



## Response of the Armagh Church Forum to the Shared Future consultation Paper

The Armagh Church Forum is a group of people from Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and Church of Ireland traditions, both lay and clergy. This response was agreed after a series of meetings.

### response to Q1 p7

Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be for a more shared but pluralistic society?

As a Church Forum we are very aware that we share this geographical space we call Armagh. We are convinced that neither side is going to go away. We can learn to live and prosper together or die and deteriorate together. Segregation became worse in Armagh over 30 years of trouble as many people felt safer living and working in their own communities. This segregation has included all in our society including the churches sector.

Our hope is that as the security situation improves people will live together and share together. Armagh has had a history of neighbourly working relationships between people such as farmers and business people. However we do feel it is necessary to create emotional safe places where difficult issues can be addressed so that we move from merely stabilising conflict to enjoying each others company and learning from each other. A shared but pluralist society should give space for disagreement on theological issues without recourse to bitterness or hatred. It is not necessary for the future together to be bland and uniform.

### Q2 p8

What should be main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in Society?

While the word "outcomes" appears to suggest results or consequences so it seems to us to be a product of policy rather than a part of the policy.

For the sake of clarity when referring to the suggestions on p8 we number them 1-6 following the order in which they are listed.

We understood this question as asking us to prioritise the aims as listed on p8. However a difficulty arose from the fact that the suggestions made there often overlap or blend into each other. In 2 of them there seems to be a negative aspect, ie no 4. "to eliminate sectarianism and racism" although this leads on to a more positive objective "to enable individuals to live and work without fear or intimidation" but even that does not conjure up any great hope of promoting really good relations.

No 5. "to reduce tension and conflict etc" reflects a low expectation of promoting really positive results.

The other proposals are more positive or forward looking and integrate with each other. For example, while No 4 is being implemented steps should be taken to move further in No 2 and 1 although we realise that the question of integrated education might be problematic for some.

While we agree with no 3 regarding respect and encouragement the element of celebration should be looked at with circumspection as celebrations sometimes take place without due regard for the rights of those not involved and can be a cause of conflict rather than togetherness.

No 6 seems to be a summing up of the other suggestions. Admitting that the positive suggestions do depend to some extent on the implementation of the negative ones we would prioritise them as 6, 2, 1, 3, 4, 5.

### Q3 p10

What do you think are the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in N Ireland should be based?



3.1 The action to create a shared society in which people are encouraged to make choices in their lives that are not bound by historical divisions and are free to do so; and a pluralist society, with respect and tolerance for cultural diversity, where people are free to assert their identity.

We feel this will be a long term action.

### 3.2 Acknowledgement of the Problem.

Churches and other faith-based organisations will have a particularly important role to play. But Clergy need to become more aware that: separation leads to purity but also to mistrust, isolation and hatred. Surely it is possible to improve community relations without diminishing theological perspectives or respect for the presence of God?

While churches acknowledge their role they are not solely responsible for the Troubles. neither can the Churches be asked to improve community relations without financial resources. Money must be made available not only for training but also for running groups.

3.3

Leadership is fundamental to change but also there is a need for facilitation of potential leaders. Work should be done with clergy who do not understand or own the vision and who are only interested in their own faith ^ identity group. This leadership needs to be coordinated by cross-Government and coordinated action.

### Widespread ownership and engagement.

A new strategy must engage and be owned by all sectors of Northern Ireland society, as all will have an important role to play. How aware are all in our society of this document?

### 3.6 and 7 The importance of local action and targeting.

It is very important to identify and help heal the following if healing is desired:

Those who are hurt emotionally; Those who are injured;

Those who are hating; Those who need assistance to cope with their problems. Otherwise these sores will fester and will be passed on into the unhealed, folklore which encourages violent responses.

### Language and Generalisation

Particular attention needs to be given to language and how we use it to describe people from the other part of the community e.g. "All them Protestants" etc. Sectarianism and hatred can be disabled if language is more precise.

## Section 4 : Implications for Action

4.1 critical here are the opening words "If we accept the aims and principles"

*This is the challenge for many who have not yet reached such acceptance in their thinking.*

4.5 and 4.4 are factual on the work of the Equality commission.



4.7 says that local government should play a central role.

*In some areas this is fine but in others local government is part of the problem ^ this in itself needs to be addressed.*

4.8 envisages a rolling and permanent programme for community relations.

*This is good - the present three year appointment norm allows LAs to pay lip service to the work. Community relations officers do not always have much clout, in local council hierarchy.*

4.9 refers to funding according to need,

*This is probably reasonable but sometimes communities with good relations on the surface can have deeper underlying tensions.*

4.10 states the obvious ^ *it is meet and right so to do!*

**Response to the question:** What action needs to be taken at local government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between government and within communities?

Local government needs to set a good example in its own behaviour. It needs to be seen as a fit place for responsible men and women to be.

Community Relations Officers need both wisdom and clout within and without the councils. They need funding to allow them to be imaginative.

A priority should be education of local communities to let them realise the benefits of a new and stable society at peace with itself.

The creation of common neutral geographical places. The Trian, Palace Stables and Market Place Theatre in Armagh are good examples of this.

The Promotion of "feel good events" such as the special Olympics.

#### Q5 p14

#### Regional Level Body

Of the two options suggested for implementing community relations at a regional level it would seem that a body with considerable independence from government would be the best way to proceed. The body would need to reflect as wide a representation of the community as possible. This would include political representation as well as representatives from other institutions such as Education, Police, Health, Church, and other community organisations where advice and expertise could be acquired to assist the regional body in planning a future strategy, and fulfilling the key functions of oversight, challenge to Government and monitoring.



### Q6 p17

What action do you think central government should take to improve relations?

4.18-4.25 We wholeheartedly agree with these proposals

4.26 Education

1. Placing the good relations dimension of citizenship at the core of the new school curriculum  
*We feel this will be recognised by teachers as a pious platitude and will not work in practice. It cannot be defined or assessed.*

2. encouraging and facilitating integrated education ...

*It is not the function of government to promote one particular system for education. There are 3 main systems, controlled, maintained and integrated. Each is entitled to equal treatment under the law and the Department's role is to facilitate according to the wishes of the parents. Nevertheless there is an onus on all schools to think more creatively about how they can cooperate together and contribute more fully to better community relations.*

3. enhancing the contribution of teacher education to the promotion of tolerance and reconciliation

*This is an area in which the Department could be most effective. A teacher consciously or otherwise projects an attitude which is absorbed by pupils. Children respond to teacher attitude, especially young children so the concentration should be on the teacher.*

4. Strategy in response to civil unrest

*In many areas the school has proved to be an oasis so government should be very careful about interrupting the on going work of schools.*

4.27 Housing

*While encouraging an integrated policy is laudable it is difficult to see how this can be done in practice. However the development of shared space in town centres could be a priority through offering incentives.*

4.28-33 agreed.

*It is self evident that any change in attitudes between communities in Northern Ireland will only come through responsible leadership. Local leadership is relatively ineffective as long as political leaders fail to set an example. A shared future requires a shared government and until this comes about and the language of politicians moderated to show respect and tolerance for those of opposing views we shall continue to be a divided community.*

### Q7 p18

How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored.

We agree with 5.2. Close monitoring can inhibit the work of voluntary cross community groups. Where grants are involved however it is important that all accounts should be carefully audited.

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