

GENERAL COUNCIL

SECTION 3

Wednesday – 4.30pm

DOCTRINE COMMITTEE

1. The Doctrine Committee has had several significant matters before it since the last meeting of the General Assembly and, to carry forward this remit, the Committee met on five occasions, in addition to a number of meetings of small groups and a significant amount of work by key individuals.

Report of the Church of Scotland Theological Forum on “An Approach to the Theology of Same Sex Marriage”.

2. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland received an invitation from the Church of Scotland to comment on the recent report of their Theological Forum to their 2017 General Assembly, “An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage” and the General Council requested the Doctrine Committee to draw up comments for its consideration. The Doctrine Committee found the Church of Scotland report to be theologically unconvincing and needing to be re-examined. The report in Appendix 1 was drawn up by the Committee and was adopted by the General Council (under powers conferred on the Council by Par 272(3) of the Code) as the response of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and forwarded to the Church of Scotland.

Same-Sex Couples and the Sacraments

3. At the October 2017 meeting of the General Council the following resolution was passed:

That the Doctrine Committee be requested to draw up guidance for Kirk Sessions where someone in a same-sex marriage or civil partnership wishes to be received onto the Communion Roll (either on presentation of a Disjunction Certificate or on profession of faith), or wishes to present a child for baptism.

4. The report in Appendix 2 was drawn up by the Committee and was received by the General Council at its meeting in March 2018, with the following resolution also being passed by the Council:

That it be recommended to 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.

Participation in Multi-Faith Civic Events

5. The Committee reported to the October 2017 meeting of the General Council that it had reviewed the report and possible courses of action which were reported to the 2017 General Assembly. The Committee recognised that there was a need to consider the important issues in greater detail in light of a number of factors:
- (a) Current trends in the public square are focused on inclusion;
 - (b) Christians are concerned about the nature of true worship;
 - (c) The ‘optics’ are significant in terms of what most people understand to be happening at these events;
 - (d) There have been huge changes in society, and especially in the Republic of Ireland, and the church has achieved very little in many areas of public life and morality;
 - (e) There is a need for greater understanding in terms of what is happening at these events;
 - (f) Symbolism is important;
 - (g) The church must seek to maintain a witness before the watching world.

As a result the Committee agreed that a conference, under the auspices of The Church in the Public Square initiative, would be beneficial in terms of helping us to achieve some clarity on the key issues. This would be aimed at key people in the church, including the Council for Public Affairs.

6. The Committee reported to the March 2018 meeting of the General Council, both on the conference held on Friday, 26th January 2018 and on its further consideration regarding participation in multi-faith civic events (see Appendix 3). The report was received by the General Council, with the following resolution also being passed by the Council:

In light of the rapid change in society, both north and south of the border, it is recommended to the General Assembly that the following statement be issued by the Press Officer on behalf of the General Council at appropriate times relating to civic events in either jurisdiction:

- (a) *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, as a witness to Christ, affirms the God-given dignity of all people, from all faiths and none, on account of their bearing God’s image. Furthermore, we affirm our solidarity with all our neighbours in our common life together. However, as a Church committed to the Lordship of Christ, we decline to participate in interfaith worship or to acknowledge the ultimate claim of any state to control religious worship.*
- (b) *The Presbyterian Church in Ireland recognises that her leaders and members will consider participation in sequential multi-faith civic events where there may be opportunities to read the Bible, speak about God’s grace in Christ or pray for people in need. However, out of concern for God’s glory and the good of our neighbour, we decline to participate in nontrinitarian interfaith worship.’*

DOCTRINE COMMITTEE

APPENDIX 1

RESPONSE TO CHURCH OF SCOTLAND THEOLOGICAL FORUM REPORT 2017

1. The Doctrine Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland welcomes the invitation from the Church of Scotland to comment on the recent report of their Theological Forum to their 2017 General Assembly. The committee recognises that this report – An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage – is the latest in a long line of reports produced for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and understands that the issues are long-standing and contested within the Church. They also address urgent pastoral and cultural matters. The Doctrine Committee offers the following response to the various sections of the report.
2. In such a potentially pivotal moment for the Kirk it appears almost eccentric to base the report of the Theological Forum on one slender and idiosyncratic account of sexual ethics. In the view of the Doctrine Committee a report of such moment for the Church of Scotland requires far more robust apparatus.¹
3. More fundamentally, the committee wishes to highlight the various hermeneutical options offered in the report. The committee rejects the presentation of biblical interpretation offered in the report. Admittedly the report begins acknowledging that “[p]ractically everyone falls into a spectrum between two poles” but then proceeds with an exposition of interpretive method that will lead to a perfect theological subjectivity. The report states:

Another more inclusive argument in favour of same sex relationships rests on a distinction between the written text of Scripture and the living word of God, the latter being associated with Jesus Christ who speaks to us in our hearts and consciences. According to this argument, we owe our allegiance to Jesus Christ the Word made flesh rather than adherence to the literal words of Scripture, and, for that reason, if people believe that Jesus is now calling the Church to a new understanding of how faithfulness may be displayed in human relationships, this should be taken seriously as a contemporary form of obedience. (1.5)

This is to suggest that our Lord’s present word to his church is at odds with what he spoke during his earthly ministry and contradictory to what was written by his Spirit-anointed apostles.

1. Robert S. Song, *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships* (SPCK, 2014)



3. Although this section of the report is only seeking to “summarise the different tendencies of interpretation” (1.3) it is increasingly apparent that this is the position being advanced by the Theological Forum. Again, the report states:

[M]ore conservative readers [tend] to focus on the words of Scripture and more inclusive readers [tend] sometimes to look through rather than at the words of the text (1.7).

4. The committee maintains that there is a faithful Christian reading of Holy Scripture that attends to the witness of the prophets and apostles which extends careful attention to both the very words of the Hebrew and Greek text (perhaps even to the jots and tittles?) and at the same time reads the texts in their canonical, cultural, and redemptive historical context. The committee does not believe that this is an impossible or endlessly enigmatic task. Reformed churches still hold to the perspicuity of Scripture.
5. Furthermore, in a previous year, the Church of Scotland received a report on wealth and poverty which contained copious references to Scripture texts. In the report – A Right Relationship with Money – arguments were based on the apparently plain and straightforward meaning of texts without the need for an anguished ‘looking through’ rather than a ‘looking at’ the words.²
6. The committee acknowledges the account of the development of legal practice in western society in Section 2. Most of this material is based on a single academic article entitled ‘The Natural Law and Innovative Forms of Marriage: A Reconsideration.’³ The various historical vignettes fail to help in addressing the question that is of basic significance – How are creatures required to live? It seems the purpose of this section is to persuade the Church that the historical practice of the Church involved “a complex and contested set of institutional practices.” (2.3.11). Yet it is hard to reconcile the various cultural complexities of previous eras with the radical suggestion that marriage is other than an exclusive male-female union. Indeed, the ultimate weakness in this historical survey is that although there have often been times of cultural and institutional complexity, no previous generation concluded that marriage was anything other than an opposite sex union.

The committee does not accept that the fundamental definition of marriage can be conceived of as a reflection of constantly evolving social conventions. Rather, it believes that the marriage union of husband and wife is an essential revelation of God’s purposes in creation and redemption.

-
2. ‘A Right Relationship with Money’ (2012).
3. J. Porter, “The Natural Law and Innovative Forms of Marriage: A Reconsideration.” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 30, 2 (2010), pp.79-97.



7. The final argument of the report is the most problematic. The authors argue (2.4.2-2.4.15) that Christ's coming inaugurates a new age in which the Second Adam inaugurates his Kingdom and brings all things under his rule, and "does not do so by procreation" (2.4.7). Several responses are in order. First, the Committee believes this is a clear example of an over-realized eschatological perspective. Of course, the gospel proclaims that we will one day be like the angels in heaven (Matt. 22:30), but it is an over-realized eschatology to claim angelic experience now.
8. Secondly, although Song's argument is rooted in Scriptural motifs and the language of Genesis, it severs the link between nature and grace. No longer does grace perfect nature. This would tend towards creating a dualism that separates the supernatural from the natural. In contrast, the Reformed faith confesses that grace restores, renews, and raises the natural. Bavinck summarizes it this way: "[R]e-creation is not a system that supplements creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves creation intact, as in Luther, much less a new creation, as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures."⁴
9. Thirdly, the suggested new paradigm, replacing heterosexual v homosexual with procreative v non-procreative, defines marriage far too narrowly in reproductive terms. The biblical-theological warrant for this move is not presented and the theological tradition of the church has long included within the goods of marriage aspects of human flourishing distinguishable from reproduction yet exclusive to marriage.
10. The Doctrine Committee offers this response with sincere prayers for the flourishing of the Church of Scotland under the Word of God. The plea of the committee is that the Kirk would return to the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures and the great tradition of the Reformed catholic churches. The committee believes that the trajectory developed by the Theological Forum will lead the Kirk to a place of profound loss and will result in the Church of Scotland losing its confessional fidelity, gospel witness, and pastoral effectiveness.

4. Jan Veenhof, *Nature and Grace in Herman Bavinck*, trans. Albert M. Wolters (Dordt College Press, 2006), p.15.

DOCTRINE COMMITTEE

APPENDIX 2

SAME-SEX COUPLES AND THE SACRAMENTS

1. The Doctrine Committee was asked to consider a request from the General Council to prepare guidelines for Kirk Sessions to address the issue of same-sex couples who may seek communicant membership (either by presentation of a disjunction certificate or on profession of faith) or who may request the baptism of a child.
 2. The Committee approached this issue in the understanding that the General Assembly has already agreed pastoral guidelines on homosexuality and has offered substantial pastoral advice for Kirk Sessions.⁵ The focus of this report is on the specific theological question of what constitutes a credible profession of faith and how it is to be understood and applied in these particular pastoral situations.
 3. The response of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to questions of who is to be received on to the communicant roll of a congregation or whose children ought to be baptised is straightforward: those who make a credible profession of faith. Consequently, the Code states that names are only to be entered on the roll of communicants after the Kirk Session “has satisfied itself as to their knowledge, soundness in faith and Christian experience” (40.2). Similarly, when it comes to the question of the recipients of baptism, the Code makes it clear that “a minister shall encourage baptism of the children of all such as make a credible profession of faith. More shall not be required, nor less accepted, by way of profession than that authorised by the Church as a whole” (83.1).
 4. Such an understanding has deep roots in Reformed, and indeed Augustinian, ecclesiology. As Calvin pointed out, the church visible is “the whole multitude, dispersed all over the world, who profess to worship one God and Jesus Christ” (Inst. 4.1.7). Given the church’s obvious lack of infallibility in knowing the heart and judging genuine profession (and what Calvin believed to be the common reality of false profession) the minister and elders judge on the basis of what is visible i.e. the credibility of profession of faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord. Such judgments can of course err, and so, rather than exclude a true believer, these decisions are to be made with charity. Hence *The Book of Public Worship* (2016) states that “A credible profession is one which, in the judgment of charity, may be believed.”⁶
-
5. ‘Pastoral Guidelines on Homosexuality’ in *The Church and Human Sexuality*, Report and Guidelines adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (Moderator’s Advisory Committee, 2013) pp.35-47.
 6. *The Book of Public Worship* (Council for Mission in Ireland, 2016), p.11.



5. It is important to clarify that within the Reformed tradition the notion of a ‘credible profession’ is effectively a shorthand for not only a credible profession of Christ as Saviour but also a credible walk in obedience to him as Lord.
6. This is the clear testimony of Scripture. Genuine repentance will ‘bear fruit in keeping with repentance’ (Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8). Jesus said ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ (John 14:15). The peace and mercy of God rests upon those ‘who walk by this rule’ i.e. the fact that the gospel brings about ‘a new creation’ (Gal. 6:15-16). The Apostle John wrote that ‘we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him’ (1 John 2:3-4). James said that it was not enough to profess faith but that true faith is shown in good works (Jam. 2:18). Paul warned the Corinthian church about the danger of failing to judge by the standards that God had revealed. The apostle viewed public sexual sin as one example of a type of sin that would bar someone from participating in the privileges of membership until there had been repentance and restoration (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 11; 2 Cor. 2:6-7). Paul gives the same counsel to the church for dealing with ‘anyone who does not obey’ apostolic teaching (2 Thess. 3:14).
7. In the context of its discussion on baptism the Confession speaks of those who ‘do actually profess faith in *and obedience unto Christ*’ (28.4). The Larger Catechism answers the question ‘Unto whom is baptism to be administered?’ as follows:

Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, *and obedience to him*, but infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, *and obedience to him*, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptised.⁷

8. James Bannerman in his classic work on Presbyterian polity, *The Church of Christ*, addresses the issue:

It is to the Church as a visible society that the ordinance of discipline has been entrusted; and it is in conformity with its character as the Church visible, that *the administration of discipline in the admission or rejection of members* must be conducted. ... [T]he evidence on which a candidate for admission may be rightly received into the communion of the Church is not a positive proof of regeneration – which no man can give to or receive from another, – but the evidence of a credible profession of faith in Christ, *and a corresponding conduct*.⁸

7. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.166 (italics added for emphasis).

8. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature Powers, Ordinances, Discipline and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), pp.35-36.



9. In Chapter 6, on ‘The members of the Church’, Bannerman says:

So long as the terms of Church membership are acknowledged to be *a visible religious profession, and a corresponding character and conduct to credit it*, there can, with ordinary intelligence and singleness of desire for the purity of the house of God, be no great difficulty in deciding upon such kind of evidence. Thus far, and up to this point, there is a definite rule to walk by, and a competent knowledge to enable the officer-bearers of the Christian society to judge in the matter. *They have power to judge of the outward profession and outward conduct of the candidate for Church membership*; and having the power, they are responsible for the right exercise of it. But when the judgement is transferred from the external profession and character to the inward conviction and experience of the candidate – when, instead of being called upon to determine the credibility of what is seen and may be known in the outward man, the office-bearers of the Church are charged to decide upon the reality of what is unseen and cannot be certainly known in the inner man – it is plain that there is a task committed to them which they are utterly incompetent and unqualified to discharge... [T]he reason for his admission to Church membership... [is] pronounced on his *visible profession and his outward conduct*. The judgment on his spiritual state belongs only to God, and may form the reason for his admission among the members of the invisible Church. The judgment on his outward profession belongs to man, and ought to form the only ground of his admission to, or exclusion from, the membership of the visible Church.⁹

10. The issue of a credible profession of faith is one which has been addressed by Irish Presbyterians in the past. The very influential *A Catechism on the Government and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church* (1835) addressed it as follows:¹⁰

- Chapter IV ‘Discipline of the Church’
- VI. When is a person to be regarded as making a *credible* profession of faith in Christ, and to be admitted to the Communion?
- That man is to be viewed as making a credible profession of religion, who manifests an acquaintance with the leading doctrines of the Gospel, who declares himself a believer in these doctrines, who professes that his heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, *and who maintains a conduct and conversation becoming the Gospel*.

9. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, pp.79-80.

10. John Barnett and James Denham, *A Catechism on the Government and Discipline of the Presbyterian Church*, sixth edition (Belfast, 1840), p.14.

11. John Murray argued: “It is by divine institution that the church, as a visible entity administered by men in accordance with Christ’s appointment, must admit to its fellowship those who make a credible profession of faith in Christ *and promise of obedience to him*.”¹¹ Or similarly, according to Charles Hodge, “the terms of church-membership under all dispensations have been the same, namely, profession of faith *and promise of obedience*.” For Hodge a profession is believable if it is “one against which no decisive, tangible evidence can be adduced.” He offers the example of an individual who “avows a purpose of obedience while leading an ungodly life” and contends that “the Church is authorized and bound to refuse to receive him.”¹²
12. For A.A. Hodge, a credible profession was one that was “sufficiently corroborated by the daily life of the professor” and as such was “ground for the presumption that the person is a member of the true Church, and consequently constitutes him a member of the visible Church, and lays an obligation upon all other Christians to regard and treat him accordingly.”¹³ Elsewhere A.A. Hodge summarised a credible profession as one that “involves a competent knowledge of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, a declaration of personal faith in Christ and of devotion to his service, and a temper of mind *and a habit of life consistent therewith*.”¹⁴
13. This emphasis is seen in the pamphlet on ‘The Baptism of Children’ produced by the Board of Christian Training as it explains the notion of a credible profession as follows: it is “a profession accompanied by some understanding of the Christian faith, *a lifestyle in accordance with Christian values*, and public commitment to the worshipping Christian community.”¹⁵
14. Dr Vern Poythress develops guidelines for the application of this idea of a profession being credible if it is accompanied by a believable willingness to walk the path of obedience and discipleship. He explains that as the Kirk Session seeks to make a judgment it must avoid twin errors that he labels “indifferentism and rigourism.” On the one hand, indifferentism fails to take seriously the need for credible evidence of repentance. On the other, rigourism “simply misunderstands Christian growth” and has “a false conception of the purity of the church” in

11. John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p.36 (italics added for emphasis).

12. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: Nelson, 1873), 3.574 (italics added for emphasis).

13. A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869), p.425.

14. A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: Nelson, 1879), 114 (italics added for emphasis).

15. www.presbyterianireland.org/Utility/About-Us/Sacraments/Baptism.aspx (italics added for emphasis).

- that it requires at the beginning a degree of sanctification that only comes with maturity.¹⁶
15. The conclusion must be that a credible profession of faith involves a lifestyle that is in accord with Christian values and biblical teaching. Deviation from that Christian lifestyle may take many forms and we do not wish to create an unnecessary hierarchy of sin or designate one lifestyle to be the only one which disqualifies people. Kirk Sessions need to recognise that Christian discipleship requires an acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ in every area of life and they should ensure that congregations are encouraged to live in a way that is consistent with their profession of faith.
 16. The Doctrine Committee recognises the danger of giving the impression that there is the only area where sacramental discipline might apply. However, the current request to the Doctrine Committee asks for guidance in one particular area.
 17. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland has a clear position on marriage and human relationships based on the teaching of the Bible.
 - (a) The position that has been clearly and consistently adopted in PCI is that homosexual activity is not consistent with Christian discipleship since it does not accord with the will of God expressed in his moral law.
 - (b) The apostolic witness in the New Testament unambiguously regards homosexual activity as contrary to nature, understood as God's created order, and that it sets forth a permanent principle of creation, not a culturally limited perception.¹⁷
 18. In light of our understanding of Scripture and the Church's understanding of a credible profession of faith it is clear that same sex couples are not eligible for communicant membership nor are they qualified to receive baptism for their children. We believe that their outward conduct and lifestyle is at variance with a life of obedience to Christ.
 19. In this context it is important to emphasise that the Church invites and welcomes all who wish to sit under the means of grace at public services and to have access to the pastoral care and counsel available within her fellowship. Like her Lord, she reaches out to all with love and compassion. This posture of grace and welcome should not in itself be confused with moral indifference or approval of any behaviour contrary to God's Word. It is rather the warmest of invitations to receive Christ Jesus as both Lord and Saviour in all of life.

16. Vern S. Poythress, 'Indifferentism and Rigorism' *Westminster Theological Journal* 59.1 (1997) p.15.

17. Stephen N. Williams, 'The Question of Homosexuality' in *The Church and Human Sexuality: Report and Guidelines Adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Moderator's Advisory Committee, 2013), p.7.

20. As with all who have adopted a lifestyle that is not in accord with Christian values, the responsibility of minister and Kirk Session is to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and encourage such individuals to walk in the ways of the Lord and to honour Christ in all their behaviours and relationships (Eph. 4:17-24). This discipling process requires careful instruction and personal counsel and ought to be a priority for Kirk Sessions as they provide pastoral oversight for all people under their care.¹⁸

DOCTRINE COMMITTEE

APPENDIX 3

Participation in Multi-Faith Civic Events

1. In response to the request of the Church for guidelines on participation at multi-faith civic events, the Doctrine Committee presented a report to the 2017 General Assembly.¹⁹ This was a continuation of the consideration given in the 2007 Report and which recognised the need for further thought given the changes in our situation. The Committee noted in the 2017 report that substantial reflection on the theological basis for involvement in multi-faith events might be facilitated by an event which helped to orient us to these complex issues and we should draw on the expertise of scholars who have a particular interest in this area.
2. A symposium was held on Friday, 26th January 2018 to which members of the General Council, the Council for Public Affairs, the Doctrine Committee and students for the ministry were invited. They were addressed by Dr Daniel Strange, College Director of Oak Hill Theological College, London, and by Professor Francis Campbell, Vice-Chancellor of St Mary's University, Twickenham.
3. Dr Strange outlined the unique challenges facing the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in addressing this issue, and the importance of recognising the intersection between the theology of religions and public theology. He acknowledged that his consultations with other scholars in the reformed world had been unsuccessful in terms of providing templates or direct advice in addressing the issue before us. He believes that an important key in helping us to understand non-Christian religions is that of idolatry.

[N]on-Christian religions are sovereignly directed, variegated and dynamic, collective human idolatrous responses to divine revelation behind which stand deceiving demonic forces. Being antithetically against yet parasitically dependent upon the truth of

18. The Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.173

19. General Assembly Annual Reports (2017), pp.103-15.

the Christian worldview, non-Christian religions are ‘subversively fulfilled’ in the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁰

4. This understanding of non-Christian religions sees them as distortions and displacements of divine revelation which possess features that are similar to, and which counterfeit, divine revelation. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can therefore be understood as the ‘subversive fulfilment’ of such religions.
5. From the perspective of the Committee, while the issue of idolatry raises many questions concerning the implications of religious error and the nature of acceptable worship, it is clear that there is a prior theological issue concerning the exclusive claims of the Lord Jesus Christ and the application of his sole mediatorial role to broader questions of religious worship.
6. Dr Strange advocated the development of a theological vision which will inform both strategy and tactics, and the need for clarity, creativity, imagination and proactivity as we navigate the complexities. As Reformed Christians, we must subversively fulfil and ‘re-possess’ values like liberty, mercy in judgment, natural rights, and openness to speech.
 - (a) It is in fact Christianity that does the work of forming citizens for common life and the public good. The irony would be that Christianity would remind society how to be (classically) liberal.
 - (b) Late modern liberal democracy – as the default configuration of the earthly city today – is at the same time ultimately deficient and disordered, and often disorders our loves. So our political engagement requires not only dismissal or permission or celebration but rather the hard, messy work of discernment in order to foster both ad hoc resistance to its ultimate pretensions and ad hoc opportunities to collaborate on penultimate ends.²¹
7. In commending a ‘subversive fulfilment’ framework and vision which loves God and neighbour, he concluded that:
 - (a) We should affirm (and be seen to affirm) the God-given dignity of people from other religions on account of their bearing God’s image.
 - (b) We should affirm (and be seen to affirm) our solidarity and ‘being-together among all people’ (sunousia as distinct from koinonia).
 - (c) We must not affirm (or be seen to affirm) religious ‘cherished’ pluralism or syncretism.
 - (d) We must not affirm (or be seen to affirm) the ultimate sovereignty of the State.

20. Daniel Strange, *Their Rock is not as our Rock: An Evangelical Theology of Religions* (Leicester: Apollos, 2016), p.239.

21. James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), pp.17, 148.

8. Professor Campbell addressed the issue from the perspective of an experienced diplomat who has had to arrange ‘multi-faith civic events’ and who has extensive involvement in inter-faith dialogue. Not only has he advised governments on how to handle faith groups but he has offered some useful practical points for faith groups to apply when dealing with governments. He encouraged the Church to go for substantial engagement over tokenistic activity, and not to be too shy or retiring. By understanding policy frameworks, we can influence government and policies through accessing appropriate channels at the right time.
9. There was a helpful response from those who attended the conference with most suggesting that the Church should not remove itself from participation in such multi-faith events but that any engagement should not compromise our confessional commitments. A number of key questions were raised about the circumstances under which Presbyterians might participate, for example, what is the difference between a ‘worship service’ and a ‘religious civic event’?
10. In a further reflection on the discussions that took place at our conference, Dr Strange wrote an editorial for *Themelios* in which he made the following points:²²
 - (a) “The topic of engaging with multi-faith civic events might appear on the surface to be a textbook open-and-shut case. Our theology of religions cannot be syncretistic, neither will we want to be perceived as being syncretistic to a watching world. Against all other so-called ‘gods’ which are lifeless and futile idols, we proclaim the transcendent uniqueness and crown rights of Jesus Christ our Lord, ‘Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12).”
 - (b) “However, there are some complications. While our theology of religions might ask soteriological and alethic questions, the answers to which push us in one direction, our public theology asks different questions which pull us in a different direction. We are aware of the dangers of cultural extractionism, of our mandated Christian (and ecclesial) civic and public responsibilities, and of that same ‘watching world’ perceiving by our action or inaction, all kinds of things which affect the plausibility structures into which we witness and proclaim the exclusivity of Christ.”
 - (c) There are at least two distinctions that need to be made. “The first surrounds what we mean by ‘multi-faith civic events’. So ‘multi-faith’ can be distinguished from ‘inter-faith’; an ‘event’ needs to be distinguished from a ‘service’ (which itself needs careful definition) and the word ‘worship’ which is not used at all,

22. Daniel Strange, *Themelios* 43.1 (forthcoming April 2018).
Available at: <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/issue/43-1>

even though we may conclude that that is what is happening.²³ “Moreover, what is being proposed is not a syncretistic ‘mush’ but in an attempt to avoid syncretism, consciously ‘sequenced’ or ‘seriatim’ contributions from faith communities.” The Committee believes it is vital to maintain the distinction between the assembly which meets for the covenant worship of God and multi-faith civic events at which prayers are offered for the nation and the Bible is read. It is a good and positive act of witness, in our increasingly secular societies, when Christian leaders can accept the opportunity to seek the help of the Triune God in the public space at civic events.

- (d) Now under *these* conditions, and if we could engineer the opportunity, could we start to conceive of a contribution that might not only not be syncretistic, but could be positively apologetic and evangelistic? How can we affirm the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in such a setting?
- (e) It may be helpful to note the format of a National Memorial Service held at St Paul’s Cathedral in London for the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire where seventy-one people had died, including a large number of Muslims. “As part of this service, Muslim schoolgirls sang a song called *Insha Allah*. While we may believe the inclusion of this element to be wrong, in the context of the Church of England guidance, we can begin to see how such a decision might be defended. They were Muslims and they sang a song to ‘Allah’. But the song’s words were carefully vetted so it could be argued that they were not *intrinsically* and *necessarily* Islamic. St Paul’s Cathedral was emphatic that this National Memorial Service was not interfaith. None of the prayers at the service were led by any but Christian representatives. Reports said, misleadingly, but not strictly inaccurately, that prayers were said by ‘faith community leaders’ when in fact it was only Christian pastors. That media outlets reported it as such just shows their lazy journalism. Overall the rationale for the inclusion of this element in the service seemed to be that, as an established church ministering to the whole community over an extraordinary and very public tragedy, this was believed to be making a reasonable adjustment without compromising the truth of the faith. Even if this was the rationale, some may still think it did compromise the truth of the faith, but it is not as clear-cut as some might imagine.”
- (f) We need to remember our particular situation as the Presbyterian Church in Ireland operating across the island and within two

23. One denomination which does give this definition in the context of this issue is The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. See their ‘Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events’ April 2004.

Available at: www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=354 Overall this was one of more helpful documents we read although it should be noted that when it comes to the issue of ‘seriatim’ prayers, the report notes that there was not unanimity within the Commission.

jurisdictions. Any discussion of ‘multi-faith civic events’ in Ireland cannot be conducted without recognition to the current state of Protestant-Catholic relationships and the wider civic discourse. “Our theology needs to be ethnographically sensitive and ‘lived’.”²⁴ so that we are “better students of the real”,²⁵ what Smith calls “...the ad hoc, contextualised work of discerning what faithful political presence looks like in this time, in our place, given these current challenges and these policy proposals and this political environment...”²⁶

- (g) It is important to remember the context in which the current pattern emerged. The Irish Republic produced a pattern for interfaith worship which was unacceptable to the Presbyterian community, and in response the Dublin and Munster Presbytery proposed the sequential model to avoid syncretism. This became the template for all civic events in the Republic of Ireland.
 - (h) In considering how we engage with ‘multi-faith civic events’ we have to navigate between two tramlines. One the one hand, a stance of subversive confrontation which proclaims the Lordship of Christ horizontally in the context of other ‘religions’ and vertically against the pretensions of ultimacy that come from late-modern liberalism which so often views religion as ‘window-dressing’ but is it itself deeply ‘religious’. On the other hand, a stance of fulfilling connection which recognises the time and our space and place: the story of “how modernity is the Child of Christianity, and at the same time how it has left its father’s house and followed the way of the prodigal.”²⁷ Using stolen capital such cultural conditions have birthed a strange looking child called the ‘multi-faith civic event’ which we need to relate to.
11. As the 2007 Report indicated, we recognise that “we are now operating within a new context with respect to the relations of Christianity, civil law and civil society” and that we need continually to re-assess the issue of church-state relations. The issue of participation in multi-faith civic events is an indicator of this need. The price for ongoing participation in civic events is constant vigilance to ensure clarity of purpose and appropriate boundaries between contributions. In particular, the language of ‘multi-faith civic events’ should be encouraged and, as far as possible, retained.

J STAFFORD CARSON, Convener

24. Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), p.64.

25. Christian Scharen, “‘Judicious Narratives’, or Ethnography as Ecclesiology” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 58 (2005): pp.125-42, 131.

26. Smith, *Awaiting the King*, p.97.

27. Oliver O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, p.275. Quoted in Smith, *Awaiting the King*, p.112.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER DENOMINATIONS TASK GROUP

1. The substantive report of the Task Group was received, and its main recommendations agreed, at the 2017 General Assembly (see 2017 Reports pages 72-99). The General Assembly, in receiving that report and accepting all of its recommendations apart from one, formally reaffirmed or established the position of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) with regard to:
 - (a) a paper outlining the Reformed Doctrine of the Church and its implications, emphasising the necessary commitment to both unity and truth with regard to inter-church relations;
 - (b) the categories of inter-church relationship used by PCI;
 - (c) the framework and principles for PCI's global mission partnership;
 - (d) the continued membership of PCI in the formal inter-church structures in Ireland;
 - (e) the continued membership of PCI of the World Communion of Reformed Churches;
 - (f) the General Assembly's councils being encouraged to continue to develop strategic partnerships, often on an ad hoc or project basis, with other denominations and parachurch organisations;
 - (g) a clear statement of PCI's position in regard to human sexuality and marriage – for the benefit of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland as a denomination and the integrity of PCI's witness;
 - (h) a stated commitment to ongoing biblical reform both in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and in the Church of Scotland;
 - (i) the development of a formal fraternal relationship with the Free Church of Scotland, through areas of mutual interest in the Councils of the respective Assemblies.
2. During the past year the Task Group has met on three occasions to take forward the remainder of its work, largely falling into three areas:
 - (a) PCI's involvement with inter-church bodies and para-church organisations in Ireland (in addition to continued membership of the formal Irish inter-church structures reaffirmed at the 2017 General Assembly);
 - (b) PCI's involvement in European and/or world inter-church bodies (in addition to continued membership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, WCRC, as reaffirmed at the 2017 General Assembly);
 - (c) PCI's formal relationship with the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church.

Other inter-church bodies and para-church organisations in Ireland

3. In the Task Group’s 2017 Report (see 2017 Reports page 75, par 13(c)) it was noted:
 - (a) PCI, or its General Assembly councils, relates to a number of denominations through shared membership of other bodies e.g. Development Agencies; YouthLink (NI); Safeguarding Bodies; etc.
 - (b) PCI, or its General Assembly councils, relates to, and works in partnership with, a number of ad hoc bodies and parachurch agencies and independent fellowships with an inter-church dimension e.g. CARE; Evangelical Alliance; Life (NI); etc.
4. The Task Group would encourage the General Assembly’s councils to proactively take up the commendation of the 2017 General Assembly “to continue to develop strategic partnerships, often on an ad hoc or project basis, with other denominations and parachurch organisations.” (2017 Reports page 75. Par 17(b)).
5. Following further discussion during the past year, the Task Group recommends to the General Assembly that the Council for Public Affairs be encouraged to develop a formal relationship with Evangelical Alliance NI, possibly in a similar manner to the formal relationship that once existed between the former Board of Mission in Ireland and Evangelical Alliance (NI).

PCI’s involvement in European and/or world inter-church bodies (in addition to continued membership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, WCRC, as reaffirmed at the 2017 General Assembly)

6. The 2017 General Assembly decided that PCI: “explores membership of the World Reformed Fellowship, with a report coming to the 2018 General Assembly.” (2017 Reports page 75, par 17(b)). Following discussion, the Task Group are not at present convinced that the potential benefits of membership of WRF are so clearly obvious that such membership should be actively pursued at present. However, the Task Group recommends to the General Assembly that the Church Relations Committee be asked to keep the issue of PCI’s possible membership of WRF on its agenda.
7. The 2017 General Assembly also decided that: “PCI reviews its membership of both CCPE and CEC (recognising that it could associate with CEC through the Irish Council of Churches), with a report coming to the 2018 General Assembly.” (2017 Reports page 75 par 17(c)). The Task Group noted that the General Assemblies of both these bodies are being held in 2018, normally being held every six or seven years. The Task Group therefore recommends to the General Assembly that the Church Relations Committee consider this matter further in the ensuing year and report with recommendations to the 2019 General Assembly, having received reports from its Convener, the Rev John Brackenridge, following his attendance in June at the

CEC General Assembly and from the Clerk of Assembly, following his attendance in September at the CCPE General Assembly.

PCI's formal relationship with the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church

The United Reformed Church

8. During discussions over the last few years, both in the Task Group and in the General Council, it was recognised that the United Reformed Church (URC) has taken a similar line to the Church of Scotland in adopting a revisionist trajectory in relations to decisions about homosexuality. Some would argue that the URC had already gone much further than the Church of Scotland in this regard and had already taken decisions to further deviate from what PCI views to be the clear teaching of Scripture in these matters.
9. It was however recognised last year, in debate in the General Council, that PCI had not formally engaged with the URC on these matters in a similar way to how it had engaged with the Church of Scotland. Therefore, during the past year, formal talks were held with representatives of the URC, with a PCI delegation travelling to London in November 2017. There were full and frank discussions, held in a cordial and gracious manner, and the outcome was a clear recognition that the URC was not only on the same trajectory as the Church of Scotland, but was significantly further down that road. While it was noted that, because of the 'congregational' influence on URC governance, much of its legislation was of a permissive rather than directive nature, nonetheless the URC had chosen to deviate significantly from what the PCI would view as the clear teaching of Scripture.
10. The Task Group recognises that there has not historically been the same level of ongoing collaboration between the councils, committees and departments of the PCI and of the URC as there has been between the PCI and the CofS. The representatives of both the PCI and the URC agreed that future contrived symbolic activity would not be beneficial to anyone. However, it was agreed that, if there were future natural areas of collaboration (through respective councils, committees and departments) which would be for the mutual benefit of both denominations, then ideally such collaboration could take place.

The Church of Scotland

11. The 2017 General Assembly encouraged "members of the Task Group to hold informal discussions with those within the Church of Scotland who are working for its reform and renewal, and coming from the 'traditionalist view', in order that the PCI might offer constructive support." (2017 Reports page 76 par 18(e)). As a result, a meeting was held in Scotland in December 2017 between members of the Task Group and a number of ministers who had remained within the

Church of Scotland but held a clear traditionalist line on the presenting issues, and therefore differed strongly with the position and trajectory of their denomination.

12. While this meeting, along other informal contacts, was useful, and at the very least was a demonstration of PCI's support for those who hold a traditionalist view, it did not bring absolute clarity as to the way ahead. There is a range of views held by traditionalists within the Church of Scotland on the matter of PCI's ongoing formal relationship with their denomination, with the following simply being a summary:
 - (a) Traditionalists are generally glad that PCI made the initial decision not to send its Moderator to the Scottish General Assembly. They indicated that this helped ensure that traditionalists within the CofS could not be portrayed as a small and an irrelevant minority, but rather they were holding to the longstanding mainstream biblical position held in the wider church. Views on the decisions in subsequent years not to send the Moderator were however mixed, with some in favour of the Moderator now returning, while others were not.
 - (b) Most felt that “without relationship there is no influence for reform”, especially at denominational level. Some therefore felt that it would be helpful to have a working relationship at that level. Indeed specific natural co-operation at the denominational level (as opposed to contrived symbolic activity), could be of positive benefit for both denominations. PCI showing an interest in issues other than sexuality, particularly where the CofS is open to positive interaction, would be a sign of genuine loving concern that could be positively received.

Recommendations as to the way forward

- 13 The Task Group recommends to the General Assembly that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland [**one option to be selected**]
 - (a) should no longer accept invitations to the Moderator of the General Assembly, or any other formal delegation, to attend the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church and no longer issue invitations to those two denominations to attend the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.
 - (b) should resume accepting invitations for the Moderator of the General Assembly to attend the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and should continue to accept such invitations from the United Reformed Church.
14. The Task Group recommends to the General Assembly that, where there are areas in which the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Church of Scotland could collaborate together for the mutual benefit of both (through their respective councils, committees and departments), then such collaboration should continue or could be considered.

15. The Task Group recommends to the General Assembly that future natural areas of collaboration with the United Reformed Church (through respective councils, committees and departments), which would be for the mutual benefit of both denominations, could be considered.

TREVOR D GRIBBEN. Convener

CHURCH RELATIONS COMMITTEE

1. Since the 2017 General Assembly, the Church Relations Committee continues to have an overview of the various inter-church bodies to which the Presbyterian Church in Ireland belongs, namely the Irish Council of Churches, the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe and the Council of European Churches. The Committee Convener, the Chairman (the Very Rev Dr Ivan Patterson) and the Rev Lorraine Kennedy-Richie sit on the Relationships with other Denominations Task Group and updated the Committee on the discussions taking place.

Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter-Church Committee

2. Both the Irish Council of Churches Executive and the Irish Inter-Church Committee met on a regular basis throughout the year and the Committee received reports regarding their programmes of work. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland is represented on the Inter-Church Committee by the Committee Convener and the Clerk, with the Very Rev Dr Ivan Patterson joining them on the ICC Executive. The Clerk also sits on the Joint Management Committee, which oversees the financial and practical affairs of both bodies.
3. The AGM of the Irish Council of Churches took place on Thursday, 22nd March 2018 in Drogheda Presbyterian. At this meeting Bishop John McDowell completed his two year term as President of ICC and was succeeded by the Rev Brian Anderson of the Methodist Church in Ireland. The Very Rev Dr Ivan Patterson took up the post of Vice President of the ICC. The key note speaker was Mr Kevin Conmy, Joint Secretary of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Secretariat, who focused on the implications of BREXIT for the island of Ireland from the perspective of the Irish Government.
4. The annual Irish Inter-Church Meeting was held on Thursday 23rd and Friday, 24th November 2017 on the theme of 'Proclaiming Christ to Families Today'. Among the speakers were Fr. Timothy Bartlett, General Secretary of the World Meeting of Families, Dr Bridget Nichols, Church of Ireland Theological Institute, Dr Graeme Thompson, PCI's Youth Development Officer, Prof. Gordon Harold, Professor of Child and Adolescent Mental Health at the University of Sussex, Caroline

Bradley, National Representative of Care for the Family and Martin O’Brien, Journalist/Broadcaster specialising in religious affairs. Again, everyone on the PCI delegation felt that this was an excellent and very worthwhile meeting, with a high calibre input and helpful discussion sessions.

World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC)

5. The Clerk of Assembly, the Rev Trevor Gribben, who was the PCI Delegate to the 2017 WCRC General Council, reported to the Committee as follows:

- (a) The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is comprised of 80 million Christians in Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting and Waldensian churches. The WCRC, working with its 225+ member churches, is active in over 105 countries. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) was a founder member of WCRC’s predecessor body, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.
- (b) The 26th General Council of WCRC was held in Leipzig, Germany from 27th June to 7th July 2017, under the theme ‘Living God: Renew and Transform Us’. The Clerk of the General Assembly, the Rev Trevor Gribben, represented PCI and the Rev Cheryl Meban, a member of the outgoing Executive Committee was also present in a non-voting (but hard working) capacity.
- (c) The following is a summary of some of the main business of the Council:

(i) Leadership:

The Rev Najla Kassab, a minister in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL), was elected as President of the WCRC. The Nominating Committee who brought a selection of nominees for the WCRC Executive Committee to the General Council said, “with her experience and many gifts, Najla’s vision, insight, spiritual strength and grace make her the right person to lead us forward as President”. The four vice-presidents are Rev Dr. Samuel Ayete-Nyampong (Ghana), Rev Dr. Lisa Vander Wal (United States), Rev Sylvana Maria Apituley (Indonesia) and Raissa Vieira Brasil (Brazil). They serve on a 22 person Executive Committee, with Dr Hefin Jones, of the Union of Welsh Independents, representing UK and Ireland – a position held for the past seven years by the Rev Cheryl Meban.

(ii) Celebration:

There was a genuine note of celebration running throughout the Council. This, of course, had much of its focus on the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation and the entire Council visited the place where it all began. Wittenberg is often referred to as the birthplace of the Reformation, and

the General Council held an impressive worship service in Martin Luther's Church. Historic sites were visited, along with time spent at the exhibition on the many facets of the Reformation, showing the impact the Reformation has had around the world.

As the Council was meeting, in what was formerly East Germany, there was also a strong theme of 'liberation from oppression' running through the Assembly. This featured a focus on the fall of the Iron Curtain, including a visit to Berlin and an impressive prayer service in the Nikolaikirche, where Christians meeting for prayer and witness contributed to the overthrow of oppressive communism in East Germany. The theme however was also reflected in the Council's focus on contemporary struggles for freedom and peace such as in Korea, the Middle East and Sudan, to name but a few. An important and powerful focus of the Council on the often violent subjection of women in many cultures, also picked up that same theme of liberation from oppression.

(iii) Significant Decisions:

Like many such councils, the WCRC General Council attempted to say something about almost everything, lest something was missed! This resulted in long and detailed discussion at the start of the week (often overrunning allocated time slots). The Council received lengthy papers on many themes such as Contemporary Theology, Justice and Gender Justice, Mission in Communion and the Strengthening of Communion. Introductions to most of this material can be found on the WCRC website (www.wcrc.ch). Discussion was set in the context of daily worship sessions along with group Bible study and a number of more formal services.

One of the most significant events of the 2017 General Council was the association of WCRC to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), drawn up initially between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. PCI were opposed in principle to the association of WCRC to JDDJ. PCI not only voted against it in the consultation stage prior to the Council but also provided WCRC with clear reason for doing so. This was drawn up by our Doctrine Committee and approved by our General Council. In Leipzig, PCI's opposition to the decision to associate was articulated and our formal dissent was both registered and noted in the minutes of the Council. It was stressed, both in the written material and in presentations from the platform, that the decision of the Council did not in any way associate an individual denomination to JDDJ, but rather the WCRC as an organisation. PCI's delegate was

graciously received, along with those from other Churches opposing association. It was apparent that this process was a European and North American priority, which was largely ignored by the overwhelming majority of WCRC Churches, especially throughout Africa and Asia – ‘a western obsession, not relevant to mission on our continent’ was the way one African delegate put it.

(iv) **Genuine Fellowship:**

Differences in theological understanding, both as it related to doctrinal statements and approaches to moral and ethical issues, were very evident. It was however interesting to note that the more conservative theological emphasis of PCI is shared by a significant number of member Churches of the Communion, as well as by individuals from other delegations. This is especially true with regards to Churches from Africa, Asia, many countries in Latin America and throughout Eastern Europe. There was also common ground found in relation to many issues with some Churches in North America, Australasia and Western Europe. Fellowship was real, even where difference existed, and there was a real sense of the world wide reformed family meeting in Council. In that context, many brothers and sisters, especially from Africa and Asia, greatly appreciated the stand taken and the speeches made by PCI and other more conservative western delegates.

The Council of European Churches (CEC) and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)

6. The Conference of European Churches 15th General Assembly will be held from 31st May to 6th June 2018 in Novi Sad, Serbia. The 2017 PCI General Assembly appointed Rev John Brackenridge to represent PCI. There will also be representatives from the Church of Ireland, Methodist Church in Ireland and the ICC.
7. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe will hold its 8th General Assembly from 13th to 18th September 2018 in Basle, Switzerland. The General Council appointed the Clerk, the Rev Trevor Gribben, to represent PCI.

Meeting with Church of Ireland

8. The annual meeting with representatives of the Church of Ireland was held on Tuesday, 30th January 2017 in Church House, Dublin. This covered issues such as ministering in linkages of a number of small congregations, engagement between theological colleges, and the implications of transitivity for inter-church relations.

JOHN BRACKENRIDGE, Convener