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CONNECT CONFERENCE ADDRESS: ENGAGING CONTEXT AND THE ONGOING TASK

Context is important. Unless we understand what is going on around us, we have little to say and do, that is meaningful. A worst case scenario is that people of faith are in denial about what is going on and are in flight from the world into an otherworldly faith, privatistic and even trivial. A changing society and world can also create a rigid, moralistic, frightened church. The flight and the fear are real and recognisable. It doesn’t have to be that way. Naming the issues can help. Understanding the context can go a long way to help shape a new way of being faithful in the world.

Where In The World Are We? We Are Living With the End Of Christendom

This does not mean the end of faith but the end of a religio-political system that began in the 4th century, lasted in Europe for 1500-1600 years and was generally bad for religion and for politics. In 313CE with the Edict of Milan, Emperor Constantine Christianized the empire, the church got into bed with the state, the state sponsored the church and clergy, the church legitimised the state’s wars and blessed its armies. Towards the end of the 4th century, Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the only legal religion. The church was now very close to political power which meant it shared the corruption of power.
EDITORIAL

Welcome to the 25th issue of the Church Fora Newsletter. Again, we thank all those who faithfully contribute to the Newsletter which we hope you find a useful learning tool as we share stories of Inter-church Fora activities and experiences, journeying together towards reconciliation.

The June CONNECT conference attended by more than 70 people was both inspiring and encouraging. The event was co-sponsored by the Irish School of Ecumenics (with the support of the Community Relations council NI) and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. For the first time inter-church groups from ROI joined with Northern groups to engage in conversations on local inter-church engagement under the banner ‘Being Christian Together’ We are very grateful for the enthusiastic support received from Dr. Damian Jackson ICC Programme Officer and Dr. Nicola Brady General Secretary ICC for this event. A special moment in the day was when we were led by Castlewellan Inter-Church choir in the singing of ‘Heaven Heard’ a hymn originally written by Paul Gilmore for Castlewellan inter-church choir and adapted for the CONNECT meeting.

The morning began with a scholarly analysis from Dr. Johnston McMaster of the present European and world context in which people today are called to live out discipleship, bringing Christian and humane values to a broken world. There are many challenges to be faced, not least an external environment that is increasingly skeptical towards churches and people of faith in general. Dr. McMaster did not stop at identifying the challenges, he also presented a helpful framework and language with which to begin addressing issues – developing a public theology, practicing a neighbourly ethic, nurturing a socially engaged spirituality. You can read his full text in this issue of the Newsletter.

As Brexit looms nearer and the toxic exchanges between the opposing sides in our context here in N. Ireland continue, we are acutely aware of the potential of the uncertainties to deepen community divisions. Moreover, we cannot ignore the warnings about the possible profound impact that events may have particularly on the poorest in society. We need here, not only a healthy and functioning democracy, but also a strong ethically and morally based economy that works for all. How do we contribute to the creation of these conditions and what do Churches have to offer in this challenging situation?

A great deal - if we take seriously the fact that Incarnation of God in human form means that theology has to be embodied, earthed in the material world God chose to inhabit. The eternal Good News of God’s love in Christ for the world has to mean something here and now, in this time and place, in these circumstances, in answer to these questions. Christian theology of the Kingdom of God drives us away from things that divide us and towards those things that bring us together. The inner dynamic of the Christian faith also demands that we work for justice, peace and reconciliation in this world, in this time and in this place. But that reconciliation needs to be done on the basis of justice: justice that takes the part of the poorest.

The reports from the various Church Fora across N. Ireland reflect the efforts on the ground in local communities to live out a neighbourly ethic and nurture a socially engaged spirituality.

It is work which demands both courage and tenacity as we strive to create what Dermot Lane describes as ‘a coalition of hope’ between secularists and believers in the service of a more humane, more just and more ecologically aware world.

Eileen Gallagher

Christendom was beginning to shake at the foundations by the 16th century and it was at the beginning of the 20th century that the catastrophe of WWI killed Christendom. The church in the West lost its power, privilege and status and is now no longer a domination system, experiencing also the loss of public influence and numbers. If we look at the Irish decade of events 100 years ago, that shaped the Ireland we live in today, we see then very powerful churches, controlling and wielding enormous authority. None of that exists today, Irish churches have been culturally disestablished and deprivileged. We are struggling with that and have hardly acknowledged the death of Christendom.

We Are Living Through The Reality Of The Secular

Some months ago I found a one page manuscript on my desk. I didn’t know where it came from, I suspect it fell from a reference book I had been using. It was the script of a broadcast I did 37 years ago. I read it and thought it was good! I read it again and thought the concluding paragraph I would never use now. The language was too theological and religious. Today the majority of listeners in Northern Ireland would not make any sense of it. Society has changed so much. We are all secular now. Churches complain about being marginalised. Leaving aside the aggressive and intolerant secularism, secular is something different. Secular is the separation of Church and State. We are no longer in bed together and the churches can’t dominate, control, determine legislation. Secular is also pluralist democracy, the many and the diverse. In a pluralist democracy all voices have the right to be heard and no one voice is privileged. Power is dispersed and shared and the churches are having difficulty getting used to that. There is still a role and a voice but no longer privileged. We are having to work out a very different relationship between faith and politics, church and state. And the secular is here to stay.

We Are Living In A Time of Political Uncertainty And Brokenness

When we elect politicians we give them a mandate to govern and legislate. For nearly three years now in Northern Ireland that mandate has been ignored. We have had no governance and no legislation, and as democratic citizens we have been unbelievably passive about it. And we have the chaos of Brexit which has exposed the brokenness of politics in the UK. The model of parliamentary democracy
is not working and wasn’t working long before the Brexit referendum. Brexit has also exposed the reality of a disunited Kingdom, largely because of a failure to recognise that the UK is made up of very diverse regions, each of which is different with different needs and identities. The concept of the UK has been essentially England and being British is an invented fiction. Brexit is also the revenge of colonial nostalgia. The next two decades, even the next decade may well see a series of constitutional crises, of which Northern Ireland will only be one. People of faith will not be able to sit above or outside of this turmoil. Our identities, loyalties, hopes, aspirations and fears will all be in the mix and this will challenge the depth and reality of our faith and our ecumenical and community relations. We need to be engaged in some deep, civic, theological and political conversations, conversations together.

**We Are Already Caught Up In the Vortex of Identity Politics**

We all have multiple identities, always more diverse and complex than we think. In a sectarian society we are always being squeezed into the straitjacket of Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist, men or women, straight or gay, indeed a range of binary identities or dualisms. We are in a world now, even in small Northern Ireland where all of these identity markers are up in the air. Identities are in a state of flux, settledness and certainties are breaking down and this is where fear, rigid moralism and religious and political fundamentalism can triumph, and violence can emerge.

I have been involved with a colleague on an extensive educational programme, Liberation From Patriarchy for Gender Justice, rolled out in Derry, Strabane and Donegal. It is funded by Peace IV, the European Peace and Reconciliation fund. There are all sorts of criteria to be met. Courses have to have a certain percentage of Catholics and Protestants. From two large courses the majority of participants have identified as neither Protestant nor Catholic. They do not identify as either and there are growing numbers of people in Northern Ireland who do not want to be identified as either Catholic or Protestant. There are also growing numbers who refuse the identity markers of Unionist or Nationalist. And there is a whole bewildering spectrum of gender identities, given some expression as LGBTI. Identity politics are radically shifting and it’s all complex. In the flux of shifting identity people of faith can’t pretend it’s not happening, still less take flight, but engage together beyond tribal identities to shape a new anthropology, the primary identity of what it means to be human and to be human together. We might describe this as shaping a theological humanism.

**We Are Confronted With Major Global Challenges**

It is in the face of these challenges that we feel most overwhelmed. Two major challenges, locally and globally are climate change and unregulated capitalism. Global emissions and the financial crisis are linked. We are aware now of the apocalyptic reality of climate change but seem paralysed about doing something. ‘What is really preventing us from putting out the fire that is threatening to burn down our collective house?’ (Naomi Klein, This Changes Everything, 2014, p18). Klein believes that lowering emissions is in conflict with deregulated capitalism. Averting climate catastrophe ‘is extremely threatening to an elite minority that has a stranglehold over our economy, our political process, and most of our media outlets.’ (p 18). When scientists began to speak seriously about greenhouse emissions, the elite were unfettered, and in 1988 we also became aware of the reality of globalization, the year of big trade agreements. The climate process was struggling and the globalization process was “zooming from victory to victory.” (p19). Market fundamentalism ‘systematically sabotaged our collective response to climate change.’ (p19). The challenges are systemic, politicians and economists have major responsibilities. We all have and our Western lifestyles are critically significant.

The earth is the Lord’s and the Bible has more to say about economics than anything else. Together as people of faith we need to analyse the scientific and social data and bring it into dialogue with biblical and theological ethics, which then becomes a programme of faith in action.

What responses should Christians together, ecumenical responses, as churches, should we be making to the context in which we find ourselves in Northern Ireland?
Here are three headlines which need to be teased out. Together we need to:

**Develop a Public Theology**

Public theology is applying theological social ethics to the big public challenges and questions. It is about doing theology in our social, political, economic and environmental context, reading the Bible as a socio-political, economic-eco text alongside our contemporary context.

**Practise a Neighbourly Ethic**

Faith is neighbourly or it is not faith at all. The biblical idea of covenant is the vision and practice of a neighbourly ethic, expressed in radically inclusive justice, tenacious solidarity with all, no exclusions, equality and the creation of a common good.

**Nurture a Socially Engaged Spiritually**

There is a lot of talk in churches in Northern Ireland about prayer but it urgently needs to become a more socially engaged prayer. This is prayer with the world rather than prayer for it, or for the religious life of the church, or one’s personal life. Every congregation and parish, inter-church group should spend time in a study of the Prophet Amos whose liberating God is engaged with everyone and not just ancient Israel or Christians. Amos’ core ethic of social justice and righteousness or right relations based on social justice is indispensable. Time also with the Beatitudes, the essence for Jesus of the values and ethics of the Reign of God. And the Lord’s Prayer in its Galilean context and our context, it’s Jubilee vision and practice of release from economic debt and bread enough for all. Amos, the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer are the basis of a socially engaged spirituality.

Dr Johnston McMaster

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**CASTLEWELLAN CHURCHES FORUM**

When the Castlewellan Churches Forum announced that the annual “Walk of Witness and Reconciliation” would take place from ST Malachy’s Church (R.C) to St Paul’s Church (C.of I.) on Good Friday the members were surprised and saddened to read the headline in a local newspaper “Free Presbyterian Ministers criticise Castlewellan walk. Good Friday event sad and shameful Act of Apostasy”.

The authors of the letter to the press wrote “the scriptures make it abundantly clear that any church which promotes the ungodly doctrine of salvation by works and does not accept the Lord Jesus Christ as the only way of Salvation is not a Christian church, but rather an institution that true Christians ought to be separated from. This is undoubtedly the position of Roman Catholicism. …… Therefore we conclude by beseeching those in St Paul’s Church of Ireland who love the Lord Jesus as their Saviour to not participate in any false unity march that would grieve the true and living God.”

The Forum was concerned that the purpose of the walk had been misunderstood and responded with a letter to the press which stated, “For the past fifteen years on Good Friday we have promoted a “Walk of witness and reconciliation.” It is an opportunity for men, women and children to bear witness to the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross to save them from sin, ……… and to reconcile them to God and to one another.”

Since 1993 the Castlewellan Bible Prayer Group has been meeting weekly to read, study and apply the teaching of Jesus to everyday life. We have members from both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches who believe that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. In 2014 the Churches Forum was established to promote reconciliation and to enable people to understand and appreciate the richness of their faith, culture and traditions. The Good Friday walk is testimony to our community that we possess a common faith in Jesus Christ and carrying a cross through the town is a reminder of Christ’s sacrificial love for everyone.

On the morning of Good Friday the walkers were welcomed to St. Malachy’s Church by Father Denis McKinley who described the criticism as incredulous. “The walk is about peace, reconciliation and hope,” he said “We have all to learn from one another.” After prayers the interchurch choir led the singing of “The Old Rugged Cross.”

A rough wooden cross was then carried in relays through the town to St. Paul’s Church where the Rector, Rev. Brian Cadden, in welcoming the walkers said “It is a real sense of joy today that despite different expressions of the Christian Faith we can come together to share the most basic aspect of our faith, which is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. I know that in my own life I have found healing that comes from a simple trust in what Jesus achieved on the cross. I know that resonates with so many of us today.”

Carrickfergus AGM with guest speaker Sr. Margaret Rose McSparran.
The story of the crucifixion was read followed by the Lord’s Prayer. After the singing of the hymn “Man of Sorrows” everyone was invited to stay for soup.

On 24th April the local press reported that the numbers on the Good Friday walk rose to more than one hundred. They included the chairman of Newry and Mourne and Down District Council Mark Murnin and Bishop Trevor Williamson, retired from the Diocese of Limerick and Killaloe. Bishop Williamson said “The Christian message is the cross of Jesus Christ and what he gave to the world. Jesus said “Love one another as I have loved you” That is the importance of this day. We learn most from those who are different, so this walk today gives us the opportunity to realise that each of our traditions has something to offer, each has something to learn from each other.”

Ronnie Hamilton

OMAGH CHURCHES FORUM HOSTS LENT & LUNCH SERIES IN TOWN CENTRE

On 14 & 28 March 2019 Members of Omagh Churches Forum moved out into the Community at Strule Arts Centre for “Lent & Lunch” Reflection series in the town centre.

The sessions were an informal way of meeting with the general public and those attending having the opportunity to talk individually with Forum members, have lunch and hear a short Lent reflection on each occasion.

The sessions were attended by over 50 people each time from across the community.

Rev Jane Nelson, Presbyterian and Mr Paddy McMahon Roman Catholic brought the reflection at the first session. Mrs Sonya Darcy, Sacred Heart College and Pastor Graham McElhinney, brought the reflection at the second session.

The members of the Forum felt that this was a very worthwhile venture and also gave the opportunity to share with the wider Omagh public about the work of the Forum.

Sad news

Mr Harry Alexander a long-standing member of the Forum died suddenly on Saturday 18 May whilst out cycling with a group of friends. Harry was a quiet gentle man who lived out his faith amongst the entire Omagh community. The respect he was held in was evident at the very large attendance at his funeral with all Christian faiths across the district present well represented. Those present heard Rev Nelson reflect on Harry’s contribution to his family, his church, young people (both in his own church and in the community), business life in the Omagh area, and in Omagh Churches Forum.

In his work with the Churches Forum he was central to the successful conference with Eamon Phoenix and Johnston McMaster plus many other cross community sessions including many young people. Harry’s quiet wisdom and sense of humour will be missed by all at the Forum meetings.

E Millar
Sec. to Omagh Churches Forum

COLERaine CHURCHES FORUM REPORT

What are some of the standout moments from the Coleraine Churches Forum in the last quarter? There were several.

Because the person who submits news from the Coleraine Churches Forum always leaves it to the last minute, it is possible to mention the inspiring CONNECT conference that took place in the beautiful pastoral setting of the Benburb Priory a few days before this newsletter is to be published. A large conference room full of church fora members from around the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rubbed shoulders with each other, reflected on their different contexts and shared fellowship and ideas. In Coleraine we are
Dungannon Area Church's Forum

Dungannon Area Church’s Forum held a breakfast in Dungannon Golf Club on 19th January.

Diane Holt was the guest speaker. Diane had spent a good deal of time in faith based community development for over twenty years. She helped to set up The Link Family and Community Centre.

In Newtownards

In March Rev. Ruth Patterson from Restoration Ministries spoke on Faith and Friendship. In May, as usual, we held our “Praise in the Park” when Newmills Silver Band led the music and there was a soloist. The theme was “Forgiveness”. Readers were all from different churches in the area.

In September, we are looking forward to having Very Rev Dr. Norman Hamilton who is to speak on Brexit and Christian Involvement.

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Isobel T. Holmes
**BALLYCASTLE REPORT**

BCA’s recent activities have included:

i) The Blessing of the Boats event which launched the annual Rathlin Sound Maritime Festival on the last Friday evening of May. After some days of lovely weather, the elements turned against this, but nevertheless a good crowd boarded the Rathlin ferry for a short but meaningful Act of Worship. Prayers of Thanksgiving for the beauty of the sea and our surroundings were followed by a Prayer for God’s Blessing and Protection on all who, for work or leisure, sail the oceans of the world or around our coasts. Flowers were scattered in solemn remembrance of all lost at sea, in war or peace, some in Rathlin Sound as such. Migrants risking hazardous sea-crossings, desperate for freedom, safety and a future were remembered – a poignant reality brought home to Ballycastle and Rathlin residents by the fact that several well-known local sea-faring men have been regularly involved as volunteers in rescue missions in the Greek islands such as Lesbos.

ii) May also saw the completion of a four-week series of innovative Bible Studies on the Book of Ruth led by Glen Jordan, theologian working with Corrymeela. Well-attended and engendering lively interaction, this also served to strengthen further the links BCA enjoys with the Corrymeela Community.

iii) BCA’s staple programmes have continued with the Good Morning Ballycastle telephone contact scheme (5-days-a-week) and the Foodbank. This latter has continued to grow as a steadily-increasing number of people in need of basic support patronise the distribution-point in Dalriada House which is in the same complex as the Ballycastle Medical Centre.

iv) While a recent Away Day has reminded our Board of possibilities for further programme growth we also remain aware that dreams have to be tailored to ‘capacity’, both human and financial. With that in mind the Board have also been making contact with community groups serving related concerns locally. BCA is one significant manifestation of ‘The Church in the Public Square’ acting in partnership with other groups committed as we are to the ongoing and exciting task of Building Community.

v) In that regard BCA also participates fully in the bi-monthly meetings of the Causeway Coast and Glens Faith Forum. To date, this has concentrated on listening to—and disclosing— the personal faith journeys of individual members from the variety of faith-traditions represented. Always a very moving and rewarding experience!

Gordon Gray  
(On behalf of BCA)

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**NEWRY DISTRICT INTER-CHURCH FORUM**

Newry District Inter-Church Forum has had a full range of activities since the beginning of the year. We meet at least twice monthly on Tuesday evening. We have been privileged to hear from a variety of speakers ranging from Eileen Murphy who gave us an insight into the work of Women’s Aid, to Brian McAvoy who gave an overview of the G.A.A. and its aim to become a much more inclusive organisation. There was much discussion at both evenings.

At the end of January, we had a joint conference with the Castlewllan Forum in the Burrendale Hotel Newcastle. Glenn Jordan was the facilitator of the conference. He spoke on Reconciliation/ Healing and Coping with the results of Conflict. As usual Glenn made us think by introducing a different angle on some of the best-known parables and how they should influence our thinking on contemporary situations.

In February the group had a visit to Dan Winter’s cottage where we received a warm welcome from Hilda Winter who provided interesting stories about the founding of the Orange Order. We also visited the Orange Order museum where we were given a guided tour.

The course given by Dr. Johnston Mc Master attracted many new faces and was considered outstanding by all those who attended.

Mr. Mel Mc Mahon Head of English in the Abbey Grammar school spoke on Wilfred Owen and his poetry. Mr Mc Mahon brought a published book of his own poetry inspired by Owen’s experiences in the Great War. Mr Hugh Mc Shane a local historian outlined the context in which the poems were set.

The Castlewllan Forum invited us to join them at a conference in Murlough House Dundrum. The main speaker, the Rev. Davidson a Presbyterian minister from Armagh gave us much food for thought. We also learned more about the history of Murlough House and enjoyed great hospitality. The following...
WOMEN IN FAITH REPORT

One of the highlights of the Spring Summer season for Women in Faith this year was a very positive and worthwhile retreat in Drumantine near Newry. This enabled us to share informally with each other and to learn from one another’s experiences in a way which is not possible during our monthly meetings.

We benefited from having arranged a speaker (Glen Jordon) and there was a lot of healthy discussion and interaction which challenged many of our attitudes and beliefs. We also had a time of craft where people could express themselves through participation in these skills under the guidance of an experienced craftswoman.

The beautiful grounds at Drumantine afforded an opportunity for people to relax and walk alone or with a friend or to reflect, gaining peace and calm and spiritual strength.

Another very successful time was the “study day”. This was our visit to Ballycastle, when 18 members and friends enjoyed fellowship and friendship at the wonderful location of Corrymeela. We were warmly welcomed and, our guide stopped to answer questions and tell stories as we walked around. For us, Protestants and Catholics and those who would not wish to be labelled, reflecting and joining in shared prayers, and singing joyously together in the Croi, it was a very memorable and meaningful occasion.

During the season we also had a craft morning when we invited some ladies who are asylum seekers to take part. This was very exciting for them, because although they spoke little or no English, they were able to participate in the craft work and this they did with great enthusiasm! One or two of us found ourselves entertaining their pre school children while the mothers enjoyed interaction with our ladies. When the time was up the meeting finished and our new friends departed regaling us with “thank yous” and applause, and carrying with great delight, the things they had made. This was a very valuable learning experience as well as helping to prevent isolation for the migrants.

Recently some of us were able to meet with the Ballymena group at their visit to Gracehill, and engage in a lovely evening. Also just recently we joined with Carrickfergus representatives going to Benburb where we spent a very interesting and informative day listening to and debating issues raised by Dr. Johnston McMaster.

We thank all who helped in the arranging of these and all our events and we are grateful especially for the continued support of Eileen Gallagher as we go forward. We wish all fora members and friends a restful and enjoyable summer break.

Jeanette McConnell

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