

Brexit Reflections

Flags have always been a part of my life. Ironic, considering that my home country, Northern Ireland, does not actually have its own official national flag! But growing up in a housing estate near Belfast during what is euphemistically known as ‘the Troubles’, you simply had to know your flags. On the one hand, *our* flag, the red, white and blue of the union and my almost sacramental understanding of it as an outward sign of a deeply held inner belief. And then *their* flag - the green, white and gold of the Irish Republic. Of ‘the other’, who no doubt had equally deeply held beliefs about what their flag meant and signified. Beliefs I could never really understand. Probably because I never tried to. Nor wanted to. At least, not back then. Flags can do that to you.

I came to the Christian faith as a young man, studied theology and became a minister of the Methodist Church in Ireland – a church that serves the island of Ireland, both north and south. My first appointment was right on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Flags were everywhere. ‘Us’ and ‘them’ were everywhere. ‘We’ were few.

In 1998 I was appointed as a mission partner to serve with the United Methodist Church, our sister church, in Germany. Again, flags – or rather, lack of them – was a theme. In Northern Ireland I was accustomed to seeing flags in churches or at particular worship services throughout the year. But the members of my German congregation had a very different attitude to flags. They had experienced the horrors of the Nazis during the Third Reich. The Hitler youth – and in East Germany, the Communist youth - with their flags and their uniforms, led the German church to be much more careful, much more critical of flags and their abuse for nationalist and populist purposes. In all my time here, I have never seen the German national flag in a church!

For the past year I have also been serving the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB) as Europe Relationships Coordinator. It’s an interesting time for this Northern Irishman, living at the heart of Europe in eastern Germany, and working for the British Methodists, particularly as the Brexit deadline approaches and the UK formally leaves the European Union. And once again, flags are having their say. It is the Irish flag, for instance, that will enable me to stay, and travel and work in the EU. Yes, I did apply for Irish citizenship and now have an Irish passport. And yes, my father, staunch loyalist that he was, may well be turning in his grave because I now not only have *our* flag, ...but also *theirs*!

The fact of the matter is that I no longer think in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Flags and indeed my whole sense of allegiance took on a profound new meaning all those years ago, when I became a Christ follower. Don’t get me wrong – when Northern Ireland (try to) play football, I’m a loyal member of the green and white army. Or when Ireland are playing rugby in the 6 nations, you will know where I stand. And when I watch the Olympics, I always want to see Team GB do well.

But as Christians our true allegiance transcends countries. Flags. Man-made borders. Jesus teaches us that every single human being is created in the image of God and is therefore our brother, our sister. The apostle Paul teaches us that our citizenship is not of this earth, but is in heaven. And John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, reminds me that the world is our parish.

That is why it will be pretty much business as usual for me and the rest of my Methodist family in Europe come the 31st January. The UK may be leaving the EU on that date, but as Partnership Coordinator for Europe I will be helping the Methodist Church in Britain to continue its joint ventures with all its partners in Europe. We will remain active members of the European Methodist Council and its sub-committees, indeed honoured and delighted as MCB to be co-chair of the council in the coming year (together with UMC Germany). The national youth gathering of the Methodist Church in Britain (3Gen) will continue to invite, welcome and be enriched by their guests from the wider European Methodist family. Every district of MCB is currently being actively encouraged to seek and initiate church twinning and partnerships intentionally with churches in Europe. Group visits and joint mission encounters to, from and with our partners in Europe, will continue as before. And the many social, diaconal and missional initiatives of our partner churches all across Europe will continue to be supported with grant aid, scholarships, mission partner appointments, and prayers.

Why? Quite simply because we are Christians. Our allegiance is to Christ, and through Christ to the world. Our mission and our calling remain the same, and for that reason, we will keep flying the flag, so to speak. Being church. Journeying together. Humbly doing faith in love.

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