**PCI publishes Hate Crime submission**

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland has welcomed the opportunity to take part in the Department of Justice’s (DoJ) public consultation on proposals for updating hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland. Publishing its response today (5 April), the Church has re-emphasised the need for any future legislation to be ‘handled with wisdom and sensitivity’, recognising the truth-claims of an individual’s faith, and an ability to express these publicly are ‘a vital part of what it means for a society to genuinely value religious freedom.’

**Four takeaways from PCI’s Hate Crime submission**

         Freedom to only express ideas that are popular is no freedom at all

         The blunt instrument of the law, even as a last resort, is no substitute for the hard, and often challenging, work of transforming hearts and minds

         PCI would strongly oppose the removal of protection for individuals and families to freely express their personal views within their own home

         With challenges to the expression of faith in the public square becoming more common, the ability to publicly express faith is a vital part of what it means for a society to genuinely value religious freedom.

In its 2,000 word submission, the all-Ireland denomination reiterates the point that ‘freedom to only express ideas that are popular is no freedom at all’. The submission continues, ‘it is paramount therefore that efforts in finding a way forward on hate crime do not become a precursor to curtailing legitimate debate or the exploration of differences of opinion in a constructive and positive way.’

The Church has welcomed the indication from the DoJ that it does not propose to include a definition of hate crime explicitly in a forthcoming Hate Crime Bill. PCI recognises that including a definition ‘could be too prescriptive and open to interpretation, which in turn could have unintended consequences. Creating a definition in itself is not a panacea. The blunt instrument of the law, even as a last resort, is no substitute for the hard, and often challenging, work of transforming hearts and minds.’

The Church explained in its submission that ‘in a world increasingly defined through the lens of individual identity, and choices which we are often told are fluid and non-binary, there is risk of being left with a binary option which boils down to this – “if you are not for me then you are against me, and if you are against me (while of course you have a the right to hold your personal beliefs) there is no place for you to articulate those beliefs.” The place of public debate or personal expression risks becoming a zero-sum game where if “you win, I lose” and vice versa.’ As stated in the response, ‘The issues involved are very important and will need to be handled with wisdom and sensitivity.’

In its consideration of the ‘stirring up offences’ the Church expresses its concern that ‘placing restrictions on discourse within private dwellings may remove the freedom to discuss controversial topics at home between family members, friends or other guests.’ PCI also noted the Department’s view that the dwelling defence is no longer fit for purpose and in particular does not provide an appropriate defence for private online communication.

That being said PCI, ‘would strongly oppose any change to legislation which would remove protection from individuals to express their strongly held personal and/or religious beliefs within their own home without being at risk of committing a criminal offence.’

Speaking about PCI’s submission, Rev Daniel Kane, Convenor of PCI’s Council for Public Affairs, said, “In a parable concerning a tree and the quality of its fruit, recorded in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus makes a comparison with the ‘fruit’ evident in our lives stating, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” Transforming hearts and minds requires much more than legislative change.

“The Department of Justice is tasked with drafting legislation that strikes a careful balance that protects the vulnerable and facilitates respectful debate. In our submission we recognise that challenges to the expression of faith in the public square in particular, are becoming more common. For many Christians grounding their public conduct in the truth-claims of their faith forms is a key element of their religious commitment.”

Mr Kane continued, “Recognising this is a vital part of what it means for a society to genuinely value religious freedom. There must be space within society to express views with which others may disagree, recognising at the same time, that this works both ways and allows people to express views about religious belief with which we may disagree. This includes in the home, where people of faith use their homes as extensions of their faith and religious activity.”

The Minister of West Church, Ballymena, “As part of the legislative process, we look forward to responding to further stages of public consultation, including consultation on the proposed Bill itself. This, of course, very much depends on having a functioning Executive after next month’s election with a Minister in place to draft legislation, and an Assembly to consider and pass it.”