

Response to Discussion Paper *What Future for Europe?* from the Executive Committee of the Irish Council of Churches

1. The Executive Committee of the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the planning for the 2018 CEC General Assembly through a response to the consultation paper *What future for Europe?*
2. Before addressing the content of the paper, the ICC Executive wishes to underline the need for effective communication to support planning, at national level, for participation in this important event. Critically, it is important to know as soon as possible the number of places that will be allocated to each member church/national council of churches, so that participants can be identified.
3. In terms of the consultation paper, the strength of the document is its focus on the values that inform policy decisions, rather than technical solutions. A significant weakness is the lack of a clear theological framework that would bring out the distinctiveness of a church response to the issues identified. It is important that we, as churches, respond to current political realities, but that does not mean that we allow politicians to set our agenda. We need to frame our own narrative in a way that is authentic to our Christian faith in terms of language and approach.
4. A further important weakness of the document is the tendency to reduce Europe to the EU zone throughout the paper. CEC reflects a European identity that is much wider than the EU and this needs to be taken into account in the planning for the General Assembly. If the General Assembly is dominated by EU issues, to the detriment of the wider European reality, it will be a missed opportunity.
5. The value of CEC's contribution is closely linked to the space it provides for dialogue and relationship-building. This discussion paper, by making too many assumptions of a shared vision, could potentially narrow the scope for dialogue by leaving those who do not share aspects of the vision outlined feeling marginalised from the outset. [A reference to the need to "overcome petty differences" (Chapter XII last paragraph) is considered to be particularly unhelpful in this regard.] It would be helpful to take a step back, make fewer assumptions, and create a more open space where member churches from different traditions and backgrounds could outline the values and considerations that shape their visions and expectations for the future of Europe.
6. Care must be taken to avoid the impression that CEC is an EU institution for churches. There is a spectrum of views within and among Christian churches regarding the role, structure and operations of the EU. It is important that this is reflected in any CEC initiative. CEC cannot take for granted that members support all aspects of EU policy or that, for example, all are in favour of monetary union. While we should support policies that are in line with our values, it is not the role of the churches to defend the EU as political system.
7. There is a need for a wide-ranging conversation about our vision for Europe (wider than the EU). By addressing the issues raised by the recent UK referendum in a

wider context, churches could bring something new to the conversation and hopefully challenge the win/lose narrative that has proved to be so divisive.

8. The General Assembly could make an important contribution by providing space for dialogue on questions such as: “What values would we, as churches, wish to see reflected in European relations?” The theme of “belonging” would be an important consideration in this context. As churches, we need to keep the focus on how we treat each other.
9. There is a need to recognise the political alienation among young people that poses a serious threat to the future — could this be addressed as part of the General Assembly?
10. The language of crisis needs to be replaced with the language of hope. Repeated references to crises, crossroads etc. can lead people to feel disempowered and disconnected. Christian churches have a responsibility to bring a different message, to bring good news to those who are losing hope. Consideration should be given to how this might be achieved through the work of the General Assembly, building on the pastoral experience of the churches.
11. The role of CEC is much wider than the focus of the former Church in Society Commission. It has an important function as a space for dialogue and relationship-building between Protestant and Orthodox churches. The General Assembly should be structured in a way that facilitates the continuation of this work. Political issues should not be allowed to dominate the agenda and eclipse other important areas of work, such as pastoral care and mission. Fundamentally, CEC is about churches relating to each other, not churches relating to other institutions.
12. This relationship building at European level is really valuable. As churches in Europe we are building on a long history of Christianity on the continent and need to continue to work together to face the challenges of the future.