**‘Towards a National Conversation’**

 **Outline of the ACI Proposal**

***‘To dialogue means to believe that the "other" has something worthwhile to say, and to entertain his or her point of view and perspective. Engaging in dialogue does not mean renouncing our own ideas and traditions, but the claim that they alone are valid or absolute’ – Pope Francis speaking in the Vatican on the 24th January 2014.***

**Why Now?**

**Why proceed with this initiative at this point in time? What is the difference between the proposed ‘National Conversation’ and ‘reform meetings’ organised in recent years?**

We are now operating in a new environment under the leadership of Pope Francis. Unlike the environment which prevailed in recent decades the lay faithful are now being encouraged to assert themselves, accept their baptismal responsibilities and take their rightful place in the life of the church. Pope Francis has indicated his desire to hear the voice of the lay faithful (‘sensus fidelium’) as evidenced by the worldwide consultation on the Vatican Survey on the Family distributed in late 2013. How can we - as people committed to church reform – respond to and support Pope Francis as he works to create an inclusive and welcoming church appropriate for the 21st Century? This proposal offers a facility to the lay faithful to express their views in less restrictive circumstances than those offered by the Vatican Survey. These views, freely expressed, could be forwarded to the Secretariat to the Synod on the Family in October 2014 as well as to the Conference of Irish Bishops.

**Outline of Proposal**

**Phase 1.** Organise a series of Regional Meetings (4/5) in areas where there is an established reform group presence.

**Phase 2**. Encourage members of the various reform groups to cooperate in organising local meetings in parishes, clusters of parishes and pastoral areas around the country. With the cooperation of the ACP Leadership enlist the support of local ACP members (priests in particular) to facilitate these local meetings.

**Irish Missionary Union [IMU]**

In addition to the support of the ACP the IMU are now part of the ACI Steering Group and constitute another very important resource available to support the concept of a ‘National Conversation’. Many IMU members are accustomed to operating independently with limited resources. Their experience would be very valuable in helping to organise and promote this initiative around the country.

**The aim of the Phase 1 (Regional Meetings) is to:**

* Respond to the urging of Pope Francis by providing a forum for positive discussion & consideration of the important issues facing the church in the 21st Century.
* Attract and engage significant numbers of individuals interested in church reform.
* Publicise the ‘National Conversation, generate interest in the initiative and encourage people to organise smaller, local meetings at the level of the parish, pastoral area or cluster of parishes.
* Establish if there is an ‘appetite’ for a ‘National Assembly’ in September 2014 (or a later date) to bring the initiative to a conclusion.

**Planning Phase 1 (Regional Meetings)**

* Organise meetings around existing reform group ‘leaders’ (ACI, WAC, Pobal, VOTFI, etc.) in cooperation with ACP & IMU members – priests, religious and lay.
* Use church facilities, where possible & permitted – meeting facilities and parish websites, newsletters, notice boards, etc., to promote the meetings.
* Consider organising some meetings in premises other than church facilities to encourage and include those who may be currently ‘outside the church’ and who may baulk at attending meetings in church premises.
* Use local media (radio and newspapers) to publicise the meetings.

Engaging local clergy (and using church facilities where suitable) may give the meetings an ‘official status’ or ‘standing’ in the eyes of some people and could attract those who might not otherwise attend a ‘church reform meeting’ – people who are perhaps interested in the future of the church but are not prepared to ‘move ahead of their local clergy’.

**Phase 1 (Regional Meeting) Structure [Possible Format]**

* Introduction – Meeting Chairperson
* Prominent (local) speaker(s) to ‘set the scene’ & identify some key issues for discussion.
* Facilitate discussion on the issues – in groups and/or plenary session.
* Record main themes by way of a summary of views expressed.
* Identify the ‘next step’ – particularly the promotion of meetings at the level of parish/pastoral area to facilitate continuing the ‘conversation’.

**The aim of the Phase 2 (Local Meetings) is:**

* To bring the ‘conversation’ on the future of the church to as many local parishes and groups as possible.
* Establish if there is an ‘appetite’ for a ‘National Assembly’ in September 2014 (or a later date) to bring the initiative to a conclusion.

**Phase 2 (Local Meeting) Structure [Possible Format]**

The local organisers to decide but it is envisaged that the meetings will involve relatively small numbers and be more informal in nature. Nevertheless a format similar to the Phase 1 meetings would probably be appropriate. Possibly:

* Introduction – Meeting Chairperson
* Where possible a prominent local speaker(s) to ‘set the scene’ & identify some key issues for discussion. Otherwise one of the local organisers ‘takes the lead’.
* Facilitate discussion on the issues – in groups and/or plenary session (depending on numbers).
* Record main themes by way of a summary of views expressed.
* Identify the ‘next step’ – most likely more than one local meeting will be required to cover the topics identified. The ‘next step’ might be to plan for further meetings to continue the ‘conversation’.

**Alternative Local Meeting Format.**

Local meetings could equally take the form of totally informal gatherings of small numbers of people in houses or local ‘coffee shops’. This format could be particularly attractive to people who feel they haven’t the resources or support to organise a bigger event. This style of meeting also offers a way of participating in the process for people who are currently not attending church but who still retain a love for and interest in the future of the church. The views expressed at these meetings should also be recorded and included in any overall report on the ‘National Conversation’.

**Possible Time-table & Important Dates**

**10th February:** Draft Plan circulated to reform groups.

**Mid Feb – Mid March:** Time for consultation with the members of reform groups around the country.

**18th February:** ACI Steering Group consider draft proposal.

**26th February:** ACP Diocesan Reps Meeting (Athlone) – prepare briefing paper based on the draft plan for circulation at this meeting.

**Early April:** Media Launch. Ideally with reps from all reform groups present. Promote initiative using national & local media in particular (radio & newspapers), reform group websites, email lists, etc.

**April-May:** Phase 1 - Regional Meetings.

**May-June:** Phase 2 - Local Meetings.

**September** **2014** – Possible ‘National Assembly’ followed by the submission of a report on the ‘National Conversation’ to the Synod on the Family and to the Conference of Irish Bishops’.

A later date may be more feasible for this gathering but postponing the ‘National Assembly’ creates the risk that any momentum generated by the Regional and Local meetings will be lost. Postponement will also mean that the opportunity of submitting a report on the ‘National Conversation’ to the 2014 Synod on the Family will be lost.

**The 2015 Synod in Rome**

The 2015 Synod is another important landmark in the schedule set out by Pope Francis for consultation with the world-wide church. It is important, in considering the idea of a ‘National Conversation’, to identify how this initiative might develop into a mechanism for contributing not only to the Synod on the Family in 2014 but also to the Synod planned for 2015.

**Funding**

It is envisaged that the regional and local meetings will be organised on a ‘self- funding’ basis through ‘voluntary collections’.

**Developing the Proposal.**

Each group considering participating in the initiative will obviously follow their own procedures for consulting with their members. Feedback from these consultation exercises is vital in terms of developing the plan for this initiative.

**END**