



10<sup>th</sup> September 1998

Rt Hon David Trimble MP  
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Dear Mr Trimble

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**Civic Forum**

For several months ECONI have been facilitating an ad hoc group drawn from those in church structures who have been responsible for engaging with the ongoing political process. Recently our discussions have touched on the proposed Civic Forum arising from the Agreement. We have had a fairly robust debate on both the value and disadvantages of participation in the Forum by the churches and the enclosed paper has been produced reflecting the balance of opinion in the group.

It was agreed that on behalf of the group I would write to you to let you know that the Civic Forum is being given serious reflection in various church structures and communities. Our concern is two fold. First, to ensure that faith communities are given due recognition as part of civil society, particularly as it becomes formalised in the Forum. Second, to ensure an informed process is in place to provide for an effective and balanced participation from faith communities.

While our group has shared its reflections with the four church leaders we do not in any way formally represent the churches but are a simple contact point for individuals who are concerned with these matters. Indeed it is expected that ECONI along with other church bodies will continue to make individual representation on the issue of the Civic Forum as details emerge in the coming weeks.

May I take this opportunity of personally expressing how much your leadership has been appreciated in recent months and the real symbol of hope that you and the Deputy First Minister Seamus Mallon MP, have provided for us all at this difficult and crucial time. Please be assured of our ongoing prayers as you continue to fulfil your heavy responsibilities for our community in the months ahead.

Yours sincerely

**David W Porter**

Director

Enc

Director David W Porter



# The Civic Forum: Involving the Churches

## *A paper from the Church Initiative Group*

### Who are the Church Initiative Group?

It is an ad hoc group of individuals in the main church and parachurch structures with responsibility for comment on social and political affairs. It seeks to reflect perspectives from both Protestant and Catholic traditions and Ecumenical and Evangelical streams.

### What is the Civic Forum?

The Good Friday Agreement provides for the establishment of a consultative civic forum (paragraph 34, page 9). It provides that the Forum will comprise representatives of the business, trade union and voluntary sectors, and other such sectors as agreed by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister; that the body will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues; and that the First Minister and Deputy First Minister will, by agreement, provide administrative support and establish guidelines for the selection of representatives.

### How will the Forum be constituted?

It is envisaged that the legislation currently being prepared to give effect to the Agreement will contain an outline clause placing an obligation on the First and Deputy First Ministers to establish the Forum and to draw up guidelines for the selection of members. It is assumed that they will conduct the latter exercise in consultation with the shadow Assembly. The Civic Forum will probably come into operation when the new Assembly formally comes into being.

### What might the Civic Forum do?

The Good Friday Agreement simply says that the body will act as a consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural issues. This rubric could cover almost anything. What might it usefully and effectively do? We suggest it could:

- Provide a route for participation in decision making at an early stage for interested parties;
- Provide a mechanism where those with political power engage in active dialogue with civic society;
- Provide a place where civic society can talk to each other;
- Comment on draft legislation before it is finalised;
- Work on significant issues and problems in Northern Ireland society, particularly those whose resolution is long term and cut across departmental boundaries, eg. unemployment, sectarianism, improving community relations, crime; define the feasible options for solution or improvement; pass these with recommendations, where there is a consensus, to the Assembly.

The Forum needs to have a right of initiation to generate its own work, and not to be purely reactive. In order to be effective the Forum will require to have an adequately staffed and independent secretariat.

While independent the Forum will need to complement and support what the Assembly does and will need to develop a constructive relationship with the politicians (and particularly the First Minister and Deputy First Minister).



## Why ought the Churches to be involved?

Churches are a major part of civic society. They make a large contribution to voluntary and community effort eg. in care for the elderly, youth work, education. They help to preserve the moral framework and uphold values. While the churches are not sectors in the way that business, trade unions and voluntary groups are (or at least defined to be in the Agreement), nevertheless they are the largest non-governmental institutions in Northern Ireland. Because of the central and major part that the churches play in society it seems appropriate to seek direct participation in the Forum, recognising that this will not necessarily be equal to the other sectors mentioned.

The Scottish Churches are involved in the (unofficial) Scottish Civic Assembly.

## How ought the Churches to be involved?

The Civic Forum as a forum for civic society ought to be as inclusive as possible. Given this we think that all religious traditions in Northern Ireland should have the opportunity to participate in the Forum, and not just the Christian churches, although Christians are of course the vast majority of religious believers.

## How should the appointment of people from Churches and religious bodies be done?

We suggest that there should be wide consultation about the appropriate mechanism for putting forward names for consideration by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The aim should be to reflect as far as possible the diversity and variety of the religious traditions within Northern Ireland.

## Points for Consideration

- While the overwhelming majority of the population with a stated religious commitment is Christian it is important that any representation on a civic forum from the religious sector should consciously ensure that the presence of other faith communities in our society is acknowledged.
- Within the Christian community the simple division of Catholic and Protestant should not be allowed to obscure the diversity that exists within each tradition, particularly within Protestantism.
- The diversity within Protestantism should be considered as both denominational (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal etc) and as interdenominational allegiances (Ecumenical, Evangelical, Fundamentalist).
- The range of organisational life in the religious sector, as in other sectors, inevitably means that not all interest groups can be included.
- Some acknowledgement needs to be given to the significance of parachurch structures (Protestant) and religious orders (Catholic) in the contribution of churches to the wider community.
- The nature of church structures and the diversity of leadership and decision making models means that it is difficult to provide for a directly accountable representation from this sector. However it is possible to ensure a representative group of individuals who enjoy the confidence of significant church and interchurch bodies in presenting their concerns and perspectives to such a body.



- Any process of appointment should involve consultation with the main churches, interchurch bodies (e.g. the Irish Council of Churches and the Evangelical Alliance), and with representatives of smaller Protestant denominations who do not consider themselves represented by such bodies.
- The churches as being part of their contribution should not overlook committed church members involved in other sectors included in the forum (and assembly), even though their primary interest will be in their professional or voluntary involvement.
- It is important that any formal church involvement involves not only ordained clergy but is representative of the fuller membership of the churches, especially women who are the majority of active church members.

### Analysis of Christian Communities

- In the 1991 Census 88% of the population claimed affiliation to a Christian church, 1% to another faith community; 4% stated no religion and 7% gave no answer. Of the Christian community 43.5% were Catholic and 56.5% Protestant.

Any participation from the Churches should in its composition reflect this ratio of 4:6.

- The Queen's University Survey of churchgoers in greater Belfast provides insight into the diversity existing within the Protestant community. There is a clear 50/50 division between those of conservative and liberal theological convictions. Conservatives would include those commonly known as evangelicals and fundamentalists, liberals would be mainly ecumenical.

Any participation from Protestant church should in its composition reflect this ratio: 3 Ecumenical: 2 Evangelical: 1 Fundamentalist.

### Process of Selection

Any process should be based on a respect for and understanding of the diversity that exists in the religious community.

- It should be inclusive in its intent by providing opportunity for churches and religious bodies who wish to do so to make suggestions for appointment to the forum.
- On the basis of such nominations a shortlist should be drawn up bearing in mind the points raised above and reflecting the makeup of the religious community as outlined.
- Consultation should take place across the main churches and interchurch bodies to ensure that those on the shortlist enjoy the broad confidence of the sector.
- Final selection and appointment should then be made by the First and Deputy First minister or by the body or structure put in place for this purpose by the assembly.

### What needs to be done now?

From our soundings there is interest and general consensus among church leaders on participation in the Forum. This interest needs to be appropriately expressed to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It is also important that the formal church bodies are kept fully informed of the discussions at the Church Initiative Group and a commitment made to continue our conversations as this matter progresses.