



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Official Response

SUBJECT: Consideration of Petition [PEI487](#) Religious Observance
REQUESTED BY: Public petitions Committee
REFERENCE: OR-2013/07
DATE: 11th October 2013
SUBMITTED BY: Rev Sandy Fraser, Convenor, Church of Scotland Education Committee

This response is brought to the Petitions Committee by the Church of Scotland's Standing Committee on Education with the endorsement of the Scottish Episcopal and Methodist Churches.

The Church believes that there is a clear and positive case for the retention of Religious Observance in non-denominational schools as defined by the 2005 guidance and the 2011 ministerial letter. The Church is aware that representatives of the denominational sector will be offering its own response to the committee, whilst recognising that there is common ground in the purpose of Religious Observance in both sectors.

The Church wishes to avoid this becoming an adversarial debate between communities of faith and those who hold to a humanist or secularist world. A genuinely inclusive approach should be a conversation about a search for common ground in a diverse world rather than any group, secular or belief based, seeking to impose its view on everyone.

To that end, whilst the Church has some fundamental disagreements with some of the assertions posited as fact and opinion presented as analysis, in the petitioners evidence presented to the committee by the national Secular Society, include many examples cited as bad practice in religious Observance which were not Religious Observance events nor intended to be, it will restrict its comments on the petitioners evidence to the summary conclusion on page 5 of the presented evidence. In addition, the Church would make the following comment on the right to withdraw; *the right to withdraw should be made very clear in school handbooks and elsewhere, the process should be simple and without conflict and the experience offered to a withdrawn pupil should be meaningful with parents being involved in how that is understood.* The Church believes however, that if we together work on a search for common ground to create genuinely inclusive Religious Observance, the issue of withdrawal will become a moot point.

The petitioner argues that the demographic in Scotland has changed since the last review. The recently released 2011 census figures showed that more than 56% of the population identified themselves as being religious in some manner, a further 23% making no indication whilst 37% said they had no religion. That is a change since the 2001 census but would suggest that with a majority still supporting religious experience as being significant in understanding our meaning and purpose,

that emphasises the need for working on what we can do together in exploring and developing spiritual development in its broadest sense continues to be important

The petitioner says he cannot see how Religious Observance can be inclusive, arguing that it is “logistically impossible”. We fundamentally disagree and would suggest that the petitioner’s conclusion is either based on an equalities paradigm, which is an adult agenda focused on the label attached to the leader of the Religious Observance event and not the content or curriculum outcome, or one rooted in an assumption that there can be no common ground between people of faith and no faith to which we take the opposite view. Much of this appears to be based on experiences that the Church would itself acknowledge is not good practice; where one faith community has dominated, where assumptions about the beliefs of the pupils have been made or where forms of proselytising have occurred. The Church would not condone any of these things but would argue that to remove Religious Observance in all schools because in some places it has not been well led would be akin to saying we will stop having Maths,(or any other subject), because some teachers didn’t teach it well. The Church is willing to work with all concerned to find a way to discover the common ground that we believe exists if all those involved are prepared to be open to the possibility that journey offers.

The Church would argue that it is that very diversity of beliefs that means we need together to face the challenge of devising and delivering high quality Religious Observance, not reduce our response to a meaningless compromise of “if we can’t agree on everything then we can’t do anything”. To take this view adds nothing to our self-understanding and avoids the opportunity and challenge diversity brings.

The Church believes that the petitioners argument that Religious Observance should be “opt in” is defeatist, suggesting that because people see the world differently, we cannot work together to find common ground. This avoids the issue and opportunity of diversity and removes the key gifts Religious Observance can bring to the whole education experience.

The Church recognises however, that even in the language used in these statements, there are barriers to resolution. The very phrase “Religious Observance” creates difficulties for some people in making progress in this discussion. That is why the Church has argued strongly that a name change to, for example, “Time for Reflection” would be a very helpful contribution to making this discussion more about what we can do together and less a binary argument between opposing views.

The Church of Scotland believes that Time for Reflection/Religious Observance, as defined by the 2005 guidance and 2011 ministerial letter is a key and fundamental part of the curriculum adding something unique and significant to the education experience of pupils and staff alike. It is, rightly, a radical change in approach that reflects the changing demography of Scotland, offering a pluralist approach to the wonderful cultural diversity that forms 21st century Scotland. Time for Reflection/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 Church agrees 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.”

High quality, well led, inclusive, innovative Time for Reflection/Religious Observance helps young people feel secure in their beliefs and values, develop their emotional wellbeing, communicate their values and beliefs, understand what it means to have respect for others, understand different beliefs, develop informed ethical views of complex issues and perhaps most importantly, nurture their resilience in ways that no other part of the curriculum offers. All of these have been identified by EducationScotland as forming part of what is meant by the four core capacities of Curriculum for Excellence.

The Church would argue that, far from being a barrier, it is Scotland's diversity that makes this possible and necessary. It is in Time for Reflection/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 Time for Reflection/Religious Observance and why it is a necessary, whole-school activity and without it, our education system would be significantly diminished

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.”

The Church believes that the frame work of the 2000 review group which is focuses on the idea of Sensing; mystery, values, meaningfulness, changed quality of awareness, “otherness” and challenge, is particularly helpful in creating Time for Reflection/Religious Observance in ways that mean everyone can participate in with integrity. Time for Reflection/Religious Observance should be and can 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 Time for Reflection/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 and a

highly successful Masters Module in Time for Reflection/Religious Observance in partnership with Glasgow University completely by nearly 200 school staff and chaplains.

This work has six core principles

- Time for Reflection/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 Time for Reflection/Religious Observance and through the reflection on that experience.
- It is the responsibility of the head teacher to decide who leads Time for Reflection/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/TfR, do so to assist the school in delivering a Time for Reflection/Religious Observance agenda defined by the school and are bound by the need to be genuinely inclusive.
- Time for Reflection/Religious Observance is not, and should never be confessional in nature (it is not worship, nor can it be).
- The very best Time for Reflection/Religious Observance is often pupil led.
- A change of name for Religious Observance 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 Time for Reflection/Religious Observance.

The Church believes that Time for Reflection/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 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 or details of its training programmes if the committee would find that to be of assistance