

## **GENERAL SYNOD 2014**

### **MOTION 5 - BOARD OF EDUCATION R.I.**

**Seconded by Archdeacon Adrian Wilkinson, Archdeacon of Cork**

**EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

#### **Motion 5 Board of Education (Republic of Ireland)**

Seconding: The Ven. Adrian Wilkinson (Diocese of Cork, Cloyne and Ross)

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

I have much pleasure in seconding the Motion before you today. I come to this rostrum, not as an expert in RE, but as someone who has two primary schools in my parish, one a three teacher and the other an eleven teacher school. This opens up for me as Rector a host of opportunities to be involved in the lives of those schools on a weekly basis and to come into contact with the pupils that attend them and the staff that work there.

In the primary school, religious education takes place in the class room. This is where what is implicit in the ethos of our schools becomes explicit. In the Republic of Ireland with its denominational system, it is the patron body which is responsible for religious education in primary schools. The Department of Education has no role in this at the moment and unlike in every other area of the curriculum, school inspectors have no role in evaluating it.

Up to thirty minutes a day are available for the teaching of RE and Follow Me is the current approved programme used. I'm sure all of us want to ensure that this time is used wisely and creatively. But it is worth asking how is this time actually being used? As a school chaplain and board member it is not my role to police the teaching of RE. My role is one of encouragement and support. After all I am not a qualified primary teacher. So who then evaluates the RE being taught in our schools? This motion requests the Board of Education RI to ensure that high standards are being maintained in the delivery of the Follow Me RE Programme. How is this to be achieved? Is it up to the school principal to monitor monthly schemes of work? Is there a broader need for diocesan or central church help in resourcing, training teachers and assessing the RE taught in schools so that high standards can be encouraged and maintained?

There is a danger with what is perceived to be curriculum overload, that RE may become the soft part of the teaching day, the optional extra if time permits? Does RE get pushed to the margins? Do we know if the gift of up to 2.5 hours for RE is being used in its entirety, to its maximum potential and creatively? If we fail to teach RE, we are actually promoting secularism and giving the signal to the children that the religious dimension to life is an optional set of beliefs, a personal choice and a leisure pursuit which is harmless and private. If we neglect to teach RE to a high standard, we are giving a confused message as to what our ethos really is. So if we are not teaching RE and resourcing it to as high as standard as possible, why have Church of Ireland schools?

I have a fear that sometimes schools are in danger of absolving themselves by thinking that the religious education can be devolved into the weekly or even daily assembly slot and so is covered by the clergy. If I could get only one point across today, it would be to say that assembly is not RE. School assembly is an important element of the school ethos. As chaplain it is wonderful to be part of such assemblies and to include hymns, a reading, prayer and maybe a short talk or power point but these are not RE. Given that assembly by definition involves pupils from the age of 4 to 12, it has to be something general and inclusive. The in depth exploration of topics is just not possible in the assembly hall, but it is in the class room.

I urge those involved in any aspect of the life of our primary schools, as clergy, members of diocesan boards of education, school boards of management and patrons to take this motion seriously. RE is where our ethos is most obvious. It is our gift to the curriculum and it is what makes our schools distinctive from all the other options available in the primary education sector.

There is a common sense phrase of much practical wisdom which says ‘if you don’t use it, you will lose it.’ RE is a wonderful subject, the course is there and teachers are professionally equipped to teach it. It is religious education not faith formation and so teachers can teach with confidence irrespective of their own faith and practice. Let us affirm it as a core subject, promote it in any way we can and ensure that it is used to its full potential for the welfare of the pupils who attend our schools. In doing so we will consolidate our ethos and have something real to offer those who deliberately seek out a Church of Ireland Primary School with all that it offers. Otherwise do we deserve schools under Church of Ireland patronage at all?