



# CNI

## FAITH FOCUS

### Managing complex identities - the Modern European

**I'll be voting to stay in. I say that to get it out of the way. But I've no intention of using this platform to make the case for staying – although some may read what I say through that lens, writes David Chillingworth in “Reimagining Europe: Christian Reflections on the EU Referendum.”**

I don't think that faith – what some have called 'bothering God' – will yield a single and clear-cut answer. But I do have some sympathy with Bishop Paul Bayes' straightforward contention that the key Christian question is not “what's best for us and our money?” but “which decision will better serve the poor?” That sounds like a throwback to the late Bishop David Shepherd's view that the gospel has a 'bias to the poor'. My own view is that the most obvious faith issue is the extent to which either side in the

Referendum debate is using a 'project fear'. The negativity of fear instinctively leads to a small-mindedness which is a poor basis from which to address an important decision.

I was born in Dublin, grew up in Northern Ireland and was in ministry there during much of the Troubles. Those years of conflict have left me with a deep sympathy for the idea that the EU is and remains the foundation of post-war peacemaking in Europe. The EU institutions are as much a memorial to the suffering and sacrifice of two world wars as the war graves and the preservation of Auschwitz. That retrospective view is attractive. But it seems to me that the European ideal needs to continue to adapt if it is to command the respect of each new generation. The two great challenges to the European ideal in recent years have been the financial crisis which began in 2008 and the current refugee and migrant crisis. In neither case, it seems to me, has Europe been able to find the kind of response which its founding ideals demand.

At the heart of the current referendum campaign is the question of attitudes in the UK to the ideal of 'ever closer union'. The agreement negotiated by the Prime Minister says that the UK will no longer be part of that journey. Yet there is a

debate going on about the purity of the nation state. I find that my experience in Ireland has left me cautious about the nationalism which goes with the nation state. I remember discussion about the search for a 'post-nationalist Ireland'. We learned the painful lesson that there are dangers in claiming or assuming purity of identity. We gradually began to define ourselves in dual-identity terms – of which Ulster-Scots is probably the most common. My own choice is Irish-British. I believe that that honours at least some of the mixtures in my background, although it failed to honour the grandmother who I thought was English but turned out to be German. It's certainly hard to be adversarial about identity if you choose to have more than one!

I'm an Irish person who now regards Scotland as home, I am very aware that the smaller nations seem to be instinctively more pro-European. Small nations with distinctive identities respond positively to the idea that they can also be part of something much bigger. I suspect that this is one of the reasons why Scotland seems to be more pro-EU than the rest of Britain. But I do not think that it would be in our best interests if a Brexit were to lead to the break-up of the UK. These are separate issues and it is important that they should be treated as such.

There is one further issue which troubles me. The clergy whom I work with know that I am keen to avoid the desire of some to decide issues through meetings of the whole congregation. We govern by representative democracy. My contention is that wider meetings allow tired arguments to be rehearsed in extreme terms by people who are speaking without accountability. The 'let the people decide' argument for referenda is of course very powerful. Indeed anything less sounds anti-democratic. But I wonder whether the referendum campaign with its complexity of different issues is really the best way of deciding this issue.

Having stated that profoundly unfashionable view, I say that I shall continue to pray for my country and its leaders. And the people will decide.

## **About the author**

*David Chillingworth was born in Dublin and grew up in Northern Ireland. He was a student at Trinity College, Dublin, and trained for ministry at Oriel College, Oxford and Ripon College, Cuddesdon. He was ordained in 1976 and spent the next 29 years in the ministry of the Church of Ireland. Most of that time was spent in places*

*which were deeply affected by the continuing community conflict – particularly the last 19 years which he spent as Rector of Seagoe Parish, Portadown. In 2005, he was elected Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane and moved to Scotland. In 2009, he became Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. Throughout his ministry, Bishop David has given a high priority to communication. He is a regular broadcaster and for the last ten years has written a blog at [www.bishopdavid.net](http://www.bishopdavid.net). He is married to Alison and they have three adult children and three grandchildren.*

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