

public schools during the past year; and, in regard to the chief recommendation of the report, that the Irish "Text-book of Scripture Lessons for National Schools" should be favourably considered by the Assembly, as fitted to be a platform on which all the Churches may reasonably be expected to unite. Resolve that the Assembly cordially approves of this recommendation of the Committee, and desires the ministers and office-bearers of the Church in their various districts to endeavour to awaken increased interest in it, and to co-operate with others for this object, so that by a combined effort the text-book may be introduced into our national schools, thus securing for our children the blessing of religious education in a satisfactory form, and in harmony with sound political principles." A similar report was drawn up for this year, 1895. It was to the same effect. The Standing Committee of the Assembly during the year to watch over the interests of education gives in its report annually to the Assembly, and the Assembly passes a deliverance on that report. This is the deliverance passed on the report for 1894-95. You will remember I read to you the other day when I was here the deliverances of the Church in Otago and Southland, which are substantially to the same effect, in favour of this Scripture text-book. I am sorry I have not brought the proceedings with me, but I might say that the great body of our Church take a similar view. Of course, in every large body or assembly of men there are individuals who constitute a minority; in this case a small minority. But the great body of the Church agree to the necessity of having some religious instruction in the public schools. They would have desired the Bible as a whole to be read in the schools, as containing the best kind of religious instruction that could be given; but failing that, they have agreed, in regard to this text-book, that it affords a basis on which most of the Churches and a great part of the people can unite in placing this instruction in our schools. At the same time we are most anxious to maintain the present system of education in its entirety—not to touch it; for we believe it to be an admirable system. I have been a member of the Education Board (Wellington) since its existence, and I have seen the working of the Act. I have no sympathy with those who denounce the present system of education as a "godless" system. Although there is no direct religious instruction provided, the whole tone of it is free in spirit, and in favour of morality and religion. But I believe that most people agree that some kind of direct religious instruction is wanted, and, so far as they are agreed, ought to be provided. In every other respect they agree in thinking the present system admirable. They believe that if an element of religious instruction could be introduced the system would more effectually accomplish all that could be desired. We wish to maintain the present system, and at the same time to introduce an element of religious instruction, believing, as we do, that it is essential to impart the knowledge of religious truth in the education of our young people. Hitherto we have been weak in pressing our objection to the exclusion of religious instruction from the schools, inasmuch as the Churches themselves were somewhat divided. The Church of England could not join with this movement for a time. They wished for denominational education. The Roman Catholics also desired denominational education. We are opposed to denominational education, because we think it would break up the present system; and rather than break up the present system of education we would prefer things to remain as they are. Now that the Church of England and the Wesleyan and Presbyterian Churches, and others, amounting to about 80 per cent. of the whole population of the colony, are all united in an agreement to ask for this improvement, we think that should form a strong argument in favour of introducing this Scripture text-book into the schools. I think some member of the Committee has said that the mere reading of this Scripture lesson-book, without being questioned on the subject-matter of it—that is, without interpretation or comment—would have no effect. I would like to say this much: I believe the reading of this book, inasmuch as it consists of large portions of Scripture, and lessons upon the truths of religion, must make our young people familiar with the simple, but essential truths of religion, and the essential and permanent facts of Christianity. This book may be made to form the basis of our Sunday-school work in applying these truths to the hearts and consciences of the children. It is said that the whole of this teaching should be left to the Church. I think the Churches are doing noble work in the Sunday-schools. I am not indifferent to that work; neither is the congregation of which I am the pastor. We have two large Sunday-schools, which contain from eight hundred to nine hundred children, taught by seventy teachers. Every Sunday we have Bible-classes for young people over fifteen years of age; I think the number of these is about one hundred and fifty; all of them under religious instruction. Generally, I have a Bible-class of my own. We do our utmost as a Church to impart religious instruction to the young. I know that other Churches are doing the same thing. Yet, I believe our work is not all that we wish it to be, and there is a large number outside that we cannot gather in. Hence the necessity of religious instruction being communicated to the youth in our public schools. That would form a basis on which our Sunday-school teachers could operate in the Sunday-school.

252. Do you desire to make any further statement?—If you will ask me questions I shall be glad to give you any further information I can. I may state, with regard to the petitions that have been sent in, I believe they would have come in greater numbers, but it seemed improbable that much would be done during the present session of Parliament. I have had petitions sent to me from Auckland, and all parts of that provincial district; also from Hawke's Bay, and various parts of the Wellington Province. I handed these petitions to Mr. Button, who, I believe, has handed them to your Committee. These, however, are but a fraction of what could be got, if necessary. In regard to my own congregation I did not ask them to sign, for it would be of little use, the session being so far advanced. I think it will be far better to put forth our whole strength next year in petitions which will voice the opinion of the people, for we believe that the bulk of the people of the colony are in favour of religious instruction being given in the State schools.

253. *Mr. Willis.*] While you said you had no wish to call our schools "godless," at the same time you must know that there is no religious instruction given in them?—No direct religious instruction.