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NEWS FOCUS -

Church judicial action concludes: David Ford removed as elder in his congregation



On Sunday morning a statement was read to Second Donegore Presbyterian Church congregation informing them that David Ford was being removed from his position as an elder in the congregation. The decision also noted that David Ford had not been personally disciplined, Alan Meban writes on the Slugger O'Toole web site.

In the spring of 2013, [David Ford voluntarily stepped aside from his duties as an elder](#) in Dunamuggy (as it is known locally) after concerns were expressed within the congregation about his support for marriage equality laws.

Back in September 2012 the Alliance Party had [announced its policy position on same sex civil marriage](#). In [a statement at the time](#), and followed up in media interviews, the then party leader said:

“Alliance has always stood for a progressive and equal society. Alliance will oppose any form of discrimination, whether it is based on age, race, disability, gender or sexual orientation.

“There are equality issues in allowing those in a same sex relationship to have only civil partnerships, which is seen as discriminatory. The motion also called for protection for faith groups, to ensure they are not forced to act contrary to their beliefs.”

For more than three years, processes around the complaints have been ongoing within the regional Templepatrick Presbytery, and an appeal

finally reached the denomination's highest court the Judicial Commission earlier this month. The appeal was refused.

While the process started with complaints about the compatibility of views held and expressed by one elder, it morphed into an investigation into that elder's compatibility to serve on the congregation's senior decision making body, known as the Kirk Session.

In a statement, David Ford said:

"On 31 August I was informed that Templepatrick Presbytery had resolved to remove me as an elder in Dunamuggy, because the other elders in the congregation refuse to work with me. On 3 October my appeal was heard by the Judicial Commission (the highest appeal Court of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland) and on 12 October I was read its Finding:

'The Judicial Commission ... resolved that the decision of Presbytery be upheld. For the avoidance of doubt, ... David Ford remains an elder ... in good standing of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland ...'

"Unusually, despite refusing my appeal, the Judicial Commission also read to me a letter

written to Templepatrick Presbytery on 12 October. In the letter, the Commission was critical of Presbytery for the way in which they had dealt with me, and directed Presbytery to address other issues of concern in Second Donegore as soon as possible.

“It is a matter of great sadness to Anne and me that both Presbytery and Session have failed to act to promote healing and unity within our church, despite repeated requests from us over the last nine months.

“I believed that, as an elder, I had a part to play in making our congregation fit for purpose. Unfortunately, Presbytery and the Judicial Commission have now made that impossible. It remains to be seen whether or not I have any role in Dunamuggy. I thank those members of the congregation and others who have supported Anne, our family and me in word and in prayer through the last four difficult years of church life.”

David Ford remains an ordained elder within the Presbyterian Church, under the care of Templepatrick Presbytery while he continues to worship in that area, just no longer able to serve on his local congregation's Session. If he joined another congregation nothing stands in his way

of being elected or co-opted as an elder onto their Session should the congregation so decide.

Asked to comment, a spokesperson for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland acknowledged that “this has been a difficult time for all concerned and we commend all involved, Mr. Ford, the Minister, Kirk Session and congregation of Second Donegore to the grace and peace of Almighty God”.

The statement explained:

“The Templepatrick Presbytery Commission principally sought to attempt to resolve issues between elders in the local congregation following Mr. Ford’s publicly stated views on Same Sex Marriage. In the Templepatrick Presbytery Commission’s initial finding, it noted that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland does allow certain freedoms of conscience for her office bearers when they are operating in a different sphere, or communicating the views of a different organisation. The Presbytery therefore did not proceed with disciplinary charges on the grounds of Mr. Ford’s articulation of the views of his political party.”

It continued:

“Under the Code of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland the Presbytery Commission found that Mr. Ford had placed himself in a position where it had simply become impossible for him to satisfactorily discharge his duties as a ruling elder in Second Donegore, due to a breakdown in relationships between him and the other members of the Kirk Session”.

The statement reiterated that “for the avoidance of doubt, as was implicit in the finding of the Presbytery Commission, Mr. Ford remains an elder without charge in good standing of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, under the care of the Templepatrick Presbytery”

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It is hard to believe that within a Christian community that is supposed to model loving relationships that it was not possible to heal the rift at the earliest opportunity given the mediation services available, never mind the Biblical imperative.

If sufficient grounds were not found to sustain the original criticism of this elder’s beliefs, it is also unfortunate that the broken personal relationships – perhaps caused by the protracted investigation and obvious fissure caused by one

elder being singled out in a Session that numbers fewer than ten – became the focus of the dissent and judicial acrimony. In this case, a faith community has sadly proven itself to be more hurtful than the bruising political arena.

[Gerry Lynch's post from April 2013](#) is worth re-reading.

While this is an internal congregational and denominational matter, the pursuit of a high profile elder for more than three years with the 'charge' morphing over that period from criticism of his political opinion to suggesting a incurable breakdown in personal relationships will be seen as a test case.

It will worry many that what may be interpreted as having incompatible beliefs (which could be around any number of issues including moral ones) can be translated into being labelled as being an incompatible person.

And specifically, the decision to remove David Ford will suggest to the outside world that the Presbyterian Church is a cold place for anyone who is in favour of same sex civil marriage, a position that has increasing acceptance amongst

Presbyterians in Ireland and other denominations.

Disclosure: I'm a member of the Presbyterian Church.

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