



CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTIANITY
IN IRELAND

RECONCILIATION: **Ways of Dealing with Northern Ireland's Past**

Submission to N Ireland Affairs Committee

January 2005

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and feel that our research and experience can add value and insight as the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the Government, and indeed the people of Northern Ireland seek to deal with Northern Ireland's past

We fully support the aim of finding "ways of dealing with the past which recognises the pain, grief and anger associated with it" and which enables Northern Ireland "to build a better future for the next generation".

Reconciliation

A significant issue facing any jurisdiction that seeks to deal with its past is developing a clear understanding of what reconciliation is, what it involves and the implications for those who participate. This word is used in different spheres and conjures up in people's minds different meanings and expectations. If reconciliation is to be promoted, it is vital that the people of Northern Ireland know exactly what is involved and what can be expected as an outcome. Great damage can be done by "mis-selling" reconciliation and creating high hopes that are not realised. It is clear from South Africa that even when some kind of national reconciliation has been achieved, many individuals do not feel personally reconciled.¹ As we consider ways to reckon with our past, the limitations and complexity of potential outcomes must be made clear.

Therefore, our intentions are to define what we understand full and true reconciliation to involve; to convey our perception of the current reality in Northern Ireland and how this limits such reconciliation; and to consider the implications this has for both the Government and Churches in the ways in which we deal with the past.

Defining Reconciliation

Christian tradition understands reconciliation to be both a process and an outcome, first and foremost between God and humans, but also between human persons and groups.

The outcome of reconciliation

As an outcome reconciliation is the place where "Truth and mercy will meet; justice and peace will kiss each other" (Psalm 85:10).

True reconciliation gives account of truth and shows mercy to those who are sorry for the wrong they have done. At the same time it demonstrates justice and leads to peace between the reconciled parties. For the Christian these are all elements that Jesus brought together when he died on the cross, and which will be fully realised at the end of time.

This all lends itself to a very high view of reconciliation. We believe such an outcome is an honourable goal in human relationships, and yet at the same time we are convinced that true and full reconciliation is beyond human ability and made possible only by the grace of God. This is no blind theological commitment, but is consistent with the history and experience of human relations and attempts at reconciliation. We hope to highlight this as we consider the reality of Northern Ireland.

¹ Examples of this are cited in ECONI publications. See Hauerwas, Stanley, *A Time to Heal*, Pathways series ECONI 1999, pp 30-31, and Thomson, Alwyn, *Forgiveness, truth and memory*, Forgiveness Paper 8, Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland 2002, p. 9



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The process of reconciliation

The outcome of reconciliation cannot be separated from the process by which it is achieved. Reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ provides a rich and nuanced insight into reconciliation and its costs.

- ***Incarnation***

We understand the incarnation (God becoming man) to be a profoundly humbling, self-giving experience where one with power made himself wholly vulnerable to the group with which he wished to be reconciled. We see someone looking to convey his trustworthiness to a group unwilling to trust him; giving up his rightful identity to identify with the "other side". Reconciliation cannot happen unless unreconciled parties are voluntarily willing to make bold moves that are trusting, self-denying and other-embracing.

- ***Sacrifice***

The sacrifice of Jesus is central to reconciliation between God and man. Sacrifice is the giving up of something held dear to achieve a desired end. For all those who wish to achieve reconciliation, some sort of sacrifice will have to be made. Reconciliation is not painless or easy.

- ***Redemption***

Redemption combines the concepts of buying back and freedom from captivity. In terms of the first, redemption underscores the value of the other party in reconciliation. We buy something back; we redeem it because of the value we place on it. If reconciliation is going to go ahead, those involved must be convinced of the value of what they are redeeming. People must be convinced that the sacrifices they are going to make are worth the reconciliation that will be achieved.

In terms of freedom, true reconciliation is total liberation from the constraints of past evil. Reconciliation can only be said to have happened when none are compelled to return to old ways, nor have lives which are still controlled by past events.

- ***Repentance***

Full reconciliation must involve repentance. Repentance is more than words. It is more than full disclosure. It is more than regret or remorse. It is saying sorry for past wrongs, an action that has power to transform post-conflict situations². But it is even more than that. It is turning from those old ways of acting to new and agreeable ways. Repentance involves a clear admission of guilt and a turnaround of behaviour. Reconciliation is not whole without repentance.

- ***Forgiveness***

For people to be truly reconciled there must be forgiveness. Forgiveness is not conditional on repentance, but full reconciliation cannot occur without both repentance and forgiveness. Forgiveness means ceasing to feel resentment against the offender, opening the potential of establishing a new, trusting relationship together.³

Hopefully this brief overview gives some indication of the understanding and definition we have of reconciliation, and begins to root it into what we would expect true reconciliation to demonstrate and achieve.

² Shriver Jr., Donald, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, OUP 1995

³ ECONI and the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland have produced several in-depth studies on the nature of forgiveness and healing, including *A Time to Heal*, *Forgiveness: Making a World of Difference* and *Embodying Forgiveness*, as well as a series of Forgiveness papers. Details of all these are in the bibliography.



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Such reconciliation is only made real by God in his relationship with humans. We do not view humans as bereft of all good and unable to make any headway towards full reconciliation. However, we are realistic in our view of humanity and of our situation here in Northern Ireland, as is evidenced in the following section. We are not optimistic that human initiatives alone can achieve such a full reconciliation in Northern Ireland or anywhere else. We believe only God can bring about full reconciliation through Jesus Christ. Human attempts will at best approximate true reconciliation, inevitably falling short.

Nevertheless, we still believe that even piecemeal reconciliation is worth pursuing and brings real benefits to broken communities. Our comments and reservations are not given because we reject any notion of human reconciliation or because we are angry that processes are not more "Christian". Rather, as stated earlier, we are concerned only to avoid people being mis-sold a reconciliation process which promises far more than it can achieve and leaves the citizens of Northern Ireland suffering greater hurt and disappointed hopes.

The current reality of Northern Ireland's past

The following sections are intended to convey our perception of the current reality in terms of understanding and dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. They highlight the difficulty we see in the people of Northern Ireland following a process of full reconciliation, as outlined above. Although this seeks to stem over-optimism about what can be achieved, we do also wish to acknowledge the progress which might be made by a political reconciliation process.

A word on forgetting

One way that people have tried to deal with the past is by forgetting it. This reflects the approach taken in Mozambique, where no formal mechanism for reconciliation has been brought about, and instead people seem to be of the conviction that the price to pay for peace is to forget. The appropriateness of this in Mozambique may be due to a strong sense of community and shared history, something we will shortly discuss.⁴

However, the people of Northern Ireland seem far from willing to forget their past. Instead their desire is to "keep faith with the dead". It is their histories that form their identities and culture. It seems impossible to forget events that some see as atrocities demanding redress and others see as defining moments in who they are as a people. How can identity be maintained when the past is forgotten? Instead it seems that Northern Ireland must deal with the past rather than forget it.

Shared history?

The reality is that the people of Northern Ireland do not consider themselves to share a single past. There is no one, united history that could be supported by all citizens. Instead there are different understandings of history, different interpretations of what happened. It will be a long time, if ever, before there could ever be a shared understanding of the past, and a subject of much debate as to who defines it.

This in itself makes reconciliation a tenuous word and concept at the moment. For reconciliation implies the bringing back together of what was once united and then separated. Currently there seems to be little or nothing that the people of Northern Ireland believe unites them in the past. And so the reconciliation that brings a shared future is hamstrung by the current lack of a shared past.

Nevertheless, this does not negate a process which shares truth and enables people to tell their stories. It just sets some realistic limits on what will be achieved by such a process at this stage, in terms of the past. Truth-telling can at least start to construct a "highest common denominator"

⁴ Thomson, Alwyn, *Forgiveness, truth and memory*, Forgiveness Paper 8, Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland 2002, p. 7



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approach to shared history, and factual truth can, as Ignatieff says, serve “to narrow the range of permissible lies”⁵. Even at this stage, communities can begin to respect the integrity of those who hold a different view of history from their own, and refrain from rewriting history in a way that flatters them.⁶

Shared truth?

In talking about truth-telling, however, we must be careful to understand that there are different understandings of truth. Truth is not neutral or abstract, but is interpreted and presented through the convictions and values of those telling it. Like history, the people of Northern Ireland have little common understanding of “truth”, and indeed its religious connotations means it plays an even more contentious role in society here.

As stated earlier, even the recounting of factual truth, should it be accepted as such, is not repentance, nor does it qualify as regret or remorse. It might even be questioned as to whether the stipulation for full disclosure only in South Africa, with no admission of guilt, qualifies as true restorative justice. Certainly, without the long sought for apologies that few seem willing to give, there will be no full reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

While we believe that truth-telling can be redemptive and that truth sets people free, we are also concerned that the exposure and potential mishandling of facts could also be explosive, destabilizing, create deeper wounds, and lead to revenge. This risk remains because there is little shared commitment to the disclosure of truth.

Shared commitment?

We highlighted earlier that for full reconciliation to take place all must prize its value and find it liberating. But it is not clear that the people of Northern Ireland currently prize the value of truth-telling, or share a common understanding as to why truth should be aired. Will it bring healing? Will there be amnesty? Is it to bring about justice? Or vindication? Will it set some free whilst condemning others to live on with the constraints of the past? Is there a greater purpose to hearing the truth, or will it merely be for the truth's sake alone? Is it to create an official history, and if so, which office is in charge of bringing that together?

We noted earlier that the outcome of reconciliation involves both justice and mercy. This means that injustice must be dealt with, and yet grace must be shown. Both must be held together. When justice alone is propounded, the chances of full disclosure are minimised and the burden on the judicial system becomes great, as evidenced in Rwanda.⁷ When amnesty is the sole strategy, people are more willing to tell the truth, but victims are unable to see justice for the crimes committed against them. And in a context where political prisoners have already been set free without a condition of disclosure, the offer of amnesty provides little enticement towards telling the truth. The resolution must also deal with the fact that, while some, comparing themselves to the violent perpetrators, hold that “not all are guilty”; others will maintain that “no one has clean hands”. In other words, how do we keep a genuine sense of communal complicity without glossing over substantive differences with regard to severity and wilful participation?

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, cited in Thomson, Alwyn, *Forgiveness, truth and memory*, Forgiveness Paper 8, Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland 2002, p. 4

⁶ Elshtain, J, “Politics and Forgiveness” in *Burying the Past* (ed Biggar, N), Georgetown University Press, 2003 and McCaughey, T, “Northern Ireland: Burying the Hatchet, not the Past” in *Burying the Past* (ed Biggar, N), Georgetown University Press, 2003

⁷ Hamber, Brandon, “Truth and Reconciliation – lessons from abroad” in *Corrymeela Connections* October 2004 (Vol 5 No. 1)



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Shared trust?

We believe the unwillingness to commit to such a vulnerable process stems from a lack of shared trust. The people of Northern Ireland maintain too great a level of suspicion as to the motivation of the organisers of and participators in a truth-telling exercise for it to be sufficiently credible. The communities are not willing to make themselves vulnerable to the other side. They are uncertain of how truth will be used and handled. There is currently no willing party involved in Northern Ireland, and insufficient relational stability, to provide a substantial identification with the “other” and a trustworthy context in which people feel free to disclose. In reality, the popular contrasts with South Africa actually highlight the dissimilarity; there is not yet the political resolution here that there was there, nor is there an established authority under whom people are willing to be humble and open.⁸

Limited conclusions

All of this serves to demonstrate both the limits and cautions concerning quick establishment of a reconciliation process.

However, we again stress that this does not mean that nothing should be done for fear of not meeting the ideal. The fate of the former Yugoslavia is testimony to the fact that time does not heal all wounds. But there should also be right timing for dealing with the past and recognition that it is slow, painstaking and, ultimately, not a completely satisfactory process. Shriver underscores the importance of timing in his recounting of the movements to bring greater reconciliation between Japan and the US, which demonstrates that healing cannot be rushed when fresh wounds abound.⁹

Truth-telling and memorial events can have some worth and value, but there is no reason to believe there will be full disclosure. And without repentance there is no reason to believe there will be forgiveness. Taking inspiration from Brandon Hamber, the most we can hope for are “patchwork quilts” of truth, repentance and forgiveness.¹⁰ While this remains a limited good that falls short of full reconciliation, it can ease some broken relationships and foster a greater sense of unity and peace.

Implications for Government

We appreciate the desire for political stability and economic prosperity. To a great extent, we share these aspirations. We also are concerned that government and all parties do their utmost to establish a political settlement that engenders trust amongst the people, which, in turn, will lead to greater potential for a process of reconciliation

However, quick solutions motivated by these concerns, that are without widespread support and trust, while potentially bringing partial reconciliation, will not stop others who remain aggrieved from burdening the judicial system to obtain justice. Such measures will not bring about anything amounting to full reconciliation and must not in any way be advertised as such.

We appreciate certain benefits in suggested ventures, such as the telling and collecting of stories, a day of reflection, a living memorial museum and public acknowledgement of responsibility by various organisations and institutions.¹¹ These provide designated places for truth to be expressed, history to be shared and apologies to be offered and accepted. There is “healing” potential for all those who participate and commit to such schemes.

⁸ cf. Boraine, Alex, *All Truth is Bitter*, NIACRO & VSNI 1999 p 22

⁹ Shriver Jr., Donald, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*, OUP 1995

¹⁰ Brandon Hamber cited in Thomson, Alwyn, *Forgiveness, truth and memory*, Forgiveness Paper 8, Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland 2002, p. 9

¹¹ cf. *The Report of the Healing through Remembering Project*, 2002



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Nevertheless, the proper concern of the churches is to help people know and experience full reconciliation through Jesus Christ. The implication of this for the government is that while churches can play a large part in encouraging political methods of reconciliation, by and large they will not advocate as true reconciliation anything that falls short of this high biblical view, and will be honest in pointing out the limitations of this worthwhile project of human reconciliation.

Implications for Churches

Churches should maintain their gospel witness to the full and lasting reconciliation of Jesus Christ. The Church does not exist to help run the world more smoothly or as a supportive institution for the state government. It is there to show the world what it should be through Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that the Church should not contribute to society – quite the opposite. But the credibility and mandate of the church does not rely on it being able to deliver the unrealistic expectations of paradise on earth on the terms set by society.¹² The Church's great vision is of the new creation that God will bring about.

So churches in Northern Ireland should not let themselves be flattered about their social importance and significance such that they are used for political ends. But as the conveyors of the message of true reconciliation, the church needs to be at the forefront of modelling it in society.

Churches could consider modelling a truth-telling process so that if and when the time is right for a process to begin in the community there is a local model already operating on a micro scale which can be replicated in the macro setting. 'Truth' needs to be spoken publicly between the churches about the nature of their relationships and ongoing contribution to the divisions of Northern Ireland which in the telling would model the kind of truth-telling to be encouraged in the community. The hurt over mixed marriages, education, flags, emblems and many other issues could be discussed and documented publicly in a repentant forgiving spirit to model the vision for the wider community. Churches must model the humility, sacrifice, repentance, forgiveness, passion for justice and gracious mercy that they set as the ideal of reconciliation.

Finally, the necessity of 'keeping faith with the dead' will shape much of the motivation, expectation and co-operation in any future truth-telling exercise within this community. This will be the case whether the dead is victim or perpetrator, civilian or combatant. In a context of violent conflict the pursuit of truth and justice and calls to remembrance are inextricably linked with the need to keep faith with the dead. The Church's overriding vocation is, however, to keep faith with the living Christ who in death showed us the truth about love, grace and redemptive power.

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¹² cf. Hauerwas, Stanley and Willimon, William, *Resident Aliens*, Abingdon Press 1989 p.43-48



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