FAITH & POLITICS GROUP

NEW PATHWAYS

Developing a Peace Process in Northern Ireland

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DEVELOPING A PEACE PROCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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INTRODUCTION

We, like many others, saw the ceasefires of 1994 as an historic opportunity - what the New Testament calls a *kairos* moment. It seemed to open up the possibilities of a new start. We were always clear that there were many obstacles in the way to peace

- 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 had to suppress during the Troubles and which returned to haunt us once the ceasefires came;
- 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 changes first;
- our attachment to ideologies which require other people to fit in;
- continuing injustice, together with the injustices created during the Troubles;
- 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'.

We spoke of the deep-rooted fears that gripped 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."*

We spoke of the "heritage of physical, emotional and spiritual scars". We were clear about the "deep and dark intractabilities" in the Northern Ireland situation in which "the politics of siege and insecurity - intensified over the last twenty-five years - meet the politics of grievance and historic resentment - also intensified over the last twenty-five years." We described the two communities as being caught in "a mutual fear-threat relationship".

Nevertheless we, like many others, dared to hope. The bombing at Canary Wharf shattered that hope. However, the events surrounding Drumcree in July 1996 and

their aftermath made the situation very much worse - when the Northern Ireland community plumbed depths of sectarianism, intransigence, anger, bitterness, distrust and hurt. We said with St. Paul, "Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" (Rom.7:2). We have been caught in a relentless sectarian force field where for many in Northern Ireland "the good which I would I do not, but the evil which I would not that I practice" (Rom.7:19). Community relations in many ways have never been worse. We have drunk deep at poisoned wells. This is the context in which a second IRA ceasefire has taken place and in which the two Governments have expressed their determination to have substantive talks and agreement by May 1998.

We seek now to discuss some of the issues relevant to the developing of a peace process at the present time. We begin by reflecting on what happened in the process to date. Hindsight can bring greater understanding of events and it behoves us all to be better prepared for future pitfalls where this is possible.

Before beginning our discussion it is appropriate to acknowledge the ambivalence surrounding the phrase. For some there never has been a 'peace process' and/or they have never felt included in the 'peace process'. The phrase is perceived as deceitful and fraudulent language got up by enemies to disguise a continuing reality of fear and threat. The phrase is, therefore, not fully shared language across the community divide. We use the phrase, as internationally it has become common to talk about a 'peace process', but we acknowledge the ambivalence surrounding its use in Northern Ireland.

REFLECTION ON THE PEACE PROCESS TO DATE

1). The ceasefires of 1994 created insecurity and uncertainty
   - there was uncertainty about whether the ceasefires marked a decisive turning away from violence or whether they were merely a pause or a tactic. Continuing punishment beatings, continuing targeting and, above all, the refusal to hand over weapons did not inspire confidence, particularly among Unionists;
   - the ceasefires intensified the political uncertainties and fears about the future. Many people were comfortable or could cope with a certain level of violence but the ceasefires disrupted these long established patterns of living. What were we going to do/be now? Some people's identities had been formed and shaped by violence; they knew where they were in conflict, and with old enemies. The prospect of peace disorientated; it could not be believed. There was an inability to take risks, to reach out and test the possibilities. All sorts of feelings which had been suppressed in order to cope came bubbling to the surface, e.g. among victims of violence and their families.

2). The ceasefires meant that the Northern Ireland conflict found other forms, e.g. disputes over marches. The fundamental fear-threat relationship between the

communities remained in place, and in fact became more overt, because a small number of paramilitaries on both sides could no longer be blamed for our problems. Unionist fears about the future and Nationalist determination that changes should take place in Northern Ireland became more obvious. Many things, which had remained relatively hidden, were laid bare. The ceasefires made it safer to express sectarianism. The conflict over marches dragged large numbers of people into it, particularly in July 1996. The violence up to the ceasefires had inhibited large scale community conflict and had in recent years only involved relatively small numbers of people. This had allowed many to opt out with relative impunity. Drumcree brought the prospect of large scale community conflict; the possibility of violence came close to many people. Bitterness and polarisation intensified because some of the brakes on the conflict were off.

3) People came to enjoy the absence of violence but it is clear that ceasefires are not enough. Ceasefires are not peace and, as we have argued above, the ceasefires created some of the conditions for intensified community conflict. A peace process has to move forward, and at the same time many people fear what the outcome of a peace process will be.

4). Mainstream Unionist opinion was not involved. It was deeply sceptical about the IRA ceasefire. This found focus in the issue of decommissioning of paramilitary weaponry. Unionists were also deeply unhappy about the whole direction of political developments and the Joint Framework Document was the culmination of this. They felt excluded and marginalised, playing in a game that always handicapped them, a game which they did not want to play, and for which they seemed to have no aptitude.

    A real peace process requires a significant partner across the community divide. It was a fundamental flaw that this has not been the case up to now.

5). The inability to overcome the issue of decommissioning and move into all-party talks. The issue of decommissioning came to symbolise the uncertainty, insecurity and distrust surrounding the process.

6). The unwillingness of the Republican movement to accept the principle that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland cannot be changed without majority consent did not encourage the view that it had decisively moved away from violence.

7). The inability or unwillingness of the British Government to move the process forward. This was experienced by many Nationalists as demonstrating a lack of commitment to moving towards a just settlement. It was also seen as giving in to Unionist concerns.

8). Little thought had actually been given to the process itself; efforts had concentrated on establishing the ceasefires. People, including Governments, were ill prepared. There were too high expectations of quick progress.

9). The problems that the peace process ran into point to some of the underlying intractabilities in the Northern Ireland problem: the fears and insecurities, the

need to protect positions, the desire to advance positions, the issue of power and power balances.

10). There was not a sufficient incentive to drive the process forward and find accommodation. A failure of the process would not face Northern Ireland with the catastrophic consequences it would have had in South Africa as the British Government remains, in the last analysis, responsible. Further, a key element in Northern Ireland politics as it has developed since the Troubles, and particularly since direct rule, is that much of it centres on pushing and pulling the British Government to do things, or not to do things, rather than the parties (and communities) seeking accommodation with each other.

FUNDAMENTALS IN DEVELOPING A PEACE PROCESS

1). **Looking For Some Other Way**

When we begin to suspect that conflict or the present situation cannot give us what we need or hope for or is unsustainable, then we are open to the possibility of looking for some other way.

When it becomes clear that neither force of arms nor force of numbers will get us what we want we may be open to find another way.

Are the various parties in Northern Ireland at a stage where they are sufficiently determined to look for another way? This is a key question in developing a peace process.

2). **Finding a Partner**

Looking for another way means that we need to find a solution with the people with whom we are in conflict. Fundamentally this means facing the reality of the situation and giving the other recognition, respect and acceptance. We stop making people fit into our version of peace. They have interests, fears, aspirations and need for security which have to be taken into account too.

Albie Sachs describes a process in South Africa where first there was an increasing recognition that change was needed. A second component of the change was the growing ability of people to learn "to look into each other's eyes" and acknowledge the fears and needs of the other. Sachs suggested that all were forced to recognise the common humanity that people shared, and he believed from this a growing understanding and mutual respect developed between people who had hitherto been adversaries.

A real peace process requires a partner. As Shimon Peres said of the Palestine/ Israel conflict:

"I think what is really important for a peace process is the creation of a partner, more than a plan. Because plans don't create partners, but if you have a partner then you can negotiate a plan."

Similarly, Nelson Mandela said of F.W. de Klerk:

"To make peace with an enemy, one must work with that enemy, and that enemy become your partner."

Thus, we need the other to find peace. We have to develop a relation with those with whom we are in conflict.

The peace process in South Africa required the support of the main blocks of White and Black opinion (the Nationalist Party and the ANC - the two main actors in the conflict). It was driven forward by them. At the same time the process aimed to involve as many different groups as possible (i.e. it sought to be inclusive). The peace process in Northern Ireland did not start from this basis. A real peace process must have **at least** the main blocks of Nationalist and Unionist opinion on board **and** seek to be as inclusive as possible.

Developing a relationship with those with whom we are in conflict raises the issues of trust and reliability. Trust and reliability are necessary for people to be able to live together. Part of trust and reliability is the willingness of people to make promises and agreements, and to keep them.

3). **Trust**

Paragraph 14 of the Mitchell Commission Report referring to the resolution of the decomissioning issue makes it clear that the key problem is the absence of trust. The Report says, "Common to many of our meetings were arguments, steeped in history, as to why the other side cannot be trusted. As a consequence, even well-intentioned acts are often viewed with suspicion and hostility". Northern Irish society is pervaded by distrust and as we say in *Breaking Down the Enmity*:

"Fear, enmity, resentment and insecurity are at the heart of inter-communal relationships. We carry resentment from our experience of being a victim and we also have the fear of becoming a victim. Identity and internal cohesion have come from the enemies that have surrounded us. As long as we remain afraid of each other we arm ourselves and live defensive lives. Resentment leads to thoughts of revenge. The other dominates our lives. Whenever fear, enmity, resentment, and insecurity are rampant there is division, and this leads to hatred, violence, destruction and war" (p. 141).

Some degree of trust is a necessary precondition for everything else: for sharing a space together, for sharing power and responsibility, for reconciliation. Without it nothing is possible.

What is required to create trust? In our context some of the factors required are

- a willingness not to destroy the other (essential to this is the decision not to use violence);
- an acknowledgement of the other side's pain and suffering and a recognition of a common humanity;

- a willingness to understand the fears and sense of threat that the other community has of us and to seek to take them into account, even if they are thought to be groundless;
- a willingness to make conciliatory gestures and actions;
- a willingness to do things that will reduce fear and threat and provide reassurance;
- showing by signs, words and actions that we want the situation to change;
- a willingness to treat the other side with respect and to avoid humiliating them;
- a willingness to meet, to listen, to talk;
- a willingness to be bound by promises and agreements (implicit and explicit) which we will seek to keep. We have obligations towards the other community and we need to show there is reliability in the keeping of promises and agreements. The Mitchell Commission's Six Principles of Democracy and Non-Violence are an important example of the commitments necessary to develop trust in Northern Ireland politics;
- a willingness to take the interests and identities of the other community into account;
- a willingness to provide for the security of the other community;
- some shared ground or togetherness that will enable conflict and differences to be dealt with;
- a willingness to develop a relationship with other groups, parties and individual and to cooperate where possible (e.g. on economic and social issues).

Trust is often tentative and it grows only gradually. It is usually imperfect which is why groups require protection and external guarantors. Trust is a risk. Completely satisfactory guarantees can never be obtained that the other group and their leaders are trustworthy. Political agreements always involve risk and uncertainty.

Confidence-Building Measures. Confidence-building is a precursor to the development of trust. It offers the possibility of trust growing. The Mitchell Commission suggested confidence-building measures in relation to

- the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, some of which, it was suggested, could take place on a step-by-step basis during the process of all-party negotiations;
- the early termination of paramilitary activities, including surveillance, targeting and 'punishment' beatings and killings;
- the provision of information on the status of missing persons and the lifting of threats against those who have been forced to leave their communities;
- continued action by the Governments on prisoners;
- a review of the situation regarding legally registered weapons;
- continued progress towards more balanced representation in the police force;
- an "elective process" which was broadly acceptable and "with an appropriate mandate and within the three-strand structure";
- an early implementation of the proposed review of emergency legislation;
- social and economic progress.

Other issues that remain of particular importance in developing confidence are

- a Bill of Rights and other means of securing the protection of the interests and identities of minorities and individuals;
- a reformulation of Articles II and III of the Republic's Constitution. This would help reduce Unionist fears, as would the development of greater pluralism in Southern society;
- measures to allow for the expression of different identities in Northern Ireland;
- measures in relation to the ethos, structures and accountability of the police service.

The issue of trust points to other fundamental issues - those of consent and belonging together. These underlie the workings of democracy and politics. They are, therefore, fundamental to a peace process.

4). **Consent**

The consent principle, i.e. there can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland without majority consent, is now broadly accepted. There has been a significant evolution of mainstream nationalist opinion - both North and South - on this issue. Only the position of Sinn Fein remains ambiguous. The principle of consent is supported by current understandings of international law and practice.

The consent of the people of Northern Ireland to a general settlement is also required. (Both Governments have committed themselves to putting the terms of a settlement, if one is reached, to the people of Northern Ireland **and** the people of the Republic). However, because Northern Ireland is a divided society the will of the majority is not the only democratic consent required - although it cannot be disregarded because of the safeguards, security and guarantees it gives. A majority's right is relatively - but not totally - uncontroversial in a stable state, i.e. one where the vast majority give their consent to its political arrangements. However, a divided society cannot work without mutual consent or agreement. Thus the **winning** of consent and the development of cross community consensus must have a high priority. And this is a fundamental part of a peace process.

Any enduring settlement will have to have the consent of both communities. There are important issues around how consent is to be measured and these will have to be clarified in negotiations.

5). **Belonging Together**

In democracies legitimate government is based on the consent of a whole people who acknowledge their common bond together. Behind this consent however lies a deeper and often unstated acknowledgement and acceptance that despite our differences we belong together. Thus, fundamental to a peace process is the envisaging of a mutually shared future - which cannot be purely nationalist or unionist.

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.

IMPORTANT ISSUES

We now discuss some important issues relating to the peace process in more detail.

(a) **Decommissioning of Weapons**

Decommissioning of paramilitary weapons has been a source of continuing disagreement since the ceasefires in 1994 and up until September 1997 blocked all-party talks. Decommissioning, while important in itself, points to a number of underlying issues

- whether there has been a decisive move away from violence by the paramilitaries or not. Unionists tend to see decommissioning as proof of a genuine conversion to democratic politics;
- the fear-threat relationship between the communities. There is a fear and a threat that force of arms or force of numbers will prevail. There is a lack of confidence that the process of political dialogue and negotiation alone will produce an acceptable outcome. Underlying this is the question: What do democracy and politics mean in a divided society? Violence, or its threat, subvert the norms of democracy, but democracy is a considerable risk for minorities in bitterly divided societies;
- the issue of trust, or more precisely its lack. Decommissioning symbolises the Unionist community's total lack of trust in the Republican movement. But it also symbolises the Republican movement's view that the Unionist community and the British Government seek its defeat - the handing in of weapons is a sign of defeat in its view - and that the Unionist community is not serious about substantive talks about the future of Northern Ireland: the issue of decommissioning is a way of avoiding serious talks;
- the issue symbolises each community's felt need of protection from the other and the need to work for new relationships between the communities which will provide justice and security. This will involve the issue of policing, a review of the situation regarding legally held weapons and a general demilitarisation of the situation (including the role of the Army). Thus decommissioning leads into the heart of the Northern Ireland problem.

The realities are that armed movements do not hand in their weapons before a settlement and the weapons can easily be replaced. Given these realities the

insistence on prior decommissioning before all-inclusive talks was always unrealistic, no matter how understandable it was. However, there are issues of confidence-building, reliability, trust, fear and threat that have to be addressed. People need confidence that there has been a decisive moving away from violence (all the more necessary after the breakdown of the first ceasefire) and that is why some decommissioning of weapons would be important. It is a sign, a promise, that things will be different in future. If not a gesture on decommissioning then how can people be given confidence that there is a decisive move away from violence?

(b) The Early Release of Politically Motivated Prisoners

The Political Context. The context of paramilitary ceasefires inevitably raises the issue of the early release of politically motivated prisoners. This was the case after the ceasefires in 1994 and the British Government responded by increasing the rate of remission and the Irish Government by releasing prisoners early. In the context of a second ceasefire which is real and sustainable the issue will arise again. The element of risk in the early release of prisoners needs to be acknowledged; it could all end again in the violence of bomb and bullet.

The Moral Reality. Many victims of violence are deeply and rightly angry about the injuries done to them. Others in society who have not been directly injured are also angry because of wrongs committed both against the victims and against society as a whole. This has to do not only with the death of loved ones or with physical injury. It is also a response to the failure of people who use violence to treat persons as persons. Violence denies the human right to exist.

This is where society's need to punish comes in. Punishment is a statement that the injury matters and, more fundamentally, that persons matter. A trial and a subsequent sentence give expression to a legitimate anger. The criminal justice system, at its best, can offer the possibility of the story of a person's injury being told, of their getting a degree of justice and of their humanity being affirmed. These may help people let go their anger. Without an adequate criminal justice system people often feel impelled to express their anger in unrestrained ways, for example through vengeance. These are some of the reasons why many are reluctant to allow prisoners to be released early.

However, we also need to recognise that politically motivated prisoners, both loyalist and republican, are deeply rooted in our community. They have acted out aspirations, fears, angers, hatreds, and hurts of much larger groups who would not allow themselves to become involved personally in violence. We need to face the fact that these prisoners are part of our community, 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 for what they have done. Prisoners cannot be written off as having total responsibility for the violence of the last twenty-five years. Many others have a responsibility.

A Divided Society. There are other factors which should influence our attitudes towards politically motivated prisoners. Northern Ireland is a divided society where the legitimacy of the state has been contested and where there has been a long

tradition of the use of violence for political ends. This use of violence has been recognised as legitimate by quite large numbers of people. Even larger numbers do not regard those involved in politically motivated violence as simply criminals. There has been an ambivalence on all sides towards the use of violence and towards politically motivated prisoners. Also, very many of those convicted were caught up at a young age in the consequences of our community's descent into conflict and violence, and ended up in paramilitary organisations. A large number would not have seen the inside of a jail were it not for the Troubles.

Further, the criminal justice system has been substantially weakened by the need to respond to violence and this has had the result of lowering the quality of justice. For instance, the convictions of some are regarded as unsafe by many neutral commentators. The relative lack off convictions of members of the security forces for unlawful action has been a source of concern to many. There has also been a perception that those members of the security forces who have been convicted of serious offences have been treated differently from other prisoners.

Nevertheless, many of those in prison have rightly been convicted for terrible crimes, and the continuing functioning of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, despite its serious inadequacies, has been one factor in preserving us from even worse retaliatory violence and an even more divided community.

The Release of Politically Motivated Prisoners. International experience suggests that the early release of politically motivated prisoners is necessary (cf NIACRO's report *Release and Reintegration of Politically Motivated Prisoners in Northern Ireland,* March 1995). It is part of the necessary measures to develop a peace process and to help to create a climate for a political settlement.

Such a move can, however, suggest that what was done and the suffering of the injured and their families are not of serious account. Very real burdens will be put on the victims. There is no early release for them. For many there can be no adequate compensation, reparation or justice. This is part of their situation. So the victims of violence are being asked to give up their claim to justice, or at least to limit their claim. This needs to be seriously faced in discussions of early release. We also need to face the reality that deep wounds will continue to be carried by many people. These hurts, pains and wounds must be acknowledged. That, too, is part of a peace process.

The victims of politically motivated violence are, of course, not the only people who have been dehumanised in Northern Ireland. The communities from which paramilitaries come have also been dehumanised, by security force actions, by sectarian violence, unemployment, and so on. To go further, members of the security forces and prison officers have themselves been dehumanised by what they have been involved in and by what has happened to them. In fact, we are all caught up in a tangled web of injustice, conflicting rights, of being sinners and sinned against, of being victims and victimisers. That is not to say that we make no distinctions between actors, actions and activities, but rather to suggest a moral complexity of which we are all a part.

Remorse. It really does matter whether people who cause hurt show remorse. Contrition is a sign, however belated it may be, that the one we have injured is, after

all, a fellow human being with a claim upon our respect. Thus, saying sorry and showing remorse are important.The release of politically motivated prisoners would be more acceptable if paramilitary organisations clearly showed remorse for their actions. Similarly, acknowledgement by the Government of unjust actions by the security forces, for instance on Bloody Sunday, should be part of the process as well. Such actions by the Government and by paramilitaries could have a very positive effect on the atmosphere in the community.

The Challenge of Forgiveness. How can we forgive those who have hurt us irreparably? How can those who have murdered forgive themselves or find forgiveness? How can those who have murdered and wounded, and those who have suffered the consequences of murder and woundedness co-exist in the same land? These questions show that the issue of forgiveness is not simply one for the pious. It is of vital practical necessity so that people can live with themselves and with others. It is something we will discuss further in this document.

The development of a viable peace process and the need to create a new future require that the position of politically motivated prisoners be addressed in a balanced way. It should preferably be done in ways which preserve the seriousness and the moral weight of the offences committed, i.e. **not** through an amnesty. It has to be recognised that how the demands of justice and how the demands of peace are to be related in a situation of communal breakdown is a search - a search that takes seriously what happened and the wrongs committed, and also looks towards the future and the good of the whole community.

c). **Parity of Esteem**

Our pamphlet *Doing Unto Others: Parity of Esteem in a Contested Space* (1997) sought to explore the concept of parity of esteem. We said that there were certain issues of critical importance in contested societies such as Northern Ireland: the different communities' experiences of the State and, in particular, of the law and justice system; issues of symbolic expression, e.g. flags emblems and anthems; how culture, language and education issues are treated; and issues of equity between the communities, e.g. in employment opportunities. And these all relate to parity of esteem.

Parity of esteem is particularly controversial when it relates to the political expression of different identities and to issues of symbolic expression. We argued that the concept has limitations and deficiences but affirmed the validity of a parity of esteem **approach** because it was an attempt to deal with the usual binational reality of Northern Ireland. It seemed to us that without a political recognition of Britishness and Irishness, Northern Irish society would continue to lack cohesion and stability. This raises some difficult issues, e.g.:

- How is the Irishness of Northern Ireland to be recognised?
- What does this mean in terms of the institutions of the State, for flags, national anthems, etc.?
- How is this to be done without weakening the Britishness of Northern Ireland?

The two Governments working together can seek to be even-handed in their approach to the two communities - this is one meaning of parity of esteem.

The British Government can introduce measures to improve equality of treatment between the two communities, e.g. in fair employment. Clearly the issues of the administration of justice and policing are of outstanding importance. The fundamental issue is how the two communities can be brought into the same relationship with the law and justice system - and this requires new political arrangements. The issue of parading is also of major significance because here we are talking about the control of the public space in Northern Ireland. This issue, as we have seen, has the potential for enormous conflict and violence.

However, neither Government can ensure parity of esteem when it comes to how the two communities treat each other. It is clear that underlying the Northern Ireland conflict, and fuelling it, are the feelings of superiority which affect us all; feelings of Irishness being superior to Britishness and vice versa; feelings of Catholicism being superior to Protestantism, and vice versa; and religious and national feelings combining to reinforce each other. If you feel superior then it is quite likely that you feel that the other should or will eventually give way to what is inherently superior. It opens the way to domination by force of arms or force of numbers. It requires the removal or suppression or demotion of the other community's symbols and practices. It requires other people to fit in, or their removal. Parity of esteem does not come naturally to people who feel superior. If the concept is to be more than a slogan or a weapon in the fight between the two communities it will require people to see each other in new ways; it will require people to make space in their identity for the other; and it will require new relationships. Thus, the concept of parity of esteem raises the question of what recognition and acceptance we give to other traditions, and more fundamentally to the people with whom we share the community.

THE PRESENT CONTEXT - SOME REALITIES

It seems to us that a peace process is operating in the context of certain realities. Some of these are

- the British and Irish Governments work increasingly together; the historic antipathy between Britain and Ireland has faded to a shadow at government level;
- mainstream nationalist opinion accepts that there can be no change in the constitutional position of Northern Ireland without majority consent;
- there will be no united Ireland for the foreseeable future;
- the British Government has accepted that it has no "selfish strategic or economic interest" in Northern Ireland;
- violence has been rejected by an overwhelming majority on the island;
- it is clear that the Provisional IRA 'war' could not and cannot be won;

- the position of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland has improved and there is no conceivable possibility that this will be reversed;
- neither community can be enticed, persuaded or coerced into abandoning its historic identity or allegiance;
- neither majority rule in Northern Ireland nor integration with the rest of the United Kingdom is a viable option;
- it is clear that there is both a British and an Irish identity in Northern Ireland and political arrangements must reflect this fact;
- Britain and Ireland are rapidly changing societies; Britishness and Irishness are being redefined and national sovereignty is being transformed in the context of the European Union;
- the religious reality of Ireland is changing, and in particular, Irish Catholicism is changing rapidly. Greater distinctions are being made between religious and political allegiances by many Churches and Christians. Increasing secularisation affects how Churches relate to each other and to society, and what influence and power they have.

Many Nationalists and Unionists, in differing ways, find some of these realities deeply unpalatable - and are trying to change or resist them. Nevertheless, they will have to be faced if there is to be an accommodation.

In the context of these realities we believe that there are some criteria which should govern approaches to the problem of Northern Ireland, which is a divided society with two major traditions. These are

- 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 Republic;
  (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.

We have said that there needs to be a political recognition of Britishness and Irishness in Northern Ireland (which will involve North/South institutions) but finding arrangements which deal with this adequately is no easy business. There are no blueprints for finding ways whereby two groups can live together peaceably and with justice in what is presently a contested space. It needs to be recognised that the normal outcome of such contestations is domination by one group or expulsion.

SUSTAINING A PEACE PROCESS

A peace process brings a time of ambiguity, uncertainty and fluidity. The things which were once solid can appear to melt into air. The possibility of change is present, both as promise and threat. There are both fears of 'sell-out' and unrealistic expectations of change. Violence is a possibility, and sometimes an actuality - the return to the certainties of violence may be attractive to some. Many peoples' hurts, anger and pain come to the surface. The issue of the meaning of what has happened is one that starts to be examined. These are some of the reasons why managing a peace process is difficult. It is why trust and confidence building measures on all sides are required.

The strategies and energies required for developing peace are different to those required to sustain a situation of conflict. Developing peace requires risk taking, creativity, determination, endurance and a capacity to build relationships and to make and keep agreements, among other qualities. At the same time communities must be both reassured and prepared for change.

In a peace process politicians need room for manoeuvre. As negotiations proceed they may see the need to obscure or conceal important changes in direction and policy. "Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay" is rarely a political virtue. Obscuring important changes in political direction may be seen as necessary to allow a politician to retain credibility with the people he or she represents. Fudging, or the creative avoidance of particular issues, may be seen as important in moving situations on and of enabling significant groups to be brought into the political process. This may be particularly true of groups that have been involved in political violence. What we are doing is recognising that a situation of community conflict has brought us to an impasse. For the sake of the possibility of a different future a new start has to be made, which means offering the possibility of inclusion in the political process to those who have been involved in violence and have declared a ceasefire. This does not mean that we regard what these people have done as of no account, nor are we naive about them. What we need to do, in the context of negotiations, is to test out the genuineness of their change of direction and commitment to democracy and non-violence.

People can change (this is a central affirmation of the Christian Gospel) and they must be given the opportunity to change. In political life this may require some 'fudging' and ambiguity on certain issues. However, it does not involve a suppression

of critical judgement. This is why it is vital that organisations which have been involved in violence, or are close to those involved, show by their words and deeds that they are making a **decisive change in direction** and are pursuing a democratic and non-violent way forward. There can be no ultimate fudging and evasion of this issue. Otherwise, society will be further destabilised and democratic norms eroded. There is a judgement to be made about what can be termed a creative ambiguity which is necessary to move a peace process forward towards accommodation, and what may be dishonest ambiguity which is ultimately destructive.

Because of the difficulty of finding agreement the possibility of interim agreements should not be despised. The principle of "nothing agreed until everything is agreed" can be a dangerous recipe for total stasis. We cannot move from a position, of deep hostility and profound mistrust to one of total agreement and confidence over night. Some issues will have to be postponed. In South Africa one of the key elements in the process of change was the development of procedural mechanisms which facilitate important breakthroughs. One of these mechanisms was the concept of "sufficient consensus" which achieved movement on some fronts even when there was stasis on others. It may be that consultative referenda might have a role to play to break impasses and secure partial agreements.

It is clear that the process requires a structured, planned, multi-faceted approach, embracing goals and timetables so that the process actually makes progress. However, we should be clear that transforming such a deeply entrenched conflict as Nothern Ireland's is a process which will last decades. A political agreement will only be the start.

A successful peace process will require difficult and painful compromises. Much will have to be given up. Long-held aspirations may have to be abandoned or modified or put into indefinite suspension. We will have to work with people who have been our bitter enemies, people who may have tried to kill us. Communities will have to be prepared for these compromises. And not only in Northern Ireland. Is there not also a need for debate in the Republic about the changes required there, e.g. in Articles II and III of the Constitution,about the relationship with Britain, about the nature of Irishness, about the inclusiveness of Irish society?

This leads us on to the role of politicians.

THE ROLE OF POLITICIANS

Politicians represent communities, with all their concerns, hurts, fears, enmities and aspirations. There is a necessary self-interest in the need to get elected. It is not natural to take other communities and their interests into account. Politics involves competition, rivalry and conflict. Politicians operate in a hard world where fear and the self-interest of communities are the primary motivations, rather than altruism or visions of a different society. Yet, politics can only work when politicians use power

forbearingly, where they sustain the fabric of the community and allow a place for opponents; and where electorates give room to their politicians to give leadership, recognise the burdens which responsible politicians carry and the forgiveness they require. This is why we pray for them.

Politicians are representative figures. At its best this can mean a politician accepting responsibility for the well-being of a community with a focus on "the future and the responsibility towards the future" (the German sociologist Max Weber in his essay 'Politics as a Vocation'). In the same essay Weber speaks of politicians requiring above all "trained relentlessness in viewing the realities of life, and the ability to face such realities and to measure up to them inwardly." This facing of reality and acceptance of responsibility for a community's future can mean reassessing where a community is and seeking to find new ways forward, leading to new political agreements.

Paul Taylor, correspondent for the *Washington Post* in South Africa during the first national election said, "I happened to cover a society at a big time with figures that rose to the occasion. They exerted moral leadership and brought frightened people across a great divide. They saw the possibilities of the human spirit". This can be true, too, of Northern Ireland.

Times of opportunity open up for communities and politicians can seize the moment and give leadership in such a way that they can carry people with them. And, of course, there is an indispensable element of risk in politics and that is why politicians need support.

A PEACE PROCESS IS MORE THAN POLITICS

A peace process is not just political. It has social, psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. And politics is in turn affected by the social, psychological, cultural and spiritual. These dimensions must be addressed in a peace process and are central to the constructive transformation of the conflict.

An important aspect of this is how people remember and how they deal with past. How people remember profoundly affects how they behave in the present and significantly affects their politics. Our accumulated history - the grievance and insecurity dating back centuries - and the pain and animosity of the last twenty eight years are part of today's realities. There is a need for opportunities for the past to be addressed symbolically, ritually and liturgically, and for spaces to be "provided for people to express to and with each other the pain and injustices experienced. Acknowledgement and mutual recognition of the legitimacy of their experience is decisive in the reconciliation dynamic" (John Paul Lederach). If hurt, pain, guilt, and loss are not dealt with effectively they will be driven underground, sure to surface in unexpected and harmful ways.

Forgiveness and acknowledgement of wrongs (including apology) are interrelated ways of dealing with what has happened, which may be deeply transformative. It is to these that we turn.

Forgiveness

One of the main reasons why violence was not much greater over the past to eight years has been the way that Christians and their Churches have chosen consistently to seek to cut cycles of vengeance by calling for, and practising, non-retaliation and forgiveness. Forgiveness is a central aspect of the Gospel. It has significantly penetrated Irish life, and its practice - particularly by many victims and their families - has had social and political effects.

However, the victims of violence or their families cannot be burdened with the demand that they forgive those who have perpetrated crimes against them. That is something they may, or may not, be able to do. None of the rest of us can sit in judgment on them. Nor can we put the burden of responsibility for progress in a peace process on them either, although they may have strong views and ideas about the process of peace and its outcome. Victims have their particular needs: for justice, for the seriousness of the harm to be acknowledged, for compensation, for apology and repentance from those who have done them wrong, for their stories to be heard. All this needs to be acknowledged, as does the fact that many victims of violence have been able to act in reconciling ways even if they have not (yet) been able to forgive the particular wrongdoer(s).

Communal Forgiveness

What **is** required is that the community at large - battered, hurt and damaged by what has happened over the last twenty-eight years - be prepared to enter into a more general process of being able to set aside the past - with all its enmities and demands for revenge - and start anew. This is something in the nature of forgiveness. As the former Zambian President, Kenneth Kaunda, said forgiveness is not so much an isolated act but "a constant willingness to live in a new day without looking back and ransacking the memory for occasions of bitterness and resentment".

Such a process of communal forgiveness takes what happened seriously; thus truth seeking and telling are important. But it seeks to bring peace to the past for the sake of the present and the future. The goal is healing and a move forward into new relationships.

Such forgiveness is made easier when there is evidence of people acting in new ways, e.g. decisively moving away from violence or being prepared to negotiate new and just political arrangements, or when regret or apology is expressed for what has happened.

If we fail to forgive we will hand on our bitterness to the next generation. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia is an example where bitterness was handed down; not only from memories of atrocities committed during the Nazi period, but going back generations before that, even to the wars between Christian and Turk. And, if the politics of grievance is not given up, the past keeps everyone in its grip. Either we find ways to forgive or else we separate from, or seek to destroy, each other. Thus forgiveness is a practical necessity for continuing to live together.

Acknowledgement of Wrongs and Apology

As individuals we are not guilty of acts we have not done or in which we have not been directly implicated. At the same time we belong to groups, communities and nations that have done things which were wrong, in the distant or more immediate past. Our history has imposed suffering on others and often brought benefits to ourselves. We cannot run away from this history and its consequences, for we are caught up in it , even if we are not personally guilty. The past affects present realities and relationships. Thus there is a solidarity in sin which involves the living and the dead.

Acknowledgement of wrongs done and hurts caused represent a facing of the reality of what a particular group, community or nation has done. If the reality of what has been done is not faced we remain in a sense in a prison of our own making and cannot move forward. Our acknowledgement of what has happened, our sense of regret and our disapproval of past actions by our group or community enables us to conduct our relationships in the present in a more generous and just way.

Acknowledgement of wrongs done and hurts caused may take the form of apology. Apology opens up the possibility of reconnection with the other. For instance, the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt in 1945 recognised the Evangelical Church in Germany's share of the responsibility for the terrible things done during the Third Reich. It paved the way for an honest approach to what had happened and for that Church's reentry into the ecumenical community.

Apology - clearly and publicly expressed - is one way of convincing people that a clear break with the past has been made. Of course, apology has to be followed by, or linked to, an attempt to undo wrongs and act differently - to establish a new justice and a new relationship.

In the public realm, for apology to have power it must be made by leaders who have credibility and a capacity to be considered representative, both by the group they are apologising on behalf of, and by the community to whom they are apologising. Timing is important: there are particular moments when words of apology speak. Too soon and often the apology is not believed: the pain, hurt and anger of the victims appear not to have been taken seriously. Place is important, as is an audience willing to respect and hear the speaker. Apology also needs to be set in the context of a process of establishing a new relationship. And the words chosen are important. For apology to have power it should be about specifics, where possible, and not just generalities.

Demands for apology are often part of a claim for justice and respect. An acknowledgement that a wrong has been done is important. But demands for apology are often counter-productive and can feed resentment. They are frequently seen as an attempt to humiliate the other. Apologies best arise out of a process of free, honest and authentic reflection, and not from moral blackmail. Apologies - even murmurs of regret - should be received in a forgiving spirit with a lack of self righteousness by a community. After all, everyone is a sinner, all groups have

committed wrongs in their history. The aim should be new relationships, not moral (or other) victories.

Loyalist paramilitaries at the time of the loyalist ceasefire expressed "abject and sincere remorse" to the families of "innocent victims" for what they did. Martin McGuinness has said, "We Republicans acknowledge the hurt for which we are responsible". Cardinal Cahal Daly apologised to the British people in Canterbury Cathedral for the hurt inflicted on them by the Irish in response to an earlier initiative when the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, came to Christchurch Cathedral in Dublin to ask forgiveness of the Irish. Tony Blair became the first British Prime Minister to publicly acknowledge that his predecessors in government had failed the people of Ireland during the Famine. These apologies and acknowledgement of hurt caused were and are not without their controversies - about their credibility, about who is entitled to speak for whom, and so on. Nevertheless, they are important acknowledgments which signal new possibilities.

Who Could Apologise in Northern Ireland

A few suggestions

- republican and loyalist paramilitaries for what they have done;
- the Unionist Parties for what happened in Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1969;
- the Protestant Churches for their complicity in anti-Catholic sectarianism and failure to raise their voices against injustice;
- the Catholic Church for what its regulations on mixed marriages did to the Protestant community;
- the main political parties in the Republic for their effective abandonment of the North up to 1969;
- the British Government for unjust actions by the security forces, for example, Bloody Sunday.

A PEACE PROCESS INVOLVES MORE THAN POLITICIANS

John Paul Lederach, a US Mennonite expert on many conflict situations throughout the world, says that there can be a danger of too much emphasis on the role of top level political leadership in peace processes. There needs to be 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. Thus civil society - churches, business, trade unions, community groups, etc. - has a vital role to play in the developing of viable

and successful peace process. There is a need for communication and links between different constituencies.

ECONOMIC AND 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.

A TASK FOR THE CHURCHES

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 made absolutes and exclusive commitments have been demanded of people. Political positions have been sacralised. Political loyalties and exclusive traditions have been put before the God who will have no other god before Him. Churches have over-identified with political positions.

One of the tasks that churches could undertake which would help a peace process is to disentangle religious commitments from political commitments. When we confess Jesus Christ as Lord (Acts 2:35) we confess that no earthly ruler or political structure can be absolute. Thereby we give politics and political commitments their proper place.

Political compromise does not sell out the transcendent God who is beyond all our political aspirations. What God requires is new and just relationships between persons and communities.

We should also be clear that nationalisms are religions, having their own form of the sacred, with stories of sacrifices and redemptive violence. We know that these stories can have great power over us but, nevertheless, they are delusions that take us into conflict and violence. The God of Jesus Christ tells us: unmask these gods; stop making victims of ourselves and others; turn and find peace.

(Much of the material in this pamphlet has been taken from the following previous publications of the Group: *The Things That Make for Peace* (1995); *Liberty to the Captives?* (1995); *Forgive Us Our Trespasses ...? (1996)*; and *Doing Unto Others* (1997). In the case of some issues the argument has been developed there at greater length).

APPENDICES

PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY AND NON-VIOLENCE

The Mitchell Commission recommended (January 1996) that the participants in all-party negotiations should affirm their total and absolute commitment to the following principles of democracy and non-violence:

(a) To democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues;

(b) To the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations;

(c) To agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission;

(d) To renounce for themselves, and to oppose any effort by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations;

(e) To agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree;

(f) To urge that "punishment" killings and beatings stop and to take effective steps to prevent such actions.

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