**23 March 2021**

**Moderator describes Secretary of State’s new powers as ‘ill-considered and irresponsible’**

**The Presbyterian Church in Ireland has called on the Secretary of State to step back from undermining Northern Ireland’s devolved institutions with new sweeping powers that ride roughshod over local decision making. Presbyterian Moderator, Right Reverend Dr David Bruce, described the regulations as ‘ill-considered and irresponsible’ and says that they should be withdrawn by the Secretary of State.**

In his statement, Dr Bruce, said, “As a Church with a strong pro-life position, we have put on record our total opposition to the imposition of abortion laws in Northern Ireland.  Such laws have removed protection from the lives of unborn children. On Friday we spoke of our grave concern at news the Secretary for State was seeking powers to implement these laws over and above the heads of locally elected representatives by directing Northern Ireland’s Department of Health. These radical, and unreasonably sweeping powers, go much further than we had been led to believe would be the case.”

Dr Bruce continued, “Far from working hard to encourage the building of consensus around highly contentious issues, the regulations laid before Parliament today drive a coach and horses through Northern Ireland’s hard won and finely balanced devolved constitutional settlement. These powers not only devalue Northern Ireland’s purposely unique system of negotiated government, they also give the Secretary of State the freedom to interfere directly, and at will, with every single department of devolved government in Northern Ireland. For instance, the Secretary of State is seeking to be able to unilaterally direct what should happen in Northern Ireland’s schools, taking local power and decision making away from governors, teachers and parents on sensitive issues, therefore undermining the right of schools to embrace a particular ethos.”

The Moderator concluded by saying, “The Secretary of State, and those supportive of devolution, cannot claim to be upholding Northern Ireland’s fragile devolved settlement while at the same time pursuing such an ill-considered and irresponsible intervention which undermines that very system. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland has always been supportive of devolution, has encouraged it, and prayed for it. These radical sweeping powers, that ride roughshod over local decision-making on such sensitive areas, are simply unacceptable. The Secretary of State should withdraw the regulations, and if not, Members of Parliament should refuse to grant him the powers that he seeks.”