Identity on the island of Ireland after Brexit and Covid-19: Can the Churches Help Shape a New Landscape?
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Introduction

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today. My talk will proceed as follows. First, I will outline changes in political and religious identification on the island since 1998, the year of the Good Friday Agreement. Second, I will reflect on how Brexit has been a shock to relationships and identities across the island (and between Ireland and the UK). Third, I will describe how the churches have responded to Brexit, primarily profiling the work of the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) and the Irish Inter Church Meeting (IICM). And finally, I will consider the role of religion during the Covid-19 pandemic, arguing that the churches' increased visibility and cooperation, which is related to responding to the pandemic, may open doors for more significant public engagement for church contributions on Brexit, particularly around issues of identity, belonging and collaboration.

I wish particularly to thank Dr Nicola Brady, General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches, for providing information for this briefing.

Identity on the island of Ireland since 1998

Political identity

The Agreement itself represented a softening of British-Irish political relations, reflected in the extent that the Irish state worked in partnership with (rather than subordinate to) the British state in the negotiations. National identity in the Republic of Ireland has traditionally been associated with Catholicism, as well as with elements of anti-Britishness and anti-Protestantism, due to the colonial past. But while national identity in the Republic remains overwhelmingly Irish, it could be argued that 'Irishness' has become less anti-British. This is perhaps best symbolised by Queen Elizabeth's state visit to Ireland in 2011, the first visit by a British monarch in 100 years.

As is well known, the two main political identities in Northern Ireland are Nationalist and Unionist; these are at times presented as packages: Catholic-Nationalist-Republican (CNR) and Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist (PUL). The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recognised these identities and in some ways copper-fastened them: upon entering the Northern Ireland Assembly, members are required to designate as Unionist, Nationalist, or Other. The Unionist and Nationalist blocs can exercise mutual vetoes on key issues. In effect, the Agreement both reflected and incentivised these two identities; some have claimed it has institutionalised sectarianism (Wilson and Wilford 2003; Dixon 2011).

In 1998, 40% of the population identified as Unionists, 25% as Nationalist and 33% as Neither. Over time, the most significant change has been the growth of Neither at the expense of the two main identities: in 2008 the figures were 37% Unionist, 19% Nationalist and 43% Neither. Neither reached an all-time high in 2018 at 50%, followed by Unionist (26%) and Nationalist (21%). In 2019 Neither dropped back to 39% (the lowest figure for 15 years), followed by Unionist at 33% and Nationalist at 23%. However, even with this dip from an all-time high, there is still an overall trajectory of increasing 'Neithers'. In addition, 44% said they did not consider themselves likely to support any of the main

political parties in an election, most of which are organised on communal lines. Taken together, the proportion of Neither and of those not supporting a political party hint that for many, the main political parties in the Assembly are not representative of their views (Hayward and Rosher 2020).

There has been some debate in recent times about the emergence of a 'Northern Irish' identity, and speculation about whether the Northern Irish coincide with the Neithers. When faced with a suite of choices including British, Irish and Northern Irish, between 20 and 25% have chosen Northern Irish in the period between 1998 and the present. Northern Irish was a choice on the 2011 Census, and 21% chose it (Walker 2019). Further, young Protestants and people of 'no religion' or 'other religions' are more likely to choose Northern Irish identity. Those who identify as 'no religion' are more likely to come from Protestant than Catholic backgrounds. Jonathan Tonge and his collaborators have argued that the DUP has sought to discourage Northern Irish identity – favouring Britishness – which makes its relative popularity among Protestants interesting (Tonge *et al*. 2014). However, there is little convincing evidence that Northern Irish is a unifying, overarching identity: it seems likely that Catholics and Protestants choose this identity for different reasons: Catholics as a way of expressing Irishness; Protestants as an identity within the United Kingdom. Indeed, those who identify as Northern Irish are more likely to also identify as Unionist or Nationalist rather than Neither – meaning religious identification rather than national identity remains 'the primary determinant of party preference' (McNicholl 2017).

Religious identity

This brings us to changes in religious identification and practice. The island has long exhibited unusually high levels of religious identification, practice and belief when compared to the rest of Europe. It has often been assumed that the island has retained high levels of religious identification and practice due to its divided and violent past. In other words, religious identification and practice functioned as a way for people to identify more deeply with their 'ethno-national' group. So, to the extent that it can be argued that the link between religion and national identity kept religious practice high, it also could be argued that the ending of the Troubles and improved relations between the British and Irish states could lead religious identification and practice to decline in both parts of the island (Ganiel 2016). Indeed, traditional measures of religious practice such as attendance at religious services have declined at more rapid rates post-1998 than in previous years.

According to census figures, in 1991, 92% in the Republic identified as Catholic. This declined to 87% in 2006 and 78% in 2016. Some decline is due to an increase in other Christian traditions and religions, due primarily to immigration. But most decline seems due to an increase in those identifying as having 'no religion' – which was 2% in 1991 and 10% in 2016. Attendance at religious services stood at 66% in 1997 (down from 91% in 1972) and has since fallen to 44% in 2007 and 35% in 2016. There are regional variations in attendance, with figures for some parishes in Dublin in the single digits. (Earlier figures sourced at *Mass Appeal – Church Attendance in Ireland*).

In Northern Ireland, religious identification has remained relatively robust and stable among Catholics. It stood at 41% in the 1968 Loyalty Survey, 41% in the 2011 Census, and 36% in the 2019 Life and Times Survey. This is probably primarily due to demographics: the percentage of the overall population of people from Catholic backgrounds is growing, and the Protestant-background population is declining due to lower birth and higher emigration rates. The two largest Protestant denominations, Presbyterian and Church of Ireland, have experienced a steady decline in identification, with Presbyterians falling from 28 per cent to 18 per cent and Church of Ireland from 22 per cent to 14 per cent between 1968 and 2019 (Ganiel 2018). Though demographic decline has doubtless played

some part in this 'religious' decline, again, more people from Protestant backgrounds are choosing the burgeoning 'no religion' category, which reached a high of 17% in the 2011 Census (and 20% in the 2019 Life and Times Survey) from a low of less than one% in 1968. Indeed, the district of North Down and Ards, historically a Protestant heartland, has been referred to colloquially as 'the atheist capital' of the island, as 25 percent of residents identified as Nones and only 11 percent of people identified as Catholic (*Religion in Northern Ireland*).

Attendance at religious services (including all who attend at least monthly) also has declined in Northern Ireland (Ganiel 2016, pp.82-83). The decline has been steepest among Catholics, albeit starting from a much higher point. Attendance stood at 81% in 1998 (down from 95% in 1968). It had fallen to 68% in 2008 and 46% in 2019. Among Protestants, it was 52% in 1998, 52% in 2008, and 46% in 2019. (The figures for 2019 are from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey). So, attendance is higher among both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland than among Catholics in the Republic.

In addition to this evidence that religious practice is higher in the north than the south, Jennifer Todd's qualitative study of identity in the early 2000s (Todd 2014) reveals that religious identification is more important north of the border. Todd amassed a dataset of 220 qualitative interviews with 'ordinary people' living in border areas (145 in the Republic and 75 in Northern Ireland). Todd's data confirmed that Catholicism is no longer as important an aspect of Irish national identity in the Republic as it once was. But in Northern Ireland, Protestantism and Catholicism remained important aspects of British and Irish identities: Todd found that in the Republic the Irish state, not religion or religious identification, 'provides the implicit frame for most debates' (Todd 2014, p.52). Of eight factors identified for 'being Irish in the Irish state', Catholicism was just eighth on the list and was 'mentioned as an essential part of being Irish only by a small minority of older respondents' (Todd 2014, p.51). In contrast, in Northern Ireland people drew boundaries around four 'fault-lines', the first of which was 'the Protestant/Catholic religious division in its different interpretations. This is almost always noted, whether to be rejected, accepted or reformulated' (Todd 2014, p.52).

Another factor that is relevant to our discussion is that historically there has been significant hostility to ecumenism on the island, particularly among Protestants in Northern Ireland. The Rev. Ian Paisley first got his start as an antiecumenical preacher, claiming that ecumenism was the gateway to a Catholic takeover of Protestantism. Paisley's antiecumenical stance reflected and tapped into Protestant fears of religious persecution and a united Ireland. To this day, even Protestants who are engaged in what would be called ecumenical activism in almost any other place on earth are reluctant to identify with ecumenism. This antiecumenical legacy means that any attempts to create an overarching, grassroots 'Irish Christian' identity would be very, very difficult.

So to summarise before moving to our reflections on Brexit. After the Good Friday Agreement, relationships between the Irish and British states improved and religious identification and practice declined, both north and south of the border, with religion remaining more important in Northern Ireland. Those who identified as 'Neither' Unionist nor Nationalist continued to grow. They are greater in number than either Unionists or Nationalists. However, there is little evidence that 'Northern Irish' has emerged as a unifying identity, either for the Neithers or across Unionism and Nationalism. And ecumenism faces more challenges in Northern Ireland than in many other places.

Brexit as a shock to relationships and identities

There is little doubt that Brexit has introduced tensions in British-Irish relations. During the Brexit referendum campaign, there seemed to be a distinct lack of recognition by the

UK government and British political parties that Brexit could have negative long-term effects on the peace process, particularly in the event of a hard border on the island of Ireland. Ireland, of course, has been on the EU 'side' in the Brexit negotiations and the EU has supported it on border issues and on protecting the Good Friday Agreement. Etain Tannam (2020) has described the years since the referendum as 'a bleak time in the history of the British-Irish relationship … marked by an awareness that the relationship in many ways has regressed, after decades of improvement.'

Northern Ireland voted Remain in the EU, with 56% choosing this option. But the vote revealed communal differences: 88% of Nationalists voted Remain, while just 34% of Unionists did so. The figures were similar for those who identified as Irish (87%) and Catholic (85%); and British (37%) and Protestant (40%). Amongst the CNR community, there was cross-class support for Remain, whereas Remain voters in the PUL community were more likely to be middle or upper class (Garry 2018). The DUP has supported Leave. The Northern Ireland Assembly collapsed in January 2017 over a number of issues, including a Renewable Heating Incentive scheme and an Irish language act. The Assembly did not return for three years, leaving a considerable political vacuum in the region. During this time, and precipitated in part by Brexit, the question of a 'border poll' for a united Ireland came increasingly to the fore. Coupled with concerns about a hard border, this inevitably increased polarisation. A report on the 2019 Life and Times Survey outlines some key indicators of the shock to relationships and identities brought about by Brexit (Hayward and Rosher 2020; Hayward 2020).

- In 2016, 18% of Unionists thought Brexit made a united Ireland more likely; by 2018 it was 28%.
- In 2016, 38% of Nationalists thought Brexit made a united Ireland more likely; by 2018 it was 64%.
- In 2018, one third of DUP supporters said Brexit makes them even less in favour of a united Ireland, while half of Sinn Féin supporters said it makes them even more in favour of it.

As Katy Hayward, an author of the report, has put it: '… Brexit has made something that people will disagree about profoundly (i.e. Irish unity) increasingly likely and increasingly consequential' (Hayward 2020). At the same time, the 'middle ground' Alliance Party made gains in the 2019 elections, signalling some voters' increasing dissatisfaction with polarisation. Even so, it seems that Brexit is threatening some of the hard-won gains of the peace process.

The Churches and Brexit

The churches on the island are organised on an all-island basis, with some dioceses and congregations even straddling the border. Because of this all-island context, Brexit has raised (or revisited) fundamental questions for the churches about religious and political identity.

The island's main ecumenical bodies are the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) and the Irish Inter Church Meeting (IICM). The ICC is the island's main ecumenical body for Protestant, Orthodox, Reformed and Independent Churches. The IICM is 'formed from the leadership of the churches made up of 50/50 representation from the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference and the ICC' (see 'Who We Are'). The two bodies have been actively considering issues arising out of Brexit. Brexit is one of the primary concerns of the ICC's European Affairs Committee and has been a major area of discussion for the Church Leaders Group, which compromises the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, and the President of the

ICC. In 2018 ICC/IICM organised a workshop on Brexit, the results of which were published as *Consultation Paper: 'Brexit and the Irish Churches – Pastoral Dimensions'* (McDowell 2018). While acknowledging 'the complexity of the issues involved, and the need to find appropriate political solutions, which is not the role of the churches' (Brady 2018, p.6), the consultation paper identifies issues raised at local, regional and international levels, considers the 'churches' role and sphere of influence, and proposes relevant actions that IICM member churches may take' (McDowell 2018, p.8).

The consultation paper recognizes that the 'church constituency' is divided on Brexit. In that light, 'the churches are seeking not to present a particular view on Brexit, but to represent the varied concerns of their people' (McDowell 2018, p. 14). That shifts the focus to supporting local faith communities to provide pastoral care around issues of concern, engaging with politicians and policymakers on issues that might be overlooked in the Brexit process, 'such as social justice, the environment, health and education' (McDowell 2018, p.14); and initiating and modelling conversations about Europe which extend beyond the confines of Brexit debates, which may include 'the impact of euroscepticism, the neglect of the EU Social Pillar, the growth of populism and the response of the EU to migrants and refugees' (McDowell 2018, p.17).

There are action points for each level and these are quite general. Their generality leaves wriggle room in an uncertain context, and provides scope for them to be adapted to local situations. Some examples of what might be attempted are provided for each point. The actions are: 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 organised a further event to discuss the consultation paper, which was attended by 60 staff members and volunteers from IICM member churches, representatives of local inter-church groups, and partner organisations. I was briefed on this meeting by Nicola Brady in July 2020. Among other points, those in attendance felt the churches had been quiet about issues related to Brexit and welcomed the practical and pastoral focus on the consultation paper. Attendees also saw Brexit in light of a peace process that was already in crisis, even prior to Brexit. They noted increasing political polarisation, linked in part to the poisonous language used in debates about Brexit. This event also produced recommendations about organising more briefing and consultation events, preparing resources, offering facilitation training, and engaging in theological reflection on a four nations basis. Following this event, the Church Leaders Group issued a joint statement urging politicians to 'weigh their words carefully' in the Brexit debate, including striving 'to listen and relate to one another in the context of mutual respect and even growing trust, rather in a divisive and unhealthy atmosphere of needlessly destructive debate and broken and fractured relationships' (McMahon 2018).

A few months after the event, a discussion resource based on it was produced, *Talking about Brexit: A Guide for Discussion Groups* (Thompson 2018). This document warns that 'disagreements on Brexit are highly unlikely to be resolved; it should be made clear that is not the intention' and suggests 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 based on the needs of the faith community, local community or wider society (Thompson 2018, p.4). ICC/IICM has not tracked the distribution of the resource or received formal feedback from any groups which may have used it.

In 2018, primarily as an effort to contribute to the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Church Leaders Group invited the leaders of the five largest political parties

to a joint meeting in the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church in Belfast. It was the first time party leaders had been in the same room in eight months. It led to meetings with the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Tánaiste and Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs. Party leaders suggested that the churches initiate a dialogue with civic society on key political and societal issues. With support of Northern Ireland's Community Relations Council, four regional dialogue events brought together approximately 120 civil society representatives, with a cross-party panel of elected representatives, between December 2018 and February 2019 (Brady and Ganiel 2020). One of the issues discussed was how the political impasse was leaving a major gap in terms of representation in the Brexit negotiations and causing serious concern about future Brexit preparations. A report on the dialogues read:

> We were particularly concerned that, in the context of Brexit, the consequences of the political vacuum were not receiving sufficient attention. Our society was becoming increasingly polarised, with a real risk to long-term damage to relationships and an increase in violence. Tragically, since we began this initiative, more lives have been lost. (The Church Leaders Group (Ireland) 2019)

In addition, the ICC's European Affairs Committee is working on a plan to equip churches in the EU post-Brexit on how to support and resource collective engagement on issues like work and employment, social security, migration, and climate justice.

There also has been development of a Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) report on 'Church, Identity and Nation', initiated before the Brexit referendum, which is now being considered in light of Brexit. There was a meeting of CTBI trustees in October 2019, with promises of more engagement on Brexit from a four nations context.

Nicola Brady, General Secretary of the ICC, offered these reflections on the churches' engagement in an email of 14 July 2020:

> From the outset, our member churches were clear that Brexit was an issue they wanted to approach together, rather than setting up their own working groups at a denominational level. To do this on an issue that is so sensitive in terms of the political and identity dimensions, and so significant in terms of its wider societal impact, is, for me, a positive statement about where we are in terms of inter-church relationships. It takes a high level of trust to navigate the complexity of Brexit, while respecting the diversity of views that exist. It is in contrast to how churches approached major public debates on issues impacting peace and good relations in the past such as the Good Friday Agreement itself, or more recently initiatives like the Consultative Group on the Past or the Haass talks where churches had their own working groups and held individual meetings. 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. Secondly, it enhances the contribution they can make to reconciliation when they facilitate a cross-community space for dialogue. Practically, collaborative approaches allow for most efficient use of resources and provide peer support for the staff or volunteers leading on these issues for the denomination. A further practical consideration is that, in an increasingly secular society political leaders also want to speak to churches together, rather than holding a series of meetings with individual denominations, so that is the other side of the equation and the two things are largely evolving in parallel.

> Other examples of things we are doing together that previously would have been done separately are the consultation on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition and the recent legacy work. In these cases churches already had their own good relations bodies, which have continued to work on the issues and prepare the consultation responses which have been signed off according to the churches' procedures. But we have had a working group where

they have been sharing throughout the process and taking meetings together. For me there is a significant contrast to the consultation on the OFMDFM [Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister] Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy just over a decade ago when the churches did major analysis separately, with separate meetings and didn't share anything until all the submissions were in.

Apart from ICC/IICM, churches' and faith leaders' engagement on Brexit has been rather thin. The impression shared above that the churches have been 'quiet' on Brexit rings true. One exception is the ecumenical Corrymeela Community, which produced a resource called *Crossing Borders: Exploring Brexit through the Lens of Ruth* (Corrymeela 2018). Like the ICC/IICM resource, it did not aim to resolve differences on Brexit but rather invited participants to reflect on Brexit in light of how otherness is presented in the biblical text of Ruth. Notably, the cover of the booklet featured artwork of refugees on a raft, desperate to reach Europe.

But while ICC/IICM and Corrymeela are attempting to contribute constructively to wider conversations, overall I would agree that the churches have been 'quiet' on Brexit. Part of this is related to religion's declining influence across the island, noted earlier in the presentation of data on declines in religious identification and practice. People aren't necessarily seeking out what the churches have to say on Brexit or interested in what they are doing. Further, the island's complicated history with ecumenism means that significant numbers of practising Christians view ecumenical bodies like ICC/IICM and Corrymeela with either hostility or indifference.

The Churches and the Covid-19 Pandemic

For a few weeks back in March, the Covid-19 pandemic overtook Brexit as the most talked-about 'story' in the news media and among citizens. The pandemic has further exposed fault-lines and inequalities across the island. But for now, there are more stories of citizens of all backgrounds 'coming together' in the face of the pandemic, than of it contributing to polarisation. This can be neatly illustrated in a slogan that has appeared on murals and gable walls in the CNR heartland of West Belfast: 'Support the NHS'. It may not be immediately obvious to all listeners, but it is most unusual for there to be visible support for organs of the British state – even the health service – in such areas. Churches have been at the forefront of the response to the pandemic. Clergy and religious staff were designated as 'key workers' by both the Irish and UK governments, recognising their important roles in burying the dead and providing pastoral care in difficult times. It is my impression that churches and faith leaders have had a higher than usual public profile during the pandemic. Some of this is driven by news stories about restrictions on religious gatherings and now, as lockdown eases, stories on how churches are opening back up.

In May 2020, working in partnership with ICC/IICM, I conducted a survey of faith leaders in Ireland about how they were responding to the pandemic. I titled the report *People Still Need Us*, a phrase used by a Catholic priest in answering one of the 'write-in' questions on the survey. His phrase encapsulated the main insights of the survey: faith leaders and communities were playing important roles in providing pastoral care and social services during the pandemic; and there was evidence of increased prayer and surprisingly high levels of online religious practice (Ganiel 2020).

At the same time, the Church Leaders Group has been meeting bi-weekly via Zoom, representing a dramatic intensification of contact and collaboration. This has enabled a more coordinated response on pandemic-related issues like the reopening of graveyards

and churches; as well as other issues like the British government's new proposals on dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland.

While it is still too soon to tell, this increased visibility and cooperation, which is related to responding to the pandemic, may open doors for more significant public engagement for church contributions on Brexit, particularly around issues of identity, belonging and collaboration.

It seems we are destined to live in 'interesting' times and there are certainly more 'interesting' times ahead: the island of Ireland now faces not only the challenges associated with Brexit, but also what are sure to be continuing challenges related to the pandemic, including economic recession, mental health issues, and a general uncertainty (or perhaps dread) about the future.

At the same time, my sense is that there are opportunities for the churches in these strange times, related to their all-island basis as well as their increasing (and so far, largely positive or neutral) public profile during the pandemic. In fact, the churches may be in a better position to help shape a new landscape on the island than at any time since the Brexit referendum. But in the days ahead, the churches may become bogged down in the everyday challenges of returning to 'normality', which includes all the stresses and strains of keeping church buildings safe for worship. Of course, returning to collective worship is important. But the churches must not lose sight of what's happening beyond their church walls. There is wisdom and vision in the church activities I have described today, but it will take concerted effort to ensure that it is communicated, not lost.

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