RESPONSE OF THE COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE EVIDENCE REQUEST REGARDING THE MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP BILL

JUNE 2026

BACKGROUND

1 The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 185,000 members belonging to over 500 congregations across 19 presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy, and we welcome this invitation to share our views on the Committee for Finance's Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill.

2 PCI believes that marriage and family are themes central to the Christian faith, reflecting not only God's loving design for humanity, but also providing a rich image of the relationship between Christ and His Church. PCI also understands marriage to be a covenantal relationship, emphasising the concept of a deep, binding and enduring commitment between one man and one woman.

Belief Marriage

3 PCI recognises that as a result of the 2017 Judicial Review judgement the Department of Justice has been obliged to put belief marriage on an equal footing with religious marriage in regard to legislation. PCI also notes that since 2017 humanist celebrants have been able to apply to become temporary registrars and thereby to conduct marriage ceremonies for humanists, and that the Minister of Finance has, as a temporary measure, opted to read in aspects of belief marriage to the 2003 Order. The proposed amendment to current marriage law would effect a permanent change in this regard.

4 In acknowledging this we refer to our understanding of marriage in the paragraph above, and it is our view that it is regrettable that in extending the current marriage legislation to include belief marriage, this understanding will be diluted. Furthermore, the Churches' contribution to society with regard to the provision of the Solemnisation of Marriage ceremonies, where we have historically for many decades carried out a civic function free of charge thereby saving a great deal of government expenditure, has been significant to say the least. To place this in the same category as the contribution of 'belief groups' could be viewed as somewhat unfortunate.

5 At PCI we are concerned that the definition of 'Belief Marriage' in clause 3(2)(b) of the proposed bill is too broad with only two requirements:
   (a) 3(2)(b)(a) '*which meets regularly for common religious worship;' or*
   (b) 3(2)(b)(b) *'the principal object (or one of the principal objects) of which is to uphold or promote philosophical beliefs'*

6 PCI recommends that the Committee should consider adopting a more specific qualifying criteria for belief groups such as the 'Dublin Model.' As this incorporates 'secular' marriage rather than 'belief' marriage, additionally this model includes specific exclusions for particular groups and could provide a usual template. The criteria stipulating level of membership, length of continuous existence and regular meetings, along with details of aims, are helpful in ensuring that belief bodies seeking registration are genuine.

7 Moreover, PCI suggests there should be a qualifying criterion, based the criteria from the 'Dublin Model' set out, to assist the Registrar General in their determination whether a belief/secular group is genuine.

8 At PCI we would also like to reiterate our belief that although a very happy occasion, marriage is a solemn event with vows made not only in the presence of friends and family, but also in the case of religious marriage, before God. Therefore, all reasonable efforts should be taken to ensure that the introduction of belief marriage does not facilitate eccentric or frivolous marriage ceremonies, which would diminish or dilute the solemn and sincere character of marriage, which ideally is a commitment between two people made for life.

For-profit Marriages

9 PCI does not favour religious and belief groups being allowed to offer marriage ceremonies for a profit. To do so would be to undermine the serious and solemn nature of the religious marriage ceremony. Anything which would increase the necessary costs of a marriage ceremony for a couple should be resisted. In that light PCI does not favour allowing independent wedding celebrants to offer legally binding marriage ceremonies on a for-profit business basis.

10 In article 12(1)(d)(ii) of the Marriage (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 it states that the Registrar General may cancel the registration of a person … on the ground that the person, *'has for the purpose of profit or gain, carried out the business of solemnising marriages.*' PCI congregations do not charge a fee for solemnising marriages, but instead suggest a donation to cover relevant costs. However, we note that some belief bodies are charging between £450-£1500.[1] While we understand that there is a need to cover expenses incurred, we believe that there should be a tightening of the rules to ensure that there is no profiteering.

11 Where a religious or belief body does charge a fee, this should be published to allow for transparency. Additionally, we urge the Committee in conjunction with the General Registrar to produce guidance as to how this should be understood in practice.

Minimum Age for Marriage and Civil Partnership

[1] https://humanists.uk/ceremonies/fees/

12 Marriage, as understood within PCI, is a sacred and solemn act with vows made before God, as well as family and friends. As a bride and groom exchange their vows, they leave their respective family units and, now joined together as husband and wife, they step forward to face the changing seasons of life together. Within PCI it is also the understanding that marriage provides the appropriate context for physical intimacy between a man and a woman. Currently legislation allows for sexual activity between consenting people aged 16 or over. In that light, and given that the number of young people aged 16 or 17 coming forward to be married is relatively small, PCI would be in favour of retaining the option for marriage at age 16 or 17 provided certain safeguards are in place.

13 PCI would suggest that where the appropriate safeguards have been introduced to protect 16- and 17-year-olds to enter into a marriage or civil partnership, then the Government should not make it a criminal offence where one or other party is under the age of 18.

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