AUTHENTIC HUMANNESS

For most of the time we live in boxes. We also live out of dualisms. Dualisms, boxes and labels define us. And we are not only defined by these but also confined by them. The dualisms, boxes and labels restrict and limit us. They make us less than human. We are Protestant or Catholic, Irish or British, Christian or Muslim, male or female, straight or gay. We could go on! Dualisms, boxes and labels that attempt to define and confine us. These are all social constructs, inventions by humans, by ourselves. We uncritically buy into them and live by them. They are constructed as control mechanisms, ways of regulating life and society. We can’t have everyone the same or equal, we have got to create distinctions, categories and identity differences because society has got to be regulated and ordered along orderly lines. But who determines the social constructs and what social order is? Those who hold the power, who need to dominate and rule out of, not the common good, but self interest.

The dualisms and labels create further dualisms because Protestant or Catholic, Irish or British, Christian or Muslim, male or female, straight or gay, heterosexual or homosexual, are all about superior/inferior, dominant/dominated, normal/abnormal. This is the social control, the regulatory mechanisms that keep people on top and others in their place. And what these dualisms, labels and categories do is dehumanise. They dehumanise not only the people who are inferior or dominated, they also dehumanise those who think they are superior or think they have some moral right to dominate and be superior. Dualisms are destructive because they fail or refuse to acknowledge that we are only authentically human together. Humanness is only found in community. That, as we shall see, is an essential biblical insight. So long as we see ideological others, see others through dualistic lenses, we are less than human. Who are we seeing and treating as less than human? What ideological label are we sticking on others? Why are we doing it or why do we want to be superior and be the dominant class, gender, religion, ethnic group, race, sexual being or whatever?

Before we are anything else we are human. Before I am Christian I am human. Before I am straight or gay I am human. Before I am anything else I am human. That is my primary identity marker. It is my givenness. One of the ultimate questions in life, therefore, is what does it mean to be human? How can we be human together? How can we enable human flourishing? How can we promote and sustain human wellbeing? How can we nurture human community which is where our authentic humanness is to be experienced and realized?

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Bible has more to say about the importance of being human than we have realized. There is a strong biblical trajectory on humanness that may have been somewhat obscured by an over-spiritual or confessional reading of the Bible. We have often read a religious text rather than a human text. Of course it’s a book about God, but it’s a book written by humans about God in very human experience. It’s a book about the human experience of the sacred in the messiness and struggle of being human and the struggle to be human. We need to recover the very human dimension to what we see as a shared sacred text. Recover the great human thread running through the text about the primacy and authenticity of being human and being human together. And
an essential insight of that human thread is, that if we want to experience the sacred dimension in life, then it is only in and through our humanism.

BEGINNING WITH THE HUMAN

The first chapter of the book of Genesis has sadly become a battlefield between literalists, who read language and text as metaphor, and a more destructive Genesis 1 has become a battlefield between science and religion, between science, creativity and evolution. It’s a misplaced and silly dichotomy that has distorted both God and humanity. Genesis 1 has its origins in Babylonian exile, the destruction of the temple, and the depth of displacement, disillusion and the total collapse of meaning we they by the rivers of Babylon unable to sing any song. But, thanks to imaginative poetic creativity, they learned to sing again. Out of the trauma of war, they regained their sense of God and their own humanity, in the face of the Almighty. Babylonian God Marduk, and all powerful imperial violence, they sang Genesis 1. In exile they were forced to re-experience who they were, what they were for in life and they reimagined the sacred, they reimagined God. And in their wonderful poetry, the language of imagination, which they always sung, tell the story of the creation of the human at the beginning of the Bible people are not Hebrews, they speak of everything else, they are human.

Then there is Adam. I had an uncle called Adam but he was not the God who was made to be the image and likeness of the god that begins with the human together. Son of Man is a vision of a more human and humanly possible human.

Ezekiel has a different usage for the metaphor. The metaphor is found more in Ezekiel’s vision of Man is Ezekiel’s word. It really means the human one. Ezekiel is located at the early stages of the Babylonian exile. He is among the first stage of the Babylonian exile. He is thinking in this dehumanizing and traumatic context. The human is the human in the midst of the catastrophic to human. It destroys and crushes body and soul. It destroys all powers of human society and all that we hold on in the human. In that situation, the prophet shapes visions of hope. Humanity can be recovered. We cannot recover our authentic humanism. The language of Revelation, Jesus reveals the human and live more humane lives together. Again we cannot and we will never do this. In the new creation, we do it too often, do from our western individualistic way of seeing. The language of Jesus is trying to say to us is that not is Jesus is some unique human divine being. But this is who we are authentically and are to be. In our humanities we are not human, we embody divinity. This is what it means to be truly human, and divine.

Significantly, Jesus is never described in Christian theology as male. Through the ages theology has made a great deal of the maleness of Jesus and used his maleness to construct a patriarchal theology. Theology of maleness in Jesus has not always been in the texts of Jesus, in the human experience and encounter with other. As, for example, in the text of Mark which never describes Jesus as male. It was always used in the text of Mark in the image of the good, non-violent, compassionate figure. So in the text of Mark, Jesus is a mysterious, heavenly figure. But the Son of Man who comes from heaven as a contrast is radically different, he is apocalyptic and therefore he is in the most major text of all. Son of Man is in the Gospels in the reference to Jesus is Son of Man. This was a metaphor used of the emperor. But the most widely used language used of the emperor. It always thought to be a male centered description of Jesus. No, the language used of the emperor. It is not true, it has been raining on the emperor. But it is a metaphor. This is a metaphor used heavily by the prophet Ezekiel and Daniel. Daniel’s language is apocalyptic and therefore he is a more symbolic Jewish genre. In Ezekiel, the language of the Emperor is just a mysterious, heavenly figure. But the Son of Man who comes from heaven as a contrast is radically different, he is apocalyptic and therefore he is in the most major text of all. Son of Man is in the Gospels in the reference to Jesus is Son of Man.
CARRICKFERGUS BOROUGH FORUM

Our December fellowship Christmas celebration was in St. Nicholas RC, with Fr. Peter Owens and focused on our prayers on the ‘Celebrating Streams of Life’ event in February 2016. In this event we invited all to celebrate the life and worship of our churches and their congregations that have maintained the Carrickfergus community, focusing first on the older established churches from Carrickfergus to the Coastal churches. Rev. Peter Lamb has been retired from St.Paul's Church in 1 Cor 15:58’s ‘Christ’. Rev. Peter Passmore has been licensed. Therefore, let us keep the feast... We celebrated the Jewish week of Passover ending at 6.00 pm Sunday Thursday 3rd April at St.Paul's /Gateway church. Here we invited Mi Grant Wetherill who is a Messianic Jew and a Director of Jewish Insights to lead us in this celebration and presentation of the significance of the eight elements that make up the Passover Table and the prayers in their Hebrew and English. We have 30 registrations from a wide range of churches that enjoyed the evening and the good quality lamb stew meal that followed. Again we hope to explore the significance of the other Jewish feast days.

Along with these events the St.Colmans /Gateway church has been hosting monthly ‘Lab’ sessions of open discussion on a variety of subjects exploring our diversity of faith expressions, as well as non Christian religions e.g Islam. Church forum members across the church spectrum have been welcome in attendance to share and contribute to this discussion forum. This has helped our programme and greater relational unity and understanding within the forum.

Helping met with both Ballymena and Larne church fora over this past year we hope to plan joint events of interest to all.

For further info on past and present events visit our website: www.carrickferguschurchforum.org

On behalf of Carrickfergus church forum . Grace and Peace to all.

Roy Crowe & Philip Orr (co-chair)

BALLYMENA CHURCH MEMBERS FORUM

Over the last 6 months Ballymena Church Members Forum have been continuing to discuss and promote community relations and reconciliation within our area.

The churches in Ballymena have been undergoing different changes and we will have to intentionally make new contacts. Canon Stuart Lloyd who has been a stalwart supporter of the Forum has retired from St Patricks Church of Ireland and his successor, Rev Mark McCouncil, has had his first year in service on Wednesday evening 1st June. We look forward to getting to know him better and we are absolutely delighted that Canon Lloyd has agreed to chair our Steering Committee. His heart for reconciliation which was demonstrated over his whole ministry in Ballymena and the experience he gained will be invaluable to us in the Forum.

The Salvation Army in Ballymena is promoting a two day leader called Chris Still who participated in the Good Friday Walk of Witness and we will be making further contact with this organisation. One of his predecessors, Elizabeth Pritchard used to be a member of our Steering Committee.

Rev Maureen Hassard, our long serving supporter of the Forum, is leaving Ballymena Methodist and we will be making a presentation to Maureen at our meeting on Monday 13th June 2016.

During February and March we have been experimenting with a Girls Brigade Company in Cullybackey for use in their programme.

On Thursday 3rd March we held our annual Conversation in Montgomery’s Restaurant Ballymena. This involved our Chairperson giving an overview of Muslims in Ballymena, Rabbi David Singer, the leader of the Jewish Community in Belfast and Bro Rev David Jardine, a member of the Society of St Francis and leader of Divine Healing Ministries talking about forgiveness in each of their religious traditions. We had around 70 in the audience that night and asking if that from which we learned. Ballymena Inter Ethnic Forum who have organised a bus trip to Dublin on Friday 10th June 2016 where we will visit the Mosque, the Synagogue, a Roman Catholic church and a protestant church. We have filled a 30 seater bus and there is a waiting list should there be any coffs.

On Good Friday 25th March 2016 we linked with the Clergy Fellowship in a Public Carrying of the Cross in Ballymena. It was attended by just over 50 people and we kept silent as we walked which meant that there was a very meaningful experience for everyone who took part.

This year we started the walk at 12.00 noon so as not to clash with other evangelists who use the Bandstand every Friday. On Thursday 12th May we supported the All Saints Parish Folk Group, our Vice Chairperson Phoebe McDonald is part of the group, in an evening of praise and worship called A New Pentecost. This took place in FEBRUARY in the Braeside restaurant, Cookstown where we all met and this was followed by lively entertainment provided by Blagheen and Davd.

Also we were pleased to be involved with the series of Lenten Talks which were organised by the Mid Uster Clergy Forum and held in the Glenaron Hotel. Dr Johnston McMaster and Dr Cathy Higgins led the programmes each evening with group discussions providing an opportunity for everyone to participate. The talks dealt with conflict and war and in particular the Easter Rising in FEBRUARY and the Battle of the Somme.

Peter McBride from the Northern Ireland Association of Mental Health was the speaker in March and his topic was Forgiveness. Peter has a breadth of knowledge and expertise as he has qualifications in Science, Divinity and Social Work all of which come in useful as the CEO of NAMI providing mental health and learning disabilities in N.I.

A trip to PRONI was undertaken in April with 19 people travelling and was a beautiful expression of the overview of the history of Public Recording Keeping in Ireland down through the centuries. He followed this with a tour of the facilities and demonstrated how to make use of the computers to gain access to family records etc.

He also had set out some documents and maps of local interest to Cookstown which were of great interest to all.

The AGM was held in May in The Glenavan Hotel and this year the guest was Most Reverend Eamon Martin Archbishop of Armagh who was most interested and entitled ‘Having Faith in the Public Square’.

Margaret Hamilton

CASTLEWELLAN CHURCHES FORUM

The core of the forum is the Bible Prayer Group. Seventeen members of the church meet weekly for Bible study and prayer.

During the past six months the church has enjoyed many lunchs during Lent. They were held in on the Community Centre.

£2,000 was donated to Christian Aid and Trocaire.

On Good Friday a walk of witness and reconciliation started from Castlereagh Church of Ireland to St Malachy’s Catholic Church.

The second anniversary of the church was celebrated on ‘Celtic Spirituality’ by Rev Grace Clunie, Director of the Centre for Celtic Christianity in Armagh.

This year has seen an increased interest in the inter church challenge in different areas. The churches in Castlereagh have enjoyed a joint Carols in St Paul’s Church and the church at the Christmas Tree.

One of the carols ‘The Little Drummer Boy’ was recorded in June and performed at the Christmas service in St. Malachy’s, Belfast.

As a result the choir is now fulfilling engagements in gospel concerts and giving performances for fund raising events in other communities.

As a Forum we have been promoting participation and support of members of the church in the choir, demonstrating another way of building ecumenical relationships.

Ronnie Hamilton
CHURCH FORA NEWSLETTER

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NEWRY DISTRICT INTER-CHURCH FORUM

Agnostic secularism is a major problem. It is taking over from Christianity in many areas, yet interest in spirituality, yoga, so-called ‘mind-body’ is growing. At our Annual Symposium in October last year our speakers addressed ‘The Voice of Christianity in a Secular Age’.

Rev Dr John Dunlop began by defining ‘secularism’ as an ideology that excludes the supernatural. Thus there is no God and no spiritual force through which religion is marginalised. God is edited out of public discussion. Believing in Christianity is odd. He said that Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, Kant, Hegel, Marx, ‘Cogito ergo sum’ has been replaced by ‘I exist, I exist’. Religion has been replaced by shopping.

There is an emphasis on individualism – personal rights what he termed in ‘individualism’. Each of us can make up our own minds what to believe and how to behave without external discipline or institutions. Life is centred on the family, social relations and sport, especially in the ‘scarred space’ of Sunday.

Dr Mary Frances McKeown said people just say ‘live and let live’. She then asked ‘freedom’ power in disguise? Democracy – rule of the majority may not represent us, because our world is divided into ‘we’ and ‘them’. We need to learn to love our enemies. Our choice is the freedom of the spirit, that is our freedom. Our connection to the people of the world who also want human dignity.

Where is the place for existentialists like Soren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who saw meaning in the life and death of Jesus.

So where is the place for difference? Hostility to God – places limits on our actions. Christianity is in good works, the poor. Then there is nothing more practical than finding God.

In authentic Christianity God became flesh and acted in the world, but today people do not dispute the existence of God. It is not the origin of the whole world. He is the yeast and the salt. Truth comes from creative reason and logos. God is in personal relationships. Sometimes the Church can be too individualistic. We need to reconnect with the Church.

This theme continued in a way that the discussion was very much about the freedom of the spirit, that is our freedom. Our connection to the people of the world who also want human dignity.

FERNMAGH CHURCHES FORUM

In the last edition of this newsletter, Johnstounen McMaster wrote of how we need to affirm and bank our long efforts at peacebuilding. This probably not the best description of the walk of the Fernmagh Churches Forum over the past few months. For reconciliation is not a single act, but a series of encounters, some large and some small, continuing throughout our lives. The excitement of big projects needs to be balanced by the need for quiet faithfulness, and we should not think that we can achieve reconciliation not only by broad our reach is, but how deep it goes. The recent activities of the Forum have, on the whole, been continuations of the traditions we have built over the years, but their importance is no less for that reason. At a time when community tensions are heightened and old histories are raised to the surface, it is a relief and an encouragement to share our experience with both old and new friends.

As I wrote our last update, we were in the middle of our autumn course of seminars, led by Johnston, in which we explored the imperatives of reconciliation: to exchange, to encounter the other, and to cultivate ties of friendship and coexistence. A number of these seminars have been completed, and some (for example on ‘the politics of truth’ and ‘the politics of power’) will continue into the next few weeks.

I was interested to see the reaction of the audience to the seminars. The seminars were both popular and challenging, and we hope to build on this momentum in the future.

Dungannon Forum Festival of Praise May 2016.

Tanya Jones

Co-Chair
OMAGH CHURCHES FORUM

2015 ended with the annual Churches’ Forum Community Carol Service, which is held in the town centre, a popular event, well supported. This year St Eugene’s Band was joined by choirs from County Primary School, Omagh CBS and Hazel Ward Theatre School. The Omagh Community Church was host to refreshments after the event. Truly a happy, popular event.

2016 opened with the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 18-25 January. The Omagh event took place on Sunday 24 January at the Church of St Mary, Killyclogher. The theme of the service was ‘Salt of the Earth’. Father Kevin McElhennon welcomed representatives from all the local churches and the well-attended congregation. Prayers for the Holy Spirit and reconciliation were offered followed by an act of commitment to the ‘Salt of the Earth’, to the ‘Light of the Word’ and to proclaim the Lord’s mighty acts.

Food Bank
At the March Forum meeting it was agreed that all local churches would provide needed assistance to the Food Bank already in place and operated by the Omagh Community Church, with aid from Trussell Trust.

Guided Retreat
A sub group has been put in place to organise an overnight retreat to take place in September 2016.

PORTADOWN INTER-CHURCH FORUM

Portadown Inter-church Forum had a very successful Christmas service in Seagoe Parish Church in mid December, and following on from a number of meetings with the Good Relations Department of the new Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon council we have been awarded some funding to keep us going for at least another year.

We had a very useful and interesting evening in mid May when local retired psychiatrist Dr Noel McCune gave a talk on ‘Mental illness - a faith perspective’. This led to a question and answer session which proved really stimulating.

Alan Turtle
Co Chairperson

WOMEN IN FAITH

Women in Faith has had an exciting year and we look forward to meeting old friends and new at our annual conference or gathering on Saturday morning 12th November 2016 at 10.00am Guest Speakers are Pádraig Ó Tuama Corrymeela Community leader and Rev Dr Lesley Carroll Fortwilliam & Macrory Presbyterian Churches.

Our theme this year is “Going forward with Compassion”

We meet in 174 Trust, Duncan Avenue on the 4th Wednesday of each month and we have had a programme of discussions with various stimulating speakers.

Carrickfergus Forum Passover Celebration with Grant Wetheral

Our most recent were Revd Colin Hall-Thompson from Mission to Seafarers, who also hosted our very interesting study trip when we visited The Flying Angel Seafarers’ Centre, as well as the Harbour Commissioners and Sinclair Seamen’s Presbyterian Church, and Revd Robert McKee who transported us to Africa by Power point where we were able to see the fascinating work done by his students in Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania.

The most interesting feature of next year’s programme is, as mentioned above, our gathering on Saturday 12th November in the 174 Trust, Everybody is welcome but a special invitation, this year, goes to the men! So Gentlemen please come along and join us for what will be a very vibrant Morning.

Lorna McKee

Belfast Community Gospel Choir performed at St Columba’s Church in April, to a well-attended and appreciative congregation.

Connect Meeting ISE
In June 2016 three Forum members attended the meeting, Sheila and Eamon Cunningham and Bob Lingwood. The theme was ‘How Shall We Live? On Being Human in the 21st Century’. The session ‘Conversations on Church Fora Best Practice’, supported by six of the Fora, was informative and useful.

Bob Lingwood

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