News

Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, Northern Ireland, speaks with Irish Foreign Affairs Minis

Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, Northern Ireland, speaks with Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney, far left, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson following a service to mark the centenary of the partition of Ireland in Armagh Oct. 21, 2021. (CNS photo/Chai Brady, Irish Catholic)

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Leaders of Ireland's Christian churches vowed to face "difficult truth" and work closer together to ensure that the fragile peace process in Northern Ireland leaves a lasting legacy of reconciliation.

The leaders gathered in Armagh for what they described as a service of reflection and hope. Among those who spoke were young people born after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement; they have only known peace.

This year marks the centenary of the division of the island of Ireland — known as the Partition — into two separate states, a mainly Catholic state independent from Britain on the southern part of the island and Northern Ireland, a predominantly Protestant state that remained part of Britain.

The Partition brought an end to the 1919-1921 Irish War of Independence, in which some 2,300 people were killed. However, it was opposed by many Irish nationalists, who rejected the division of the country and lamented the discrimination and sectarianism in the new northern state, where Catholics were subject to immediate pogroms and denied equal rights.

Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh told those who gathered in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral Oct. 21: "When I look back on what happened on this island in 1921, like many others in my community and tradition, I do so with a deep sense of loss, and also sadness.

"For the past 100 years, Partition has polarized people on this island. It has institutionalized difference, and it remains a symbol of cultural, political and religious division between our communities," he said.

Archbishop Martin was joined at the ceremony by leaders of the other Christian traditions, including the Church of Ireland (Anglican), Methodist, Presbyterian and the Irish Council of Churches.

The ceremony became controversial after Irish President Michael D. Higgins declined an invitation, insisting that the event had become political — a claim rejected by the church leaders.

The 300 guests included Irish Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Queen Elizabeth II had been due to participate in the service; however, on the eve of the event, a communique from Buckingham Palace said the 95-year-old monarch had reluctantly accepted medical advice to rest rather than travel for the event.

Archbishop Martin said he had 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."

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Church of Ireland Archbishop John McDowell of Armagh also spoke of churches working for reconciliation. "I am sorry that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we didn't do more to become peacemakers, 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.

"That's certainly what I mean when I say we have too often been captive churches," he said.

The Rev. David Bruce, Presbyterian moderator, said he had "mixed feelings" looking back over the past 100 years.

"Northern Ireland is my home too, and I love it," he said. "But I lament the physical and emotional pain which has been caused over this last century to so many people by violence and the words which lead to violence.

"Sadly, such things remain, and not only on this island. In hope, we long for a day when, as the apostle John describes it, God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain," Rev. Bruce said.

Armagh is the country's ecclesiastical capital, where the fifth-century missionary St. Patrick first presided over the church.

The Rev. Sahr Yambasu, president of the Methodist Church in Ireland, used the example of St. Patrick as a model of reconciliation.

He recalled how St. Patrick had been brought to Ireland and enslaved as an act of violence.

"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 summarized in one word: grace — unmerited concern for the good of the other.

"For us Christians, grace is a gift. That gift is a person. Jesus Christ is his name. He is the gift of God to St Patrick. It is that gift that made him return to Ireland, not to hold the past against the people of Ireland, but to hold before them the possibility of a mutually enhanced future: a future devoid of recriminations and unjust relationships; and a future imbued with and infused by grace," he said.

Rev. Yambasu insisted that "reconciliation refuses to see people through any other lens other than how God sees them — as made in his image."

More than 3,500 people were killed in the 1968-1998 sectarian conflict known as The Troubles. It came to an end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which

committed all parties to achieving constitutional change by exclusively peaceful means and set in place a future mechanism to permit referenda on both sides of the border on Irish unification.