Introducing...

THE CHURCHES' LEGISLATION ADVISORY SERVICE

Final Report of the Group Reviewing the Churches Main Committee

SUMMARY

Background

The Churches Main Committee was established in the 1940s to liaise with Government in the churches' interest over public policy and law-making. Some of the issues with which the CMC has actively concerned itself over the past few years are charity law, council tax on second homes, ecclesiastical exemption, employment rights for clergy, landfill tax credit scheme, land registration and marriage registration law. It currently represents some 39 denominations, is chaired by the Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham and has a small staff secretariat.

Review

In mid-2005, prompted by its newly appointed Chairman, the Executive Committee commissioned an independent review of the CMC's role, membership and governance to examine whether the CMC could better meet its constituents' needs for the 21 st century and, if so, how this could be achieved. The review group was chaired by Peter Bottomley MP.

Process

The Review Group consulted widely amongst the CMC's member bodies and other stakeholders, including Government. Based on that input, in March 2006 it issued a consultation report to CMC members. The report affirmed the CMC's role as a support mechanism and voice for the Christian churches, whilst recognising the value of partnership with other religious bodies. It proposed the CMC should have sharper terms of reference, a change of name, a new smaller governing body and up-to-date working practices including the use of time-limited groups, proactive e-communication and a restructured secretariat.

Post-consultation

The CMC members, subject to some fine-tuning regarding the importance of working with other bodies, assuming a whole-UK perspective and providing opportunities for dialogue, broadly welcomed these recommendations. Having responded to these concerns, the Review Group now issues its final report, whose recommendations are set out overleaf, in respect of the body it proposes henceforth to be known as the Churches' Legislation Advisory Service (CLAS).

Further Information

The full report is available from: Policy Unit, Church Commissioners

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FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

A Fresh Start

The Churches Main Committee should be re-launched as the Churches' Legislation Advisory Service (CLAS). It should have a proper constitution, making explicit its remit and working arrangements.

The CLAS should be a Christian ecumenical body, providing a service to its member churches and other faith and secular groups, and should aim to increase its membership among Christian denominations currently unrepresented.

Its relationship with other Christian bodies and its operation generally should be reviewed again in five years' time.

Working Practices

Governance and Secretariat

Its secretariat will have day-to-day responsibility for the work of the CLAS. A small governing body should replace the current Executive Committee and be responsible for all governance matters, including staffing and finance. It should comprise six members, including one Anglican bishop as chair, one seat for the Roman Catholic Church and one for a representative of the free churches. Members should elect the other three governors.

Participation of Members

Much of the CLAS's policy work should be done through time-limited task groups. Its main means of communicating should be electronic and the secretariat should brief members on matters of interest by regular email bulletins, which should also be a means of gaining feedback from members.

The CLAS should ensure adequate representation of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish interests. It should have good two-way links with groups concerned with churches' interests in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

Topical seminars should take place regularly for members and other interested parties.

Interaction with Government and other Authorities

The CLAS should ensure close links with those who prepare legislation within Government. The Cabinet Office should be invited to alert Government departments to the role of the CLAS.

It should forge closer links with the European Parliament and Commission, working with European church bodies, to monitor initiatives with implications for UK churches.

The CLAS should make greater effort to publicise its work.

Secretariat

The new governing body should review the allocation of costs between member churches and agree a policy on subscriptions for non-members.

The CLAS should consider whether its future secretariat should be employed by itself, by another church body (or shared between both), or outsourced.