

Joint Statement by Protestant and Catholic church leaders on St Patrick's Day, (17 March 2021)

Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland
Most Rev John McDowell, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of all Ireland
Rev Dr Thomas McKnight, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland
Most Rev Eamon Martin, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of all Ireland
Very Rev Dr Ivan Patterson, President of the Irish Council of Churches



Photograph: The leaders of Ireland's main religions gather in Saint Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh to deliver their St. Patrick's Day message

Church Leaders Statement in full

As disciples of Jesus Christ, sharing in the grace of his redemption, and in the Father's unshakeable love for his creation, we have been reflecting together on the events of 1921 on this island. We wish to share some of our thoughts as we continue these conversations and as we journey together through the year.

Every generation of leaders, civil and political, is called to make choices about the structures that govern our life in community, now and in the future, in circumstances that will always be less than ideal. Significant anniversaries provide an opportunity to reflect on our trajectory, exploring what can be learned for today through a re-examination of the contrasting and intertwined narratives of conflict and compromise that surround these pivotal points in our history.

Some may struggle with the concept of a shared history when it comes to the centenary of the partition of Ireland, the establishment of Northern Ireland and the resulting reconfiguration of British-Irish relationships. What is undeniable, however, is the reality that we have to live in a shared space

on these islands, and to make them a place of belonging and welcome for all. In our approach to the past we have a moral responsibility to acknowledge the corrosive impact of violence and words that can lead to violence, and a duty of care to those still living with the trauma of its aftermath.

There are insights from Christian social ethics that may offer a helpful perspective, alongside others, as we seek to navigate our contested past in a way that will contribute to healing of relationships in the present and a hopeful vision for the future. Christ's teaching, ministry and sacrifice were offered in the context of a society that was politically divided, wounded by conflict and injustice. His call to 'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things of God' (Mark 12:17) conveyed the reassurance that beneath these societal fractures lay a deeper source of connection because all things belong to God.

Jesus lived out this message of hope by repeatedly and intentionally crossing social boundaries to affirm the dignity of those who had been marginalised or excluded by his own people and by society. In these encounters, as exemplified in the meeting with the Woman of Samaria (John 4:1-42), we see that Christ does not seek to minimise differences, but rather to establish connection through gracious listening, replacing exclusion and shame with the hope of new beginnings.

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.

We find inspiration and encouragement in the progress that has been made through our peace process in building relationships of mutual respect and trust across these islands. These relationships are often tested, and will at times be found wanting, but our communities have also demonstrated great resilience, solidarity and compassion, evident most recently in the response to Covid-19.

There has been considerable progress too in addressing unjust structures that excluded people and unfairly limited their life chances. The power of institutions has diminished, leading to greater accountability for those in leadership. This helps create an environment where we can value our different identities in a pluralist public square, conscious of both our rights and responsibilities. Yet there is much work still to do. With so much of our lives now being lived in the digital space there can be a temptation to retreat into spaces where our definition of community is limited to those who agree with us. This leads to an increasingly fragmented society in which too many people fall through the cracks.

Churches, alongside other civic leaders, have a role to play in providing spaces outside political structures that give expression to our inter-connectedness and shared concern for the common good. It is our hope that shared reflection on our past will support and strengthen this engagement, inspiring us to renew our commitment to the work of building peace for the future. As the Apostle Paul said, "So then let us pursue the things that make for peace and the building up of one another" (Romans 14:19).