

## IRISH CHURCHES' AFFIRMATIONS ON MIGRATION, DIVERSITY AND INTERCULTURALISM

The Irish Inter-Church Committee and its constituent churches, in issuing these *Affirmations*, recognise the significant changes over the past decade in the fabric of our Church communities and of society as a whole. We are seeking to ensure that the following *Affirmations*, founded on Gospel values, will inform and drive the plans, processes and programmes of our Churches as, individually and together, strive to live out the mission of Christ in an increasingly diverse and intercultural society.

We affirm our commitment as Christian Churches:

- 1. To recognise and appreciate cultural and ethnic diversity as gifts of God, and to ensure that these gifts are reflected in the life of the Church.*
- 2. To foster faith communities where the rights of each person are respected and where scope is provided for each person's potential to be realised.*
- 3. To work towards inclusive communities, paying particular attention to addressing racism and xenophobia in attitudes, actions, practices and policies.*
- 4. To explore and adopt ways of worship, systems of administration and other structures so that they fully respond to and reflect the Church membership.*
- 5. To defend the rights of migrants in accordance with international and national laws and standards on migration.*
- 6. To advocate for the rights of all migrants, and in particular their right to family life.*
- 7. To support and assist migrants in appropriate, practical ways in their efforts to integrate in Church and society.*
- 8. To establish networks with migrant-led Churches and chaplaincies by fostering co-operation and collaboration with them in providing pastoral care and support to migrants.*
- 9. To seek the development of appropriate services for migrants and to draw attention to the need for public services generally to be responsive to the circumstances of migrants.*
- 10. To work together as Churches and to network with people of other faiths and none to promote a greater understanding between denominations and other faiths and none, ensuring the growth of a society based on respect, dignity and equal rights for all its members.*

We offer these Affirmations in the hope that they will guide our Churches and communities towards achieving a just, fair, equitable and harmonious society. In order to ensure the practical application of this document, we invite the appropriate Commissions/policy bodies of our member Churches to report in 12 months time on the progress made in implementing measures to give effect to the ten commitments outlined above.

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## Introduction

***Do not ill-treat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would a fellow-Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. (Lev 19.33, 34)***

Migration stories have a central place in the Hebrew Scriptures. At the heart of these stories of the movement of individuals and groups is the message that the stranger is to be cared for as a brother or sister.

In the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ shows by word and action how all people, without exception, belong to the Family of God. He makes clear that God does not make distinctions on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, gender, language, religion or culture. In the story of the final judgment, Jesus highlights what is essential in the life of the Christian: followers of Jesus will be judged by the response they give to the person who is hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned or a stranger. Identifying himself with the person who is a stranger, Jesus shows us what is expected of us in our response to 'the stranger' today:

*I was a stranger and you received me in your homes ... whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me. (Mt.25.35, 40)*

The response of the Christian Churches to migration and to migrants in all their diversity draws its inspiration and its impetus from the life and teachings of Jesus. Through Jesus we learn of God's plan for the world and all its peoples. In word and action, Jesus is the model for the Churches of how they are to co-operate in realising the vision of God for the universe and for all of humankind.

## Migration Globally

Migration today, involving some two hundred million people worldwide, constitutes probably the greatest-ever population movement in human history. Making up a significant part of this population are those fleeing persecution in search of a place of safety, as well as those searching for work to support themselves and their families. Encompassing as it does millions of people from diverse backgrounds with a wide spectrum of hopes and aspirations, migration today presents new challenges at many levels. Now part of the reality of contemporary society, migration flows have an influence on all aspects of life – economic, social, political, cultural and religious.

## Ireland's Experience

While the particular experiences have been different in many ways, Ireland, North and South, has had significant inflows of migrants, especially in the past decade. Initially, the main inflows to the Republic were of people seeking asylum. Quite quickly, however, their number was far exceeded by new arrivals from both within and without the EU who came in response to growing employment opportunities. In Northern Ireland, on the contrary, the majority came for work purposes with very small numbers seeking asylum. At official level in both jurisdictions, a variety of political, economic and social measures have been put in

place in response to the new demographic situation. As well as acknowledging their own areas of responsibility for the integration of newcomers, relevant government bodies, North and South, recognise and affirm the role of the Churches in this process.<sup>1</sup>

### **Churches' Tradition of Welcome**

At the heart of the Bible is the welcome of God for all of humankind. God created humankind in God's image and likeness (Gen 1.27) and invited all men and women to be part of God's people.

This desire of God received a new expression in the coming on earth of Jesus as a human being: 'God loved the world so much that God sent God's only Son'. Coming among us as one like us, Jesus, *the eldest of many brothers*, shows His followers how they are to be sisters and brothers to one another.

The welcome which Churches are called to extend is inspired by and has to be modelled on that which Jesus lived. Jesus welcomed those who because of their gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, were regarded as outsiders in the society of his time. Even though it was not considered acceptable for Jews to speak with Samaritans, Jesus had a long conversation by a well with a Samaritan woman. He received Mary Magdala at his table and went for a meal to the home of a tax-collector, somebody who because of his job was classed with outcasts. Jesus cured the daughter of the Gentile woman from Syria, after her argument persuaded him that he had to reach out to people beyond the confines of the Jewish community.

Today, given the unprecedented movements of people, the challenge to the Churches is to welcome wholeheartedly, with openness and genuine hospitality and without distinction, those women, men and children from a wide variety of backgrounds who come to live among us.

*Christians must become promoters of an authentic 'culture of welcome' ... which knows how to appreciate the authentic human values of the other, going beyond the numerous difficulties which accompany living together with persons different from ourselves.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> At the launch of the 2007 official document on integration, *Statement of Integration and Diversity Management*, the then Minister, Conor Lenihan TD, said: 'The remarkable immigration that we have experienced in this country over the past decade and the challenge of integration that it brings is one of the biggest challenges that we face as a country.' The Minister continued: 'The new integration policy focuses on the role of local communities, authorities, sporting bodies, faith based groups and political parties in building integrated communities.'

Speaking at the Church of Ireland Pilgrim People Conference on immigration and integration in January 2008, Gerry Kelly MLA, Junior Minister in the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, said that the Church had a key role in being able to deliver in areas where Government may fail: 'Diversity involves new people, living down the street, shopping at local shops, attending local schools and working alongside us and sharing our places of worship. It is at this level that the real level of integration must happen. ... It is important for us all to work together to promote good relations but Church and Government, in partnership, could provide the focused leadership.'

<sup>2</sup> Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (2004) *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi –The Love of Christ Towards Migrants*, 3 May 2004, n. 39.

Fostering this culture of welcome, so that it becomes an integral part of the life of individuals, families and communities, is a responsibility not only of the leaders of the Christian community but of each and every member.

Hebrews 13 tells us to: *Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

## **Hospitality and Inclusiveness**

To welcome newcomers is an essential dimension of the mission of the Christian community. Important as it is, welcoming others is, however, only a first step. Implied in the initial welcome is a series of practical ongoing consequences if hospitality is to be genuine.

In Jesus we see one who chose images, signs and symbols through which those with whom he was speaking could understand his message – he spoke of planting, fishing, shepherds and sheep, fig trees, vines and vinedressers, yeast, mustard seeds, birds of the air...

And so Christian Churches in Ireland today must seek ways of communicating and relating that recognise and respond to the presence of migrants. The issues which Churches need to consider include: How are newcomers and the established community given an opportunity to introduce themselves to one another? How are liturgies reflective of the languages, cultures and religious sensitivities of the entire community? Do the symbols used in the liturgy speak to the whole of the worshipping community? What is the readiness to change the times, tempo and content of liturgy in order to include all those present? Are notices and announcements, oral and written, communicated in ways that are comprehensible to all?

## **Enabling Participation**

Jesus shared his mission with his followers. It was to them he committed the responsibility of bringing to completion the task which had been entrusted to him by God. The Gospels spell out the variety of roles and the importance of the involvement of all in bringing about the reign of God. Translated into today's terms, *all* the baptised – not just ordained ministers or those officially appointed to leadership roles – are called to be co-creators, collaborators in the work of building God's kingdom. It is essential, then, that all members are invited and given the space to participate in the life of the Church, whether at national, diocesan, regional or local level. Recognising the variety of gifts present, not least those brought by newcomers in the Churches, there must be scope for participation in decision-making and planning as well as in the provision of the myriad services which ensure a lively and life-giving community.

## **The Principle of the Common Good**

*The principle of the common good ... stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates 'the sum total of*

*social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily’.*<sup>3</sup>

Churches are required to witness in and among themselves to that commitment to the common good to which the whole of society is called. Working for the common good means Churches striving to obtain for every person and for all peoples the conditions necessary for integral human development so that everyone can contribute to the creation of a more humane world – a world in which each can give and receive, and in which the progress of some will not be a stumbling block to the development of others.

The common good includes recognition and respect for the rights of all persons regardless of colour, ethnic origin or religion. The promotion of the common good requires, therefore, effective action to address racial prejudice, intolerance, and discrimination. Legal instruments, while vital, are only part of the answer. The fostering of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect is essential and needs to occur at every level and in many different ways within society. It is a task for a wide range of State and non-state institutions, agencies and organisations. Within the Churches, it is a task for individuals and communities as well as for those in positions of leadership.

### **Churches’ Role in Advocacy**

The Churches’ role in relation to migrants cannot be considered in isolation from Ireland’s obligations arising from international human rights instruments. It is these obligations which must find authentic expression in national legislation, policies, procedures and practice. Wherever and whenever these fall short, the voice of the Churches needs to make itself heard.

Advocacy may involve intervention on behalf of individuals in their efforts to secure their rights and/or action to ensure that legislation and policies are adequate and appropriate, and that they operate in a just, transparent, and humane manner. In the area of migration, advocacy needs to recognise and take account of the specific rights that apply to different categories of migrant – for example, the rights of people seeking asylum as compared with those who migrate for other reasons. For Churches, an important issue is that their parishes and congregations may include in their membership people who are undocumented migrants. This is a reality that cannot be ignored; instead, it requires action and policies to ensure access for all, irrespective of legal status, to services and other fundamental rights.

In the current economic crisis, high levels of unemployment, severe competition for scarce jobs, reductions in incomes, and cutbacks in public services, are all leading to deep public unease. In such circumstances, newcomers to the country can easily be looked on not as people with rights, but as a drain on resources such as housing, education, health services and welfare payments. The Churches have an important role in guarding against and publicly countering the development of a ‘culture of suspicion’ in respect of economic migrants and refugees; allowing this culture to go unchallenged means that racism, xenophobia and other forms of discrimination can take root and gain acceptance and support.

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<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, Dublin: Veritas, 2005, n. 164.

## **Churches Working Together**

The guiding principle of ecumenical relations – that Christian Churches should not do alone what they can do together<sup>4</sup> – is of particular relevance and value in all that concerns the Churches' involvement with migrants and refugees.

The cooperation of Churches with one another in this endeavour both enhances the response which any one Church might make on its own and contributes significantly to building up relations of understanding, trust, friendship and sharing between the Churches.

While many of the longer-established Churches already have some experience of collaboration in joint projects, the inclusion of those Churches which are new to this island presents both an opportunity and a challenge. It is within these Churches – which often differ in theology and in structures from the 'older' Churches – that a large number of migrants find a spiritual home and a wide-ranging support network.

## **Promoting Intercultural Dialogue**

Cultural diversity is one of the most visible changes migration has brought to Irish Churches and society. This reality calls for a response by the Churches based on an appreciation of richness and vibrancy inherent in such diversity.

Parishes and congregations can provide forums for intercultural dialogue, as well as mediation instruments where the need arises. Public celebration is an important element in recognising and valuing cultural diversity: cultural events and initiatives can serve to enhance the visibility of local new communities, as well as foster better understanding between different communities. The Churches have an important role also in promoting inclusive concepts of culture, and facilitating the participation of people with a migrant background in cultural events and activities.

## **Monitoring Progress**

The efforts of the Churches and of individual parishes and congregations, to promote integration and respect diversity are enhanced where progress in these areas is monitored on a regular basis. An important element of the work of the Churches at both national and local level, therefore, is to consider ways in which they can review initiatives being undertaken in response to migration and critically examine how well these are meeting needs. In this, a key requirement is to find effective ways of hearing the views and experiences of migrants themselves and of responding appropriately.

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<sup>4</sup> Expressed in the Lund Principle, which was agreed by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference of the World Council of Churches held at Lund, Sweden. The principle affirms that Churches should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.

## **IICM November 2009**

This Declaration has been formally endorsed and accepted by:

The Irish Inter-Church Meeting

The Irish Council of Churches

The following individual churches who commit themselves to its implementation:

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