



The Church of Scotland

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David Stewart MSP
Convener, Public Petitions Committee
The Scottish Parliament

By email to petitions@scottish.parliament.uk

Monday 26 August 2013

Dear Mr Stewart and members of the Committee

My attention has be brought to PE01487 – religious observance in schools.

I understand that you may be considering this petition in the near future. The Church of Scotland has prepared the enclosed briefing for your information.

If I can be of any further assistance or if you would like any other information please do not hesitate to contact the Church and Society office at the above address.

Yours sincerely

Rev Sandy Fraser
Convener, Education Committee



The Church of Scotland

Background briefing for the Public Petitions Committee of the Scottish Parliament with reference to petition PE01487, Religious Observance in Schools

The Church of Scotland wishes to share with the Committee an alternative view to that expressed in the background to the petition PE01487, Religious Observance in Schools.

In particular, the Church wishes to offer a different view as to the purpose of Religious Observance in schools, as defined by the 2005 circular and the 2011 letter of guidance. The Church wishes to argue that by making Religious Observance opt-in, it cannot play the key and valuable role in helping pupils achieve the four capacities at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence; successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

Church of Scotland supported wholeheartedly the radical change in the practice of Religious Observance (RO) brought about by the 2000 review and the guidance that followed from that review.

Religious Observance is no longer tied to any one faith community's creed or liturgical calendar. Nor should it be. It is instead focused on the beliefs and values that shape and are shaped by each school community. The Church believes that this properly reflects the multicultural, diverse Scotland of the 21st Century. What is defined now as Religious Observance in Schools is a pluralist approach in a pluralist society.

The petitioner argues that because every community is diverse, that kind of reflection is impossible. The Church would argue that it is that very diversity that both makes this possible and necessary. It is in Religious Observance events that young people can discover and explore tools for reflection, both individual and collective. They provide opportunities to celebrate human dignity and to search for meaning and self-understanding. They are also a place to encounter different beliefs and points of view, which are fundamental in making sense of the pluralist society in which we live. That is the purpose of Religious Observance and why it is a necessary, whole-school activity.

We agree with the statements made by Scottish Ministers in the 2005 guidance and reiterated in the 2011 advice note that:

“Religious Observance has an important part to play in the development of the learner's four capacities: a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen and effective contributor.

“It should also provide opportunities for the school community to reflect upon and develop a deeper understanding of the dignity and worth of each individual and their contribution to the school and wider communities.”

The Church also agrees with the comment in the 2011 advice letter that:

“many school communities contain pupils and staff from faiths other than Christianity or with no faith commitment, and this must be taken fully into account in supporting spiritual development. It is of central importance that all pupils and staff can participate with integrity in forms of religious observance without compromise to their personal faith.”

In other words, all Religious Observance should be genuinely inclusive of people of faith and no faith. The Church knows that this is no easy task but it believes that it can be achieved and that in achieving it, something very significant is brought to the creation of a genuinely inclusive society where we each move beyond tolerance to deep respect, understanding and common living based on real self-understanding about our own beliefs and values.

It is that commitment to providing genuinely inclusive Religious Observance that has meant the Church has worked with local authorities and others to deliver training events for school staff and community partners, including school chaplains, across the country. A highly successful Masters Module in religious observance in partnership with Glasgow University completed by nearly 200 school staff and chaplains.

This work has six core principles

- It is the responsibility of the head teacher to decide who leads Religious Observance and how it fits into the curriculum in their school.
- Outside leaders, including chaplains, when asked to assist in the delivery of RO, do so to assist the school in delivering a Religious Observance agenda defined by the school and are bound by the need to be genuinely inclusive.
- Religious Observance should be built on the exploration of sensing as defined by the 2000 review; *sensing mystery, values, meaningfulness, changed qualities of awareness, otherness, challenge*; in both the experience created by Religious Observance and through the reflection on that experience.
- Religious Observance is not, and should never be confessional in nature (it is not worship nor can it be).
- The very best Religious Observance is often pupil led.
- A change of name for Religious Observance events can often have a very positive effect on the sense of inclusion and is to be encouraged, e.g. “time for reflection”.

In the training, the Church emphasises that chaplains are not in school by right but by invitation of the head teacher and their core task is to assist the school in achieving its goals and objectives in whatever way the head teacher feels is helpful to the school. That may or may not include the delivery of Religious Observance.

The interpretation of the paragraph by the petitioner regarding worship is not one shared by the Church. Worship in a school should only ever be, as the paragraph indicates, part of the informal curriculum and participation should be voluntary. The paragraph is not referring to Religious Observance but to situations where, in the view of a head teacher, because of the history of that community, worship should form part of the formal curriculum. It is in the guidelines to

differentiate those situations from Religious Observance, not to suggest that such events can double as Religious Observance.

The Church believes that Religious Observance as defined by the 2005 guidelines and 2011 advice letter provides a fundamental part of the cross curricular, whole school curriculum in the same way that Personal and Social Development (PSD) is regarded. To argue that it should be opt-in rather than opt-out would be to diminish the educational experience for young people in the same way as to remove PSD would affect severely the capacity of a school to deliver on the four capacities as its primary goal.

The Church would very happy to bring to the Committee further information about the Church's work in making Religious Observance genuinely inclusive including its training programme, the Glasgow University Masters Module, examples of Religious Observance delivered under the 2005 guidelines and 2011 advice letter or anything else that may be of assistance to the Committee.

26 August 2013