

## **IHRC Conference Religion and Education –**

### **The Church of Ireland perspective on the role of religion in primary schools**

I wish to thank the conference organisers for the invitation to share this platform and contribute to this important conference. This is a hugely significant debate and there has been a tendency in Ireland to avoid objective, consultative discussion on this issue. We are moving toward a more dialogic model of engagement with those of the full range of beliefs. For example, at the beginning of September, the Church of Ireland organised its first inter-faith conference that was focused on inter-faith dialogue and engagement and all who participated found it an enriching and challenging experience. I note also the importance of respectful engagement on an issue such as this one that is so deeply personal, both in terms of individual personal beliefs and in terms of the education and development of children.

I would firstly like to note that the primary education system we have inherited represents the complex, difficult and distrusting relationships that existed between Christian churches on this island in the first half of the nineteenth century. This is a society that has become more visibly diverse with regard to belief in the last two decades especially but in reality has not been monolithic in that regard for many, many centuries. Nonetheless, the reality is that one belief group – the Roman Catholic church – represented, and continues to represent the large majority of Irish people, who describe themselves, at least nominally, as adherents of that church.

The great majority of our primary schools are denominationally managed for the historical reasons alluded to already, and over 91% of all our primary schools are under Roman Catholic management and reflect a Roman Catholic ethos in terms of school culture, tradition and practices as well as religious education provision. This has an impact on those of other beliefs in no small way because Roman Catholic schools include religious formation, doctrinal instruction and sacramental preparation as part of their core curriculum in RE.

The reformed church minority population is highly diverse in and of itself - includes the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists, the Society of Friends and also recognises the Lutherans, the Eastern Orthodox churches as being

part of a wider communion. For historical reasons, as Milne (2003) has argued, especially since the foundation of the state, the reformed church minority population was very conscious of the challenges in maintaining its diverse identities in a State where the large majority belonged to another Church and where the laws, practices and norms of that State reflected the majority belief.

For this reason, maintenance of schools with their distinctive ethos was of particular importance. The primary school with its links to the parish communities was a central part of the maintenance of identity. While Irish society has changed considerably and the threat to community integrity posed by doctrines such as *ne temere* are no longer the cause of concern that they were for many decades, the faith school remains very significant within the life of a local church community. This is particularly true for scattered rural communities but is also very important in urban areas. It has a central role in the maintenance of a distinctive belief and cultural identity in a majority culture that remains different in small but significant ways. The State recognised its obligations to support and facilitate the Protestant minority in maintaining that distinctive identity in part through the support of its schools. This has gone some way towards addressing the obligation that a democratic state has to recognise the right of its citizens to hold a diversity of beliefs.

We should bear in mind that children do not simply learn about ideas in the abstract. For example, as John Dewey argued in the early part of the twentieth century, children could only learn about democratic citizenship through engagement in democratic activity in their schools. In the same way, the Church of Ireland would argue that faith schools provide children with an opportunity to learn about living in a faith community through actively experiencing that in their primary school. This is especially important in small rural areas where communities are widely scattered. In those contexts especially, the faith school provides a crucial central focus for the community. Faith schools also provide a very important opportunity for children to learn about their own distinctive belief and cultural heritage. This is especially important in a society where the great majority of the population do not share that distinctive belief and cultural heritage.

Schools under Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist management have always included children from each of the reformed church communities, as well as those from the other churches with which they are linked. This has meant that such schools have always had to facilitate and recognise diversity of belief as a norm. Thus, the shared Religious Education programme, *Follow Me*, focuses on development of broad moral and Christian values rather than having a specific focus on faith formation as that would serve to exclude rather than include.

Faith formation (including preparation for sacraments and other specific teaching of doctrine) is done at parish level rather than in the schools. In the Church of Ireland, the practice is that young people make their own decision with regard to confirmation. They must opt into voluntary classes organised at parish level and this generally happens when young people are in early adolescence but can happen later. In general, young people receive communion once they have been confirmed as they are now recognised as adults in the church.

Therefore, the pattern of sacramental preparation that characterises Roman Catholic primary schools in Ireland is not replicated in the reformed church schools. As noted in research with parents of primary school children (Lodge 2004), sacramental preparation was key to influencing parental choice for those of minority beliefs and this was one of the reasons given for them to opt to send their children either to reformed church schools or to seek a multi-denominational alternative. People of other beliefs have always been welcomed in reformed faith schools. Many of these seem content with the specific ethos which does emphasise the link with the parish and the Religious Education programme with its focus on development of broad Christian and moral values. However, for some the teaching of RE is, in and of itself, problematic and the operation of the parish-school link presents challenges, as articulated by a number of the previous speakers.

Schools under Church of Ireland management are keen to honour their legislative commitments. On the one hand, the Education Act requires that they uphold the ethos and on the other hand the Constitution gives clear rights to parents / guardians to withdraw their children from religious education that is not in accord with their own beliefs. Particularly in a climate of limited resources and one where those limitations

are likely to grow rather than to reduce, this presents dilemmas for schools as well as for parents / guardians.

The current model of primary education provision in Ireland, as I noted at the outset, strongly reflects the nineteenth century origins of the system. It has become increasingly diverse in recent years, with the addition of faith schools managed by our friends in the Islamic community and by the development of both Educate Together and VEC-managed Community National Schools. The position of the Church of Ireland is that such diversity is welcome because it allows for individual groups, especially smaller communities such as our own, to maintain our distinctiveness and gives crucial opportunity for our children to have access to their distinct belief and cultural heritage.

Thank you.