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The Churches' Role in Articulating 'Essential Values'

A REPLY TO PHILIP MCDONAGH'S AND MARGARET M.
SCULL'S RESPONSES TO 'PULPIT TO PUBLIC: CHURCH
LEADERS ON A POST-BREXIT ISLAND' BY GLADYS GANIEL*

Gladys Ganiel

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work,
Queen's University Belfast

In my article 'Pulpit to Public: Church Leaders on a Post-Brexit Island', I noted that 'the churches' ability to communicate about questions of significance is compromised by their waning influence'. This is a theme that

*Read Philip McDonagh's response, 'Shaking Ideologies', <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.52>; read Margaret M. Scull's response, 'The Role of Christian Church Leaders, Past and Present', <https://doi.org/10.3318/ISIA.2021.32b.56>

Author's e-mail: G.Ganiel@qub.ac.uk; ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5106-9911>
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both Philip McDonagh and Margaret Scull highlight in their responses. Any study that attempts to analyse church leaders' contributions to public debate about the island's future must confront the possibility that their attempts will simply be ignored.

Since my article was published, controversy arose around an event organised by the Church Leaders' Group: a service of reflection and hope on the centenary of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland, which was held in St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh on Thursday, 21 October 2021.

In her response, Scull referenced Irish President Michael D. Higgins's decision to decline an invitation to the event. Higgins was concerned that the event celebrated partition, which he regarded as a tragedy. There was a series of misunderstandings and miscommunications between the president and the organisers, with people of goodwill on all sides left confused and hurt.

But the controversy was such that a service that might have passed relatively unnoticed received significant coverage—including live television broadcasts by RTÉ and BBC Northern Ireland and extensive analysis in the island's print media. In 'Pulpit to Public' I observed that the confession for the churches' past failures included in the Church Leaders' Group's 2021 St Patrick's Day statement was relatively under-reported. The same could not be said for the service.

The service built on the St Patrick's Day confession, with Catholic Archbishop Eamon Martin saying, 'I have to face the difficult truth that perhaps we in the churches could have done more to deepen our understanding of each other and to bring healing and peace to our divided and wounded communities'; and Church of Ireland Archbishop John McDowell adding, 'Now, as a church leader I am sorry that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we didn't do more to become peace-makers, or at least to speak peace into the situation. Too often we allowed the attitudes around us to shape our faith, rather than the other way around.'¹

And while the church leaders spoke of the need to lament the past, an orientation towards the future was provided by schoolchildren, who spoke of focusing on the challenges of the future, such as climate change, and preserving the island's peace.

In his response, McDonagh argued that 'we should not overinterpret the decline of church influence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries',

¹ The order of service, including the church leaders' addresses, can be found at <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/CHURCH-LEADERS-GROUP-IRELAND-Service-of-Reflection--Hope-Media-Pack-Final.pdf>, accessed 25 October 2021.

putting this in the wider context of ‘the shaking of secular orthodoxies’. In other words, many of our taken-for-granted values—not just religious ones—have been challenged and a re-evaluation of cultures is necessary, in Ireland and globally. McDonagh still sees a role for the churches in helping to articulate ‘essential values’, albeit as a voice among many, not a dominant partner.

Elements of the service of reflection and hope hinted at ways in which church leaders may still play a role in articulating such ‘essential values’. This was perhaps most powerfully expressed in the sermon by Methodist President Rev. Sahr Yambasu, which was the spoken centrepiece of the event. Yambasu invoked the story of St Patrick, the former slave who returned to his captors in Ireland with a message of hope and liberation. Yambasu said:

Patrick had every reason to hate the Irish and seek for vengeance. But he didn’t. Instead, he forgave and was forgiven. Consequently, the history of this place could be summarised in one word: GRACE – unmerited concern for the good of the other.

Yambasu returned to the theme of grace eight times in his sermon, summarising it as ‘choosing relationship over being right’. He warned against the dangers of dehumanising others and recognised that extending grace is difficult. He said: ‘building an equal and just future is costly. It is a moral imperative needing moral courage to fulfil.’

The service reflected what is perhaps an unprecedented unity of purpose among the island’s national-level church leaders. In and of itself, this makes it of historic significance. Yet the impact or ripple effects of the event cannot be judged quickly. Much depends on what the church leaders themselves and, perhaps more importantly, faith-based activists at the grassroots do next.

Finally, as I argued in ‘Pulpit to Public’—the churches’ contributions to almost all public debates may be compromised until or unless they can deal fulsomely with the legacies of their own past, including abuse *as well as* their contributions to division and violence. And as the uniforms of the schoolchildren taking part in the service reminded us, another aspect of the churches’ legacy is their role in education, which may become increasingly controversial, north and south, as the island becomes simultaneously more multi-faith and secularised.