Official Response

SUBJECT: Religious Observance – Scottish Government consultation on guidance
REQUESTED BY: The Scottish Government
DATE: 24 February 2017
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The Education Committee of the Church of Scotland is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government’s consultation on revisions to the guidance on Religious Observance in Schools.

The Church of Scotland has a long held the view that high quality well led, inclusive and innovative Time for Reflection / Religious Observance helps young people to develop their emotional wellbeing, communicate their values and beliefs and understand what it means to have respect for others. Perhaps most importantly such Time for Reflection / Religious Observance enables young people to develop informed ethical views of complex issues and nurture their resilience in ways that no other part of the curriculum offers.

Within this response the Committee has focussed its attention on the four main areas of revision that are being suggested. The Committee has not sought to comment on the minor revisions relating to renumbering, formatting and nomenclature, taking these to be self-explanatory in nature.

Proposed revisions:

1. Setting guidance in revised, updated context, including reference to other important pieces of information about Religious Observance (RO).

The Committee perceive this updated context to be helpful in situating Religious Observance within the most up to date legislation and guidance. The Committee accept this as a positive step in ensuring that Time for Reflection / Religious observance within schools is clearly situated within the national framework for Scottish Education as it progresses.

2. Clarity about the definition of RO and that Time for Reflection is equally valid terminology.

In 2014 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland passed the following section of deliverance:

“Urge the Scottish Government to change the name of Religious Observance (RO) to Time for Reflection to better reflect current practice in schools following its 2005 guidelines and 2011 letter which encouraged the use of that or other appropriate titles to increase a sense of inclusivity in Religious Observance events.”

(General Assembly 2014, Church and Society Council report, section 74 of the Deliverance)
While the Church is entirely supportive of the value of Time for Reflection / Religious Observance within Schools we acknowledge that the term “Religious Observance” can at times be a barrier to the participation of certain groups and individuals. The suggested broadening of the terminology to include “Time for Reflection”, therefore, may help schools to ensure the full and inclusive participation of all concerned and enable schools to further embed the practice within their life and work.

3. Importance of schools communicating effectively about their RO plans.

The Church of Scotland is supportive of measures that will ensure that learners and parents are fully informed about the educational activities that the School delivers. As Religious Observance remains an activity that Schools are statutorily required to deliver we see it as proper that it should be subject to such communication. By explaining the practice effectively in this way we would hope that parents and learners alike could have greater engagement with the Time for Reflection / Religious Observance that is delivered in their schools.

4. Clarity about the relevance of young people’s own views in any discussions about withdrawal from RO.

The Committee is supportive of there being a mechanism for withdrawal from Time for reflection and of that mechanism taking into account the views of the young person in question. It is the experience of the Committee that where Time for Reflection / Religious Observance is delivered in an inclusive, innovative way, in collaboration with the young people involved, there is little if any objection to participation. If individuals are withdrawing from Time for Reflection / Religious Observance as a result of poor practice the Committee would expect the school to take action to ensure that the situation is rectified.

We trusts that this information is of assistance to the committee and would be very happy to provide any further information, for example, case studies of effective Time for Reflection/Religious Observance if the committee would find that to be of assistance.

Graeme Donald

Convener of the Education Committee of the Church of Scotland