

Consultation Paper: Brexit and the Irish Churches - Pastoral Dimensions

September 2018



**Churches
in Ireland**
Connecting
in Christ

Irish Council of Churches
Irish Inter-Church Meeting

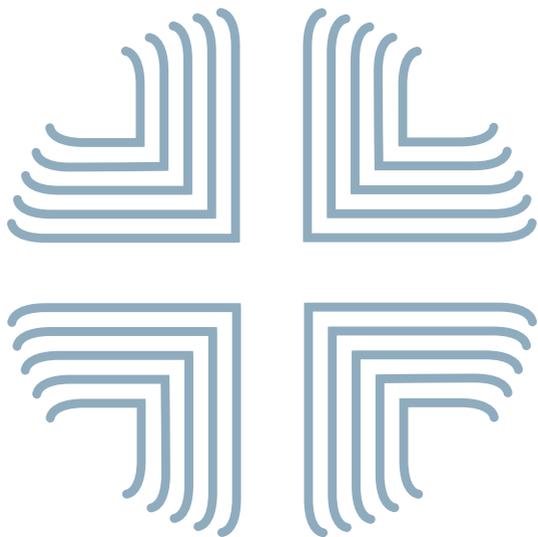


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Introduction

Dr Kenneth Milne, Convenor ICC European Affairs Committee

There was no thought of Brexit when four years ago the Irish Council of Churches established a European Affairs Committee. On the contrary, it seemed that the future of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland lay within the European Union and that therefore it was imperative for Churches to liaise more effectively with the European institutions, given the growing importance of policies emanating from Brussels.

That remains the case. Some members of our Churches, as citizens of the Republic, will continue to be citizens of the EU, while the impact of sharing a land border with the European Union will clearly impact on those who reside in Northern Ireland.

Having adjusted to the creation of two distinct political jurisdictions on the island almost a century ago our Churches should be confident of overcoming whatever stresses lie ahead, and we believe that as part of civil society we have a role to play in supporting our members in what is likely to be a protracted period of some difficulty. But to do so we need to be well-informed and energetic in maintaining our contacts with the European institutions and to sustain our commitment to doing so.

Two separate but interlocking issues are at present engaging public attention: the 'withdrawal' agreement whereby the terms on which the United Kingdom leaves the European Union will be set out (and in which the land border between the EU and the UK is a matter of crucial importance), and also under discussion is the form that the post-Brexit relationship between the EU and the UK will take, which at the time of writing is not clear. What is apparent is that much negotiation lies ahead, Brexit being followed by a transition period the length of which has yet to be determined, and during which it is anticipated that fresh issues will arise. The Churches, if they wish to keep abreast of proceedings, will require stamina.

The pages that follow describe the context in which the present Brexit discussions are taking place and also put forward practical suggestions as to what contribution the Churches can make as we face into territory that is to a large extent unknown.

Background and Context

Dr Nicola Brady, ICC General Secretary

Established in 1973, the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (IICM) reflects the contemporary landscape of Irish Christianity across Protestant, Orthodox, Reformed, Catholic, Independent and Migrant-led Churches and encompasses the vast majority of Christians within the island of Ireland. It comprises representation from the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) and the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference¹. The IICM facilitates dialogue between our member churches on issues of shared concern. Unsurprisingly, in recent years, the future relationship of the UK to the EU and the implications for the island of Ireland of any changes to that relationship, has been a significant focus, with particular attention to the economic and social consequences, and the impact on community relations.

The European Affairs Committee of the Irish Council of Churches published a position paper ahead of the referendum on UK membership of the European Union in 2016 and a visit by Committee members to the EU institutions, facilitated by the Belfast office of the European Commission, took place in November 2017. This followed a similar visit by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, facilitated by the Commission's Dublin office, in November 2015. In October 2017, Bishop Noel Treanor invited the President and General Secretary of the ICC to join a delegation to attend the "(Re)Thinking Europe" conference, which took place in the Vatican. Jointly hosted by COMECE (The Commission for Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Union) and the Vatican Secretariat of State, and featuring a keynote address from Pope Francis, this conference brought together people in positions of leadership (church, politics, business, charities, the diplomatic corps) from across the EU to discuss the future of the Union. Participants were encouraged to transpose this model to their own national contexts, with a focus on the priority issues impacting perceptions of the EU in that country.

Recognising that, in an Irish context, Brexit will not only dominate the agenda, but entails significant risks with regard to community relations, advice was sought from the Community Relations Council NI about how best to progress this work. We are very grateful to the CEO, Ms Jacqueline Irwin for her guidance in relation to strategic planning and to Mr Paul Jordan, Director of Funding and Development, for his support in relation to the application for funding to support planning and research to inform and shape this work.

With the support of the Community Relations Council, the IICM organised a planning meeting on Monday 25 June 2018, facilitated by Rev Dr Peter McDowell, Belfast Bible College. The meeting brought

1 For more information see <www.irishchurches.org>.

together representatives of the member churches of the IICM, academics, the business and voluntary sectors. The purpose of the meeting was to identify key issues arising out of the Brexit referendum, the ongoing negotiation process and possible scenarios after Britain has left the EU. Having identified key issues, possible ways churches could engage constructively were to be proposed. This report collates the information discussed to identify areas in which churches have particular interest, influence or contributions to make, and to propose specific action the churches may take.

The meeting considered two main themes:

- Social and Economic Dimensions, with input from Prof David Phinnemore (QUB) and Siobhan McAlister (NICVA);
- Identity and a Shared Society, with input from Prof Colin Harvey (QUB) and Rev Trevor Gribben (PCI).

We are very grateful to all contributors for sharing insights and challenges arising from their work. In addition, we are grateful for the willingness of EU representatives to contribute to our reflections, notably Ms Colette Fitzgerald, Head of Office, The Office of the European Commission in Northern Ireland, Mr James Temple-Smithton, Head of Office, European Parliament Liaison Office in Ireland, and Mr Fearghas O Béara, Adviser to European Parliament Vice-President Mairead McGuinness.

In the report that follows, Rev Dr Peter McDowell summarises the key themes addressed in the discussion and proposes a range of possible actions that could be taken by churches and inter-church groups at different levels — local, regional and international.

This report is offered for consideration and discussion as a work in progress. It acknowledges the complexity of the issues involved, and the need to find appropriate political solutions, which is not the role of the churches. At the same time, however, it highlights those areas where churches have a role to play, and where they can draw on past experience and learning. Above all, it emphasises the urgency of assessing available resources and anticipating future needs in order to maximise the contribution of the Irish churches to the protection of social justice and social cohesion in the challenges ahead. We are grateful to Dr McDowell for his valuable contribution to this initiative.

Report from IICM Planning Meeting on Brexit

Rev Dr Peter McDowell, Facilitator

1 CONTEXT: THE CHURCHES' APPROACH TO BREXIT

The background to the Brexit referendum and the ensuing processes is well known. The process of negotiating a withdrawal deal has been slow, generating uncertainty in many areas. As the only part of the UK with a land border with the EU, the unique status of Northern Ireland in the process has become apparent. The issue of the Irish border and future arrangements has assumed great significance. Cross border cooperation in trade, education, health care, agriculture and other sectors has increased over many years. The possible consequences of the Brexit process for these sectors have the potential to affect individuals and communities in significant ways.

Northern Ireland is also in a unique position in its relationship with the EU and the UK. The Good Friday Agreement gives citizens of Northern Ireland certain rights not available to other UK or Irish citizens, such as dual citizenship. The Agreement has also provided a framework within which various communities have felt their identity to be recognised and protected. Brexit, by its very nature, raises questions of identity and belonging although, perhaps, in new ways.

This is exacerbated by the fact that while the UK as a whole voted to leave the EU, in Northern Ireland there was a majority vote in favour of remaining. The Brexit process has been taking place at a time when the Northern Ireland Assembly is not operational, which further complicates the representation of Northern Ireland constituents.

The member churches of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (IICM) are all-Ireland bodies representing local parishes and congregations in both jurisdictions. Their membership includes people with a wide range of opinions on Brexit, so there will often be disagreement within churches about specific policies and proposals. There are, however, core values and practices arising out of the gospel that will lie at the heart of all the churches' contributions at every level of engagement, from informing the opinions of individual members to official contributions by the churches to governments and institutions.

The shared values the churches bring to this conversation include:

- An understanding of the common good and social justice. Foundational to this are the dignity and worth of each individual and community.

- The need to seek reconciliation in the face of divisive issues. Churches recognise that they have not always lived up to gospel values in their response to the Northern Ireland conflict, at times modelling rather than challenging the divisions in society. There have, however, been significant examples of leadership and some important learning that can be applied to the current context.
- The practice of pastoral care, that is, the ongoing support offered at local level to people facing challenging circumstances. Churches offer this support in various ways both to members and non-members.
- In the face of uncertainty the church is a community of faith and hope and so will engage constructively throughout the Brexit process, and do so with a view to also being constructively engaged when the process is over, no matter what the outcome.

This is simply a selection of values and practices arising out of the gospel that inform the churches' engagement with Brexit. They are often not unique to the churches, although churches have particular understandings of them. Therefore they provide a basis for the churches to engage constructively with institutions and politicians and to make comment on specific proposals. At local level these values and practices provide the basis to promote respectful and open conversation to inform people's thinking about Brexit.

1.1 Structure of the report

This report deals with the issues arising out of Brexit and the churches' response in three sections. The first deals with the local level, that is, with issues and actions pertaining to local communities and individuals. The second deals with issues and actions at the regional level and the third at the international level.

Each section lists key issues raised at the meeting, examines the churches' role and sphere of influence, and proposes relevant actions that the IICM member churches may take.

It should be noted that one issue was identified at the IICM meeting that applied to all three levels (local, regional and international). This was the issue of uncertainty arising out of the Brexit process.

For the sake of clarity the word 'church' in this report refers to the national church structures, or denominations. The church in a particular locality is referred to as 'parish or congregation.'

2 THE LOCAL LEVEL

This section deals with the issues arising out of Brexit that impinge upon individuals within parishes and congregations and upon local communities.

2.1 Local Issues

At the local level uncertainty over the Brexit process and its outcomes affects individuals within parishes and congregations as much as other citizens. The outcomes regarding farming subsidies, cross-border business arrangements and similar issues are unclear, but will have direct impact on businesses and the individuals who work within them. Border areas will potentially feel the most impact, particularly people who cross the border for work, education or health care.

The voluntary sector is also uncertain as to the impact of Brexit on funding for projects which often address local needs. Much of this sector depends on EU funding and charities are reporting concerns regarding the possible impact of Brexit on the economy, human rights and social tensions. A particular concern in the post-Brexit climate is the increase in race related incidents.²

Britain leaving the EU will bring change to local communities and to individual lives. The uncertainty at local level is felt personally.

2.1.1 Preparing for change and building community resilience

It is apparent that Brexit will involve change with local and personal impacts. Preparing individuals and communities for that change and supporting them through the process should be a key objective. The uncertainty and impending change imply the need to be proactive about building community resilience. In particular, attention should be paid to the following:

Tackling polarisation: the danger of increasing polarisation within communities arising from Brexit is widely recognised. This includes the dangers of increased sectarian and political tensions and racism.

Resourcing pastoral care: the effects of Brexit may have personal consequences for people within local communities. Those providing pastoral care will need resources and support. Many of the pastoral care issues may be similar to those commonly dealt with by churches, but with the added dimension of the wider uncertainty caused by Brexit. An increase in need for pastoral care would increase the pressure on clergy and leaders among whom there are already significant demands being made and notably high incidences of work related stress. This is exacerbated in a context where the wider community and voluntary sector is experiencing funding gaps and uncertainty.

² For detailed analysis of these concerns see the following NICVA publications: Carys Brown, Potential Brexit Implications in the VCSE Sector (December 2017) and NICVA Position Paper on Brexit Implications and Recommendations for the Negotiating Parties (December 2017) available at <www.nicva.org>.

2.2 The Churches' Position

The member churches of the IICM are made up of parishes and congregations embedded in local communities. These parishes and congregations provide a system of pastoral care for their members and are often actively engaged in addressing local needs through activities including youth work, food banks and various social activities for the elderly and parents of young children.

In many localities there are positive and active relationships between churches. These groups often have a track record in addressing differences and encouraging dialogue.

Parishes and congregations are, therefore, in a key position to contribute to the building of community resilience through the Brexit process. While the issues arising out of Brexit are in some senses unique, in other ways they are very similar to issues that churches have been engaged with for many years. This experience and resource can be applied to the Brexit situation. However, local leadership (both lay and clergy) will probably not be aware of specific developments of the Brexit process and the possible impacts in their area. Hence specific support for local churches will be required.

2.3 Action

2.3.1. Resourcing local churches

Parishes and congregations have significant social capital to help local communities face the challenges of Brexit. Yet they are not separate from the communities, but made up of ordinary people who are as affected by Brexit as the rest of society.

The churches, under the auspices of the IICM, have an opportunity to be proactive in providing the support and resources that local parishes and congregations will require as they provide pastoral care and support for those affected by the Brexit process. This care and support will not be limited to active church members, but will also be expressed through many community engagement projects. Consideration should be given to what support and resources local parishes and congregations may require in order to inform and develop this engagement. This could include such things as:

- Ensuring leaders in parishes and congregations have information on supports available to various groups affected by the Brexit process (such as business people, farmers, etc.);
- Collating and disseminating relevant information regarding the Brexit process and possible impacts to church leaders;
- Discussion on how the values and practices arising out of the gospel relate to developments in the Brexit process or specific proposals;

- Providing training for local church leaders dealing with particular local issues;
- Providing support for clergy and leaders facing extra pressure because of Brexit related issues in their community.

2.3.2. Building community resilience

There is great potential for parishes and congregations to contribute to building community resilience. However, parishes often require an outside stimulus and encouragement to engage. They also often need structure and support to know how to engage positively with an issue that is both complex and divisive.

Support for this sort of activity could take the form of providing discussion materials and guidelines. Materials could be produced either as one resource, or sequentially as the Brexit process progresses.

A more ambitious project would be for the national churches, separately or collectively, to initiate and facilitate conversations at the local level and to collate results to form a national picture.

It has been noted that young people will be particularly affected by Brexit and feel alienated from the process. Parishes and congregations are often well positioned to engage young people through links to schools, youth clubs and through organisations such as Youth Link NI.³

There are several examples of how churches have been facilitated and resourced to engage positively with such controversial and potentially divisive subjects (see Appendix). IICM could give consideration to how churches could initiate such a process within Northern Ireland.

In addition, there is a network of inter-church fora throughout Northern Ireland, supported by the Irish School of Ecumenics and the Community Relations Council NI, which seek to model at local level the positive relationships, based on shared values and respect for diversity, we would wish to see at all levels of society.

³ Youth Link NI supports churches in working together to develop youth work and ministry. See <www.youthlink.org.uk> for more information.

3 THE REGIONAL LEVEL

This section deals with the issues arising out of Brexit that have regional impact, that is, within Northern Ireland and the border region, across the island of Ireland, throughout the UK and between the UK and Ireland.

3.1 Regional Issues

The uncertainty around Brexit at the regional level has various components and feeds into each of the following issues. The complexity and slow pace of the negotiations is resulting in a high level of frustration on all sides in the debate.

3.1.1. Economic Issues

Northern Ireland has received significant funding from the EU. Prominent examples are subsidies for the agricultural sector and funding for peace and reconciliation projects. The future trading arrangements between Britain and the EU remain unclear. Brexit will, therefore, have a marked effect on all areas of the economy including business, agriculture and the voluntary sector.

3.1.2. Cross-border cooperation

Cross-border cooperation has greatly increased since the Good Friday Agreement, particularly in areas such as health care, education and power supply. Many businesses also depend on an open border for goods, services and labour. The future of the Irish border is of great significance to each of these areas.

3.1.3. Identity

The Good Friday Agreement has provided an accommodation on many issues that has been acceptable to most people and parties in Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland. Brexit has caused certain issues, such as citizenship and the question of a border poll, to re-emerge. There are concerns by some communities that protections or rights guaranteed under the Good Friday Agreement will be lost or diluted. The issue of identity has consistently been a factor in Northern Irish society and Brexit has added another dimension to it. In particular Brexit has raised constitutional questions, not just in Northern Ireland but in other parts of the UK.

3.1.4. Leadership Vacuum in Northern Ireland

The prolonged absence of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland means that we are not adequately preparing for Brexit, notably by assessing our capacity to cope with any increase in devolved responsibilities in areas such as agriculture and environmental policies. Policy and funding gaps arising from the lack of ministerial decision-making are also having a negative impact on the ability of the com-

munity and voluntary sector to prepare for the consequences of Brexit.

3.1.5. Possible effects within the churches

With one part of the island of Ireland leaving the EU while the other remains, this may have an impact on the churches as all-Ireland institutions. There are likely to be legal and practical implications for institutions who will be operating both inside and outside the EU. Less obvious is the possibility of tensions within churches arising from different approaches to the challenges within the different jurisdictions, and competing views of the “national interest”.

3.2 The Churches' Position

The member churches of the IICM are all-Ireland organisations with strong international networks. For example, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) provides a forum for discussion of issues that are of concern in a four nations context.⁴ The Irish Council of Churches has an ongoing dialogue with its Welsh counterpart, Cytûn regarding shared concerns about Brexit, notably the potential impact of a border in the Irish Sea, which could have significant implications for Welsh ports.⁵

Churches, because of their nature, hold certain values and will have particular concerns to represent to politicians and policy makers. This will include ensuring that certain issues are not lost from Brexit planning and discussion. The churches will be seeking to ensure that economic and constitutional issues are appropriately dealt with, and that issues such as social justice, the environment, health and education are not ignored.

Each church has parishes or congregations throughout Ireland with members holding a range of political views. In engaging with politicians and policy makers the churches are seeking not to present a particular view on Brexit, but to represent the varied concerns of their people. This poses a particular challenge in a context where the churches are in some senses both symbolic of the divisions in the society and making positive contributions to the overcoming of divisions. The national inter-church structures have resources and experience in bringing people holding opposing views together and facilitating constructive conversations leading to increased community cohesion. Churches could have a positive role in influencing the tone of the Brexit debate by modelling forms of discussion in which both differences and commonalities are explored in a constructive manner.

⁴ See <<https://ctbi.org.uk>> for more information.

⁵ Updates on the work of the Cytûn Wales/Europe Working Party can be found here: <<http://www.cytun.org.uk/waleseurope/index.html>>

3.3 Action

3.3.1. Initiating and modelling conversation

Churches have experiences in initiating the sort of conversations that can enhance local resilience and provide a model in which shared values become a starting point in approaching a divisive issue. Such conversations appropriately take place at a local level (see section 2.3.2), but local parishes and congregations require encouragement and equipping in order to facilitate the conversation. It would be helpful if the development of such a programme could be supported through planning and resourcing by the churches at a regional level.

In order to achieve an inclusive model of dialogue, particular effort will be required to ensure that people of all views feel they are able to participate. This is especially true where one view is perceived to be in the majority in a particular location or in a group organising the dialogue. As previously stated, some of the issues raised by Brexit may have deeply personal implications for people, including church leaders. Careful reflection on language is required to avoid giving people the impression that they will not be heard in the conversation.

3.3.2. Engagement with politicians and policy makers

It may be helpful for the member churches of the IICM to develop a plan for engagement with regional politicians and policy makers. The aim of this engagement would be twofold:

i) To represent the views and concerns of church members. Implementing the proposals in section 2.3.2 and 3.3.1 could help provide reliable evidence for this purpose.

ii) To present the particular areas of concern for the churches arising out of their faith and values. The church will want to comment on the headline issues of economics and the border, but also encourage politicians to ensure social justice, the environment, health and education are addressed. A key task for the churches will be defining the values arising from their faith that are pertinent to the Brexit debate and process, and formulating them in a way that is coherent and relevant to the wider public and policy makers.

In order to engage effectively the churches need to ensure that their contributions are based on reliable data and a comprehensive analysis of issues. Each church has some mechanisms for gathering and processing such information and generating responses. However, they could also consider mechanisms by which such information can be shared between the churches and when representation by churches together is more appropriate than representation by separate churches.

Churches have an important role to play in influencing the language and tone of political debate, reminding elected representatives of their responsibility to govern for all by protecting the common good.

4 THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

This section deals with the issues arising out of Brexit relating to the UK, Ireland and the EU.

4.1 International Issues

The prolonged Brexit negotiations have created uncertainty over the final relationship between Britain and the EU. There is thus some uncertainty of the final relationships between Northern Ireland and Ireland, the EU and even the UK. At the same time, the UK will need to redefine its wider international relationships.

4.1.1. The Good Friday Agreement

The uncertainty over the final relationship between the UK and the EU (and therefore Ireland) and the arrangements for the Irish border may have implications in terms of the Good Friday Agreement. All parties remain committed to the Agreement, but there are widespread concerns as to the actual or implied consequences of various forms of Brexit, given that common EU membership was a critical element of the context that made the agreement possible.

4.1.2. Representation

The special status of Northern Ireland within the Brexit process has come increasingly to the forefront during the negotiations. It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the views of the people of Northern Ireland are represented and heard in the discussions. The lack of a functioning Northern Ireland Assembly removes a key element of representation, making the constructive input of all other voices even more important.

4.1.3. The Future of the EU

Regardless of the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, one jurisdiction on the island will remain within the EU, and developments at EU level are likely to impact on the UK, and Northern Ireland in particular. The Brexit debate highlighted both misconceptions and concerns about the functioning and role of the EU that need to be addressed in other member states. Post-Brexit the EU will also be changed and these changes may have an impact in Ireland. Other issues of concern to the Irish churches in an EU-context include the impact of euroscepticism, the neglect of the EU Social Pillar, the growth of populism and the response of the EU to migrants and refugees.

4.2 The Churches' Position

The churches have a history of engagement with the European Union from the days of its foundation, recognising common ground in the efforts towards reconciliation of erstwhile enemies that was central to the vision of the original architects. The community method is closely aligned with the values of Christian churches.

The Irish Council of Churches works with the Conference of European Churches (CEC), part of whose role is to monitor and take action on EU policy and legislation, and several of the Irish churches

are members of CEC.⁶ A similar role is performed by COMECE (The Commission of Catholic Bishops' Conferences in the European Union).⁷

Under Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty the EU is committed to maintaining 'an open, transparent and regular dialogue' with churches and religious associations or communities'. Representatives of the Irish churches have been invited to attend these dialogues in Brussels.

4.3 Action

4.3.1 Representation to the EU

It has been encouraging to see the openness of officials across the EU institutions to engagement with the Irish churches in recent years, and the obvious concern for the protection of the Northern Ireland Peace Process. The churches, under the auspices of the IICM, may wish to develop a strategy for building on this engagement with the EU during and after the Brexit process. Such engagement would aim at representing the needs and views of local communities and the particular values of the churches.

This strategy would also aim to engage with the EU Commission office in Belfast, the Parliament Office in Dublin and build on the relationships established in Brussels.

Consideration could be given to initiating a conference or workshop between churches and religious associations or communities in Northern Ireland in line with Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty. Such a conference would be an opportunity for local and regional issues to be shared directly with EU representatives.

4.3.2 Sharing information from the EU at local level

Communication between local communities and the EU institutions needs to be a two-way process. Grassroots discussion among citizens is vital to enhance the democratic debate. The Brexit debate has revealed a lack of awareness in some sections of society regarding the nature of EU influence on the legislation and policies that govern everyday life. Churches could play a role in facilitating information-sharing and awareness-raising to ensure that people are adequately informed about decisions that affect them and equipped to participate fully in political processes, including any debates on the future of the European Union. Reminding people of the original vision and values that led to the establishment of the EU would be an important contribution to the debate.

⁶ For more information see <www.ceceurope.org>.

⁷ For more information see <www.comece.eu>.

5 FINAL REFLECTIONS

This report has sought to summarise the discussion of the IICM meeting on Brexit in June 2018. This meeting brought together the perspectives of the churches, business people, academics, politicians and others in positions of leadership in society. Key issues have been identified, the particular role the churches have and contribution they may make has been highlighted and action points proposed.

Two things should be noted in conclusion. First, although the discussion has been presented in terms of local, regional and international issues, these categories are not independent of each other. The issues of one category play into each of the others. For example, conversations at local community level may need the support and encouragement of the IICM or other regional bodies. Also, the results from local conversations should be fed into representations by churches at regional and national/international level.

Second, the issue of uncertainty is predominant during the negotiation phase of Brexit. Eventually more clarity will emerge as certain key dates are reached. However, uncertainty regarding the long term effects of Brexit will remain. The churches should, therefore, plan for positive engagement not just during the negotiation period but continuing into any transition period and beyond.

Conclusion

Most Rev Noel Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor

The first direct elections to the European Parliament were held in May 1979. Forty years on in May 2019 citizens of the Member States of the European Union will elect the Members of the European Parliament for a further mandate of five years (2019-2024). These European elections will take place against the background of Brexit and its impact on the European body politic and in the context of growing splintering of politics throughout Europe. A pervasive sense of insecurity, rising populism, the ghettoization and manipulation of public opinion via social media platforms, and the evaporation of a narrative of a shared sense of destiny for our countries and peoples will colour the outcome of these forthcoming European elections.

Since the end of World War Two, and particularly since the foundation of the European Communities just over sixty years ago, a sense of belonging to an economic and embryonic political community was fostered by both the national governments of the Member States and by the European institutions. It is true that the European demos did not develop apace, though member states, their regions and peoples benefited massively from the solidarity which was the fuel of the European project and its funds. The UK and Ireland entered the then EEC together in 1973 and both countries, their regions and peoples, benefitted beyond measure. Furthermore, the relationship between our countries was enhanced and transformed. As members of the EU our governments and their representatives shared and pursued many common interests. Our shared EU membership and framework provided a genetic context for the achievement of peace in Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland.

As our countries engage with the prospect of Brexit, both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland “face into territory that is to a large extent unknown”, as Dr Kenneth Milne remarks. That future unfolds in a European and global context marked by a profound sense of uncertainty in the political realm. The sense of destiny, the open horizon of growth and hope offered by the European project for the greater part of the opening of the first decade of this millennium has evaporated. Reason and public sentiment have parted ways. Such seminal issues of our time as the quest for meaning, the future of work (and artificial intelligence), the search for wisdom in the labyrinth of the cyber world, the future of economic systems and their governance, trade and nascent trade wars, climate change and care of the environment, migra-

tion flows, security, demographic growth and megapolisation with its multiple challenges – generate subliminal yet potent fear, apprehension and protectionist reactions. Intriguingly against this background many have discovered and cited W B Yeats’ words – “the centre cannot hold ...”

On this new horizon of expanding bewilderment and a splintering commonweal, the future welfare, societal and spiritual, of the human family requires nourishment, cultivation and prophetic impetus. The wellsprings of such welfare are multiple and their agents are equally so. Among them and alongside key civil society actors, Christians and the Churches by dint of their discipleship of the Risen Christ have a vocation to act as leavens of critical discernment and facilitators of courageous and prophetic leadership. In this anteroom to politics the Churches, espousing no interest other than the common good of the entire human family and a politics responsive to the issues and culture of our time and our interdependent global condition, have a shared responsibility to create contexts and spaces of encounter, exchange and understanding.

This Consultation Paper: *Brexit and the Irish Churches - Pastoral Dimensions* offers welcome suggestions in this direction. They build on the experience of initiatives such as, the Rome October 2017 “(Re-)Thinking Europe” Conference and the IICC Planning Meeting on Brexit held at the Presbyterian Assembly Buildings, Belfast, 25 June 2018. The fruit of encounters, exchange, reflection and the outcomes they generate might be brought to the EU level via Article 17 TFEU (governing the dialogue between the EU churches, religious associations or communities as well as with philosophical and non-confessional organisations) and thereby enhance the democratic legitimacy of the European project which in one way or another will remain vital for our future, the future of these islands and of Europe as a whole.

Appendix

Examples of Church and Faith-Based Engagement

The following are examples of churches or faith-based initiatives stimulating positive conversations related to Brexit or other divisive issues.

1. Church of Scotland: the Scottish Independence Referendum

Recognising the importance of the Scottish Independence referendum and its polarising nature the Church of Scotland General Assembly in 2012 agreed that the church should remain impartial in regard to its position on Scottish independence. It did, however, initiate a process of engagement at civic, political and local level on the questions raised in the debate. A series of community consultation events were organised under the banner 'Imagining Scotland's Future'. These events were designed as safe spaces for people to consider the values they wished to see underpinning Scottish society and what vision they could aspire to. The church was 'seeking to understand the values that our communities hold and to reflect them in the public debate'. The final report notes that when discussions focussed on a positive and aspirational vision for Scotland's future and on what would take these aspirations forward the common adversarial frames that often dominated the discussion were replaced by 'a deep concern for our neighbours, a focus on the local community, the future of children and young people, and a longing for a more peaceful and sustainable world'.⁸

2. The Irish Churches' Peace Project

The Irish Churches' Peace Project (ICPP) was a three year project initiated by the churches of the IICM and funded by SE-UPB. Six Good Relations Officers were deployed to regions in Northern Ireland and engaged in a wide range of programmes designed to develop good relations. These programmes all involved local churches, but ranged from encounters between churches exploring commonalities and differences along with dialogue about contentious issues, to initiating community engagement projects bringing together churches and community organisations.

In some contexts ICPP was a catalyst for churches to engage with each other and their local community in new ways. In

⁸ The final report can be found at <http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/19243/our_vision.pdf>

other contexts ICPP worked with existing groups, but provided resources and expertise for them to expand their work into new areas. Several resources arising out of the ICPP experience were produced.⁹

3. Cytûn: Brexit discussions

Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) have initiated a series of local conversations about Brexit. The events are advertised as an opportunity for local people to listen to each other and share a vision of Wales post-Brexit.

The first part of each event allows people to join a conversation group focussing on one of the following topics: education; agriculture and rural life; citizenship, identity and human rights; migration and free movement; Wales and the wider world, and; democracy and decision making. All groups are facilitated and participants are encouraged to follow certain guidelines in the conversation, including, to see listening as the most important part of the event, to be sensitive to others and to make comments on ideas not people.

The second part of each event focusses on asking the question, 'What next?'

4. Corrymeela Community: Conversations about Brexit and the Book of Ruth

The Corrymeela Community has produced resources to explore conversations about Brexit, borders and belonging using the biblical book of Ruth.¹⁰ The resource is designed to be used in local congregations, although facilitators from Corrymeela are available to assist. The resource is written with the expectation that participants will have differing views on Brexit, but seeks to open conversations on key issues in light of a sacred and ancient text.

⁹ ICPP resources are available at <<https://www.irishchurches.org/resources>>

¹⁰ The resource is available at <<https://www.corrymeela.org/cmsfiles/resources/faith-and-life/Ruth/ruthforwebp.pdf>>

Contact

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