on issues such as patronage and the place of RE in schools. The Panel's Education Subgroup will continue to monitor developments and respond appropriately.

Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland

41. The Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland was passed in 1983. It reads:

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.

42. In 1992 the Supreme Court ruled, in *Attorney General v. X*, that abortion is permitted under the Constitution only where pregnancy presented 'a real and substantial risk to the life, as distinct from the health, of the mother', including where the risk was through suicide. This was enshrined in legislation

in the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013. The 2013 Act defines the ‘unborn’ as existing from implantation in the womb until ‘complete emergence... from the body of the woman’. This conforms to the Irish Supreme Court judgment of Roche -v- Roche and ors [2009] IESC 82 on the beginning of pregnancy.

43. The Irish Government established a Citizens’ Assembly in 2016 to consider the possible retention, reform or repeal of the Eighth Amendment, as well as several other issues facing Irish society. The Assembly is a body comprising the Chairperson and 99 citizens, randomly selected to be broadly representative of the Irish electorate, and it will report and make recommendations on each topic to the Houses of the Oireachtas for further debate by elected representatives. A submission to the Citizens’ Assembly on the Eighth Amendment was formulated by the Panel, agreed by the Council for Public Affairs and submitted in December 2016. The Assembly is due to meet at the end of April 2017 to formulate and vote on recommendations to the Oireachtas regarding the Eighth Amendment.

44. The PCI opposed the insertion of the Eighth Amendment into the Constitution of Ireland, with the General Assembly passing the following resolution in 1982:

That the General Assembly is firmly opposed to indiscriminate abortion, but does not believe it wise to insert a clause banning abortion into the Constitution of the Irish Republic. The State’s regulation of this and other matters affecting morals should be a matter for legislation by the Dáil and the Senate, and not for definition in the Constitution.

45. A further General Assembly resolution on the matter was passed in 1983:

That the General Assembly reaffirm their resolution of last year (1982 Minutes, p.77) that they are “firmly opposed to indiscriminate abortion, but do not believe that it is wise to insert a clause banning abortion into the Constitution of the Irish Republic”. If, however, a Referendum on this subject is held, the Assembly encourage those of its members who are entitled to vote to do so in accordance with their own judgement.

46. Historically, the reformed perspective on the issue of abortion has been nuanced, and this is reflected in General Assembly resolutions of recent decades. In 1982 the General Assembly declared their ‘opposition to abortion on demand for purely social reasons, or as a means of birth control’, but recognised that there are ‘exceptional cases where medical abortion might be necessary’. The PCI has since recognised the need to allow for termination of pregnancy in extreme cases when allowing the pregnancy to proceed will threaten the life or have a catastrophic effect on the health of the mother, and has acknowledged that the law in Northern Ireland – which permits termination of pregnancy when the mother’s life or permanent or long-term health is at risk – strikes a careful and fine balance between the need to protect the life of the unborn and the need for proper care of the mother. The report of the Abortion Task Group, welcomed at last year’s General Assembly, rejected additional grounds for abortion in cases of ‘fatal fetal abnormality’ and sexual crime, albeit with modifications. In terms of the former, the report concluded that it is consistent with the position of the PCI to accept that we cannot categorically rule out abortion just on a sanctity of life principle in those cases of anencephaly where it takes the form of complete incapacity for either sentience or consciousness. In terms of sexual crime, the report concluded that steps taken to prevent implantation, where there has been

a risk of conception, also cannot be categorically ruled out on a sanctity of life principle, and that different positions on this are consistent with the PCI's position that human life begins at conception.

47. There is a lack of clarity about the legal consequences of repealing the Eighth Amendment. Some believe that the Oireachtas would become the sole judge of the circumstances in which legislation should permit abortion. Others contend that a pre-1983 position revives, whereby the unborn still have implied rights under the Constitution. Furthermore, there is a third view that a simple repeal would remove or severely limit the power of the Oireachtas to constrain the circumstances in which abortion could be prohibited.¹

48. Therefore, in formulating a submission to the Citizens' Assembly the Panel had to take cognisance of the General Assembly's position on the Eighth Amendment and the role of the Constitution in 'matters affecting morals'; the PCI's position on abortion; and legal opinion on the consequences of retaining, reforming or repealing the Eighth Amendment.

49. On the one hand, the General Assembly has resolved that matters such as abortion should not be dealt with through the Constitution. On the other hand, there exists legal opinion that a simple repeal of the Eighth Amendment would have to be interpreted as an unqualified decision to remove protection for the unborn, resulting in abortion on request – a situation that would be in contravention of the General Assembly's position. Furthermore, the Panel was conscious that the current law, shaped by the Constitution, does not allow for termination of pregnancy in some of the exceptional circumstances recognised by the PCI. The submission to the Citizens' Assembly therefore recommended that the Eighth Amendment be reformed to provide access to abortion in extreme cases, where continuation of the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother or will have a catastrophic effect on her physical or mental health, and that in such cases, the most stringent safeguards should be provided.

50. It is highly unlikely that this is the PCI's final position and submission on the issue. As indicated above, the Citizens' Assembly will make a recommendation which will then be discussed by both Houses of the Oireachtas. There is a good possibility that a question on the future of the Eighth Amendment will then be put to the people in a referendum, though at this point we do not know what that question will be. The PCI will need to review its position accordingly through the Panel and Council.

TREVOR MORROW, Convener

1 See Brian Murray, 'Legal Consequences of Retention, Repeal, or Amendment of Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution', paper produced for the Citizens' Assembly, available at www.citizensassembly.ie/en/Meetings/Brian-Murray-s-Paper.pdf

DEALING WITH THE PAST PROJECT TASK GROUP

51. The Task Group is responsible for taking forward the project agreed by the 2016 General Assembly, and is comprised of the Moderator, Clerk, Rev Tony Davidson (Convener), Very Rev Dr Norman Hamilton, Mrs Valerie Stewart, Mrs Catherine Bell, Mr Sam Pollock, the Rev Professor Bill Adley and Mr Gavin Norris.

52. An Academic Advisory Group and Reference Group of current and former Moderators act as a sounding board for the Task Group and monitor the quality and progress of research. The Academic Advisory Group is comprised of The Rt Hon The Lord Alderdice, the Very Rev Principal Stafford Carson, Prof Ian McBride, Dr Duncan Morrow, Dr Ethel White and Dr Gillian Wylie. The Reference Group is comprised of the Very Rev Principal Stafford Carson, the Very Rev Drs Rob Craig and Trevor Morrow and the Rt Rev Dr Frank Sellar.

53. The Task Group applied successfully to the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund and has secured the partnership of Queen's University Belfast in delivering the requirements of the project. The project is entitled 'Reconciliation through Dealing with the Past: Learning from Presbyterian Responses to the Troubles'. At the time of writing, the Task Group is working with Dr Gladys Ganiel (the lead researcher) of QUB in recruiting a research assistant. The project will be academically rigorous and conform to the associated ethical standards.

54. Approximately 100 participants will be interviewed. A letter has been sent to every active minister asking them to identify potential interviewees who were affected by events that took place during the period 1968-2000. Categories of interviewees include: ministers and their spouses; victims and survivors with their families; members of the security services and their families; personnel in emergency and health services and their spouses; politicians; former paramilitaries, some of whom may have served prison sentences; some with valuable insights who may have left the Presbyterian Church; and some "critical friends". The Task Group has also been keen to identify "quiet peacemakers" i.e. when anarchy reigned on the streets they may have kept order in schools, in government and in community and commercial life; these might include civil servants (in local or central government), business people, teachers, social workers, youth workers, local Councillors and journalists, those involved in civic life, or the arts and sport, Loyal Orders or the voluntary sector, and mediators in local disputes. The Task Group has worked with the Academic Advisory and Reference Groups in deciding the proportion from each category that will make up the approx. 100 interviewees, keeping in mind that some will fall into more than one category. The Task Group has also been mindful of the need to maintain a gender and geographical balance.

55. The Task Group would like to thank all those who are willing to help the Church in this project. It is aware of the courage and potential pain involved in remembering stories from a troubled time in our history, but is also aware of the good will and commitment of ministers to pastor those in their local congregations who are most vulnerable.

56. The project has a projected timescale of two years. It is the hope of the Task Group that the project will help to encourage a wider culture of story-telling, so that future generations would have archived a history of the Troubles which emerges out of the experience of Presbyterians in Ireland. Attentive listening should also help to discern any past shortcomings and enable the Church to be better resourced to know where to place its energies in the future.

57. The Christian's primary memory is the memory of Jesus Christ. All memories have to be filtered through his life, death and resurrection. The Project will help to assess how the Church responded to the Troubles according to its own Biblical standards, as well as contribute more effectively to wider societal discussions on dealing with the past. The Task Group prays that the project will be a source of healing to our Church and wider society, and bring glory to our Lord Jesus Christ who has called us to be peacemakers in our time and place. As a result of this project about the past the Church should be able to speak with greater understanding and confidence about our future.

TONY DAVIDSON, Convener

COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

RESOLUTIONS

1. That the General Assembly welcome the establishment of the Controlled Schools' Support Council as a dedicated advocacy and support body for Controlled Schools and strongly encourage the development and maintenance of the Controlled Sector's warm, open, Christian ethos.

2. That the General Assembly thank those who serve as Transferor Governors in schools as they manage increasing and exceptional demands on their time and energy, and the outworking of budgetary uncertainty and decreasing resources.

3. That the General Assembly recognise the need to address educational underachievement and call for the identification of public policies and practical measures that will raise standards and promote the value of education.

4. That the General Assembly:

- (a) note the four potential 'options' in relation to admissions for denominational schools put forward by the Minister for Education and Skills;
- (b) recognise the difficulties that Protestant and other minority faith schools would face if any of the four 'options' were introduced;
- (c) call again upon the Irish Government to ensure that its policy protects minority rights and enables ongoing access to, and the sustainability of, schools with a Protestant ethos.

5. That the Report of the Council for Public Affairs be received.