



## **Reflection**

### **Now is not the time for withdrawal**

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At Christmas we are presented with the humble nature of our Lord, born in a stable in Bethlehem, against the backdrop of political and social change and we hear God telling a new story. We, as Churches in Ireland, are learning again how to prophetically voice and demonstrate our faith within changing religious landscapes. It is not a time for withdrawal – rather, there must be meaningful reflection and engagement with each other and with the communities around us. Churches can learn from their own experience of telling a powerful story but need to renew their exploration of how to communicate the Christian narrative today.

November 2013 marked fifty years since the death of C S Lewis. His autobiographical work, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, comprises an account of Lewis' conversion (or re-conversion) to Christianity. I was struck that in his account of growing up as a Protestant in Northern Ireland he finds God in the world around him, in nature and in conversation with friends from different religious traditions. I found the articulation of his coming to faith deeply confirming for my own faith, spiritual journey and experience of others.

Similarly, Pope Francis' recent document on Evangelisation clearly illustrates a leader who truly relates to his flock, and possesses the pastoral acumen to understand his priorities when mediating Christ in today's world: 'I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.'

C S Lewis and Pope Francis share an enormous love for Jesus, expressed in different ways. I feel it is apt this Christmas to acknowledge their Christian vision and pragmatism.

The Irish Inter Church Committee recently received a report that encapsulates the current task of our ecumenical work on this island, *Reflection, Renewal, and Positive Change in Ireland*. In the view of the Report: 'it is time for the Churches to work more actively together to nurture caring and healing conversations, construct thoughtful shared languages, advance the common good, promote justice, peace, and the creation of a safe, secure and shared society. Churches on our island can only do so with profound humility, and with a voice that acknowledges sins, failings and transgressions.'

Churches across this island need to hold to the Christian concern for every human person in our midst, and never let the vision of Christian ethics and justice be corroded by racism, xenophobia, narrow nationalism and debased forms of materialism. The values we proclaim are global, universal, timeless, and apply to all human persons and to our shared environment. The Churches must, through their actions, never allow humanly constructed borders and boundaries to undermine these universal values. Mutual respect must underpin and guide our efforts.

On this basis, there is an opportunity for the us to rebuild trust by standing with and for the poor – Churches for the poor on this island; Churches always mindful of the voices of the marginalised and the vulnerable in our society – listening and allowing others to speak; to be with those who rightly expect the value-driven promise of a ‘fresh start’ to mean something in their world.

I convey to you every blessing for this festive period,

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Irish Council of Churches 2012–2104