

Peace As A Mission Must

Ask a Presbyterian what mission means to them and words like overseas, doctors, teachers, Malawi etc will be popular answers. Next up would probably be evangelism, reaching out, at home. But it is fairly certain that well down the list will be peace building. However at a recent seminar hosted by the Board of Mission Overseas and the Presbyterian Peace Building Department the question was posed as to what extent peacemaking is the new face of the Church's engagement in global mission.

“As a denomination we have engaged in global mission for some 170 years,” pointed out Mission Overseas Secretary, Rev. Uel Marrs, “always endeavouring to meet people at their point of need.” That meant that if healthcare was needed doctors and nurses were sent; if people were poorly educated, teachers; and if there was no church, evangelists and pastors. “When the need is to resolve conflict in a world of brokenness and destructive divisions surely it makes sense to train and send mediators and peacemakers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” he continued.

“He is not only the great physician, the one true teacher, the one full of compassion for the poor but the prince of peace, who at Calvary reconciled people to God, to themselves and with others. As such, peacemaking is surely to

be found at the heart of God's mission in a broken and fallen world.”

Of the 25 countries in the world with the highest risk of political instability and internal war, 19 of those are in Africa and three of them are countries where the Board of Mission Overseas has direct involvement – Kenya, Malawi and Sudan.

Grasping the place of peace building in mission

Having grown up during our own Troubles, Uel Marrs' personal journey to grasp the place of peace building in mission took a significant step forward when he went to Kenya in 1989 and found a situation significantly more complex and difficult than the one he had left behind.

“Instead of two tribes in conflict there were more than 50 and with various allegiances and alliances. Inter-tribal tension and conflict was never far below the surface of life and in those early years we lived through some uncertain times as Kenya inched slowly towards democracy and more democratic government.”

Despite its apparent stability trouble flared in Kenya again during last year's election and over 1000 people were killed and tens of thousands displaced in violence that brought to the surface the old issues of politics, ethnicity and land.

Already aware of these and other problems, PCI's partner church in Kenya, the Presbyterian Church of

East Africa (PCEA), was in the process of setting up a peace desk and sent Thomas Leremore, a Kenyan married to an Irish Presbyterian missionary, to Belfast to learn from our experience.

Thomas spent some time with Laura Coulter, one of the Presbyterian Church's Peacemaking Programme Officers, undertaking the Gospel in Conflict course. “We discussed mediation and the other aspects of the work he was going to be undertaking, together with the biblical mandate for peace building,” explained Laura. “He also looked at the way we organise peace building within our church, met with some of our peace agents and visited various projects and programmes that they were involved in.”

After Thomas's return to Nairobi the relationship was further developed when Laura was invited to Kenya to conduct some training for local church leaders and she has subsequently been impressed with the progress made. “PCEA has now trained 85 peace agents who are hard at work in their communities. Three Presbyteries have begun peace initiatives with a further ten planning to implement programmes by the end of the year.”

Peace building is a powerful mission opportunity

The main speaker at the seminar was Joe Campbell. He is a former leader with Belfast

YMCA and Assistant Director of Mediation Northern Ireland. Joe, now retired, together with his wife Janet, is in Nepal working as Peace and Conflict Transformation Advisor with the United Mission.

He is convinced of the vital role that peace building can play in the mission of today's church and that because of our experience in Ireland we have learnt things that we can offer others in conflict situations.

“I am in no doubt that peacemaking is at the heart of following Jesus,” says Joe. “It is not on the periphery but at the heart. The Great Commission tells us “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples...”. The call is to make disciples, not just believers. That means those who walk the way of Jesus, who learn his thinking, his acting, imitating his way, the way he relates to people on the margins, the way he crosses boundaries, breaks down barriers and the way in which he relates to his enemies.”

With his experience of working, first in Northern Ireland and now in Nepal, Joe Campbell is sure that reconciliation is the work of God and works in the opposite way to human expectation.

“Normally we would expect reconciliation to begin with repentance of the wrongdoers – when he apologises then I'll forgive him. That's how we think.

But my experience is the

opposite. Wrongdoers are rarely willing to acknowledge what they have done or come forward to own up. God begins with the victim restoring to them their humanity that the wrongdoer has tried to remove from them.

“That God would begin with the victim and not the evildoer is consistent with divine activity in history. God takes the side of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the oppressed and the imprisoned. If reconciliation is principally God's work then we are ambassadors for Christ. It is in God working through us that reconciliation is found.”

Peace building key to our evangelical future

And in a challenge to the church Joe Campbell asks if “instead of seeing peace as an optional or even controversial element of PCI's life, could a renewed commitment actually be key to the evangelical future of the church?”

“If we, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, invest in our Church's unique position at this time in our history it may be the very hopeful and powerful mission opportunity and radical healing gift we have to offer a broken world.”

Recounting his continuing experiences in Nepal, Joe Campbell left his audience in no doubt that people from Ireland do have a lot to offer churches overseas trying to cope with conflict resolution.

He explained that much of his work is listening, observing and then perhaps asking a good

question, the sort of question that only an outsider could ask.

Also he highlighted the raft of good training programmes we have here that overseas churches could benefit from and also by experiencing firsthand the peace work that church members are involved in like Wave, Cornerstone, Corrymeela, ECONI and One Small Step.

“These things took us years to put in place and we have an opportunity to help others to learn. We have done some things well and missed big opportunities, but they can learn from us.

“While others are struggling to begin peace building programmes, we can walk with them through the mire of uncertainty and anguish, through their wars, while hope slowly emerges. When I think of the late 70s and early 80s in Ireland, it was pretty hopeless but we got through and by sharing that experience we might help others design and sustain their efforts over the long haul.”

Showing the uniqueness and Lordship of Christ through peace building

Perhaps the most powerful example of how churches could help bring about peace and respectful co-existence was told through Uel Marrs' experience of Indonesia where at the turn of the century Christians and Muslims massacred one another killing thousands, making tens of thousands refugees and destroying homes, schools,

churches and mosques.

The whole situation began to turn around when the announcement by the local Christian leader that “if any of his community wanted to kill another Muslim they would have to kill him first” was reciprocated by the Muslim leader.

The violence eased and the two communities began to live peacefully side-by-side again. Christian and Muslim communities had looked into the abyss together and decided they did not want to go there and were determined to work towards mutual respect and co-existence despite all their differences.

For Uel Marrs this example highlighted the good that can come from a mission of reconciliation but also made clear some of the difficulties particularly in a multi-faith situation.

“One reflection is that peacemaking is so difficult because it seems you have to be prepared to absorb and live with the pain inflicted upon you in order to truly extend forgiveness and work for peace.

“We must note the challenge the church faces to hold on to the uniqueness and lordship of Jesus Christ, avoiding religious pluralism. While we partner creatively with people of goodwill to promote peace, including people of other faiths, we are called to the healing of broken relationships that ultimately goes far beyond tolerance and peaceful co-

existence. We can only go so far in peacemaking before we must acknowledge Christ's lordship in order to be able to go further in transforming conflict. God in Jesus Christ is the centre and hope of the world's peace and we have to remember that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

“To journey in peacemaking is a risky journey but one that cannot be avoided. It requires those engaging in peacemaking to know peace with God and the peace of God if they are to share and promote peace making between people.

“It challenges us to be prophetic in unjust situations, to count the cost of absorbing evil without passing it on, to be courageous and move out of our comfort zone, to carry the cross, to be uncompromising on the Lordship of Christ yet to take the risk of being misunderstood and called a traitor, to be a bridge painfully walked on by one or both sides in the division we may be wrestling with, to be ready to die rather than participate in destruction.

“Surely peacemaking is the heart of the gospel and integral to mission, to evangelism today.”