

Seeking Peace

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"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." *Philippians 4:4-7*

Recently I (Debs) was struck by the connection between gratitude and peace, something which I think we, as Christians, often forget. If I can find thankfulness in my heart for all the ways in which God has blessed me and how I've seen Him at work around me, then I believe it allows room for God's peace to enter my heart and whole being. There is a steady calm which can come as a result of recognising the provision of our Heavenly Father and this helps us to move forward in faith and face whatever trials may come our way.

Considering this biblical truth has led me to reflect on the current political climate of Northern Ireland. To be honest I don't know if enough of us have actually stopped to take note of the amazing times we are living in and to give God thanks for the power-sharing government now in place at Stormont. Perhaps it is only now that we can begin to process what we have been through during the last 30-40 years and move from a place of hurt to a place of healing. In order to make that journey I believe that thankfulness for God's

mercies and grace to us, despite the worst of times, will open the way into the 'peace which passes understanding'.

It is therefore timely that the Peace and Peacemaking Panel launched the 'Gospel in Conflict: Loving your Neighbour' course earlier this year and, alongside the Youth & Children's Board, 'Preparing Youth to be Peacemakers' (PYP) Programme, Presbyterian congregations throughout Ireland have the means with which to engage in gratitude and peace in a new era.

The Gospel in Conflict is an introductory course on peace building aimed specifically at Presbyterians. It aims to challenge, equip and support Presbyterians to contribute more actively to peacemaking as an integral part of Christian discipleship. It explores five themes; Living in a Disabled Society, Exploring Our Presbyterian Identity, Dealing with Disagreement, Relating to our Neighbours and Taking Steps to Building Peace.

Designed to run over five weeks, each session lasts around two hours. It can be

used in a variety of settings, including house groups, midweek meetings or as part of evening services. I (Laura) have now delivered the course in several churches and am hopeful that many more will take this opportunity to explore the issues of conflict and peace building in our community and church.

Peacebuilding is also about building good relationships with one another within the church. One session of the Gospel in Conflict course examines what the Bible says about dealing positively with difference. We plan to develop and promote the conciliation service within PCI. There are now a number of trained conciliators who are available to offer mediative support to individuals or groups who find themselves in conflict situations, whether it's within a congregation or between congregations. Because it is important to equip people with the necessary skills to deal with conflict situations, we have developed training in areas such as conflict awareness, building good relationships, decision making, and cultural

diversity, which are offered to any church.

Like Gospel in Conflict, Preparing Youth to be Peacemakers is a discipleship-focussed programme which serves to disciple, equip and resource young people as they consider the biblical calling to be peacemakers. The course also recognises the increasing cultural diversity of Ireland and thus explores how we understand and relate to ethnic minority groups. Since 2001 PYP has been run with over 50 groups, including youth fellowships and 6th form classes, with many finding it hugely beneficial, deepening their understanding of their Christian faith and identity, and strengthening their commitment to put that faith into practice.

Another facet of the PYP programme is the fact that youth leaders are encouraged to participate in Facilitator Training, equipping them to deliver the programme to their young people. Not only has this allowed many more groups to complete the programme than would be possible if facilitated by one staff person alone, but it has also demonstrated an investment in youth leadership skills for those taking the training and has allowed those youth leaders to take a journey of personal reflection about living as a Christian in a divided society.

Now that the Gospel in Conflict course has been launched, it excites us that there is opportunity for congregations to run both youth and adult courses, concurrently if possible, and

thus put peacebuilding on the agenda for each congregation as a whole. It is important that young and old learn from each other and together look to the Prince of Peace with grateful and expectant hearts.

We believe that there is a continuing need for our denomination to make a greater contribution to peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The violent conflict is over, but there remains a huge task in building peace and working towards a shared space. Through this peace building programme, our vision is to support and challenge Presbyterians to contribute more actively to peace in Ireland through practical peacebuilding steps.

Debs Erwin & Laura Coulter
Peacemaking Programme

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Peace is like gossamer – vulnerable, yet indestructible: tear it, and it will be rewoven. Peace does not despair.

Begin to weave a web of peace: start in the centre and make peace with yourself and your God.

Take the thread outwards and build peace within your family, your community – and in the circle of those you find it hard to like.

Then stretch your concern into all the world.

Weave a web of peace and do not despair.

Love is the warp in the fabric of life: truth is the weft:

care and integrity together – vulnerable, but ultimately indestructible.

Together, they spell peace...

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