

The text submitted to the Seanad Consultation on the Constitutional Future of the Island of Ireland (October 2022)

Like other churches in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland is an all-island body, its constitutional basis legislated for in both jurisdictions. It is also the case that there are significantly more Methodists living in the North than in the South.

In conversation with Senator Mark Daly, we were given the impression that the Seanad would particularly like to hear from 'Protestant voices in the North'. With that in mind these comments may have a 'Northern flavour'. That said, we also note that Methodists in the Republic of Ireland have played a significant and positive role in public life and have probably had an influence that is beyond their small numbers.

Quite apart from any North/South differences it must be said at the outset that Methodists could not be considered a homogenous block from a political point of view. We encourage all our congregations to vote in elections, but we don't tell them who to vote for. Voting is done in secret, but on the basis of casual conversations it would be reasonable to guess that the average Methodist in Northern Ireland is more likely to vote Alliance than Sinn Fein. It would also be a reasonable guess that say a majority of Methodists would vote for broadly Unionist parties. If we include the Alliance Party, which has no fixed position on the constitutional question, that majority would be significant.

That said, if we had a referendum on the constitutional issue in the near future it would be hard to predict exactly how the 'Methodist vote' would split. Almost certainly issues beyond simple constitutional preference, such as economics and health care, would be very significant.

Over the years our Council on Social Responsibility have commented on political issues. In doing so we are driven not by any particular political or constitutional position but out of a deep concern for issues such as peacebuilding, reconciliation, compassion for the poor and the pursuit of the common good for all in our community.

By way of example, the issues of most concern to us are succinctly laid out in part of our 2013 submission to the Haass / O'Sullivan consultation. (See appendix 1 below.)

Then again, five years ago, our Council produced a document in anticipation of the 20th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Five enduring principles were further spelled out. (See appendix 2 below.) Five years on they are still applicable to this discussion.

Together with these principles we offer these related or overlapping comments on the issues that have particular practical importance for this conversation with the Seanad Committee.

Dealing with the pain of the past. While the 30 years of the Troubles mainly in the North are the foremost example of the harm and hurt we have endured on this island, they are not the only cause of painful memories. Any hopeful future here must find ways of dealing with the bitterness of the past. This is not to suggest that victims have a veto on any

political progress but failure to deal constructively with our painful history may cause us to live through it again.

Building on firm foundations. Any new political arrangements must be built on a secure foundation of genuine agreement. This will take time and effort (no doubt, a great deal of time and effort.) Something that is not supported by a majority in each of the main constituencies, as opposed to a simple overall majority, will be inherently unstable and probably lead to a situation worse than the one we now have.

Genuine persuasion and not coercion. In all discussions that take place, in any campaigning during the run up to a referendum and in the application of whatever result, it is imperative that all involved use genuine persuasion and do not resort to coercion or the threat of it. To have the firm foundation referred to above it is vital that any agreement is entered into freely and that it is genuinely understood.

More than 50% plus 1. Perhaps the worst outcome of all would be a very narrow majority in favour of a radical change in the present situation. (The outcome of the Brexit referendum is a case in point.) A narrow overall vote in favour of constitutional change might see nearly a million Protestant / British / Unionist people in the North East corner of the Island feeling that they are a threatened minority.

“New Irish” A brief final point is to notice that Ireland has changed a lot in recent decades. We no longer have the simplistic binary choice of Catholic or Protestant; Irish or British. On an island that is increasingly secular and pluralistic we need to hear all the ‘other’ voices as well.

We are very happy to have these ideas discussed further with members of the committee.

Rev Dr David Clements

Chair – Northern Executive Council on Social Responsibility.

Appendix 1

METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND - Submission to Richard Haass “Dealing with the Past”

Where the Methodist Church in Ireland is coming from

- # We wish to encourage yet challenge all people to do more for the common good
- # We recognise that we have an imperfect peace and there continues to be concern about good governance surrounding the political arrangements although it needs to be acknowledged that Northern Ireland has come a long way
- # We wish to act as critical friends
- # We believe that the future should be built on reconciliation and trust

Core Principles

Developing trust: flags and parades, how we deal with the past etc are symptoms of the differences in culture – which ultimately have got to deal with relationships – how we treat our neighbour. So respecting (without accepting or agreeing) the right of someone to see things differently is important, being sensitive to that right / difference and finding ways to develop trust. The challenge here is how to develop trust.

Offering generosity: being prepared to acknowledge our own wrongdoing, by what we have not done / failed to be or do / being sensitive to others, not being triumphalist, being prepared to compromise.

Being accountable: accepting responsibility for decisions made, not passing the buck / blame to others, being honest; this is not pointing the finger at others alone especially the politicians / PSNI / Parades Commission etc but looking critically at our own individual and collective behaviour as well. It is right to question / challenge others but only if we look honestly at ourselves also. The Churches / faith communities must look honestly at themselves as well. Leadership is not just about accepting the credit when things go well, it is also about taking the “flak” or accepting the blame when things go badly.

Acting responsibly: having due regard and being sensitive to the rights of others, acting within the law, being aware that our words / actions can affect the behaviour of others.

Seeking the common good: Northern Ireland is increasingly a much more diverse society than hitherto and there are opportunities to develop a common identity. Legislation, policies, decisions, actions and words of politicians especially those in the Executive need to reflect a more inclusive, collaborative approach.

Appendix 2

Taken from our document discussing the 20th Anniversary of the GFA.

Enduring Principles For A Shared and Hopeful Future

The Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 2017 approved five enduring principles arising from the Belfast Agreement of 1998. It did so expecting “much tumult in British, Irish and EU politics as Brexit is negotiated.” The principles that we commend to endure during these tumultuous times are:

1. Consent – Article 3 of the Constitution of Ireland has enshrined that “a united Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island.” The Republic only seeks such a united Ireland when people are “in harmony and friendship” and recognising “all the diversity of their identities and traditions.” True consent has to be free and informed and will, in effect, require a large proportion of the unionist population to give such consent in order for any constitutional change to have the necessary full democratic support.
2. Respect Identities- it has been agreed that the identities of both nationalists and unionists require to be equally recognised at all times in the governance of Northern Ireland and in the relationships on the island as a whole. There will be required a great focus, in coming years, upon resolving the historic and conflictual identities on the island and on the creation of a shared narrative, so that both identities are reconciled in peace and harmony as a basis for any longer-term proposals for constitutional changes. Winning hearts and minds to a shared and mutually beneficial political endeavour is more important than seeking to end land borders in the short term without full and free consent. The commitment in the Belfast Agreement “to partnership, equality and mutual respect” must endure.
3. Social and Economic Well-being is the Priority- in the wake of Brexit the correct approach by political leaders ought to be to develop a *Good Neighbour* policy which seeks to optimum social and economic well-being of all the people of Northern Ireland and of the Republic without any unhelpful or overt pressure to change the constitutional status of Northern Ireland in the short or medium term. Brexit will require special arrangements for Northern Ireland so that the Belfast Agreement is honoured and vital economic interests are protected; such arrangements are best designed and are best freely supported by both unionist and nationalist on the basis that they make best economic sense, will lead to the optimum economic development North and South of the border and thus serve the well-being of all the people of the island. We need every political party on the island to work together to achieve this.
4. Responsibilities of the British and Irish Governments: Under the Belfast Agreement and the subsequent British-Irish Agreement, there is a clear principle that the two sovereign Governments have responsibility for “the totality of relationships” and as guarantors of the Belfast Agreement. There is an urgent need for both Governments

to exercise fully and effectively their responsibilities for 'all-island and cross-border co-operation on non-devolved issues' in the context of Brexit in order to secure the social and economic well-being of the peoples of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This is their express and legal responsibility either in conjunction with a Northern Ireland administration, if such an administration is re-established, or in the absence of a devolved administration.

5. Spirit of Concord Required for Devolved Government- The 'Declaration of Support', which prefaced the Belfast Agreement in April 1998, speaks of a 'spirit of concord' with which the Agreement was commenced. It outlined the 'deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering' incurred in the 'tragedies of the past' and hence, the need to '*firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.*' The reaffirmation of 'total and absolute commitment to exclusively democratic and peaceful means or resolving differences on political issues and the commitment to 'endeavour to strive in every practical way towards reconciliation and rapprochement within the framework of democratic and agreed arrangements' remain essential imperatives. While seeking to encourage and build a 'spirit of concord' so that an effective devolved Government becomes possible again it is clear that Northern Ireland urgently requires clarity as to its governance now – hence our proposal above for a consultative role for the elected Assembly and new ministerial arrangements to be agreed by the two sovereign Governments as outlined in Belfast Agreement.