

# **THE CHURCH AS ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ACTOR**

## **THE CASE OF SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP IN IRELAND**

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### **1. CORI Justice Commission's perspective**

The Republic of Ireland has been changing dramatically in recent years. Its economic boom, euphemistically called the *Celtic Tiger* economy, has been making headlines world-wide. The changes are evident in the increasing levels of economic growth, employment growth, unemployment decline and significant current budget surpluses over a number of years. The population has been growing. Traditional emigration patterns have been replaced by net immigration. Dependency ratios are falling. Standards of living have been rising for most of those in employment. Income per capita is rising dramatically. The national debt as a proportion of GNP has been falling dramatically. Ireland is seen at both EU level and by the OECD as a success story in terms of the conventional macroeconomic indicators.

On a more visible level we witness dramatic changes every day in terms of a massive growth in consumption indicators. The sale of new cars, foreign holidays and other consumer items has grown at an unprecedented rate since the mid-nineties. The private housing sector is booming. New shops, restaurants, night clubs and pubs are opening every week and attracting a foreign as well as a local clientele. Dublin has become the favourite European capital city for many in search of weekend entertainment.

This picture, however, does not tell the entire story of what has been happening to Irish society over the past fifteen years. There is another aspect of this story that must also be recognised and acknowledged. Side by side with the 'new Ireland' of the *Celtic Tiger* is another Ireland characterised in terms of a widening rich/poor gap, long-term unemployment, run-down inner-city housing estates, hidden rural poverty, early school leaving, single parent-hood, homelessness, growing aggression and violence. There are long, in some cases growing, waiting lists for medical care and

public housing. Ireland has a two-tier education system as well as the highest level of adult illiteracy among all European Union countries. There is little evidence of the Irish economic 'miracle' in many of the deprived sectors of the Irish economy. The fruits of economic transformation have not benefited all members of Irish society. The 'rising tide' of the Irish economy has failed to lift all boats.

There is still considerable poverty and social inequality in Irish society. While employment has grown dramatically, the divisions in Irish society have widened and the proportion of people living on income equivalent to less than 50 per cent of average household disposable income (i.e. less than €140 a week for a single person in 2001) is not falling. It is clear that economic growth can widen divisions in society and create greater levels of income inequality. In the absence of government intervention the benefits of economic growth will not 'trickle down' to the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. While failing to tackle poverty on an adequate scale, government policies are also failing to address issues of income distribution and social equity.

These issues have not been seriously debated in Irish society to date. The government has introduced a substantial range of anti-poverty strategies that target disadvantaged groups. However it has failed to seriously address the structural causes of poverty in Irish society, which have been exacerbated by the recent economic miracle. A minimalist approach to the eradication of 'absolute' or 'consistent' poverty' which ignores issues of equality and distributive justice will not produce a fair society.

Today many people ask questions such as: If Ireland of the Celtic Tiger is so good why do we meet so many anxious faces on our streets? Why are so many people experiencing stress in meeting their commitments, be they financial, social, family, etc. Why do so many parents have a struggle to find the resources necessary to keep their children in school? Why are so many people homeless or living in overcrowded accommodation? Why is there so much fear and anxiety in our communities? As the pace of change escalates those who have the economic and social resources acquire the equipment necessary to ride the crest of the present boom while a large minority live in fear of being submerged. Those on the crest of the boom have anxieties about staying there. This anxiety fuels the tendency to accumulate more and more to the point where, in practice, they adopt the slogan that 'greed is good'. Meanwhile those who struggle to 'hang on' are feeling their grip loosening and the prospect of being part of this society becoming more remote.

This reflection brings to the fore the issue of values. People find their fears are easier to admit than their values. Ireland seems to accept a two-tier society in fact, while deriding it in principle? This dualism in our values allows us to continue with the status quo. In practice this means that it is okay to exclude between a quarter and a third of the population from the mainstream of life of Irish society while large resources and opportunities are channelled towards other groups in society. This dualism operates at the levels of individual people, communities and sectors.

### **Christian values**

CORI's concerns in this socio-economic reality are deeply rooted in Christian values. Christianity subscribes to the values of both human dignity and the centrality of the community. The person is seen as growing and developing in a context that includes

other people and the environment. Justice is understood in terms of relationships. The Christian scriptures understand justice as a harmony that comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, people and the environment. **A just society is one that is structured in such a way as to promote these right relationships so that human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.**

As our societies have grown in sophistication the need for appropriate structures has become more urgent. While the aspiration that everyone should enjoy the good life, and the good will to make it available to all, is an essential ingredient in a just society, the good life will not happen without the deliberate establishment of structures to facilitate its development. In the past charity in the sense of alms-giving by some individuals on an arbitrary and ad hoc basis was seen as sufficient to ensure that everyone could cross the threshold of human dignity. Calling on the work of social historians it could be argued that charity in this sense was never an appropriate method for dealing with poverty. Certainly it is not a suitable methodology for dealing with the problems of today. As world disasters consistently show, charity and the heroic efforts of voluntary agencies cannot solve these problems on a long-term basis. Appropriate structures are required to ensure that every person has access to the resources needed to live life with dignity.

Few people would disagree that the resources of the planet are for the use of the people, not just the present generation but also the generations still to come. In Old Testament times, these resources were closely tied to land and water. A complex system of laws about the Sabbatical and Jubilee years (Lev 25: 1-22, Deut 15: 1-18) was devised to ensure, on the one hand, that no person could be disinherited, and on the other, that land and debts could not be accumulated or the land exploited.

Interdependence, mutuality, solidarity, connectedness are words which are used loosely today to express a consciousness which is very Christian. All of creation is seen as a unit which is dynamic, each part is related to every other part, depends on it in some way and can also affect it. When we focus on the human family this means that each person depends on others initially for life itself and subsequently for the resources and relationships needed to grow and develop. To ensure that the connectedness of the web of life is maintained, each person is meant to reach out to support others in ways that are appropriate for their growth and in harmony with the rest of creation. This thinking respects the integrity of the person while recognising that the person can only achieve his or her potential in right relationships with others and the environment. All of this implies the need for appropriate structures and infrastructures.

When the Justice Commission sees the reality that is Ireland and the wider world today and reflects on these from the perspective of Christian values and Catholic Social Thought it comes to the conclusion that the world is not as God wishes it to be. The Commission understands that building the reign of God involves doing what we can to move the present reality from where it is towards where God wishes it to be. This provides the Commission with a number of issues to be addressed on an ongoing basis. These include:

- ◆ Identifying what the present reality really is.

- ◆ Developing some awareness of what alternatives to the present situation are viable or possible.
- ◆ Discovering which of these are closest to God's Will.
- ◆ Taking action to move towards these alternatives.
- ◆ Recycling the process on an ongoing basis.

In all of this the Commission recognises and acknowledges that it does not have all the answers. Rather, it is always struggling to get more accurate answers to the questions it asks and trying to seek out and develop better alternatives to what is already available. It constantly offers its analysis and vision and proposals for action to the wider society for comment and critique. It seeks an ongoing dialogue on these issues with the wider society as well as with those who share its Faith. The following sections provide a short outline of key aspects of the Commission's approach in these areas.

## **2. CORI Justice Commission's approach**

We identify five central aspects of the Commission's approach to its work. These are:

- ◆ Social analysis
- ◆ Dialogue
- ◆ Vision building
- ◆ Action
- ◆ Reflection/recycling the process

### **2.1. Social Analysis**

Much of the Justice Commission's work is underpinned by detailed social analysis. In doing this work of social analysis we follow a relatively standard approach. Whether we are addressing an issue such as social exclusion, an area such as Ireland or a problem such as drug addiction we seek to develop a comprehensive, integrated understanding by addressing the reality's following components:

- ◆ Economic structures: what resources exist in this reality and how they are organised?
- ◆ Political structures: what power resides in this reality and how decision-making is organised?
- ◆ Cultural structures: what the core meaning in this reality is and how it is organised and transmitted?
- ◆ Social structures: arising from the economic, political and cultural structures, how are relationships organised?
- ◆ If appropriate the different levels of these structures are analysed (e.g. local, regional, national, international).
- ◆ The history of whatever we are analysing is also looked at and built into the analysis.

## 2.2. Dialogue

Dialogue is a crucial component of the Justice Commission's work. In fact there are two different dialogues or 'conversations' going on all the time. These dialogues or conversations are with:

- ◆ Those who share our Faith, and
- ◆ The wider society.

Both of these have two sub-groups with whom the Commission seeks to conduct an ongoing 'conversation'. In both conversations the subgroups with whom dialogue is sought are:

- ◆ People who are committed/involved and interested
- ◆ People who are not so committed/involved or interested

The methods and approaches used vary in the two main dialogues. They also vary in the two sub-dialogues being conducted on an ongoing basis.

The Justice Commission believes very strongly that both main dialogues must go on at the same time. The conversation the Commission conducts with the wider society is deeply informed by the conversation it conducts with those who share our Faith. The stance taken in the wider society stems from the conclusions being reached in the Faith conversation. Choices have to be made constantly concerning what issues to pursue in the wider reality, what position to take on these issues, what actions are to be sought, etc. Always, the Commission's decisions in these areas are informed by its conversation with those who share our Faith.

The dialogue is a two-way affair, however. This means that the realities of the wider society are constantly challenging and influencing the Faith-conversation. Often, there are aspects of the wider reality that the Faith-conversation has not recognised or has sought to avoid. If the dialogue is to be real and transformative, it must be two-way and must involve a real engagement. It must also include a willingness to change one's mind if the evidence suggests this is what is required.

The language spoken in the first of these conversations is different to that spoken in the second. This, in effect, means that the Commission has to be bi-lingual in its work. We shall return to this issue later in this paper.

## 2.3. Vision-building

From the perspective of Faith, if we want to move the world from where it is towards where God wishes it to be, then it is essential that we seek alternatives to what is being offered in the present reality.

From the perspective of the wider world which is experiencing so much change it is also important that we seek alternatives to the vision of the future being offered by the dominant forces of our world at present. This is necessary because the vision that is being offered is not capable of delivering on its promise. The conventional economic vision of the future is simply unattainable.

Consequently, the Justice Commission puts a lot of work into seeking out alternatives, re-imagining the way things might be and assessing what could be both desirable and viable.

#### 2.4. Action

Following on this work of seeking out alternative futures the Commission seeks to design action that could lead towards reaching that alternative future. This results in the Commission being involved in a range of activities that must be addressed if the 'vision' issue is to be treated seriously by others who are sceptical or threatened or whatever. In practice this has involved the Commission in a wide range of activities ranging from piloting programmes to researching issues to advocating positions. We shall return to this issue later in this paper.

#### 2.5. Reflection/recycling the process

Reflection on what is happening, and constantly recycling the process of analysis, dialogue, vision-building and action, is crucially important. Hopefully some of the wider world reality is being changed, as a result of our involvement. However, we ourselves are also being changed. Our experience of the wider reality is brought to bear on our Faith reflection just as our Faith reflection is brought to bear on the wider reality. We try to ensure that this produces constant development in and between both conversations with which the Commission engages. This is critically important if there is to be any real learning from experience over time.

### 3. CORI Justice Commission's stance, analysis and vision

In its ongoing work the Justice Commission has developed a statement on its role and policy. This identifies where the Commission's starting points are, how they see Ireland today and how they envision the future. The following is the Commission's most recent statement of its position on these realities:

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*We start from the belief that Ireland is not the kind of society envisaged in the Gospels. We do not accept the divisions we see. Like many we wish to work for a society where “the hungry are filled with good things” (Lk. 1:53). Taking inspiration from the Beatitudes we work with Jesus for the coming of the Kingdom where the poor will be happy because they have sufficiency, where those who hunger and thirst for what is right will see their vision concretised in the structures of society, where the gentle (or ‘or the lowly’) will be guaranteed their right to a part of the earth’s resources (“They shall have the earth for their heritage” Mt. 5:4). With St Paul we are conscious that the “entire creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth”. (Rom. 8:22). We want to play a positive role in this great act of giving birth to a future society.*

*How can this Gospel message be made relevant in our mission today? In recent years the Church has developed a large body of social teaching. We find in this teaching the guidelines needed to point the way for us pilgrim people. From Pope Leo XIII who began the call for major changes in the*

*socio-economic order to the present day, the Church is calling us to transform society. We recall that Paul VI in 'Populorum Progressio' called for "bold transformations, innovations that go deep" (32). The synod of Bishops (1971) in its document 'Justice in the World' said that "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel" (6).*

*Pope John Paul II in 'Laborem Exercens' calls for a complete analysis to reveal unjust structures so that they may be examined and transformed to build a just earth (2). More recently in 'Centesimus Annus' he talked about the virtues needed to be involved in this transformation. "To destroy such structures (of sin which impede the full realisation of those who are in any way oppressed by them) and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience" (38).*

*Recent social teaching alerts us not only to the structures that oppress people but also to the structures that cause destruction to the environment. "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone ...there is an order in the universe which must be respected ...the ecological crisis is a moral issue" (Pope John Paul II January 1, 1990).*

*The Commission sees its policy as answering this call to transform society. In the following paragraphs we analyse Ireland from the perspective of people who are poor and socially excluded. This perspective provides a different analysis and vision from that provided to our society by its dominant thinkers and decision-makers. We believe the present reality and the vision being offered should both be seriously challenged. We go on to outline the key elements of an alternative vision which would see the emergence of a society where Gospel values were dominant. In conclusion we state why we believe the present moment of human history is so important. We also outline the Commission's proposed agenda so as to take advantage of this moment and move Irish society towards a more Gospel-based future.*

### ***Ireland Today***

*When we look at Ireland today – north and south – we see a society, which ranks among the top twenty per cent of the world's richest societies. We see people who have gained a great deal, materially, in recent years. The Republic's average per capita income is now substantially above the European average. The Good Friday Agreement has brought dramatic changes in Northern Ireland as well as in the Republic. We see a world of possibilities and opportunities open before many members of this society. At the same time we see great divisions in this society. One in every five people is below the poverty line. There is a major scandal of rural poverty. Many urban dwellers live in degrading conditions. Growing inequality is a major feature of society. Social exclusion is the lived experience of a large number of people. The rest of society marginalises these people.*

*When we look at power structures in Ireland we find that the process of decision-making involves the direct participation of a small elite who lead the*

*major interest groups representing the powerful in Irish society. Those who can lobby, persuade, manipulate, even threaten the society, ensure their voices are heard. There is a growing demand for the involvement of people who are excluded. This demand comes principally from the community and voluntary sector. In the Republic the arenas of social partnership have been adjusted in recent years to include representatives of this sector. In Northern Ireland the new Legislative Assembly and its related bodies provides new possibilities for participation. How open decision-making structures are to hearing the voices of those who are marginalised and socially excluded remains open to question. Real power in Ireland – north and south – is in the hands of a small elite. This elite benefits from having such power while others pay the cost.*

*Looking at values and attitudes in Ireland we see a society which has maintained many traditional values. At the same time it is undergoing profound change. In the past few decades the values of the consumer society have become dominant. People assume that everything is replaceable. Priority is given to using human ingenuity and cheaper production methods regardless of quality or consequences for the environment. “Success” and profit are the objectives and they are sought in the shortest possible timeframe. Within this materialist and consumer society the religious practice rate is high by any standard. Many people, however, question the division between the religious ideals pronounced by various Churches and the values that guide the day-to-day lives of a great many Church members.*

*There are sharp class divisions in Ireland. The potential for mobility out of the more marginal and disadvantaged categories will be slight in the future if we continue to follow the present development model. There are other major divisions in Ireland between rich and poor, between young and old, between men and women, between north and south, between the various groups involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland, between urban and rural dwellers, between the employed and all others in society, and so on. Changes in the European context continue to have a major impact on the Irish situation. The more we look at our society the more we realise that there are groups who benefit from its economic, political, cultural and social structures and others who do not. The numbers who do not benefit from the present situation are large and the gap between them and the rest of society is widening. This is not inevitable. Rather it is the result of decisions taken by people to organise society in this particular way.*

### ***An Alternative Future***

*Is this the way our society should be organised? Is this the way God wishes our society to be organised? It seems to us that the obvious answer to both questions is in the negative. So two further questions present themselves: what kind of alternative future do we have to offer? And what are we doing to articulate and make concrete this alternative? These questions become especially important given the changing European context in which Ireland is situated.*



*When the politically and economically powerful in our world address the future, they offer us today only one vision - that of a society with expanding production, greater competitiveness, deepening divisions and wider gaps between rich and poor. They see power as being in the hands of a small elite. The most important people in such a society are seen as those who facilitate the more efficient running of the production process from which all of life's "goodies" are presumed to flow. In reality the majority would have no say in the shaping of such a society and would not participate in its decision-making processes to any great extent. The very meaning of life would be radically altered, human rights would be eroded, human dignity would not be respected, human development would not be facilitated and the environment would be exploited.*

*We believe this vision needs to be seriously challenged. Our Christian values state clearly that we should not accept the present growing divisions in our world but should, instead seek to eliminate them. We need to search for and strive to achieve balance in our values, goals and priorities. This will require a shift of emphases.*

*We need to move from quantitative to qualitative values and goals, from organisational to personal and interpersonal values and goals. We need to move from values that are economically based towards values that put far more emphasis on the real needs and aspirations of people. We need to move from mechanistic to organic values, from masculine towards feminine priorities. We need as a society to change direction, to find and maintain balance in all our relationships – with ourselves and God, with people we are close to and people in the wider world and in our relationship with the environment.*

*A society moving along these balanced lines would be a just society based on the **Biblical understanding of justice as a harmony which comes from fidelity to right relationships with God, with our neighbour and with the environment.***

*We stand at a moment of great change in human history. The human race is faced with major choices concerning the future. Ireland in strengthening its commitment as a European partner is embarking on an uncharted journey where many choices about our future will be made. We believe that Irish religious should be involved with ALL Irish people in making these choices. We should not be afraid of this. We should not consider such a role as arrogant or unrealistic. The Gospel calls us to be involved in shaping a future, which is closer to the values of Jesus Christ.*

*The Goal Statement of CORI states that "CORI is a voice for Irish Religious on Justice issues. It promotes justice and challenges unjust structures by:*

- ❖ Doing ongoing social analysis of the present reality;*
- ❖ Identifying root causes of injustice;*

- ❖ *Developing an alternative vision of society, and*
- ❖ *Working for the realisation of this alternative vision”.*

The Goal Statement goes on to identify specific goals concerning spirituality, collaboration, women, care of the earth. Northern Ireland, violence and our methods of working. In service of the Conference’s Vision and Goal Statement the Justice Commission will continue its work of analysis, reflection, development of alternatives, advocacy, enabling and communication.

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#### **4. Main areas of CORI Justice Commission's work**

In actualising this statement of its stance, analysis and vision the CORI Justice Commission divides its work under four major headings:

- ◆ Public Policy
- ◆ Enabling and Empowering
- ◆ Spirituality
- ◆ Partnership Projects

##### **4.1. Public Policy**

Public policy is a major determinant in shaping society. Consequently, the Justice Commission puts a great deal of effort into addressing this area. Later we will list some of the issues addressed by the Commission in this context. Here we simply list some of the initiatives and activities of the Commission in this arena during the past eighteen months:

- ◆ Held its annual Social Policy Conference on the topic *Participation and Democracy: Opportunities and Challenges*.
- ◆ Published a book containing the conference papers, with the same title.
- ◆ Published its annual Socio-Economic Review entitled: *Prosperity and Exclusion: Towards a New Social Contract*.
- ◆ Made a submission to Government and its various Departments before both National Budgets in that period.
- ◆ Published a detailed analysis and critique of both national Budgets in that time-frame.
- ◆ Presented a paper on the future of work at the Vatican's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference on the Papal Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*.
- ◆ Made a series of interventions on issues relating to Refugees and Asylum Seekers
- ◆ Were members of and made an input to the following Government Working Parties:
  - ◆ Basic Income Working Group
  - ◆ Benchmarking and Indexation of Social Welfare payments Working Group.
  - ◆ Refundable Tax Credits Working Group
  - ◆ Racism Awareness Working Group.
  - ◆ National Committee of the UN Year of the Volunteer

- ◆ As well as these the Justice Commission has an ongoing participation in the following State Bodies
  - National Economic and Social Council (NESC)
  - National Economic and Social Forum (NESF)
  - National Agreement Monitoring Group (Programme for Prosperity and Fairness)
  - Social Economy Monitoring Group.
  - Labour Market Standing Committee
  - Environmental Monitoring Committee of the National Development Plan.
  - National Anti-Poverty Strategy - Income Adequacy Working Group.
  - National Anti-Poverty Strategy - Employment/Unemployment Working Group.
  - Public Transport Partnership Forum
  
- ◆ The Commission also has ongoing participation in several 'linkage' groups, linked to State bodies. These cover issues ranging from housing to the national spatial strategy, from environment to refugees and asylum seekers.
- ◆ The Justice Commission is represented on County Development and/or Strategic Policy Committees in twelve Local Authorities.
- ◆ The Commission also has an active involvement in most of the 34 Community Forums established in the Local Authorities.

The Commission believes that these initiatives have made a significant contribution to :

- ◆ Updating the social analysis not just of the Commission but of the many groups who use its material.
- ◆ Communicating the analysis to a wide audience.
- ◆ Providing a forum for policy makers to discuss and debate specific issues of public policy.
- ◆ Providing opportunities to highlight the divisions in society.
- ◆ Providing opportunities to be a voice for the voiceless.
- ◆ Providing an alternative vision
- ◆ Providing concrete proposals for action.
- ◆ Outlining and suggesting models of good practice.
- ◆ Arguing for a fairer distribution of national resources.

These initiatives are focused on a variety of groups in Irish Society. Among these are:

- ◆ Opinion formers
- ◆ General public
- ◆ Religious
- ◆ Churches (leadership and members) and other religions
- ◆ Politicians and members of Government
- ◆ Government Departments and local government structures
- ◆ Academic world

- ◆ Social Partners (Business, Trade Unions, Farmers, Community and Voluntary Groups)
- ◆ Activists
- ◆ Those who share our values especially in the voluntary and community sector

The Commission receives much feedback that confirms these activities and initiatives are particularly appreciated by those involved in advocacy work with poor people and excluded groups.

#### 4.2. **Enabling and Empowering**

A major focus of the Justice Commission's work is enabling and empowering people and groups to participate in all arenas where decisions effecting their lives are taken. To this end the following initiatives were undertaken.

##### **GCIPP Programme**

Since 1995 the Justice Commission has had an internship programme. This has now been developed into a programme entitled *Generating Change and Influencing Public Policy*. This programme is part-time, lasts for one year and is done by people who are active in a range of different policy areas. At present there are 10 people on the programme.

##### ***Public Policy Network***

Those who have completed the programme *Generating Change and Influencing Public Policy* (Internship Programme) meet regularly to discuss policy issues and develop strategies to effect change. This is also a great source of support and information sharing for members.

##### ***Workshops and Seminars***

The Justice Office facilitated 41 workshops/seminars, involving over 2,250 participants. These were structured to share the research and information of the Office, to learn from the experiences and insights of participants, to address issues concerning the future and to share models of good practice.

##### ***CARA Network***

Over ten years ago the CARA Network was started to connect groups and individuals, both religious and lay, who were involved in initiatives to transform society. During the past five years this network has been contributing to and monitoring the Task Force on the Reform of Local Government. Members have been playing a very active part in local communities alerting community and voluntary groups to the developments taking place and facilitating their involvement. A number of its members have been elected to Strategic Policy Committees and County Development Boards. They are also very active in the County Community Forums. (CARA is an Irish word meaning 'friend'. In this context it stands for **C**ommunication, **A**nalysis, **R**eflection and **A**ction.)

##### ***Justice Responsibles Network***

Many Congregations have named personnel who co-ordinate justice ministry. This network which meets twice annually facilitates members in reflecting on their role,

providing mutual support, sharing models of good practice and in developing strategy for and with religious.

### ***CORI Social Economy Network (C-SEN)***

In the period 1994-98 the Justice Commission piloted a programme which created jobs for 1,000 unemployed people in 162 projects in six pilot areas around the country. Since then the Commission has been working to get the concept of the social economy accepted and relevant action taken by Government. Substantial progress has been made on this and a social economy programme is now being developed throughout the country. This network links the 162 projects in the original pilot programme and the network meets twice a year.

### **4.3. Spirituality**

The work of the Justice Commission is deeply rooted in the Christian Scriptures and in Catholic Social Thought. The issue of spirituality has been central to its deliberations from the very beginning. This issue is addressed by the authors in a separate paper entitled *The Practice of Spirituality and Social Engagement*.

### **4.4. Partnership Projects**

The fourth major area of work for the Justice Commission is its involvement in partnership projects. The principal ones are as follows:

#### ***Basic Income***

The Justice Office works with 17 countries (12 in Europe), USA, Canada, Brazil, South Africa and New Zealand to draw together work in progress on Basic Income around the world. This network is called BIEN. Sean Healy and Brigid Reynolds presented a paper at the biannual Conference held in Berlin in October 2000. They also contributed a chapter to a book on this issue produced by this network and published from the University of Amsterdam. In 2002 they presented a paper on basic income to a conference at the University of Liege.

The Commission also developed a partnership project with *Citizen's Income Trust* in Britain on this issue. This produced a study of Basic Income for the United Kingdom.

#### ***Benchmarking the Social Economy***

As noted earlier the development of the social economy has been a particular concern for the Commission. This particular initiative is a joint project with organisations in Belgium, France, Portugal and Germany on developing benchmarks for models of good practice in relation to the social economy. This project was highlighted in a report from Ireland's Comptroller and Auditor General entitled *Local Development Initiatives*. In the context of looking at 'value for money' this initiative was seen as having a valuable contribution to make to the employment and future prospects of unemployed people.

### ***Networks and the Social Economy***

This is a network of projects in Ireland, Italy, France and Portugal who develop job-creation projects in the social economy and link these projects to promote best practice. The Irish Government has a special interest in this project through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

### ***Study of Strategic Responses to Unemployment***

Two networks have been developed with partners in France, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium to provide strategic solutions for the problem of social exclusion caused by unemployment. One is a network of projects, the other is a network of legal experts.

### ***Ecumenical Initiatives***

The Justice Commission also seeks to develop ecumenical initiatives. Over the past eighteen months being covered in this listing there have been a number of initiatives. In Ireland work has been done with the Church of Ireland, the Jewish community and the Islamic community. The Office also addressed a conference in London organised by Church Action on Poverty. This was chaired by Lord Sheppard and addressed the issue of 'Work and Worth: A New Agenda'.

### ***Ethical Investment***

The Commission also has a project on ethical investment. This involves some research and providing advice to a financial institution on ethical investment policy.

## **5. Key issues CORI Justice Commission works on**

Below we list some of the key issues addressed by the Justice Commission in its work. These are critical issues for society at this time and how they are addressed will have a major bearing on the future shape of society. We do not address them in any detail here. In other arenas we have produced and published a substantial amount of material on each of these issues analysing the present situation, outlining an alternative vision for the future and developing implementation pathways to move towards a more desirable future. We list them here so that readers, unfamiliar with our work, will gain some idea of the range of issues we address.

Poverty

Income distribution

Taxation

Work/unemployment/job creation

Social Exclusion

Participation

Social Provision

Accommodation

Healthcare

Education

Cultural Respect

Sustainability - local, national and global. In this context we include social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Rural Development  
Specific Northern Ireland issues  
North/South (of the world) relationships

Most of these issues are addressed in terms of the local, the national, the European Union level and the wider international context. This is not an exhaustive list but it serves to illustrate the range of issues addressed by the CORI Justice Commission.

We now address the issue of social partnership specifically. Many of the issues listed above are addressed within the social partnership process, although not exclusively so. They are addressed in a wide range of other policy forums as well.

## **6. Social Partnership**

Here we tell a very short version of the story of the development of social partnership in Ireland in the last decade and a half. For a more detailed treatment of some of this material see the book *Social Partnership in a New Century* edited by the present authors and published by CORI Justice Commission.

### **6.1. Social Partnership in Ireland since 1987**

Social partnership as we know it today emerged in the late 1980s when Ireland's economic and social development was in dire straits. There was deep recession, falling living standards, declining employment, very high unemployment levels, huge exchequer borrowing requirements and a debt/GNP level that was unsustainable. O'Donnell (1998) concluded that "by the mid-1980s, Ireland's economic, social and political strategy was in ruins, and its hope of prospering in the international economy was in considerable doubt".

Social partnership emerged from a concerted effort by Government, trade unions, employers and farming organisations to address this reality. The National Economic and Social Council (NESC), of which all of these sectors were members, produced a strategy document which, in turn, provided the basis for a three-year national agreement entitled *The Programme for National Recovery*.

Following this programme there have been four further national agreements each covering, about a three-year period. Each of these was based on a strategy document produced by the NESC. These strategy documents reviewed the preceding period, set out the challenges to be faced in the period ahead and recommended a strategic approach to economic and social policy in that period. By definition these documents were compromises between the different sectors involved. They did, however, involve a great deal of learning from each other as different perspectives and priorities were discussed and taken into account. In this process different social partners did not give up their own goals, objectives or tactics. However, they did agree "an inclusive overview of options, challenges and trade-offs, in the period covered by each of these strategy reports" according to McCarthy (1999:7).

### **6.2. The Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partners**

From the inception of this process in 1987 the CORI Justice Commission argued that there should be a fourth pillar of social partners in addition to the three already in place i.e. trade unions, employers and farmers. According to the Commission this fourth pillar should represent excluded groups not represented in their own right in the social partnership process. The Commission highlighted the absence of unemployed people, poor people and women from the process.

In 1993 the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) was established with a broader range of participants than the NESC. Among its members were people representing a range of excluded groups. Its remit was to address issues of social policy, exclusion and unemployment.

When the negotiations for the fourth of these agreements began in Autumn of 1996 Government invited eight groups from the community and voluntary sector to be part of the discussions. These became the Community and Voluntary Pillar of Social Partners that negotiated, signed and monitored the implementation of the last two agreements. Representatives of the pillar were included in NESC as well. CORI Justice Commission was one of the organisations invited to be a member of the Pillar. It also provides one of the Pillar's five representatives on the NESC.

The Commission was very conscious of the challenges this new role provided. In particular it was aware of the importance of recognising that the negotiating role should not lead to a compromising of the prophetic role it had come to exercise at this time. The Commission discussed these challenges and how they were to be addressed in detail and agreed to proceed with this new involvement. Over the years since then the Commission has constantly monitored its own performance on this issue and made adjustments as it saw fit. It has maintained its approach as outlined above. It has also maintained its stance. The dialogue and 'conversation' capacity demanded of the Commission has increased substantially within the social partnership process and we have tried to develop this in the light of experience in this process as well as in other arenas.

### **6.3. The Social Partnership Process**

We have already outlined the pattern of the social partnership process. It involves reflection, analysis and policy prescription developed on a shared basis. This is followed by negotiation, implementation and monitoring of a national agreement. The NESC strategy document that underpinned the *Partnership 2000* agreement, (NESC,1996:66) provided a characterisation of social partnership along these lines:

- ◆ It includes a combination of consultation, negotiation and bargaining;
- ◆ It is heavily dependent on a shared understanding of the key mechanisms and relationships in any given policy area;
- ◆ Government plays a unique role. It provides an arena within which the process operates. It shares some of its authority with social partners
- ◆ The process reflects inter-dependence between the social partners. This is necessary because no party can achieve its goals without a significant degree of support from others;
- ◆ It is characterised by a problem-solving approach which seeks to produce a consensus in which various groups can address problems together;



- ◆ It involves trade-offs between and within interest groups;
- ◆ It involves different participants on various agenda items ranging from national macro-economic policy to local development.

This is a good description of the social partnership process. It is also a statement of the conditions required of a social partner for effective participation in the process. O'Donnell points out (2001:6ff) that as the process has developed it has become clear that there are two further conceptions, or dimensions to social partnership:

- ◆ Functional interdependence, bargaining and deal making.
- ◆ Solidarity, inclusiveness and participation.

O'Donnell develops these two points and adds a third as follows:

Effective partnership involves both of these, but cannot be based entirely on either. To fall entirely into the first could be to validate the claim that the process simply reflects the power of the traditional social partners, especially if claims for the unemployed and marginalised are not included in the *functional* interdependence, and are seen as purely *moral*. To adopt a naïve inclusivist view would risk reducing the process to a purely consultative one, in which all interests and groups merely *voiced* their views and demands. While these two dimensions are both present, even together they are not adequate.

There is a third dimension of partnership, which transcends the two discussed above. Although the concepts of 'negotiation' and 'bargaining' distinguish social partnership from more liberal and pluralist approaches, in which *consultation* is more prominent, they are not entirely adequate to capture the partnership process. Bargaining describes a process in which each party comes with definite preferences and seeks to maximise their gains. While this is a definite part of Irish social partnership, the overall process (including various policy forums) would seem to involve something more. Partnership involves the players in a process of deliberation that has the potential to shape and reshape their understanding, identity and preferences. This idea, that identity can be shaped in interaction, is important. It is implicit in the description of the process as 'dependent on a shared understanding', and 'characterised by a problem-solving approach designed to produce consensus' (NESC, 1996b: 66). This third dimension has to be added to the hard-headed notion of bargaining, (and to the idea of solidarity), to adequately capture the process. (O'Donnell, 2001:6-7)

It is interesting to note in this context that the social partners do not have to agree on an ultimate social or economic vision of the future. Rather, the focus is primarily on a problem-solving approach. In practice, this means that consensus and a shared understanding are outcomes from the process rather than pre-conditions.

Some people find it difficult to understand that consensus can be reached even though there are underlying conflicts of interest or very different visions of what the future ought to be. Yet this is the reality. The key to understanding why this is so may lie in the fact that those participating see the consensus as provisional. They are prepared to support movement towards specific action while holding open the option of reviewing the underpinning analysis as well as the vision and goals that underpin the consensus. In practice this review process is an ongoing part of social partnership.

#### 6.4. Characteristics of a Social Partner

In studying social partnership very often the nature of a social partner is understood in traditional terms that have evolved in countries with a longer tradition of partnership-type systems. A year after the Community and Voluntary Pillar had become part of the social partnership process the NESF published a report that addressed, among other things, the new view of what a social partner is now. It contrasted the traditional of a social partner with the newer version now in place in Ireland. Table 1 is taken from that NESF report (NESF, 1997:37).

**Table 1: Traditional and New Ideas of a Social Partner**

<b>Traditional idea of a Social Partner</b>	<b>New characteristics of a Social Partner</b>
Monopoly	Continuous mobilisation
Function (economic or regulatory)	Co-ordination of functions
Producer groups	Actors in civil society
Bargaining	Information as key resource
State intervention in the economy	New forms of public advocacy
Hierarchy	- analysis
	- dialogue
	- shared understanding
	Actor, not just voice

The traditional idea of a social partner is summarised in the left-hand box. One key idea is that a group had to have a monopoly of representation of a given social group. For example trade unions represented all workers. Employer's organisations represented all enterprises. A second characteristic was their functional roles. They were seen as having a definite functional role in the economy a clear regulatory role. Some argued that only producer groups should be recognised as social partners. Organisations in these situations spent much of their time bargaining with each other and with government. Because the government intervened extensively in the economy it found itself in negotiation with these bodies. Finally, each of the social partners in this traditional sense were organised hierarchically and were very concentrated.

According to the NESF report this traditional understanding of what constituted a social partner has become less relevant. The characteristics of social partners in the newer understanding are summarised on the right hand side of Table 1. Social partners are now seen to be continuously mobilising citizens who have problems that need to be addressed. Social partners must now offer practical achievements and a vision of a better economy and society. Their strength is now seen far more in co-ordination; they assist in defining and co-ordinating functions rather than relying on fixed functional roles. They are actors in civil society who respond to unintended consequences of policy, economic change or action by other groups. According to the NESF information is now the key resource which a modern social partner brings to the table. "They are needed precisely because the information is generated within

their organisational ambit. They have the links, the capacity, and the contacts with what is really going on in society.

They also use new forms of public advocacy. In place of the old form of bargaining we now have analysis, dialogue and shared understanding. The NESF report makes the telling point that "It is possible to bargain without discussing, and a lot of traditional bargaining was like that. At the other extreme, it is possible to analyse without putting yourself in the shoes of the actors, and a lot of traditional social and economic science was like that. In between, there is a combination of discussion, analysis and deliberation, which might be called *negotiated governance*. Irish social partnership, at its most effective, seems to be moving towards this model. This challenges social partner organisations to facilitate analysis and action at local level and feed this in to policy at national level...." (NESF, 2001:38-39).

A social partner must be an actor in society, not just a voice. Action is critically important. Mobilising, organising, delivering and solving problems with others, are now central characteristics of effective social partners. This means that the organisation must be prepared to be constantly shaped and reshaped in light of the action it takes.

### **6.5. Demands of social partnership on social partners**

The social partnership process is extremely demanding for those involved. It makes huge demands on an organisation's resources and on the individuals who play an active role.

An example of these demands can be seen in the fact that commitment to this social partnership process requires involvement in the extensive network of policy design and evaluation involving social partners and government that has emerged. There are a great many working groups, task forces and committees established as part of the implementation of the national agreements. These are "testimony to the attempt to apply the policy learning process developed at a strategic, national level to a variety of policy problems which have been identified in the partnership process" (McCarthy 1999:9). This involvement takes time, personnel and resources. It demands much analysis and critique so that one can play a competent part in the on-going process.

Another example of the demands of social partnership is in the need for major additional work to link the action with which the organisation is involved with the partnership process.

For the Justice Commission it also demands that alternatives have to be investigated and evaluated to see if they would provide better opportunities or more likely avenues to progress the core issues already identified above. In this evaluation the Commission always seeks to compare what the social partnership process is producing with what any *real or likely* alternative might produce. The evaluation is not against some Utopia that is unlikely to emerge any time soon.

The Commission also recognises that the social partnership process is not the only means of engaging in the economic, political, cultural and social reality. However, it

does provide a major opportunity and an enormous arena in which to advance many of the issues considered to be central to shaping a better future.

## **7. Engagement as Economic, Political, Cultural, Social Actor**

Reflecting on the nature of social partnership and on the Justice Commission's involvement in that process as well as in its other activities we suggest the following seven requirements for Church to be a credible actor in the economic, political, cultural and social spheres. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list but these seem to us to be especially relevant given our experience in the social partnership and related contexts of Ireland at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The seven we suggest are:

- ◆ Social analysis
- ◆ Dialogue - the issue of conversation
- ◆ Being bilingual
- ◆ Vision-building
- ◆ On-going action
- ◆ Being prophetic and resisting the temptation to be absorbed by the status quo
- ◆ Realising credibility comes through involvement

### **7.1. Social Analysis**

For the most part there is no one, clear, obvious, unambiguous reading of reality. In both conversations with which the Commission engages reality is being constructed. There is a perspective brought to bear in reading reality by those who approach it with the eyes of Faith which is different to the perspective of one who does not approach it in that way. It is the same reality, however, that is being approached, no matter what ones perspective on, or reading of, that reality.

For the Justice Commission it is important to engage with both 'conversations'. However, the analysis of the wider reality is influenced by the Faith-based conversation being conducted on an ongoing basis. The stance the Commission brings to bear in its analysis work is very influenced by the Faith-based conversation.

To engage meaningfully in either conversation, social analysis is crucial. The Commission approaches it with a Faith-based perspective. That, however, does not mean that the work of social analysis needs to be any less thorough. As we have seen already the Commission follows a particular model of social analysis which it finds useful in its work. This work is always 'work in progress'.

### **7.2. Dialogue - the issue of conversation**

We have seen in this paper already that the issue of dialogue is of crucial importance to the Justice Commission. The Commission conducts two on-going dialogues - one with those who share our Faith and one with the wider society. Both of these dialogues are conducted with two sub-groups - those who are committed/involved and interested and those who are not. These dialogues are conducted at the same time. Each dialogue informs and influences the other so they are genuine two-way affairs. Consequently, each dialogue constantly challenges the other at a variety of levels. To

be involved in such a dialogue demands a willingness to change one's mind. The language spoken in these dialogues are different (cf. Next section).

The new understanding of a social partner also demands that we dialogue. It demands that we dialogue with our own membership and constituency, with the wider society and with the policy-making process.

In this context the issue of 'conversation' becomes an important issue. According to David Tracy (1987:19)

"Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it."

In this context 'conversation' is a deeper engagement than might often be associated with that term. O'Connell (2001:7) states that

"Conversation is not just sharing in another's folklore, food or art. These sorts of meetings can be important as a prelude to conversation. Conversation is more to do with the type of encounter that enlarges one's sense of connection and responsibility. It ...transforms the participants and energises them to work towards what is good for all in society. Where there is a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other, there is a greater commitment to the common good."

Sharon Parks and her co-authors (Parks et al: 1996:70) state that "the single most important pattern we have found in the lives of people committed to the common good is what we have come to call a *constructive engagement with the other*." This highlights the importance of conversation in this process. The Commission has recognised this and sought to develop conversations in a variety of areas as we have seen already. Sometimes they are called conversation and sometimes not. The issue of conversation is central to Church's involvement as a real actor in these arenas.

The issue of developing communities of discourse which produce a basis for generating change is also relevant here. Wuthnow (1989) has expanded on this in his work. He notes remarkable similarities in the social conditions surrounding three of the greatest challenges to the status quo in the development of modern society i.e. the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and the rise of Marxist socialism. He argues that each episode of cultural ferment occurred during a period of rapid economic growth that fed new resources to central governments at the same time as it uncoupled traditional alignments between the states and factions of their ruling elites. These conditions were receptive to powerful new ideas and also facilitated greatly increased public discourse about social and individual responsibilities. The parallels with today are striking and highlight, again, the importance of 'conversation' that forms the foundation of any community of discourse.

### **7.3. Being bilingual**

We have spoken earlier in this paper of the need to be bilingual in the work the Commission does. One language is spoken in the dialogue with those who share our Faith. A different language, sometimes very different, is spoken in the dialogue with the wider society. In these two conversations there are different assumptions, different core meanings, different perceptions of the world.

The dialogue with the wider society is critically important because those with whom we dialogue are real, they make decisions that have major impacts on people's lives and on the wider world generally. However, if we fail to maintain a second conversation, i.e. with those with whom we share Faith, then we are very likely to accept uncritically as our own the analysis, the perceptions etc. of the dominant culture in the wider world. In fact we believe that the conversation with those with whom we share Faith is the critically important one of these two conversations.

Church education should therefore be bilingual. Christians should have the capacity to engage in both of these dialogues, speak the appropriate language in both of these conversations.

We believe the language used in the conversation with those who share our Faith would not be effective in the conversation with the wider world. In fact it is likely to be irrelevant. The failure to appreciate this fact, and the consequent need for bilingualism, lies at the root of many failed interventions by Church in wider society debates in Ireland over recent years.

### **7.4. Vision-building**

The Book of Proverbs tells us that "without a vision the people perish". We believe this to be as true today as it was in Old Testament times. The dominant vision being offered at the moment sees wealth, employment and production growing steadily into the foreseeable future. This is seen as producing a world in which everyone has a stake and where the good life can be accessed by all. It assumes that everyone, in a world population twice as large as it is today, can reasonably aspire to and achieve the high-consumption lifestyle enjoyed by the world's affluent minority at present. This is seen as progress.

We believe this conventional economic vision of the future is unattainable. Environmental degradation, encroaching deserts, unemployment, starvation, widening gaps between rich and poor, exclusion from participation in either decision-making or development of society: these are the global realities confronting decision-makers today. Social inequality, endemic deprivation and environmental stress accompany economic globalisation. Millions of people in richer parts of the world recognise these problems and are seriously concerned about the plight of the billions of people on all continents whose lived experience is one of constant exclusion from the resources and the power that shapes this world.

The Justice Commission believes that if we are to be serious about the reign of God then we must be serious about this issue of vision-building. This is especially

important in the Irish context, as much of Ireland's development is dependent on the wider world providing a positive environment.

Vision-building is not just the work of sociologists or economists. It is very much the work of theologians as well. Historically, the best theologians were not those who repeated the past but those who fashioned a more profound vision and a more vibrant motivation for action for the Christians of their own era and context. It is crucially important therefore, if one is to be a credible actor in the economic, political, cultural and social context, to be involved in vision building.

### **7.5. On-going action**

An approach that is not rooted in on-going action in the economic, political, cultural and social reality is simply not credible in the context we are discussing here. This is clearly acknowledged in Catholic Social Thought (CST). Over the years CST has sought major changes in the socio-economic order. In previous centuries there was huge commitment to action in areas such as education and healthcare. Over the past thirty to forty years there has been a growing realisation that the Churches need to seek deeper changes in socio-economic realities if the reign of God is to be advanced. While there have been calls for "bold transformations, innovations that go deep" there is also a growing recognition that talk alone is simply not enough. Neither is it sufficient to educate people and expect them to go and transform reality without, ourselves, being deeply involved in action for transformation as well.

Catholic Social Thought has a range of themes that provide a coherent focus for action. These include:

- ◆ Dignity of the human person
- ◆ Human rights and duties
- ◆ Social nature of the person.
- ◆ The Common good
- ◆ Relationship, subsidiarity and socialisation
- ◆ Solidarity
- ◆ Option for the poor.

The Justice Commission has believed from its inception that on-going action was crucially important if change was to come and if the Justice Commission was to be credible. These themes have provided a framework to underpin its action. Talking about solidarity is not enough. It is crucial that action is taken to generate the necessary change to build solidarity.

### **7.6. Being prophetic and resisting the temptation to be absorbed by the status quo.**

The more one is involved in the wider reality the greater the danger that one will be absorbed by the status quo. Instead of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and working for a world that is closer to its core message, there is a likelihood that one may accept the dominant core meaning underpinning the status quo. Brueggemann (1978) has put it succinctly when he argues that it is crucial that we

always seek "to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us". This is the prophetic task.

This involves critiquing the dominant consciousness and working to dismantle it. But it goes beyond this. It also seeks to energise people and communities. In this context the issue of an alternative vision is central. According to Brueggemann "the key word is 'alternative' and every prophetic minister and prophetic community must engage in a struggle with that notion".

The dominant culture that underpins the status quo is uncritical. More than this, it finds it very difficult to tolerate serious and fundamental criticism and goes to great lengths to stop such critique. At the same time the dominant culture becomes a wearied culture, unable to be energised by alternative ideas or visions. We acknowledge that few people relish critique! The challenge to the prophetic dimension is to hold these two aspects together. Either by itself is not faithful to the Christian tradition. For us, this is the point at which compassion is central. Without compassion the activity lacks a central component of the Judeo-Christian understanding of what it means to be prophetic. As far back as Moses we see a dismantling of the politics of oppression and exploitation and its replacement with a politics of justice and compassion. In the Exodus experience this politics was not just focused on developing a new religion or new religious ideas or a vision of freedom. It was clearly focused on the emergence of a new social community, a community with a history that had to devise laws, a form of governance and order, norms of right and wrong and sanctions of accountability.

Central to this is the notion of the freedom of God. If the God we worship is a static god of order who simply protects the interests of those with resources and power then oppression will follow. On the other hand if the God we worship is free to hear the cry of the poor, free of control by those with resources and power, then that will emerge in what we do and what we are. It will show itself in the work of justice and compassion. Focusing on politics and social change alone is not enough. Focusing on God alone is not enough. Both dimensions are essential if we are to be prophetic.

### **7.7. Realising credibility comes through involvement**

Finally, it must be recognised that credibility never comes by 'speaking from on high'. Involvement is essential for credibility to be present. In part, at least, this mirrors one of the new characteristics of social partners we identified earlier. Being a voice is not enough. One must also be an actor. If one is to be credible in the economic, political, cultural and social context then it is crucial that one be involved in a real way and not just pronouncing from 'on high'.

The Justice Commission always offers its analysis, critique, vision, alternative ideas, activities etc. as contributions to the public debate on the specific issues addressed. It seeks responses to its positions. It is always conscious that it has no claim on having all the answers or that what it offers is coming directly, or indirectly, from God! Rather it realises that dialogue and conversation with the wider reality are crucial aspects of seeking the truth. It is also aware that it must be open to change in



response to what emerges in the dialogue. Too often positions emanating from Church bodies are presented in an unintelligible language and/or depend for their credibility on claims that they are emanating, even if indirectly, from God. This is not a credible position for an actor in these arenas in the twenty-first century.

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