

Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

Opening Statement: Reverend Karen Sethuraman

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for the invitation to address you today.

Ireland's Future

Since our last meeting together I accepted the invitation to join the team at Ireland's Future. It is a privilege to be part of a hardworking group who are committed to putting their shoulder to the wheel regarding possible Irish Unity. I made this decision with the blessing of my board/colleagues, family and friends. It is noted that Ireland's Future was established *'to advocate for, and promote, debate and discuss the future of Ireland, including the possibility and viability of new constitutional arrangements on the island.'* Furthermore, it is important to mention that Ireland's Future make it absolutely clear that they are ***'not a political party and are not affiliated to any political party. They welcome participation from people from all political persuasions who are interested in furthering the goals of Ireland's Future.'*** I have highlighted this particular point as it is important to me for two reasons.

Firstly, my work as a Minister centres on peace and reconciliation, and I have the privilege of working with people from all backgrounds on this island, across the UK, and further afield. Secondly, I believe it is critical that conversations regarding the future of Ireland extend beyond the political arena. During our previous discussion together I advocated for a Citizens' Assembly as I am passionate that our conversations are not solely politically-led, but also people-led. Simply put, my heart is for people. I want all voices in our communities to be heard. When you get to the core of what matters most to people— it is not their political stance, but rather the bread and butter issues that affect us all concerning education, housing, healthcare, the economy, and so on.

Therefore, I'm sure you can understand my disappointment at some comments made to my colleague, Niall, at the last committee. One member (in an attempt to link us to a political party), publically stated *'if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck – it's a duck.'* I understand political opposition, but I would kindly ask that this is not projected onto those of us who are not political.

The work of peace and reconciliation calls us to have the courage to extend beyond our own boundaries, and to step into all places and spaces. I was born into a Unionist background; my family, friends and colleagues are Unionists. I am currently involved in various projects to include: the Catholic/Protestant divide, gender equality, racism, LGBT+ rights, inter-faith work, writing a column for Belfast Media, and so on. I am a champion of progressive faith and public theology as I believe in equality, inclusion and creating a fair society for all. I have had the privilege of serving as Chaplain to two Belfast Lord Mayors. It was an honour to champion our City. My reason in sharing this is because peace and reconciliation is best exemplified when people from very different backgrounds not only work together, but form friendships. I can assure you that my work is not politically motivated or linked to any political party.

Nation of Neighbours

Previously, I shared my vision of creating a Nation of Neighbours based on the ancient question: Who is my neighbour? This ancient question is foundational to my work as I believe it has the potential to help provide a unifying framework to build a Nation of Neighbours. Thanks to the Anabaptist/Mennonite Trust I have been accepted to begin a PhD this coming autumn on this very theme (from a faith/theological perspective). Why is this important to me? **Because I am your neighbour and you are mine.** It doesn't matter what background we are from – we must always find ways to work and partner together, creating a better place to live. Even though it was disappointing to hear such comments made, I was overwhelmed by the response and support for myself, and the work of Ireland's Future. I/We are not part of any political party. Those of us who are entrusted with a place of leadership have the responsibility to move away from name-calling, labelling and pigeon-holing. Let's learn to lead well and by example. Let's together put our shoulder to the wheel of peace and reconciliation, and concentrate on creating a better home and future for all of us.

In closing, I would like to extend the hand of friendship and welcome to the Chair and all members. Please come to Belfast and spend time with us. Hear our stories and the work we are involved in.