**CHURCH LEADERS’ SERVICE – 21st October 2021**

**Next Thursday, in St Patrick’s Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh, the Moderator, Right Reverend Dr David Bruce, will take part in a Service of Reflection and Hope to mark the centenary of the partition of Ireland and the formation of Northern Ireland. The Service has been organised by the Church Leaders Group (Ireland) with the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Rev Dr Sahr Yambasu, preaching the sermon.**

In today’s Irish News Dr Yambasu writes about how talking with is fellow Church Leaders has prompted him to reflect on what might be relevant from the experience of Sierra Leone, where he is originally from, and how the Service offers a commitment to reconciliation and respect. He says, “A fundamental challenge is to acknowledge how our identity has been shaped by our history, while recognising that it does not have to be defined by it.”

*By now everyone will be aware that we in the Church Leaders Group are hosting a service of Reflection and Hope next week. When I joined the group in June of this year, on becoming President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Church Leaders’ collective engagement on the 1921 centenaries was already underway. As someone who grew up in Sierra Leone, I was very conscious of the pain of partition. Although the two contexts are very different, there are some significant themes that resonate across continents, as identity-based conflicts and power struggles blind us to the ties of our common humanity.*

*In the Church Leaders Group we have been reflecting on the human impact of borders. I belong to the Kissi tribe which, before the continent of Africa was partitioned by European powers, inhabited land that was later separated into three nation states: Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. The borders that were imposed divided families and communities and disrupted people’s everyday lives. This was done without thought or care for the dignity, rights or consent of the people affected, in what historians would later call ‘the scramble for Africa’.*

*The wounds from that injustice have left deep scars. When we allow political structures, and social and economic power, to undermine the ties that bind people together we increase the risk of violence. In Sierra Leone this took the form of a decade-long civil war that is widely held to be one of the most brutal in human history. As we reflect today on the legacy of that conflict we see clearly that the perpetrators of violence not only destroyed the lives of those they held to be ‘the other’, but their actions were also a horrific act of self-harm and self-destruction against their own community.*

*Entering into this process of dialogue with my fellow Church Leaders about the consequences of 100 years of partition in an Irish context has prompted me to reflect on what might be relevant from the experience of Sierra Leone.*

*A fundamental challenge is to acknowledge how our identity has been shaped by our history, while recognising that it does not have to be defined by it. A source of great sadness for me has been the impact of colonisation on the rich cultural diversity of African communities. Political and economic conquest was underpinned by a colonisation of the mind that devalued local languages and traditions and dismantled local community structures. The result was a greatly diminished sense of self-worth for those whose language and customs had been denigrated in this way.*

*We have to address the painful legacy of our history in a way that respects the dignity and rights of those who have been marginalised, but no one community can do this in isolation. It takes courage to reach out and seek to engage in dialogue with those who have hurt us, but this is the only way we can bridge the gap between divided people. This outreach does not require us to forget the past, but it does help prevent us becoming stuck there.*

*In Sierra Leone, as in Northern Ireland, communities have shown great courage in giving perpetrators of violence an opportunity to join the work of reconciliation. The victims and survivors are often those who have shown the greatest leadership and chosen forgiveness at great personal cost in order to bring the gift of peace to themselves and others.*

*If we are to build on this courage in a way that offers real hope for the future we have to be willing to ask the difficult questions around power and exclusion and address the structural injustices that push people to the margins of our society today.*

*Borders take many forms. It is important to recognise the human impact of political borders, particularly at a time when we are becoming increasingly aware of our interconnectedness in the face of global challenges affecting the whole of humanity. At the same time, we need to be aware of the multiple ways in which we can create borders that limit our interactions with those we consider to be different from us.*

*In our service of Reflection and Hope we seek to offer a space in which we can all hear different perspectives, acknowledge what has been harmful in our history and commit ourselves to the work of reconciliation and building a society in which the worth and dignity of every person is respected and valued. Beyond the service, we will continue our efforts to help heal the wounds of the past and lay the foundations for a better future.*

*Embracing those who are different is not about promoting oneself; it is about creating space for each other to flourish. It is not about assimilating them into ourselves; it is about recognizing that there is something of us in the ones we embrace. It is not about ignoring justice; it is about creating space within ourselves for the wrongdoer in hope of reconciliation. That is what GRACE is. It is choosing relationship over being ‘right'. ‘Accept one another…just as Christ accepted you …to bring praise to God.’ (Romans 15:7)*

**Photo:** **(1)** Rev Dr Sahr Yambasu, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland **(2)** members of the Church Leaders Group (Ireland) at St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral, Armagh (Left to Right) the Moderator, Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, Dr Yambasu, the President of the Irish Council of Churches, Very Rev Dr Ivan Patterson, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primates of All Ireland, the Most Rev John McDowell and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and Primates of All Ireland, the Most Rev Eamon Martin respectively.