

GENERAL SYNOD 2014

MOTION 5 - BOARD OF EDUCATION R.I.

Proposed by Dr Anne Lodge, Diocese of Dublin

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Board of Education motion: That the General Synod affirms the importance of Religious Education in primary schools under Church of Ireland patronage and calls on the Board of Education RI to ensure that high quality standards are maintained in the delivery of the *Follow Me* Religious Education Curriculum.

Motion in the name of Dr. Anne Lodge and Ven. Adrian Wilkinson

Members of General Synod will be very well aware that there are pressures being brought to bear on the place and status of Religious Education in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. The current Minister for Education and Skills has made repeated public statements about the need to reduce the time for Religious Education and devote more time to numeracy and literacy. He has also repeatedly stated his preference that primary school children learn about religions rather than participating in faith formation as part of their education. He is not alone in these views; much of the rhetoric on this topic in the media and by pressure groups assumes that parents do not want their children to engage in faith formation in school, that teachers are uncomfortable teaching Religious Education and that children would be better off studying a generic ethics, morals and values curriculum and learning more science.

It would be easy in the face of such negativity to decide to stay silent, to re-trench to the Sunday School model of delivery of religious education and to give into pressure to keep faith a silent and somewhat shameful personal matter. When exactly did Jesus say “blessed are those who are quietly ashamed to believe”? I don’t recollect any of St. Paul’s many letters recommending silence on matters of faith nor do I recall any parts of the Acts of the Apostles where St. Peter preached that we can best love God by staying quiet about it! For too many in our society, and indeed some in our Church, talk of faith, of God is regarded as unseemly. Christianity is a missional faith and it is one that we are called on to live and proclaim publicly. As a Christian community we in the Church of Ireland are very lucky to be able to structure the content of the religious education programme that is taught in our schools. It is the Church of Ireland rather than the State that decides on the content of the Religious Education programme taught in our schools. We have been blest with a God-given opportunity to ensure that we can shape the

curriculum that enables us to share our faith with our children, to support them as they explore their own spirituality and to guide them as they learn to discern God in their lives and develop their own sense of discipleship. It also provides us with an opportunity to express our Christian faith publicly and to offer it generously to those who choose to be a part of our school communities.

Considerable work and investment was made by the Church of Ireland to design the Religious Education programme entitled *Follow Me*. That programme was very carefully constructed to be inclusive of children of the various reformed Christian churches and to be age-appropriate both in its content and in its approaches to teaching. The programme was devised consultatively – teachers from across the country were involved in its development and roll-out. The inservice work funded by the General Synod Board of Education RI generated a lot of positivity among teachers and created strong collegial bonds among people. The General Synod Board of Education needs to consider engaging in a focused evaluation of the programme, involving experts, teachers, parents and children working side-by-side to help revamp it to meet current and future needs.

We know that aspects of the *Follow Me* programme need to be updated. We are very well aware from teacher feedback that the programme needs new resources. Our primary schools are full of interactive white boards and even the very young children are adept in using sophisticated technology. The General Synod Board of Education RI should consider supporting the development and dissemination of technology-friendly resources to enable teachers and children to explore the Christian faith in innovative and child-centred ways.

But there is something more fundamental than resources that should concern us chiefly and that is time. Religious Education is being squeezed in many of our primary schools. It is being relegated to last place because there are so many other demands on teachers. We know that in many schools time is consistently borrowed from Religious Education to give to other subjects. There are very simple reasons why this happens. The Department of Education and Skills requires schools to engage in evaluation of all their programmes with one exception. The Department does not oversee or evaluate the teaching of Religious Education. From the time that teachers qualify from my College or elsewhere, their teaching of Religious Education is a matter for themselves. It is unlikely that anyone will ask them to account for the time they devote to the teaching of that subject week by week nor does anyone ask them to evaluate their work. And members of Synod, I don't blame teachers for sidelining Religious Education if the bodies responsible for its oversight appear not to be engaged with how it is being taught in our schools.

I want to conclude by talking a little about school culture. Educational researchers like me are all too well aware that many of the most important things children learn in school are not included in the formal curriculum but happen through the ways in which we organise our relationships, the ways we structure our living, learning, playing and praying. These are all the habits and ethos of our institutions. If teachers consistently use Religious Education time for other subjects the message to children is clear – Religious Education doesn't matter. If Religious Education has outdated resources the message to children is clear – this subject is boring and old-fashioned.

There is a strategic role for the General Synod Board of Education here. Engage teachers alongside experts in the evaluation and updating of the programme, in the development of new resources and in the devising of self-evaluation tools to enable teachers and schools to critically look at the ways in which they are planning and delivering the Follow Me programme and thinking about ways in which they can improve that work. And lest you think I am suggesting something outlandish here let me assure you that this is exactly what teachers and schools are doing with regard to the rest of the primary curriculum. The General Synod Board of Education can provide supports to schools and to teachers to ensure that high quality standards are maintained in the delivery of the *Follow Me* Religious Education Curriculum in Church of Ireland primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It can do this in practical ways that support schools, teachers and most of all that facilitate children in spiritual learning of, and engagement with, their faith. We owe the the best possible Religious Education programme to our children.

Ladies and Gentlemen, members of General Synod, I commend this motion to you.