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# Pulpit to Public: Church Leaders on a Post-Brexit Island<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores church leaders' contributions to public debates about a post-Brexit island. It analyses the work of Corrymeela and the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Meeting (ICC/IICM); and the Church Leaders' Group, which is comprised of the Catholic and Church of Ireland archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian moderator, the Methodist president and the president of ICC. These groups' main contributions have been their discursive

<sup>1</sup> Read a response to this paper by Philip McDonagh, *Irish Studies in International Affairs: ARINS* 32 (2) (2021), <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.52>.

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framing of Brexit, reconciliation, and dealing with the past as inter-related; and organising facilitated dialogues around these issues. It argues that church leaders have brought the past into debates about the future. But the effectiveness of this move may be determined by their ability to extend debate about dealing with the past to both sides of the border, and on their willingness to address their own past failures, including their contributions to division and violence, and the legacy of church abuse.

## INTRODUCTION

What role are the churches playing as the island of Ireland embarks on its post-Brexit transition? The churches have largely avoided debates about a border poll and constitutional futures, although Corrymeela, the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Meeting (ICC/IICM), and the Church Leaders' Group have contributed to debates around Brexit and the issues it raises about identity, belonging and the island's future. These groups have linked questions about moving forward in a post-Brexit era with reconciliation and dealing with the past. It could be said that their key contribution to ongoing debates has been bringing the past into the future, arguing that a better future depends on effectively addressing the past.

But the churches' ability to communicate about questions of significance is compromised by their waning influence. In previous generations, governments privileged the perspectives of church leaders; now, their perspectives are not considered above those of other civic groups. Less religious populations do not notice or simply ignore their statements and activities; while even those who remain devout may be only dimly aware of the work of ecumenical organisations. Even so, through these groups church leaders are contributing to debates in two main ways: through their discursive framing of Brexit, reconciliation, and dealing with the past as inter-related; and through facilitated dialogues, with the aims of promoting understanding and collaborative action around these issues. These groups' discursive framings and facilitated dialogues have had two main audiences: churches and other civic groups at local levels; and policy makers, some at high levels. While it may at first appear that church leaders play different roles at these levels, their role should rather be understood as mediating between these levels, especially in communicating grassroots concerns to high-level political leadership.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This role is in line with John Paul Lederach's 'levels of action' pyramid for explaining peacebuilding, in which religious leaders (among other actors) are located in the middle as mediators between grassroots actors at the base and political actors at the tip: John Paul Lederach, *Building peace* (Washington DC, 1997), 39.

The article proceeds by contextualising the churches' place on a secularising island, discussing their decline since partition, and analysing their reduced yet remaining potential to contribute to public debates. It analyses the work of these groups, providing examples of statements and facilitated dialogues, including meetings with politicians and policymakers. Although these groups have attempted to extend debates to the whole island and beyond, their focus and therefore potential impact has been on Northern Ireland. This is understandable given the legacy of the Troubles and Brexit's impact on Northern Ireland, where there has been street violence during loyalist protests over the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol. It argues that these groups could extend their contributions by taking an even fuller island-wide approach, appealing more explicitly to publics on the southern side of the border. The Church Leaders' Group is perhaps best-placed to do so because it is comprised of the Catholic and Church of Ireland archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian moderator, the Methodist president and the president of the Irish Council of Churches, giving it greater visibility and wider societal legitimacy than ecumenical organisations. At the same time, such efforts could be complicated by the legacy of abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, which have damaged the churches' public witness more so in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. The Church Leaders' Group's 2021 St Patrick's Day confession surrounding the churches' contributions to division and violence could serve as a starting point for more fulsome apologies for the churches' past failures, potentially restoring their credibility in future-orientated public debates.

## THE CHURCHES' PLACE ON A SECULARISING ISLAND

Religion has been a divisive boundary marker since the plantations of the early seventeenth century, reinforcing differentials in ethnicity and economic and political power. Religious ideas and rituals provided compelling (and exclusive) content for oppositional identities: Catholics saw themselves as part of the one true church; Protestants regarded themselves as God's chosen people.<sup>4</sup> Paralleling trends across Europe, religiously-tinged violence and discrimination persisted for centuries, with the anti-Catholic (and to some extent, anti-dissenter) penal laws of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries leaving

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *Dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge, 1996); Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving beyond sectarianism: religion, conflict and reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin, 2001); Claire Mitchell, *Religion, identity and politics in Northern Ireland* (Aldershot, 2006); Marianne Elliott, *When God took sides: religion and identity in Ireland—unfinished business* (Oxford, 2009).

a legacy of bitterness.<sup>5</sup> The movement for home rule in Ireland during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further exposed the fault lines of religious difference. Fearing their rights would be compromised by a home rule parliament in thrall to the Catholic Church, Ulster Protestants declared that ‘home rule is Rome rule’ and produced a protest document called the Ulster Covenant (1912), which resonated with the Calvinist theology of the region’s largest Protestant tradition, Presbyterianism. It was signed by church leaders and churches assisted in the mobilisation of some 500,000 people to sign the men’s and women’s versions of the covenant. Home rule was suspended due to the Great War, but on Easter Monday 1916 a small alliance of activists declared an Irish republic and occupied key locations in Dublin. One of its leaders, Pádraig Pearse, romantically compared the rebels’ actions to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The Easter Rising precipitated a war for independence that concluded with a treaty and the partition of the island. Churches associated with the majority on each side of the border enjoyed privilege and prestige, with the religious minorities cut off from their co-religionists in the other jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup>

A century after partition, the island can be described as secularising, albeit with continued (if reduced) patterns of religious vitality.<sup>7</sup> The long and wide-ranging debate about how to define and measure secularisation is beyond the scope of this article. For our purposes, José Casanova’s three-fold definition of secularisation helps explain how we can describe the island as secularising. Casanova’s approach consists of 1) structural differentiation, or the separation of religion from politics; 2) a decline in religion’s public influence, or the privatisation of religion; and 3) declines in religious practice.<sup>8</sup> The following account of the churches’ roles in the island’s history, while brief and selective, charts the churches’ changing relationships with politics, their

<sup>5</sup> Brian M. Walker, ‘The case against Northern Ireland exceptionalism: the ‘academy’, religion and politics’, in John Wolfe, *Irish religious conflict in comparative perspective: Catholics, Protestants and Muslims* (London, 2014), 93–106; Joseph Ruane, ‘Long conflict and how it ends: Protestants and Catholics in Europe’, *Irish Political Studies* 36 (1) (2021), 109–31.

<sup>6</sup> Elliott, *When god took sides*; Gladys Ganiel and Martin Steven, ‘Ireland and the United Kingdom’, in Lucian Leustean and Grace Davie (eds), *Oxford handbook of religion in Europe* (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Karen Andersen, ‘Irish secularization and religious identities: evidence of an emerging new Catholic habitus’, *Social Compass* 57 (1) (2010), 15–39; Gladys Ganiel, ‘Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: towards a concept of ‘extra-institutional religion’’, *Social Compass* 66 (4) (2019), 471–87; Crawford Gribben, *The rise and fall of Christian Ireland* (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> José Casanova, ‘Rethinking secularization: a global comparative perspective’, *The Hedgehog Review* 8 (1–2) (2006). Scholars of secularisation also chart declines in religious beliefs, such as belief in god, heaven or hell. In order to keep the discussion within limits, I do not present that data in this article.

decline in societal influence, and declines in practice. Decline is analysed first in the south of Ireland and then in Northern Ireland, allowing for analysis of the different relationships between the churches and politics, south and north.

### *Church, state, and society in the south of Ireland*

After partition, the Irish Free State granted the Catholic Church control over education and health, and a 'special position' in the 1937 constitution. Politicians deferred to bishops, with Catholic social teaching reflected in state laws on divorce and contraception. Censorship was widespread, and mass-going and popular devotions were taken for granted.<sup>9</sup> The Catholic Church cultivated an all-encompassing culture that Tom Inglis has called a 'moral monopoly';<sup>10</sup> Derek Scally has compared the church-state alliance to the communist regime in East Germany, arguing that it created an atmosphere where citizens could not recognise or were afraid to challenge abuses of power and coercive control as seen in industrial schools, mother and baby homes and Magdalene laundries.<sup>11</sup> Relationships between Catholics and the Protestant minority were uneasy, driven by some violence against Protestants in the early days of the state and by the Vatican's 1907 *Ne Temere* decree, which stipulated that children of 'mixed' marriages must be raised Catholic.<sup>12</sup>

The economic modernisation associated with Sean Lemass's tenure as taoiseach (1959–1966) reflected and helped create a degree of secularisation in Ireland, in line with trends in other Western nations. Censorship eased and the media became more critical of the church, women increasingly moved into paid work outside the home, and even the Catholic Church attempted to liberalise itself from within through the Second Vatican Council.<sup>13</sup> Secularisation in 1960s Ireland was not as rapid or radical as elsewhere, but from this period

<sup>9</sup> J.H. Whyte, *Church and state in modern Ireland, 1923–1979* (Dublin, 1980); Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: the undoing of a culture* (Dublin, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Tom Inglis, *Moral monopoly: the rise and fall of the Catholic Church in modern Ireland* (2nd edn. Dublin, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Derek Scally, *The best Catholics in the world: the Irish, the Church and the end of a special relationship* (Dublin, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Heather Crawford, *Outside the glow: Protestants and Irishness in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2010); David Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy: Irish Protestant histories since 1795* (Cambridge, 2014); Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne (eds), *Protestant and Irish: the minority's search for a place in independent Ireland* (Cork, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950*; Inglis, *Moral monopoly*; Susie Donnelly and Tom Inglis, 'The media and the Catholic Church in Ireland: reporting clerical sex abuse', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (1) (2010), 1–19; Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming post-Catholic Ireland: religious practice in late modernity* (Oxford, 2016); for analysis of the impact of Vatican II reforms elsewhere, see Stephen Bullivant, *Mass exodus: Catholic disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (2nd edn, Oxford, 2019).

a series of events revealed the Catholic Church's weakening influence on the state. In 1973, following a referendum, the special position of the Catholic Church was removed from the constitution; in 1985, the sale of contraceptives without a prescription was legalised; and in 1995, a referendum legalising divorce was passed. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, Ireland had become the first nation to legalise same sex marriage by referendum (2015) and had used a referendum to repeal the eighth amendment of the constitution, which had prohibited abortion in all but the most restrictive of circumstances (2018).<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in the 1990s, the horror and scale of the abuse of the state's most vulnerable citizens by clergy and in church-run institutions was finally exposed to public scrutiny. Testimonies of abuse by survivors coupled with searing television documentaries and critical media coverage severely damaged the Catholic Church's reputation—especially when it emerged that the Church's main priority had been avoiding scandal, not protecting the vulnerable.<sup>15</sup> The state responded with a series of inquiries into orders and institutions including the Diocese of Ferns, the Archdiocese of Dublin, reformatory and industrial schools, the Diocese of Cloyne, Magdalene laundries, and mother and baby homes.<sup>16</sup> A 2002 indemnity agreement between the ministers for finance and education and the conference of Religious in Ireland, representing 18 religious orders, ensured that the state would pay the bulk of compensation for victims—a move that has been interpreted as enabling the orders to evade responsibility.<sup>17</sup> Just how decisive a factor the scandals have been in secularisation is a matter

<sup>14</sup> For analysis of previous referendums on divorce, see Michele Dillon, *Debating divorce: moral conflict in Ireland* (Lexington, 1993); for analysis of how Catholic religious leaders increasingly framed moral debates in secular as well as religious terms, see Brian Conway, 'Religious public discourses and institutional structures: a cross-national analysis of Catholicism in Chile, Ireland, and Nigeria', *Sociological Perspectives* 57 (2) (2014), 149–66.

<sup>15</sup> On abuse and the Irish Catholic Church, see James Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen laundries and the nation's architecture of containment* (South Bend, 2007); Claire McLoone-Richards, 'Say nothing! how pathology within Catholicism created and sustained the institutional abuse of children in 20th century Ireland', *Child Abuse Review* 21 (2012), 394–404; Ethna Regan, 'Church, culture and credibility: a perspective from Ireland', *New Blackfriars* 94 (1050) (2013), 160–76.; Marie Keenan, 'Sexual abuse and the Catholic Church', in Tom Inglis (ed.), *Are the Irish different?* (Manchester, 2014); Eamon Maher and Eugene O'Brien (eds), *Tracing the cultural legacy of Irish Catholicism: from Galway to Cloyne and beyond* (Manchester, 2017); James Gallen, 'Transitional justice and Ireland's legacy of historical abuse', *Eire-Ireland* 55 (2020), 35–67; Claire McGettrick, Katherine O'Donnell, Maeve O'Rourke, James Smith and Mari Steed, *Ireland and the Magdalene laundries: a campaign for justice* (London, 2021); Gladys Ganiel, 'Responding to abuse in Ireland: what can the Catholic Church learn from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada?' in James Gallen and Tanya Ni Mhuirthile (eds), *Law, responsibility and vulnerability: state accountability and responsiveness* (London, 2021); Scally, *The best Catholics in the world*.

<sup>16</sup> Reports on the inquiries were published between 2005–2021.

<sup>17</sup> Scally, *The best Catholics in the world*; Ganiel, 'Responding to abuse in Ireland'.

for debate.<sup>18</sup> Scally concluded that some Catholics have ceased mass-going to register dissatisfaction with the scandals.<sup>19</sup> Even some Catholics who regularly attend mass have distanced themselves from the ‘institutional’ church of the Vatican and the Irish bishops, framing it as corrupt and self-serving.<sup>20</sup> Speaking at a civic reception during Pope Francis’s 2018 visit to Ireland, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar publicly redefined the relationship between church and state:

Holy Father, I believe that the time has now come for us to build a new relationship between church and state in Ireland—a new covenant for the twenty-first century...Building on our intertwined history, and learning from our shared mistakes, it can be one in which religion is no longer at the centre of our society, but in which it has an important place.<sup>21</sup>

Considering the tone of much media coverage and public discourse about the Catholic Church, Varadkar’s words could be considered balanced and even conciliatory. Analysis of media coverage during the pope’s visit revealed that the abuse scandals received more coverage than other topics.<sup>22</sup> Surveys found that the dominant public opinion was that Francis had not done enough to address abuse during his visit.<sup>23</sup> But although Varadkar recognised ‘the failures of both Church and State and wider society’, he also shifted most blame to the church, instructing the pope to ‘use your office and influence’ to ‘bring about justice and truth and healing for victims and survivors’.

In sum, Ireland has experienced Casanova’s first two aspects of secularisation: there has been a dramatic severing of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the state; and a marked decline in the Catholic

<sup>18</sup> Helen Goode, Hannah McGee, Ciaran O’Boyle, *Time to listen: confronting child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in Ireland* (Dublin, 2003); Peter Mulholland, *Love’s betrayal: the decline of Catholicism and rise of new religions in Ireland* (Dublin, 2019); Hugh Turpin, ‘Leaving Roman Catholicism’, in Daniel Enstedt, Goran Larsson and Teemu Manstinen (eds), *The handbook of leaving religion* (Leiden, 2019); Ganiel, ‘Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland’.

<sup>19</sup> Scally, *The best Catholics in the world*.

<sup>20</sup> Ganiel, *Transforming post-Catholic Ireland*; Ganiel, ‘Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland’.

<sup>21</sup> Speech of An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, on the occasion of the visit of Pope Francis (25 August 2018), available at: [https://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/News/Taoiseach's\\_Speeches/Speech\\_of\\_An\\_Taoiseach\\_Leo\\_Varadkar\\_on\\_the\\_occasion\\_of\\_the\\_Visit\\_of\\_Pope\\_Francis.html](https://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/News/Taoiseach's_Speeches/Speech_of_An_Taoiseach_Leo_Varadkar_on_the_occasion_of_the_Visit_of_Pope_Francis.html) (last accessed 14 May 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Gladys Ganiel, ‘Negating the Francis effect? The effect of the abuse crisis in Ireland’, *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* 20 (2019), 335–57; Gladys Ganiel, ‘Pope Francis versus Mary McAleese and Marie Collins: the 2018 papal visit to Ireland and the role of abuse in the decline of the Catholic Church’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> Ganiel, ‘Pope Francis versus Mary McAleese and Marie Collins’.



Church's public influence. Accompanying this, there has been a sharp drop in religious practice, fulfilling Casanova's third aspect. In 1972, mass attendance stood at 91 percent, dropping from 66 percent in 1997 to around 35 percent in 2016, with figures much lower in some urban parishes.<sup>24</sup> There has been a corresponding rise among those who identify as having 'no religion', from 2 percent in the 1991 Census to 10 percent in 2016. Pew's 2017 survey found 15 percent identified as 'religiously unaffiliated' and the 2018 European Social Survey put this figure at 32 percent.<sup>25</sup> Church leaders have lost their privileged position with politicians and in public debates, and they face considerable challenges communicating with a population that is disillusioned with or uninterested in church perspectives. An assumption that the Catholic Church has been mostly to blame for past abuses has undermined the churches' credibility and their ability to contribute to public debates.

### *Religion, politics and society in Northern Ireland*

In Northern Ireland after partition, the Protestant unionist majority quickly asserted its dominance. The Presbyterian Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the north, exerted particular influence on politics;<sup>26</sup> Liz Fawcett argued it functioned as a folk religion,<sup>27</sup> not only among its adherents but also through inflecting the wider evangelical movement with theological concepts like the 'chosen people' and religio-political covenants.<sup>28</sup> The Orange Order, a pan-Protestant organisation that emphasised its religious purposes, was embedded in the ruling Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) through its

<sup>24</sup> For discussion of these and other attendance figures from the European Social Survey, see Eoin O'Mahony, 'Religion and beliefs among Catholics in Ireland: a short review of recent ESS data' (Dublin, 2013). The 2016 figure is from the European Social Survey. There also have been declines in belief in God, heaven, hell, etc. See Michael Breen and Amy Erbe Healy, 'Secularization in Ireland: analysing the relationship between religiosity and demographic variables in Ireland from the European Social Survey 2002–2012', *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 3 (2014), 113–25.

<sup>25</sup> Pew Research Centre, 'Being Christian in Western Europe', <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>; Philip O'Connell, Micheál Collins, Mathew Creighton and Monika de Silva Pedrosa, 'Irish social attitudes in 2018–19: topline results from round 9 of the European Social Survey' (Dublin, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Mitchel, *Evangelicalism and national identity in Ulster, 1921–1998* (Oxford, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Liz Fawcett, *Religion, ethnicity and social change* (London, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> See also Frank Wright, 'Protestant ideology and politics in Ulster', *European Journal of Sociology* 14 (2) (1973), 213–80; David Miller, *Queen's rebels: Ulster loyalism in historical perspective* (Dublin, 1978); Donald Akenson, *God's peoples: covenant and land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (Ithaca, 1992); Neil Southern, 'Ulster, God's people, and the interplay between Old Testament and Calvinistic conceptions of covenant', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22 (1) (2007), 19–34; Gladys Ganiel, *Evangelicalism and conflict in Northern Ireland* (New York, 2008).

position on the Ulster Unionist Council; between 1921 and 1969 every prime minister was an Orangeman.<sup>29</sup> Catholics were disadvantaged through gerrymandering, majoritarian electoral systems and other forms of discrimination. Catholic society responded by ‘turn[ing] in on itself and...develop[ing] a parallel universe to the majority one.’<sup>30</sup> After the Second World War, the reforms of the British welfare state helped create a better-educated Catholic middle class that protested their exclusion through a civil rights movement in the late 1960s. When peaceful civil rights marches were met with violence by the Royal Ulster Constabulary, unresolved grievances and tensions spiralled out of control, marking the beginning of the Troubles. Westminster prorogued the Northern Ireland parliament in 1972, instigating direct rule.<sup>31</sup>

While the Orange Order retained its position on the Ulster Unionist Council during this period, the more obvious illustration of the relationship between religion and politics was the career of Revd Ian Paisley. Paisley began as an evangelical, anti-ecumenical preacher. He started his own denomination, the Free Presbyterian Church, in 1951 and a political party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), in 1971. The Free Presbyterian Church remained small and the DUP was unionism’s second party during the Troubles. But these organisations stifled moderation in religion and politics, as the Presbyterian Church and the UUP tacked to the right to keep people from deserting to their rivals.<sup>32</sup> Paisley’s public persona was fearsome and fiercely anti-Catholic; some loyalist paramilitaries claimed that he inspired or provided cover for their violence.<sup>33</sup> Steve Bruce explained Paisley’s prominence as evidence that evangelicalism comprised the ‘core’ of an oppositional Ulster Protestant identity, underscoring the importance of religion even for those who never read their bibles or attended church.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Eric Kaufmann, *The Orange Order: a contemporary Northern Irish history* (Oxford, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Elliott, *When God took sides*, 241.

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: the origins of the Troubles* (Dublin, 2005); Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland’s 68: civil rights, global revolt and the origins of the Troubles* (2nd edn, Dublin, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> On Paisleyism, see Steve Bruce, *God save Ulster! the religion and politics of Paisleyism* (Oxford, 1986); Ed Moloney and Andy Pollak, *Paisley* (Dublin, 1986); for the impact of Paisleyism on Presbyterianism, see Gladys Ganiel and Jamie Yohanis, *Considering grace: Presbyterians and the Troubles* (Dublin, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> Ganiel and Yohanis, *Considering Grace*; See also Dennis Cooke, *Persecuting zeal: a portrait of Ian Paisley* (Dingle, 1996); John Brewer and David Mitchell, *Ex-combatants, religion and peace in Northern Ireland* (London, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Bruce, *God save Ulster!* 246.

On the other hand, some Christians were active peacemakers, including Redemptorists Fr Alec Reid and Fr Gerry Reynolds,<sup>35</sup> Church of Ireland Archbishop Robin Eames, Presbyterian Ken Newell, and Methodist Harold Good;<sup>36</sup> special interest organisations like Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI), which offered a compelling critique of Paisleyism;<sup>37</sup> and ecumenical communities like Corrymeela.<sup>38</sup> John Brewer's major study commended these 'mavericks', arguing that the larger 'institutional' churches were constrained by their most sectarian elements, preventing them from playing transformative roles.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Nukhet Sandal argued that religious leaders articulated an 'inclusive public theology of citizenship' and a 'public theology of inclusive governance' which pushed political leaders to peace.<sup>40</sup> But while Sandal invested much in statements and media coverage of them, Brewer dismissed them as 'speechifying', arguing that they contributed little to peace on the ground. Indeed, many regular churchgoers have no awareness of what church leaders have said about peacemaking.<sup>41</sup> They also do not know about the Methodist, Church of Ireland and Presbyterian churches' peacebuilding programmes, all of which began in the decade after the Good Friday Agreement. These ran for only a few years, fading away when external funding ceased.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Kevin Rafter, 'Priests and peace: the role of the Redemptorist Order in the Northern Ireland peace process,' *Études Irlandaises* 28 (1) (2003), 159–76; Martin McKeever, *One man, one God: the peace ministry of Fr Alec Reid CSSR* (Dublin, 2017); Gladys Ganiel, *Unity pilgrim: the life of Fr Gerry Reynolds CSSR* (Dundalk, 2019); C.K. Martin Chung, 'Facilitated dialogue: the political theology of Fr Alec Reid,' *Glencree Journal* (2021), 62–76.

<sup>36</sup> These and other clerics are profiled in John Brewer, Gareth Higgins and Francis Teeney, *Religion, civil society and peace in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 2011); See also Alf McCreary, *Nobody's fool: the life of Archbishop Robin Eames* (London, 2004); Ronald Wells, *Friendship towards peace: the journey of Ken Newell and Gerry Reynolds* (Dublin, 2004); Ken Newell, *Captured by a vision: a memoir* (Belfast, 2016); Robin Eames, *Unfinished search* (Dublin, 2017); Good is profiled in Gladys Ganiel, 'Protestants and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland: overcoming opposition, apathy and a loss of legitimacy?' in Brigitte Bastiat, Olivier Coquelin and Frank Healy (eds), *Northern Ireland: twenty years of peace and reconciliation?* (forthcoming).

<sup>37</sup> Mitchel, *Evangelicalism and national identity in Ulster*; Ganiel, *Evangelicalism and conflict in Northern Ireland*; Maria Power, 'Preparing evangelical Protestants for peace: ECONI and peacebuilding 1987–2005', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26 (1) (2011), 57–72.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Wells, *Hope and reconciliation in Northern Ireland: the role of faith-based organisations* (Dublin, 2010); Leah Robinson, *Embodied peacebuilding: reconciliation as practical theology* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Brewer *et al.*, *Religion, civil society and peace in Northern Ireland*.

<sup>40</sup> Nukhet Sandal, *Religious leaders and conflict transformation: Northern Ireland and beyond* (Cambridge, 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Ganiel, *Evangelicalism and conflict in Northern Ireland*; Ganiel and Yohanis, *Considering grace*.

<sup>42</sup> Gladys Ganiel and Nicola Brady, 'The churches, reconciliation and addressing the legacy of inter-communal violence in Northern Ireland', *Glencree Journal* (2021), 92–102; Ganiel, 'Protestants and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland'.

As in Ireland, secularisation began tentatively in the 1960s, and was bound up with macro-level processes of modernisation and the reforms of the welfare state. After the Good Friday Agreement, re-alignments within unionism revealed churches' changing relationships with political power. By 2005, the originally anti-agreement DUP, whose elected representatives were disproportionately evangelical, had become the largest party within unionism.<sup>43</sup> The DUP moderated its positions on some matters,<sup>44</sup> and conservative evangelical pressure groups like the Caleb Foundation responded by lobbying for influence within the DUP on 'moral' issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>45</sup> Within conservative evangelicalism, Paisley was perceived as abandoning his religious principles for political gain, and lost his position as moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church.<sup>46</sup> Also in 2005, the Orange Order broke its links with the UUC.<sup>47</sup> Within the Catholic-nationalist-republican community, the Catholic hierarchy's consistent condemnation of republican violence during the Troubles exacerbated tensions between the church and the republican movement, including what is now the community's largest political party, Sinn Féin.<sup>48</sup> The clerical abuse scandals also impacted the Catholic Church's relationship with its community in Northern Ireland, though not to the same extent as in Ireland, where church power had been so firmly tied to the state.

So, like Ireland, Northern Ireland has experienced Casanova's first two aspects of secularisation: the links between churches and their communities' political representatives have weakened; and the churches' public influence has declined. There also have been drops in religious practice, corresponding to Casanova's third aspect. Among Catholics, attendance declined from 95 percent in 1968 (weekly), to monthly rates of 81 percent in 1998 and 46 percent in 2019. Among Protestants, weekly attendance was 45 percent in 1968, while monthly attendance was 52 percent in 1998 and 46 percent in

<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Tonge, Maire Braniff, Thomas Hennessey, James McAuley and Sophie Whiting, *The Democratic Unionist Party: from protest to power* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> See Neil Southern, 'Ian Paisley and evangelical Democratic Unionists: an analysis of the role of evangelical Protestantism within the Democratic Unionist Party', *Irish Political Studies* 20 (2) (2005), 127–45; Steve Bruce, *Paisley: religion and politics in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 2008); Ed Moloney, *Paisley: from demagogue to democrat?* (Dublin, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Gladys Ganiel, 'Ulster says maybe: the restructuring of evangelical politics in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies* 21 (2) (2006), 137–55; Gladys Ganiel and Paul Dixon, 'Religion, pragmatic fundamentalism and the transformation of the Northern Ireland conflict', *Journal of Peace Research* 45 (3) (2008), 419–36.

<sup>46</sup> Moloney, *Paisley*.

<sup>47</sup> *Irish Times*, 'Orange Order votes to sever ties with the UUP', 12 March 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968–1998* (Oxford, 2019).

2019.<sup>49</sup> Northern Ireland, however, is less secularised than Ireland: church attendance figures are higher and qualitative studies have found that people are more likely to consider religious aspects of their identity important than in Ireland.<sup>50</sup> Abuse scandals have had an impact, but they have not been as pervasive in the public consciousness as in Ireland. As such, Northern Ireland is potentially more fertile ground for church influence.

## BREXIT, RECONCILIATION AND DEALING WITH THE PAST

Most faith-based contributions to debate around Brexit and the issues it has raised have been made by Corrymeela, the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting (ICC/IICM), and the Church Leaders' Group. These groups are profiled here simply because they are the ones that have engaged with these debates, in the absence of other faith-based voices. Analysis is based on a careful reading of statements and documents produced by these groups.<sup>51</sup> The main findings are that these groups have situated Brexit in the wider context of reconciliation and dealing with the past, in Northern Ireland and beyond; and have created opportunities for dialogue on these issues at societal and political levels. These groups have played mediating roles, communicating grassroots concerns and examples of lived experiences on the ground to higher political levels.

### *Corrymeela*

Corrymeela is a centre for reconciliation located on the north Antrim coast. It was founded in 1965 by Revd Ray Davey, Presbyterian chaplain at Queen's University Belfast, and Queen's students from various Christian traditions. Davey was a military chaplain during the Second World War, witnessing the allied bombing of Dresden while in a prisoner-of-war camp. These experiences spurred his commitment to reconciliation. Corrymeela is now a professional reconciliation centre employing around 40 full-time staff.

<sup>49</sup> Ganiel, *Transforming post-Catholic Ireland*, 34–36; Monthly attendance figures from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey. See also Bernadette Hayes and Lizanne Dowds, 'Vacant seats and empty pews', *Economic and Social Research Council: Research Update* 65 (February 2010).

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Todd, 'Social structure and religious division: comparing the form of religious distinction in the two Irish states', in John Wolfe (ed), *Catholics, Protestants and Muslims: Irish 'religious' conflict in comparative perspective* (Basingstoke, 2014), 42–58; Gladys Ganiel, 'Secularism, ecumenism and identity on the island of Ireland', in John Carter Wood (ed), *Christianity and national identity in 20th century Europe* (Gottingen, 2016); Jennifer Todd, *Identity change after conflict* (London, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Statements and documents are available on the organisations' websites. I consulted staff/former staff members to ensure I did not overlook any key statements or initiatives.

After the 2016 Brexit referendum, Corrymeela became concerned about Brexit's impact and sought to '...[stimulate] dialogue around the kind of community and nations we want to be.'<sup>52</sup> Like ICC/IICM and the Church Leaders' Group, it linked Brexit with reconciliation and dealing with the past. It also created opportunities for facilitated dialogue around these issues in Northern Ireland, Ireland, Britain and further afield through a dedicated 'public theology' project, 'Border Crossing: Exploring Belongings through the Book of Ruth.'

In its report on the project, Corrymeela situated it within the wider context of the Irish government's 2017 all-island symposia of civic leaders, which were prompted by Brexit.<sup>53</sup> Corrymeela received funding for the project from the Irish government's reconciliation fund and the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland. It was developed by Pádraig Ó Tuama, a poet, theologian, and then leader of Corrymeela, and theologian and reconciliation practitioner Glenn Jordan.<sup>54</sup> Ó Tuama and Jordan produced a downloadable discussion-based resource, which has been available on the Corrymeela website since April 2018. This resource provided the basis for workshops, seminars and discussions between 2018 and 2020. Around 5,000 people engaged with the materials, either self-directed or facilitated by Ó Tuama and Jordan.<sup>55</sup>

A 2021 book expanded on themes covered in the online resource and included discussion questions and prayers for use with small groups.<sup>56</sup> It is a short but sophisticated theological work that provides insight on the original Hebrew texts, which serve as a starting point for considering relationships between insiders and outsiders in the ancient world of Ruth, as well as at the present juncture in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK. Jordan's chapter on 'compassion and the law' argued that the book of Ruth is a story about the re-interpretation of scripture for new circumstances, with kindness and compassion overruling the law that would have excluded foreigners like Ruth from the community. Jordan asserted that kindness is not vapid 'do-goodery' but rather is fundamental to constructive political discourse around Brexit and other issues:

Christianity responds to the dilemma of what to do with our suffering, of what to do with our violence and division, with acts of

<sup>52</sup> Corrymeela, 'Crossing borders: Brexit and the book of Ruth,' (Ballycastle, no date), 15.

<sup>53</sup> Corrymeela, 'Crossing borders.'

<sup>54</sup> Jordan died unexpectedly in June 2020.

<sup>55</sup> 4,000 participants is cited in Corrymeela, 'Crossing borders,' 4; 5,000 is cited in Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan, *Borders and belonging: the book of Ruth—a story for our times* (Norwich, 2021), xi.

<sup>56</sup> Ó Tuama and Jordan, *Borders and belonging*.

lovingkindness. This is our big idea. Kindness. Kindness and grace overcome violence and division...Kindness is never constrained by the rules. Kindness changes the rules. And laws.<sup>57</sup>

Corrymeela's report on the project included 12 wide-ranging recommendations, some focused on policymakers, others actionable by individuals, churches or small groups.<sup>58</sup> Recommendations aimed at politicians and policy makers included the use of citizens' assemblies or constitutional conventions across the nations of the two islands, a tempering of extreme language, a 'programme for national and community dialogue and reconciliation...that extends beyond a simple resolution of the argument about Europe or the border on the island of Ireland', a return to the recommendations of the Consultative Group on Dealing with the Past, and a consideration of the outworking of Brexit in light of climate change. Other recommendations emphasised the importance of including stories and personal narratives in public discussions, which can have a humanising effect; and improving public awareness of basic geography, political processes and historical events on both islands.

Corrymeela built on this work with a podcast series (February–May 2021), framing 2021 'as a significant year in Irish and British history, marking the centenary of the partition of Ireland, and the first year of Brexit'...and including twelve 'conversations that discuss Irishness and Britishness through the lenses of politics, history, art and theology.'<sup>59</sup> Guests included former president of Ireland Mary McAleese, and Anthony Reddie, who offered a reading of Brexit through black liberative theology. The podcast website includes full transcripts of the conversations as well as reflection questions for group or personal use. This project received funding from the Irish government's reconciliation fund, the Community Relations Council, the American-based Henry Luce Foundation, and the Friends of Corrymeela.<sup>60</sup> A further 'Theology in Conversation' series for Lent 2021 featured a session with Katy Hayward and Dong Jin Kim on 'Theology and Borders.'<sup>61</sup>

It remains difficult to gauge the wider impact of this work, including the more recent book and podcasts. It may be that the projects have appealed to a constituency that is already aware of and supportive of Corrymeela's

<sup>57</sup> Ó Tuama and Jordan, *Borders and belonging*, 78–79.

<sup>58</sup> Corrymeela, 'Crossing borders', 6–8.

<sup>59</sup> The Corrymeela Podcast, available at: <https://www.publictheologyireland.com/podcast> (last accessed 3 June 2021).

<sup>60</sup> People who provide regular financial support for Corrymeela.

<sup>61</sup> Public Theology Ireland, <https://www.publictheologyireland.com/audiovideo> (3 June 2021).

faith-based reconciliation work. At the same time, the Irish government has provided funding for the work and Corrymeela's report on 'Border Crossing' presented its recommendations to it. But it can be difficult to untangle whether or to what extent these faith-based interventions impact the decisions of policymakers.

### *Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting*

ICC/IICM are the island's national-level ecumenical organisations. ICC was founded in 1923 in 'the aftermath of World War I and the period when partition and the border had just been created.'<sup>62</sup> Its members include the island's three largest Protestant denominations: Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist; as well as Orthodox, independent and migrant-led churches. The IICM developed out of the 1973 Ballymascanlon talks between ICC and the Catholic Church, which focused on responding to the Troubles. Now, IICM refers to when ICC and the Catholic Bishops Conference work together. In 2015 IICM began to address weaknesses it had identified in its structures and approaches, prompted by reflections on the Irish Churches Peace Project (ICPP) (2013–2015), a joint initiative of ICC and the four largest churches.<sup>63</sup> While ICPP contributed constructively to some local grassroots projects, there had been a lack of clarity about its priorities and its sustainability, with its activities ceasing when external funding expired.<sup>64</sup> The 2015 restructuring replaced IICM's separate 'social issues' and 'theology' departments with more flexible working groups, which have included working groups on Brexit and 'legacy' (reconciliation/dealing with the past).

ICC's European Affairs Committee was established in 2013 to facilitate contacts with ecumenical organisations in Europe and European institutions in Ireland, and to educate Irish churches about the EU.<sup>65</sup> Prior to the Brexit referendum it produced a discussion paper which stated that 'the arguments point to the desirability of the UK staying within the EU', while recognising

<sup>62</sup> ICC website, <https://www.irishchurches.org/about/who-we-are> (7 May 2021).

<sup>63</sup> For fuller discussion see Ganiel and Brady, 'The churches, reconciliation and addressing the legacy of inter-communal violence,' 94–96.

<sup>64</sup> Peter McDowell, 'The Irish Churches Peace Project: a catalyst for peace,' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 86 (1) (2020), 3–20.

<sup>65</sup> ICC website, <https://www.irishchurches.org/about/european-affairs-committee> (7 May 2021).



‘that many Christians hold a different view.’<sup>66</sup> Because the paper was issued by a committee, it did not amount to ICC officially taking a position on the referendum. In 2017 an ICC delegation visited the EU institutions in Brussels, meeting with officials from the European Commission, members of the European Parliament, the Northern Ireland Executive, representatives of the task force on Article 50 negotiations with the UK, and the Irish Permanent Representation. Then ICC president Bishop John McDowell described it as ‘a valuable opportunity for faith communities to share concerns with policy-makers’, although it is difficult to evaluate whether policymakers took their concerns on board.<sup>67</sup>

In 2018 IICM held a workshop that formed the basis for a consultation paper on pastoral dimensions of Brexit.<sup>68</sup> This paper offered suggestions on how churches might respond to concerns raised by Brexit at local, regional, and international levels. Actions included: local level—1) resourcing local churches; and 2) building community resilience; regional level—1) initiating and modelling conversation; and 2) engagement with politicians and policy makers; international level—1) representation to the EU; and 2) sharing information from the EU at local level. IICM discussed the paper at an event attended by 60 staff members and volunteers from member churches, representatives of local inter-church groups and partner organisations. This event resulted in recommendations about preparing resources, offering facilitation training, and engaging in theological reflection on a four nations basis. IICM produced a discussion resource based on the event, which warned that ‘Disagreements on Brexit are highly unlikely to be resolved’ and suggested aiming for ‘outcomes’ such as better understanding and acceptance of others, modelling respectful listening and disagreement, considering how faith values connect with political decisions, and discussing practical actions.<sup>69</sup> Further plans for European engagement post-Brexit have been developing through a research partnership with Dublin City University, focused on how

<sup>66</sup> ICC European Affairs Committee, ‘The Irish churches and the EU referendum: a discussion paper’ (Belfast and Dublin, 2016), available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/resources/Euro-Affairs-Doc-Email.pdf> (14 May 2021).

<sup>67</sup> ‘ICC visit to European institutions’ (6 December 2017), available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5173/icc-visit-to-european-institutions> (26 May 2021). McDowell became Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh in 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Peter McDowell, ‘Consultation paper: Brexit and the Irish churches: pastoral dimensions’ (Belfast and Dublin, 2018), available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/Brexit-Report-copy.pdf> (14 May 2021).

<sup>69</sup> Dave Thompson, ‘Talking about Brexit: a guide for discussion groups’ (Belfast and Dublin, 2018), 4, available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/Brexit-Guide-for-Discussion-Groups.pdf> (14 May 2021).

religious leaders can use multilateral engagement to ‘support political efforts’ to address challenges like peacebuilding and climate justice.<sup>70</sup>

In October 2020 the co-chairs of IICM, Catholic Bishop Brendan Leahy and Presbyterian Revd Ivan Patterson, president of ICC, outlined IICM’s ‘priority concerns’ about Brexit.<sup>71</sup> They stressed the importance of retaining the principles and relationships set out in the Good Friday Agreement, and urged local churches to ‘proactively [intensify]...efforts in peacebuilding and community relations’. A February 2021 consultation paper on ‘The Unfinished Work of Peace’ identified Brexit as a ‘new challenge with the potential to undermine the achievement of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement’, and noted ‘unique elements’ churches could bring to peacebuilding, like drawing on biblical narratives ‘to promote the common good’, and advocating the ‘risky and painful’ process of forgiveness. The paper highlighted four areas in which churches could contribute to peacebuilding: support for victims, collective commemoration and memorialisation, formal legacy processes and structures, and tackling paramilitarism. It identified priority objectives in each area, including providing safe spaces to acknowledge victims’ suffering, working with artists to explore new possibilities for commemoration, equipping churches to ‘pastorally accompany’ those going through formal legacy processes, and raising awareness of paramilitary-style attacks. The paper concluded with five priority action areas: reconciliation work in the context of the 2021 centenaries, engaging with young people and supporting their leadership, collaboration with churches on an east/west basis, providing spaces for churches and faith-based organisations to build capacity for peacebuilding, and developing opportunities for international exchange with societies facing similar challenges. Work on an east-west or four nations basis had already gathered momentum under the auspices of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), an umbrella organisation that includes ICC and ecumenical bodies from England, Scotland and Wales. In 2020 CTBI convened an informal four nations church leaders’ forum, which held two virtual conversations around the pandemic and another on Brexit, while a fourth in April 2021 examined challenges across the four nations in terms of identity and social cohesion. While it is too early to evaluate work prompted by this paper or the

<sup>70</sup> DCU, ‘Research projects overview’, available at: <https://www.dcu.ie/religionandhumanvalues/research-projects-overview> (26 May 2021).

<sup>71</sup> IICM, ‘Open letter to political and civil society leaders on Brexit’ (14 October 2020), available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5438/open-letter-to-political-and> (14 May 2021).

four nations forum, they are notable for their ambition and for their advocacy for the churches to address issues together, rather than separately.

Working together may seem unsurprising for ecumenical organisations. But previously the largest denominations contributed separately to public dialogues on reconciliation and dealing with the past, making their own submissions to public consultations on the Good Friday Agreement, the Consultative Group on the Past, the Haass-O'Sullivan talks, and the OFMDFM's<sup>72</sup> 'cohesion, sharing and integration' strategy. According to Nicola Brady, General Secretary of ICC: 'Increasingly, our member churches want to approach these kinds of issues and challenges together, because they realise that this is a way of modelling good relations at leadership level.'<sup>73</sup> Brady also highlighted the practical advantages of the denominations' increased cooperation, such as the sharing of resources and peer support for staff and volunteers working in the different denominations. In addition, political leaders prefer to speak to churches together, rather than meeting each denomination separately.

In sum, ICC/IICM's documents have linked issues raised by Brexit to unresolved issues from the peace process—a discursive framing that situates Brexit in a wider historical context of division and the potential for violence. In addition, ICC/IICM has facilitated a process whereby the largest denominations are now more committed to presenting united contributions on Brexit and reconciliation/dealing with the past, streamlining their interactions with politicians and policymakers. ICC/IICM also have developed new networks of faith-based activism at European, four nations and local church levels, but there is limited awareness of their work in the media and among many local churches.

### *The Church Leaders' Group*

Throughout the Troubles, the Catholic and Church of Ireland archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian moderator, and the Methodist president often made joint statements condemning violence and advocating peace. In 2015 the ongoing meetings of these four leaders expanded to include the president of ICC. This 'new' Church Leaders' Group was aware of criticisms that in the past statements had not gone far enough, so it committed to a programme of activity that has included engagement with governments north and south, as

<sup>72</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, now called The Executive Office (TEO).

<sup>73</sup> Email, 14 July 2020.

well as facilitated dialogues with politicians and civic leaders. At the same time, the Church Leaders' Group has not directly engaged in debates about a border poll or constitutional futures. This has been a deliberate choice, because to do so could be perceived as politically partisan and could alienate their own church constituencies as well as the wider public.

Like ICC/IICM, the Church Leaders' Group has linked issues arising from Brexit with reconciliation and dealing with the past. The public profiles of the leaders who compose the group mean that, by its very nature, its statements and activities receive more media attention than Corrymeela or ICC/IICM. This gives its work potentially broader (if perhaps not deeper) reach, although it is likely that public awareness of their statements is limited, given increasing secularisation. During the pandemic, the Church Leaders' Group became more active and generated more media attention, especially in Northern Ireland. On St Patrick's Day 2021 the group issued the most comprehensive confession ever for the churches' contributions to division and violence, signalling that they understood confession as integral to churches' ability to contribute to reconciliation and dealing with the past. The group also facilitated dialogues among civic and political leaders and met privately with political leaders—with access to those leaders indicating at least some potential influence.

After the Northern Ireland assembly collapsed in January 2017 the group organised a consultation with local churches and faith-based charities, then communicated their concerns with politicians and the media. It also met with representatives of political parties behind the scenes. In September 2018, the group invited the leaders of the five largest political parties in Northern Ireland to a meeting at the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church in Belfast—the first time the party leaders had met together in eight months. Further meetings with the British secretary of state for Northern Ireland and the tánaiste and Irish minister for foreign affairs followed. Following these meetings, the Church Leaders' Group extended this model of dialogue to other groups of elected representatives. With support from the Community Relations Council, it organised four regional dialogue events, reaching around 120 civil society representatives as well as cross-party panels of elected representatives (December 2018 to February 2019). A report of the findings from the dialogues was presented to the party leaders, the secretary of state, and the tánaiste during the next round of negotiations, in May 2019.<sup>74</sup> Through

<sup>74</sup> Ganiel and Brady, 'The churches, reconciliation and addressing the legacy of inter-communal violence in Northern Ireland', 97.

these dialogues, the Church Leaders' Group reminded political leaders of the urgency of restarting the political process (especially in light of Brexit), the priority of reconciliation, and outstanding issues on dealing with the past. While it is difficult to evaluate whether this initiative contributed to the restoration of the assembly in January 2020, it demonstrated the group's commitment to move beyond issuing statements to creating spaces for dialogue.

The Church Leaders' Group became more active during the lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020. While previously it met on a quarterly and ad hoc basis, meetings increased to fortnightly. It issued statements in support of Northern Ireland justice minister Naomi Long's announcement about funeral arrangements (24 March); in support of frontline workers (27 March); a call for an island-wide day of prayer (27 March), which took place on Palm Sunday 5 April; and a thank-you for frontline workers (20 April). A 4 May statement about church re-openings in Northern Ireland repeated their support for government restrictions and asked the Northern Ireland executive to lift restrictions on the use of church buildings for private prayer. The group issued a further statement supporting the Northern Ireland executive's pathway to COVID re-openings (18 May). During this time, the group met with the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, the minister of state for Northern Ireland, the first and deputy first ministers, and the shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland.<sup>75</sup> Church leaders characterised their relationships during the pandemic as at an all-time high in terms of the level of contact and the quality of interaction; it could be argued that 'national-level, inter-church cooperation has been more frequent and united during the pandemic than at perhaps any other time in Irish church history.'<sup>76</sup> At the same time, while some statements implied an all-island approach, politically-focused statements were more frequently concerned with Northern Ireland. This may reveal something about the Church Leaders' Group's relationships with political power in Northern Ireland, including an expectation that their interventions are taken more seriously in the north.

The Church Leaders' Group's northern focus also was reflected in initiatives related to reconciliation and dealing with the past. It produced a two-minute video message for Remembrance Day 2020, which included

<sup>75</sup> Information provided by Brady, General Secretary of ICC, May 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Gladys Ganiel, *Something other than a Building: A Report on Churches on the Island of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Report commissioned by the Irish Council of Churches, Belfast, 2021), available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/Final-Something-other-than-a-Building.pdf> 6 (30 August 2021).

images of war memorials and landscapes. They remembered ‘the sacrifice of so many in the two world wars and other conflicts, lamenting this loss of life on all sides’, as well as those who lost loved ones during the pandemic.<sup>77</sup> Traditionally, Remembrance Sunday is an important event in Protestant churches in Northern Ireland, marked by wearing the poppy, laying wreaths and remembering the dead from the world wars and the Troubles. It usually passes unacknowledged in Catholic churches, north and south, so Catholic Archbishop of Armagh Eamon Martin’s participation was significant.<sup>78</sup> This video was shown at the end of RTÉ’s Sunday broadcast worship. Following that, the Church Leaders’ Group’s 2021 New Year’s statement was framed around the theme of ‘interconnectedness’ and explored how Brexit and the pandemic had raised awareness of people’s dependence on each other. It set these issues in the wider context of dealing with the past, including the centenary of the foundation of Northern Ireland and of partition and ‘the opportunity for us to reflect together on the failings of relationships and use of violence across the whole island.’<sup>79</sup>

Building on the New Year’s statement’s reference to ‘the failings of relationships’, the Church Leaders’ Group’s 2021 St Patrick’s Day statement pushed further, directly addressing how the churches have been implicated in the island’s troubled past. This statement was produced as a six-minute video, filmed in St Patrick’s Church of Ireland cathedral in Armagh and interspersed with land and cityscapes from across the island.<sup>80</sup> After acknowledging 2021 as a year of potentially divisive centenaries, it articulated what could be considered the (institutional) churches’ most united and comprehensive confession ever for their historic contributions to division and violence:

<sup>77</sup> ICC, ‘Remembrance: church leaders reflect in special video message’ (9 November 2020), <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5442/remembrance-church-leaders-reflect-in>, (14 May 2021).

<sup>78</sup> Martin previously participated in commemoration of the first world war, including co-leading with former Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh Richard Clarke a cross-community delegation of young people to the Somme (2016) and pilgrimage to Messines (2018); see Sermon of Archbishop Eamon Martin for the World War I commemorative service in Saint Anne’s Cathedral Belfast (2018), <https://www.armagharchdiocese.org/ermon-of-archbishop-eamon-martin-for-the-world-war-i-commemorative-service-in-saint-annes-cathedral-belfast/> (3 June 2021).

<sup>79</sup> Presbyterian Church in Ireland, ‘Church leaders’ 2021 new year message’, 1 January 2021, available at: <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/January-2021/Church-leaders-2021-New-Year-Message.aspx> (14 May 2021).

<sup>80</sup> Church Leaders’ Group, ‘In Christ we journey together’, St Patrick’s Day statement (17 March 2021), available at: <https://www.presbyterianireland.org/News/March-2021/Church-Leaders%E2%80%99-St-Patrick%E2%80%99s-Day-Message.aspx> (27 May 2021).

We have an opportunity, in marking these events from our past, to be intentional in creating the spaces for encounter with those who are different from us, and those who may feel marginalised in the narratives that have shaped our community identity. This will require us to face difficult truths about failings in our own leadership in the work of peace and reconciliation. As Christian churches we acknowledge and lament the times that we failed to bring to a fearful and divided society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God, made in His image and likeness. We have often been captive churches; not captive to the Word of God, but to the idols of state and nation.

The confession within the statement received some media attention, although perhaps not as much as might have been expected given the implications of what was said and who was saying it. In Northern Ireland, the statement was covered by *BBC News* online, the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *News Letter*, the *Irish News*, *UTV* (online) and the Slugger O'Toole blog, as well as some regional newspapers. In Ireland, RTÉ broadcast the video at 12.55pm on St Patrick's Day, just prior to the 1.00pm mass. The only other mention that I found in media outlets in Ireland was three short paragraphs at the end of a story in the *Irish Times*, which was focused on a statement by Catholic Archbishop of Dublin Dermot Farrell on continued restrictions on public worship.<sup>81</sup> The lack of coverage reflected the churches' declining societal influence and underscored the challenges churches face in communicating in the public arena.

On the other hand, the Church Leaders' Group's rising public profile in Northern Ireland was reflected in two special services broadcast by the BBC. First was a 'Service of Hope at Easter' on *BBC One* Northern Ireland television (Easter Sunday 4 April 2021). Filmed at Belfast's Waterfront Hall and hosted by journalist Audrey Carville, it featured the leaders' 'personal messages of hope...after a year dominated by the coronavirus'.<sup>82</sup> The group next featured on a *BBC Radio Ulster/BBC Radio 4* Sunday service marking the Northern Ireland centenary (2 May 2021). The service

<sup>81</sup> Ellen O'Riordan and Patsy McGarry, 'Archbishop queries church restrictions as people 'wade through aisles for milk'', *Irish Times*, 18 March 2021.

<sup>82</sup> *BBC One*, 'Service of hope at Easter', 4 April 2021, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000v1hk> (14 May 2021).

opened with Revd Heather Morris, General Secretary of the Methodist Church, paraphrasing the confession from the St Patrick's Day statement: 'As Christian leaders, we acknowledge and lament the times when we failed to bring to a fearful and divided society the message of the deep connection which binds us as children of God...'<sup>83</sup> While this confession was not as strong or detailed as the previous statement, to some extent it is remarkable that it was included at all. During the broadcast, American-born Methodist president Tom McKnight interviewed the two archbishops and the Presbyterian moderator about their experiences of growing up in a divided Northern Ireland. ICC president Patterson preached on the good Samaritan, noting that the story 'sets a challenge to us all to act with respect and civility towards the other—people with whom we may fundamentally differ'.

The Church Leaders' Group responded to protests and street violence in Northern Ireland over the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol, with an open letter to political leaders (13 April 2021). It emphasised the importance of the Good Friday Agreement as a basis for moving forward, and pleaded for the 'entire Northern Ireland Executive' to advocate 'for the protection of the common good across the whole of Northern Ireland.'<sup>84</sup> This statement led to a meeting with Taoiseach Micheál Martin on 15 April, addressing not only the violence but also the Irish government's 'shared island' dialogue initiative and challenges raised by the pandemic.<sup>85</sup> During the meeting, the taoiseach acknowledged the group's St Patrick's Day statement.<sup>86</sup>

The Church Leaders' Group's activity and public profile is increasing in Northern Ireland, due partly to its work on the pandemic but also through its statements and activism around Brexit, reconciliation and dealing with the past. The group has planned a further series of events and initiatives to develop the themes outlined in the St Patrick's Day statement, which will be announced when there is greater clarity about what is possible in light

<sup>83</sup> *BBC Radio 4*, '100 years: reflecting on the past—building a future together' (2 May 2021), available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000vnzx> (14 May 2021).

<sup>84</sup> Church Leaders' Group, 'Church leaders call for unified political response to address violence and community tensions', 13 April 2021, available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/news-blog/5457/church-leaders-call-for-unified> (14 May 2021).

<sup>85</sup> Ed Thornton and Hattie Williams, 'Irish church leaders discuss violence with taoiseach', *Church Times*, 16 April 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Thornton and Williams, 'Irish church leaders discuss violence with taoiseach'.



of COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>87</sup> Although statements have limited impact, the symbolism of the St Patrick's Day confession could prove important, if built upon. At the same time, the Church Leaders' Group might make a more significant contribution by emphasising reconciliation and dealing with the past in Ireland as well as Northern Ireland, highlighting the need for an 'interconnected' approach to the future.

## CONCLUSION

Corrymeela, ICC/IICM, and the Church Leaders' Group have contributed to debates about constitutional futures in a roundabout way through their attention to Brexit and the questions it has raised about identity and belonging. They have consistently spoken about Brexit in a wider context of reconciliation and dealing with the past, reminding their civic and political dialogue partners of the importance of linking the island's future with efforts to redeem its past. This is a significant contribution, albeit one that could be made by other civic groups—something that these groups acknowledge themselves. At the same time, Christian perspectives on forgiveness and reconciliation have informed their contributions, which brings something unique to the public sphere.

It can be difficult to evaluate whether or to what extent these groups' contributions have shaped debates, especially among policy makers. But if in the past it was assumed that the churches functioned as chaplains to their tribes, these groups are at least attempting to transcend this association. Brady, general secretary of ICC, emphasised that meetings with policymakers have been framed around 'the common good', including requests to prioritise societal cohesion and respectful dialogue, rather than divisive political rhetoric.<sup>88</sup> This is an example of 'soft power', the ripple effects of which are almost impossible to measure.

As ecumenical organisations, Corrymeela and ICC/IICM perhaps appeal to a limited constituency—Christians interested in faith-based reconciliation. Yet they have received funding and support from government agencies and may have reached beyond their usual base through their facilitated dialogues or podcasts. The Church Leaders' Group generally receives more media attention than these other groups and it meets with high-ranking politicians

<sup>87</sup> Information provided by Brady, ICC General Secretary.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Brady, 10 August 2021.

and policymakers. As such, the Church Leaders' Group may be better able to harness churches' remaining societal legitimacy and advance faith-based contributions to wider debates. This does not mean the work of Corrymeela or ICC/IICM is insignificant; on the contrary, the networks between these groups mean that they have informed each other's work, while also trying to reach the general public.

But it is uncertain how far these groups can push debate. In July 2021, the British government announced controversial plans for a Troubles-related amnesty. This move signalled that there is now little hope that recommendations on dealing with the past included in the 2014 Stormont House Agreement will come to pass. These recommendations had their origins in the consultative group on dealing with the past, which was chaired by Church of Ireland Archbishop Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, a former priest. One evaluation judged the consultative group as the least effective of Northern Ireland's transitional justice mechanisms, in part because it lacked external, international involvement to advocate for difficult measures.<sup>89</sup> The government's proposals have been sharply criticised by the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian moderator and other church leaders.<sup>90</sup> As such, it could be argued that church-based advocacy on dealing with the past has simply been ignored.

Other challenges may arise as wider public dialogues shift to questions about constitutional reform and/or a referendum on unification. Unionist political leaders find it almost impossible to take part in debates about a referendum on unification. This situation is somewhat analogous to periods during the Troubles, when unionist politicians would not speak with Sinn Féin. We now know that Redemptorist priests Alec Reid and Gerry Reynolds recognised this problem and responded by organising secret dialogues between Sinn Féin and Protestant clergy. These talks helped move the peace process along, not least by enabling Sinn Féin to understand wider Protestant/unionist perspectives.<sup>91</sup> While this is not to suggest that secret talks are now appropriate, it is worth noting that a few individual Protestant clergy have publicly joined ongoing dialogues on the island's future: former Presbyterian moderator Revd

<sup>89</sup> Dawn Walsh and John Doyle, 'External actors in consociational settlements: a re-examination of Lijphart's negative assumptions', *Ethnopolitics* 17 (1) (2018), 21–36.

<sup>90</sup> *Church News Ireland*, 'Churches warn of upset at UK Government's decision on Troubles-related crimes', 16 July 2021, available at: <http://www.churchnewsireland.org/news/irish-uk-news/churches-warn-of-upset-at-uk-governments-decision-on-troubles-related-crimes/> (12 August 2021).

<sup>91</sup> Ganiel, *Unity pilgrim*, 171–78.

Norman Hamilton is part of the Social Democratic and Labour Party's New Ireland initiative, while Baptist Revd Karen Sethuraman is part of the civic nationalist group Ireland's Future. Corrymeela's Ballycastle and Dublin 'cell groups' of people associated with the organisation have had conversations about a 'shared' or 'new' Ireland. They have discussed health services, education systems, political structures, and the pastoral implications of possible constitutional change.<sup>92</sup> These cell group conversations could be understood as laying the groundwork for future Corrymeela-facilitated dialogues about a border poll or related issues. Finally, the Church Leaders' St Patrick's Day statement admitted that the churches were wrong to have put state and nation before God and human interconnectedness. This suggests that ICC/IICM and/or the Church Leaders' Group could promote dialogue around these topics, creating spaces where the 'common good' or 'interconnectedness' are framed as higher ideals than political identity or unification. In Ireland, division on unification is unlikely to break down based on religion or background, but it is very likely this will be the case in Northern Ireland. So, such dialogues would need to be managed carefully to appeal to and include Northern Protestantism/unionism. Moreover, there is an emerging 'middle ground' in Northern Ireland that does not identify as either nationalist or unionist.<sup>93</sup> It is unclear whether or to what extent church groups include and interact with this rather diverse grouping. There are in fact more 'neithers' than nationalists or unionists, so their perspectives will be important.

But all faith-based contributions to these debates may be compromised by religion's waning influence on politicians, policymakers and the public. This is most pronounced in the south of Ireland, where the Catholic Church has faced a crisis of legitimacy due to the abuse scandals. And while all three groups have argued that issues raised by Brexit should be considered on an all-island and east-west, four nations basis, in practice their own contributions have focused more on Northern Ireland. This is partly due to the more obvious impact of the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, greater openness to faith-based contributions from northern politicians and policymakers, and a higher public profile among a more religiously practising public.

Finally, while church leaders' opportunities for influence may be greater in Northern Ireland, they could enhance their contributions by extending their focus to the southern side of the border. There are few voices in the public

<sup>92</sup> Information provided by Rev Alex Wimberly, Corrymeela leader.

<sup>93</sup> John Coakley, 'Is a middle force emerging in Northern Ireland?', *Irish Political Studies* 86 (1) (2021), 29–51.

sphere talking about the legacy of partition in terms of how it contributed to the development of an at times destructive church-state-society alliance in Ireland. While this alliance produced a strong sense of Irish Catholic identity and belonging, it also produced abusive institutions that have left many citizens and their descendants with unresolved trauma. Framing that trauma as in part a legacy of partition—without excusing churches for their actions—could open new directions for discussion about an all-island approach to reconciliation and dealing with the past. Given the Catholic Church’s damaged legitimacy in Ireland, this is unlikely to be effective without more fulsome acts of confession or apology for its role in abuse, in which it could be supported by the leaders of Protestant denominations, whose churches also operated abusive institutions. The Church Leaders’ Group’s St Patrick’s Day confession could be something of a template in this regard, although it is arguable that it did not have the impact it might have had because it was buried in a longer statement and lacked specific examples of the churches’ failures. The symbolic value of fuller, more detailed confessions, north and south, could provide inspiration for politicians and other civic actors to prioritise reconciliation and dealing with the past. Church leaders have brought the past into the future, but the effectiveness of this move may be determined by their ability to address their own pasts.