

**Wednesday, 18 February 2026**

**Proposing speech of the General Council's Report (Section 2) to the Special General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, meeting in Assembly Buildings, Belfast by the Convener of the General Council, Very Reverend Dr David Bruce.**

Moderator, David Bruce, Retired, General Council Convener.

The General Council is building on decisions made at the last Special General Assembly in December. That Assembly asked for several pieces of work to be commenced, mainly through Task Groups and Peter Gamble in seconding this report will explain what has been done so far. In all of these responses, the needs of those who have been hurt and harmed remains paramount to us.

Members of Assembly may be aware that the Acting Clerk, Dr Allen, has been on sick leave for a number of weeks. We pray for his full recovery, thanking God for him, while we miss his presence in the office. I wish to inform the Assembly that effective from the end of January past, Mr Dermot Parsons who was the Council for Social Witness Secretary and was stepping in to the role of Head of Safeguarding, has resigned his position. Active steps are being taken to recruit a successor for the post of Head of Safeguarding, and to strengthen the staffing team in the new Safeguarding Department, as we have already agreed as an Assembly.

I am pleased to say that following recent recruitment advertisements a good field of candidates for the post or posts of Safeguarding Officer have been received and interviews will take place soon. Tribute must be paid to the Safeguarding Lead Jayne Bellingham and the team who have been travelling across the church delivering a series of roadshows seeking to help Designated Persons, ministers and other leaders to fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities. We thank members of our congregations for their patience as Access NI forms are redesigned, and online systems stabilised. This all takes time to get right, and we ask you to bear with the Team as they work on it.

I want now to speak briefly about the progress we have been making in connection with the external review of governance and safeguarding required by the Charities Commission of Northern Ireland. There is some crossover between this work, and our responses to the PSNI whose criminal investigation continues. Dr Murray has been given the responsibility of being the main liaison person between the Police investigation and the church, just as he does with the Charities Commission, which includes identifying a Panel to conduct the external review to which we are committed. I want to say two things about this.

Firstly, Dr Murray is being asked to make commitments on behalf of the church which lie well outside the normal expectations of any Moderator. To assist him in this, a small specialist advisory Task Group has been appointed by the General Council, to which he can refer as needed. In addition, the Deputy Clerk assists the Moderator with specific aspects of Police Liaison. The Task Group I have mentioned can access independent legal advice as and when they need to.

Secondly, regarding the appointment of the external review panel, Dr Murray, with the advice of the Task Group, has progressed this. A firm proposal regarding a Panel has been lodged with the Charities Commission for their approval. The Enquiry Panel's remit will include an examination of both the governance and safeguarding dimensions of our work. If this receives approval, the work can commence as soon as next month.

The church must be under no illusions that things will be said to us concerning our past and current practice, in areas extending beyond safeguarding, and I have no doubt this will be challenging to hear. As a church, we will have an important job to do when this report is completed – in referencing back to Scripture, to the reformed confessional heritage from which we have come, and also as we look forward to the implementation of best practice in the protection of vulnerable people, and the implementation of models of governance which meet the requirements of the law of God and the law of the land. In this regard the work of the Structures and Resources Review Panel is timely.

Lastly Moderator, I wish to comment on the Task Group report which is our main item of business today, concerning the appointment of a Clerk. The Assembly will note the recommendations on pages 15-17 of the Report, and the resolutions on page 34. In commending this report to the House I make the following comments.

Central to these proposals is the creation of a Senior Leadership Team of three people. A Director of Operations will be responsible for the operational side of running the charity. This role will include many of the duties of the current Financial Secretary, along with some of the duties associated with the former role of General Secretary. The General Council considers the use of the term General Secretary in our governance to be obsolete and that it be set aside.

In these proposals the Clerk and the Deputy Clerk who must be ordained ruling or teaching elders, will be responsible for servicing the needs of the courts of the church, including the Assembly, its Commissions and Councils, Presbyteries, and where necessary, Kirk Sessions.

As a Senior Leadership Team, the strong expectation will be that these three postholders work collaboratively along with clarified and intentionally implemented line management arrangements.

The use of the word Leadership in describing the role of this Team rather than an alternative such as Administrative or Management is deliberate. These roles are Executive positions ensuring the delivery of decisions made here. In management parlance, they don't just do things right, they do the right things – and this is leadership.

The qualities required for organisational leadership in a church ought to be modelled on the Lord Jesus Himself who led like a servant rather than a master. This is what he said, and to this we aspire “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

In this proposal the three postholders would be responsible to this General Assembly through the General Council and be line managed by its Convener. There is a further proposal that a co-convener of the General Council be appointed who will be a ruling elder if the convener is a minister. It is envisaged that a regular pattern of (probably) monthly meetings will be needed, between the General Council Co-Conveners and the Senior Leadership Team through the year.

The Deputy Clerk will speak more about the timeline connected with the appointment of a Clerk, should the General Assembly agree to these proposals, along with progress reports on other matters agreed at the December Special Assembly.

Moderator, I move the reception of the report and its appended recommendations as per the resolutions on page 34

**Ends.**