

The Things That Make For Peace

Responding to the Ceasefires - 29th September, 1995

Introduction

Over the past ten years as a group we have sought to reflect on some of the major social and political events and issues in our society. We brought our ideas together in 1993 in "Breaking Down the Enmity". We have tried to bring to our reflections the perspective of faith, as understood by a group representing the diversity of the traditions in Ireland. The ceasefires and the publication of the Framework Document seem to us to be other landmarks inviting our further reflection. We outline in this document the principle themes that we feel are important to consider at this time, and we do so in the hope that it will encourage others to do their own reflection, thus contributing to the debate about the way ahead.

A New Opportunity

The Republican and Loyalist paramilitary ceasefires have brought hope into a situation which, for an entire generation, has been known throughout the world for its bombings, killings and violence. But while ceasefires in themselves do not bring peace, we now have a new opportunity to work for peace. To that end there is a great need for us to build up trust among people divided by fear and suspicion, to leave behind talk of winning and losing, and to reject the temptation to exploit fears and prejudices to which we are all vulnerable.

The Context

It is not only in Northern Ireland that change is happening. While no direct comparisons are possible, we cannot but be aware of the remarkable changes in South Africa where, after years of bitter enmity and feuding, former enemies are now working together to build peace. Elsewhere, in the Middle East, the Israelis and the PLO are groping towards territorial and political realignments in a search for an agreed settlement.

This new dynamic, which is in evidence in many parts of the world, creates a new context for bringing the Northern Ireland problem closer to a solution. We cannot remain unaffected by recent dramatic changes where we have seen examples of how spirals of violence and political stalemates can be broken.

Closer to home we are beginning to experience the growing importance of the European Union. This offers a context to all in Northern Ireland which could, in time, help to reduce the relative importance of the Unionist/Nationalist divide.

In all our documents we have emphasised the importance of the two Governments working together on the Northern Ireland problem, because we believe that it is only they who can provide the necessary framework for the two communities to live together. The two Governments in the Downing Street Declaration offered a set of principles and the outline of an approach to the Northern Ireland problem. The central thrust of the Declaration lies in the British Government's assurance that "it has no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland"; in the Irish Government's acceptance that "it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland in the absence of the freely given consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland"; in the commitment of the two Governments to self-determination for

the people of Ireland; and in the offer of a place at the negotiating table for Sinn Fein once violence has been brought to an end and definitively renounced.

The two Governments have now moved to flesh out the principles of the Downing Street Declaration by offering the Framework Document. The Downing Street Declaration, the ceasefires and the Framework Document are offering us opportunities and challenging us to find a way forward. However the ceasefires are not yet secure, indeed they are still fragile. We neither have a political settlement nor reconciliation between the communities. All of this requires us to face up to a variety of deeply taxing issues.

Some Challenges

The last 25 years have left a heritage of physical, emotional and spiritual scars, as well as reviving memories of the hurts of past centuries. So many people, both directly and indirectly, have suffered as a result of violence, injury, bereavement, intimidation, imprisonment, etc. We will never know just how many lives have been shattered by all the forms of violence that have dominated our society for a whole generation.

There are the deep-seated fears that grip different groups in the community. Among many Unionists there is the fear that a conspiracy exists involving the whole Nationalist community, the British Government, the Republic and the US Government to force them to give further political ground. Among many Nationalists, there exists the fear that history will repeat itself and that, yet again, they will end up being oppressed and suffering discrimination. There is also the fear throughout the community that the democratic process will not have been fully accepted while weapons are not decommissioned and remain in the hands of paramilitaries.

There are many other obstacles in the way of healing:

- our sense of victimhood, which means we nurse our wounds and cannot see other people's;
- the hurt, anger and sense of disorientation that many of us feel;
- attitudes, feelings, differences and unresolved business that we have had to suppress during the last 25 years and which have returned to haunt us now that violence has ceased;
- our chronic capacity to believe the worst about each other and to say, "I told you so";
- our impatience with any agenda other than our own and our inability to listen to each other;
- our block in facing the reality of the other;
- our constant desire that the other change first;
- our attachment to ideologies which require other people to fit in;
- continuing injustice together with the injustices created by the last 25 years;
- our need to grieve at the loss of our old identities and our fear of risking the creation of new ones;
- our insecurities and our sense of abandonment by others;
- our need to be or to remain "top dog".

One of our immediate challenges is to develop the peace process. The cessations of violence are fragile. Issues like prisoners and the decommissioning of arms (which we discuss below) are very important in this process.

The violence of the last 25 years has given many of us our reference points and our identities. Some of us are tempted by the desire to go back to these old reference points and to inhabit the security of our old identities. The challenge is to believe that peace is now possible and then to seek to make it happen.

If the cessations of violence fail we will have lost a unique opportunity which may never occur again. If the violence returns it will not be the same as before. We will have entered an entirely new situation.

Forgiveness

There is a huge agenda which has to be addressed in our journey towards reconciliation in the years ahead. The demands, both pastoral and prophetic, will be immense, and nowhere more so than when we address the issue of forgiveness. This is a central theme, deeply sensitive and profoundly challenging, and prompting many questions such as:

- how are the bereaved and those physically and emotionally wounded going to feel about the early release of prisoners?
- will past crimes still be investigated?
- will people feel cheated of justice, and this on top of the original crime committed against them?

There is a terrible irony in the call to forgive. People have had to draw on their deepest resources - physical, emotional and spiritual - to survive tragedy, loss and bereavement. Are they now to be asked to reach out in forgiveness towards those who have caused the suffering and the pain? As well as having to find the strength to survive, are they now to be asked to find the moral courage to forgive? Yet if they cannot eventually come to forgiveness they will be left in a place of darkness, suffering the added pain of bitterness on top of their loss.

There is no easy route; there is no easy forgiveness. Can we not wait to see if the other is going to move first? The words of the late John McMichael of the UDA challenge such a disposition: "there is no section of the divided Ulster community which is totally innocent or totally guilty, totally right or totally wrong. We all share the responsibility for creating the situation either by deed or by acquiescence. Therefore we must share the responsibility for finding a settlement".

The Christian approach to forgiveness recognises it as a "miracle of grace and to many it will only be given after a long pilgrimage of darkness and sometimes despair...It is something we are enabled to reach only by the God who forgives us; a sign of grace, not an achievement" (*Burying our Dead*, pp. 6,8). Forgiveness can never eradicate the injury; it is still there as a fact of history. But forgiveness can enable the victim to live with the injury. It is not a matter of forgiving and forgetting; it is not excusing, condoning or trivialising wrong; but also it is not allowing oneself to be trapped in the prison of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth mentality which is ultimately destructive of both oppressor and victim.

This challenge is not just to individuals but to communities and hence to Churches. While we most often think of repentance as something we have to do as individuals, we see in the Bible that the community is also confronted with the need for it. The Chosen People constantly turned away from social justice (the beratings of the prophets, Amos and Hosea) and it was as a people that they had to seek forgiveness (2 Chron. 6,38). Without admitting

guilt and seeking forgiveness they could not return to the Covenant community. The Churches cannot simply preach the message of forgiveness. We are challenged to bow our heads in acknowledgement of our own substantial contribution, as Churches, to the conflict. Over many years we have fed sectarianism by defining our own denomination's identity primarily in terms of its relationship - most often one of opposition - to that of the other tradition. The Churches, therefore, are obliged to lead in the practice of forgiveness. Central to our faith is the narrative of forgiveness, reconciliation and new possibilities which, if it were really believed and acted upon, could be transforming. A task for the Churches then, and for Christians in Northern Ireland, is to help prepare people for and give leadership in change, to encourage people to live confidently, to enter into relationships and to create communities which allow people to listen to and welcome each other.

Dialogue

Because of the great fear and suspicion that have existed throughout the North over the years many people from the different communities have grown more and more isolated from each other. Our energies have gone towards strengthening boundaries and barriers rather than building bridges. To reach out to those that were not "our own kind" could risk the accusation of letting the side down, of selling out, or of betrayal. It would appear foolhardy to consider embarking on a process of dialogue in a setting that equates any reaching out with weakness and loss of face.

We have been obsessed with the fear of betrayal, fear of losing our identity by a kind of sell-out or surrender, implying that we do not care about the truth and are prepared to compromise and sell our birthright. To that extent it has been important to have had clearly defined enemies. By taking up a defiant and even violent stance against them we reinforced our own identity. We were clear where we stood, what we stood for and what we stood against. It was "us against them" and we all knew our place. It is little wonder that in such a context the notion of compromise was totally out of order.

There is a kind of compromise which is without integrity and which is not based on an honest acceptance of difference and authentic diversity. The history of the Church tells the story of a struggle to affirm diversity within an overarching unity. The experience described in the New Testament when the Jewish Church had to let go of an absolutist Jewish identity is instructive. Peter, against his own principles, was challenged firstly in a dream, and then through his meeting with Cornelius (Acts, Chapter 10), to acknowledge that there was nothing and no one unclean in the sight of God. While Gentiles were welcome into the developing Church, the Jews did not have to abandon their Jewish roots. The Jewish Scriptures remained an essential part of their story and a foundation for their understanding of God.

Reflection on this can help us to see the task facing us today and provide guidance for the journeys we have to make. Each tradition must have the courage and the self-belief to tell its story, a story of recent and not so recent times that has shaped its character and outlook. And each tradition must have the patience and the generosity to listen to the story of the other tradition, knowing it to be equally valid and worthy of respect. In listening to this story we face the otherness of the other and the reality of difference. We do not require them to fit into what we are.

Belonging Together

In democracies legitimate government is based on the consent of a whole people who acknowledge their common bond together. Behind the concept of consent, however, lies a deeper and often unstated acknowledgement that despite our differences we belong together, and an acceptance that we must and will work together.

For democracy and politics to work in Northern Ireland we must come to an acknowledgement that we belong together, even as we are divided into Unionists and Nationalists, Catholics and Protestants, British and Irish. If we cannot accept each other as people who come from traditions of equal value, or if we demand that the others change their identity before we accept them, then there can be no real progress. The consequence will be separation.

Thus the choice is between the politics of reconciliation—where a space is given to the interests and identities of all the communities in Northern Ireland—or the politics of separation—where each community pursues its own interests and identity—which will lead us back to violence.

Parity of Esteem

One of the phrases that has come into widespread use in current political debate is "parity of esteem", which, although it does not appear in the Downing Street Declaration, informs the thrust of the document.

In the Declaration both the British and Irish Governments have committed themselves to "full respect for the rights and identities of both traditions in Ireland", and the document goes on to spell out some implications of this respect: "the right of free political thought; the right to freedom and expression of religion; the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations; the right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means; the right to live wherever one chooses without hindrance; the right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, sex or colour". (Para.5)

These are statements of aspiration and the intention of both Governments is that such aspirations would be reflected in any future political arrangements. These will have to address the complex political reality of the bi-national nature of Northern Ireland, a divided society where there are two major traditions, one of which feels an allegiance to Britain while the other looks towards the Republic of Ireland. In 1986 our Group offered some criteria (*Towards Stability and Peace*) which we felt should govern approaches to the Northern Ireland problem. We see no reason to change any of these and therefore we repeat them:

Northern Ireland is a divided society and there are two major traditions;

- therefore Northern Ireland cannot be governed in the same way as more homogeneous societies, like Britain and the Republic of Ireland;
- neither community can be coerced or dominated and therefore each community should be given parity of esteem and treatment;
- Northern Ireland is linked with the rest of Ireland and Great Britain (by history, relationships, culture and aspirations);
- there are three sets of relationships that need to be taken into consideration:
 - (a) between Nationalists and Unionists within Northern Ireland;
 - (b) between Northern Ireland and the Dublin Government;

- (c) between political representatives in London, Belfast and Dublin - the totality of relationships within these islands;
- any political settlement requires the consent of majorities in both communities in Northern Ireland and the agreement of the British and Irish Governments;
- within Northern Ireland there has to be a sharing of power and responsibility (however that is institutionalised);
- both communities require protection (e.g. through Bills of Rights, institutional arrangements, guarantees from outside bodies, etc.);
- the constitutional position of Northern Ireland cannot be changed without majority consent;
- violence is an unacceptable way of promoting constitutional change.

Giving such criteria due recognition, any political settlement will require much debate and dialogue among political parties and communities, and questions such as the following will have to be addressed in the effort to give each community parity of esteem and treatment:

- How do Unionists formally recognise the Irishness of Northern Ireland?
- How do Nationalists formally recognise the Britishness of Northern Ireland?
- What does such acceptance mean in terms of the common ownership of the institutions of the state? This raises the thorny issue of flags, national anthems, etc.
- How does one give allegiance to a state while having an aspiration fundamentally to change that state?
- What can be set in place by way of protection for both traditions, e.g. a Bill of Rights, guarantees from outside bodies, fair employment practices, fair administration of justice, policing and security?
- Can the vexed question of the territorial claim in Articles Two and Three of the Republic's Constitution be resolved by creating North-South institutions which have the full consent of both traditions?

Finding political arrangements which deal fully with the bi-national nature of Northern Ireland is a very difficult business. It is not surprising that the two Governments have taken two years to produce the Framework Document. Irrespective of our assessment of this document it is at least a sign of the two Governments working together. It seeks to take seriously all of the three relationships to which we have referred previously. It is therefore very likely to remain a major component in future deliberation. Those who reject it must put forward alternatives which take account of the views of the other tradition.

There are no blueprints for finding ways whereby two peoples can live in one land together without domination. The Framework Document should be judged in this light. Getting the balance right is no easy matter. The bi-national nature of Northern Ireland means that so long as it remains part of the United Kingdom some mechanism has to be found to allow an expression of the Nationalist identity. Unionists will have to face this reality. Similarly Nationalists will need to accept that the British dimension of Northern Ireland will require a continuing connection with the United Kingdom, and that this will not disappear.

We should recognise that the process which has just begun can proceed only on a step by step basis. Moving from a position of deep hostility and profound mistrust to one of co-operation and confidence cannot be achieved overnight.

What is important is that we all give ourselves time, that we do not make premature judgements and foreclose on options. We have this opportunity to move forward; we dare not throw it away.

Sovereignty

Today there is an increasing blurring of sovereignty. States can no longer do what they want; they have had to share sovereignty with others and cede it to supranational institutions.

In the context of our divided society in Northern Ireland, this is particularly to be welcomed because it offers the possibility of reducing the destructive link between communal identity, politics and the sovereign state. The bleak "either or" choice of national sovereignty is softened in such a context. This is why the political and constitutional development of the European Union is of importance, because it gives a chance to develop a new network of relationships between the Union structure, the nation states and local ethnic relationships and sub-states.

For Christians absolute sovereignty belongs to God. The sovereignties of the nations are relative and for the well being of peoples. This is the backdrop, therefore, against which Christian people can consider the quality of their allegiances.

Dealing with the Weaponry

The decommissioning of arms raises fundamental issues such as the nature of the state and how communities can be given security and protection. It is difficult to expect that weapons will be decommissioned before a political settlement. At the same time the presence of all the weaponry makes political agreement that much more difficult.

To talk seriously about the decommissioning of arms and demilitarisation is to be prepared to talk about the "final" decommissioning of political violence in Irish life. A farewell to arms is a farewell to the continuities of Irish history and the identities they give. It means that we are embarking on the construction of a new Irish society in which we will learn political violence no more.

The violence of the last twenty-five years appears to have exhausted itself for now. That has occurred before and what happened was that the weapons were stored away. Then years later the cycle of violence started again with new weaponry. The old grievances and fears became alive again. What we are looking for this time is a final decommissioning of political violence. Therefore we have to face the issues of justice and security for the different communities. It also means that we have to work for new relationships between the communities which will actually give them the best guarantee of protection and security. Thus the talk about decommissioning of arms and demilitarisation leads us to the heart of the Irish problem. Getting rid of the weapons will not be easy, but it has to be done.

Policing and Security

Policing is probably the most sensitive of all the issues facing the people of Northern Ireland. Traditionally Unionists have seen the RUC as an important body in upholding the institutions of the state, and have thus seen it as entitled to the support of the community. There is a fear among the Unionists that any interference with the RUC would undermine their long-term

security. On the other hand, many Nationalists have deep suspicions of a force that they see as sectarian. While changes have taken place recently and renewed efforts have been made to enlist people from both traditions, they have met with little, if any, success. Although there appears to be considerable political resistance to discussion about the RUC we would pose the following questions:

- How can we create a police service that has the full support and involvement of both communities?
- Is there a place for some form of regional police service?
- Is there a place for some form of unarmed community police service?
- Could state security functions be separated from the civil police service?
- How could the idea of a "police service" be promoted rather than a "police force"?
- What kind of structure of accountability would be appropriate?

The debate on these questions is only beginning. But already certain consequences seem unavoidable if we choose certain options. For example:

a) Maintaining the RUC with only minimal change

This would be the highest act of faith in the RUC. It would recognise the sacrifices that so many have made - 350 deaths and 7,500 injured - in the conflict with the paramilitaries. Many in the Unionist community would be happy with this outcome. But it would also mean that the police force would probably continue to have a disproportionately and unacceptably high percentage of Protestants. Catholics would be under little pressure to join it. Therefore they would take little responsibility for policing. They would consequently continue to feel little responsibility for Northern Ireland as a whole.

b) Fairly radical changes within the context of one police force for Northern Ireland

The type of change might include: changing the name to "Northern Ireland Police Service"; increasing the autonomy of local divisions; where necessary ensuring the local divisions coincide with political divisions; giving greater power to Local Police Community Liaison Divisions, including the power to approve local police budgets. Many of these changes have already been made in police services in England and Wales.

Many Unionists would find such changes difficult. Some would object that they might deepen sectarian divisions. Others would argue that they would simply recognise such divisions realistically. Many Nationalists might welcome them.

A variation of this proposal is that local police regions would be based on geographical factors only, and not on political divisions. This suggestion has been put forward by Seamus Mallon who argues that police members would develop a common loyalty to the region. Others would suggest that in some areas, such as Belfast, political divisions are too deep to allow this to happen, at least for several years.

c) Separate Police Forces

Those who argue in favour of this proposal believe that it is the only way to take seriously the depth of division between different communities. This is so deep that separate police

forces are needed for different areas. They also say that it is the only way to avoid Nationalist areas being dominated by present members of the RUC.

d) Put policing under a Department of Justice in a new power-sharing Assembly

This has recently been suggested by the Alliance Party. They argue that the community has to take responsibility for policing and this can be achieved only if the political problem is faced head on. Others believe that it is better to allow any new Assembly some time to develop before taking on more contentious issues, and therefore that it would be better to expand the powers of the Police Authority.

We believe that it is too early to take hard and fast decisions on these issues. The debate should instead be allowed to develop and individuals and groups should be expected to change and develop their positions as it progresses.

Some realities are however going to remain in relation to policing. Some of these are:

given that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority wishes, the British Government will have ultimate control of policing for the foreseeable future;

present members of the RUC are going to play a major role in any police service of the future because they are the people with the most experience of the job;

unless Nationalists can identify with the police service of the future, political divisions within Northern Ireland will continue;

accountability of the police service needs to be strengthened, either by giving a new Assembly power over the police or by strengthening the powers of the Police Authority.

Prisoners

Related to the issue of policing and security is the question of what to do about those in prison as a result of the conflict. There has been talk of amnesty, reprieve, early release, parole etc. There is concern about what message such actions might be sending to other violent elements in the community. How might anything which appears to be early release be understood by the victims or relatives of victims of violence - maybe as adding insult to injury? Is there not some justice in requiring punishment for crime? During the troubles many people have disappeared and their relatives have been given no answers to their tormented questions. Others have not been permitted to return to their own country. While these are very real and, for some people, very raw questions, it is well nigh impossible to make any movement forward without a courage and a generosity above all, quite ironically, from some of those who have suffered most. However painful and whatever the details, unless we can summon such a spirit, the bitterness in our society will be prolonged. While it is not for us to legislate how victims should feel, unless we can find resources of generosity and act out of such resources, we will inevitably create new waves of resentment and hatred. Put starkly and very simply, risks will have to be taken, not just by individuals, but by communities and leaders. The paramilitaries, both Loyalist and Republican, are deeply rooted in their respective communities. They have acted out the aspirations, fears, angers, hatreds and hurts of us all, even those of us who would not allow ourselves become involved personally in

violence. We need to face the fact that paramilitaries are part of our communities, even though many of them have been rightly convicted of crimes for which they must carry responsibility. The moral reality is that they belong to us and we belong to them; we share a fundamental solidarity in sin, even though we may be rightly angry about what they have done. They cannot be written off as having total responsibility for the violence of the last 25 years. We all have our particular responsibilities.

Amnesty for paramilitary prisoners is not, however, an appropriate response, for it suggests that what was done and the suffering of the injured are of no account. The healing of the community requires that the situation of these prisoners has to be addressed. We all need a new start. We, therefore, suggest that consideration be given to a scheme for the phased release of paramilitary prisoners over a period of years. This would mean that such prisoners would serve a minimum term for crimes such as murder.

Release of prisoners would be much easier if all paramilitary organisations clearly showed remorse for their actions. Contrition is a recognition that those we have injured are fellow human beings with a claim upon our respect. It is part of a return to full humanity.

The Churches

In a spirit of humility and contrition the Churches are challenged to acknowledge their part in and responsibility for the conflict in Northern Ireland. While it can be stated that, among other things, the courage and leadership of individual pastors and Church leaders have contained the violence, nevertheless, the Churches as institutions have contributed to community division and sectarianism.

Roman Catholicism in Ireland has been over-identified with what many Protestants have seen as an exclusivist Gaelic/Nationalist culture. Northern Irish Protestantism has been over-identified with the Unionist Ascendancy and with the Orange Order. We need to find ways of releasing ourselves from these captivities for the sake of the Gospel, so that our Churches achieve a more healthy relationship with their own community and with the whole of society. A Church's concern should be with the whole of society, not just the part of it with which it is, by reason of history, culture, etc., more closely associated.

Unless we actively take initiatives on the ground, and do so very purposefully, our Church structures, through the sheer momentum of how they operate, will be vehicles to keep us apart. We have to consider how, as different Churches, we relate to each other, i.e. as clergy, as laity, as Church bodies and organisations, as groups associated with the Church. What opportunities exist, or could be created, to meet, work, talk and pray with people within the immediate or near-by community who belong to a different denomination? Again there is risk, in the interests of reconciliation.

This is not to say that differences in religious belief can be glossed over, but even where there are deep theological differences human meeting and friendship are possible. And also possible is the courage to attempt to:

acknowledge that both sides were to blame for contributing to division;

eliminate anything that does not treat other Churches with truth, fairness and love;

give leadership in forgiveness and encourage parishes and communities to meet in dialogue with those of different denominations;

co-operate in projects for the common good.

The Churches in Ireland and Britain have no credibility in the field of reconciliation in so far as they regard the call to seek healing of their own divisions as an optional extra. While differences will remain, what is important is that they are contained in a relationship of love and respect, believing that we do indeed belong together. The integrity of each tradition has to be taken seriously as well as the need for all traditions to be renewed and transformed by the Holy Spirit. But to refuse to meet is to remain captive to sectarianism.

Education

What happens within the educational system in Northern Ireland will, without doubt, affect the growth, or otherwise, of reconciliation in our society. That is not to say that the "solution" lies within our approach to education, but it certainly can be a real factor in sustaining any political settlement. While the home probably plays the major role in laying down stereotypes in the mind of the child, the school is also a most potent influence in either sustaining or challenging such stereotypes. Where separation is the order of the day in the educational system a very powerful message is being conveyed without a word being spoken.

Whatever arrangements are made it is important that children are exposed to each other's traditions in and through the school. This could be facilitated through the twinning of schools and a variety of cross-community events involving pupils and teachers. There has been a growth in the number of integrated schools in both the North and the South in recent years. While there is opposition to this form of education from both Protestants and Catholics, it has to be recognised that parents have a right to send their children to integrated schools and that right has to be respected. Where Churches feel they cannot encourage integrated education we feel that, at the very least, no obstacles should be placed in the way of sincerely intentioned clergy and laity who support such a form of education. If Christians oppose integrated schools, and if they also make no effort to develop cross-community contact, then it is difficult to believe that they are serious about peace making.

Also we would wish to underline the importance of Teacher Training education and the great need for this to be done in such a way as to prepare the teachers to promote a deeper mutual understanding and openness among pupils of different traditions. During these difficult years much has been learned about how adults can learn creatively and build trust together. We believe that Adult Education is equally important for mutual understanding and can make a real contribution towards furthering the process of reconciliation in our society. It is vital that Adult Education be fully resourced for this purpose.

Economic & Social Issues

For a variety of reasons sections of the middle class have done well out of the Troubles, and at a time when social policies have led to a widening of the gap between the well off and the poor. There is an obligation on those who have benefited economically to put something back into the community in terms of investment of skills and resources.

There are significant areas in the North where the majority of people are unemployed and are effectively excluded from the rest of society. They are largely poor, less well educated and living in bad housing—this is a reality in both Catholic and Protestant areas. The situation in which people in these areas find themselves is no fault of theirs; it is largely the consequence of our present way of running our economy (similar things, of course, are happening in parts of the Republic and in Britain). While we do not claim to have the answers to these very severe problems, we are convinced that unless the social and economic circumstances of these people are tackled, any talk of real peace will be hollow. Unless substantial social and economic changes actually reach the excluded, then we are continuing to add to the reservoir of disillusionment and bitterness. It is the people in these areas who have suffered and have been deprived more than any other social group during the course of the Troubles. Here again there is a need for dialogue. Politicians and government personnel are not used to working in partnership with people in inner-city areas. Therefore among the questions that have to be addressed on the ground are:

- How can areas of greatest social need be targeted?
- How can released prisoners and other paramilitaries be rehabilitated by the provision of jobs when there are already many others who cannot find work?
- Can we continue to receive ever increasing amounts of economic assistance without becoming, to an even greater extent, a dependent society?
- What is the basis for a sustainable, long-term economic structure for our society?

The Republic

The political parties in the Republic, with the exception of Sinn Fein, have accepted the principle that there should be no changes in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the greater number of its people. The Irish Government's acceptance of the statement in the Downing Street Declaration that "it would be wrong to attempt to impose a united Ireland in the absence of the freely given consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland" represents a process of evolution in Irish nationalism. The fact that it was a leader of Fianna Fail who co-signed the Declaration is an indication that the acceptance of this principle has been widespread. Sinn Fein too has committed itself to accepting the outcome of the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

We believe changes are necessary in Articles Two and Three of the Republic's Constitution in order to further the acceptance of this principle. It is quite possible to draft these articles so that the Nation and the State do not occupy the same territory. It is precisely the belief that Nations and States have to be contiguous that has led to so many problems throughout the world where there is disagreement over national boundaries. At the same time we believe that it is essential that proper recognition be given to the Nationalist aspiration that the Nation and the State be one.

There is also need for changes at a political level in the Republic. It would help the development of closer relationships between North and South if more people in the South accepted that there are many different strands in contemporary Irishness, including a British dimension. This can be seen in the close links that sections of the community in the Republic have with Britain through family links and through work, sport, Churches, etc. The history of the two islands is inextricably intertwined and this needs to be recognised and affirmed to a greater extent. We also need to affirm the good things that have been given to the Republic because of this relationship.

The people of the Republic have been engaged in a deep debate for several years over issues of pluralism. This is, and always will be, a matter of degree. It is also a matter of debate as to when laws should reflect greater or lesser pluralism. The issue of divorce is one area where this tension is currently focused. Facing up to such issues will, among other things, help to enhance the credibility of the Republic as it works for change in Northern Ireland.

Great Britain

The recent co-operation between Britain and Ireland, marked especially by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, by the Downing Street Declaration and now by the Framework Document is a recognition that progress in reconciliation within Northern Ireland is partly dependent upon a healing of the wounds between Britain and Ireland as a whole. Governments tend to see this in purely pragmatic terms. But the full reality of what is involved here needs to be more openly recognised. That means recognising, for example, that English policy in and towards Ireland down the centuries has in different ways played a large part in creating the difficulties and the sufferings in Irish society, as the Archbishop of Canterbury did in his sermon in Christ Church Cathedral in November 1994. If the British Government and people as a whole could see the Anglo-Irish process as part of long-term healing of relationships within and between these islands rather than limit it to cooperation over Northern Ireland, that could be a major contribution towards long-term reconciliation.

Our Vision

The reality of Northern Ireland is that, although we have ceasefires, people are far from being reconciled. As we enter into this new time, the pain of change awaits all of us; we have to let go our deep, ingrained resistance. Yet if we resist change we may very well move back into violence. On the other hand if we seek unrealistic change we can destroy the modest possibilities that are before us.

The ceasefires give us an unprecedented opportunity of a new start. We can say with hope that we are on the move in Northern Ireland. The call is to leave, like Abraham, the safe, secure, familiar places and journey out into an unknown future, in trust that we will be given a land together.

Great wisdom is required as we face the inevitable tensions which arise in the immediate wake of any ceasefire. Some of these have been outlined by John Paul Lederach (a US Mennonite Professor with experience of many conflict situations throughout the world):

Firstly, the pressure to expect too many questions to be solved instantly, with too little attention being given to working on long range or even medium range perspectives.

Secondly, there may be too much emphasis on the role of top level political leadership without an organic process of change at all levels of society. Unless change takes place in a way that involves wide participation, ownership and responsibility, new structures are likely to be unstable and non-inclusive.

Thirdly, if the changes are to be more than a mere transition, and to lead to transformation and reconciliation, they must address the political, economic, psychological and spiritual dimensions of life.

We recognise in the present very fluid situation that as the context changes so will the questions, and hence all our suggestions are at best tentative. We are called to walk into the future, learning to trust one another in the trust that God is with us. It is the God of hope, who, again and again can break into our lives and communities, can disturb our complacency, undermine our unjust structures and help transform our views of one another. We believe that there are grounds for hope in the possibility of such transformation