

**RESPONSE OF THE COUNCIL FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS OF THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND TO THE SEANAD PUBLIC
CONSULTATION ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL FUTURE OF THE ISLAND OF
IRELAND**

SEPTEMBER 2022

Introduction

1. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has over 200,000 members belonging to around 530 congregations across 19 Presbyteries throughout Ireland, north and south. Along with the other main Christian denominations on the island of Ireland, PCI remained as an all-island body following partition in 1921. The Presbytery of Monaghan and the Presbytery of Dublin and Munster are located in the Republic of Ireland, while the Presbytery of Derry and Donegal is a cross-border presbytery with congregations located in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
2. The Council for Public Affairs is authorised by the General Assembly to speak on behalf of PCI on matters of public policy. In October 2021, the General Assembly resolved to encourage the Council for Public Affairs to make submissions to, and interact with, statutory authorities and related bodies on this island, attempting as far as possible to reflect the views of members in both jurisdictions.
3. Indeed, this has been part of the warp and weft of PCI's engagement with government and society over many years, with many former PCI Moderators, and others, actively working in public, and in private, to build good relationships across these islands, and further peace and reconciliation. As a founding member of the Irish Council of Churches, which celebrates its centenary in 2023, PCI has a strong track record of formal engagement and dialogue on a wide variety of issues on an all-island basis.
4. The Decade of Centenaries has given all on the island of Ireland opportunity to pause and reflect on events of 100 years' ago, as well as considering what we can learn as we think about future relationships across these islands, north and south, east and west. For PCI, this included "The Future of Our Past: Remembering and reassessing 1916" held in January 2016, and more recently "On These Steps" in September 2021, which marked the role that PCI played in hosting the new Northern Ireland Parliament, following partition of the island of Ireland in 1921.
5. The latter was supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Reconciliation Fund, which also provided assistance towards a subsequent series of listening events, amongst loyalist working class communities, with young people, and those living in border areas. These allowed for a wider conversation within the denomination about the impact of the last 100 years, and also the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead as Christian citizens on the island of Ireland.
6. Similarly, the Seanad Public Consultation Committee is taking the opportunity of the centenary of Seanad Éireann to "look at the constitutional future of the island of Ireland, given the ongoing public policy debate on the issue, the safeguarding of the peace process, and the future we would like for generations to come."

7. PCI acknowledges the Committee's open call for submissions "from all the people and interested groups and organisations... and people of all traditions and opinions." Given a denomination of such size and geographical spread, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' view on the constitutional future of the island of Ireland amongst Presbyterian people. Whilst it may be broadly correct to assume that Presbyterians in the North generally identify with a unionist perspective, and those in the South are more sympathetic to a narrative of constitutional change, it would be wrong to conclude that there is homogeneity among Presbyterians in either jurisdiction.
8. These comments and principles are offered to assist the Committee in its deliberations and reflect both public statements made by senior leaders within PCI, and internal conversations within the denomination. Representatives from PCI would be willing to contribute to the Committee's hearings as part of its consultation process.

Careful conversations

9. As a society and communities on the island of Ireland, there is much we have collectively learned about ourselves and one another during this past "decade of centenaries". It has been interesting to observe that centenary events during the earlier part of this decade provided opportunities for the discovery of forgotten shared histories within families and communities, particularly in relation to events around World War 1.
10. Conversely, as the decade has moved towards the centenary events that led to partition, it has become more difficult to remember together. It was notable that PCI's "On These Steps" event, held at its Union Theological College in September 2021, to mark the role played by the College in hosting the Northern Ireland Parliament following the partition of the island of Ireland and creation of Northern Ireland, was the only such occasion to have representation from both the UK and Irish governments, alongside all of the NI Executive parties and the Irish Church Leaders.
11. This is a useful reminder that the topic of constitutional change cannot be divorced from the events that have shaped and marked both jurisdictions over the past 100 years, and which continue to have a lasting impact. The discussion cannot solely be about political aspirations, electoral mechanisms, anthems or flags, or even the societal and economic opportunities and challenges that should be considered.
12. It is helpful to also reflect on how much Ireland, north and south, has changed over the past 100 years, not least with the arrival of many from countries right across the globe who now call this island 'home'. The most recent reception of people fleeing the war in Ukraine builds on a tradition of welcoming those from other places who are seeking to make a better and safer life for themselves. Presbyterian churches in the Irish Republic are among those who have been blessed in recent decades by the presence of people from African, Eastern European and Asian backgrounds.
13. Given their own cultural and national experiences, especially those from a post-colonial or post-Soviet background, conversations about constitutional change on the island of Ireland may, through a lens of recent conflict experience, be perceived less positively and with more suspicion. For these reasons, and many more, it is vital that our "New Irish" are included as part of these discussions.
14. Careful conversations on the constitutional future of the island of Ireland should not presume a pre-determined direction of travel. Rather an earlier, more critical, and more difficult discussion is required about the setting of a tone; where being in the same room can become sitting at a

table; and sitting at a table can become a conversation; and where a conversation can become a relationship.

15. While, in the light of the outcome of referenda in other jurisdictions, it might seem prudent to consider practical realities like housing, education, biodiversity etc., moving ahead on practicalities without first laying the foundations for a relationship that can flourish to nurture and nourish our future together, and without fear, will be a significant missed opportunity.

Reconciliation requires recognition

16. The Committee highlights reconciliation as one of the societal ‘opportunities and challenges that should be considered’. It is unfortunate that initiatives and programmes in Northern Ireland that seek to promote reconciliation have been caricatured as ‘motherhood and apple pie’, and therefore easily dismissed. It is equally unfortunate that the word ‘reconciliation’ has become synonymous in some quarters with constitutional change on the island of Ireland, through the unification of both jurisdictions, north and south.

17. Speaking in September 2021 at the “On These Steps” event, former Presbyterian Moderator Very Rev Dr David Bruce had this to say about the matter:

“Reconciliation – repeatedly affirmed in statements and agreements from both churches and governments in the past - does not suffer from amnesia. Reconciliation is not soft or forgetful. Setting the past aside as if it didn’t happen is no basis or foundation for healing. Reconciliation that has the grit and grip to re-write a life is that which names a wrong as the wrong that it is, whether perpetrated by the state or by an agent of terror. Such naming and then acknowledgement of a wrong presents a choice to those at the table.

“If they have the courage and good sense and moral backbone to repent of it, to lament that it ever took place, to say so and face the guilt that lies at its heart, then a door is opened to a new future. Reconciliation that grows to fruitfulness in this precious soil produces a brand of person that the world cannot ignore, and the critics cannot answer. There is a deep-seated heroism, at peace not only with themselves, but incredibly, with their enemies. As the Psalmist puts it, “You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies.” God’s vision for us is that we, friends and enemies alike, can sit together and eat together at the table.”

18. PCI has sought to contribute to this ongoing conversation by capturing the stories of 120 Presbyterian people impacted by the Troubles, and published in 2019 as the book ‘*Considering Grace, Presbyterians and the Troubles*’¹. It is the first time that such a full range of experiences of people from a Presbyterian background have been captured in this way and includes perspectives from clergy, first responders, security forces, medics, women, people from border counties and leading public figures. Taken together, the stories point towards the need for a gracious remembering, to acknowledge suffering, be self-critical about the past, and to create space for lament, and for remembering *for* the future. It has been PCI’s experience that sharing these stories has opened up opportunities for those from other backgrounds and communities to share their own experiences of hurt and pain arising from the Troubles.

19. In March 2022, the Irish Times published an interview² between journalist Freya McClements and the former Irish rugby international Andrew Trimble. During the interview they discussed the findings of a recent Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI poll on attitudes towards a united Ireland in the Republic of Ireland, including a question which asked respondents to what extent they would agree or disagree with a new national anthem. Only 21% indicated that it would be something

¹ [Considering Grace - Presbyterian Church Ireland \(presbyterianireland.org\)](https://www.presbyterianireland.org/considering-grace-presbyterians-and-the-troubles/)

² [Andrew Trimble: People in the Republic are not ready for a united Ireland – The Irish Times](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/andrew-trimble-people-in-the-republic-are-not-ready-for-a-united-ireland-2022-03-15/)

they would accept, with over 7 in 10 saying that they would not accept it. In response, Trimble commented: “I find it disappointing, really disappointing... but I’m not sure if I find that surprising or not. What it does say is that this is a case of they [in the North] will join us [in the South] and they will play by our rules, and that is never going to work. It needs to be challenged.”

20. Indeed, it may be that ‘New Irish’ communities and those on the margins of society in Ireland, will look to see how these conversations develop as an indicator of a willingness to allow diversity to flourish, or a sign that divergent communities and experiences might be expected to conform to a ‘one size fits all’ definition of Irishness.
21. A century and more of broken relationships across these islands will not, cannot, be healed through a referendum on constitutional change, and especially not one which may be perceived to have an inevitable result. Such work requires ‘grit and grip’ and must be grounded in courage, good sense and moral strength, recognising the hurt and pain inflicted by the past and acknowledging very real fears about the future.

A vision for society

22. The Public Consultation Paper states the Committee wishes to hear a vision for the future. At its General Assembly in 2016, PCI adopted its “Vision for Society Statement”³ the text of which is as follows:

*We, members of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland,
saved by grace
and called by God to grace-filled relationships,
in the power of the Holy Spirit
as ambassadors of Christ’s Kingdom
in a broken and divided world;*

*Believe that the Good News of Jesus Christ
challenges and equips us
to develop radically new attitudes and relationships
with our neighbours throughout the whole of Ireland.*

*We confess our failure
to live as Biblically faithful Christian peacebuilders
and to promote the counter culture of Jesus
in a society where cultures clash.*

*Accordingly, we affirm Christian peacebuilding
to be part of Christian discipleship
and reassert the Church’s calling
to pursue a peaceful and just society in our day*

*We seek a more reconciled community
at peace with each other,
where friend and foe,
working together for the common good,
can experience healing
and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

³ [Vision for Society Statement - Presbyterian Church Ireland \(presbyterianireland.org\)](http://presbyterianireland.org)

23. This challenges us within PCI across the island of Ireland to embody grace-filled relationships in a broken and divided world, and work together for the common good. As a denomination, we recognise that this is a vision to which we should be constantly striving, whatever the constitutional future of these islands.
24. Dr Bruce finished his remarks at “On These Steps” in September 2021 with the following comments:

“North, south, east and west on these islands present us with a web of opportunities to grow – economically, culturally, spiritually, if we have the vision for it. In a post Brexit, Protocol environment some of this has been made more complicated, but if anything it has been made more urgent. We must work tirelessly to sort out the new configurations of our cultural, commercial and spiritual connections... Whatever a new Ireland resembles, it will not be because someone was victorious, while another was defeated. If it looks like that, it won’t be a new Ireland.”

Concluding comments

25. As the Committee undertakes its deliberations and considers the submissions from individuals and groups across the island, the following observations are offered:

- Careful conversations on the constitutional future of the island of Ireland should not presume a pre-determined direction of travel.
- Careful conversations on the constitutional future of the island of Ireland must also be even-handed in that they allow discussion about the advantages of Northern Ireland remaining as a constituent part of the United Kingdom, as much as they allow for discussion on the unification of both jurisdictions, north and south.
- Practical considerations regarding constitutional change will be based on unstable foundations if the hurt and pain of the past is not acknowledged and recognised alongside very real fears about the future.
- A singular focus on practical considerations risks side-stepping the harder conversations about cultural and social differences, and the even more difficult work of engaging hearts and minds.
- Finding ways to include perspectives from ‘New Irish’ communities will enrich the Committee’s process.



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