

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN IRELAND

RESPONSE TO WHAT FUTURE FOR EUROPE? REAFFIRMING THE EUROPEAN PROJECT AS BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF VALUES

AN OPEN LETTER OF CEC TO CHURCHES AND PARTNER ORGANISATIONS IN EUROPE AND AN INVITATION TO DIALOGUE AND CONSULTATION.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS:

1. Brexit gives rise to great anxiety and to great danger in respect of a return to strife on the island of Ireland. EU membership was a key element in the context of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the EU has been a very important support to the peace process. Ireland requires to be given Special Region status in any new relationships between the UK and EU.
2. The Methodist Church in Ireland (MCI) is both positive about and supportive of the approach by CEC, based upon the ‘common values’ outlined in the Open Letter. It affirms the analysis that Europe faces “multiple and interrelated crises.”
3. The ‘institutional architecture’ of the EU is deficient and the EU is at a ‘crossroads’ and an EU collapse has become possible if deficiencies are not addressed.
4. The Churches and other partners need to outline a new vision for Europe, based upon seeking to fulfil the promise contained in the stated values and objectives of the EU, rather than the operant ideology of ‘neo-liberalism’ or market fundamentalism.
5. Serious concern regarding the overturning of the security settlement which has obtained since 1945 needs to be voiced by the Churches.
6. Analysis needs to be undertaken by Churches as to why the EU is losing its appeal to the peoples of Europe and proposals to address the issues raised by such analysis brought forward. The concept of ‘Social Europe’ needs to be reinvigorated.
7. Churches, we recommend, should commit to the following:
 - **A renewal of prayer for Europe and all its peoples and for EU in public worship**
 - **A planned, systematic and organised programme of hospitality to welcome, house, support, train and integrate refugees and migrants**
 - **Ongoing dialogue with other Churches and with other civil society partners at national and European levels to raise awareness of the many economic, social, political and environmental issues impacting on all Europeans**
 - **Undertake, together, to research, analyse and study the key issues facing Europe so that Churches might make informed and timely contributions to the resolution of these issues.**

INTRODUCTION

In June 2016 CEC issued **WHAT FUTURE FOR EUROPE?** and invited Member Churches to react to the Open Letter and to be part of “a consultative and participatory process leading to the next CEC Assembly in 2018”. The Methodist Church in Ireland commends CEC for this initiative and is appreciative of the opportunity to contribute a Response. The future of Europe and of the European Union [EU] is even more clouded in 2017 than it was when the Open Letter was written.

For the island of Ireland great anxiety has been raised following the BREXIT Referendum. The damaging consequences that may flow for relationships between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and particularly, *within* Northern Ireland, in the wake of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

leaving the EU include economic and financial loss, with increased impediments to trade with a new customs land border across the island, but may well be a catalyst for a return to the strife on the island which dominated the period from 1969 to 1998. The so-called ‘Troubles’ inflicted death and injury to thousands of citizens and a fragile peace has been in place since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It is important to note that the Good Friday Agreement is predicated on both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK) being members of the EU; the EU has substantially funded the peace process through its unique peace and reconciliation funding programmes. The majority of the people in Northern Ireland voted to remain a member of the European Union in the Referendum in 2016.

As a Church which serves in the two jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland we are gravely concerned for the future both of the European Union and that of the people of the island of Ireland in consequence of Brexit. We are alarmed at the apparent inability of Member States and the European Union to address effectively the key and pressing issues facing the Union. We also share the deep and growing concern, given the uncertainty of prolonged and complex negotiations over coming years, for the future well-being and prosperity of Great Britain and Northern Ireland when it exits the EU in 2019.

This Response affirms our positive support for the approaches to advocacy by Churches and by CEC, based upon the ‘common values’ as outlined in the Open Letter. In particular, the emphasis on how the values which underpin the EU may be put into to practice is very welcome. We wish to make some comments on the general situation and set of crises in Europe. We conclude with recommendations in relation to the island of Ireland following BREXIT which we believe would be not only in the interests of peace and prosperity in Ireland but are essential for the EU’s future development as well. We make four general recommendations for Churches to consider.

Affirmation for Analysis in Open Letter and need to Churches to undertake an analysis and ‘speak truth to power’

The Methodist Church in Ireland affirms the analysis in the Open Letter that Europe faces “multiple and interrelated crises.” The major issues giving rise to the crises include:

- Brexit – the difficulties and timescale of any new arrangements are unprecedented for EU as the first Member State seeks to exit the EU
- Migration and refugees- the EU and Member States have largely failed refugees and the challenge remains massive and permanent in regard to migration
- European economy – while there has been some stability in recent times following the financial crash low growth, high unemployment and poverty combined with enormous risks to the Euro must be addressed
- Foreign and security policy – the EU has become marginalised and threatened with major shifts in outlook by former allies notably USA and Great Britain and a more revanchist Russia
- Political gridlock – the institutional architecture is failing to address key issues effectively and has lost citizen support with the rise of Euroscepticism and added to this are sporadic terrorist threats giving rise to fear and feeding reactionary politics.

These key issues have failed to be adequately addressed by an institutional architecture which is deficient and this has led EU to the crossroads where an EU collapse is possible. The response of the EU to the 2008 financial crisis demonstrated a lack of solidarity in resolving the problems leaving a range of countries, particularly Greece, in a now dire situation. The deficits in the EU architecture

include the fact that a currency Union of 19 of the 28 current Member States is not sustainable on its own without a banking, fiscal, and ultimately, a political Union. Hence the permissive consensus from the people of the Union, which just about made the Treaties viable before 2008, was eviscerated in the wake of the financial crash of 2008. At this stage Germany's surplus is 754 billion euros while Italy's deficit is 359 billion euros: not only is Greece's position unsustainable but the imbalance between Germany – the apparent 'winners' in the current defective arrangements – and Italy and other countries- the 'losers' -does not look sustainable for the future even as the ECB continues to buy Government and corporate bonds to the amount of 80 billion euros a month.

There is a dangerous and tragic element to the weakening of the EU in that it once offered a unique example of a totally new way for Member States to relate – States which had engaged in bloody warfare twice in the decades before the emergence of the European Economic Community- based upon clear and explicit values giving rise to a common European citizenship.

It is vital to stress that the EU was founded on the values of respect for human dignity, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights of persons belonging to minorities. It recognises that Member States should be characterised by pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity equality between men and women. These core values are supplemented by more detailed operational objectives:

- An area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers
- An internal market where competition is free and undistorted
- Sustainable development, based upon balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment
- The promotion of scientific and technological advance
- The combatting of social exclusion and discrimination, the promotion of social justice and protection, equality between men and women, solidarity between the generations and protection of the rights of the child
- The promotion of economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among Member States.

From the perspective of Christian social teaching the stated Core Values of the EU have a significant consonance and therefore they are deserving of the support of Churches and by CEC.

The Methodist Church in Ireland upholds these 'common values' and agrees that the Churches ought to recommit to them in the face of xenophobia, racism and inequalities of so many kinds. In 2001 the Churches in Europe in **CHARTA OECUMENICA** supported a process designed to bring Europe closer together stating that "*without common values, unity cannot endure.*" We agree that at this crossroads in Europe the Churches and other partners must urgently "outline a new vision for Europe" based upon seeking to fulfil the promise contained in the stated values and objectives of the EU. MCI recently, for example, had to highlight, alongside other concerned voluntary bodies, the failure of the EU and Member States in relation to the rights of the child in respect of unaccompanied children in the refugee crisis despite to explicit legal obligations of Member States and the EU.

The common challenges facing the peoples of Europe and the key political and economic issues cannot be addressed without a reformed international institutional architecture which is consensual and effective: climate change, international terrorism and crime, equitable trading arrangements and peace-making are examples of areas where separate and isolated national actions will surely fail at enormous cost to the welfare of the peoples of Europe.

Churches should be openly voicing their concern that the environment external to Europe as it is shaped by Russian attempts to change the borders of Europe and by the United States of America's recent turn against the EU, with a President openly seeking to make it more disunited, may well lead to new European wars. The security settlement that has prevailed since 1945 is being overturned. Member States, such as Poland and Hungary – maybe with others joining that list in forthcoming elections- are now governed by more authoritarian leaderships which are often contemptuous of the EU and the rule of law and some are openly admiring of authoritarian leadership in Russia and other countries.

We should not forget that the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, the European Social Charter, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights – all historic milestones for the peoples of Europe- will be meaningless if the collapse of the EU occurs or it partly survives as a carcass for external powers to abuse or even devour at their pleasure. Also threatened is the world's biggest emergency humanitarian aid budget run by the EU and this will have severe consequences for so many in the world. It is unlikely that Russia and the USA would be willing to make up for the loss of this support.

The Churches must assist civil society and our political systems to analyse *why* the EU is losing its appeal to the peoples of Europe and assist in developing proposals to address the problems and dismantle the ideologies which have led us astray. It is vital, also, that voices are constantly raised pointing to the core values and successes of the EU to combat the negativity of 'blaming' the EU which national politicians have often engaged in, thus, allowing the power of a populist press to denigrate the EU most inaccurately. Churches have a key role to 'speak truth to power' and to people in general.

We agree that the European cooperation project is at "a Kairos moment- a crucial moment of truth- for the future of Europe." A key part of the analysis Churches need to develop must surely relate to the defective economic ideology – often labelled 'neo-liberalism'- or 'market fundamentalism' which dominated the EU leadership's thought and national leaders as well from the 1990s onwards. The clearest example of the power of such an economic ideology is the narrow remit of the European Central Bank (ECB) which has a sole concern with price stability unlike the Federal Reserve Board in the USA which is required to take on account of economic and social goals. It is hard to envisage any popular revival of public support for the EU and, indeed, deeper integration until the concept of 'social Europe' is given the high priority it once had for the EU and its leaders. The ugly present situation in many EU countries of shattered lives of unemployed youth, bankrupt business owners, and declining standards of living and rising inequalities must be addressed through stronger redistribution of money and wealth throughout the Union. If this does not occur the future of the EU will be bleak and highly problematic. The fact is that since 2007 the German economy has grown by almost seven per cent, whereas the economies of Belgium, France and the Netherlands have remained stagnant, and those of Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Portugal have all contracted. This is the context for the rise of right-wing nationalists and Eurosceptics. The EU is in a trap of low growth, high inequality and political discontent with trust in the EU institutions at an all-time low. If the Euro system cannot be reformed – and with political leadership and will it ought to be- then it will either have to be scrapped or it may well collapse, given for example, the Italian situation of deficits. Muddling through, as seems to be the approach by the EU's leadership, with low growth and austerity, punctuated by intermittent economic and political crises is most likely to fail. Churches must share a deep and evidenced-based analytical assessment of the current economic and political contexts; otherwise we fail to contribute to solutions and end up speaking in irrelevant clichés about abstract concepts: if we do so, we fail in God's mission and we fail the peoples of Europe.

IRELAND, BRITAIN AND EUROPE

Ireland's future is highly contingent on what happens in Europe. Many Reports analysing the potential economic impact of Brexit suggest that it may represent for the Republic a permanent loss of GDP of up to 3%. More pessimistic analysts expect a reduction in trade between the UK and Ireland of twenty per cent. The UK is Ireland's largest trading partner.

The feared economic decline comes at a time when the Republic faces enormous social deficits in the areas of housing, healthcare, welfare, pensions and infrastructure as it seeks to recover from the trauma of the crash of 2008. There remains as a consequence of the 2008 crash high public and private debt. The international environment has brought into question the twin pillars of industrial policy – foreign direct investment and access to the UK market. The losses to Northern Ireland of exiting the EU will be very large indeed and are unlikely to be compensated for in the long term by increased transfers from the Treasury in London. Statistics for 2015 indicate that the Northern Irish economy is indeed dependent on trade with Britain (16.2 billion euros in sales) but is also critically in need of its trade with the Republic of Ireland (4 billion euros in sales) and with the EU (2.2 billion euros in sales) and the rest of the world (4.4 billion euros in sales). The 10.6 billion euros sales from Northern Ireland aside from sales with Britain indicate the high vulnerability of the Northern Irish economy to a 'hard Brexit'.

Ireland – both Northern Ireland and the Republic must now begin to engage with the European integration project in a wholly different way. The island of Ireland requires to be regarded as a Special Region in any new relationship with the EU because of political and economic imperatives.

We believe it is essential that we support urgent reform of the EU as it is currently a long way short of the kind of EU that its Core Values and Objectives indicate and of the kind of EU that Ireland, North and South, requires. Social justice requires a renewed commitment to a 'social Europe' based on the values enunciated by the Christian leaders who set the train of integration going after the disaster of the Second World War. It is in such a context agreeing a Special Region status for the island of Ireland within the EU and in relation with the UK should be practical and very possible.

The option of a 'hard Brexit' will impact greatly on Northern Ireland and the Republic. Even more importantly it may lead to a breakdown of the fragile peace arrangements in Northern Ireland with the imposition of a police or militarised land border as well as a customs border. The consequences of such is highly likely to include further decades of sectarian strife and violence.

A wiser option for the EU, Ireland and Britain would be a negotiated outcome maintaining a customs union for the UK and the EU (thus maintaining a common external tariff on goods and services). Even more favourable would be the UK remaining in a single market as Norway does as a non-member of the EU as this would allow for widespread freedom of movement for people, services, capital and goods.

Wise options require to be chosen by political leaders who see the 'big picture' and who are determined to make the forces bringing people together stronger than the forces separating them. Churches have an important, even vital role, in supporting such political leadership and creating in civil society sufficient political understanding and support so that they succeed. Popular sentiment over the coming years of trial for the EU and Ireland is crucial and must be informed, developed and sustained based on the Christian principles and values outlined in the Open Letter from CEC.

Our Churches we recommend should commit to the following*:

- A renewal of prayer for Europe and all its peoples and countries and for the European Union's twenty-seven countries in public worship

- A planned, systematic and organised programme of hospitality to welcome, house, support, train and integrate refugees and migrants
- Ongoing dialogue with other Christian churches and with other civil society partners at national and European levels to raise awareness of the many economic, social, political and environmental issues impacting on all Europeans
- Undertake, together, to research, analyse and study the key issues facing Europe so that Churches might make informed and timely contributions to the resolution of these issues.

“On the basis of our Christian faith, we work towards a humane, socially conscious Europe, in which human rights and the basic values of peace, justice, freedom, tolerance, participation and solidarity prevail.” **Charta Oecumenica.**

We conclude this Response with these words which introduced the Open Letter by CEC and, in endorsing them, look forward to working together in CEC and with all Christian Churches and other partners in making the sentiments a reality for the peoples of Europe in the future.

March, 2016.

* As suggested by Dr. Tom Healy, Director of the Nevin Economic Research Institute, Dublin, in a talk given to the Church of Ireland European Affairs Working Group.