

## Response to the OFMDFM Committee Inquiry on Together: Building a United Community – October 2014

1. As the Church and Society Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, we are grateful for the opportunity to offer this relatively brief paper to the Committee, along with the offer to appear before you to expand on the points raised in this paper and on other issues in TBUC.

2. There is much in TBUC that is worthy of real commendation, In particular we note the emphasis on young people; the development of 10 shared educational campuses and the emphasis on raising the hopes and opportunities for NEETS, along with the aspiration to remove the physical barriers in interface areas over a ten year period.

3. We are also pleased with the explicit recognition in the TBUC Strategy of the huge importance of a forward looking cohesive society.

***'The economic, political, cultural and social changes that have been taking place highlight that there is much for us all to be collectively proud of as a society. However, we know that this progress can only continue within the context of a united community. We cannot build a modern, well-equipped society in the absence of good relations, equality of opportunity and reconciliation. This Strategy sets out a vision for the kind of society we want to see and outlines the strategic framework that will shape action in tackling sectarianism, racism and other forms of intolerance.'***

This restatement of key aims from the Belfast Agreement in 1998 is very welcome: There it was agreed that :

***'we make a fresh start in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.'***

4. As a church-based submission to your Committee we will confine ourselves at this juncture to offering comment from a macro and longer term perspective.

5. We invite the Committee to explore the implications of the Strategy NOT being implemented either in full or in part, for we sense that this might well turn out to be the case. What would the implications be for the economy of we were to remain a divided society? For political progress and development to a mature democracy? For the policing and justice systems? For communities already experiencing significant tension? For incoming communities and their ability to contribute to our future?

6. Community cohesion, reconciliation and trust over the 17 months since the publication of TBUC has scarcely been encouraging. The Haass talks floundered, and the Executive itself has been described recently by the First Minister as not fit for purpose. These are strong signals that the aims of TBUC are being constantly eroded and set aside in favour of other considerations.

7. This erosion is being accentuated by the very poor quality of public discourse, which seems increasingly to be fractious and ill tempered. For example, in May 2014 the Belfast Telegraph reported: ***Speaker William Hay has repeatedly warned MLAs against intemperate language ... He has also warned some remarks had been made which would not be allowed in any other parliamentary democracy.***

8. It is our view that aggressive public discourse mentors and encourages community tensions, by 'normalising' such language and the underlying attitudes. We therefore invite the Committee to comment in its inquiry report on the need for quality in all public debate (whether in the Assembly or on the media) as an essential contribution to the building of a reconciled and cohesive united community.

9. We also have significant concerns about the traction of the strategy at local community level since its publication in May 2013. The strategy largely focussed on the work that government departments and local

councils after the RPA would undertake – and this was very welcome. However, there was minimal focus on the contribution expected from wider civic society (except in the area of sport). One of the results of that weakness is that there is minimal understanding of the strategy by the populace as a whole, and therefore little commitment or even sustained interest in it. This weakness needs to be rectified as soon as possible.

10. In this regard, we note that TBUC commits the Executive to an ambitious programme of action. This has been slow to materialise and as a church we are conscious of the frustrations of many community groups, which have been keen to contribute to the implementation of the strategy. The lack of action is undermining confidence in the initiative and implies a lack of commitment on the part of the Executive.

11. Finally, it seems inevitable that the increasing austerity will severely damage the delivery of the strategy... exemplified in this recent DEL Committee hearing:

***Committee for Employment and Learning***

***October Monitoring Round 2014: DEL Officials - 1 October 2014***

***The Chairperson:***

***Did you not even feel that there would have been any Executive support for bidding for the £0.5 million cut from the Together: Building a United Community budget?***

***Mr McMurray: Not in the current climate of moneys available.***

12. It seems beyond doubt that if the aims of TBUC are not central to the thinking, decisions and working of the Executive as austerity bites, that they will be marginalised in favour of other competing policy and departmental needs. If this happens, and that seems likely, then some of the commitments made in the Belfast Agreement will continue not to be achieved. This would be a very serious development, and the Committee might wish to comment on this in its report.

13. Finally, we would suggest that the Committee itself publishes an annual review of progress on TBUC to ensure that there is proper independent monitoring of the strategy over and above the stated ministerial oversight.

14. We reiterate our willingness to give oral evidence to the Committee if invited.

***Submitted by Very Rev Dr Norman Hamilton  
(on behalf of the Church and Society Committee of the Presbyterian Church)***

***9 October 2014***