Introduction to 1993 Compilation

Review of documents published by Group - 4th March, 1993

Note:

In 1993 the Faith and Politics Group issued a compilation of the documents we had already produced. The following is the introduction to that volume.

INTRODUCTION

In January 1983, at the Greenhills Ecumenical Conference, a motion was passed calling for the setting up of a Christian Centre for Political Development to analyse the relationship of Churches to politics in Ireland, and to promote appropriate changes in this area. A steering committee was set up and a number of other people co-opted in an individual capacity. The members were both Protestant and Catholic and from North and South. As the project advanced it became clear that the idea of a permanent Christian Centre for Political Development was too ambitious and instead the group has concentrated on the relationship between faith and politics, with particular reference to Ireland.

Ten years on six documents have been produced by the group: Breaking Down the Enmity (1985), Understanding the Signs of the Times (1986), Towards an Island that Works (1987), Towards Peace and Stability: A Critical Assessment of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1988), Remembering Our Past: 1690 and 1916 (1991), and Burying Our Dead: Political Funerals in Northern Ireland (1992). One further document is included in the book - A Declaration of Faith and Commitment by Christians in Northern Ireland (1986). The Declaration was not initiated by the group, but members were involved in its drafting.

Breaking Down the Enmity: This document is a reflection on the link between faith and politics in Ireland, and particularly in 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 been put above the God who will have no other god before him. Idolatry has led to violence. Christian faith has been compromised; two communities have called upon their religious traditions to sanctify 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.

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 and 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. In the final part of *Breaking Down the Enmity* we tried to give some consideration to what such a politics would look like in Ireland. In particular we saw it as important that the British and Irish Governments should work together.

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 gave the relation of faith and politics a sharp and particular 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: This was our first response to the Agreement which we saw 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 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. At the time of the unionist Day of Action in March 1986 it became clear that the immediate priority of 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 NorthernIreland was launched 24 June 1986 to help this witness of resistance to develop. It was not published by the Group but members were involved in its drafting.

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.

Towards An Island That Works: In this document we examined the way people in the South relate faith to politics and how this affects the Northern conflict. We outlined some of the changes going on in Southern society over recent decades, particularly in relation to the North. We tried to see what further changes were required in order for the South to face the realities of the North. We also sought to envisage what a more Christian politics might mean in the Republic and how the Churches could be better signs of the Covenant Community and of the Kingdom.

Towards Peace and Stability? This document gave our considered assessment of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It is our view that the most important aspects of the Agreement are: a) the recognition of the reality that Northern Ireland is both British and Irish, and b) the obligation on the Governments of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to work together. We believe that the process which the Agreement represents (whatever the precise details) is of vital importance. It is, therefore, our view that any future agreement will have to retain these two aspects.

Remembering Our Past: Close together, in 1990 and 1991, the anniversaries of two foundation events in Irish history occurred: The Battle of the Boyne and the Easter Rising. These two events were marked by a series of articles brought together in Remembering Our Past: 1690 and 1916. The stories surrounding these events have expressed the fears, aspirations, hopes and identities of the two main communities on this island. Each community has expressed a determination not to be made victims. But how has the other community was ignored in the 1916 proclamation. The Catholic community always remains the defeated community in the retelling of the Battle of the Boyne story. A fundamental challenge therefore to the two traditions in Ireland is: how do we deal with the reality of the other tradition and establish a new relationship?

Today we live in a new situation in which the old stories and their understandings have to be re-examined in a context which puts an emphasis on the finding of ways to live together and on the safeguarding of the rights and identities of both communities. The section entitled `1916: Uses and Abuses of the Memory' shows this clearly in the Republic and `Victors or Victims?' shows it likewise in Northern Ireland.

The challenge of a new situation means that we have to face the reality of the past and its various legacies. One of these legacies is a history of violence and coercion. `1916 Violence and the IRA' explores this in the Republican tradition. It is now also clear that the traditional stories have repressed the complexity of situations. `1916: Northern Nationalists and Unity' shows that the actual attitudes of Northern Nationalists to the Republic are not monolithic but rather are quite ambiguous.

Christian faith has at its heart the memory of a victim: Jesus Christ. As we remember him, the liberating activity of God is expressed and we are offered the possibility of remembering the people we have diminished, rejected and injured - the people that we have made victims. We are offered the possibility of a new start, of establishing new relationships with those we have victimised. Memory is a source of hope. In this perspective, how can we remember our past events in ways that help forgiveness and the forming of new communities of respect which are able to take the other into account?

Burying Our Dead: The public profile of our Churches is often at its highest in the burying of people who have been killed because of the `Troubles'. Such funerals are times when the agony and division of the Northern Ireland community are most acutely felt. Such funerals are acutely difficult occasions, not only because they are often widely reported and what is said and done taken out of context, but also because of the unspoken messages that can unintentionally be conveyed to the various communities on this island and abroad. On these occasions Churches are seen in some way to represent the communities from which they come. Burying Our Dead seeks to give consideration to some of the issues arising from such `political' funerals.

Modes of Political Change

It has been suggested that there are three modes of political change. One is the command mode: change is commanded from the top down or by the coercive power of government or groups in society (the imposition of the Anglo-Irish Agreement on the unionist community is an example). A second is the exchange mode when change is made worthwhile, i.e. the appeal is to prudential self or group interest. The third mode of change - the perceptoral

mode - is where people change not because they have been coerced or because it has been made worthwhile but because in some sense they have become different people. No society operates by this mode alone. We cannot be naive about the role of coercion, fear and self interest in politics. Nevertheless the perceptoral mode offers a way to see how Christians in society might transform politics so that solutions might emerge out of dialogue instead of being imposed by victors in a struggle for power. It is a way in which the fears and hopes of different groups, and their traditions and histories, are taken seriously.

Political behaviour cannot be divorced from societal and personal attitudes and values. If we start to think and feel about politics in a different way and try to realise different values in and through politics, political realities will change. Only as we change will our politics and our politicians change. Politicians in Northern Ireland are trapped and cannot change unless we change. We get the politicians we deserve. There is a lot of pressure on them: they carry the burdens of a community's fears and aspirations. We should not blame our politicians for a situation we are all in. Rather we should be working to give politicians the freedom to take risks for the rest of us, and encouraging and supporting them when they do so.

We cannot stay where we are in Northern Ireland. The call is to leave the safe, secure and familiar places to reach out to the other community, even when that involves risks. Is there any other way? In Northern Ireland the way we currently protect our communities and identities through violence, separation from other communities, refusal to share power, and refusal to accept responsibility, is as much a danger to ourselves as to our enemies. We live among our ramparts and fortifications - our `peace' lines. Christians have a particular responsibility to act in this situation. To live with God is to take risks - we are called into his future, to go with him. The great reflections on religious and political courage in Hebrews 11:24-27 may give us comfort: `It was faith that made Moses leave Egypt without being afraid of the king's anger; he would not turn back, as though he saw the invisible God' (v.27).

The challenge is to take risks which give us the possibility of having a future together in Northern Ireland. We need to create a `common house'. To do this we need the outside dimension of the British and Irish Governments working together and the EC may in time have something to offer. We also need a dynamic which is internal to Northern Ireland. How can we develop and sustain in Northern Ireland a vision of two communities living together in difference where there is a place for everyone, so that everyone has a sense of `transcendence', of something shared together?

Violence

Escalating violence threatens the possibilities of benign change in Northern Ireland. Indeed it may threaten everything. It may be that conflict and violence have become a way of life for certain sections of the community. It may even be what keeps them together. These possibilities have to be faced. In any event, there will be no quick end to violence. The security forces have prevented the escalation of the mutual threat relationship between the two communities and this helps to give us what `peace' there is. At the same time some security policies and some actions by the security forces feed the violence and reinforce the paramilitaries and their supporters. This applies in the area of the administration of justice as well. Changes brought in to respond to a specific atrocity or series of atrocities are often particularly prone to this danger. The politics of the latest atrocity is not a good basis for policy; it always gives the paramilitaries the initiative. Ultimately it is only the two communities within Northern Ireland who can reject the paramilitaries. Government policy,

while seeking for effective security, should be working towards facilitating this. A determination to endure, to outlast the paramilitaries without panic or resorting to their methods is vital. Such a determination is part of the way to obtain an end to terrorism. Is it part of the role of the Churches to nourish and support such an attitude?

The Importance of Reconciliation

God is the Father of us all. His power and goodness stretch beyond groups and draw every group towards him and towards one another. Sadly, in our divided community we often tend to forget this. Yet we know that God first loved us (I Jn 4:19) and `while we were still enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' (Roms 5:10). We bring gifts with us in coming to God and we need to be reminded that before the gifts can be offered we are required to go back and reconcile ourselves with our brothers and sisters (Mt 5:23-24). Reconciliation and peacemaking lie at the heart of Christian life and worship. As Bishop James Mehaffey says `Once you let them go you are giving up your faith in Christ'.

Moreover, we have to take seriously the universalism of our faith; if there is `neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Gals 3:28); neither is there Catholic nor Protestant, Green nor Orange, `for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gals 3:28). In Christ we learn that even though we are all different we are also the same to God. We learn what it means to be human. We need to accept the other in his or her distinctiveness or otherness and we need to see the other as human like ourselves. If we could do this in Northern Ireland we might take a crucial step forward towards a benign process in our politics.

We see the task of reconciliation - of finding a way of living together in difference - between the Christian traditions as central. And because `judgement begins at the House of God' (I Peter 4:17) the Church must resolutely face those areas of her life where practice contradicts her message. Churches which are unable to achieve reconciliation amongst themselves are not well placed to preach peace to politicians and to other. In all our documents we have made a number of suggestions for easing relationships between the Churches. We see a need for the Protestant Churches to examine their anti-Catholic dimension. We suggest a number of changes in *Towards an Island that Works* for the Catholic Church to make, such as offering communion to inter-Church couples when requested, not putting obstacles in the way of those who wish to give experiments in integrated education a fair trial, and altering some of the rules for mixed marriages. We also feel that the Catholic Church needs to take seriously Protestant fears of Catholic ecclesiastical power. The task of reconciliation is not just one for the Churches as institutions. It is for all Christians. If we stand aside and insulate ourselves from what is taking place in the community then we bear some responsibility for what happens.

Worship and Reconciliation

Worship is the central act of the Christian community. Biblically there is a link between how (and whom) we worship and how we act. Sectarian attitudes and actions, the condoning and perpetration of violence and injustice, these destroy the credibility of our worship. Psalm 122 shows the relation of worship to justice and peace: 'Since all are my brothers and sisters, I say "Peace be with you". Since Yahweh our God lives here, I pray for your happiness! How we handle the other community in our worship becomes the key to its authenticity. If we ignore its members what are we saying? If we treat them with hostility and contempt how

then do we worship the God who is a `God of Peace' (Roms 16:20). If the other community is our enemy, and it may well be since some of them have done terrible things to our community, how is this to be handled in our worship?

The meaning of the Eucharist or the Mass or Communion or the Lord's Supper - whatever we call it - is of particular importance. It is a love feast and represents people coming together in all their differences to break bread together and to hear again the story of Jesus, the innocent victim put to death by human malevolence and yet vindicated by God. There we hope to experience some of the peace and freedom of the Kingdom of God. How can we receive this peace and freedom, how can we receive, sacramentally, the Lord's Body and Blood unless we are committed to making a new relationship with our enemies, the people we are in danger of making our victims? The Masai in Kenya dramatically exemplify this, for when there is a disagreement or conflict in the tribe, the Eucharist cannot be celebrated. Is the way we celebrate the Mass or Communion not a blasphemy unless we see our participation in it as an opportunity to make peace and develop new relationships? Without that commitment we risk eating and drinking damnation to ourselves (1 Cor 11Who we pray for - who is inside and outside our concern - and how we pray shows how we really understand ourselves and how we stand in relation to the inclusiveness of the Kingdom and to the God who has no favourites (Acts 10:34). To pray to the God who is the Father of us all makes a `non-sense' of our historical separations and divisions. Unless we continually remind ourselves of this our prayer will lose its authenticity and distinctiveness.

Reconciliation and Justice

All our documents have given a central place to the idea of reconciliation, whether between our Churches or between the communities in Northern Ireland. We have been criticised by some who oppose justice to reconciliation, or who see 'reconciliation' as a soft word which acts to paper over the real injustices of society. It is, therefore, appropriate that we give some consideration to what we mean by reconciliation and how we see it in relation to justice.

What does reconciliation mean for us? It means people finding a way of living together in difference. It means the restoration of broken relationships. It means wanting the other to be with us and not wanting to destroy, dominate or separate from them. It means being able to take the other community into account and sharing power, responsibility and resources. It means going beyond the `right' and `wrong' of the conflict - the vicious circle of action and reaction - to create new and creative relationships.

What then do we mean by justice? In the Judeo-Christian tradition justice is a relational concept. It is not primarily about material possessions, getting what you deserve or having 'rights'. Justice is about having a place, being included in the community, being given what is needed to make a contribution, participating, being taken into account, and being treated as human. Justice is putting things right for all. It is primarily about a quality of relationships. Justice in a divided society is what is required to share the space together without domination or victimisation.

Authentic reconciliation must involve justice. It means profound change in a situation. It is not a way of quieting down a situation so that nothing really changes. It is not a question of `justice' then `reconciliation'.

Both belong together in a Christian understanding. The story of the meeting of Jesus with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 illustrates this. In the meeting with Jesus, Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector, was able to see himself in a different way. Through the healing which Jesus brought Zacchaeus was able to 'see' the victims he had made and offer reparation to them. It is to the extent that we bring the marginalised into the centre of the community and give them a place that we have a just society.

Most conflicts between groups throughout history have been `solved' by domination, the destruction of the other group, or driving them out. As we remarked in *Towards Peace and Stability?*, `By and large national communities that co-exist in the same soil develop in rivalry with and antagonism to each other. More commonly they are concluded by final victories or forced separations'.

To seek reconciliation honestly in Northern Ireland is, therefore, in the perspective of history a genuinely utopian project. The `realities' of history should make us all cautious. Destruction could be just around the corner. Therefore in Northern Ireland the politics of reconciliation are the only realistic politics, the only ones that will give us all a future on this patch of narrow ground.

Fear, Enmity and Justice

We have an asymmetry of experience and feeling between the two communities in Northern Ireland. We have the fears of the Protestant community, the community which up to recently has been the dominant one, supported by the British connection. We have the resentments of the Catholic community generated by a history of oppression caused, many believe, by the same British connection. The Protestant community fears that it, in its own turn, will become the oppressed. We have a potent history of antagonism between Protestant and Catholic and very considerable fears on one side and hopes and dreams on the other. The way justice is pursued in such a context is of vital importance. The use of violence means that the issues of injustice become more and more lost in the violence. As the violence escalates the more this becomes the case and in the end everything is about violence and nothing else. Expulsion and separation become the likely outcome. In the context of continuing violence talk about a future together becomes incredible.

This is not to deny the existence of injustice. An end to violence does not mean an acceptance of the status quo. Rather it offers the opportunity of creating a process of real change that makes more just relationships a possibility.

In conflict situations a mutual self righteousness tends to prevail. We are the `goodies', they are the `baddies'. The truth about ourselves is that we are all both victims and victimisers (some of us more one than the other). We are all sinners and sinned against. The fact that we are all sinners means that all human beings are fundamentally the same. There are no pure `goodies' and `baddies'. The way we respond to being sinned against is of the utmost importance. The danger is that we either victimise ourselves and turn the violence inwards or else victimise others and turn the violence outwards.

Struggles for justice need to find ways of taking the oppressor or the dominant group into account as Martin Luther King did. How can the enemy be saved as well? The answer given in *Towards an Island That Works* is that `We are called to enter into a new relationship with

the oppressor based on forgiveness, acceptance and justice'. What guarantees can our enemies have that they will not become the victimised in their turn?

If those who struggle for justice need to be cautious and act with wisdom and patience, then dominant groups need to also show the same qualities so that they can learn what `the signs of the times' are telling them. Disturbance in society signifies that things cannot go on as before, that the other group has to be taken into account and the future has to be shared, otherwise conflict and violence are likely to intensify. Outside intervention also becomes increasingly likely. Power may be taken away. All this has happened in Northern Ireland and it is a painful process to go through. There is no way back to the previous situation. The only way forward is to look for new possibilities and create new relationships.

The Creation of an Underclass

One of the issues that we need to focus on in Irish society is the division between the `haves' and `have-nots'.

Increasingly we have a large group of people in our cities who are effectively excluded from society through their economic and social circumstances. We have an underclass of people who are poor, unemployed and badly educated. They have no reason to accept the `norms' of society, which in their view offer them nothing. In Belfast this is not only true of some Catholic areas of the city but increasingly so in many Protestant ones also. In these areas the effects of political violence and deprivation interact and reinforce each other. Fair Employment legislation may improve the lot of some Catholics but what will it do for those in the ghettoes? (Civil Rights legislation in the USA has helped to improve the position of the middle class black people but it has done very little for those in the inner city). What does talk of political solutions mean in areas like this? How can these people be included in society? Unless we can in time find answers to these questions we will never have a peaceful, or just, society.

Some Key Issues

In our documents we have raised a number of important questions that need to be addressed by the different groups in the conflict.

- (a) For the Republic: Irish Nationalism has to show itself genuinely respectful of diversity. Can the Republic's Government give clear signals that the Republic poses no threat to the unionist community's traditions and values? This would help to balance the role given to it under the Anglo-Irish Agreement of representing the nationalist community in the North.
- (b) For the unionist community: Do Unionists really accept the equality of their nationalist fellow citizens? Do they accept the equal validity of the two traditions and identities in Northern Ireland? If so, what do they think this means in terms of the common ownership of the institutions of the state? The key issue is the need to enter into a new and realistic but creative relationship with the Catholic community and the nationalist tradition.
- (c) For the nationalist community: The nationalist community, we feel, needs to accept that a United Ireland is unlikely to be achieved in the foreseeable future because too many people (and not only Protestants) wish the Union to continue. What are the implications of this for Nationalists? How is the relationship with the Republic to be balanced against the need for a

closer relationship with the unionist community in the North? Which should have priority? While it is valid to work for far-reaching change in the situation in Northern Ireland, there also has to be a willingness to work towards a situation where political responsibility is accepted as well (e.g. for policing), even though progress may be slow.

- (d) For the British Government: The UK Government is the sovereign Government in Northern Ireland. It is helping to prevent the two communities from destroying each other. At the same time it needs to ensure that the security forces are subject to the strict rule of law and that the administration of justice is fair and impartial. Northern Ireland remains the greatest challenge to Britain's commitment to the rule of law and good government. Sufficient attention needs to be given to it.
- (e) Anglo-Irish Relations: If the two Governments are serious about the Anglo-Irish Agreement then it represents a profound change in the relationships between Britain and Ireland. The entanglements of past history mean that change in British attitudes to Ireland and Irish attitudes to Britain will not happen quickly. Nevertheless, if the Agreement is for real it must in the end involve such change. How the two Governments treat each other and work together is highly important and has deep and long-term implications for both.

In Anglo-Irish relations there seem to be permanent tensions and differences of perception and interest. Nevertheless, in our view, either the two Governments work together to provide a stable framework in which the two communities can work together, or the eventual disintegration of Northern Ireland as presently constituted becomes likely in the long term.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement focuses on Northern Ireland, but there is a wider problem of British-Irish relations, of which Northern Ireland is only one part. This should not be forgotten.

The unionist community is a frightened community lacking self confidence and feeling itself alone, abandoned and stripped of political power. This is a factor in its political immobility. How can it be given more confidence? How can it be given more security so that risks can be taken? How can it be reassured that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is not a slippery slope to a United Ireland?

Part of Northern Ireland's predicament lies in history and culture. Most societies caught in a similar predicament have failed to escape. That does not mean that escape is, by definition, impossible. What it does mean is that change of the kind which might resolve the crisis is unlikely to come easily or quickly. It also points to the radical change that is required in peoples' attitudes to each other. Therefore the difficulties of the 1990-1992 talks process is not too surprising.

It may well be that a 'solution' to our problems is beyond us at the moment and there needs to be change within the wider society and cultures before there can be political change. Therefore, 'non-political' action and the work of voluntary agencies and community groups, and co-operation between the Churches, are important. We need to learn the practice of co-operation and democracy and we have to learn it somewhere. We need places and situations where we can experience trust with people of the other community.

Similarly, significant developments in integrated education, cross-community contact schemes, progress in fair employment, better protection for human rights, increased respect

for the identities of the two communities, and the creation of employment in deprived areas - all these may help benign processes to evolve and cultures to change in helpful ways.

The sharing of power and responsibility in local Councils would also help to change the political culture, so that politicians could learn the practice of co-operation and experience trust together.

Faith and Politics

Christian faith may suggest boundaries and directions for political involvement. We have tried to suggest in *Breaking Down the Enmity* what these might be in Ireland. Christian faith does not, however, suggest that there is or should be a uniformity of political positions for Christians. A proper Christian concern is going to have at its heart the development of new and just relationships between communities. Any `solution' or position must have this at its core, rather than a concern for territory or sovereignty.

Our group has tried to move beyond what we perceived as the Christian criteria for politics in Ireland to see what political consensus we had among ourselves and to see what we might be able to say about a specific political arrangement - the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A different group of Christians might come up with a significantly different set of opinions and proposals based on the same criteria. Our project is of necessity a provisional and tentative one - designed to promote discussion and response, rather than to come to definitive and binding conclusions.

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, failing that, suggest alternative ways in which the links between faith and politics might be made more appropriately. Over the years we have been heartened by the response to our documents. We would like to see many more joining in the discussion as to how our faith is to inform our politics in Northern Ireland.

Note

1. David Marquand, *The Unprincipled Society*, London: Fontana, 1988, pp. 229-238.