**Statement**

**9th March 2017**

**Text of the Church leaders’ joint statement in full**

As political parties begin to engage in negotiations for the future of Northern Ireland’s political institutions, Church leaders have released the following statement, emphasising the need for all citizens to support our elected representatives in the task of building a stable, peaceful future for all:

“As citizens our responsibilities do not end with the casting of our vote. Our newly elected political representatives have an important task ahead of them to rebuild trust in our political institutions by placing the common good at the centre of their approach in the search for meaningful solutions to our current difficulties.

“They will need the support of the whole of society as they work to protect the achievements of the peace process. Although it is understandably disheartening to find ourselves at another potential political impasse, we should not forget that the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland in the last two decades in terms of peace and reconciliation seemed unimaginable only a few years earlier, when our society was still dominated by violent conflict.

“The key to that transformation lay in people from all sectors of society, and all shades of political opinion, coming together to articulate a new vision for the future. By re-committing ourselves to that vision, and reflecting on the values that shaped it, we can address the remaining obstacles to peace and continue the vital work of reconciliation.

“The vision that inspired our peace process was one where communities could live free from the threat of violence, with all the benefits of a peaceful society. Central to this vision was a commitment to the protection of rights for all, in a context of mutual respect, so that no one would be left behind. It was recognised that the victims and survivors of the conflict had undoubtedly paid the highest price for the peace we enjoy today and did so in the hope that a culture of violence would give way to truth and justice and the righting of social wrongs.

**More…**

“It was understood that peace and reconciliation would require a transformation in our political culture, moving from a mentality of ‘us’ and ‘them’ to a truly inclusive society where diversity is celebrated and all can participate in shaping the future. It was a vision for a fully participative democracy where elected representatives would share responsibility for governing on behalf of the whole community, with a commitment to the common good and the protection of the most vulnerable.

“Not everything in this vision has yet been achieved as many of us had hoped, but the current circumstances provide an opportunity for each one of us to ask ourselves what we are doing to make it a reality and whether we have, perhaps, begun to take the progress of recent years for granted. In any process of conflict resolution we should be prepared to face setbacks and embrace these challenges as an opportunity to continue to learn from our mistakes, while working to put in place the necessary safeguards. A culture of blame will only trap us in an endless cycle of instability and insecurity.

“Our elected representatives need our support if they are to have the courage to put the most challenging issues at the centre of the current negotiations and take responsibility for finding lasting solutions. As Christians, we recognise the importance of supporting those in positions of political leadership through prayer and action.”

**Archbishop Richard Clarke, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh**

**Archbishop Eamon Martin, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh**

**Bishop John McDowell, President of the Irish Council of Churches**

**Rev. Bill Mullally, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland**

**Rt. Rev Dr Frank Sellar, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

**Ends.**