

GENERAL COUNCIL

SECTION 3

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

(This report was remitted from the 2020 General Assembly Standing Commission for consideration and decision at the 2021 General Assembly. The implementation dates have been adjusted accordingly.)

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The General Assembly in 2019 agreed that the report of the Decision Making and Dissent Task Group be sent down to presbyteries for discussion and comment. The presbyteries approached the request for comments in a number of ways. Some asked a task group to form a report which was debated at presbytery. Others considered the response over two presbytery meetings and a few arranged special meetings of presbytery and had round-table discussion inviting interested elders from congregations to take part.
2. The Task Group was pleased to have received responses from all 19 presbyteries and was encouraged by the manner in which the report was received, and by the constructive contributions that were offered in the replies.
3. The Task Group had suggested some relevant background papers in the 2019 report. The feedback from presbyteries highlighted some additional papers in particular which the Task Group noted.
 - (a) Papers listed in 2019 report:
 - 1974 Report re ‘A Brief Statement concerning Faith and Order’
 - 1981 Doctrine Committee Report re ‘Subscription to Creeds and Confessions’
 - 1990 Report of the Judicial Commission re ‘Liberty of Conscience’
 - 2014 Report of the General Board re ‘Freedom of Individuals to Express Opinions’
 - 2018 General Council Report (extracts)
 - (b) Additional papers highlighted by Presbyteries:
 - The 1979 Judicial Commission report re ‘Formula of Subscription’
 - The 1982 Judicial Commission Report re ‘Memorial of the Rev W.W. Porter’

- The 1988 General Assembly Minutes re Westminster Confession of Faith (the interpretation of the Pope as the Antichrist)
4. The presbyteries were asked some focused questions on section (C) of the 2019 report, which referred to ‘Areas in which greater clarity is needed and where there is room for improvement’. The presbytery responses highlighted some main issues for further consideration by the Task Group, namely:
 - (a) The need to improve how significant issues come to the General Assembly for decision – support was indicated for the introduction of a ‘Green Paper’ process.
 - (b) The need to re-examine how the General Assembly conducts its business - including the role of retired ministers in General Assembly decision making.
 - (c) The need to bring greater clarity regarding the standing of General Assembly decisions and the meaning and scope of dissent.
 - (d) The need to improve how General Assembly decisions/policies are communicated.
 - (e) The need to clarify how General Assembly decisions/policies can be changed.

B. TOWARDS A NEW PROCESS FOR BRINGING REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

5. It was noted that there was significant support for wider consultation prior to important decisions being made or policies finalised. More ‘conference style’ meetings to help shape policy were commended, as was a compulsory ‘Green Paper Consultation Stage’ prior to significant new policies being decided by the General Assembly. It was also noted that the volume of routine business, generated on an annual basis by Assembly bodies, leaves little space or time for strategic thinking and significant debate at the General Assembly each year.
6. ‘Conference style’ meetings could take a number of forms:
 - One large conference in the Assembly Hall with, say, 6-8 representatives from each presbytery, involving input from ‘experts’, facilitated discussion round tables and structured feedback.
 - A number of similar regional conferences, combining four or five presbyteries, allowing for a greater number of participants.
 - Presbytery-based conferences, with each congregation having a number of representatives. ‘Expert’ input could be by coordinated video presentations or even ‘live streamed’ input and interaction.
7. In light of this feedback from presbyteries, the Task Group considered a number of options regarding how the General Assembly receives reports and makes decisions and brings the following four recommendations for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly:

Recommendation 1:

That from the 2022 General Assembly onwards, subsequent to each General Assembly, up to two sets of regional or presbytery ‘conference style’ meetings be held – a first set could be held in the summer/autumn after the General Assembly and a second set could be held during the late winter/spring preceding the next General Assembly. These regional conferences could, in any particular year:

- (a) reflect on specific matters remitted by the General Assembly and/or on the implementation of new policies decided by the General Assembly (first set of conferences);
- (b) give preliminary consideration to strategic and significant policies and issues (first set of conferences);
- (c) be forums for discussion and giving guidance regarding matters coming to the General Assembly prior to recommendations being finalised (second set of conferences);
- (d) be an opportunity to be informed about and consider significant issues prior to decision-making at the General Assembly (second set of conferences).

Recommendation 2:

That from the 2022 General Assembly onwards, where a significant change of policy is being considered, or a new policy being proposed (especially where the matter is strategic or potentially controversial), there should be a formal ‘Green Paper Consultation Stage’ prior to recommendations for decision coming to the General Assembly. A ‘Green Paper Consultation Stage’ would:

- (a) be triggered by the General Assembly (or by the General Council), following recommendation from a newly constituted General Assembly Advisory Committee;
- (b) include the drafting of a ‘Green Paper Consultation Document’ outlining the background to the matter, the reasons necessitating new policy/decisions, an analysis of options that could be considered, etc.;
- (c) involve consideration of the ‘Green Paper Consultation Document’ at one or more of the following levels – regional, presbytery, kirk session;
- (d) result in a ‘Green Paper Report’ to the General Assembly, which itself would authorise the drawing up of a full policy report for consideration and decision at the subsequent Assembly.

Recommendation 3:

That from 2023, the General Assembly should continue to meet annually, but for a shortened period, to:

- (a) together meet with the Lord – listening to his Word, coming to him in prayer and gathering at his Table;

- (b) consider strategic and significant policies and decisions (including formal Green Paper Reports);
 - (c) receive reports on a rotation basis from selected councils and commissions (mostly on a biennial basis);
 - (d) deal with essential annual business;
 - (e) greet and hear from representatives of partner Churches.
8. It was noted that even when the General Assembly sets a remit for a piece of work, a council or a dedicated task group carrying forward that remit may need guidance between meetings of the Assembly. This could include a need to consider adjusting the remit, guidance as to the scope of the recommendations to be brought to the General Assembly, or to find ways to address unforeseen consequences that have arisen during the process. This would require reflection by a body independent of the group taking forward the original remit. Such monitoring is especially important when issues are being considered that are potentially controversial, or may have significant impact on the Church.
9. The Task Group therefore concludes that a new General Assembly Committee is required, under the General Council, to fulfil this important role of monitoring and advising as outlined. This senior committee could also usefully encompass the roles currently carried out by the current Moderator's Advisory Committee. The Task Group therefore brings the following recommendation for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly:

Recommendation 4:

That a new 'General Assembly Advisory Committee' be constituted by the 2021 General Assembly:

- (a) to take on the current remit of the Moderator's Advisory Committee;
- (b) to recommend to the General Assembly (or General Council) that a 'Green Paper Consultation Stage' be triggered (as outlined above);
- (c) to monitor the progress of remits set by the General Assembly;
- (d) to recommend to the General Council that a remit be adjusted, with the General Council having authority so to do;
- (e) to give guidance as to the scope of the recommendations to be brought to the General Assembly from a remit;
- (f) to address unforeseen consequences that have arisen during the process of carrying forward a remit.

C. TOWARDS A NEW PROCESS FOR CONSIDERING REPORTS AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

10. It was agreed by presbyteries, and is unquestionably desirable, that every opportunity should be taken to enable wider and fuller participation by representatives during the General Assembly. The question of increased involvement by elders, women and younger people during the Assembly is being considered by the Making the General Assembly More Accessible

Task Group and it is expected that an agreed strategy to assist their participation will be recommended at the 2020 Assembly.

11. The question of business being done in private was given little support by presbyteries, and it was agreed that there should be no change in the present arrangement of all proceedings being conducted in public except for the business of the Judicial Commission or where issues relating to a specific individual are being addressed.
12. Many presbyteries suggested that there should be a greater use of electronic facilitation of Assembly business. For example, all reports, along with supplementary reports and minutes, should be provided in full electronic/digital format. The Task Group agreed that this is the direction of travel for the future, and brings a suitable recommendation below for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly.
13. It is recognised that Christ is always present in his Church and governs it by God's Word and Spirit. The General Assembly is the supreme court of the Church and, in humble obedience to Christ, it discharges its authority and governance responsibilities. It is imperative that the members of the General Assembly acknowledge the authority of the Assembly and fully respect the procedures and practice of the court. All members of the Assembly should be equally valued and feel their presence is significant and recognised. All those participating should be treated with proper regard and dignity.
14. Retired ministers are recognised for their experience and expertise and are of exceptional value to the Church. The pastoral work carried out in retirement, and the preaching ministry they continue to conduct is widely recognised. Many presbyteries depend on the availability of retired ministers to oversee vacancies and fulfil presbytery responsibilities. The contributions of retired ministers to the debates of the General Assembly are also recognised. Their wisdom and experience are invaluable and acclaimed. The question of their right to vote was the main issue that concerned presbyteries. The Task Group suggests a change regarding the voting rights of retired ministers and brings a suitable recommendation below for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly.
15. For the sake of good decision-making, all ordained ministers actively serving the Church, along with all representative elders, are reminded that they have an obligation to attend the courts of the Church and participate, as appropriate, in their presbytery and in the General Assembly.
16. In light of above points, the Task Group brings the following recommendations for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly:

Recommendation 5:

That the General Assembly Business Committee appoint a dedicated Task Group to consider cost and, with the approval of the General Council, implement a system for the provision of full electronic/digital reports for the General Assembly.

Recommendation 6:

That, from the 2022 General Assembly onwards, retired ministers will be required to opt to remain full members of the courts of the Church – with automatic retention as full members at the point of retirement, and then thereafter each retired minister be required to request annually to be retained.

D. TOWARDS GREATER CLARITY REGARDING THE STANDING OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISIONS AND THE MEANING AND SCOPE OF DISSENT.

17. Overwhelmingly presbyteries concurred with the emphasis the Task Group gave to two key points which were noted in its report to the 2019 General Assembly, namely that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is both a confessional Church and a Presbyterian Church.
18. PCI is a confessional Church:
- (a) The Rule of Faith (Code Pars 10-14) states:
 - (i) *10. The Word of God as set forth in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and the supreme standard of the Church.*
 - (ii) *11. It is the privilege, right and duty of every person to examine the Scriptures, and each individual is bound to submit to their authority. Having formed a definite conviction as to what the will of God is upon any subject, it is each person's duty to accept and obey it. In exercising this God-given right of private judgment, individual Christians are not to set their reason above the Word of God, or to refuse light from any quarter. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they are to use their reason to ascertain the divine will, as revealed in Scripture, and are to refuse to subject conscience to any authority except that of the Word of God. In the words of the Westminster Confession "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship."*
 - (iii) *12. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, as a witness for Christ, has adopted subordinate standards. In these are found what the Church understands the Word of God to teach on certain important points of doctrine and worship. These subordinate standards are a testimony for truth and against error, and serve as a bond of union for members of the Church.*
 - (iv) *13. The Confession of Faith (as approved by the Church of Scotland in her Act of 1647), and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, prepared by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, are the subordinate standards of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Accepting these subordinate standards, the Church holds that civil rulers must be obedient to Christ in their own*

area of authority, yet they ought not to attempt, in any way, to constrain any person's religious beliefs or intrude upon their rights of conscience.

- (v) **14. The Church alone** has the right to interpret and explain her standards, under the guidance of the Spirit of God.
- (b) The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, though a democratic Church in its decision-making processes, is not at liberty to simply change its core principles and policies as 'demanded' by the ever-changing culture in which it seeks to witness. Rather, the Church stands firm on the foundation of its supreme standard, with its primary loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ, the sole King and Head of the Church.
- (c) PCI's subordinate standards are "a testimony for truth and against error, and serve as a bond of union for members of the Church." Policies are developed and decisions taken within that doctrinal framework.
- (d) In the light of both feedback from presbyteries and further discussion, the Task Group has come to the view that there is a need for the 1974 report 'A Brief Statement concerning Faith and Order', to be updated with a contemporary statement on faith and order. The Task Group therefore brings the following recommendation for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly:

Recommendation 7:

That the Doctrine Committee be instructed to draw up an updated and contemporary 'Brief Statement concerning Faith and Order', for consideration and adoption by the General Assembly, ideally in 2023.

19. PCI is a Presbyterian Church

- (a) Key decisions are made by ministers and elders meeting together in 'representative gatherings' (Code Par 19):
 - 19(1) The Presbyterian Church in Ireland shall be governed by presbyters in representative assemblies, otherwise known as the courts of the Church. These courts comprise Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries and the General Assembly.*
- (b) The General Assembly is a coming together of ministers and representative elders from every PCI congregation (Code Par 104):
 - 104. (1) The General Assembly is the supreme court of the Church, representing in one body the whole Church, including all subordinate courts and particular congregations, and acting as its supreme legislative, administrative and judicial authority, in dealing with all matters brought before it.*
- (c) The General Assembly is not simply a meeting, but rather it is the Presbyterian Church coming together to make decisions together - with every congregation represented by its minister and representative elder, both of whom have full and equal voting rights in that decision-making process.

20. The fact that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is both a Confessional Church and a Presbyterian Church has certain clear implications. Chief among these are:
- the fact that “The Church alone has the right to interpret and explain her standards, under the guidance of the Spirit of God” (Code Par 14)
 - the fact that “Decisions of the Assembly are final and binding upon the whole Church...” (Code Par 104(3))
21. However, not every policy or every doctrinal statement, has the same standing. Some matters are part of PCI’s subordinate standards; some matters are set out in PCI’s constitution (the Code); and some matters are policy or statements agreed by the General Assembly, often following on from a detailed report and debate on the underlying biblical principles involved. Some policy matters or doctrinal positions may be outlined in all three of these ways – a sort of ‘triple lock’ of reference in the subordinate standards, inclusion in the Code and the subject of a detailed Assembly report and related decision.
22. The Task Group agreed that there is a need to be clear regarding the nature of specific decisions made by the General Assembly, therefore it brings two suitable recommendations below for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2021 General Assembly.

The Meaning and Scope of Dissent

23. It was agreed by the Task Group that the term dissent is misunderstood. The common use of dissent in the public square and in the media, as a difference of opinion or disagreement with a majority position or opposition to the policies of a governing body, is different from how dissent is defined in the courts of the Church. There is the need for education and clarification in regard to what it means to dissent within the General Assembly and other courts of the Church. Members of the General Assembly can dissent from a decision and express their dissent by recording their disagreement, but are obliged to implement the policy of the Church.
24. It was agreed that this be termed ‘formal dissent’ from decisions of the General Assembly and that this should be clarified by small amendments to the Code, and the insertion of the relevant sections of the Code in the guide to Assembly Procedure, the yellow pages of the Assembly Reports, as follows:

Code Para 104(3)

*“Decisions of the Assembly are final and binding upon the whole Church, but a member of the Assembly who dissents from a decision may require a statement of the fact of his **formal** dissent to be recorded in the minutes, although he shall not thereby free himself from obligation loyally to implement the decision so long as it stands unaltered.”*

Code Para 147(6)

“Any member of the court may object to the adoption of any resolution by the court and, in the case of an inferior court, if the objection be not sustained may formally dissent and appeal to a superior court.”

Code Para 160(2)

“Formal dissent relieves of all responsibility for the taking of the decision incurred, but does not exempt members from obedience to any law or injunction of the Church, nor from the obligation to implement the decisions of Church courts, until these may have been reversed or altered by the processes of complaint or appeal, or other due consideration by the court.”

25. To be clear, a presbytery or kirk session cannot formally dissent from a decision of the General Assembly. Indeed, the Code states that, “no inferior court has a right to review the proceedings of a superior or co-ordinate court.” (Code Par 21(4)). However, when generally discussing a decision of the General Assembly, a presbytery or kirk session could (for instance) resolve, without challenging that decision, to express its concern regarding the implementation of the decision and also seek guidance to assist in that regard.
26. The issue of more general dissent, especially in light of today’s culture, and how dissatisfaction with, or opposition to a policy can be expressed, is different for members of the Church and for those who are in the ordained leadership of the Church (both ministers and elders).
 - (a) Those who are in the wider membership of the Church have greater freedom to hold/promote views at variance with the formal position of the Church. They are not bound by subscription to PCI’s subordinate standards, nor have they taken on the responsibility and constraints of leadership. However, all members of the Church should seek in debate and discussion to “continue in the peace and fellowship of the people of God” (Code Par 6).
 - (b) For ministers and elders, debate and discussion can of course also take place outside the formal structures of the Church, both in private discussions and in more organised ways. However, ministers and elders have ‘subscribed’ and, through ordination vows, have taken on the responsibility and constraints of leadership. This has implications in relation to the freedom of ministers and elders to hold/promote certain views at variance with the clear position of the General Assembly.
 - (c) There are, however, some areas regarding which the PCI has decided that its ministers and elders can hold a different belief than that stated in the WCF, e.g., the role of civil magistrates (in the Code); the view of the Pope (by GA resolution); and a certain liberty of conscience regarding the ordination of women (Judicial Commission report and GA resolutions).

- (d) Generally speaking, any public debate involving ministers and elders of the Church should seek to avoid discourse that “gives rise, or may give rise, to scandal injurious to the purity or peace of the Church” (Code Par 132(1)(b)). Ministers and elders of the Church should ensure that by their public comments they do not bring the Church and its agencies into disrepute. Ministers and elders should also ensure that their public statements do not equate to an open declaration of their intention to take actions that would lead to defiance of, or disobedience to, the courts of the Church – contumacy as defined in Par 132(b) of the Code.
 - (e) In the light of both feedback from presbyteries and further discussion, the Task Group concluded that the principles enunciated in this report should replace the more limited 2014 report “Freedom of Individuals to Express Opinions”.
 - (f) Some presbyteries have raised the specific issue of the confidentiality of private sessions of presbytery and General Assembly. It should be noted that when a Church court sits in private, the only thing that can be communicated outside of that meeting is the decision arrived at during the private session. For any member, minister or elder, to break the confidence of a private session of presbytery or General Assembly is a direct defiance or disobedience to the courts of the Church.
27. In light of above points, the Task Group brings the following recommendations for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly:

Recommendation 8:

That the Judicial Commission’s Code Republishing Panel be instructed to insert into the Code appropriate definitions outlining three different types of General Assembly decision:

- (a) Decisions that are binding and must be followed (these will include both provisions inserted into the Code and other binding decisions adopted by Assembly resolution).
- (b) Decisions that are in the form of guidelines that should be followed in all but exceptional circumstances, the exception having to be justified to a superior court if required.
- (c) Decisions that are in the form of guidance, that is, good advice that should be taken into consideration.

Recommendation 9:

That once Recommendation 8 is implemented, the General Assembly Business Committee shall ensure that there is clarity regarding the standing of all resolutions coming to the General Assembly for decision.

Recommendation 10:

That on the basis of par 26(e) above, the Decision Making and Dissent Task Group be instructed to draw up a comprehensive report, for consideration by the 2022 General Assembly, on the “Freedom of those in Ordained Leadership to Promote Opinions at variance with the clear position of the General Assembly”.

E. TOWARDS IMPROVING HOW GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISIONS/POLICIES ARE COMMUNICATED

28. While it is recognised that this is an urgent matter, there is a need for the improved communication of General Assembly decisions and policies to be considered as part (albeit an important part) of an overall review of PCI’s communications strategy. Therefore, the matter is referred to the Communications and Strategy Task Group under the General Council.

Recommendation 11:

That the Communications and Strategy Task Group should aim to bring a comprehensive report on a communications strategy for PCI (including how General Assembly decisions and policies are communicated) to the 2023 General Assembly, with the General Council being authorised to take any necessary interim decisions.

F. TOWARDS CLARIFYING HOW GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISIONS/POLICIES CAN BE CHANGED

29. It is of the essence of church government within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland that members of the General Assembly be free to debate reports presented to the Assembly, oppose the conclusions of those reports and seek to have those conclusions rejected. Likewise, though obliged to loyally implement the decisions and policies of the General Assembly so long as they stand unaltered, members of Assembly are free to seek to overturn or alter those decisions or policies. Such debate and efforts to overturn or alter the policies of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland should, however, primarily take place within the General Assembly itself and through the procedures laid down in the constitution of the Church.
30. While through a competent memorial to the General Assembly a kirk session or presbytery can seek a change in the policy of the Church, that process can seem opaque to many, if not somewhat antiquated in its form. There is also a lack of clarity as to how members of the General Assembly can table additional resolutions to a particular Assembly report and exactly what issues these can and cannot address. Therefore, the Task Group brings the following recommendation for consideration by the General Council and, if agreed, by the 2020 General Assembly:

Recommendation 12:

That the Clerk of Assembly, in consultation with the Judicial Commission's Code Republishing Panel, be instructed to report to the 2022 General Assembly (including tabling overtures to amend the Code if appropriate) to clarify and simplify Assembly procedures so that a clear process is in place whereby the General Assembly can be requested to:

- (a) consider reviewing or changing a current policy or area of work;
- (b) consider developing a new policy or area of work;
- (c) consider making a specific exception to a particular policy;
- (d) consider making a statement on a particular issue of concern.

NOBLE McNEELY, Convener

VOWS FOR FULL MEMBERSHIP AND BAPTISM TASK GROUP

(This report was remitted from the 2020 General Assembly Standing Commission for consideration and decision at the 2021 General Assembly.)

1. In the report to the 2019 General Assembly the Implementation Task Group referred to the variety of vows that appeared to be used within the PCI at admission both to baptism and to full membership. The Implementation Task Group asked that steps be taken to clarify the vows to be used at admission to baptism and to full membership.
2. The General Assembly agreed the following resolution: The General Assembly instruct the General Council to appoint a task group to recommend how best to clarify the vows taken at admission to full membership and at baptism, with a report coming to the 2020 General Assembly.
3. At the meeting of the General Council on 10 October 2019 the Vows for Full Membership and Baptism Task Group was appointed, with the following membership:

Moderator and Clerk; Convener of General Council (Convener); Rev Dr David Cupples and Mr Tom Finnegan (Council for Congregation Life and Witness); Very Rev Principal Stafford Carson, Prof John Gillespie, Rev Mairisine Stanfield (Doctrine Committee); Prof Drew Gibson (Professor of Practical Theology); Rev David Bruce (Secretary to a former revision group).
4. The task group met on four occasions, on 11 November and 9 December 2019, 27 January and 24 February 2020. It was agreed that the issue of various vows being used was prevalent in the church, and it was apparent that ministers were using a variety of resource material for the administration of baptism and for a service of admission of new communicants.

5. The task group consulted some recognised resources that are commonly used by ministers:
 - Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland (1940)
 - Book of Public Worship of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (1965)
 - Public Worship, an Experimental Revision (Public Worship Committee, PCI, 1989)
 - Book of Public Worship (Board of Mission in Ireland Worship Panel, 2011)
 - Book of Public Worship (Council of Mission in Ireland, 2016, on PCI website).
6. In addressing how best to clarify the vows taken at admission to communicant membership and at baptism the task group agreed to compose vows which expressed:
 - belief in the triune God
 - commitments made were dependent on the grace of God
 - the prayerful support of the congregation for those making the vows
7. The task group presents in the three appendices below the vows to be taken at admission to communicant membership, the baptism of infants and the baptism of believers, and recommends the use of these vows at services of admission to communicant membership and baptism.

APPENDIX A

VOWS TAKEN AT ADMISSION TO COMMUNICANT MEMBERSHIP

1. Introduction. What is the purpose of making vows at the time of membership?
 - 1.1 These vows are an expression of God's covenant with his people. This is an important milestone on a person's journey as a disciple of Christ, signifying both their commitment to God, and His to them. These vows mark the progress from baptism to full communicant membership of Christ's church.
 - 1.2 These vows are an individual's statement of belief in the triune God, and include commitments they will wish to make in His service. As such, they are not to be made without careful consideration, counting the cost.
 - 1.3 The taking of these vows marks a moment when a person publicly identifies as a follower of Jesus Christ. They confirm a person's membership of the church of Jesus Christ more widely, and this local congregation in particular.

2. The Vows

In becoming a communicant member of the congregation:

- (a) Do you believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? (I do)
- (b) Depending on the grace of God:
 - (i) Do you trust in Jesus Christ alone, as your Saviour from sin and as Lord of your life? (I do)
 - (ii) Do you promise to live as a follower of Jesus Christ, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit? (I do)
 - (iii) Do you commit as a communicant member of this congregation, to worship, serve, give and participate fully in its life and witness? (I do)

Affirmation by the congregation to new communicant members.

(This could be read out by the minister, an elder or the entire congregation together.)

As a community ruled by God the Father, redeemed by God the Son and led by God the Spirit, and in welcoming you as new members to this church, we too make these affirmations:

We affirm the apostles' faith and the covenant calling of our baptism to be the people of God.

To you we say, "Join us as we worship Him together".

We humbly share our commitment to live together as a community seeking to be obedient to Jesus in everything. There is no part of our life together which we refuse to submit to his Lordship.

To you we say, "Join us as we live for Him together".

We confidently declare our intention to be witnesses to Christ's transforming presence in our community and beyond, and commit to supporting this mission by praying, giving and working.

To you we say, "Join us as we serve Him together".

APPENDIX B

VOWS TAKEN AT THE BAPTISM OF INFANTS

In presenting this child for baptism:

- 1. Are you affirming your belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? (I am)
- 2. Depending on the grace of God:
 - (a) Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone, as your Saviour from sin and as Lord of your life? (I am)
 - (b) Are you committed to living as a follower of Jesus Christ, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit? (I am)

- (c) Are you willing to provide a Christian home, and bring up your child in the worship and teaching of the church, so that he/she may come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour? (I am)
3. **Commitment by the congregation:**
As we receive (name) into the fellowship of the Church, do you promise with God's help, to be faithful in prayer, spiritual nurture, Christian example and influence, for him/her and his/her family? (We do).

APPENDIX C

VOWS TAKEN AT THE BAPTISM OF BELIEVERS

In presenting yourself for baptism:

1. Do you believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? (I do)
2. Depending on the grace of God:
 - (a) Do you trust in Jesus Christ alone, as your Saviour from sin and as Lord of your life? (I do)
 - (b) Do you promise to live as a follower of Jesus Christ, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit? (I do)
 - (c) Do you commit as a baptised member of the Church, to worship, serve, give and participate fully in its life and witness? (I do)
3. **Commitment by the congregation:**
As we receive (name) into the fellowship of the Church, do you promise to join with him/her in the life of prayer, worship and service that we, together, offer to God? (We do)

NOBLE McNEELY, Convener

SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES TASK GROUP

1. The Task Group - entitled “Supporting Families in Challenging Times” - consists of the Rev Richard Houston (Convener); Miss Karen Jardine (Secretary); the Moderator and Clerk of the General Assembly; Rev Joanne Smith; Rev Peter Dickinson; Rev Stephen Lowry; Mr Tom Finnegan along with academics and health and social care professionals from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
2. The stated purpose of the Task Group is to “review and develop our pastoral care for women and families affected by pregnancy crisis, pregnancy loss, the diagnosis of a life-limiting condition and other related circumstances and that this should include support for those caring for children and young people with disabilities”.
3. The Task Group identified three priority areas of, (i) training in ministry, (ii) education in congregations, and, (iii) resourcing for pastoral care, and its recommendations (below) were subsequently adopted by the General Assembly Standing Commission in June 2020:
 - (a) That the Task Group engage with the relevant departments in Union Theological College to discuss the provision and development of education for students who are training for pastoral ministry in a new ethical and moral context.
 - (b) That the Task Group liaise with the appropriate council(s) to ensure a cohesive approach to resourcing and educating congregations in their ministry and witness to families who are experiencing pregnancy crisis, pregnancy loss, the diagnosis of a life-limiting condition and other related circumstances.
4. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the Task Group has been unable to meet since February 2020 and will not have completed its work in the originally anticipated time-frame.
5. The Task Group was given permission by the General Council to resume its work by considering how the identified priority areas of, (i) resourcing, (ii) equipping and, (iii) signposting, might be progressed with a view to bringing forward concrete recommendations to the 2022 General Assembly.

RICHARD HOUSTON, Convener