

PEACEMAKING NEWS

SPRING 2009

Presbyterian
CHURCH IN IRELAND



TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY

I recently had the great pleasure of designing and facilitating a course in Lisburn, titled, "Transforming our Community". The aim of the course was to explore links between faith, the Gospel and community relations in Lisburn.

This course developed as a follow-up to "The Gospel in Conflict" course, which was run in late 2007 through Dromore presbytery to Presbyterian churches in Lisburn. One key difference of this course was a more representative group from various churches in Lisburn.

Another difference was the involvement of Churches Together in Lisburn as the umbrella group which promoted the course widely throughout local churches.

The course was held over five weeks. Themes which we explored were: Our Spiritual Journeys/Communities; Our Political Traditions, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, and Church and Community. To our surprise, thirty-six people arrived on the first night and this level of interest was sustained over the next month. The course was interactive and we invited guest speakers along on different nights. An evaluation was carried out on the final night over a shared meal. Some comments from participants:



Content varied and thought provoking

Challenged by the openness of other participants

The interaction between everyone was fantastic...a step forward

Made me look at things from a different perspective

Churches need to share more with each other

A real openness and willingness to listen

I was challenged to reach out more and show more of God's love to all no matter what the background

We have only started.



The course was a great success. In my view, several reasons contributed to this. The year long developmental work which we did in order to bring people on board was a key factor in the broad support it attracted. Working in partnership with local clergy and Lisburn City Council was important in the sense of ownership by a wider group. We also tried to make the course as relevant as possible to the local area and this focus on church engagement with the local community was maintained throughout the course.

This focus is an important one in peacebuilding. To reach out to our community, we need to engage much more with local community issues and people. Christ calls us to show His love to our world- we can only do this as we work in partner with others towards the rebuilding of our fractured society.

The Peacemaking Programme comes to an end in June. However, I still believe that there is a 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, dealing with our past, and working towards a shared future. In the words of Very Rev Dr Birney:

"The reconciliation of our divided society is the greatest single challenge facing us today. Everything else pales into insignificance beside it. Yet no one is as equipped as the followers of Jesus Christ are to bring this about because for us it is a gospel imperative" (Peacemaking News, 2003)

Laura Coulter

PEACE-MAKING AS MISSION

Uel Marrs, Executive Secretary of PCI's Board of Mission Overseas, and Joe Campbell, who has had many years' experience of peace-making in Ireland and Nepal, were among the speakers at an event entitled 'Peace-making as Mission', which took place at Union College on 27 January 2009. The main theme was that as Christians we should see peace-making as part of our mission both at home and overseas, alongside evangelism and practical help.

Uel spoke of Kenya, with its 50 tribes, inching towards democracy, which underwent a severe bout of internal conflict early in 2008 following a disputed general election. 1,000 deaths occurred, and many thousands were displaced. Through Thomas Leramore of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Laura and Stephen Coulter were enabled to deliver a course to Kenyans about peace-making in Northern Ireland, and a Peace Desk was

established. The question was asked 'How can local churches contribute to peace in villages?' Now 85 peace agents have been trained in Kenya to work locally.

There were lessons from India, where Christians in Orissa State, faced with the destruction of over 100 churches, maintained their Christian hope, led non-violent protests, gradually gained the support of other people of good will, and refused to become isolated from their Hindu neighbours.

In the Moluccas area of Eastern Indonesia, where extreme Islamist militias had provoked conflict between Christians and Muslims, a turning point was reached with the Moderator of the Church in Halmahera Island said that if anyone was going to kill a Muslim, they would first have to kill him. The Sultan of the neighbouring island of Ternate then responded with a parallel statement, the government stepped

up its efforts to contain the violence, and the Islamist militias retreated. Christians returned to live among their Muslim neighbours.

Joe Campbell drew out some principles of Christian peace-making. Making peace is difficult because we have to absorb the pain inflicted on us. We have to grasp the theology of the Cross, and follow the pattern set by the God who chose to suffer in humility. To turn the other cheek goes against the prevalent 'rights' culture. We must believe that people can be changed. Joe recalled the example of the late Rev. Jack Weir and other clergy who in 1974 went to Feakle, County Clare, to talk to leaders of the Provisional IRA. In Nepal, as in Kenya, experience in one conflict is transferable to another. A Nepali who attended a course in post-conflict Rwanda returned home transformed, and enabled to lead people towards reconciliation, forgiveness and healing in his homeland.

Lindsay Green, Peace group, Knock PC.

A CD of this event is available, free of charge, from the Peacemaking Department, Church House.



McCracken NEWS



Historian, Mr Philip Orr (5th from the left) who spoke on "New Loyalties – Christian Faith and the Protestant working class", pictured with some member of the newly formed McCracken Memorial Peace Group and their Minister, the Rev. Alexander Wimberly.

McCracken PC has been committed over many years to cross-community involvement led by Rev Dr David Irwin. During his ministry David encouraged us to be peace makers not just peace lovers and included a peace and reconciliation theme in prayers and many sermons.

Over the last fifteen years McCracken has been involved in a number of inter-denominational events and activities e.g.:

- The meeting on several occasions of a group of ladies from St John's Malone, St Brigid's and McCracken,
- The hosting of a cross-community concert
- The gathering of signatures in

support of the Peace Vocation

- Joint Bible studies between St Joseph's in Carryduff and McCracken
- Attendance at the annual PCI Peace and Peacemaking conferences
- Hosting of a South Belfast Presbytery peace conference and Sunday Service.

Peace and peace making is at the heart of the gospel, in response to which our new minister, Rev Alexander Wimberly, and the Kirk Session tasked the existing peace agents to form a group of up to seven members to formulate a programme of instruction to better equip us as a congregation to engage in peace and peace making. As part of this

programme Philip Orr of Fitzroy congregation gave a thought-provoking and stimulating talk entitled "New Loyalties, Christian Faith and the Protestant Working Class" on January 25th, well-attended by McCracken and visitors alike. Our Peace Group is to be commissioned in church in March and Laura Coulter will lead about 25 of us in the Gospel in Conflict course in May.

These activities are one small way in which we endeavour to carry out the vision of our minister and Kirk Session of McCracken as a neighbourhood Church.

Maggie Blakeman, Secretary,
McCracken Peace group



BUILDING COMMUNITY IN BALLYCASTLE

Ballycastle has long enjoyed Good Relations. Still subtly influenced by its ancient history as part of the Kingdom of Dalriada and placed at the northern end of the Glens of Antrim, it remains to some degree 'A Place Apart'. While some serious incidents occurred during the recent Troubles local political life has avoided extremist divisions. People of both traditions share naturally in the business and cultural life of the town and area. Good neighbourliness abounds. In short, Ballycastle is a happy and harmonious place in which to live.

In this the local churches and their clergy have played their part. For many years they have shared aspects of major Festivals, like Harvest, Remembrance and Christmas. Study series have been led by staff of the Irish School of Ecumenics, using a local hotel. And of course Ballycastle is the location of Corrymeela, centrepiece of the Corrymeela Community.

However it is in just such a benign environment that hidden social needs can go unnoticed and underlying differences remain unacknowledged. So it was that a new and structured inter-church and cross-community movement came into being. This arose out of a conference in Limavady in February 2005 for representatives of churches and faith-based organisations, convened by the Good Relations officers of the five District Councils from Moyle to Londonderry. The initiative had come from Faithworks,

a nation-wide movement inspired by Baptist pastor Steve Chalke, with a two-pronged objective, namely to encourage Christians and their churches to become more involved in addressing practical social needs and thus to witness to their faith; and to encourage Government to see the churches as partners in the building of a healthier society, bringing vision, skills and not least the spirit of volunteering to what ought to be a shared enterprise

Those members of local Ballycastle churches who attended, including local clergy, met subsequently and Ballycastle Church Action emerged. After consultation and a well-attended public meeting, the local churches together with Corrymeela nominated representatives to form a Committee, lay-led, with the clergy playing a background advisory role. Some other individuals with special expertise or specific abilities have been co-opted, including the Moyle Council District Good Relations Officer.

The first major project, Good Morning Ballycastle, was a telephone contact scheme for isolated and vulnerable mainly-elderly persons. A dedicated office was established in town-centre premises owned by the Church of Ireland Parish. Telephone and computer facilities were installed, a part-time Coordinator was appointed, volunteers recruited and the scheme is operating successfully. Currently almost fifty people are contacted daily by one

of the 20 trained volunteers. Linked with this is an 'Advocacy' programme, offering assistance to needy families in claiming legitimate benefits.

English language classes have been run for guest workers, mainly Polish. With limited take-up, the future for these is uncertain. Extensive local interest in 'the arts' also offers potential for novel initiatives in communication and community building. So, in association with the Four Swans Festival movement, "Stars" – a modern interpretation of the Nativity, initiated by Corrymeela, written by Damien Gorman, involving professional actors and linking up the local churches, schools and other community groups, is being planned for the pre-Christmas period 2009.

BCA is also facing the challenge of peacemaking: how we can help the wider community to move beyond a 'peace of truce' to a 'peace of reconciliation', to quote Dr David Stevens. With Corrymeela on its doorstep and indeed part of BCA, the Ballycastle churches through this new instrument intend to play their part in building that human community which will reflect not only the physical beauty of our natural surroundings in coast and countryside, but also the koinonia envisioned in the promise of the Kingdom of God.

Gordon Gray
Ballycastle Church Action

Clonard/Fitzroy Fellowship

This year's programme started with a concert by Capercaille as part of the Queen's Festival.

A talk on eco-congregations by Sr Catherine Brennan inspired both churches so much that a little ecology group has developed in looking at everything from enjoying creation to how we use energy in our churches and homes. Some of us are doing a "carbon fast" during lent.

"In conversation with Philip Orr" was another fruitful evening. Philip talked about his books "The Road to the Somme" which had just been republished and another recent publication "New Loyalties: Christian Faith and the Protestant Working Class". He talked about specific models of mission, like Billy Mitchell's conflict transformation work and explored a series of case studies that model experimental and innovative engagement. Philip showed a diversity of local church theology and practice, and how the initiatives share a common commitment not to abandon the Protestant working class.

Another important topic entitled "Our Future Neighbourhoods Segregation, Sharing and the Churches" focused on our largely segregated housing areas. Jennifer Hawthorne, Community Cohesion Officer of the Housing Executive, spoke about the Shared Neighbourhood Programme which is developing shared housing areas where people choose to live with others regardless of their religion or race in an area safe for all. She spoke of the over 80 peace walls still in Belfast and of new nationalities coming to Northern Ireland. A very challenging evening for us all.

Sandra Rutherford
Peace Agent, Fitzroy PC

PYP NEWS

DEBS ERWIN



2ND BALLYEASTON CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION PROGRAMME

Deborah Erwin with young people from 2nd Ballyeaston who recently completed a 7-session programme in conflict transformation exploring where conflict comes from and how it can be transformed. The programme culminated in an art workshop when art facilitator, Dianne Minford, guided the young people through the process of developing an art-piece to express the values they'd learned from the programme.

YOUTH ASSEMBLY ASKS FOR COMMITMENT TO PEACEBUILDING

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to be involved in a new YAC initiative – the SPUD Youth Assembly which aims to give young people throughout the Presbyterian Church in Ireland the opportunity to be involved in the Church's decision-making processes.



At a regional event in Antrim attended by 220 delegates and a residential event in Portadown the young people discussed issues brought by the four mission boards of PCI as well as a further 2 issues chosen by the young people of the SPUD working group. Resolutions on each issue have now been finalised as a result of these events and will be brought to the General Assembly for consideration in June. Peacemaking was one of the issues chosen by the young people and there was awareness amongst delegates of the extent of division in Northern Ireland and how it impacts their lives. The young people also recognised that their homogeneity and ignorance of people different to themselves was unhealthy and limited the Church's witness and relevance.

It was an absolute privilege to be involved in facilitating the discussion sessions with the young people and listen as they grappled with tough issues with maturity, insight and honesty. We are blessed in PCI that we have young people with such strength of commitment to following Christ and to playing their part in the body of Christ. By the grace of God they will continue to be a prophetic voice to the Church as a whole and ensure that we do not walk away from addressing the challenges facing us in our post-conflict society.



THE GRACE OF GOD

It was a Sunday morning and, in a church in East Belfast, a Peace Service and a 'Day of Prayer for our Land' were underway. Unknown to the worshippers around her, a lady sitting near the back of the church was reacting strongly (within herself) to what was happening. As the service proceeded – with a focus on peace, forgiveness and reconciliation central to the service – the lady could feel something snap. She experienced again a hatred and anger that welled up within herself. 'Those people at the front of the church are living in cuckoo land', she thought, 'they are not in the real world!' (the lady's own words). She rose from her seat and left the church angry and upset.

In the world of the lady, during this period of the 'Troubles', one son, under threat, had been forced to leave his job. She had witnessed policemen, soldiers, civilians being shot, killed, and injured. She knew the fear and the anger of the time, and the strong emotions of loyalism. She supported strongly the cause which her people represented and, in her own words, could have shot anyone from 'the other side'.

A difficult test was to come to her when one of her sons was shot – shot, because of mistaken identity, by the Army. She experienced the agony of shock, worry and fear as she waited by the bedside of her son in the Intensive Care wing of the hospital. Although her son lived, the results of this incident would be with him all his life. Yet this happening did not weaken her

commitment. Despite the depth of her feeling at what had occurred in her immediate family, it was this lady who went to a young soldier (lying nearby her son in hospital) who had also been shot, and who was crying out for his mother. The soldier's mother was too afraid to come to Belfast and, as the young man lay dying, it was this lady who took his hand and gave the best comfort she could in his hour of need. Humanity in action lay deep in her heart.

So, on that particular Sunday morning in the church service, it seemed to this lady that anyone who talked about 'forgiveness, reconciliation, peace' in the reality of the world that she knew obviously had no experience of what life was really like for the majority of people. She had no time for such nonsense and, true to her convictions, couldn't continue to sit in church listening to what was being said and sung. The church minister visited the lady following the service. He shared sympathetically with her as she presented to him her feelings and views on the matter. As a result the lady continued to attend church except, on occasion, when the focus conflicted with her deeply held views.

The following number of years went by, with the ups and down of life, and the very gradual change in the situation in the Province.

It is now a Sunday afternoon in late June 2008 – several years since the first

event described at the beginning of this article. Again the annual morning Peace Service has taken place. Once more it is the open 'prayer time' held in the church hall in the afternoon as part of the 'Day of Prayer for our Land'. Such was the situation when the lady at the centre of this story commenced to pray. In prayer she told the story that has been shared in this article. She concluded by saying that she had experienced the forgiveness of the Lord, and could, at this point in her life, extend that forgiveness to others. She knew the peace of God and what reconciliation meant. The depth of her experience was obvious to all who listened – amazed and thrilled at her courage in witnessing to the love and grace of God in her life!

Two thoughts. This is but one true and wonderful story of the grace of God in action. Sometimes, as peace workers, we can be discouraged when little seems to happen where we are placed, or we face opposition. May this article be an encouragement to continue to pray about, work for and witness to the gospel call to forgiveness, reconciliation, peacemaking, wherever you are serving. Secondly, often we are not aware of the totality of the experience of people. God only requires of us that we are faithful to our calling. He alone works in the hearts of His children and, in His time and way, brings about wonderful things according to His purpose.

Peace Agent, East Belfast

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