

Standing together in uncertain times: inter-church relations in Britain and Ireland through the pandemic and beyond.

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“The impact of COVID-19 has prompted us to ask searching questions about what it means to be a community of Christian believers in today’s society.”

Co-Chairs of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, 27th January 2021¹

When the news broke of the Irish Government’s decision to introduce lockdown measures in March 2020 I was facilitating an inter-church gathering of Church Communications Officers in Dublin. We were due to be joined by several religious affairs correspondents for a discussion on media engagement with the changing religious landscape in Ireland. The conversation took an unexpected turn when our first guest arrived straight from an emergency Government press conference and informed us that we needed to begin planning immediately for church closures. The announcement was met with a degree of disbelief, which soon gave way to anxiety as the full realisation of what this would mean began to sink in: no Sunday services, no baptisms, weddings... and what about funerals? At that stage it was meant to be only for a few weeks, but we would find ourselves navigating the complexity and uncertainty of this pandemic over the next two years.

Those in leadership in churches felt torn between the responsibility to keep people safe and protect public health on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to provide pastoral care and support people’s spiritual wellbeing, without losing that sense of being part of a worshipping community. In the different jurisdictions across these islands church leaders faced challenges in engaging with government to establish what would be considered necessary, safe and, consequently, permissible in rapidly changing circumstances. Often they found themselves doing this in a context where the significance of faith, and faith communities, to people’s lives was not well understood.

As the COVID-19 experience caused people to review their assessment of what was truly essential it was clear that for church leaders ecumenical dialogue and cooperation were essential elements of church life. This was arguably more evident than ever before. The existing national ecumenical structures on these islands moved their meetings online and met more frequently to provide a space where church leaders could support each other. In Scotland a new ecumenical body, the Scottish Church Leaders' Forum, was formed in March 2020 in response to the pandemic. At the request of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Most Revd Justin Welby, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) convened for the first time a meeting of church leaders from across the UK and Ireland to share their experiences. This initial conversation led to a collective statement and call to prayer for Holy Week of 2020, and was followed up with further meetings. The increased visibility of ecumenical cooperation during this time was cited as a hopeful and encouraging development in research into the impact of the pandemic on faith communities in Ireland and Scotland.ⁱⁱ

It could be argued, on this basis, that the investment over decades in the development of ecumenical structures and, crucially, the nurturing of the relationships that underpin them, was proving its worth in this time of crisis. Yet, there can be no room for complacency about our current trajectory. It cannot be taken for granted that more frequent contact will necessarily lead to greater depth of relationship, or more effective action. One encouraging sign in that regard was the way in which other areas of shared concern were brought to the table in meetings that had arisen from the pandemic response, including advocacy on climate justice for the COP26 summit, racial justice and solidarity with refugees, amongst other things. In October 2020 CTBI reconvened the British-Irish Church Leaders' Forum, this time at the request of the Church Leaders' (Ireland) Group, to discuss concerns about the impact of Brexit on the Northern Ireland Peace Process as the UK Internal Market Bill was before Parliament. The exchange helped raise awareness of the concerns of church leaders in Ireland, and the work they had been doing together to engage with political leaders, and allowed for sharing about other initiatives, such as that taken by the Anglican Primates of the UK and Ireland several days later.ⁱⁱⁱ

As we find ourselves hopefully now emerging from the acute stage of infection risk from the pandemic, and begin to assess its longer-term impacts, alongside the many other pressing issues that demand our attention, an important test of the strength of our ecumenical engagement will be the extent to which it is prioritised as church life returns to some form of normality. Will church leaders continue to prioritise space and time for ecumenical engagement in their planning as calendars fill up with travel and in-person events? In CTBI we are hoping that the efficiency of virtual meetings, adequately supported by intentional strategic focus on relationship-building and consultation, will support increased collaboration through regular, short and focussed exchanges.

As the pandemic introduced us to the language of ‘social distancing’, we became more acutely aware of the value of social connection. Community expressions of solidarity and compassion lifted our hearts as we endured dark days. The importance of social connection and compassion to health and wellbeing is evident in the pastoral experience of churches and has been demonstrated in multidisciplinary academic research.^{iv} Yet as the immediate threat of COVID-19 recedes we face a society that is not only wounded by the unequal experience of the pandemic (a subject which will be the focus of public enquiries by both the UK and Irish Governments) but also deeply divided by socio-economic inequality — exacerbated by a cost of living crisis, political polarisation and identity-based conflicts. The consequences for the mental health of individuals, and the wellbeing of families and communities, are of deep concern.

Since 2020, as part of a project on the theme of ‘Church, Nationhood and Identity’, CTBI has consulted with our membership about the identity-based fractures experienced in the different jurisdictions on these islands. We have heard a desire for the churches to have a strengthened collective voice in the public square, articulating Christian perspectives on solidarity and social justice, in dialogue with other voices in a pluralist society. We were encouraged in this work by Professor Francis Campbell of Notre Dame University Australia, who addressed a CTBI webinar in April 2021, encouraging us to draw on the learning from the churches’ ecumenical journey to create safe spaces for dialogue in which the challenging questions about the competing political aspirations that flow from our different identities can be addressed in a way that is respectful, evidence-based and grounded in a recognition of our interdependence — in stark contrast to the debate that is often modelled in the media and in political settings.

In CTBI we have come to realise that much of our work brings us to the places where people are divided by difference. This is unsurprising, and a natural fit given that the form of Christian unity we espouse is one that embraces difference, and underlines how we are enriched as a Christian community by the unique perspectives and experiences of our different traditions when we come together. Through our Interfaith Theology Advisory Group we have also been examining how that unity in diversity is lived and communicated in an increasingly pluralist and multicultural public square.^v

In 2023 we mark the thirtieth anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a crime that shone a new light on the nature and consequences of racism in UK society. The Christian response to this tragedy, and the courageous response of the Lawrence family, found expression in the work of Racial Justice Sunday, a long-term area of investment for CTBI.^{vi} When the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 sparked global protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, CTBI found a strong response to our invitations to dialogue (via webinars) on experiences of

institutional racism and the promotion of racial justice in the context of policing. On the first anniversary of George Floyd's death church leaders from across these islands took part in a very moving online worship service, which was broadcast on BBC Radio. We have since seen increased engagement with the resources produced for Racial Justice Sunday, and this year CTBI's service on 13th February 2022, with participants from across Britain and Ireland, was also broadcast by the BBC. People have told us their stories of racism and exclusion. We have heard their pain. Now we need to act for lasting change.

Of particular concern at present is the way in which racism is being targeted at people seeking asylum, some of those with least resources and networks of support. CTBI supports the Churches' Refugee Network to facilitate ecumenical engagement with people seeking asylum, those working to support them, and those who make and implement government policy in this area. This work extends the practice of hospitality and encounter that is central to our ecumenical engagement to those who find themselves on the margins of our society. At its most recent meeting the Network heard from people seeking asylum about the impact of the uncertainty of the asylum process on their lives, and the fear that has been generated by the April 2022 agreement between the governments of the UK and Rwanda to relocate people seeking asylum far from where they sought refuge. Church leaders have been vocal in their opposition to this agreement, while in Ireland churches have also been active in campaigns for the reform of the Direct Provision system that limits the freedom and prevents the integration into the local community of people seeking asylum.

While governments have been praising the community spirit that helped vulnerable people get through the pandemic, asylum policy has had the effect of creating a hostile environment for refugees. Churches have long been vocal on the contradictions inherent in this approach, but it was the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian on 24th February, resulting on the displacement of millions of people in Europe, that really brought to light the lack of solidarity and compassion in Europe's response to refugees. Unsurprisingly, the war in Ukraine has dominated the agenda of ecumenical encounters since that time.^{vii} The urgent humanitarian needs, both of those forced to flee and those left behind in Ukraine, have been a priority focus for fundraising, advocacy and other forms of outreach. CTBI has been working with CTE and colleagues in the other national ecumenical instruments to convene regular roundtables to exchange information, updates and facilitate collaborative practical responses that make the most effective use possible of the churches' networks and combined social capital. We have benefitted, in particular, from the learning from the multi-agency partnership approach developed by Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) to respond to the arrival of refugees from Afghanistan in September 2021.^{viii}

Across the Church there has been an awareness of the need to use our voices to advocate for justice and peace.^{ix} Speaking into this space, churches are mindful of the responsibility to place on the record the very clear condemnation of violence, human rights abuses and crimes against humanity. At the same time, there is a concern that in today's world militarisation is the default response to conflict, with diplomacy and dialogue too quickly and easily dismissed.

These tensions are evident in the debate around the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the World Council of Churches (WCC). The 11th Assembly of the WCC takes place in Karlsruhe, Germany, from 31st August to 8th September this year, with the theme 'Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity'. In advance of that gathering there have been calls for the expulsion of the Russian Orthodox Church as a response to Patriarch Kirill's public support for the invasion of Ukraine, and failure to condemn the violence perpetrated against the Ukrainian people. When interviewed on the subject the WCC Acting General Secretary reflected that this will not be the first time the Council has engaged in dialogue and discernment around members' support for military power and that these questions have always been approached spiritually and with a focus on the suffering of the victims.^x There is an awareness too of the significant numbers of Christians caught up in this conflict in both Ukraine and Russia, a conflict that Metropolitan Onuphry of Kyiv and all Ukraine (Moscow Patriarchate) has characterised as 'fratricidal'.^{xi} Even before the war, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine had fractured relationships among Orthodox churches. Since the February 2022 invasion those fractures have spread and deepened. In spite of this, the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th WCC Assembly, which brought together representatives from the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, including the Russian Orthodox Church, produced an agreed report which included the following:

During our deliberations, there was an expression of grave concern over the armed conflict in Ukraine that has already claimed many people's lives. The participants in the meeting have been unanimous in condemning the wars and call upon all the parties involved in the conflicts to do everything within their power for the urgent establishment of peace and for ensuring safety in Ukraine, Russia, Europe, and the whole world. We also condemn systematic campaigns of disinformation that promote divisions and hatred. In this time of great hardships, we are called to lift up fervent prayers to Christ the Savior so that hatred may not take hold of human souls and hearts, but, instead, love and fraternal communion may return to the brotherly peoples in anguish.^{xii}

When on Sunday 3rd April, Church leaders from across the UK and Ireland came together with the national ecumenical organisations and Christian Aid to promote acts of prayer and witness with the theme #WePrayforUkraine, they included the people of Russia in their prayer for peace. There have been some calls for strong condemnation of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the attitude of

Patriarch Kirill to the war,^{xiii} but also a desire to support those in that church who have been courageously calling for peace and providing humanitarian support to the Ukrainian victims of the conflict.

This experience of the unthinkable — the return of war to Europe — calls us to bring renewed attention to our contribution to the efforts to promote global peace and security. People of faith made a defining contribution to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but in the decades since have we perhaps become complacent about the drift in relationships between different parts of the world, East/West, North/South, and the erosion of the foundation of shared values that helped support global, multilateral responses to the challenges facing the whole of humanity? In a book entitled *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy* Professor Philip McDonagh and his co-authors have argued that there is significant under-developed potential for religious actors to support renewed efforts for inclusive, global dialogue on the values that shape and inform how we respond to existential challenges at what might be regarded as an inflection point in human history.^{xiv} This role is under-developed because of the lack of investment and attention from both religious leaders themselves as well as a lack of consideration of faith perspectives by political and other civic leaders. Religious leaders bring to the table networks that span from local community to international level, with pastoral insights that are often informed by work in acute situations of human suffering, and experience of navigating cultural diversity and the complexity of multilayered identities. Greater intentional strategic focus on the establishment of dialogues of mutual respect, and the development of mutual literacy between religious and secular leaders, has the potential to open up new possibilities for international diplomacy.

Ecumenical dialogue can provide a strong foundation for the churches' engagement in this wider global reality. This is evident in the preparations for the WCC Assembly where, in addition to the war in Ukraine, delegates will engage in dialogue and discernment on a range of themes including the Covid-19 pandemic; the climate emergency; racism and xenophobia; digitalisation; militarisation and authoritarian politics. While the Catholic Church is not a member of the WCC, it will have representation, and there are obvious synergies between the WCC theme and the hopes outlined by Pope Francis for the current Synod of the Catholic Church (2021-2023) with its theme: Communion — Participation — Mission. The area of ecumenical relations is a significant pillar of this synodal process, with the handbook for local church engagement inviting reflections on the following questions:

What relationships does our Church community have with members of other Christian traditions and denominations?

What do we share and how do we journey together?

What fruits have we drawn from walking together?

What are the difficulties?

How can we take the next step in walking forward with each other?^{xv}

In CTBI we are conscious not only of the learning from our ecumenical journey, but also of the unique perspective of the British and Irish churches. In reflecting together on the challenges posed by Brexit, we are reminded that the Good Friday Agreement has been rightly held up around the world as a beacon of hope and an extraordinary achievement of statecraft precisely because of the complexity of the identity-based challenges and the degree of interdependence involved. Drawing on that history, reinforced by the experience of solidarity and servant leadership that characterised the response to COVID-19, which was grounded in deep listening and an openness to learning together, might we be inspired to go deeper in our relationship-building, exploring the challenging questions around the way in which our fractured fellowship restricts and inhibits the *Missio Dei*? The recent example of the St Margaret Declaration of Friendship between the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland offers an encouraging example of the way in which an openness to self-critical reflection on the past, inspired by a hopeful vision for the future, can inject themes of friendship, reconciliation and commitment to the common good into the wider public discourse.^{xvi} There is much urgent work to be done and a strong foundation of relationships from which to build our collective responses so that our ecumenical networks and structures, from the local to the global, continue to provide critical spaces for purposeful encounter between those who seek to shine the transformative light of Scripture on the challenges of today.

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ⁱ 'Something Other Than A Building' Report – IICC Co-Chairs Response, 21 January 2021 <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5454/something-other-than-a-building>

ⁱⁱ See Gladys Ganiel, *Something Other Than a Building – A report on churches on the island of Ireland during the pandemic*, (2021) <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/Final-Something-other-than-a-Building.pdf> and Brendan Research *Adapt and be Flexible – the Mission doesn't stop!: The Scottish Church and the COVID-19 pandemic* (2021) <https://www.brendanresearch.com/projects/scif-acts-covid19>

ⁱⁱⁱ 'UK Archbishops urge Government not to breach international law over Brexit' *The Guardian* 18 October 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/18/uk-archbishops-urge-ministers-not-to-breach-international-law-over-brexit>

^{iv} Emma Seppala, Timothy Rossomando and James R. Doty, 'Social connection and Compassion: Important Predictors of Health and Well-Being', *Social Research* Vol. 80: No. 2: Summer 2013.

^v Recent discussion papers from this working group include: 'Church Growth and Interfaith Relations' and 'Praying Together in Multifaith Contexts: Some Ecumenical Reflections' <https://ctbi.org.uk/category/theology/inter-faith-theological-advisory-group/>

^{vi} Richard Reddie (ed.), *Race for Justice: The struggle for equality and inclusion in British and Irish churches*. [Forthcoming – 2022].

^{vii} See, for example, the reports from the CTE Forum of 14th-16th March <https://ctbi.org.uk/cte-forum-2022-keynotes-and-reports/>

^{viii} See, for example, 'More than 200 Afghans resettled in Wales following Taliban takeover' *ITV News* 21 September 2021 <https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2021-09-10/230-afghan-refugees-fleeing-taliban-are-resettled-in-wales>

^{ix} CTBI has collated statements from member churches and ecumenical bodies on the war in Ukraine at this link: <https://ctbi.org.uk/church-response-to-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>

^x 'Fr Ioan Sauca: "God is on the side of those who are suffering"' 14 April 2022

<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/fr-ioan-sauca-god-is-on-the-side-of-those-who-are-suffering>

^{xi} 'Metropolitan Onuphry appeals for penitential prayer and an end to the "Fratricidal war"', 24th February 2022 <https://orthochristian.com/144642.html>

^{xii} Inter-Orthodox Pre-Assembly Consultation for the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2022 "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity" (15-20th May 2022)

<https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Report-Inter-Orthodox%20Pre-Assembly%20Consultation-FINAL.pdf>

^{xiii} See, for example, 'Rowan Williams adds his voice to calls for WCC to eject Russian Orthodox Church' *Church Times*, 5 April 2022 and 'Church in Wales votes unanimously for WCC to distance itself from Russian Orthodox Church' *Church Times* 28 April 2022.

^{xiv} Philip McDonagh, Kishan Manocha, John Neary and Lucia Vasquez Mendoza, *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2021).

^{xv} *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Vatican, 2021) <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html>

^{xvi} 'Historic agreement between Church of Scotland and Catholic Church in Scotland' 23 May 2022 <https://ctbi.org.uk/historic-agreement-between-church-of-scotland-and-catholic-church-in-scotland/>