

# Talking about Brexit: A Guide for Discussion Groups (Draft)

Dave Thompson



**Churches  
in Ireland**  
Connecting  
in Christ

Irish Council of Churches  
Irish Inter-Church Meeting





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## Introduction

The United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, and its role in the various forms of a European Community before that, have always sparked debate and disagreement. This recent period, since the lead up to the referendum in June 2016, has been particularly divisive and emotive; so why would any church<sup>1</sup> want to talk about Brexit?

Every faith community has a different context (geographic location, membership, previous experience of discussing contentious issues), it is important for each group to think clearly about what this conversation will mean in their context. Particularly, *what will be the benefits of holding this conversation?*

There may be others, but here are three possible reasons to hold a discussion-based event around Brexit.

1. No matter what the outcome, Brexit has shaped, and will shape the lives of the people who belong to your community. As with any major change in society, the Good Friday Agreement (or subsequent agreements), the outbreak of war, a notable change in legislation, the members of your group are going to live through that together. A 'safe' space to share hopes and fears, ask questions and hear alternative perspectives might be helpful to them personally.
2. Connected to this is the church's role in wider society. Over the years, it has become increasingly common for churches to hold 'hustings' before elections. All candidates are invited, and the invitation is extended to the general public. The church then becomes a public space where respectful debate and exchange is fostered. Modelling how to speak to each other in love should begin at the grass roots of a community, and Brexit offers an opportunity for churches to change the tone of the conversation by promoting respectful debate and encounter.

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<sup>1</sup> While this resource is most likely to be used by churches, it might also be used by inter-church or para-church groups. For this reason, 'faith community' or 'group' have been used throughout the document.

3. Pro-Brexit or anti-Brexit, most people agree that leaving or staying in the European Union impacts on Christian values. Participants in a discussion should consider questions such as, what is the connection between my faith and my political view? Or, what are the values of the gospel? How do these values call me to act? Conversation of this nature can help people better apply their faith. It can also help to develop relationships, increasing the community's members' knowledge and acceptance of each other. (And increased acceptance of each other's differences often leads to increased acceptance of other people in society who hold different views).

Whatever the reason, it is crucial these are not only clearly established in the minds of the organisers, *but clearly presented to the participants*. Brexit might be the content of the discussion, but the emphasis should be placed on what the benefits of engagement are likely to be.

The outcomes might be that the community:

- Better understands and accepts each other.
- Models listening, respectful challenge and disagreement.
- Considers how faith values connect with political decisions.
- Discusses action, based on the needs of the faith community, local community or wider society.

Disagreements on Brexit are highly unlikely to be resolved; it should be made clear that is not the intention.

What follows is an overview for how a small team might facilitate a group discussion about Brexit from a faith perspective. *There is no 'one size fits all'; these suggestions should be adapted to your context and the needs of your group.*

## 1 TALK ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY

- Is your group used to lively debate and discussion? If so, the starting point will be very different from people who are rarely divided up into small groups. It will be helpful for participants to be clear about what is going to happen, and what is expected of them, particularly for groups who are unused to open discussion. (See section 3 for more.)
- What opinions do you think will be reflected in your group? Will there be an even split? Or will there be a minority and majority? If so, how will you give 'protection' to your minority? How will you welcome all people, and all opinions? How will you communicate that no one is forced to contribute?
- Is your group likely to be talkative? If so, then discussion groups of 4-5 might work best. If your group is likely to be more reticent, then larger sub-groups of 6-8 might work better.

## 2 BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR AIMS

Discuss these questions as organisers. Write the answers down and keep them to the fore in your planning; *everything you do should assist your aims*.

- What need is this event meeting?
- What is going to be gained from it? What will change for the better? (For ideas, see introduction).
- Consider your language: do you want a *conversation*? This implies sharing or reflection of a more personal nature. Do you want *discussion*? This might imply a more issue-based approach, where challenge and exchange of contrasting opinions will be more likely. How do you see/hear the tone of the event?

### 3 CHOOSE FACILITATOR/S

Someone, or perhaps two people need to lead at the event. The facilitator's role is to make the process easier for everyone. In this case, a facilitator should:

- Welcome everyone at the start, put people at their ease.
- Give an overview of what is going to happen.
- Set clear expectations for how the group will act.
- Initiate each stage of the event.
- Keep an eye on time.
- Hear feedback, or responses (if that's what you choose to do).
- Stay calm and stay out of the conversation; ask questions, help it to flow. Being 'removed' allows you to keep in mind the overall aims of the event.
- Sum up positions, themes, questions and actions (depending on what your aims and activities are).
- Formally conclude the event.

## 4 EXPECTED BEHAVIOUR

Communicate clearly the atmosphere you want the event to be conducted in, rather than wait until heated debate/argument has begun and then try to restore calm! A simple contract can set the tone of a meeting. A short, helpful contract might ask for:

**Consideration:** Give people time to talk. Allow space for reflection; don't rush to speak. Be aware of how long you yourself have spoken. Accept that disagreements are not going to be resolved. Be accepting of each other, even if you don't accept an opinion.

**Curiosity:** This is an opportunity to hear other views; don't be so polite you don't ask questions, or politely challenge positions.

**Confidentiality:** After the event, talk about what you've learned, talk about the kind of things people said, but don't talk about specifically about who said what. Sometimes what people say, isn't always what they mean. Let's make sure nobody gets taken out of context.

It is important to note that the contract is not just for the start of the meeting. It can be helpful to make a reference to what has been agreed as the meeting progresses and reflect on whether any changes are required as the discussion develops.

In addition to this, you might want to ask people to:

- **Speak from 'I' statements.** Talk about your faith, how you feel events affect you or the people around you. Accept that other people will speak from very different experiences.
- **Decide how you want challenge to occur, if at all.** Personal statements shouldn't be challenged. (For example, if someone says, "I'm not worried by Brexit at all," no one can say "yes you are!" And they shouldn't say, "well you should be!") However, a feature of discussion about Brexit has been misinformation, on all sides, so you may consider there is a place to ask for the source of an opinion. (For example, if someone says "economically, we'll be ruined if we leave Europe", then it is acceptable to ask, "why do you think that?" Or even to give an alternative opinion that other factors suggest we won't be ruined).

## 5 STARTING OUT.

Think again about your aims; what are you inviting people into? With this in mind:

- Do you want your participants to have thought about anything before they come? Anything they might read or watch? Not just on Brexit, perhaps something on discussing contentious issues, for example, the Better Angels programme in America? Search Youtube for 'What is Better Angels?'<sup>2</sup>
- How do you want the room set up?
- Do you want tea and coffee on arrival?
- How do you want people to mix and mingle? Will they be put into groups? Will they choose their own groups? Will the groups change as the event progresses?
- How will you begin? Will you open in prayer? What will you pray about? Might people pray for each other?<sup>3</sup>

Brexit *shouldn't* be the first topic under discussion; people need a chance to 'warm up' first. This could be something as simple as exchanging information with the next person, or in a small group. People might exchange their name, a highlight from the last week, their favourite sandwich, their favourite biscuit -whatever introduces them to each other.<sup>4</sup> A second round of introductions might take this a little deeper; you might ask the pairs/groups to share a value that's important to them (patience, time with family, generosity, hospitality, courage) or maybe even, when you go to vote, what quality do you look for in a politician? This is simply 'warming' the room and deepening the conversation.

When the welcome, opening and introductions are over, this might be a good time to talk about the format for the evening. Be clear; reassure people. Take time to fully explain

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2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGIRxUd1DZ4>

3 An alternative 'opening prayer' would be to ask people to pair up, either with someone they know, or perhaps someone they don't know. After introductions have taken place, ask for a moment or two in silence during which each person will pray for the other one.

4 For more ideas, try here: <https://conversationstartersworld.com/questions-to-get-to-know-someone/>

the contract. This isn't free-for-all conversation this is about agreeing on how you're going to be with each other.

Before getting to more open discussion, find out more about the opinions of the group. One possible exercise is to get the group to stand in a circle. Someone reads a statement related to Brexit. If a participant agrees strongly, they take a few steps forward. If they agree slightly, they take a step or two forward. If they're not sure, they stay still. If they disagree, they step back. The statements might be something like:

- I think of myself as European. (In what senses?)
- Brexit is a topic that causes strong emotion in me. (In what ways?)
- The effects of Brexit cause me concern. (What are they?)
- Brexit will make an impact locally.
- Brexit will make an impact across NI.

The group might be asked to comment on why they have chosen to stand in a particular position, (see the questions in brackets) but this doesn't have to happen. Similarly, don't ask everyone to explain; this exercise is simply to continue to 'warm' the group, as well as clearly establish there are differences of opinion. Remind the group again about the need for respectful engagement.

## 6 DISCUSSION/ CONVERSATION

### Sample questions

#### a. Personal responses

You may want to start off with some personal responses, considering questions such as:

- Regarding Brexit, what concerns you most right now?
- Have these views changed over time?
- How does your faith connect to these views?
- Are there any weaknesses in your position?
- Can you identify with any of the concerns expressed by people with opposing views?

#### b. Impact of Brexit

It might be helpful for your group to look at Brexit in 3 (overlapping) sections: local, national and international. A short overview to begin with, might help direct thoughts.

Local overview: Brexit will have an economic impact: farming communities, voluntary sector and possibly employment in general. There has been polarisation of communities during the process, affecting pastoral care of people both inside and outside the church.

National overview: NI has received much funding from EU, especially concerning peace initiatives. There is uncertainty around the border, especially given the increase in cross border cooperation over the last two decades. There has been the re-emergence (or greater prominence) of issues of citizenship, and increased talk of a border poll. Brexit has taken place in a leadership vacuum.

International overview: There is remaining uncertainty over the final outcome, and the effect on north-south agreements, given they were written in a European context. There are also questions about the future of the EU itself; there are misconceptions and concerns about its role and functions that need to be addressed in other member states.

For each section, the same questions could be asked:

- What do you think are likely to be the main impacts?
- What are the 'gospel values' or 'Christian values' that should be considered in the church's response?
- How should the church respond?
- In practical terms, how *could* the church respond? What actions could be taken by a local church, with inter-church support or with church support nationally?

### **c. Different activities**

- These questions could be given to small groups for discussion. Thought should be given to changing the groups during the event. There is no right answer to this. If the initial groups are working well, it might be wise to leave them be. If, on the other hand more intense discussion has occurred in some groups, a change might calm this. If groups have accidentally become 'single identity' (pro or anti Brexit), or have become male/female, or younger/older, then you may want to change. It all depends on what best serves your original aims.
- An alternative approach to discussion groups, is to place three or four of these questions (or topics related to Brexit) on large (A2/A1) sheets of paper on tables, or on the floor. Allow everyone 10-15 minutes to visit each question twice. Participants add answers or make comments on the page. They are free to add comments to other people's answers/comments too, that way there is a slow build-up of what the room thinks concerning that question or subject. Participants could then be divided into smaller groups to take one sheet each and use what has been written as a starting point for discussion. For example, "polarised communities" might have been written in the middle of the sheet, twenty comments might have been added about people's experience of/ thoughts on this topic. A small group will take this away, and might be asked to locate themes in the comments, or how the church might respond.
- A short period of silence, for reflection, might help. Similarly, there might be a five minute 'comfort break' to restock on tea and coffee.

#### **d. To plenary or not to plenary**

A plenary, when the small groups feed back to the whole group, is entirely up to the organisers, depending on what the aims of the event are. The advantages of a plenary are that they give people a chance to hear from the whole room, and pick up ideas or perspectives not present in their small group. Broad themes can also surface in plenaries. On the down side, if mishandled, plenaries can be long and exhausting! A balance is needed between hearing helpful thoughts and including every group and hearing every thought from every group! Keep in mind:

- How long you want to spend in plenary, and state that clearly from the outset. If you only want a few brief thoughts from each group, say something like, “If I could give each group a minute each to feed back – literally!” (In your own head, recognise it will always be over the minute.)
- Ask each group to appoint one person to feedback.
- When hearing from a number of groups, ask for aspects that haven’t been heard yet: “In the last two groups, did you talk about anything we haven’t heard so far?”

## 7 FUTURE PLANS

- One event doesn't solve everything! Depending on your aims, it might be helpful to sum up the themes that emerged. With a smaller group, everybody might be invited to comment briefly on something new they learned, or something they are leaving thinking about.
- Questions that need more time to be answered, could be collated by the facilitator/s. For example, is there a role for the local churches in preventing racism? Or, what might the church's response be if we do see an increase in unemployment?
- Every church has a different context and congregation. While the conversation might have started with Brexit, responding to issues means considering the group's/ church congregation's DNA; churches share values, but there are also specific things that stand out in localities, or opportunities for specific churches to act.

## 8 CLOSING UP

- If there has been a lot intense discussion, finishing the event by considering *needs* is a good way to bring a group together again. When a group is asked, *whether you're for or against Brexit, what are the things you need?* Very often the answers centre on, security, health, well-being or inclusion. These needs are shared by everyone, even though there are disagreements on how to achieve them.
- The event might close in prayer, by one person, a number of people, or for each other.