

Summary Report of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Working Group

on

Together: Building a United Community (2013)

and its comparison with

Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation in 2010

The Church of Ireland Response to the Programme for *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* (CSI) highlighted a range of issues and concerns. These were as follows:

1. Tone & Relation to other reports / past policies

- There was no reflection on how CSI relates to, builds upon or potentially supersedes other publications and reports that address the future of Northern Ireland.
- The title, *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, is unlikely to find its way into the public consciousness. A *Shared Future* was something the entire community could grasp.
- The use of language in relation to such matters as equality, rights, tolerance, and prejudice is at times incoherent and inconsistent.

2. Divided Community:

- CSI seeks to promote and maintain a position of equality between two historically divided communities at the expense of community relations and reconciliation.
- The absence of the language of reconciliation is deeply regrettable.
- CSI reflects the party political interests of OFMDFM in securing electoral mandates from existing divisions, perpetuating the failings of the past at the expense of the future.

The Church of Ireland proposed:

- A vision of the future must be predicated on more than accepting historic divisions as unalterable, then allowing for equal but separate communities in the future.
- The aspiration for reconciliation, mutual respect, and peaceful relationships should undergird the concepts of equality and rights and how these concepts are articulated and pursued.
- The need for peace and reconciliation must always take precedence over the interests of party politics.

3. Practical Issues: integration Housing, Education

- In particular key areas, such as housing and education, CSI is inadequate in its lack of vision and direction.

4. Role of Victims

- There is no reference to the role of victims and survivors.

The Church of Ireland proposed:

Seeking forgiveness for the past is vital for the healing of relationships and to enable the community to secure a peaceful future.

5. Funding and Implementation

- The options presented for implementation and funding are, unsurprisingly, lacking in clarity and detail.
- There is a lack of a clear timeframe for the implementation of goals.
- There is a lack of clarity as to whether some of the aspirations alluded to are actually goals of OFMDFM.
- The Community Relations Council is barely mentioned.
- There is a strong assumption that Community Relations is a subset of equality provisions.
- There is little analysis as to if, why or how previous provisions have failed. A 'new day' is merely assumed.

The Church of Ireland proposed:

- An independent body, representative of the whole community, is vital in holding those in political office to account and to take a lead in promoting, training and equipping communities and individuals for the work of reconciliation.

6. Role of the Church/es

- The role of the Church and other faith based communities is largely absent. This is not only to the detriment of the publication but it fails to reflect the reality of how much the Churches are involved in community life.

The Church of Ireland proposed:

- The language of reconciliation, forgiveness, truth, and grace articulated by, and personified in, Christ becomes the voice of our future.
- There is much collaborative work that must be done, and can be done, across political and religious divides and as a Church we commit ourselves anew and afresh to this challenge.

In short, the Church of Ireland indicated considerable concern with the approach taken in CSI, and the overall response from a wide range of groups and organisations was highly critical.

Together: Building a United Community

An initial reading of this Proposal indicates the following:

1. No previous reports are directly referred to, with the fact that 'previous consultations' occurred alluded to. It seems fair to conclude that *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* as a title is gone.
2. There is the establishment of an *Equality and Good Relations Commission*. This is to be independent and statutorily based.
3. The overall tone and direction is, in comparison to CSI, more strategic, with more proposals, clearer priorities and high level goals. The headline actions are:
 - Establishing 10 shared education campuses
 - 10,000 NEET placements on a united Youth Volunteering Programme
 - 10 new shared housing schemes
 - Four Urban Village schemes
 - Cross Community Sporting events
 - Removal of interface barriers by 2023
 - Pilot 100 shared summer schools
4. The language of Reconciliation and Good Relations is now much stronger. In contrast with CSI para 1.9 states 'This strategy is not about managing division or allowing our history of segregation to continue'. This is welcome. It also appears to be the case, however, that the underlying presumption is that of dealing with two communities who largely live apart. Two examples:

- 'Equality of Opportunity' is a clear aim. However, if this never moves beyond a 'one for you, one for me' approach, it will most likely perpetuate and deepen division and a sense of injustice.
- The underpinning principles either presume two sides that can live at a safe distance, or two sides that can work together. The principles never presume the end of 'two sides'.

- Diversity, Fairness, Respect, Rights, Tolerance – all presume and are predicated upon distinction, difference, opposites, the other. Presumes two sides learning to respect from a safe distance
 - Cohesion, Inclusion, Integration, Responsibilities, Sharing, Interdependence – presume two sides learning to work together

5. Victims and survivors are mentioned in 1.22 although there is nothing new other than referring to what has recently been established.
6. There is a consistent awareness of the reality of people living under a sense of 'threat'. The antidote to this is presented as 'safety' and this is covered in Section 4.
7. The role of many other agencies, organisations that have been working on the ground for decades, is also largely absent.
8. The role of the Church/es is almost completely absent.

Reflections

1. Obviously the TBUC proposals are offered as an outline or a 'beginning' for the work of social integration. It is important that the 'beginning' is not delayed and that steps are taken to bring to fruition the projects and targets outlined.

2. It is regrettable that the Churches appear to have been largely absent from the minds of those who wrote the policy. However, it also serves as something of a 'wake-up call' to the Church/es. We cannot abandon our responsibility for helping to shape our society for the future.

3. The proposals contained in *Together: Building a United Community* involve:

- Shared education spaces
- Housing schemes and urban villages
- Youth placements
- Arts strategies & Community Festivals
- Sport as a vehicle
- Tearing down walls and interface areas
- An independent statutory body on equality and good relations

4. The implications for the Church/es are challenging, but we are prepared to embrace wholeheartedly the aim of a fully integrated Northern Ireland and to commit ourselves to achieving that end.

Therefore we would ask, is there merit in the Churches being represented on any new Equality and Good Relations Commission when it is established?

This presents a challenge to the Churches to show imagination and a willingness to work together. The proposals are filled with opportunities that either are, or should be, the natural habitat of the work of the Church. Education, housing schemes, youth placements, tearing down walls, community festivals, informing culture and identity.

The Churches may also help facilitate and resource a dialogue on ethical issues such as forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, threat, safety and fear.

If TBUC is to succeed and to provide a practical 'beginning' it is vital that its objectives and outworking are clearly publicised and coordinated to allow people to see that the commitment to a shared future has not been shelved simply because political agreement on other associated matters has not been fully reached.

We should be doing what we can, when we can with what we have.