

## **Church of Ireland**

### **Response to CEC's Open Letter 'What future for Europe?'**

On behalf of the European Affairs Working Group of the Church of Ireland, we wish to thank the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches for sending out the Open Letter to the Member Churches in advance of the next assembly in Novi Sad, Serbia, from 30 May to 6 June 2018.

You have invited responses by the end of December 2016, including relevant, localised contexts in those responses.

The Church of Ireland is the Anglican Church on the island of Ireland, with dioceses, parishes and members living both in Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, and in the Republic of Ireland. The Open Letter has been discussed fully at meetings of this Working Group in recent weeks, and our discussions have been facilitated by the expert advice of an interested economist and by members of the Working Group.

As a working group, we welcome your challenge to consider how the Church can make both *koinonia* and *diaconia* realities in the way we live out the Gospel in our nation and in our society, and how we can find practical responses and search for meaningful answers to the problems that confront us and the opportunities that face us today.

Of course, since the Open Letter was sent out to the Member States, the context for the Church of Ireland has changed dramatically, both for the Church and for its members. Most notably, the recent referendum in the United Kingdom on membership of the European Union ('Brexit') raises many questions for the churches and citizens on this island and poses many challenges.

The principal challenge posed by the referendum result is the possibility of a new 'hard border' being imposed between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, which would have serious implications for all aspects of life on this island. The return of a 'hard border' would restrict the free movement of people, possibly bring a loss of income for farmers North and South of the border, generate greater difficulties for businesses exporting from the Republic of Ireland to the UK, see a drop-off in British tourists visiting the Republic of Ireland, and even see a future spill-over of rising racism and anti-immigrant feelings.

The Church of Ireland would hope that any changes brought about because of Brexit, and the border issue in particular, will reflect the desire for reconciliation and the strengthening of peace.

The response to refugees and migrants has been mixed in Ireland. The Church of Ireland has two working groups to monitor and respond to related issues, but the variation in responses at community level raise questions about Ireland's reputation as the land of 'Cead Mile Failte' ('A Hundred Thousand Welcomes').

On the one hand the Governments in Dublin and the Assembly in Belfast have yet to meet the commitments given on the number of refugees who would be accepted into the respective jurisdictions. On the other hand, however, the Irish Naval Service has played a particularly exemplary role in rescue operations in the Mediterranean and Irish aid agencies have contributed to varying degrees to work with the churches and refugees in Greece.

Many local communities feel they are confronted with a dilemma of offering a welcome for refugees but knowing there is a major housing crisis in Ireland or being aware of tensions surrounding the housing of members of the Travelling Community.

Providing a welcome space for refugees may be both a challenge and an opportunity for parishes, and one suggestion involves each parish or group of parishes doing something tangible, such as offering a practical welcome for one family.

The Open Letter raises questions about conflicts on the fringes of Europe, and we note that peacekeeping operations are a major part of Irish foreign policy and have popular support throughout the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, there has been a notable expressions of support for Irish naval operations with refugees in the Mediterranean.

We cannot be complacent about a major human tragedy that is on our doorsteps. As Christians we need to keep people aware that the roots of our Christian identity and story are in many places East and South of Europe that are now emeshed in conflict.

The Church also needs to speak out about xenophobia in Ireland, and while there has been no notable rise in far-right pressure groups in either jurisdiction, there is no room for complacency.

Nor can we ignore the reality that many migrants are the victims of climate change and that the environmental issues we face today cannot be separated from the social and economic challenges.

Like all European societies, Ireland north and south faces tensions between the desires to maintain cultural identity and the need to embrace diversity. These can be turned to a positive hope for the future without becoming insular and isolated on the one hand, or threatening and irrelevant on the other.

In the face of growing Euro-scepticism and the rise of xenophobia and racism, there is a pressing need to re-examine the European Vision and to breathe new life into our hopes for a shared future to which the Churches make valuable contributions by realising the outworking of *koinonia* and *diaconia*.

On behalf of the Church of Ireland, the European Affairs Working Group assures CEC of our continuing commitment to engaging in this discussion leading up to the assembly in 2018, and of our hopes to take part in that assembly.