

The Review

“Ecclesiastical earthquake”

In his opening address to the Assembly, Moderator Dr Richard Murray, said that the Church was living through “an ecclesiastical earthquake” and encouraged members to look to Psalm 46.

During the service of worship, which was preceded by a time of prayer, Dr Murray highlighted that as a Church we need to seek our refuge in the Lord, draw on the river of his Spirit and learn to rest in him: “I encourage you in this time of trouble for PCI not to fear but to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of the church.”

He also drew attention to God’s grace and his continued presence with us. Looking ahead, he said: “Let’s be careful to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.”



Victims remembered

While February’s Special Assembly was called to focus on two specific and time sensitive pieces of business, the victims of PCI’s failings were to the forefront of many minds.

During morning worship, Moderator Dr Richard Murray said, “We affirm those who have faithfully and dutifully carried out their safeguarding duties, but others have failed us, and in their wake, we are acutely aware

of people who have suffered and been left desolate.”

In his prayer, the Moderator’s chaplain, Rev Mark Neilly remembered victims, known and unknown, saying, “We ask that you would draw near to them as the God of all comfort. Bring healing where there is pain, bring truth where there is uncertainty, bring justice where it is needed and restoration where it is possible.”

General Council convener Dr David Bruce assured the House that, as work begins on decisions made at December’s Special Assembly, “the needs of those who have been hurt and harmed remains of paramount concern and importance to us.”



Safeguarding

PCI’s Safeguarding Department has now been set up.

Dermot Parsons, who was Secretary to the Council for Social Witness and was due to step into the role of Head of Safeguarding, has resigned, but as Dr David Bruce explained “active steps are being taken to recruit a successor” and to strengthen the staffing team in this new department.

Policies and procedures are being updated, with documents being improved, but “naturally, it will take time for matters to bed in, with appropriate staffing levels being addressed,” he added. Rev Peter Gamble, PCI’s Deputy Clerk, told the House that the new department’s staff are “working very hard and with great effectiveness.” As previously agreed at December’s Special Assembly, the department will be paid for through congregational assessments.

New Senior Leadership Team

As recommended in the report to the Assembly, the House agreed to separate the role of Clerk and General Secretary. The term ‘General Secretary’ will no longer be used and a new position, ‘Director of Operations’, will instead be created.

The task group set up to consider these roles acknowledged it is a difficult moment to change the long-standing model of senior leadership amidst ongoing internal re-examination of structures, and external review of governance matters by the Charity Commission, along with the possibility that scrutiny of management structures or practices by the PSNI investigation may uncover systemic shortcomings. Nevertheless, the task group’s conclusion was that there is a comprehensive case for splitting the existing responsibilities across two posts given the scale, complexity and skill set required to provide effective senior leadership to the Church.

In the debate, Dr Bruce stated:

“Change is going to follow those reports when they are submitted and some of those adjustments might well be considered wholesale changes. I don’t think that tinkering with the machinery in light of the reports that are coming is going to be sufficient.

“I think we will be invited to at least consider and possibly to implement fairly wholesale changes. They, of course, will be brought to the General Assembly for decision and discussion. The changes that we’re proposing today are adjustments to what already exists, and these adjustments address the particular matters of collaborative decision making and accountability while strengthening as a matter of urgency, our professional oversight of the running of the charity.”

It was agreed that the new post of Director of Operations incorporate a proportion of the current duties of the Financial Secretary, and that the job description and personnel specification for the Financial Secretary (as well as those of

the Clerk and Deputy Clerk’s roles) be redrafted to reflect the changes. The Director of Operations will provide line management to many of the offices working within Assembly Buildings, including: Finance, Human Resources, Conferencing and Operations, Property, IT and Safeguarding.

A new Senior Leadership Team, comprising the Clerk, Deputy Clerk and Director of Operations will be formed, with the line management arrangements of these located with the co-conveners of the General Council.

There were speeches for and against an amendment asking to replace the term ‘Senior Leadership Team’ with ‘Senior Administrative Team’. The issue seemed to centre upon the understanding of the exercise of leadership within the wider system of Presbyterian polity, however the amendment failed to gain Assembly support.

It is hoped that a new Clerk-Designate can be formally nominated to the General Assembly in June 2026.



External review

An update was given regarding the external review of governance and safeguarding which is required by the Charity Commission of Northern Ireland (CCNI).

There is some crossover between this work and PCI's responses to the continuing criminal investigation by the police; the Moderator, Dr Richard Murray, is acting as the main liaison with both bodies. He is assisted by the Deputy Clerk and also has access to a small advisory task group appointed by the General Council.

Having been requested by CCNI, part of Dr Murray's role has been to identify a panel to conduct the external review; he has already lodged a firm proposal for its appointment with the Commission for approval. If this is given, work can begin soon.

Dr David Bruce said: "The enquiry panel's remit will include an examination of both the governance and safeguarding dimensions of our work... 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 absolutely no doubt this will be challenging to hear."



Internal review

Rev Peter Gamble gave updates on progress made since December.

December's Special Assembly had agreed the establishment of a task group to inquire into issues of governance, culture and integrity within PCI. This has now been appointed and will begin work soon.

The task group looking into the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements is beginning its work, and the examination of the protocol for use in safeguarding cases which involve ministers and leaders is in progress, with a report due to be brought to June's Assembly following review by ministers and kirk sessions.

"Support of measures regarding Adults at Risk of Harm, and an examination of the necessity for a Survivor Redress scheme are all on the Safeguarding Development committee's current and future agendas," added Mr Gamble.



Issues highlighted

Several speeches highlighted issues for the House to consider going forward.

Alan McAdam, an elder from Corvalley, Monaghan who has a consultancy business advising charities, suggested that the current size of the General Council could prove a restriction to its effectiveness:

“...the General Council consists of circa 70 members. In the case of the 107 charities in the Republic of Ireland I’ve reviewed over the past seven weeks, the largest board or decision-making body of any of them is 25 persons, not 70, to allow it to function as it should...”

Former Moderator, Dr Norman Hamilton drew attention to the importance of ensuring good communication, saying:

“I suggest that we need to go much further and be much more purposeful in our ongoing communications with the Church and wider society. My key concern is that since the crisis broke in early November, the main source of information and analysis to both the Church and wider society has been through many journalists... Whatever is decided...by this Assembly, it needs to be fully and properly understood...owned and actively supported by ordinary people...in the congregations across the land.”



June’s General Assembly

This year’s General Assembly will take place from Tuesday 9 to Friday 12 June.

Deputy Clerk, Rev Peter Gamble, explained the extended timeframe will “facilitate more opportunities for worship, prayer and fellowship.”



There will also be a slight change to how Council reports are presented, with each given the opportunity to speak to their written reports. Mr Gamble said there will be a “more overtly spiritual thrust to reports, as the motivating force behind our work.”

To find out more

The full report of February’s Special Assembly, and a recording of the business proceedings can be accessed on PCI’s website: presbyterianireland.org/specialga26 or by scanning the QR code.



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