

Choose Life-Introduction

Introduction to the 1987 compilation - 12th November, 1997

The three documents included in this booklet are 'Breaking Down the Enmity', published January 1985, 'Understanding the Signs of the Times', published March 1986, and 'A Declaration of Faith and Commitment by Christians in Northern Ireland', published June 1986. The Declaration was not initiated by the Inter-Church Group on Faith and Politics but members of the Group were involved in its drafting.

Breaking Down the Enmity

Breaking Down the Enmity is a reflection on the link between faith and politics in Ireland, and particularly Northern Ireland. Religion and politics have become so tangled up in Northern Ireland that politics has taken on some of the dimensions of a religious crusade; political positions have been absolutised and exclusive commitments have been demanded of people. Political loyalties and exclusive traditions have become idols - they have been put above the God who will have no other god before Him. Christian faith in turn has been compromised; two communities have called upon their religious traditions to sanctify their political and cultural traditions, to a greater or lesser extent. In the process we have forgotten that the Gospel is a call to all men and women to enter into a relationship with Christ, and, with Him, to be with their neighbour, whoever or whatever he or she may be.

We have, therefore, been concerned to disentangle the proper claims of Christian faith from those of politics. In doing this we do not seek to withdraw Christian faith from a concern for politics and the well being of society. Instead we wish to give politics its proper place. Politics is the way different groups find of living together in society, where they give 'space' to each other and where differences are accepted. Conflict, which is an inevitable part of living, is regulated by agreed institutions.

One of the central themes of the Scriptural section in 'Breaking Down the Enmity' is the notion of the 'Covenant Community'. In the Covenant Community everyone is given a place, particularly the poor, the vulnerable and those who are or could be victims. Failure to do this means putting oneself out of relationship with God: it means community disharmony and eventual destruction. In the Covenant Community we are all accountable not only to God but to each other. There is a relationship of fundamental oneness among the parties, so that, whether we like it or not, we share one destiny and we must therefore see to each others' well being and interests, even in our own self interest. In Northern Ireland Catholic and Protestant communities are interlocked - we share the same narrow ground together. We have no choice but to be accountable to each other, or else we will destroy one another.

Christian faith challenges all exclusive claims of tribe, tradition and political commitment. The Gospel invites us into the space created by Christ, and to find there those who were previously our enemies. It therefore breaks down the enmity between us - enmity caused by different traditions, and national, political and religious loyalties. The Gospel opens up for us a view of wholeness, justice and living in right relations which sees the whole world as potential brothers and sisters. True politics may therefore be seen in the light of this vision as being the nourishing of *humanness* in corporate life, of finding ways of human beings living with each other. This is the challenge to politics in Northern Ireland; the challenge to

Christians is to nourish such a politics. Chapters 5 and 6 of 'Breaking Down the Enmity' tried to give some consideration to what such a politics would look like in Ireland.

Understanding the Signs of the Times

The signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in November 1985 might be seen as an attempt to create a new politics in Northern Ireland. It gives the relation of faith and politics a particular and sharp focus. How were Christians of different traditions to respond to the Agreement and its implications? What were the questions being raised by the Agreement? 'Understanding the Signs of the Times' was our response. We saw the Agreement as offering an *opportunity* for all the parties in the conflict *to face reality, to change course and to create new relationships; or else to be sucked into further destructive conflict*. We said that things could never be the same again in Northern Ireland whether the Agreement worked or not. We took no position on the merits of the Agreement but said that those who rejected it had the responsibility to offer an alternative which would be acceptable to both communities.

The Agreement has created a profound crisis of identity within the Protestant community. The sense of shock, anger, bitterness, betrayal and abandonment cannot be underestimated. A year on the Agreement remains unacceptable to the vast bulk of Unionist opinion. The Agreement has been met by bitter resistance. Many in Protestant Ulster have said 'No'. The challenge to create a viable relationship with the Catholic community remains, but many people seem unready to face the basic choices open to them.

The response of the Catholic community to the Agreement has varied. Some, particularly on the Republican side, have rejected it; others are sceptical for they see no concrete changes on the ground, particularly in the areas of justice and security. Others again (particularly in the S.D.L.P.) have welcomed it as representing a far reaching change in the position of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland. Many Catholics have had great difficulty in understanding the depth of the Protestant reaction to the Agreement. There is a challenge to the Catholic community to comprehend this and to see that the fact of the Agreement and the very depth of the Protestant reaction require that it too must be prepared to make an imaginative response. The fact of the Agreement moves us *all* into uncharted waters with risks, dangers and opportunities.

The Agreement is also a challenge to the Republic. The acceptance of a position of influence presupposes an equal acceptance of responsibilities for *all* the people of Northern Ireland (and not just the minority). It may also be that for the Agreement to work people in the Republic will have to face the reality that unification is not a serious option at this time, and that therefore a reformulation of Articles 2 and 3 in the Constitution is required. Does the symbolic crisis caused by the Agreement among Northern Protestants not need to be balanced by a similar 'crisis' in the Republic over Articles 2 and 3? Is this the price that needs to be paid for a new and more creative relationship between North and South - a dying of an old identity in order that new relationships may come?

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is a means to an end, i.e. to peace and reconciliation, justice and a new relationship in Northern Ireland, not an end in itself. We said in 'Understanding the Signs of the Times': 'In this light the question is not whether we approve of the Agreement or not, but whether it will help towards this ideal?' The Agreement is not sacrosanct or immutable.

The Declaration of Faith and Commitment

We ended 'Understanding the Signs of the Times' by saying that both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are called to put their allegiance to Christ above all else. It became clear after March 1986 that the immediate priority for Christians was the need to resist the attempts to revive the strength of sectarian loyalty and to recall Christians to the priority of the Lordship of Christ over their political commitment. The Belfast *Declaration of Faith and Commitment* by Christians in Northern Ireland was launched in June 1986 to help this witness of resistance to develop.

In proclaiming the Lordship of Christ we witness to the God who is not the God of exclusive traditions and political loyalties, but to Him who invites us all and includes all who wish to come into His Kingdom. We therefore have to say 'No' to a politics which attempts to impose total and exclusive commitment. There is a Christian 'No' to be said to those who demand a total commitment to Loyalism and a similar 'No' to those who seek to make a United Ireland an absolute demand and are prepared to use any means to achieve it. Such a 'No' may help in the end to open a way to a more constructive politics in Northern Ireland, where the questions raised in 'Understanding the Signs of the Times' can be addressed. It may help those with deep sectarian and violent impulses see that a significant section of the community is not willing to be dragged into violent conflict. It may be that only when the negative forces exhaust themselves in futility will a new realism and a desire for change develop in which constructive political leadership can emerge with solid support. In the meantime Christian resistance can attempt to keep a light burning, a witness to other possibilities.

Proclaiming the Lordship of Christ implicitly raises questions about what might be a proper and humane politics. Such a politics is a genuine politics of survival and it therefore creates a future for everyone. It is a politics which 'works', and is in a correct sense a 'realistic' politics.

Those in authority have a particular responsibility in helping to create and sustain a just, peaceful and inclusive community, i.e. to develop a 'realistic' politics. In the context of Northern Ireland the role of the British Government is of vital importance (the Irish Government too has a role in this, a role institutionalised in the Anglo-Irish Conference). The Belfast Declaration said: 'We declare that it is the responsibility of government to protect human life and to uphold justice and the political, economic and cultural rights of both Nationalists and Unionists without exception. We declare that government must respect the rights of both communities and the police must impartially serve both traditions'.

In particular the security forces must operate within the rule of law when dealing with terrorist actions. This, it has to be acknowledged, leads to many difficulties and dilemmas. The security forces should not be scapegoated for society's failure. Nevertheless a series of actions by the security forces over the last 17 years (the most publicised concerning the shootings by the security forces which were investigated by the Deputy Chief Constable of Greater Manchester, Mr Stalker), raises important issues concerning the limits to, and restraints on, these actions. These limits and restraints *must* be observed, otherwise the State becomes, in the words of St. Augustine, 'organised brigandage', or in our world sections of the security forces become indistinguishable in the end from the terrorist (as has happened in some South American countries in the mid-1970s).

Choose Life

'I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.' (Deut. 30:19).

'Turn and be healed' (Matt. 13:14 cf Is. 6:10).

'If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven; and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land' (II Chronicles 7:14).

There is a crisis in all our traditional ideologies in Ireland at the moment. This presents us with an opportunity. Many people are becoming aware of the *non-sense* of much of the conflict. It becomes clear what, in the name of different political loyalties and commitments, we are actually doing to each other and ourselves: we are destroying our own humanity and that of the other. No one in this conflict can achieve all of what he or she wants. Many of the political ideas that groups fight for have become insubstantial, have retreated into impenetrable mists. Is it not time to turn from fantasy and violence, to stop and face reality and find some way forward together?

This is the only possibility open to us to break out of the endless vicious circle of enmity, vengeance and conflict where we are all legitimate targets, and the Molochs of sacrifice - the Gods who demand total loyalty to exclusive traditions and political loyalties - require ever more victims. If the destructive conflict continues it will empty Protestant and Catholic culture in Northern Ireland of all positive content and we will become simply violent people finally undifferentiated and united in violence.

There is a race between the forces of disintegration, destructive fantasy and violence and the possibility of renewal and growth. Either we learn to make friends or we pursue our own ruin. Will we turn and be healed?

Some Key Questions

In the facing of reality and finding some way forward together some key issues emerge:

For the Protestant Community:

- The need to enter into a new and realistic but creative relationship with the Catholic community and the Nationalist tradition. Complete integration with Great Britain, majority rule and the attraction of certain forms of independence look like ways of avoiding this central issue. There is also the need to take seriously the deep-seated fear that Catholics have of Protestant political power.

For the Catholic Community:

- The need to accept that a United Ireland cannot be achieved in the foreseeable future and that while working for far reaching change in the situation in Northern Ireland there has to be a willingness to accept responsibility as well (e.g. in policing). There has also to be a willingness to take the British element in Protestant culture seriously.

For the Protestant Churches:

- The need to look honestly at and examine the anti-Catholic element in Protestantism.

For the Catholic Church:

- The need to take seriously the deep seated distrust of Catholic ecclesiastical power. How can Protestants be convinced that their values will really be respected?

For Christians Together:

- Christians will only be a credible witness to society when the enmity and fear are taken out of the relationships between them. This does not mean everyone becoming the same; it means living *together in difference* in a relationship of love and respect. It means facing and working together on the injustices between and within communities.

For the People in the Republic:

- The need to clarify what is being sought in Northern Ireland - is it a United Ireland or is it peace and justice within Northern Ireland? Can both be achieved? The Anglo-Irish Agreement has caused a profound symbolic crisis for Ulster Protestants. Does this crisis not need to be balanced by a similar 'crisis' of identity in the Republic over Articles 2 and 3 in the Constitution? Is this the price for a new creative relationship between North and South?

For the People in Great Britain:

- The need for a real engagement in the problems of Northern Ireland. At present the vast majority have an almost total lack of interest and concern. Indeed there is more interest and concern in the situation in South Africa and Nicaragua, situations over which Britain has almost no influence or control, than in Northern Ireland where it is the sovereign government. Britain has an indispensable role to play in Northern Ireland on account of its being the sovereign government. It is helping to prevent the two communities from destroying each other and themselves. By positive action it can help to create and sustain a society where the values and interests of both communities are given a place.

We saw *Breaking Down the Enmity* as a draft issued for discussion and response. We have been surprised and heartened at the amount of discussion it has promoted; similarly at the response to the other two documents. Many more people need to join in this reflection on faith and politics. In 'Breaking Down the Enmity' we invited Churches, Study Groups and individuals to respond to our document by asking themselves can they accept the text as it stands or, failing that, suggest alternative ways in which the links between faith and politics might be made more appropriately. The invitation still stands.