**COLLECTIVE WORSHIP IN SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**THE ISSUE:** Collective Worship and Religious Education, since the major post-war Northern Ireland Education Act of 1947, have been continually linked together in legislation as compulsory aspects of educational provision, with later Education Acts reconfirming this requirement. In controlled schools (which have traditionally served the Protestant community) the nature of daily collective worship and RE “shall not … be distinctive of any particular religious denomination”, whilst in other school types (mainly Catholic schools and the small cohort of Integrated schools) denominational provision is acceptable, subject to the approval of Boards of Governors. The clear assumption behind all educational legislation in Northern Ireland over the years, however, is that any religious teaching or worship in schools will be Christian. Conscience clauses enabling parents to withdraw children from RE and collective worship are also included in legislation, and teachers may also avail of the legal right not to teach RE or participate in collective worship.

**THE CONCERNS:** Levels of adherence to the legislative requirements regarding collective worship in Northern Ireland vary considerably. Some schools continue to observe the requirement for daily worship, but observation and anecdotal evidence suggests that most schools do so only once or twice per week. The NI Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has no jurisdiction over collective worship except to note if the school timetable schedules such occasions. Despite their general support for the principle of collective worship in schools there has been little evidence of any engagement with these issues from the Churches or government or other interested parties in NI in recent decades. Research evidence suggests that relatively few parents avail of the right of withdrawal of their children from RE, and that even fewer request withdrawal from collective worship. A small-scale research project on collective worship carried out in the early 1980s (which was the last known work on this issue up to the present time) raised some questions about practical issues, resources, leadership and the concerns of teachers, but there is no evidence of it having any practical impact on the approach taken by schools. This lack of professional guidance or critical professional review inevitably means that there is considerable variation in the standards and quality of school collective worship across the system.

**THE OPPORTUNITIES:** The current attitude of the educational authorities in Northern Ireland, combined with the significant reduction of professional support in relation to RE and collective worship, suggests a disinterested readiness to adhere to the status quo and an unwillingness to engage with any of the issues that might arise in relation to collective worship; thus poor practice is overlooked and good practice is not disseminated. The vacuum that this creates requires serious attention, and the following steps are proposed:

* There should be deliberative engagement with the Department of Education and other relevant authorities to discover where (if anywhere) responsibility for monitoring this situation currently resides in Northern Ireland.
* Attitudes to collective worship in schools should be included in surveys of the public, such as in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and the Young Life and Times Survey, in order to explore ethical and practical concerns.
* A survey of teachers and head teachers should also be carried out to discover attitudes towards the current legislation on, and practice of, collective worship. This should be followed up by a conference or seminar for all interested parties in order to explore the way forward in relation to school collective worship in Northern Ireland.