

A time for courageous & compassionate leadership

Report on the Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative (September 2018 - February 2019)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Out of a shared pastoral concern about the acute political and social crisis arising from the prolonged absence of the devolved institutions, Church leaders invited leaders of the five largest political parties in Northern Ireland for a dialogue in September 2018. This was followed by separate meetings with the Secretary of State and the Tánaiste in October 2018
- Participants at each meeting agreed that it would be helpful if this dialogue could be opened up to other elected representatives and wider civil society
- Between December 2018 and February 2019 approximately 120 civil society representatives met in four regional facilitated meetings. These meetings focussed on the consequences of the political impasse and ways in which political leaders and civil society could work together for the common good
- Despite the severity of the challenges, the feedback from participants involved in this dialogue initiative conveyed the sense that the regional events had been 'hope-filled encounters'
- There is great value in people from different backgrounds, and different sectors, coming together to support each other, recognising our collective responsibility for the common good.
- A strong message came from these meetings that this is the kind of leadership people want, and need to see at the present time.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

1. As Church Leaders, on 28 September 2018, we brought together the leaders of the five largest political parties in Northern Ireland for a dialogue about the short, medium and long-term consequences of the political impasse, with particular emphasis on the impact on the most vulnerable and the threats to peace and good relations. This was followed by meetings with the Secretary of State and the Tánaiste. Participants agreed that the Church Leaders' dialogue, with its emphasis on collective responsibility for the common good, had provided a positive forum for constructive engagement on important issues, and that it would be helpful if this could be opened up to other elected representatives, and the wider civil society.
2. We undertook to facilitate four regional meetings in various parts of Northern Ireland, bringing together MLAs from different parties, representatives of local churches, and representatives of civil society from a number key sectors, which included education, health and social care, policing, business, farming and agriculture, youth work, family support, women's groups, anti-poverty work and community development. Approximately 120 civil society representatives took part in this dialogue process with meetings taking place in Newry (6 December 2018), Belfast (23 January 2019), Ballymena (1 February 2019) and Derry-Londonderry (13 February 2019). A facilitated conversation took place with a focus on the consequences of the political impasse, and ways in which political leaders and civil society can work together for the common good. Two of us attended each regional meeting in a process that was kindly supported by the Community Relations Council.

3. This initiative arose from our shared pastoral concern about the acute political and social crisis arising from the prolonged absence of the devolved institutions. People in Northern Ireland are demonstrating once again a commendable resilience in the face of adversity, but in our churches and faith-based charities we are seeing daily the damaging impact of this uncertainty.
4. We were particularly concerned that, in the context of Brexit, the consequences of the political vacuum were not receiving sufficient attention. Our society was becoming increasingly polarised, with a real risk of long-term damage to relationships and an increase in violence. Tragically, since we began this initiative, more lives have been lost.
5. We are very grateful to all those who contributed to this dialogue, the political leaders, local church leaders and civil society representatives. Participants stated that they were willing to make time for this initiative, in the midst of the many other urgent demands on their time, because they wished to contribute to efforts to promote a different kind of leadership, and a better quality of dialogue in the public square: one that had the common good as its focus.
6. Our efforts in this area are still on-going, but as our political leaders and the British and Irish Governments begin a new round of negotiations, we felt it was important to share some of the key themes arising from this work to date.

KEY THEMES & OBSERVATIONS

This is a time for courageous leadership

7. The significant achievements of our peace process were built on courageous leadership. Across communities and across these islands people in positions of leadership in all sectors of society took risks for peace. The promise of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement was founded on the disavowal of violence and a commitment to work to build better relationships grounded in mutual respect. While the threat of violence has been greatly reduced, the work of building better relationships has remained incomplete.
8. Sectarianism remains a pervasive problem in our society. The current political vacuum is both a cause and consequence of a breakdown in trust. It emerged against a backdrop of long-term instability in the political institutions and a drift away from the commitment to promote peace, reconciliation and good relations that lies at the heart of the peace process. Our society is fractured and it will require courageous leadership to bridge the gaps and challenge all of us about our commitment to peace and reconciliation.
9. We once again remind our political leaders that they are called in a particular way to serve the common good. With so much at stake they have a responsibility to safeguard the democratic institutions that are essential for the wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland and the future of our society. While a certain amount of antagonism is to be expected in normal political debate, it is possible to have positive, respectful personal relationships in spite of political differences. Our opponent does not have to be our enemy. Participants expressed a desire to see political leaders being more proactive in seeking out opportunities to come together and show leadership for peace and reconciliation.
10. When politics is broken the responsibility for fixing it does not rest with the politicians alone. Through this process we have seen that those in leadership in civil society are ready to support our politicians in the difficult decisions they face. The community and voluntary sector has managed to continue to provide a vital lifeline to those in need while coping with the policy and funding gaps arising from the absence of Ministers. We need to ensure that this experience and expertise informs and shapes political decision making and that the role of civil society in holding our elected representatives to account is supported and respected.

We can have robust political debate that is both reasoned and respectful

11. In our post-conflict society, peace and good relations can still be fragile and need to be protected. All in positions of leadership are called to weigh their words carefully and consider whether their interventions are likely to enflame tensions or exacerbate polarisation. A divisive approach to political debate has a corrosive effect on society. The impact of this negativity can be keenly felt by our young people, who look to those in leadership to inspire them with confidence about their future and promote a culture of aspiration as they too struggle with the impact of the current uncertainty.
12. Particular mention must be made of the way in which some people use social media, often under cover of anonymity, as a platform for very personal attacks on those who put themselves forward for public leadership. Participants in this process described this behaviour as ‘toxic’ and emphasised that it can be a major disincentive to those who would consider coming forward to serve their communities in a leadership role.
13. Through this process we have seen that respectful debate is not about asking people to abandon their principles or political convictions. It is possible to have robust debate that is respectful when participants are willing to listen and recognise the legitimacy of other perspectives. It is fundamental that political debate in the public square should be reasoned and evidence-based, keeping the discussion firmly grounded in the realities that people are facing. The media has a vital leadership role in this context, holding those in positions of leadership to account for the ways in which their words and actions impact the whole of society, and keeping the focus on the facts and the lived experiences of people in our society.

Our society is facing an urgent and deepening social crisis

14. As the outworking of the political impasse continues to erode the foundations of essential public services, the community and voluntary sector is experiencing an ever-greater demand for support. For increasing numbers of people, supports such as food banks and emergency loans — designed to be emergency provisions — are becoming part of their normal routine as they find themselves unable to make ends meet.
15. Community and voluntary organisations are warning that thousands of people will face a cliff edge situation in March 2020 if the current welfare reform package expires, leading to a significant drop in income and/or risk of homelessness. Those affected will be among the most vulnerable members of our society. This, combined with other problems that have been identified as Universal Credit has been rolled out in Northern Ireland, will significantly increase the hardship experienced by many households from next year.
16. The views expressed by participants over the course of this dialogue initiative suggests that there would be significant civil society support if politicians were to unite around this particular issue, highlighting the urgency of taking action to protect the most vulnerable.

Reconciliation is essential for hope - it is also essential for the common good

17. Christians have been called by God to bring the message and ministry of reconciliation to the world (2 *Corinthians* 5: 17-21). In this vision of reconciliation, all things can be renewed, even when we fail. All of us in positions of leadership are seeking the way to best serve our communities in the particular challenges of a post-conflict society, where the hurts of the past still run very deep.
18. There is great value in people from different backgrounds, and different sectors, coming together to support each other recognising our collective responsibility for the common good. We have heard a strong message coming from our local communities that this is the kind of leadership people want, and need, to see at the present time.

19. Despite the severity of the challenges we face, the feedback from participants in this dialogue initiative conveyed the sense that these events had been hope-filled encounters. As Church Leaders it was a great privilege for us to be able to make some small contribution by providing this space at a critical time. There is a need to do more of this type of engagement, with an emphasis on relationship, listening and understanding, in order to begin to restore hope. Such initiatives need to be grounded in the reality of the challenges that people are currently facing, and underpinned by a commitment to meaningful action around shared priorities.
20. We believe that this is a time for courageous and compassionate leadership that is not only committed to making politics in Northern Ireland work, but work for the common good of all.

Most Rev Dr Richard Clarke

Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All Ireland

Most Rev Eamon Martin

Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of all Ireland

Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen

Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Rev William Davison

President of the Methodist Church in Ireland

Rev Brian Anderson

President of the Irish Council of Churches

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