

Social and Political opportunities for 21st Century Irish Ecumenism

Response to the Survey of Faith Leaders and Laity
Philip McKinley – Dublin-based Ecumenical Officer, Irish Inter-Church Committee

This survey and indeed the whole 'Visioning 21st Century Ecumenism' project represent for me enormous treasures. I have recently been appointed as Dublin-based Ecumenical Officer with the Irish Inter-Church Committee, which represents fifteen different churches. This Dublin-based position is a new one and one immediate challenge for this slightly pioneering role is the lack of empirical data regarding areas of growth and movement within Irish ecumenism today, particularly in the Republic. Therefore this survey is so valuable for my work, in fact I can see it forming many priority areas for the next three years, so my deepest thanks to Gladys, Therese and all the ISE team. But it's through this new role therefore that I examine the survey.

I have been asked this afternoon to unpack and discuss the social and political issues that have been raised. My background is work in issues of interculturalism and while I was fascinated in the responses concerning immigration, my colleague Adrian Christea is far more qualified than I to address these, so I will instead just focus on the sections concerning reconciliation and ecumenism. Since I started my job, I have asked the same question to many different people; 'where is the Holy Spirit moving in Irish ecumenism today, where are people excited and where are people itching for answers and results?' This survey is a wonderful way for me to test and compare some of the responses that have been shared with me, now with broader opinion, both geographically, theologically and denominationally.

Although I found the whole report extremely informative, enlightening and inspiring, let me just briefly begin with a few small nitty points, which are not so much criticisms, but rather represent areas that I had hoped the survey would address, but I feel still remain unanswered, not the compilers fault rather the respondents.

To begin with, and this may represent a bug bear of mine, I feel there is a desperate need with Irish ecumenism for a distinctly rural vision to be articulated, however nobody really touched on this. Many perceive ecumenism as being not only pertinent to the eastern or North-Eastern coastline of Ireland, but to the towns, suburbs and cities of Ireland. The three main issues chosen in the questionnaire; immigration and diversity, reconciliation and ecumenism, are quite simply much more pertinent to the ecclesiological life of Belfast than Belmullet. I learnt this the hard way, having been sent out as a wet behind the ears Hard Gospel project worker, to a rural parish to discuss immigration. After about half an hour the rector, gently leaned forward and whispered in my ear 'know your audience'.

So we have to be relevant to rural Ireland, middle Ireland indeed the deep South of Ireland and we must not always get too swept away by the latest European or global issue. Ecumenism in the Republic particularly, must diversify beyond just Protestant and Catholic relations. In a county for instance like Mayo (where only 1% of the population is Protestant), single issue ecumenism just won't work. We will reduce ourselves to what one priest described to me recently as 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity rent-a –Protestant syndrome'. One Roman Catholic priest in Leitrim wrote in the survey that he didn't see any opportunities for ecumenism in his area, presumably because there are not enough Protestants to rent. We don't need however to throw the baby out with the bathwater, there are certainly complex Protestant-Catholic issues to do with land, history and culture still in need of address. Last week the Abbey Theatre in Dublin for instance hosted the world premiere of a new Sebastian Barry play, 'The Tales of Ballycumber', set in present-day south county Wicklow. It highlights quite creatively, sensitively, yet starkly, the subtle divisions that still remains

between Protestants and Catholics in farming Ireland. Interestingly, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, Dr John Neill, said at the launch of Malcolm Macourt's book 'Counting the People of God', that in his experience in Tuam and Cashel Dioceses, the church at the crossroads was always more ecumenical than the church in the town, because farming is by its nature more ecumenical than life in the town.

I think we in Ireland need something distinctive like the Association for Churches Together in Scotland's very substantial rural ecumenical programme that covers issues such as the utilising church space to help fill the void of closing post offices, agricultural depression and isolation and creation and eco-theology issues such as Genetically Modified crops and national food policies. So I was disappointed that none of the other respondents touched on this.

Secondly, I felt it was a missed opportunity not to explore youth issues. The Irish ecumenical movement is now two generations old. I see a gap appearing between my parent's generation who were shaped and motivated overwhelmingly by the Catholic-Protestant divide and the Troubles. My generation however, has been shaped much more by a variety of diverse influences such as post-denominationalism, individualism, anti-clericalism, liberalism, pluralism and secularism. The Jesuit priest, Michael MacGreil recently produced a fascinating report based on a National Survey of Religious Attitudes and Practices in the Republic of Ireland in 2007-08, called 'The Challenge of Indifference'. In it he dedicates a chapter to present-day opinions about Christian Church Unity. Of those who were 56 years old and over, 35% felt that Christian unity was desirable. However of those aged between 18-25 only 12.5% felt that Christian unity was desirable. What is all the more fascinating is that according to his research and I quote 'one would expect that the young, more urbanised and more highly educated would be more open to the desirability of Church Unity. In fact, there was a higher level of support for Church Unity among the more devout sub-samples, such as the older, the widowed and the rural or village born'. Of course, if young people are not vibrant in confessional life, then they will also not be vibrant in ecumenical life, however I think as Prof Hogan said earlier, ecumenism is an Enlightenment or Modern concept, therefore young, urbanised and educated people, may in fact be laying down a very serious post-modern challenge for ecumenism. Part of the 2010 visioning process for me is examining the unique contribution the Celtic Tiger, post-Troubles generation can make.

The third and final issue that I was hoping to get an answer on was how to address apathy. This is by far the biggest issue I have confronted so far. Perhaps rather than seeing it as people being apathetic, they are in fact laying down a challenge by asking 'so what?'. In fact, viewed in this light, 'apathy' could be seen as an immensely creative challenge rather than an indifferent dead-end, but it is a major stumbling block for my work, and I didn't feel anything really helped address this issue in the survey.

Now the positives, well there are countless social issues, which respondents see relevant for shared action. The ecumenical bodies on social action might have about 20 years of work from this report. Some of social issues that were highlighted include a desire to see reconciliation between humans and the environment, between people of different sexual identities, between rich and poor, between rural and urban, between public and private sector, between the republican groups; between PSNI and breakaway republicans; between the grieving families of 'Hoods' and Victims of Hoodish behavior, within families, within marriages, within local communities, family feuds, ex-service people and families of victims in Northern Ireland, within Europe, with the government for equal treatment of the non-religious within schools, in schools, with those in prison, and within yourself. Ecumenically there was a desire to see more dialogue on theology, shared social action, reconciliation between Roman Catholics and Protestants, peace, less talk and more action, end racism/sectarianism and class difference, bringing schools together, healing, dealing with the past,

forgiveness, respect, listening, anti-sectarianism, confronting materialism, joint action on combating secularism, demonstrating shared concern for international aid / development, encouraging cross community relations, protect family and married life, moving the agenda on from being 'Troubles related', dealing with 'extreme' Protestantism or 'fundamentalism,' shared communion and reaching out to smaller Christian denominations, including Pentecostals.

It's interesting the creativity and enthusiasm shown towards social issues, from both clergy and laity, as opposed to ecclesiological and theological issues. This perhaps reflects how praxis-orientated ecumenism has become. However one of the successes for this whole project for me will be whether Irish ecumenism can be theologically re-envisioned, because the issues I've outlined are profoundly theological problems, from which I hope our shared social action could then follow.

There were three broad social and political categories, that caught my attention and I believe will form a major part of the next phase of Irish ecumenism.

Firstly secularism, I was shocked at the level of anger expressed by atheists in the survey. One Church of Ireland respondent in Co Dublin suggests ecumenical activity may have to focus on reconciling with an angry secular society. This could take place on a number of forms and a number of axes. For instance within Protestant churches in the Republic for instance it could be framed under the ongoing dispute between the churches and the Government over schools under Protestant management or within the Catholic church it be framed under the fallout that will surely ensue from the imminent report of the Archdiocese of Dublin. For instance, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin described the meeting two weeks ago between the Irish Episcopal Conference and the victims on institutional abuse, as the most significant and important meeting he had ever attended. These are the front page stories, so perhaps we need then to be scratching where society is itching, before we make ecumenism a self-isolating exercise. 21st Century ecumenism may require those in faith institutions dialoguing with those that oppose them and this may perhaps have to take place on an intra-confessional axis.

Secondly local ecumenism. I am currently compiling a mapping exercise of local inter-church groups in Ireland. My initial findings portray an immensely vibrant and energetic grass-roots ecumenism at the moment, I would even describe it as a 'silent revolution'. In the survey, I was struck by how parochial some of the issues raised were, but of course we will be moved by the issues that directly affect us. How then can we be greater empowerers of local diverse forms of ecumenism?

Finally, multi-dimensional ecumenism. In Ireland because of our National Question we have naturally had an enormous emphasis on our Catholic-Protestant relations. This single issue, although immensely multi-faceted and vitally important, now needs to take its place in partnership with a variety of other key issues. For instance the Irish School of Ecumenics' new course on Ecumenics has three dimensions; inter-church relations of course, as well as inter-religious relations and inter-cultural relations. My background is in work in interculturalism however the person who taught me most about interculturalism came from a background in inter-church and cross community relations, Revd Dr Doug Baker. There are enormous repositories of skills, experiences and learning that must be shared with one another. We must therefore view 21st Century Irish ecumenism as having many issues, many focal points and many diverse expressions, but still in unity with those many parts.