

GENERAL SYNOD OF THE SCOTTISH EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Mission and Ministry Board

Response to Petition PE01487 – Religious Observance

The Scottish Government's vision for children and young people is "A Scotland in which every child matters, where every child, regardless of his or her family background, has the best possible start in life". Therefore no one can disagree with the statement from Caroline Lynch of the Scottish Secular Society that we must urgently "seek the best way forward to ensure the minds of Scotland's most precious resource are safeguarded." Human beings are spiritual beings and we must safeguard the spiritual as much as the physical and mental wellbeing of our young people. Spiritual development is not something a human can opt into or out of.

The Curriculum for Excellence provides an important impetus to achieving the vision of the Scottish Government and to fully preparing today's young people for adult life in the 21st century, by being safe, nurtured, achieving, healthy, active, included, respected and responsible. It is based on the words, *Wisdom, Justice, Compassion* and *Integrity*: inscribed on the mace of the Scottish Parliament which have helped to define values for our democracy.

Our history is based in faith. Our education system, our moral system, our judicial system, matters like prison reform, the abolition of slavery, child welfare reforms and so on were all initiated or fostered by people of faith. Our Scottish schools are still places where young people can be enabled to build up a strong foundation of knowledge, an understanding of how faith has inspired people and a commitment to considered judgement and ethical action. Such history, tradition and values provide a valuable backdrop to the necessitous provision of Religious Observance in our Scottish schools.

In 2004, The Religious Observance Review Group defined Religious Observance as "community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school's community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community." Religious Observance events are a wise way of providing opportunities for young people to reflect on these values and on how they resonate with the 21st century Scottish society in which they live. In a very hectic schedule it gives the members of the school community time to stop and reflect on issues which affect them personally and collectively. Some of these are issues of justice and compassion and are important to help them to understand diverse cultures and beliefs and support them in developing concern, tolerance, care and respect for themselves and others.

As a society we are prone to anti religious bullying. It would be very easy for young people to pick up wrong concepts about all faiths if their only input is one lesson a week for a year or so in secondary school. There are as many misunderstandings about all the major religions as there ever have been and a chaplain of any faith at least provides a living example of what that faith represents - beyond just words in a textbook.

Religious Observance events, like religious education generally, help young people to explore beliefs and values, and assist in promoting respect and empathy. They help, in a diverse society, to foster civilised debate and reasoned argument, and to enable an understanding of the place of religion and belief in the modern world. All of this helps to prepare children for life in a society where religion is a significant shaper of attitudes and culture. It is important in our view that children are prepared for life in an inter-faith and multi-cultural society.

Acts of Religious Observance conducted by those of any faith must be done with integrity and focused on the beliefs and values that shape each school community which can be very different in each school. Young people themselves maintain that acts of Religious Observance give them the opportunity to think, help them to have open minds and provide opportunities for discussion. Worship is different and if any such opportunities were to be provided within a school community they must of course be voluntary – but that is already adequately catered for in the current opt out system. If Religious Observance were to become opt in rather than opt out it could not play its current valuable role in assisting pupils to achieve the four capacities at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence. It would also diminish their ability to experience the vast diversity of religious and non-religious expression found in all our school communities.

On a purely practical basis, systems for opting in, as opposed to opting out, rarely work adequately. Practically speaking, school management would have considerably increased paperwork to deal with which would be vast and constantly changing. Would a decision to opt in require an annual renewal? Might not forms easily be lost? When it comes to personal spirituality at what age are children considered old enough to decide for themselves?

The creation of an opt in system could prove divisive. For those who were to opt in, what might they in consequence miss out on while they participated in an act of Religious Observance? Subject classes could not easily carry on without such children and for religious observance to be undertaken during lunch break would seem unfair. Surely keeping the class together is a better option especially as the chaplain can raise issues that are current in the school without being seen to be on one side or other and can encourage controlled debate which teachers can continue thereafter.

Our Church would be happy to discuss this further and to provide any information and concrete examples that would be helpful to the Committee.

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