REFORMED ALWAYS TO BE REFORMED

The 16th century Reformations were plural. There were four classical Protestant Reformations, each with distinctive differences. They were the Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and Radical Left Wing or Anabaptists. The Anglican and Reformed models came to Ireland with political conquest and Plantation, which was why the Protestant Reformations were something of a failure in Ireland. The Anabaptists, big on separation of church and state and non-violent, never made an impact on Ireland, except for the later presence of the Quakers. The Catholic Reformations, which significantly reformed the Catholic Church, was centered on the Council of Trent 1545-1563.

The 31 October 1517 is a bit misleading. Luther may have nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenburg, a way of giving notice of a public debate, but the Reformations were a decades long revolution. They were religious, social, political, cultural and economic with no clear water between these. The Reformations or revolution reshaped Europe and legacies remain.

Europe has moved beyond the polemics of then, though we still have something of a hangover in Ireland. We live in a different world with some very different questions. Commemoration of the past or an interpretation of the past can be a way of avoiding the big questions of now. There are some themes from then with resonance for now.

The reformations and political violence

In 1524-1525 there was a peasants’ revolt. In a changing world the farmers became the left behind or the pushed behind. Luther opposed and wanted to crush the farmers’ revolt and the authorities did in a brutal and violent way. In 1618-1648 there was a thirty years war, a product of the Reformations, and the largest and most destructive war of its time. It was a bloody, religiously inspired war. Why does religion at times become so socially conservative and oppose justice? How does religion become so implicated in violence and war?

A theology of crisis

Religiously, socially, politically and economically the 16th century was in crisis. In a crisis religion either takes flight, usually into forms of piety or otherworldly religion. Or it engages with the crisis, goes back to the theological drawing board and comes up with a theology of crisis. Luther produced a theology of crisis. The Reformations or revolution reshaped Europe and legacies remain.

There were pre-Reformations which paved the way for what happened in the 16th century. A key influence was humanism, articulated by the Catholic priest Erasmus of Rotterdam whose influential and ground breaking translation of the New Testament shaped the 16th century Reformations. There is no denying the fierce and violent polemics of the 16th century. In 500 years...
EDITORIAL

Welcome to the 21st issue of the Church Fora Newsletter. We are grateful to those who contributed articles to this issue and to those who continue to be ‘explorers of possibility’ and ‘weavers of wholeness’ in their local groups. The context in which we work in summer 2017 confirms the need for such ‘explorers’ and ‘weavers’ as we live through many unsettling events both in our community and in the wider world. Central in the motivation of Inter-church activists across N. Ireland is a desire to contribute to shaping a peaceful, just and inclusive community. Bishop Noel Treanor in a recent address to an ecumenical gathering in Clogher diocese spoke of ‘a shared and urgent responsibility to re-appraise ourselves of the irreplaceable contribution our faith heritage and tradition can and must make to shaping a saving view of the world, an anthropology, a humanism, which generates hope, spiritual energy and reconciliation with the ballast of history for the “good purpose”, as St Paul puts it, (1 Cor 12:7), or “the common good”, as understood in Christian Social thought, for present and future generations’.

Here in N. Ireland our politicians struggle to piece together a political agreement which will stem the unravelling of devolved government. They are also confronted by the many challenges and uncertainties resulting from last June’s tectonic plate shifting referendum. Recently Fintan O’Toole commented that the EU was founded on a kind of constructive pessimism. ‘Behind its drive towards inclusion and equality lay those two powerful words: or else. It was an institution that knew that if things are not held together by collective justice, things will fall apart.’ The glue of collective justice is needed not just in the European context but locally.

In this time of political uncertainty here all of civic society has a role to play in supporting and encouraging leaders to forge a solution to the political crisis, a solution which has the capacity to deliver justice, focus on the common good and create conditions and policies which facilitate human flourishing for all sections of the community. This too is a shared and urgent responsibility.

This year marks the anniversary of an ecclesiastical breach - the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. The Reformation had an enduring impact and its legacy is felt keenly today. Through its religious, social, and political effects, the Reformation set the stage for the modern world. Current research by historians, biblical scholars and theologians is producing new, non-polarised insights into the life and work of Martin Luther as a reformer who enriched the entire Christian tradition, notwithstanding the divisions which followed in Western Christianity. These divisions were due mainly to cultural and societal factors well beyond Martin Luther’s control and intentions as a theologian. Some local inter-church groups are planning seminars to explore and reflect on the impact of the Lutheran Reformation and the impact of other reformations within Churches. Participants hope to gain new insights into these seminal events and new understanding of the potential for reform in all churches today. They also hope to get a better understanding of how religious ideas are subverted and result in sectarianism.

Our recent CONNECT conference had as its theme ‘Reformed Always to be reformed – re-formations then and now’. Participants had the benefit of Johnston McMaster’s recent research and wide knowledge on the subject of reformations. In a very stimulating final session the conference discussed the 21st Century context - what will ‘reformed’ theology look like for Christian Faith Communities in relation to other globalised religions? You can read an abridged version of Dr. McMaster’s conference address in this Newsletter.

500 years after 16th century reformation we live in a global village under threat with ever-increasing inequality making long-term political and social stability impossible. This week UNICEF reported 12 million people (7 million of them children) are on the move in central and Western Africa driven by state violence, poverty and climate change. Those figures reflect what is happening in only one area of a world crying out for political, social and economic justice.

Meanwhile in all troubled areas there are people from diverse faiths and people of no faith working tirelessly to ease the suffering of fellow human beings. In the words of Nelson Mandela ‘Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future’.

Eileen Gallagher

BALLYCASTLE CHURCH ACTION – 5TH ANNUAL ‘BLESSING OF THE BOATS,’ CEREMONY.

Ballycastle Church Action hosted the 5th and now annual ‘Blessing of the Boats’ service as part of the Rathlin Sound Maritime Festival on Friday 26th May 2017. Weather conditions were excellent, and Ballycastle town centre and many shop fronts bedecked in bunting and Maritime themed displays.

A well attended joint prayer service was conducted by representatives of all of the local denominations. – Fr Brian Daly (St Patricks and St Brigids, Ballycastle), Rev David Ferguson (Ramaan Parish, Church of Ireland) and Rev John Stanbridge (Ballycastle and Cragmore Presbyterian Church). The service was held on the deck of the car ferry MV Canna in Ballycastle harbour. Local boats, currachs, ferries and other craft of various sizes were joined by the crew from Red Bay Lifeboat in a circular flotilla for the wreath laying ceremony which took place further out in the bay. Special Guest, musician Joby Fox, funder of Refugee Rescue a humanitarian and non political NGO currently based in Lesvos Greece, which has helped thousands of refugees fleeing war and persecution laid the ceremonial wreath from the bridge of the MV Canna at sea, this was followed by many individual flowers from members of the public.

The ferries gave free passage to anyone who wanted to take part in the ceremony. In all another wonderful event and tribute to the industry of Ballycastle Church Action. Ballycastle Church Action’s newest venture is its participation in the Causeway Coast & Glens Inter Faith
The Forum is represented by members of the following faiths: Muslim, Hindu, Baha’i, Christian, Sikh, Church of the Later Day Saints, and it is hoped to add representatives from the Jewish and Buddhist faiths in due course.

The purpose of the Forum is to learn about each others’ traditions; build Relationships of Trust; Respect for other traditions and cultural differences.

Discuss issues of common concern and appreciate the value of diversity.

Understand the needs within local faith communities today.

Understand the importance of dispelling myths and eventually to be able to visit our individual faith celebrations e.g. St. Patrick’s Day, Easter, Baha’i New Year, to name but a few.

Explore the relationship and influence that Abraham has on all our faith groups.

To this end we have been sharing each others’ personal faith journeys and already have learned much about other traditions.

Since January 2017 the Steering Committee of Ballymena Church Members Forum have been involved in a process of developing greater understanding among one another. This has involved each of us telling our story to the group and then responding to questions/comments from the others on aspects of our story. This has been very enlightening and we have learned a lot about each other that was not immediately apparent before.

On 1st April the Forum took 43 people on a Day Retreat to the Benedictine Monastery at Rostrevor. We arrived at 11.00 a.m. and were welcomed by Brother Eric. Then everyone was free to attend the 11.30 Eucharist with the monks. After that, Rev Stuart Lloyd had organised a programme of reflections at different points throughout the day in the conference room at the Monastery. After a final service of readings and reflections we left the Monastery at 4.30 p.m. for the journey back to Ballymena.

On Wednesday 21st June 2017 we arranged for our Committee to meet with the North Antrim M.L.A.s and M.P. for an exchange of views and discussion on how we as a faith based group and they as politicians can better relate to each other.

We have also met with Dr Johnston McMaster and Eileen Gallagher to discuss how to take forward the contents of letter sent out by Johnston and Kathy Higgins about Fora Members playing their role in civic society. It was decided that Johnston would deliver a 4 week course for us in November 2017 around the themes of “the Common Good” “Equality” “Democracy” and “Putting it into Practice”.

Wilbert Morton

Carrick Church Forums Good Relations program focused last January on ‘Church, Community & Change’ when we welcomed Mr. Derek Poole - experienced Church and Community facilitator to re-envision and re-energise the Churches sector into peace and reconciliation initiatives through four interactive workshops.

In our fast changing multicultural community and world is the church still relevant and adaptable to its community’s many tensions and needs? How can the churches’ message of Peace and Reconciliation be effectively lived out into our changing community? This was drawn from his draft report on ‘Galvanizing the Peace’ where there is the danger of losing peace building momentum and reverting back to the bad old days.

His concluding 4 themes were:

1. ‘To build Intentional community’ in contradiction of the individualistic material consumer word of greed and exploitation.
2. Nurturing authentic Christian worship as a means to God’s grace and not just for entertainment.
3. Leading Christianly not like the worlds social management processes, achievements, goals or techniques but by the genuine good news ‘Gospel’ that brings a radical encounter with Christ and goes to the heart of the human condition / brokenness and predicament.

4. Plant trees! quoting Martin Luther ‘in hope of a better future for God’s creation’

Picking up on the 2nd theme of ‘Nurturing authentic Christian worship’ our monthly informal cross-community fellowship has focused on worship, video and ‘Lecto divina’ reflection, short scripture meditation and sharing, and of course good chat over tea/ coffee! This mix is encouraging more to attend.

Monthly interchurch Lab discussions facilitated by Rev. Mike & Steve continue to run as people from various church backgrounds explore topical subjects, listen and discuss with one another in order to be better equipped to serve God and our community.

Roy Crowe & Philip Orr (co-chairs)
CASTLEWELLAN CHURCHES FORUM

Lent is the busy time of the year when members of our three churches Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic come together for a variety of activities. Each Thursday over 50 people from across the community meet in the Community Centre for Soup, Bread and Cheese Lunches.

The buzz of conversation and the generosity of the patrons tell of a people at ease with each other and showing concern about deprived communities in other parts of the world. This year from our community lunches we were able to donate £2000 to Trocaire and Christian Aid.

On Good Friday a Walk of Witness and Reconciliation took place through the centre of the town. People from different church traditions volunteered to carry a wooden cross from St. Malachy’s R.C. Church to St Paul’s C of I where prayers were offered by the local clergy and cups of soup provided for everyone.

The Forum’s Interchurch Choir participated in a concert in The Lodge, the town’s Arts and Cultural Centre. The choir includes local clergy and anyone who likes to sing along with a guitar & ukulele. They finished their performance with “We all need a hug in the morning.” The composer of the song Ben Sands, Musician from Rostrevor, stood up in the audience and congratulated the choir and their conductor Mona Owens.

Encouraged by Eileen Gallagher, Forum Development Officer, we have developed relations with Newry Forum in the same Council district. We enjoyed a joint visit to the Somme Centre to commemorate the centenary of the battle.

Two years ago the Forum in conjunction with the Irish Churches Peace Project organised a dinner for representatives from the local schools, businesses, health and social services and youth clubs. They were asked for any concerns they had for social issues impacting on the life of the community.

In March the Forum responded to some of these issues with a series of talks held in the local hotel under the title “Shared Hope in Dark Places” and we added “With Light from the Beatitudes” for we wanted to include a spiritual dimension to the issues discussed.

The speakers were chosen from different faith traditions and because they could add a faith perspective to their subject. The meetings were chaired by the local clergy and each night 60-80 people attended from across the community.

The Castlwellan area has a high incidence of suicide among young people, so mental health was addressed by Graham Logan, Psychotherapist for the charity Inspire which provides community based support for people with mental illness throughout Ireland.

The speaker said that home treatment teams can help people manage their illness but faith groups are important. They connect people with each other and faith gives a purpose to live for and serve God – not ourselves.

Group support was also emphasised by Claire Dowds, course director of Bethany Bereavement. She said that while grief is a natural reaction to loss it needs to be expressed. The listener must offer reassurance and reflect the feelings of the bereaved person.

Homelessness and Poverty was the subject of a talk by Father Peter McVerry, a Jesuit Priest who has opened 16 hostels in Inner City Dublin for homeless people. He said that while poverty caused homelessness in the Republic it was drug addiction in Northern Ireland. His experience changed his understanding of God. “You will find God” he says “in the distress of those around you.”

Poverty and reconciliation was also the theme of the talk by Dr John Kyle – a GP in East Belfast and Deputy Leader of the Progressive Unionist Party. His interest in politics is to improve the lives of disadvantaged communities on both sides in Belfast. He spoke of their financial poverty due to a flawed system of welfare, of their emotional poverty associated with low self-esteem and broken family relationships. They also experienced spiritual poverty where the church is irrelevant to them.

He said “Lives could be transformed by an encounter with God for faith speaks of self-worth when we believe we are made in the image of God. Those who feel excluded need to be valued and ensured of a place in society.”

This is the hope that our speakers expressed for those in dark places in our communities.

Ronnie Hamilton

![Castlwellan Good Friday Walk of Witness and Reconciliation.](image)

COLERAINE CHURCHES FORUM

The Coleraine Churches Forum organised an ambitious conference probing the relationship between Islam and Christianity on 1 April 2017. The speaker for the event was Dr. Chris Hewer, and Christian theologian who is also a highly acclaimed expert in Islam. The day was a resounding success with more than 60 people in attendance.

From the outset, Dr. Hewer offered an explanation of Islam that burrowed right down to its core principles. “Islam does not begin with Muhammad, he said. It begins with the only Being that is not created: the only eternally existing being, it is God, and you can’t put an ‘s’ on the end.” He went on to explain that Islam’s God “created the world to experience a state of harmony and balance, due order, safety, security and peace. That is the relationship between God and the world. This relationship is captured in Arabic with three letters equivalent to the Roman letters S, L and M: SaLaM (Peace). As a faith Islam, which is composed of the same three letters devotes
itself to that same harmony of relationship with God.”

It immediately became apparent that much of what is being presented about Islam by fundamentalists and by popular media is a distortion of what it truly aims to be. Dr. Hewer was candid about areas where Islam and Christianity differ from each other. His message was, however, that it is entirely possible for the two faiths to exist in harmonious relationship with each other.

Opening the 1 April event, Maura Hickey, Mayor of the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, said, “Events like these promote peace and harmony in the Borough. It is fair to say that there is not a lot of knowledge of Islam in our society.” She thanked the Churches Forum, who worked closely with the Causeway Faith Forum and the Coleraine Islamic Society for putting on this event.

Dr. Hewer’s visit spanned several days. In addition to the weekend conference he addressed several audiences and forums from Corrymeela to Derry/Londonderry. In each case the response was overwhelmingly positive. As he left, arrangements were already being made for him to return to Northern Ireland in the future.

Apart from this landmark event, the Coleraine Churches forum continue to meet on the first Wednesday of every month. We continue to welcome a variety of guest speakers and engage in meaningful discussion on current events. One of the visitors we welcomed was Reverend Stephen Campbell, a church of Ireland minister who spends most of his time doing vital and sacrificial missionary work among local and expat communities on the Costa del Sol in Spain. Originally from Northern Ireland we were moved by his many experiences of life behind what we usually only think of as the glitz and glamour of a popular holiday destination.

Our theological discussion group continues to meet. This quarter we spent a session exploring the question of the Afterlife. After almost two hours of conversation covering a wide variety of views on the topic, Pastor Bert Ritchie, thanked the participants and commented on the joy of being able to discuss so many different ideas that are deeply held, and still walk out of the room as friends. This comment perhaps captures the ethos of the Coleraine Churches Forum. We value friendship and curiosity, as well as frank engagement with the issues of day to day world. We welcome new members and opportunities to build new friendships.

Weiers Coetser

Everyone enjoyed our Christmas party to which we invited friends. This proved an opportunity to relax over a lovely lunch and to get to know one another better. We had seasonal music by Moreen which we all greatly enjoyed.

In the spring months our meetings featured speakers from Christian Aid, Malawi, and Romania. Each speaker was very encouraging and we were fascinated by aspects of life and living, very different to our own. The April meeting highlighted the wonderful work of “Nightlight” which helps people, chiefly young people, who get into difficulties in Belfast streets especially on The Golden Mile and Odyssey areas at night.

In May we had a very instructive and enjoyable study day, when we learned so much about Drumalis, Lame which is the outreach centre for the Sisters of the Cross and Passion.

Following this we travelled to Gracehill, the Moravian Centre, and had a fascinating glimpse into life and times of the early Moravian settlers.

In the autumn our group will again help immigrants by volunteering to provide meals and clothing at the International Meeting point on the Lisburn Road Belfast.

Please remember our Annual Gathering in the 174 Trust on Saturday morning 11th November with guest Speakers Baroness May Blood and Dr Brian Lambkin.

Lorna McKee

Women in Faith June 2017

Women in Faith have had a very interesting year. We were pleased to welcome some visitors to most of our meetings on the fourth Wednesday of each month 174 Trust at 10.30am.

During the Autumn season 2016 we held our Annual “Gathering” in mid November. The theme was “Going forward in Courage”. Our Speakers, were Dr Leslie Carroll who showed us a film depicting the results of racial hate in Rwanda and the ongoing effects of building the peace, and Mrs Sarah Cook who demonstrated the recent work of Corrymeela following the peace process. Both were excellent. The discussions afterwards were lively and thought provoking.

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NEWRY DISTRICT INTER-CHURCH FORUM

At the November 2016 AGM Brian Eggins and Anna Hanna stood down from being Co-Chairs of NDICF. Marjory Parrott and Cathy Cassidy took over. Jeanette McConnell became Minutes secretary.

At our next theological discussion meeting Gavin Fleming led a discussion on the Apostolic Succession; Later Noel McLune gave a talk about Mental Health and Christianity. On another occasion we showed and discussed the Phillip Orr DVD ‘Half Way House’ and had a general discussion about aspects of faith.

On Saturday 4th February, fifteen members and friends from Newry & District Inter Church Forum joined with nine members and friends from Castlereagh Inter Church Forum, for a joint trip to the Somme Memorial Museum in Newtownards. We were welcomed with tea, coffee and scones, and then had time to explore the many exhibits, prior to joining in the guided tour, which was both informative and sobering. The two Fora appreciated the opportunity to enjoy a joint activity, and wish to thank the Executive Office for the funding which made the trip possible.

Meeting with NIMMA May 2017.

Over ten percent of marriages in Northern Ireland are ‘mixed’, that is between a Catholic and a Protestant. This situation has caused much dissent over the years between churches and within families. The Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) was set up in 1974 to help people contemplating or already committed to mixed marriages. Ken Dunn, Chairman of NIMMA gave us a stimulating presentation about NIMMA. He pointed out the difficulties between churches and within families that still exist though much improved through the work of NIMMA. He introduced a book giving stories of children of mixed marriages.

Our most recent event has been a course led by Dr Johnston McMaster on Christians and War, Christian and Peace. The five weeks covered issues of: To Hell and Back: Thinking Deeply About the Twentieth Century. Is There Such a Thing as a Just War? Is Pacifism Credible in a World of Real Politics?

Brian Eggins and Marjory Parrott

COOKSTOWN DISTRICT INTER-CHURCH FORUM REPORT

The 15th Annual General Meeting of the Cookstown and District Inter-Church Forum was held at Glenavon House Hotel on Monday 8th May 2017 at 7.30 pm. There were approximately 48 in attendance including 3 members of the Mid-Ulster Clergy Together and a special guest, Walter, a theology student from Hong Kong who accompanied our joint guest speakers.

Monthly meetings/ events continued throughout the year. In January we had Jennifer Hobson speaking on the Camion de Compostela walk. February was a social occasion with our annual dinner in Breaside .Denise Wright Race Relations Co-ordinator for South Belfast and Chairperson of EMBRACE Migration Awareness shared thoughts and insights on her work at the March meeting.

In June we held a barbecue and Chairperson of EMBRACE Migration Awareness shared thoughts and insights on her work at the March meeting. In June we held a barbecue. In July we had the ‘Festival in the Park’. In August.

Pauline Marshall

DUNGANNON DISTRICT INTER-CHURCH FORUM

During the Queen’s visit to NI in 2012, she went to Enniskillen. This visit provided the focus for the Dungannon Churches’ Forum outing with the Riverbrook Inter-Faith group from Sligo.

After a welcome and tour of St Macartan’s Church of Ireland Cathedral led by Rev Kenneth Hall, we crossed the street following in the steps of the Queen’s visit, to meet Monsignor O’Reilly in St Michael’s Catholic Church. Our visit to Enniskillen museum gave us the chance to see the commemorative painting of the Queen’s visit by Hector Mc Donnell.

After a very pleasant get-together over lunch in Mahon’s Hotel in Lisnaskea, we visited The Garden of the Celtic Saints and Famine Memorial in the grounds of the local Sacred Heart Church. This was the setting for a series of monumental wood sculptures, depicting scenes and figures from myth, Irish life and Scripture, by a young Lithuanian man, Jonas Raiskas. Jonas worked from 2007 until 2011 carving the beautiful figures for the garden. The sheer skill of this artist was acclaimed by all.

We were indebted to Eileen Gallagher who had arranged every aspect of the day, and for the support of Mid-Ulster District Council.

Festival in the Park. 28th May 2017

Each year our Forum arranges a Festival of song and praise in a large marquee in our local Park. This year, the two participating choirs were from St Patrick’s Catholic Church, Donaghmore.

The school children in one of the choirs ensured that parents, grandparents, as well as school friends, were present in support. The sunshine added to the pleasure and the praise. It was all enhanced by the support of our local Council and the attendance of the Council Chairperson.
“There’s no point in building bridges if we’re not going to use them.” These words from our guide, Dr. Seosamh Ó Ceallaigh (Joe Kelly) rang especially true as we travelled through Donegal two days after the last general election. Our study trip through the Cloughaneely district of the Donegal Gaeltacht gave us many examples of generous and imaginative bridgebuilding in the region’s rich history. From the cromlech at Gortahork, over four thousand years old, to the unique modern status of Tory Island, home of the only remaining Irish king, it is an area where history speaks throughout the striking and beautiful landscape. We heard about land wars and sheep wars, famine and migration, folklore and the development of Irish language education. And through all this, we learned especially of those individuals who were prepared to cross cultural and traditional boundaries in order to reach out and help their neighbours. They were inspiring stories, and especially relevant to us at a time of potential polarisation. We are grateful to all those who organised and led the event, and for the support of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. It was a fitting close to the first half of 2017 for the Forum, which is continuing to explore the ways in which we can share our history, our present and our future. Our activities, including the service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and our very popular Lenten lunches, are helping to keep issues of reconciliation to the fore and to remind us of how much is still to be achieved. We will return in the autumn with a conference, seminars and other events offering opportunities to talk and to listen, to learn and to share. New members are always welcome, and more information is available on our website at www.fermanagchurchesforum.org.

Tanya Jones

LARNE TUESDAY GROUP

As the 2016/2017 season of Larne Tuesday Group draws to an end, we reflect on our programme with the theme Captured By A Vision and the range of topics and speakers starting with a local historian who talked about the role that Larne played in World War 1. This was a fascinating and well researched introduction, especially for those who grew up in Larne. Dr Frank Sellar followed this and spoke about his personal faith journey and his book ‘Anywhere But Nineveh’. Then it was the turn of Rev Ken Newell who also spoke about his journey and his book ‘Captured By A Vision”. These were 2 excellent thought provoking meetings, appreciated by all present and left us wanting to hear more. Other speakers were the previous mayor of Mid and East Antrim Council giving his insight into the challenges and highlights of the recent council amalgamation and the author Tony McAuley who drew on humorous stories from his own childhood when he felt he was living in a divided society. The season drew to a close with Rev Martin Magill telling us about his cross community work and in particular the 4 Corners Festival organised in conjunction with Rev Steve Stockman. This was another inspiring and deeply personal talk and a great way to finish our season. We look forward to hearing more inspirational speakers share their personal stories with us next season.

OMAGH CHURCHES FORUM

Omagh Churches Forum members went on a study visit last month to Armagh. The group visited both Cathedrals in the city and were given guided tours of each. They also had a guided tour of Cardinal Tómas Ó Fiaich Memorial Library. All guides were very knowledgeable and provided a wealth of information to the participants. The Forum members received a very warm welcome from both Archbishop Eamon Martin and Fr Peter McAnnelly in St Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral and from Archbishop Richard Clarke and the Very Rev Gregory Dunstan in St Patrick’s Anglican Cathedral. Omagh Churches’ Forum members were very impressed by the co-operation and genuine friendship that exists between the church leaders in Armagh. The group found the study visit to be very interesting and provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on our common heritage and beliefs.
Tillich articulated it as the human and divine protest against any absolute claim made for a relative reality, even if the claim is made by the Protestant Church. No partial object of loyalty can become an ultimate object of loyalty, including the Bible or Protestantism. The Protestant Principle means that loyalty to nation, state or country cannot be ultimate either as it did in the 19th and 20th centuries with destructive and catastrophic consequences, and as threatens to do again in Europe and the US. The Principle is really the first word of Sinai, ‘You shall have no other God’s before me’. (Exodus 20 v 3) Have Irish Christians of any tradition ever really believed in the Protestant Principle? Would we dare to recover it in the 500th anniversary year?

Reformed always to be reformed
This is one of the greatest insights of the Reformations. Semper reformanda, reformed always to be reformed is a core European value. Nothing stands still, no institution or organisation remains static. There is no finished product. Reform is always needed or the revolution is never over. Reform is not just religious. It was not in the 16th century and is still not confined to religion. It is social, political, religious and economic. Do our churches need reform? Do our political institutions need reform? Unless there is constant reform churches, political institutions and social and cultural organisations become moribund, irrelevant and unfit for purpose. They do not serve the people for whom they exist. Expecting those in power to embrace reform may be like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas! But how many as church members or as citizens are really up for change? Reform always requires new paradigms of theology, politics or economics.

In relation to the faith community a new paradigm of theology would be reign or Kingdom of God centered. Reform would create new models of applied social ethics and create a radical public theology and public ethics. The Christology would be a truly human Christology which at the same time would shape a more humane and compassionate anthropology. In a world of poverty and violence it would be a justice and peace Christology. It would be theology done in the midst of others, taking seriously the twin context of religious pluralism and the secular. Put another way, in the 21st century world for Christian faith communities in relation to other globalised religions, what would ‘reformed’ theology and ethics look like?

(The above is an abridged edition of presentations by Dr Johnston McMaster at the Connect Conference held in ISE, Belfast on 8th June 2017. Fora interested in holding seminars, workshops or conferences on the Reformations during 2017-2018 please contact Eileen Gallagher).

Dr. Johnston McMaster