

RECONCILIATION

Ways of Dealing with Northern Ireland's Past

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Reconciliation: Ways of Dealing with Northern Ireland's Past

THIS DOCUMENT

This document has been prepared in response to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee request for evidence.

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THE MARANATHA COMMUNITY

The Maranatha Community is a Christian movement with many thousands of members throughout Northern Ireland and Great Britain active in all the main churches and every political persuasion. Since its formation 24 years ago, it has been deeply involved in work for peace and reconciliation in the Province with a very substantial caseload. Protestant and Catholic members of Maranatha have worked closely together for the whole of this period. Its membership includes a substantial number of people involved in the health and caring professions and in a wide range of voluntary work. In addition to victims of violence and intimidation, its work has embraced children and young people, people with drug and alcohol problems, the disabled and disadvantaged. Maranatha operates a healing ministry and undertakes relief projects in many parts of the world. The Trust is a registered charity number 327627.

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I. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 We welcome the decision of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to conduct an inquiry into the issue of establishing reconciliation in communities and between individuals who have been afflicted by terrorism.
- 1.2 We also welcome the Secretary of State's programme of discussions about "ways of dealing with the past which recognise the pain, grief and anger".

2. CHANGING THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE YOUNG

- 2.1 It has been our experience over many years that attitudes which contribute to suspicion, division and hatred, are invariably rooted in very powerful formative influences which have been brought to bear on the young. These have been sustained by peer group pressure in the context of involvement in continuing confrontation. They have also been fed by a cultural and religious inheritance from previous generations which has often been deliberately and grossly distorted.
- 2.2 The long-term establishment of healthy community relations will only occur when responsible citizens ensure that children are set free from the myths, symbols and language of bigotry with which they have been systematically imbued over many years.
- 2.3 The visual environment of militarist murals undoubtedly has a profound and lasting influence upon children. The commitment of those, on both sides of the divide, to the complete eradication of provocative murals, graffiti and other symbols of confrontation, would be warmly welcomed by the wider community upon whom they have been imposed. There are substantial numbers who do not wish to perpetuate tribalism and would strongly support a clean up of a disfigured environment which ties them to the past. Perhaps sponsors could be found to fund displays and murals proclaiming messages of peace and hope, rather than hatred and despair. Imaginative schemes of neighbourhood regeneration would encourage the young to escape from the shadows of the past.
- 2.4 Children and young people have rarely met those who have been politically and militarily involved on the other side of the divide. Our experience is that the most effective way of dealing with a continuing situation of distrust is for men and women who have been personally involved in violence but who have given it up, to share with children and young people, and present an attractive alternative for the future.
- 2.5 In this context we would specifically draw the attention of the Committee to the work of public-spirited people such as Tom Kelly and James Tate. Tom, a Catholic, was very active in the Provisional IRA and James, a Protestant, was very active in the UVF. They both served long prison sentences and renounced violence. They came together in the Maranatha Community and now have an

impressive record of faith-based joint work for peace and reconciliation, especially among the young. Their impact on students in schools has been profound and lasting. One of the most effective ways of dealing with Northern Ireland's troubled past would undoubtedly be to arrange for those with first-hand experience of violence, such as Tom and James, to engage in a long-term programme of education in reconciliation.

3. FORGIVENESS

- 3.1 Many thousands of people in Northern Ireland inevitably nurture painful memories of past hurts and injustices in the troubles and also passed-on stories of atrocities in their families.
- 3.2 Remembering can bring pain or healing, depression or hope. Days of reflection and sharing can enable hurting people to learn from one another and to make appropriate commemorations of a past which can never be forgotten.
- 3.3 Our experience is that no amount of counselling and teaching can ever substitute for a deep sharing of pain followed by an exploration of the process of forgiveness and the healing of memories.
- 3.4 This Community has arranged many meetings in key areas of confrontation and violence in the Province when former perpetrators of violent acts and their victims have been brought together. The publicly declared sorrow of former paramilitaries combined with the witness of victims has proved to be a major factor in the reconciling process. These have included people such as Bernadette Power and Christine McKay whose husbands were gunned down and who have publicly forgiven those who murdered their loved ones.
- 3.5 The sharing of guilt and pain has, in the context of Christian faith, led to acts of repentance and forgiveness. These have a profound and lasting influence on the participants and also on the local community. They have had a dynamic influence on the process of healing the past.

4. ENDING FEAR

- 4.1 The problem of creating community leadership in many areas hinges on the fact that often those who emerge as community leaders are themselves associated in the eyes of the community with paramilitary groups which are still actively engaged in bullying, extortion and violence. Thus, the confidence of ordinary people who wish to escape from the past is immediately eroded.
- 4.2 The ties with the past can only be broken if the local community is convinced that criminal acts by friends and associates of community leaders, or community leaders themselves, have totally and finally ceased. Tragically, at a time when the

peace process seems to be centred on the act of disarmament, the fact remains that the most highly organised criminal groups still active today are directly linked to the paramilitaries. It is widely recognised that paramilitary criminal activity is continuing unabated and even, perhaps, increasing in scale. Fear will only be overcome when all criminal activity is publicly renounced by politicians and paramilitaries alike. This is the essential pre-condition for the continuation of the reconciliation process.

- 4.3 The honest sharing of ideas and views can only take place if there are no repercussions. A higher degree of mutual trust and respect is needed and sadly this is often not found in some civic groupings.

5. RECONCILIATION INITIATIVES

- 5.1 Many excellent initiatives for reconciliation have been taken by Christian groups in different parts of the Province.
- 5.2 Over many years this Community has arranged hundreds of meetings attended by Catholics and Protestants in almost every centre of population in Northern Ireland. These have borne rich fruit and have also generated an enormous caseload of counselling and personal help. The process of reconciliation is inevitably slow and the fear experienced by actual and potential local community leaders to stand out against violence is still widely evident.
- 5.3 Meetings between opposing interests need not be politically confrontational if carried out in an atmosphere of honesty and genuine care. This can best be achieved by joint Protestant/Catholic sponsorship, with no political agenda.
- 5.4 Many sincere initiatives for reconciliation have involved superficial and often short-lived gestures. It is far more important to influence a small number of people deeply than a large number superficially. Sharing personal life stories is particularly valuable.

6. VOCABULARY AND ENVIRONMENT

- 6.1 Much political vocabulary is exclusive rather than inclusive. Often the words used are deeply embedded in history. Genuine peacemakers on both sides will have to learn a new sensitivity to reactions to certain words and phrases. In particular, it should be recognised that the pain of history can easily be perpetuated by emotive words, songs and images and by the continuation of a mythology which is often sterile and artificial.
- 6.2 Urgent efforts should be made to avoid provocative 'patriotic' gestures which fuel old conflicts, open old wounds, and cause deep offence to the other side. This will require strong and imaginative leadership from both sides.

7. ROLE MODELS

- 7.1 It is vital for the young to have good role models who they can respect.
- 7.2 Political leaders need to recognise that one of the major problems is that in the areas of greatest trouble the dominant local role models for children and young people may be hard-line political activists and paramilitaries renowned for their ruthlessness and corruption.
- 7.3 Those at the lower end of the educational scale, especially facing the prospect of long-term unemployment, are particularly vulnerable to the supposed glamour of association with the paramilitaries and their 'macho' image. Sadly, many of those involved in paramilitary organisations have no trade, no job and have known no other life than involvement in the troubles. They move naturally from political to 'military' activity and then to criminal activity.

8. EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- 8.1 Young people who have not been drawn into sectarian attitudes and acts and have gone forward to higher education are often very reluctant to return permanently to their home community. They frequently move elsewhere, even out of the Province, thus robbing communities of future leaders. This trend must be reversed.
- 8.2 There is an urgent need for authority to be given back to general society from activist minorities and for new local leaders to be empowered. If there is more than a very small minority of former paramilitaries in local leadership, there will inevitably be uneasiness and the emergence of strong new leaders will be inhibited. People in some communities still feel that grants made to various neighbourhood projects are used to strengthen paramilitary penetration and control.
- 8.3 For many years the power-base of the paramilitaries has been dependent upon maintaining division and polarisation in the local community. Unless this is recognised, no progress will be made.
- 8.4 It also needs to be recognised that the power exercised by the paramilitaries has in many respects grown rather than diminished during the years of the peace process. Without a radical reversal of this trend little progress can be made.

9. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

- 9.1 Churches on both sides of the divide agree that Christians in Northern Ireland are the beneficiaries of a great Christian inheritance which they treasure. They agree, however, that we are all damaged by the pain, suffering, evil and injustice of past years.

- 9.2 The churches are now in a unique position and could play a key role in transformation and reconciliation during the next few years. Many local churches have outstanding records of work for reconciliation.
- 9.3 Local Protestant and Catholic churches working together could, with Government and civic support, extend the process of community sharing. In particular, they could offer hope of shared sorrow and repentance for the past and for an honest and healthy consideration of basic personal questions by their adherents. These could include:-
- *'Do I admit the reality of the pain and unease, anger and even sense of injustice within me as I view those of other traditions?'*
 - *'Do I accept the reality and legitimacy of the pain, and unease, anger and injustice of those in another tradition?'*
 - *'Am I prepared to accept the faults in my own tradition and the good aspects of other traditions?'*
 - *'Am I ready to walk in the shoes of those of other traditions – feeling their pain and seeing the present situation through their eyes?'*
 - *'Am I ready to admit that many of my own attitudes, words, hopes and fears are rooted in and dictated by my inherited tradition?'*
- 9.4 Simple acts of people coming together from both sides of the divide with honesty and humility, but without compromising fundamental beliefs, can play a major role in creating an atmosphere of peace and justice. The initiative for these clearly lies with Christian organisations and the institutional churches, but with the active and enthusiastic support of government and public institutions.