

Conflict Transformation Papers

Volume 6

Faith Politics and Social Action

Building Peace through Partnership

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Building Peace Through Partnership is a conflict transformation programme being developed by LINC Resource Centre in partnership with a number of community-based initiatives that are committed to constructive dialogue between individuals and groups as a means of facilitating conflict transformation at grass roots level.

It is our intention to publish a series of papers on issues raised at community level which project participants believe are relevant to the conflict transformation process.

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Introduction

As Northern Ireland continues to take tentative yet progressive steps towards '*normalisation*' it is imperative the Christian Church is not left behind or viewed by its community as being *out of touch* with the people to whom they are called to serve.

Christians are often perceived as individuals who have become disengaged from the communities in which they live, only associating with their own innate or insular organisations. This is particularly true within marginalised working class Protestant communities where there is a feeling that the mainstream churches have opted out of local community life for the greater part of the 'troubles' and the smaller evangelical churches have become so heavenly minded that they have lost touch with many of the harsh realities of life on earth.

I know from personal experience that this is not true of all pastors and lay persons. Certainly within the past ten years the number of local churches that have been engaging with local communities has increased. Yet the fact remains that many of us who are committed both to the gospel and to practical peace-building and social transformation feel isolated and misunderstood by fellow Christians. Our work is still perceived to be secular rather than spiritual.

Christianity is social as well as personal. It impacts upon the totality of human life and informs us how best we can interact with others and enjoy the creative gifts and talents which God has endowed us with. It also informs us how we ought to work for the enrichment and enhancement of human life and to combat those social evils that lead to deprivation, alienation, conflict and violence. This leads us to a discussion of faith and politics, for social change demands political action as well as spiritual insight and Christian compassion.

Some evangelicals question my involvement with politics, especially my involvement with the Progressive Unionist Party. Faith and politics have not tended to be very good running mates. Politicians often tell us that Faith and Politics don't mix; that the church should keep its nose out of politics. Evangelical churchmen often tell us that politics is worldly and that Christians ought not to engage in worldly things. Others, while acknowledging that the church ought to be involved in the business of social transformation, opt out for fear of being accused by fundamentalists of selling out to the social gospel.

Yet, if politics is a legitimate activity in the sphere of human life then men and women of faith have a legitimate right to engage in politics. If the gospel has relevance to the totality of human life then it has relevance to politics – for politics is part of the warp and woof of human life. The early Christian church regarded all of life as being under the Lordship of Christ. If Jesus Christ is Lord at all, He is Lord of all (including the sphere of political activity).

Christianity also informs us as to how best we should engage in those social and political activities that are designed to watch over promote and protect the interests and welfare of the society in which we live. Christ is either the answer to all of life's problems or He is the answer to none. He is either relevant to the totality of human life and the affairs of the universe or He is relevant to none of them.

The articles in this booklet, most of which have been published in various periodicals over the past five years, give a brief outline of my personal position on issues of faith, politics and social action. They are published here as part of the Conflict Transformation Papers series partly as an explanation of why I, as a Christian, am engaged in peace-building and social transformation and partly as a challenge to other Christians to re-engage with those communities that have suffered, and continue to suffer, from social and economic injustice, alienation, conflict and violence.

Billy Mitchell
Series Editor
July 2004

Guns into Ploughshares

“... and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”

Isaiah 2:4

When I was asked if I would like to take part in an ecumenical service which involved me participating in a symbolic act of decommissioning in a Catholic Church in the republican heartland of Derry's bogside, I must admit to being a bit hesitant. In a society where religion and politics are so inextricably linked, and where one is expected to toe the community or tribal line, it would have been all too easy for me to have politely refused. If pushed, I could have conjured up a dozen excuses for refusing the request.

I chose to accept the invitation and, for me personally, the challenge because I believe that as a Christian peace-builder with a loyalist paramilitary background I have a contribution to make towards promoting the concept of active non-violence. It is one thing to advocate non-violence amongst my friends and fellow travellers; it is quite another thing to make a public affirmation of that commitment in a televised programme which included the symbolic decommissioning of guns. I felt that, as a politically active loyalist who refuses to turn my back on members of my former paramilitary organisation, it was important for me to stand in the presence of the spiritual and political leaders of the Catholic-Nationalist community and affirm my opposition to violence and to the sectarianism that so often leads to it.

It was important, too, for me to stand alongside senior clergy from my own community and publicly affirm that there are loyalists who share their vision for a just, equitable and peaceful society. "Middle Unionism" does not have a monopoly on non-violence within the pro-British community. I also felt that it was important for someone from within the evangelical wing of Protestantism to show that the term "evangelical" does not mean "sectarian" or "rejectionist" and that there are evangelicals who are prepared to show that ecumenists do not have a monopoly on peace-building and inter-faith dialogue.

I have left violence behind me, but the symbolic act of laying down my violent past in the solemn setting of a religious service was intended to be a public affirmation before God and the people of Northern Ireland of what I desire for both today's and tomorrow's generation. The unveiling by a former republican activist and myself of a sculpture made of 'decommissioned' guns was symbolic of our resolve to remain consistent in our opposition to violence as a means of resolving political conflict.

The guns were not quite refashioned into ploughshares, but they were refashioned to the extent that they were no longer capable of being used as weapons of war. To use the latest decommissioning cliché, they were guns that had been put beyond use. We have not yet achieved substantial decommissioning in Northern Ireland, and I do not believe that decommissioning in the sense that some desire it will ever be achieved. But I believe that the longer weapons are not being used the more certain we will be that they will eventually

be put beyond use. The sculpture unveiled at the service was a fair representation of where we are at in the “guns” debate – not quite ploughshares, but not quite weapons of war.

The Biblical text on which the “Guns into Ploughshares” theme was based is Isaiah 2:4 where we read *“and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”*.

These poetic words of the Hebrew prophet look forward to a day when conflict will be settled by the peace-sustaining Word of God rather than by weapons of destruction. When such a stage in the conflict transformation process has been reached there will be no more need for war or for the materials of war. In such circumstances the production of weapons will become obsolete and will be replaced by the production of instruments of peaceful employment.

The poet is looking for an era when war itself will be a thing of the past. We have clearly not reached that stage yet in Northern Ireland, or in any other conflict zone for that matter. The decommissioning of weapons of war can only take place when the concept of war itself is decommissioned and that is an ideology that few, even within the churches and democratic politics, are willing to embrace. I am conscious that many of the churchpersons and constitutional politicians who pay lip service to the “swords into ploughshares” concept still want to carry the ace card of the “just war” up their sleeves – just in case.

The “swords into ploughshares” concept demands a universal and wholly consistent commitment to the philosophy and practice of non-violent action. It demands a rejection of both the so-called “just war” theory which some have renamed “civilising violence”, and the Pearsian principle of the “blood sacrifice” which many have developed into a philosophy of “redemptive violence”. It also demands a rejection of the tit-for-tat “reactive violence” that we are so used to. Violence from whatever quarter, and committed under whatever pretext, is wrong and must be rejected.

It is only when the principle of violence is rejected that the tools of violence can be declared obsolete. Only then will the “swords into ploughshares” prophecy be fulfilled.

We still have a long way to go.

Dealing with Socially Harmful Activities

“What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”

Micah 6:8

The public debate about the merits and demerits of Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland during the past number of years has been conducted by media pundits and political opportunists who believe that it involves some sinister plot to replace the state police with paramilitary police forces. Much of what has been written in the popular press and commented on in political circles bears little or no resemblance at all to the philosophy or the practice of Restorative Justice as it is being worked out at community level. Even where interviews with practitioners have taken place, many of the resulting articles have been adversely coloured by selective reporting and personal prejudice.

Restorative Justice is not a *technique* to be applied to the formal criminal justice system to help make it work, nor is it some devious scheme designed by paramilitary groups to enable them to exercise control over their areas. It is a genuine community response that seeks to address socially harmful activities in a restorative and non-violent manner.

I use the term “socially harmful activities” as a catchall for those activities, criminal and non-criminal, that are harmful to people living in community. Socially harmful activities take place *in* the community *against* members of the community, and are usually carried out *by* disaffected members of the community. Such activities undermine good community relations, frustrate community and economic development and invariably lead to a downward trend in the quality of life for people in the community. Dealing with socially harmful activities is therefore a community matter and it demands a strategic community response. Restorative Justice programmes provide such a response inasmuch as they are community led and community driven.

I am involved to some extent in the development of four community initiatives that have a Restorative Justice component and, contrary to media misrepresentation, they do not operate as alternatives to the formal justice system; nor are they controlled or manipulated by paramilitary organisations. On the contrary, they complement the formal justice system and are administered by accountable and transparent Management Committees comprised of representatives drawn from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

Each of these initiatives follows the principles of best practice in both training and programme delivery and is subject to rigorous independent assessment and evaluation. There has been, and continues to be, constructive consultation with the police and other statutory and voluntary agencies having an interest in community safety and justice issues.

The research that led to the development of Restorative Justice initiatives in unionist communities began some five years ago as a multi-agency response to rough 'justice'. The three-year lead-in period was essential to enable us to explore and to understand both the principles and the practice of Restorative Justice as it functions in other countries, and to

ensure that our practitioners were properly trained in the various aspects of programme delivery.

The formal justice system and the Restorative Justice system are not contradictory. They simply approach justice from different, but complementary, perspectives. Whereas the formal justice system tends to focus on the laws that have been broken, Restorative Justice focuses on the harms that have been done to the individual victim and to the wider community. The first task of Restorative Justice is to work towards the restoration of victims, empowering them and responding to their needs as they see them.

Restorative Justice believes in the worth of the individual, even the individual who engages in socially harmful activities. Individuals *can* and *do* change and it is the task of the Restorative Justice practitioner to help facilitate such change. Where people do change we believe that the community must formally validate that change. This is one of the core values of Restorative Justice.

The formal justice system is concerned primarily with punishment and retribution, not with reformation and restoration. Restorative Justice provides a complementary service by bridging the gap between retribution and restoration. Likewise, rough 'justice' does not consider reformation or restoration. It simply inflicts pain as punishment and generates a cycle of alienation, bitterness and ongoing anti-social activity. If Restorative Justice is to be regarded as an alternative to anything, it is an alternative to unlawful and violent responses to socially harmful activities.

The Restorative Justice practitioner does not have an investigative role and does not pass judgement or impose sanctions. His/her role is to support perpetrators in understanding, accepting and carrying out their obligations to make things right with their victim and with the wider community. Voluntary victim-offender mediation is an integral part of the Restorative Justice programme and can be a crucial step in validating the hurt that has been caused to the victim. It can also be a catalyst for change in the attitude and behaviour of the perpetrator.

The concerned Restorative Justice practitioner will encourage restoration and reconciliation rather than coercion and isolation, and will work towards the ultimate goal of facilitating change and of healing the broken relationship between the perpetrator, the victim and the community.

Restorative Justice is a non-violent and non-coercive response to socially harmful activity. Individuals participate on a voluntary basis only and none of our programmes support coercion, imposed sanctions, physical pain or expulsion. The ultimate goal of Restorative Justice is not to punish people but to reduce the incidence of socially harmful activity, to promote victim-offender reconciliation and to help to create safer communities. Restorative Justice is a philosophy that complements the theology of reconciliation and as such is a practice that local churches could, and should, participate in.

In Defence of the Faith!

“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God”.
Psalm 20:7

Should political Unionism have a role in defending the Evangelical Protestant Faith? In my long experience as a loyalist activist I have often heard it argued that Ulster Unionism has a duty to champion the cause of Biblical Protestantism. Indeed there was a time when I accepted that argument as being wholly valid. However the more I study the Word of God the more I have come to realise that trusting politicians to defend the faith is like trusting in chariots and horses rather than in the name of the Lord. While I readily admit that, for generations, evangelical Protestantism was regarded by many Protestants as the spiritual heartbeat of Unionism, I do not believe that any legitimate faith community requires a political bulwark.

If Unionism is genuinely about maintaining the link with the rest of the United Kingdom then Unionists must accept the multi-faith and multi-cultural nature of the United Kingdom. Pluralist societies cannot give preference to one religion over another and, if the oft quoted phrase “civil and religious liberty for all” is to have any legitimate meaning, each citizen of the United Kingdom must be free to worship his or her god, or to dissent from worship, according to the dictates of their own individual consciences. For this reason I personally subscribe to the belief that the Church of England should be disestablished. There is no room in a pluralist society for a State Church.

It has long been a cardinal tenet of Protestantism that each individual is personally responsible for what he or she does about the claims of the Christian gospel. If we, as Protestants, really believe that then we must reject any alliance between church and state and any reliance upon political parties to legislate in defence of our faith. As a Christian I repudiate the blasphemous notion that the defence of my faith in Jesus Christ is dependent on any political party or any form of government legislation. The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom which no human government or political party has a right to intervene in.

Are politicians so arrogant that they would assume powers that belong only to the Holy Trinity? I am kept in my faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by the power of the Queen of England or any of her ministers. Any religion that is dependent for its defence upon political institutions or human governments is inherently and fatally flawed, and carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. To suggest that the government of a post-Christian society such as we have in the United Kingdom can in any way defend my faith simply adds insult to injury.

Political unionism is about citizenship. As a Unionist I desire nothing more and nothing less than to retain my position as a citizen of the United Kingdom. My loyalism is, therefore, focused on securing and maintaining for myself and my family full and equal citizenship within a multi-faith and multi-cultural Union. Consequently I am committed to working for a classless society where all citizens are afforded equality in terms of both opportunity and outcomes regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age,

disability or other such considerations. That in itself necessitates involvement in secular class politics.

Loyalism must therefore be a secular, pluralist and class conscious movement. That in no way excludes people of faith from playing an active role within loyalism. Indeed there are a number of committed evangelical Christians, as well as other people of faith, involved within my own party. We seek to bring our faith perspective to the debate on core issues and, where we personally have to dissent from policies which we cannot endorse as individuals, we are given liberty to do so. Democracy is not about coercion, it is about freedom of choice and respect for diversity. Indeed that is what authentic Protestantism is about as well – though somewhere along the road of history that has been conveniently forgotten by some self-proclaimed fundamentalists.

Gordon J. Spykman, a Reformed Theologian in the Calvinist tradition, writing in support of a principled pluralist position says, “We live in a religiously splintered world, surrounded by a wide range of contrasting faith communities. Pluralism, as an alternative way of living together in society, seeks to reckon seriously with these very real philosophical differences. It seeks to ensure that the public as well as the private rights of all groups in society be safeguarded within a common democratic order”. Spykman goes on to argue that pluralism “disavows special pleading for the privileged status of established groups and vested interests. The rights that it affirms for one group in society it also advocates for others”.

A loyalism that claims to be true to the legacy of the Reformation must embrace pluralism. The concept of “civil and religious liberty” is a pluralist concept that flows naturally from the Reformation. As the Croatian theologian, Meic Pearce explains, “The Protestant Reformation (has) opened a fissure which made growing pluralism all but inevitable”.

Pluralism has a duty to ensure that people of faith have the liberty to worship God according to their own individual consciences; it has no duty to promote or to defend any particular religion or set of religious beliefs. Christ and not loyalism must therefore be the only defender of the Protestant Faith.

Community Development & the Churches

“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

Jeremiah 29:7

Concerns are being expressed within the Protestant community about the widening cultural gap between the local churches and the local communities. Those of us whose approach to community development is underpinned by a commitment to the Christian gospel are concerned at the steadily declining presence and impact of the (Protestant) churches. Christian community activists feel increasingly misunderstood, isolated, and marginalised within the Christian community. And many community activists who do not profess faith, or who have given up on their faith, believe that the churches have become irrelevant. It is not that they are anti-Christian they simply do not see the relevance of institutionalised religion in a world that is hurting day and daily.

Almost every parish has within it a marginalised community. Sometimes we falsely call them "problem estates" or "problem people". A better, and more accurate, term would be "estates with problems" and "people with problems". Some of the most creative long-term solutions to the problems of our marginalised communities are coming from grass-roots community activists. As a Christian and as a democratic socialist I believe that the church has a role to play in working alongside these community activists and in helping them to empower their communities to identify and to develop sustainable quality responses to their problems. The church ought to be a bridge between a world of hurting humanity and the love and compassion of a healing Saviour.

In my own experience as a community activist I have come to realise that if the church gets involved in community development work it will require strong commitment and risky actions on the part of ordinary Christians. It will also take strong informed leadership on the part of the senior laity and clergy. But risk-taking and informed leadership should be second nature to those who have answered the call to take up their cross and follow Christ.

The call to serve the church in the field of Community Development is not a concept that is taught at Theological Seminary or that is included in the curriculum of Christian Training Colleges. Yet there are sound biblical and theological principles that underpin Christian involvement in Community Development. If all of life comes under the control of a Sovereign God who is the creator, upholder and sustainer of all things, then there can be no division between Church and Community. As I see it, the gospel, rightly understood, is holistic. It responds to people as whole people; it doesn't single out just spiritual or just physical needs and speak to those in isolation. Christian community development begins with people transformed by the love of God, who then respond to God's call to share the gospel with others through evangelism, social action, economic development, and justice.

The great question is "How do we affirm the dignity of people, motivate them, and help them take responsibility for their own lives?" The answer lies in what some community theologians have called the "felt need concept". By beginning with the people's felt needs we establish a relationship and a trust, which then enables us to move to deeper issues of

development. This idea of beginning with people's felt needs is what is called the *felt need concept*.

The impact of the spiritual values of the church on society should be as "salt" and "light" (c.f. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount). As salt the church ought to be a preserving influence in the community. Not preserving the status quo as so many churches and churchmen have sought to do, but preserving society from corruption - political corruption, economic corruption, social corruption as well as moral corruption. As "Light", the church ought to shed the light of truth upon all aspects of human darkness - social, political, cultural, economic, moral. It should be a beacon of truth and hope to those who sit in the darkness of social & economic deprivation, to those whose lives are overshadowed by the darkness of educational disadvantage and to those whose quality of life is being blotted out by the darkness of discrimination and exploitation. It should be a probing searchlight that helps to expose and to eradicate the darkness of political misrepresentation, human dogma and religious bigotry.

The thrust of the Christian gospel is reconciliation. Indeed reconciliation is at the very heart of the gospel. Primarily, there must be reconciliation between man and his God. But there must also be reconciliation within the heart & soul of the individual, between individuals and groups of individuals and, crucially in this day and age of consumerism, reconciliation between man and his environment. Traditionally the churches have tended to concentrate upon the first - reconciliation between man and his God - to the neglect of the rest, thus neglecting three quarters of the gospel. The question many of us are asking is, "Can a gospel that reconciles people to God without reconciling people to people be the true gospel of Jesus Christ?" Our love for Christ should break down every racial, cultural, political, ethnic and economic barrier. It should help to break down the greed and the selfishness that leads to social and economic deprivation and that deepens the gulf between the powerful and the powerless - between the "haves" and the "have nots".

If the church is to be faithful to Jesus Christ and to His message of reconciliation, it must become pro-active in a full-orbed programme of reconciliation. This ought to be reflected in its confession of faith, in the language of its liturgy, in the celebration of its worship, in the form of its government and in the attention it gives to political, social and cultural issues. If sin is to be denounced it must not be restricted to the usual personal failures associated with drink, gambling, fornication and crime. It must also include those corporate sins that are responsible for structural violence - economic greed, political exploitation, desocialisation, disculturation, racism and sectarianism.

It is imperative that the church becomes a focus for reconciliation in all aspects and spheres of human life. Changing times demand new ideas and new structures. The gospel of the Kingdom requires prophetic imagination and an unselfish commitment if we are to bridge the gap between the church and the community. The question of how community development and evangelism can co-exist is being answered by a few committed church-people in Northern Ireland. We need to encourage others to respond to the challenge. It must not be left to the few.

Father, Forgive Them

“Jesus said, Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...”

Luke 23: 34

He had just endured one of the worst punishment beatings ever handed out. After the brutal flogging with bone-tipped thongs, which ripped furrows of raw flesh off His back, His head was pierced with long sharp thorns till they drew blood. He was then forced marched through the city streets with a hewn tree on His back before being executed in one of the most brutal fashions known to man – crucifixion.

In the midst of this orgy of inhumanity the victim cried out, “Father, forgive them”. Notwithstanding the excruciating physical pain and the unimaginable mental anguish, the victim’s immediate and overwhelming desire was for the welfare of His executors. That is what Easter is all about. The golden thread running through the barbarity of the crucifixion and the triumph of the resurrection is the theme of forgiving Love. At Christmas we celebrate the love that clothed divinity with humanity so that God could be with us. At Easter we celebrate the love that clothed divinity with death so that we need not fear it.

The cry for mercy, “Father, forgive them” was the victim making intercession for his victimisers. Where we might cry out for vengeance, under the guise of honouring justice, He cried out for mercy and forgiveness. The story of the crucifixion calls us to embrace the same spirit of forgiveness exercised by Jesus on the Cross. The Easter message calls us to pray for our enemies, even when they are endeavouring most to injure and abuse us. The power and excellence of true Christianity is its propensity to dispose us to pray for the forgiveness of our enemies.

Some years after the crucifixion a young Christian convert fell victim to a brutal sectarian murder. A young man called Stephen was taken out by a bigoted religious mob and stoned to death because of his faith. As the force of the stones, hurled against his head with maddening ferocity, began to sap the life from his body Stephen offered a simple prayer for his killers, “Father, do not hold this against them”. The example of Jesus on the cross was already being picked up by His followers. Forgiveness, forged in the fires of divine love, was to be the weapon of Christian warfare. It should be noted that in the case of Jesus and Stephen their pleas that God would forgive their enemies was undeserved, unmerited, unasked for and absolutely unconditional.

This concept of forgiveness and of returning love for hatred was taken up earlier this century by the late Martin Luther King Junior. King regarded the command to love one’s enemy as “an absolute necessity for our survival”. In his powerful book, “Strength to Love”, the civil rights leader wrote, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction”.

King, who wielded love as a political weapon in the struggle for justice and human rights, went on to say, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend”. Integral to King’s theology of love was the theme of forgiveness – unconditional forgiveness. He believed passionately that those who were devoid of the power to forgive were also devoid of the power to love. For King, this power to love and to forgive was crucial to his philosophy of non-violence, and to ultimate victory in securing justice and human rights.

The very idea of victims of violence and injustice making an unconditional plea for forgiveness on behalf of their enemies is often ridiculed as foolish and impracticable. Indeed there are some, even within the higher echelons of organised religion, who would pour scorn upon such a practice. I remember well the harsh criticism that certain political clerics heaped upon the head of the late Gordon Wilson when he said that he bore no grudge against those responsible for his daughter’s death. He was prepared to leave judgement to the courts or to God and remarked, “whether or not they are judged here on earth by a court of law...I do my very best in human terms to show forgiveness”.

Martin Luther King did not see forgiveness as being tantamount to excusing injustice or violence. He was very clear that “Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains a barrier to the relationship”. For King, as for Jesus, forgiveness is seen as the catalyst that creates the right conditions for a fresh start and a new beginning.

Isn’t that what we all want? Perhaps we should try the Way of the Cross and embrace the principles of Love and Forgiveness as key weapons in our struggle for justice and peace.

Glorying in the Cross

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

Galatians 6:14

In Northern Ireland, the Easter Season has specific meaning for different people within both sections of our divided community. For many of my fellow loyalists it heralds the start of the marching season when both the Apprentice Boys of Derry and the Junior Orange Order hold the first of their celebrations. For many within the nationalist tradition Easter is the time for commemorating the Easter Rising. This too is celebrated in parading and related festivities.

For many others within both traditions Easter is a time for reflection on the historical and spiritual reasons why we have an Easter Season at all. While the popular press will give much column space to the cultural and political celebrations of both the Loyal Orders and the Republican Movement, very little will be given to the spiritual message of Easter.

The Easter Message for me is summed up in the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians: *-But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.* (Galatians 6:14)

I attribute the change in my life, and in particular the change in my approach to the Northern Ireland conflict, to the transforming power of the Cross. Were it not for the effects of Christ's death on the Cross I would not have changed. There was no power within me as a person that could have changed my attitude or my way of life. There was no power in my Protestantism that could have changed me. There was no power in my political philosophy that could have changed me. The power that enables me to work for peace and reconciliation does not reside in me. I have nothing at all to glory in, save in the Cross of Christ

Some may glory in their conformity to the laws of their religion; others in their zeal for a political cause, or in their talents, or in their learning, but the supreme boast and glorying of a Christian is in the cross of Christ. The non-Christian world of Jesus' day looked upon the Cross with contempt. Even today there are those who reject the Cross of Christ as a thing to be ashamed of. But to the Christian, that cross is the subject of glorying. I rejoice in the Easter Message because of the love of Him who suffered there for people like me. The love of Christ for me led Him to die upon the cross. This same loving Saviour commands me to love my neighbour as myself. Indeed He goes even further. He commands me to love my enemy.

It is only through the power of the Cross that I can attempt to love my enemy. Jesus was nailed to the cross by Love. Love must nail us to the task of building a just and lasting peace. Reflection on what Christ has done for me on the cross constantly reminds me of the need to be non-judgemental in my dealings with others - especially with those whom I perceive to be my enemy.

The Easter Message compels me to compare the justice of God with the justice of men. Men see justice purely in terms of retribution - of "getting our own back". God sees justice as a means of restoring broken relationships and establishing just relationships. The greatest punishment beating that ever took place took place in the Courts of Pontius Pilate when Jesus was beaten to within an inch of His life and then taken out to be crucified. Yet His simple and gracious answer was "Father, forgive...."

Christ suffered and died that we might be reconciled to God and that we might be given the spiritual power to be reconciled to each other. As one who has been reconciled to God in Christ I have a solemn obligation to be reconciled to my fellow citizens - even with those with whom I fundamentally disagree politically. The task of working for reconciliation within and across our divided communities is not an option for me - it is a divine command. To refuse to work for restoration and reconciliation for me would be to reject the love of God that nailed Christ to the cross. Indeed it would be tantamount to rejecting Christ Himself.

Easter for me is a time for reflection on the spiritual message of that first Good Friday and that first Easter Sunday

Liberating the Dead **(Reflection on Easter Saturday)**

“Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead..... “

Apostles Creed

“He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through Whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison”

1 Peter 3:18, 19

The Easter Story is the heart of the Christian gospel. The claim that Jesus died and rose again from the dead is so integral to the gospel that without it there is no gospel at all. Indeed, as George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, has pointed out, without the resurrection of Jesus there would be no Christianity and no church. Good Friday would have been a Bad Friday had there not have been an Easter Sunday. The death of Christ without His resurrection would have been a disaster. The events of both days are fairly well known to us. But what about the day in between!

The one day of the Easter Season that traditionally receives little attention within Protestant circles is the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The events that took place between the death and the resurrection of Jesus are usually linked to that clause in the Creeds which speak of Jesus descending into hell and which Hans Kung, the Swiss Catholic theologian, warns us to be wary of attempting to interpret. Sometime between Jesus' death and His resurrection He entered the deepest and darkest recesses of hell to show solidarity with the dead and to ensure ultimate victory over death.

Whereas the events of Good Friday exemplified Christ's solidarity with the extremities of human suffering and forsakenness, the events of Holy Saturday illustrate His solidarity with the dead and with the fact of death. When he entered into the domain of the dead Jesus breached the frontier between the dead and the living and established Himself as Lord of both the living and the dead. The dead will remain dead until the general resurrection, but the sting has been pulled from the tail of death. As the Lutheran theologian, Jurgen Moltmann points out, “The dead are still dead, and not yet raised, but by virtue of the fellowship of Christ they are already ‘in Christ’ and together with Him are on the way into the future of the resurrection”.

It is not stretching the message of Easter too far to suggest that the "dead" may also include all who are so held in bondage to evil forces that they are "dead" as touching the quality of their lives. While there may well be a hell to come, for countless millions of the world's population there is most certainly a hell here on earth, and the same Christ who shows solidarity with those bound by the forces of the hell to come is the same Christ who shows solidarity with those imprisoned within their hell on earth.

Easter should remind us of our duty to show solidarity with those who are held fast in the grip of evil - injustice, exploitation, poverty and oppression. To show that solidarity we must go through the Good Friday experience of identifying with the sufferings and the marginalisation of our less fortunate brothers and sisters. That will most certainly involve a "death" of some sort. It will clearly include dying to self and to a life that enjoys the social and economic affluence that comes at the expense of other human beings. That must inevitably lead to a desire to show solidarity with those whose sufferings have reached a point where their quality of life may best be designated by the word "death".

Christ did not enter the underworld of the dead as an outsider; He entered it as one of the dead. He was no Odysseus or Orpheus entering the underworld as a living conqueror. On the contrary, He was a dead man entering the world of the dead to experience it and, ultimately, to set its captives free. If Christ was to redeem humanity He must embrace and experience every aspect of humanity - including the extremities of human suffering and death. Thus, He set the pattern for us to follow. In the struggle against evil and injustice, Christians cannot show solidarity with the dispossessed and the disempowered without embracing and experiencing the struggle of the dispossessed and the disempowered.

In the journey from Good Friday to Easter Sunday - from death to resurrection, from injustice to justice, from powerlessness to empowerment, from mere existence to qualitative living - we must encounter the harrowing experience of Holy Saturday. We must do that, not as sympathetic outsiders, but as insiders who share both the experience and the struggle. This is not a task for welfare capitalists, champagne socialists or bleeding heart liberals; it is a task only for those who are prepared to show selfless, sacrificial solidarity with the victims of structural injustice.

The victory over death and hell and evil was not won on Easter Sunday in the glare of resurrection glory, it was won on Holy Saturday in the dark and hostile caverns of the underworld. Behind the resurrection was the struggle between Christ and the hostile powers of evil. That is where the victory over evil must still be sought - in the world of injustice where prejudice, intolerance, exploitation and violence hold their prey in a vice-like grip - and that is where the Christian ought to be.

Wherever men and women suffer injustice Christ is crucified afresh, for He is there in the midst of them. The people's bishop, Arnulfo Romero, saw the crucified God in the midst of the crucified men and women of history. In the faces of the poor and oppressed of El Salvador he saw the disfigured face of God. It was that vision of the crucified in the midst of his suffering people that inspired Archbishop Romero to enter into solidarity with both their sufferings and their struggle. It cost Romero his life - that too can be the cost of following Christ.

Easter is not simply about celebrating the resurrection and Christ's victory over death and hell - it is about committing ourselves afresh to the struggle against the evil that manifests itself in prejudice, exploitation, poverty, alienation and violence.

Patrick

A Reflection on His Writings

".... contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints"

Jude 1: 3

As a religious dissenter I have little time for the tomfoolery that surrounds the canonisation of saints. Thus, I will speak about Patrick rather than 'Saint' Patrick. Patrick, the messenger of the gospel who challenged slavery, militarism, and the forces of darkness, is someone whom I have a lot of time for. Patrick, the 'saint' of nationalist mythology who is celebrated with nationalistic fervour and gallons of green beer by millions who have never read his writings or believed in his message, is someone I can well do without.

It is almost impossible to unravel the tangled skein of legend and myth that time has woven around the few historical facts that we know about Patrick. Yet if we are to honour Patrick the man, as opposed to Patrick the myth, we must try to come to some understanding about who he was and what he stood for. Thankfully we have access to two short documents written by Patrick from which we can glean some knowledge about his person and character. Neither document - "The Confession" nor the "Letter to Coroticus" - contain a great deal of biographical detail, but they do give us an insight into the mind of the man whom history has immortalised as the person who brought Christianity to Ireland.

One of the great characteristics of Patrick that comes through in his writings is his humility. In the opening sentence of "The Confession", written near to the close of his life, Patrick regards himself as *"a sinner, most unlearned, the least of all the faithful and utterly despised by many"*. The one whom later generations were to elevate to sainthood regarded himself as a humble sinner and the least of all the faithful. At the close of a life of service in which he courageously triumphed over the evils and the barbarity of his day, he wrote without any recourse to triumphalism. There is a sense of humility about Patrick that all who would claim to honour his name would do well to emulate.

Patrick's determination to overcome his educational disadvantage should be an inspiration to all who have suffered from a similar disadvantage. One would have expected that someone who was the son of a church deacon and the grandson of a presbyter in Roman Britain would have been educated in the classics and in the teachings of the church fathers. Yet Patrick regards himself as someone who was "most unlearned". In his Confession he talks of his hesitation to write because *"I was afraid of exposing myself to the talk of men, because I have not studied like the others, who thoroughly imbibed law and Sacred Scripture, and never had to change from the language of their childhood"*.

Obviously his six years in captivity would have denied him access to the quality of education that he might have expected if he had been left at home. Yet missing out on formal education in the classics does not appear to have hampered Patrick's capacity for learning. What he has missed out on due to his captivity he made up for upon his escape. Both his writings and the work that he undertook in Ireland suggest that he had a keen

intellect and an astute mind. A lost youth, in terms of educational attainment, does not mean that a person's usefulness to society is lost. Educational disadvantage is just that - a disadvantage. It can be overcome.

His own experience of slavery made Patrick very conscious of the sufferings of others. Several commentators have suggested that Patrick was the first to condemn the institution of slavery. He certainly does this in his Letter to Coroticus where he writes, "*they (the slavers) are enemies of me and of Christ my God*" ... wherefore ... "*it is not permissible to court the favour of such people, nor to take food or drink with them, nor even to accept their alms*". Do we really have to ask what Patrick would say about a society that courts the favour of those behind Bonded Child Labour and who profit from the sweat of the 250 million child labourers across the world? Would a Patrick's Day march in support of Anti-Slavery International and the ICFTU campaign against child labour not be a more appropriate way to honour Patrick than the unbridled hedonism that characterises so many parades and celebrations on the 17th March?

If Patrick was ahead of the rest of Christendom in opposing slavery and the exploitation of the poor, he was equally ahead of his time in championing the cause of women. Compare the few sentences in which Patrick writes compassionately about women with the harsh sentiments of some of the Church Fathers. The sufferings of women in Ireland, especially those held in slavery, touched the heart of Patrick. He commends their strength and their courage in the face of suffering. Thomas Cahill says that "He (Patrick) is actually the first male Christian since Jesus to speak well of women" and Dermot O' Donoghue comments, "It is clear that (Patrick) is deeply and sensitively open to women and womanhood".

Patrick was a person who thought ahead of his time on many issues. Perhaps that is because the gospel, when it has been stripped of church dogma and honestly applied to the issues of real life, is timeless and contains a message that is for all ages. The triumphalism, the religious self-righteousness, the slavery, the exploitation and the sexism that Patrick repudiated are still with us. We might honour Patrick better if we were to follow in his footsteps and tackle the same issues with the same fervour and courage that he did.

Meekness or Weakness?

“Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart...”

Matthew 11:29

It has been said that former prisoners who now oppose violence have spent too long in jail - that somehow the prison experience has softened our hearts and broken our spirits. I have a video recording of a television documentary in which a local preacher-politician ridicules people like me as the "hard men who have gone soft". If "going soft" means rejecting the prejudice and the bigotry that leads to violence, then perhaps he is right. If "going soft" means exchanging the weapons of death for the weapons of dialogue, then perhaps he is right. None of us should have to apologise for that sort of "softness".

Meekness may be used as a synonym for softness. But there is a vast difference between meekness and weakness. The strong and the confident have nothing to be afraid of; they can afford to be meek.

Violence is clear evidence of an unwillingness to engage in dialogue and rational political argument. It betrays a lack of confidence in the power of political persuasion to facilitate a resolution to the social and political issues that have created a sense of alienation within many working class communities. It must be said however that lack of confidence in dialogue and in the political process stems as much from the corruption that has increasingly become characteristic of post-Agreement politics as it does from any unwillingness by people on the ground to engage in dialogue or political action.

Rather than provide an excuse for violence, the corruption of the political process and the alienation felt within working class communities presents us with fresh political and spiritual challenges. Violence will exacerbate, rather than halt, the process of marginalisation and alienation felt within our communities. The degree of damage inflicted in terms of broken human relationships, the weakening of community infrastructures and the negation of democratic principles makes violent responses to the process of political and social marginalisation of working class communities self-defeating in the long term. It is something that we must reject and I would urge all who value a citizenship that is based on peace, stability and respect for diversity to embrace policies and programmes of non-violence as a means of addressing the problems facing our communities.

Dialogue and political activism may take some considerable time before real progress is achieved and it takes strength of character and resilience to stick with the lengthy and frustrating process of dialogue. There are no short-cuts to conflict resolution but surely the slow lumbering process of dialogue and political activism is preferable by far to the slow lumbering processions of distraught mourners wending their way down city streets and through country lanes to our cemeteries and churchyards.

Non-violent activism is not a soft option. It demands much in terms of commitment, courage, self-control and moral argument. As Martin Luther King Jnr once pointed out, the non-violent activist "is passive or non-aggressive in the sense that he is not physically

aggressive towards his opponent. But his mind and emotions are always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he is mistaken”.

Scapegoating

He (Aaron) is to lay his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert (and).... The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place..."

Leviticus 16:21-22

In Old Testament times the itinerant Hebrew nation had a ritualistic way of cleansing itself of any guilt arising from social sins. The religious leader laid hands on a goat and ceremoniously transferred the guilt of the people to the goat. The beast was then driven outside the camp of Israel into the wilderness. From this ancient ritual we have developed the practice of scapegoating.

When something goes wrong in society and it is perceived that this is due to corporate wrongdoing we look for a scapegoat. We usually pick on the eccentric, the minorities and the unlovable – those who are different. Someone has to bear the guilt for society's ills so that the rest of us can rest easy in our own sense of self-righteous well being.

In Northern Ireland we have ready made scapegoats in the paramilitaries. Like every other part of the United Kingdom and Ireland we have a problem with drugs. But it is not our fault. The paramilitaries are to blame. We still have the most ancient trade in the world – prostitution – but it is not really society's fault. It is all down to the paramilitaries. We are plagued by anti-social behaviour, petty crime and organised crime – just like many other cities. But in Belfast it is not our fault. If it wasn't for those damned paramilitaries Northern Ireland would be a great wee place to live in. At least that appears to be the analysis of politicians, clergy and civic leaders.

Let me make it quite clear. I am not an advocate for paramilitarism nor am I about to suggest that they are paragons of virtue. I used to be one myself and am not blind to what goes on within paramilitary circles. At the same time I refuse to make them the scapegoats for society's ills.

Like many of my former comrades I have moved on. But I have not moved away from those who remained nor have I turned my back on the new generation that came after me. Because I know that there is a better, less violent and more democratic way in which to resolve Northern Ireland's problems, I have a duty to work with others of a like mind alongside my former organisation in the hope that we can be an influence for change. Notwithstanding the current unrest within loyalism I believe that we are being successful.

One would have thought that the slow but steady move towards politics and the steady reduction in violence would have been welcomed by so-called constitutional politicians and church leaders. But not so; raise the issue of drugs, rackets, prostitution and other forms of criminal activity and the paramilitaries are automatically blamed. No names are ever linked to specific criminal acts. Nothing tangible is ever presented. Yet the organisation as a whole

is painted with broad black brush strokes. The ritual of scapegoating does not require evidence; it just requires a prejudiced mind and a willing press.

Scapegoating is as pernicious an evil as any of the sins that we ceremoniously heap on the heads of our vicarious victims. It is first of all an exercise in self-righteousness. As a society we can cleanse ourselves of all guilt for our social ills. So long as we can point to the scapegoat we have no need to look at ourselves.

Secondly, it is an exercise in social exclusion and marginalisation. Just as the scapegoat was driven outside the camp into the wilderness so we attempt to drive our scapegoats outside the parameters of respectable society into the margins of a supposed mafia sub-culture. We demonise, vilify and marginalise others so that we can enjoy the smug satisfaction of our own self-righteousness. We fail to recognise that members of paramilitary organisations are members of our own communities – that they are husbands and sons, brothers and fathers. They are not animals like the Hebrew scapegoat; they are flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. They are the physical manifestation of our failure to resolve our differences.

Scapegoating saves the media from having to investigate the true origins and nature of our social ills. It is a lot easier to lay the blame on a ready-made scapegoat than having to look for real identifiable culprits. Blaming unincorporated organisations which have no legal remedy against slander and libel is a lot safer than naming individuals and having to face them in court.

Politicians use the paramilitaries as scapegoats to cover up their abject failure to establish a just, equitable and peaceful society in which all citizens can enjoy a life free from crime and deviant behaviour. Many church people, including some clergy, use the paramilitaries as scapegoats to cover up their failure to build a bridge between a world of hurting humanity and the love and compassion of a healing Saviour. Locked away in their holy huddles and spiritual bunkers they have lost the significance of incarnational theology and forgotten the true meaning of kenosis.

Whatever the faults of paramilitarism may be – and there are many – they ought not to be used as the scapegoats for society's ills or as a cover for the failure of civil society to address its own problems. Social problems are our problems. It is time to stop passing the buck.

Scripture Politics

(Some Lessons from the Sermons of Rev William Steele-Dickson)

One of the wall murals on the New Lodge Road, painted to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the 1798 Rebellion, is dedicated to the memory of the Reverend William Steele-Dickson. Having been raised in Carnmoney the name of Steele-Dickson, who was born at Ballycraigy within the townland, was part of the folk history of my childhood. The area that now forms the Borough of Newtownabbey, together with adjacent districts of South Antrim and East Antrim, is a rich source of history in relation to the Ulster-Scots Presbyterian community and, consequently, to the radical tradition of the United Irishmen with whom Steele-Dickson was associated.

Rev Steele-Dickson, like the majority of his contemporaries in the Presbyterian ministry, was educated at Glasgow University and sat under the teaching of Frances Hutcheson, the forerunner of the Scottish Enlightenment. I was pleasantly surprised to see that Steele-Dickson's contribution to the radical politics that flourished in 18th century Belfast has at last been recognised by nationalists. Modern day republicans tend to focus on influences of Wolf Tone and Thomas Paine to the neglect of those Presbyterians who were influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment. The radical politics of Antrim and Down were influenced by the Presbyterian clergy who graduated under Frances Hutcheson at Glasgow University. To ignore the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on Presbyterian Ulster is to do a great disservice to the Presbyterian community and is perhaps an indication that some within the republican tradition have been loathe to admit that anything good came out of the Ulster-Scots community.

We can learn something about the philosophy that Presbyterian ministers brought back to Ulster from Glasgow University by reflecting on the sermons and speeches of Steele-Dickson. A little book comprising three sermons on "Scripture Politics" preached and published by Rev Steele-Dickson was used influentially as a "tract for the times" in the period leading up the 1798 rising. It is worth reflecting on the tone and tenor of these sermons, for his message continues to be relevant for us today.

In a timely sermon, first preached in 1781, Steele-Dickson deals with what he termed "*that blind tyrannical daemon*" of sectarianism. Basing his address on the text "My Kingdom is not of this World", Steele-Dickson admonished his fellow Presbyterians to "*cherish and diffuse that liberal spirit in religion, which views the Redeemer as the sole Lord in his own kingdom; and all Christians as His subjects, and accountable to Him alone in religious matters*".

The philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment, which flourished amongst the Ulster-Scots community in 18th century Ireland, insisted that all citizens should be valued for their human worth and not on account of their religious or political views. Steele-Dickson sought the establishment of a just, equitable and pluralist society and encouraged his fellow Presbyterians in general and his fellow ministers in particular, to work for the development of such a society.

In Sermon Two of "Scripture Politics", Steele-Dickson addressed the issue of persecution and intolerance. Basing his message on the text "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth Peace - goodwill towards men*", Steele-Dickson reproaches Christians for bringing shame on the gospel by ungodly acts of injustice, violence and cruelty. He deals with the sad fact that Protestants had persecuted Catholics; that Catholics had persecuted Protestants and that Presbyterians had at times persecuted both. The lessons of history and the experiences of his own life taught Steele-Dickson that no one religious community had a monopoly on suffering. They taught him too that no one religious community had a monopoly on intolerance, or was the sole perpetrator of persecution and suffering.

Steele-Dickson reminded his people that the need to acknowledge *our* offences is as crucial as complaining about the offences of others. Inherent in his message was the need to heal the hurts of the past and make things right for the future as a prerequisite for reconciliation. Persecution and intolerance were not just manifested in violence. Steele-Dickson warned his fellow Presbyterians of the need to guard their tongues as well as their actions. He urged his hearers not only to speak the truth but also to hear the truth.

In Sermon Three of Scripture Politics, Steele-Dickson called for prophetic preaching against the sins and injustices of bad government. He argued that it was the duty of ministers of religion to rebuke the partiality, injustice, and oppression of governors, and to expose the abuses of government. He went on to say that it is the duty of the ordinary people to call for and to enforce reform. He goes on to warn that where reform is denied we run the risk of violent revolution. His warnings went unheeded by the occupants of Dublin Castle and the events 1798 were the outcome. However Steele-Dickson is clear where he stood in relation to campaigning for reform: - "*... the method proposed for obtaining reform, is the way of peace, as well as prudence...*" This appears to contradict his alleged support for the United Irishmen and the violent events of '98.

Steele-Dickson obviously believed that the church had a key role in helping to facilitate social change. It is not enough for the church to preach against the wrongs and consequences of personal sin - drink, fornication and violence - there must also be a prophetic "*Thus saith the Lord...*" spoken against corruption in high places, against structural violence and institutionalised injustices, against exploitative working conditions and slave labour; indeed against all that would militate against wholesome living.

If the mural on the wall is to mean anything in real terms, not just a decorative political painting to identify the politics of the area, the radical non-sectarian philosophy that motivated Steel-Dickson and his fellow Presbyterians ought to be lived out in the lives of those who have thought him a suitable person to be commemorated. It ought too to be lived out in the lives of those of us who cherish our Ulster-Scots Presbyterian heritage.

Racists are no Friends of the Union

"Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens"

Exodus 22:21

Discrimination, intimidation and physical attacks on British citizens and foreign nationals living in Northern Ireland, because of their colour or ethnic background, are an affront to all who cherish the principles of civil and religious liberty and equal citizenship within the Union. Such racist activities are also an affront to all who sincerely believe in the core principles of the Protestant Reformation, which proclaims the love of God for all mankind regardless of race or ethnicity. Racism is based solely on hatred, the gospel is based on Love – the two are incompatible.

It is sad therefore to learn that racists, propagating the evils of 'British' nationalism and 'white' supremacy, are once again seeking to gain a foothold in working class Protestant communities in Belfast, Ballymena and Craigavon. Attacks on people of colour in Belfast followed the distribution of leaflets from an organisation calling itself the "British Nazi Party" while in Ballymena the homes of Filipino nurses were attacked following leaflet drops by a group calling itself "The White Nationalist Party". Leaflets purporting to come from the same group have been circulating in the Craigavon area where members of the Muslim community have been the target of racial hatred.

Thankfully they are infinitesimally small in number, and it is clearly debatable whether such organisations actually exist other than as a flag of convenience for a few racists; but, as the saying goes, "a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump". Protestants have a duty of care to their fellow British citizens and to foreign nationals living in their areas, regardless of ethnic background, to ensure that they live in peace and harmony. It was refreshing to see two senior loyalists, Tommy Kirkham and David Ervine, speaking out against racist attacks in Protestant areas.

Genuine Unionists will be aware that racism is subversive of both Protestantism and political Unionism. Political Unionism and Nationalism - be it 'British' nationalism, 'Irish' nationalism or 'White' nationalism - are wholly incompatible. Being British is about citizenship not nationality. The Liberal Unionist, Arthur Aughey, has rightly noted that –

"The idea of the Union is the willing community of citizens united not by creed, colour or ethnicity but by the recognition of the authority of the Union".

Principled political Unionism is thus able to facilitate pluralism whereas 'British Nationalism', so-called, which links citizenship to a single racial and ethnic identity, is inimical to Unionism. Citizenship within the United Kingdom has nothing to do with race, ethnicity or nationalism. It is about a political identity that is rooted in citizenship and in loyalty to the concept of the Union.

The peoples who form the unionist community come from a number of diverse cultures and traditions – Irish, Scottish, English, Welsh and Huguenot descent, as well as a goodly

number of Commonwealth immigrants and their offspring. Principled political Unionism is about maintaining citizenship within a state that acknowledges and validates the identity, culture and traditions of those who make up the Union. Citizenship for the British subject is not about a single national identity or cultural exclusiveness. It is about sharing a political identity that transcends religion, culture, language and ethnicity. In short, it is about living in a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic pluralist society rather than in a society where citizenship is based on a single national identity.

It is estimated that 30% of the world's population belong to a Commonwealth country and the unionist community in Northern Ireland ought to be proud to be part of that international family. The Commonwealth is a multi-ethnic, multi-faith and multi-cultural association of free peoples. The one thing that binds them together simply is their shared history with the United Kingdom which is manifested in the fact that they all have a common working language and similar systems of law, public administration and education. This shared history has enabled them to develop a vibrant and growing association of states that, with a few exceptions, are in tune with the modern world.

We have a responsibility to welcome those who come seeking refuge from persecution and terror? The words of the Moses the Hebrew lawgiver, are worthy of consideration – “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt” (Exodus 22:21). This injunction was repeated time and time again. Because they were once aliens and strangers, the Hebrews were to love the aliens in their midst. This Biblical injunction has relevance to both the Scotch-Irish and the Anglo-Irish for both were once aliens and strangers on this island. Many of our Presbyterian forbears also left this island, fleeing the penal laws, to seek refuge in America. Others left to seek a new life in places as far apart as Canada and Australia. Should the descendants of those who have a history of seeking refuge in strange lands and who experienced the hardships of being strangers and aliens not have some sympathy for those who come to our shores seeking refuge?

Racism is not only politically incorrect it is incompatible with authentic Protestantism. In Biblical terms, racism is sinful, and ought to be shunned.

On Being Salt and Light

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt has lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.

Matthew 5:13-16

As a Christian I believe that the spiritual values of my faith ought to impact upon society as I interact with the wider community. As a Christian community activist I believe that I have a responsibility to address the issues and problems of the local communities in which I work.

The call of Jesus to His disciples that they should be “salt” and “light” to the world has become a cliché in many circles, but the terms *salt* and *light* do reflect the work of the Christian community activist.

As salt we ought to be a preserving influence in the community. Not preserving the status quo as so many churches and churchmen have sought to do, but preserving society from corruption - political corruption, economic corruption, social corruption, cultural corruption as well as moral corruption.

As "Light", we ought to shed the light of truth upon all aspects of human darkness - social, political, cultural, economic, and moral darkness. We should be a beacon of truth and hope to those in darkness -

- the darkness of social & economic deprivation
- the darkness of educational disadvantage
- the darkness of discrimination and exploitation
- the darkness of political misrepresentation
- the darkness of human dogma and religious bigotry

For me, the thrust of the Christian gospel is reconciliation -

- reconciliation between man and his God
- reconciliation within the heart & soul of the individual (integration)
- reconciliation between people (individuals and groups)
- reconciliation between man and his environment

Traditionally the churches have tended to concentrate upon the first - reconciliation between man and his God - to the neglect of the rest, thus neglecting three quarters of the gospel. If the church is to be faithful to its Head and to His message of reconciliation it must become pro-active in a full-orbed programme of reconciliation. This ought to be reflected in its confession of faith, in the language of its liturgy, in the celebration of its worship, in the form of its government and in the attention it gives to political, social and cultural issues.

If sin is to be denounced it must not be restricted to the usual personal failures associated with drink, fornication and crime. It must also include those corporate sins responsible for structural violence - economic greed, political exploitation, desocialisation and disculturation.

It is imperative that the church becomes a focus for reconciliation in all aspects and spheres of human life. The social, economic and cultural gap between churches and local communities must be closed - not merely bridged by a few church-based workers.

I believe that it is the job of Christian community activists to help build that bridge and it is the task of the church as a corporate body to endorse and support Christian community action in the same way that it does other aspects of Christian ministry.

Faith and Class Politics

Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

James 1:27

A common charge levelled against loyalists like myself is that we have abandoned the faith of our Protestant heritage and sold out to secular socialism. Those of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ are especially targeted for our alleged apostasy.

The belief within certain sections of the Protestant-Unionist community that Christianity and class politics are mutually exclusive has fuelled the bitter antagonism which religious fundamentalists have towards Christians whose politics are left-of-centre. The fear that any interaction between Christians and socialists must lead to a dilution of the faith is completely irrational and displays a clear lack of faith and a lack of confidence on the part of the fearful.

While Christianity and Marxism are philosophically irreconcilable I believe that Jesus and Marx, as individuals, shared many common ideals. If it were possible, I believe listening to a dialogue between Jesus and Marx would prove to be very informative and most enlightening for Christians and Marxists alike.

Both Jesus and Karl Marx had a passion for transforming social structures. Both wished to empower those who were excluded from the power structures of their societies. Both sought to enrich and enhance the quality of human life for the disadvantaged and the dispossessed. Both were outraged at the social and economic inequalities that forced people in their days to live in poverty and oppression. Both had a deep and abiding sympathy for the deprived, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed. While they would clearly have expressed irreconcilable differences with regards to philosophy and theology, they would have found much in common to talk about and, more importantly, to act upon. I believe too that both would openly disassociate themselves from much of what has been said and done in their names.

Jesus would certainly have disassociated Himself from the religious wars, the inquisitions and the persecutions that have been carried out in His name. I would like to think that Karl Marx would disassociate himself from the purges, the Gulags and the suppression of human rights that have been carried out in the name of socialism.

The Bible abundantly testifies that there is a special place in the heart of God for the poor. Indeed when Jesus commenced His earthly ministry He used the following statement to outline the focus of His mission: -"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed (Luke 4.18). The church has often attempted to spiritualise the words of Jesus as if to say that He referred only to spiritual bondage, spiritual oppression and spiritual blindness. However, as the Christian historian, Timothy L. Smith, points out: - "The poor are not oppressed simply by their sins

but by an exploitative society. To face up to social wrong - unfair wages, desperate housing conditions, the reign of ignorance and deference to the idols of race or class or nationalism - is the obligation of every Christian". As Keir Hardie, one of the early Christian Socialists, once declared "Christ's great work was... to remove the causes which divided man from man, to make it impossible for the strong to oppress the weak or the rich to rob the poor".

In his book, *Religion and Revolution*, the Marxist revolutionary Fidel Castro said, "the church should take the lead in responding to the widow, the orphan, the hungry and the needy." Notwithstanding the differences in belief and ideology that exists between Castro and Jesus, I would suggest that no genuine follower of Jesus could disagree with his statement. Indeed if we set Castro's comments alongside those of the Apostle James (James 1.27) we will see that they are both singing from the same hymn-sheet.

Jon Sobrino, the Latin American Liberation Theologian, has identified two classes of "the poor" for whom Jesus the Liberator had a soft spot. The first class was the economic poor – the hungry, the poorly clothed, the badly housed, the sick and the infirm. The second class included the social outcasts of his day – women, prisoners, prostitutes, winebibbers, lepers, strangers, and the one who was different.

Looking back on my childhood days our family certainly fell into the first category. My own experience of life was one of watching my young widowed mother struggle to feed, clothe, house us and nurse us through the many sicknesses that came with poverty. For our family, life was a struggle to obtain the basic necessities of life and to ward off the attention of the moneylenders, the tick men and the host of other parasites who fed on the misery of the poor.

It wasn't until I went to prison, and fell into the second of Sobrino's categories, that I had time for both personal reflection and interaction with others from a similar background. In Long Kesh we explored issues that we took for granted on the outside.

Even in prison we did not attempt a scientific analysis of our experiences. I have never exhaustively read *Karl Marx* but I have read and experienced *Other Marks* - the marks of pain furrowed across the brow of my widowed mother who was at her wits end because her money and her food had run out, the marks of pain on the faces of at least a dozen neighbours or friends who died before their time as a result of industry induced cancers, the marks of shame on the face of a school friend who felt that the only marketable commodity left to sell was her own body. These marks spoke volumes.

Doctrinaire socialists may well be correct in producing their scientific analyses of the causes of poverty and deprivation. My analysis, flawed as it might be in terms of doctrine and theory, is the product of personal experience. I have been there, I have experienced it and I am entitled to wear the tee-shirt.

I know too, from personal experience, that there is more to human well-being than material things. There is a spiritual dimension to human existence that needs to be nurtured as much as the physical. For me, a living relationship with the Risen Christ meets that need.

Tony Benn who has described himself as a “Christian without God” and who was brought up in a Christian home, acknowledges that the moral roots of his socialism lie in religion. In his “Arguments for Democracy”, Benn follows Keir Hardie and George Lansbury in acknowledging that his “political commitment owes much more to the teachings of Jesus...than to the writings of Marx whose analysis seems to lack an understanding of the deeper needs of humanity”.

Jesus fully understands those deeper needs of humanity. Thus, a socialism that is informed by the spiritual passion of Jesus ministers to the whole person.

I see no contradiction in being a follower of Jesus Christ while, at the same time, seeking the social, political and economic emancipation of either the economic poor or the social outcasts. On the contrary, I believe with Jon Sobrino that that is exactly what Jesus Himself would seek to do.

Thus, I am neither ashamed of my faith in Jesus Christ or of my commitment to class politics.