

Submission

**to the
Northern Ireland
Consultative Group on the Past
by the
Maranatha Community**

25th January 2008

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I. Introduction

In recent times we have seen striking developments towards peace in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that many individuals and communities continue to be profoundly overshadowed by past events – recent and distant. In spite of the hopes raised in the past year, there is still deeply embedded anguish and sorrow.

There is in fact unfinished business.

2. Some Crucial Questions

Pain and anger generate separation and violence. In order to bring healing to a riven community, we must be prepared, on both sides of the divide, to face up to and answer honestly some crucial questions:

- Are we prepared to admit and own the reality of the pain, unease, anger, and even sense of injustice, within us as we view those of another tradition?
- Do we accept the reality and the legitimacy of the pain, unease, anger and sense of injustice in those of another tradition?
- Are we prepared to recognise the weaknesses and sins in our own tradition as well as noting those we believe we see in other traditions?
- Are we prepared to rejoice in the real blessings in both our own and other traditions? Can we do this without succumbing to the ever-present dangers of triumphalism?
- Do we acknowledge and feel the pain, enormity and sin of division between those of different traditions who have been caught up in the sectarian divide?
- Are we prepared to accept personal responsibility to break down the barriers which exist between these groups and individuals and to heal those divisions?
- Are we ready to walk in the shoes of those of other traditions – feeling their pain and seeing the present situation through their eyes?
- Are we prepared to understand the motivation of people of other traditions, even though we may not agree with it?

- Are we willing to forego the use of words like “struggle”, “war” and “crime” which incline people on both sides of the divide to become entrenched in their positions instead of advancing into healing?
- Are we ready to admit that many of our attitudes, words, hopes and fears are rooted in and dictated by our inherited traditions, good or bad?
- Are we prepared to lay down all the burdens of history and renounce revenge?
- Are we prepared to commit ourselves to live and speak peace, harmony and mutual care?
- Are we prepared to give practical expression, in the places where we live, to mutual recognition and sharing in community living between traditions?
- Are all of us, ordinary citizens, and political, religious and social leaders, prepared to express sorrow and repentance to each other for what has happened?
- Can we collectively, governments and nations as well as groups and individuals, say sorry to one another?
- Do we realise that, in the last analysis, the ultimate healing is to be found in forgiveness, however impossible that may seem in the face of deep pain and injustice?

Injustices acknowledged or unacknowledged smoulder on for years. They frequently breed revengeful attitudes, which in turn provoke cycles of revenge.

The need for innocent victims and their relatives to find closure and to let go of their sorrows is immediate and urgent. Are we willing to provide them with a vehicle and opportunity to express their grief and extreme sorrow?

3. The Past

Past pains repeatedly dwelt upon inevitably bring resentment.

Past hurts turned over in the mind generate anger that leads to bitterness and outrage.

These emotions often lead, ultimately, to violence.

We have learnt that time does not necessarily heal. Memories of the past do live on.

Untreated hurts often do not diminish but, on the contrary, grow. Then, painful memories can readily be stoked up and become potent and formative social influences, often expressed in language, imagery, attitudes and behaviour.

4. Memory

a. Social inheritance

In the context of Ireland as a whole, there are profound memories rooted in the inherited history of the land. Injustices of the past are often remembered and sadly nurtured to fuel present antagonism. Past battles in political history, whether ending in victory or defeat, are commonly romanticised, and the divisions between traditions perpetuated and even exaggerated.

This is not unique to Northern Ireland. All over the world, where there has been outrage at past events, the sense of injustice tends to live on. We see this in the treatment of the Matabele people in Africa, the genocide of the Armenians a century ago, and the remembered conflict with Islam reverberating in the Serbo-Croat confrontation. In Ireland as a whole, the images of King William and Cromwell still remain, just as there is continued recall of the penal system of long ago, the Easter uprising, the “Black and Tans”, and more recently the “B Specials”. All this historical inheritance has undoubtedly led to hardening of attitudes. Also the teaching of different and often conflicting versions of history in schools and elsewhere has exacerbated the problem.

b. Family inheritance

The attitude of children is powerfully influenced by the family and generational situations recounted by parents and grandparents. Generational issues are increasingly being recognised as an integral part of Christian healing. Anger, sadness and depression are often rooted in ancestral emotions.

Family influences have often established rigid mindsets, which are extremely hard to alter.

In addition to the affect of violence, the Troubles have often had indirect but devastating effects on family relationships through suicide, drink, drug addictions and a widespread sense of depression, hopelessness and fear. Many have lived under the continuing threats on the estates of local gangs of paramilitaries.

c. Personal remembrance

Individuals who have experienced personal trauma frequently vividly recall the precise circumstances and location of incidents, and also the perpetrators. In both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, images of shock and outrage at what has been seen and experienced are imprinted in the emotions

of countless thousands. Sensory recall frequently continues for many years after an adverse event, bringing a variety of emotional disturbances such as deep depression, nightmares and phobias. Central to healing is the recognition that what was wrong in the past can be put right now. However, there must first be an honest admission of what has happened.

5. The Truth

The recollection of past trauma is inevitably painful, but denial or evasion is dangerous and prevents progress: the admission of the reality of what has happened is the first step in the healing process. Today, as in the past, pain, anger and despair generate bitterness and separation. Broken relationships can only be healed when the brokenness has been acknowledged.

After pain has been honestly admitted, the initial stage of the process of conflict resolution can be completed. However, real progress can only be made when honest sorrow and regret about the past are each both felt and expressed. This is best done in sharing between people of the formerly opposing sides – people of both traditions seeking healing together.

When we recognise one another's hurts, there is at least some hope of mutual understanding, and even the possibility of forgiveness. However, in order for this to be achieved, bold initiatives to facilitate this need to happen across Ireland as a whole and should also include Britain.

6. Sorrow

The expression of sorrow can often be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Immense sensitivity needs to be shown to those who have suffered, perhaps many years ago.

The wrong kind of sharing can be perceived as patronising or capitulating, and can be unproductive or even counter-productive. Also, we have much to learn about the dangers of 'triumphalism'. People continue to feel threatened in a variety of ways.

When past sorrows are re-lived, there can often be a desire, frequently encouraged for political purposes, to establish localised memorials of past events. Thus pain is perpetuated. The boundaries of sorrow need to be pushed back to embrace the entire community.

When this is done it will soon be recognised that we are all, to some extent, victims.

We all, to a greater or lesser extent, bear some measure of responsibility for the overall situation as well.

When collective sorrow is expressed, there are grounds for hope. When genuine sorrow is expressed by former combatants, politicians and ultimately nations, there will be strong grounds for hope. There would be a dramatic change in climate if those involved in the troubles could express genuine sorrow for what has happened, both individually and collectively. The time is now ripe to take major initiatives in this direction, but the opportunity will not remain open for ever.

We must not attempt to airbrush out the problems of the past, including the thousands of people, most of them innocent, who have been exiled to England or elsewhere.

There is very great danger in appearing to defend the indefensible. This particularly applies to policies about the ‘on the runs’, an issue which continues to cause extreme pain and anguish amongst victims.

Whatever the motives, there have been thousands of criminal acts, which became part of the life of Northern Ireland for forty years. These remain crimes, even when some of the parties concerned construe them as “the struggle” or “war”.

This is an issue that calls for the former combatants to come together in honest dialogue and parity of esteem. Without this direct contact many of the present deeply engrained prejudices and misunderstandings will remain.

7. Reconciliation

A fundamental element of any reconciliation process is forgiveness.

People cannot be told to forgive. They may not wish to forgive, or they may not in their human strength have the ability to forgive, even though they desire it.

Over many years, in many different situations, there have been countless instances of men and women who have been terribly injured, physically, emotionally or both, forgiving their enemies. We believe this is a gift of God, for which we must pray. Wrong or broken relationships can only be put right when there is a recognition on both sides of the pain of both parties, and a readiness to share this pain.

Although the world has heard much of the violence and ill-will in Northern Ireland, it is important to recognise that the love and healing so widely manifest in Northern Ireland has not gone unnoticed.

8. Revealing Wounds

Uncovering and revealing wounds is a difficult and painful process, but it is an essential part of the healing process.

When we see and face up to our own wounds, and then see and face up to the wounds of those we may consider to be our enemies, there can be the beginning of shared pain and shared healing.

There has been much experience of this already in Northern Ireland. We need now to establish a means to spread this process more widely. We need to foster a far greater measure of personal and public sharing. We need to facilitate and support healing within families, within communities, between political parties, and across traditions.

9. Telling the Truth

We need to provide victims and their families with a means of telling their stories to compassionate listeners and, where appropriate to record them. People need the opportunity to give expression of their grief and the trauma they have experienced.

We believe the way of Jesus is the way of true healing. In spite of all the pain over the centuries, the whole of Ireland has been rooted and grounded in the Christian faith.

The Holy Spirit has been defined and widely recognised as Truth and Love.

It is the degree to which we are prepared to face up to the truth in love, to share our wounds and pain openly between ourselves and before God, that we will be enabled to experience authentic and enduring healing, liberation of spirit, and personal and community peace.

We must all have the courage to express sorrow – privately and publicly.

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Note: The Maranatha Community comprises many thousands of Christians drawn from all traditions. Its membership includes Protestants and Catholics, Irish and English, those from Northern Ireland those from the Irish Republic, Nationalists and Unionists. The Community has been deeply involved in work for unity, reconciliation and healing in Northern Ireland for the past 27 years.

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APPENDIX

Resolving Conflict

"I am right,
they are wrong.
I am good,
they are evil.
I will stand strong
and I will fight,
because truth
is on my side.
I will not change,
I will not surrender,
I will remember,
I will never forgive,
I do not want to understand
I will not yield."

This is a lie
that I am living
which leads to dying,
which fails to see
the roots of conflict
are also in me.

This is a mask
that I am wearing
which hides my face,
which gives me
false security,
which cuts me off from
those I name as enemies,
and blinds me
to their humanity.

Deep down
within me
pain brings resentment,
unease brings suspicion,
hurt brings hatred,
anger brings outrage,
bitterness brings violence.
Can I admit that
buried in me there is
real anguish and sorrow,
unfinished business,
unforgiveness,
unresolved conflict?

Am I ready
to reject the lie
and admit the truth
and be set free?
Will I forever
be held by the
chains of the past
which prevent
peace
within me,
peace
with the others,
peace with God?