

Good morning all,

Please see press release below, issued on behalf of the Irish Council of Churches – and **under embargo until 5.00pm today** – on its centenary service which is taking this afternoon in Belfast Cathedral. A selection of photos from the service will follow afterwards.

Thanks for your time.

Yours,

Peter Cheney

Church of Ireland Press Officer

PRESS RELEASE

Embargoed: 17:00 22 January 2023

For the attention of newsdesks, photodesks and religious affairs correspondents

Celebrating our Reconciling Vision of Hope

Special service celebrates centenary of Churches working together

The Irish Council of Churches – one of the world’s oldest national representative church bodies – has celebrated its centenary with a special service of worship at Belfast Cathedral this afternoon (22 January). The service, with the theme ‘Celebrating our Reconciling Vision of Hope’ took place on the eve of the Council’s first meeting 100 years tomorrow (23 January 1923) at the height of the Civil War in Ireland.

Present were representatives from 16 all-Ireland member denominations, with including the Most Rev Eamon Martin, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, and the Rev Dr Harold Good, former President of the Methodist Church, who both delivered an address. The service was led by the Dean of Belfast, the Very Rev Stephen Forde.

The service also celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Ballymascanlon Talks, which led to the establishment of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. In 1973, in the midst of The Troubles, the Council began ground-breaking historic talks in Ballymascanlon Hotel in County Louth with senior members of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. Over the course of time, these became formalised as the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (IICM), the means by which the ICC continues to engage and collaborate with the Catholic Church. The IICM is co-chaired by the President of the ICC, currently the Rt Rev Andrew Forster, Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, and a representative of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, currently the Most Rev Brendan Leahy, Bishop of Limerick, who also took part in the service.

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Irish Inter-Church Meeting**

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Reflecting on this point in history, Archbishop Martin said, “Peace, reconciliation and forgiveness on this island will only be progressed by bringing to light the truths that remain hidden and festering about our troubled past, and by engaging in respectful conversations across our communities about what we mean by a shared future.

“It may seem ambitious, but might we in the Churches offer to help develop an agreed truth recovery process to address the legacy of pain and mistrust that continues to hang over us? And might our Churches also work together to create spaces for dialogue at parish, congregation and community level so that all voices can be fully heard about the kind of society and values we want for our children and grandchildren?”

The archbishop continued that it was a credit to the pioneers of Ballymascanlon that the congregation in the Cathedral “could gather today as true friends in Christ, and much closer companions on the Way, as brothers and sisters who can share each other’s joys and burdens and be open and honest about our successes and our vulnerabilities.”

Dr Good spoke of the Christian Churches bringing humility and hope to realising a vision of reconciliation. He said, “Let us not under-estimate the impact of the words of the late Queen Elizabeth during her historic visit to Dublin, when in humility she spoke of things which could have been done differently, or not at all. Just imagine if following this service, each of us was resolved to acknowledge the hurt which collectively – if not individually – we have inflicted upon each other and for which we now seek to be reconciled.”

Dr Good added, “Hope looks at the world as it is and responds with a determination to change it. The shared hope of which we speak is rooted in the unshakeable conviction that if we say and do and be the people that we are called to be, God will not be found wanting.” During his address he also referred to the forthcoming 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and 60th anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech and noted that “at the centre of our shared faith is the unshakable belief in Resurrection. And, as the Easter people, it is to us that God has entrusted this Gospel of Hope.”

Members of the public joined representatives from the Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter-Church Meeting at the service.

Speaking after the service Bishop Andrew Forster, as President of the ICC, said, “I would like to thank everyone who took the time to come to St Anne’s today to worship God together and share with us this significant milestone in inter-church relations on this island, especially Archbishop Eamon and Dr Good for their addresses. In eternity, 100 years is but a blink of an eye, not even that, but in the context of our human story a century is a significant moment.”

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Bishop Leahy, the IICM's Co-Chair, added, "I think those who attended each of these historic events 50 and 100 years ago would want us today to be grateful that after all that has happened on this Ireland over the past century we were able to join together to worship God, thanking Him as we continue to pray for the unity that is Christ's gift to the Church, and for a servant heart. In humility, may we serve and love one another in and across communities and in doing so work for the common good."

Ends

A press pack will be available from 3.30pm at www.irishchurches.org and the service will be livestreamed at www.facebook.com/belfastcathedral

A selection of photos will be shared with news desks after the service. For more information about today's service, please contact Peter Cheney, the Church of Ireland's Press Officer, on +44 (0) 7774 295 369.

Notes to Editors Irish Council of Churches

The Irish Council of Churches was founded in 1923 at the height of the Irish Civil War and is the formal national body through which our member churches formally engage, dialogue and act on a wide variety of issues. We are established by our member churches and funded by them.

The ICC Executive meets four times a year and is made up of church general secretaries and other nominated representatives from across the range of Protestant, Orthodox, Reformed and Independent church traditions. The President is the public representative of the Council and serves for two years.

Irish Inter Church Meeting

In 1973 in the midst of the Troubles the Council began historic talks in Ballymascanlon with the Catholic Church which over the course of time became formalised as the Irish Inter Church Meeting. The meeting is coordinated by a committee which also meets four times a year. This Inter Church Committee is formed from the leadership of the churches made up of 50/50 representation from the Irish Bishops Conference and the Council.

ICC Membership

The ICC's constitution describes the organisation as "Christian Communion in Ireland willing to join in united efforts to promote the spiritual, physical, moral and social welfare of the people and the extension of the rule of Christ among all nations and over every region of human life."

This mandate stems from the original constitution that established the United Council of Christian Churches and Religious Communities in Ireland in 1922. There were seven founding member churches at the Council's first meeting in January 1923 (Church of Ireland,

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Presbyterian Church, Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, Moravian Church, Congregational Union, and the Religious Society of Friends/Quakers).

This historical background is significant as it indicates that the Council's ecumenical beginnings were shaped by the aftermath of World War One and the period when partition and the border had just been created on the island of Ireland.

This Council was one of the earliest pioneers of National Councils of Churches throughout the world and six of its seven founding churches continue in its membership today. The original Council started in the context of momentous changes in Ireland. It served at the cutting edge for those churches wanting to express their Christian witness in working together for the benefit of all peoples, both locally and overseas. Its mandate covered the whole island and continues to reflect the all-Ireland focus of the majority of its member churches.

Participants in the centenary service

The main addresses were given by Most Rev Eamon Martin, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland and the Rev Dr Harold Good, former President of the Methodist Church, the following will also take part in the service:

At different parts of the service prayers were led by:

- Rt Rev Andrew Forster, ICC President and Church of Ireland Bishop of Derry and Raphoe
- Most Rev Brendan Leahy, IICM Co-Chair and Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick
- Most Rev John McDowell, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland
- Very Rev Kieran McDermott, IICM Co-Secretary and Administrator of St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Dublin
- Bishop Mike Royal, General Secretary, Churches Together in England
- Rev Fr Anish John, Indian Orthodox Church
- Rev David Nixon, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland
- Pleasaunce Perry, representing the Clerk of Ireland Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends
- Rt Rev Lena Cockroft, Moderator of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church
- Very Rev Fr Ioannis Pantelidis, Greek Orthodox Church in Ireland
- Col. Neil Webb, Divisional Commander of the Salvation Army Ireland Division

Scripture readings were read by:

- Pastor Anja von Issendorff, Lutheran Church in Ireland
- Rt Rev Dr John Kirkpatrick, Moderator, Presbyterian Church in Ireland

The Benediction was given by:

- Rt Rev Andrew Forster

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- Most Rev Brendan Leahy
 - Rt Rev Sarah Groves, Moravian Church and ICC Vice-President
 - Rt Rev George Davison, Church of Ireland Bishop of Connor.
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