

**Address by Canon Ian Ellis to the Irish Inter-Church Meeting,**

**Dromantine, Co Down, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

**The Centenary year of the Irish Council of Churches and the 50<sup>th</sup>**

**Anniversary of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting**

**(Abbreviated)**

The origins of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (IICM) lie fifty years ago this year, in 1973. The early 1970s were of course the early years of the Troubles and understandably the media were keen to report on any talks that were taking place across the religio-political divide. However, the Ballymascanlon Talks, as the IICM was originally called, were primarily a result of the new ecumenical opportunities which opened up with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), although the church leaders' desire to contribute positively in the difficult circumstances of the time was undoubtedly also a factor.

Political life in Northern Ireland was in a fragile state in 1973 and in many ways has remained so, if with rather different contours, but nonetheless we have seen the political achievement of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, the twenty-fifth anniversary of which fell this year. It has led to a power-sharing Executive, but the structure of the Agreement has made the Executive

vulnerable to collapse due to non-co-operation of one political tradition or another. Changing the structure has been suggested from time to time, but any change would clearly require a wide consensus.

Following the Roman Catholic Church's change of direction at Vatican II in terms of ecumenical relations, the leaders of the Church of Ireland, Methodist, Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Churches started to meet together. Subsequently, the Irish Council of Churches (ICC, established 100 years ago this year, in 1923) and the Irish Hierarchy established two joint-committees – the Joint Group on Social Problems and the Violence in Ireland Working Party - and, ultimately, the high-level meetings that were held at the Ballymascanlon Hotel, Dundalk. The first of these meeting was held on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1973.

To move from the context of 1973 to what we are to learn for today from that experience, I would reiterate and expand briefly on three short questions I have commended in *Called to be One*, which I was asked to write to mark this year's centenary of the Irish Council of Churches and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting:

- *Is our unity truly such as will draw the world to faith?* The close relationship between mission and unity is well recognised. John 17:21 speaks of unity that the world may believe. There is certainly space for a

variety of expression of Christian faith and worship. Yet that diversity requires a certain integrity and a shunning of divisiveness. Unity and diversity can co-exist, but for the churches the question remains as to the limits of diversity that are acceptable within the one household of faith. However, perhaps now more than ever our unity will be judged by the world around us, less by our ecclesiastical divisions or even our efforts to overcome them, but more by our willingness and readiness to work together in the service of the world, reaching out to a society around us with so many needs, and to a world in great need.

- *Are we really doing as much as we can together?* The answer here, I feel, is No. It was the World Conference on Faith and Order, held in 1952 in Lund, Sweden, that enunciated the standard ecumenical principle that the churches should act together in all matters except those in which conscience and conviction compel them to act separately. It was a call not to be focused on *doing ecumenical things* but on doing things, as much as possible, *ecumenically*. The churches today do need to act further on this.
- *Do our actions match our words?* Consistency and integrity are expected in public life and perhaps even more so in church life. The churches must not say one thing and do another, they must not demand standards in public life that they are not prepared to put into practice

themselves. From the parish or congregational level to the corridors of denominational power, it is important that the churches are not only welcoming but also are both open and accountable.

An important change for us in the churches since 1973 is the reported decline in Christian religious adherence, taking all denominations together across the island, as a proportion of the total population.

All our churches are committed to mission and this situation has prompted serious thought within our denominations about how to change the downward statistical trajectories. Currently, Protestant churches are considering different approaches to outreach and within the Catholic Church the current theme of synodality is seen as important not least in terms of offering what Professor Eamonn Conway has described as “a pathway towards cleansing the Church of current impediments to its mission, such as clericalism and loss of credibility”.

No doubt the clerical sexual abuse scandals have added greatly to disillusionment with ecclesiastical institutionalism, a trend that is only strengthened by a general but, I believe, correct tendency in modern society to be more questioning of authority structures.

As for our ecumenical structures in Ireland, absent a new organisation bringing together the ICC and the IICM into one body, the churches have tried their best to make the most of the situation. The adopted common strapline,

'Churches in Ireland Connecting in Christ', is an effective and dynamic one, surely pointing the right way forward.