

How Can Clergy Address the Legacy of the Troubles?

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As I sat down to prepare this presentation, I looked back at a blog post I had written publicising today's event. There was a glaring typo. The Scripture verse that is the theme for the day, "Go and do thou likewise," is from Luke 10:37, and is Jesus's instructions after telling the story of the Good Samaritan. But I had it written as Luke 10:3.

Out of curiosity I read Luke 10:3; it said: "Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves." It struck me that in some ways, this verse is also apt for today. Clergy who are intentionally and reflectively addressing the legacy of the Troubles are a minority – and they face challenges and obstacles that are positively wolf-like.

Today I want to share with you some ideas about how clergy can address the legacy of the Troubles - how lambs can make some progress among the wolves, so to speak. Some of my thoughts will be based on reading the work of other scholars, other thoughts will have come from my own sociological fieldwork on the island of Ireland. I've interviewed and observed Christian advocates of reconciliation and it is from them that I have gleaned my deepest insights.

I will address five ways clergy can address the legacy of the Troubles: 1) prioritizing victims and survivors, 2) public acknowledgement (including self-critique and repentance), 3) re-defining and re-emphasizing reconciliation, 4) re-imagining worship and language, and 5) inspiring and involving the rest of the church – and by that I mean the laity. Clergy may be able to provide some leadership, but you cannot address the legacy of the Troubles on your own.

Before delving into these, it is worth noting that the first three ways, prioritizing victims and survivors, public acknowledgement, and reconciliation, feature prominently in the document released after the Haass-O'Sullivan Talks – the agreement on which there was no agreement. Please bear that in mind.

Prioritizing Victims and Survivors

I agree with this statement from the Proposed Agreement (p. 20):

The first requirement of any comprehensive treatment of the legacy of the past must be to provide for the social and health needs of victims and survivors; they must necessarily command a prominent place in matters related to the past. The burden of their pain and loss has been exceptional and has been borne with remarkable dignity, patience, and grace. In many cases, victims have become prominent voices in the effort to heal divisions across communities – an extraordinary example of leadership from which all in Northern Ireland could learn.

I am glad that Peter McBride is here to speak later this afternoon on 'the clergy as victims and survivors.' I have no doubt that many clergy were themselves traumatized and need specialist mental and physical health services. He will have greater insights than I do in this area.

I also think there's great potential for groups of clergy and laypeople working together to create safe spaces where victims and survivors can publicly share their stories of trauma from the Troubles. Several events in the recent 4 Corners Festival in Belfast, organized by a group of clergy and laypeople, attempted to do this. Such events, whether public or private, provide victims and survivors with the opportunity to have their suffering acknowledged and recognized, which can contribute to personal healing.

We should also remember that the legacy of the Troubles may drive some people, even if they are not a direct victim or survivor of violence, to find solace in prescription drugs, alcohol abuse, or suicide. I was frankly shocked by the statistics reported by Ruth Dudley Edwards in Ireland's Sunday Independent on 16 February 2014. She writes:

"I was jolted on Monday to read that since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, levels of suicide in NI have shot up so sharply as almost to equal the number of Troubles killings. Roughly, there were 3,600 killings from 1969-1998 and 3,300 suicides from 1998-2012. In 2012, for instance, compared with 15.4 per 100,000 in the North, the suicide rates were 8.5 in England, 11 in [Wales](#), 12.2 in the Republic and 14.7 in [Scotland](#) (heavily skewed by [Glasgow](#)).

As we search for explanations like deprivation, stress, alcohol, drugs and the internet, we need to know that what has been going on in Northern Ireland is of a different order. Just to take male suicide statistics (77 per cent of the total) since 1998. While suicides have doubled in Northern Ireland, the trend has been gradually downwards in England, Scotland and Wales, and – until the 2008 recession – in the Republic. And although for years, the public services have ignored the elephant in the room, it's clear that this is linked to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a pointless and vicious war that terrified, brutalised and damaged hundreds of thousands. The World Mental Health Survey Initiative (an offshoot of the [World Health Organisation](#)) has found the rates of PTSD are higher in the North than in any of the other 27 countries investigated, including Brazil, Columbia, [Iraq](#), [Israel](#) and South Africa."

We must ask ourselves what followers of Jesus can do about such brokenheartedness in our midst. To take one example, I can commend to you the "Flourish" programme, a new inter-church initiative to help clergy address suicide (<http://www.wewillflourish.com/>).

Public Acknowledgement (Including Self-critique and Repentance)

The Proposed Agreement contains much that is constructive on the importance of 'Acknowledging Past Acts' (p. 22ff). Again, I think it is worth quoting from the Proposed Agreement:

Sincere acknowledgements are a foundational step in the effort to contend with Northern Ireland's past. They constitute powerful gestures by individuals involved in the conflict and send an important message to other such individuals, to the people of Northern Ireland, and to the world that those responsible for causing pain are prepared to accept their responsibility and that after conflict and division comes the difficult task of reconciliation.

I am aware that many Christians in Northern Ireland think that religion has played no part in the conflict, and that the churches in fact 'did their best' to mitigate violence. I agree that many courageous Christian individuals and groups made major contributions to peace. But I also think religion has contributed to division and conflict on this island. For centuries religious institutions on this island aligned themselves with political power, created and reinforced divisions and stereotypes, made sure the 'two tribes' did not

intermarry with each other, enlisted God on their ‘side,’ and provided theologies that justified separation and violence.

For example, Rev Dr Johnston McMaster’s recent book, *Overcoming Violence: Dismantling an Irish History and Theology – An Alternative Vision* examines how both Protestants and Catholics, using the religiously-informed traditions of covenant (the Ulster Covenant) and blood sacrifice (the 1916 Rising), constructed and justified a culture of violence. For him, Christian traditions on this island have been based on a ‘myth of redemptive violence’ that distorts the gospel of Jesus.

I am convinced that Christians on this island need to publicly acknowledge how their religion was used to justify violence and division. I would go further and say that Christians should have the courage to not only acknowledge past sins, but to repent for them in word and in deed.

Of course, this raises difficult questions about who repents, and on whose behalf they repent.

ECONI was years ahead of most institutions on this island when it came to engaging in critical self-reflection on their (evangelical) tradition – and repenting. In 1988 the group that would become ECONI published ‘For God and His Glory Alone’ as a letter in the *Belfast Telegraph* and a booklet, signed by around 200 evangelical leaders.¹ *For God and His Glory Alone* included ‘ten biblical principles relevant to Christian witness in a divided community.’² The page devoted to Reconciliation read³:

As Evangelicals, we must accept our share of the blame for any way in which we have contributed to the alienation felt by many of the minority community in Northern Ireland. We have allowed our differences to be turned into barriers, and at times we have been active in that process. Such humanly constructed barriers are caused by our arrogance and attitudes of superiority.

After the failure of the political parties to agree on the Proposed Agreement, what is to stop churches or Christian organizations from fulfilling this aspect of the Proposed Agreement with public acknowledgements? If the institutional churches will not do this, could Christian organizations or groups of clergy and laity working together at local levels publicly acknowledge past sins? Why should we have to wait for an invitation to do this from Richard Haass, Meghan O’Sullivan, or our own political parties?

Re-defining and Re-emphasizing Reconciliation

Reconciliation was seen as a worthy goal in the ‘Shared Future’ document and in the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past. Although ‘reconciliation’ was virtually absent from OFMDFM documents ‘Together Building a United Community’ and ‘Cohesion, Sharing and Integration,’ it makes a return in the Proposed Agreement. The Proposed Agreement reads (p. 19-20):

It is clear that the vast majority of citizens and communities wish to live free of the division and enmity that has too often defined this society. At the same time, it is also clear that people have different senses of the past’s meaning and importance. This is the heart of the challenge of reconciliation – the transition from a divided society to one that is whole, from a wounded society to one that is healed.

Throughout the Troubles, Christian organizations like ECONI, the Irish School of Ecumenics and Corrymeela produced stacks of theological and practical resources about reconciliation. A key insight shared in all of this thinking is that reconciliation needs to happen at a number of *levels*, not just at an individual level between people, or between individuals and God. I have identified two main themes in their approaches to reconciliation: 1) reconciliation is relationship-centred, and 2) reconciliation includes addressing social, political and structural aspects of sectarianism. Johnston McMaster and Cathy Higgins’ 2002 handbook, *Communities of Reconciliation: Living Faith in the Public Place*, defines reconciliation this way:⁴

... Reconciliation needs to be understood and developed as social reconciliation. ... We might then say that reconciliation is about taking initiatives and actions that make enemies into friends through give and take and by building new and different forms of community. This kind of reconciliation is about transforming relationships and structures through lengthy processes requiring courage, risk and commitment.

But this is not a vision of reconciliation that has ‘caught on.’ In 2009, on behalf of the Irish School of Ecumenics, I conducted surveys of clergy and laity on the island of Ireland, which asked specific questions about diversity, reconciliation and ecumenism. Respondents had the opportunity to ‘write-in’ their own definitions of reconciliation. Then they were asked to tick boxes to indicate ‘how important’ (on a scale of 1 to 5) they thought various forms of reconciliation are, such as reconciliation between individuals and God, between individuals, between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, between Catholics and Protestants on the island of Ireland, between people of other religions, between other religions, and between people of different ethnic groups.

Christians across all denominations rated individual forms of reconciliation very highly. But when they were asked about social or group forms of reconciliation, their enthusiasm waned. This is clear in the table detailing the results from the clergy survey.

(POWERPOINT SLIDE INSERT TABLE 10, P. 27 HERE).

Among clergy in Northern Ireland, 85% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between individuals and God, and 68% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between individuals. But only 46% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and 34% between Catholics and Protestants on the island of Ireland.

Percentages were even lower among laity. In Northern Ireland, 65% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between individuals and God, 55% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between individuals, 36% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and 27% thought it was very important to preach and teach on reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants on the island of Ireland.

What this tells me is that most Christians in Northern Ireland, and on the island of Ireland, do not see reconciliation between our Christian traditions as a vital aspect of living out their faith.

It tells me that conceptions of reconciliation, among our clergy and the people in the pews, are overwhelmingly individualistic and as a result, impoverished.

Re-Imagining Worship and Language

One of the striking phrases from Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg’s book, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, is how Catholics and Protestants speak about each other as from ‘the other religion.’ One of the legacies of the Troubles, and the hundreds of years of division that preceded them, is that there is much that we do and say in our churches that communicates to people that there is an ‘us’ and there is a ‘them.’ I think there is an opportunity for clergy to show leadership through introducing intentional changes in worship and language. You can start doing seemingly small things in your congregation’s worship or using language that carefully communicates that all Christians on this island are sisters and brothers – not opponents.

For me, one of the most striking examples of how this might be done happens in Holy Cross, the Benedictine Monastery in Rostrevor, Co. Down. On numerous occasions when I have been there, when the monks say mass they pray not only for the leaders of their own church, they pray for the leaders of the main

Protestant churches as well as the evangelical churches. Recently someone related to me how they were moved that they had heard the monks refer to Rev Heather Morris, the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, as ‘our president.’ It’s a simple, but radical, step – publicly praying for people and churches from ‘other’ Christian traditions, thus communicating that Christians can be united. Could parishes and congregations start doing that at a local level?

In her fascinating book, *The Real Peace Process*, Siobhán Garrigan offers a number of insights into how our Christian churches could change their worship practices in ways that could begin breaking down our sectarian systems and mindsets. Garrigan argues that transforming sectarianism will require more than just inter-denominational encounter (the so-called cross-community work with which we are so familiar). For her, changes must also happen intra-denominationally. She offers the following practical suggestions:

- Every Christian, when planning, leading or participating in worship, should try to imagine what it would be like if a person from a different tradition to their own were present. She says, ‘What this visualization does is to lessen the chance of you saying or doing something sectarian in that service or else having a mechanism to challenge yourself when you do’ (p. 195).
- Every Christian ‘must ask ourselves how our worship should be performed to foster faithful living of faith tradition in our time’ (p. 198). She is convinced that ‘growing out of sectarianism might mean growing deeper in love with our own confessional tradition’ (p. 198). She says this to emphasise the point that is not just in joint worship or in ‘mixed marriages’ that Christians can move beyond sectarianism.
- Christians can ‘create, foster and participate in new encounters with other Christians across the denominational divide’ (p. 201). Here, she discusses the witness of the Clonard Monastery-Fitzroy Presbyterian fellowship. She also says that the Unity Pilgrims, another Clonard initiative, has also been exemplary in crossing boundaries, and that similar groups could be tried in other parts of the island.
- Christians should participate in ecumenical bible study, but ‘not as “study” in the sense of debate or discussion or education, but rather as prayer’ (p. 211).

There are already small steps like this underway. There’s an initiative in the Belfast area called ‘In Joyful Hope.’ Every month or two, Christians from diverse traditions gather in a church to share in a Eucharist or communion service. Owing to the discipline of the Catholic Church, this means that those gathered do not all partake of the bread and wine. But as Fr Gerry Reynolds from Clonard, one of the founders of the initiative, has explained:

‘[Our] key thought was that the joy of being present at the Eucharistic worship of another Christian tradition is greater than the pain experienced by not being able to share fully in the celebration.’

Another example of re-imagined worship is practicing the discipline of ‘ecumenical tithing.’ I came across this concept in the writings of Fr Michael Hurley, the now late founder of the Irish School of Ecumenics.⁵ After reading Hurley, my very basic definition is:

A commitment for Christians to pledge to spend a significant percentage of their time in worship and service with Christians from a tradition other than their own.

For Hurley, a commitment to ecumenical tithing is a way to encourage the ‘formation’ of a more fully-rounded Christian character. So he writes (p. 83):

‘Each of us devotes a certain amount of our time, our energies, our resources, our services, our money to our own Church – to its worship and its various other religious activities. The question is: could we withdraw a tenth of that time and energy and money from our own and devote it to another Church?’

He goes on to provide specific examples (p. 83-84):

'But could Presbyterians tithe their Sundays to the Church of Ireland, i.e. go to the Church with the Anglicans rather than with their fellow-Presbyterians some five times a year? Could a member of the Church of Ireland reciprocate this ecumenical gesture or do likewise with the Methodists, worshipping with them on the occasional Sunday and also transferring the tithe of their support for the Church Missionary Society to the Methodist Missionary Society? Could Roman Catholics transfer a tithe of their support for Trócaire to Christian Aid? And sometimes buy and read the Church of Ireland Gazette instead of the Irish Catholic or Catholic Herald? Could Roman Catholic ordinands tithe their theological studies to another Church? In other words, could they study and live with Anglican, Orthodox or Presbyterian ordinands for a part of their course?'

Last April, Fr Martin Magill (now the parish priest at Sacred Heart in Belfast), began sharing his experiences of 'ecumenical tithing' in a regular Monday post on my blog. Fr Martin visits a congregation from a different tradition each Sunday, usually an evening service after he has tended to worship in his own parish.

Michael Hurley recommended that Christians embarking on a disciplined programme of ecumenical tithing do so in groups and receive appropriate pastoral care from church leaders. You could say that this is what happens with the Unity Pilgrims from Clonard. But I think we can ask how we might facilitate the spread of this practice across our churches. Could groups of local churches develop covenants where they cancel a service once a month and all meet together as one? What would such a practice communicate not only to the people in the pews, but those in the wider community as they become aware of the practice? I think it could begin to communicate that that Catholicism and Protestantism are not 'different' religions, but that we are all Christians.

I have one further point about language. As Christians, we should have embarrassingly rich resources from which to draw when we speak about reconciliation. There are other concepts we can talk about, too, such as self-repentance, forgiveness, hope, what it might look like to lament our shared losses, and – borrowing a phrase used recently by Archbishop Eamon Martin – how we might create 'covenants of friendship' amongst ourselves. But as ever, words are only words if they are not backed up by the kinds of action I have just described.

Inspiring and Involving the Rest of the Church

I understand that as clergy, you have a lot on your plate: planning worship, visiting the sick, weddings, funerals, and the everyday struggles of life. As a clergy friend of mine remarked to me recently in a message on Facebook:

In my lunch hour I will reflect on my role in helping with the NI conflict - lol. Tongue in cheek, but such are the pressures on us that hard stuff like ecumenism and NI political or community non-church engagement gets squeezed out.

Comments like this were common in the survey of clergy I conducted in 2009. Most said that they did not spend as much time on reconciliation or ecumenism as they would like.

But as clergy you have the opportunity to inspire other Christians to see addressing the legacy of the Troubles as absolutely central to what it means to follow Jesus on this island. Rev Arlene Moore, the minister of the joint Church of Ireland/Methodist Church of the Good Shepherd in Monkstown, recently shared a story with me about how she had a Sunday evening conversation with parishioners who had been reflecting on her Sunday morning sermon – and then asked her if they could be released from other church duties to give time to focusing on ecumenism and reconciliation. Arlene said:

My sermon was based on Candlemas (the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary) and the presentation of Christ in the Temple. I asked three questions:

- *Have you recommitted yourself to Christ recently, and will you do it here and now?*
- *What is the one thing God is asking of you, calling you to do before you die?*
- *And are you giving yourself totally to doing that?*

Arlene said that these questions issued from the challenge of Simeon and Anna to us. They were waiting for the promised Messiah and knew that God would not let them die without fulfilling the role He had for them. Somehow her words that day – no doubt coupled with the strong reconciliatory witness of a number of lay-led groups and initiatives within Church of the Good Shepherd – had inspired those parishioners to believe that the role God has for Christians on this island is to live as witnesses of unity and reconciliation.

Sheep among the Wolves?

I have provided a number of examples today of what clergy, working with laity, might do to address the legacy of the Troubles. Some of the initiatives may seem too timid; some may seem too bold, too radical, too upsetting to some of the people in our churches who believe with all their hearts that the churches have no business addressing the legacy of the Troubles.

I have been involved with organizing the 4 Corners Festival in Belfast, which takes place in and around the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The festival was originally conceived by Fr Martin Magill and Rev Steve Stockman from Fitzroy Presbyterian as a way to get people to cross boundaries by going to events in the ‘four corners’ of the city. An overriding theme that came out of the events of the festival was how we might find the courage to confront our fears about peacebuilding, and our fears about what our future together on this island – with former ‘enemies’ – might look like.

Laura Coulter, the Irish Churches Peace Project field worker in North Belfast, recently wrote on Contemporary Christianity’s PS blog about ‘Facing our Fears – A Gospel Imperative?’ I don’t underestimate how frightening and difficult it will be to go out as ‘sheep among wolves.’ But I think Laura leaves us with some comforting last words:

We have built walls of fear, mistrust and suspicion of each other which are difficult to remove. However, the Biblical commandment that occurs most often is “don’t be afraid”. ... When we deal with our fears, we are dealing with a major barrier to finding peace. Nothing calms fear so much as seeing that the person next you is not afraid. Real peace implies something deeper than polite acceptance of those who are different. We need to discover who the other person is and reveal who we are. In developing relationships across cultural, political and religious boundaries, we will begin to see afresh God’s work in the lives of others and also in our own.

¹ *For God and His Glory Alone* (Belfast: ECONI, 1998), available at: <http://www.contemporarychristianity.net/resources/pdfs/fgandhga.pdf>, accessed 21 February 2012.

² Patrick Mitchel, *Evangelicalism and National Identity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 261. The principles were: love, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, citizenship, truth, servanthood, justice and righteousness, hope, and repentance

³ *For God and His Glory Alone*, p. 16.

⁴ Johnston McMaster and Cathy Higgins, *Communities of Reconciliation: Living Faith in the Public Place* (Newtownards: Colourpoint Books, 2002), p. 9.

⁵ Michael Hurley, *Christian Unity: An Ecumenical Second Spring* (Dublin: Veritas, 1998).