

HEALING THE HURTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Appendix A of the Report of the Council of Social Responsibility to the Methodist Conference, 2004

INTRODUCTION

The question of how we move on after the last 35 years of conflict is both complicated and contested. With increasing disquiet about the political process, together with the tendency of many to withdraw from public debate into a private family and narrow social world, it is going to be very difficult to get a consensus on the way forward.

The metaphor of healing is an appropriate one. It suggests that there is a great deal of disease, dysfunction and pain out there in our society. This is clearly the case and while the patient's condition may now not be critical it is still far from stable. It should also be recognised that when the patient is stable and discharged from hospital, there will need to be a long and perhaps difficult period of rehabilitation.

There is one dilemma that should be named at the outset and born in mind throughout. It is this. The sick patient metaphor referred to above is generally taken to refer to society as a whole. The pain, however, is felt by individuals in the context of the family. The burden of pain is not shared equally. The statement, sometimes made that 'everyone is a victim of the troubles' has a superficial element of truth in it, but at the deeper level it is profoundly untrue. The dilemma is that certain proposals that may be for the good of society, and promote healing in that context may add to the suffering of some who already carry an unfair share of the burden. (e.g. early release of prisoners / amnesty / 'closing the book') The reverse may also be true. Some things that may be called for by some victims may have a high cost for society. (e.g. the call for a particular inquiry)

In looking for a way forward, the right balance will be very hard to find. The prospect of a broad consensus seems remote but this is not a reason to curl up like hedgehogs and wait for warmer weather!

THE DEBATE SO FAR

After surviving the years of the 'Troubles' with large doses of denial, the mid to late 1990's saw a number of ground breaking publications. These included, *We will remember them*, the report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield; *Living with the trauma of the 'Troubles'*, the report of the Social Services Inspectorate; the work of The Cost of the Troubles Study.

Other things still well worth reading are, *Past Imperfect* (Incore) edited by Brandon Hamber; *Turning the page without closing the book*, by Bill Rolston and last but not least, the report of CSR to conference of 2000, "Victims of the Troubles."

The last few years have seen quite a lot of work and debate in this area, though we do not seem to be any nearer to an agreed way forward. The following is a brief outline of the main contributions.

Reshape Rebuild Achieve April 2002.

This policy document from OFMDFM sets out "A strategy to deliver practical help and services to the surviving physically and psychologically injured of violent, conflict related incidents and those close relatives or partners who care for them, along with close relatives or partners who mourn their dead." In a brief paragraph under the heading Truth and Justice, the document avoids making any comment, but points to the Healing Through Remembering Project which was in progress at the time

Healing Through Remembering June 2002.

This project consulted widely and addressed a range of issues. They made six broad recommendations

- A network of commemoration and remembering projects
- A collective storytelling and archiving process
- A day of reflection
- A permanent living memorial
- A process of Acknowledgement by all parties involved in the conflict. This is seen as first step to some kind of truth recovery process. "Some consideration was given to the establishment of a specific model of truth recovery, but it was felt – given the complexity of the issues arising from discussion and the broad views expressed in the submissions – that the board was unable to propose at this stage a single specific model."
- An ongoing Healing through Remembering initiative - to follow up and implement the project's ideas

At the time of writing, there are suggestions that the project, which has been more or less dormant since the report was issued, is going to further develop its work in the near future.

Recognition and Reckoning - Democratic Dialogue December 2002

Democratic Dialogue convened a round table discussion to reflect on progress after the OFMDFM report *Reshape Rebuild Achieve*. The written report, contributions from seven of the participants, together with editorial comment by Brandon Hamber and Robin Wilson, gives a broad and informative view of the issues being debated. There are two main areas

- Meeting the needs of victims – here progress is acknowledged, though many matters are still of concern
- Truth and Justice – here there is agreement that issues must be addressed, but as to how it should be done, there is no consensus.

A shared future – A consultation paper on improving relations in Northern Ireland – January 2003

This government consultation paper sought to draw out a wide-ranging discussion on our future society. While not focussing specifically on issues related to trauma, truth or justice the feedback is bound to have included these issues. A report analysing more than 500 responses has been published, www.asharedfutureni.gov.uk/knox.doc and it is anticipated that the Government will be publishing its proposals for a good relations strategy later this year.

Who are the victims? - NIO Statistics and Research Agency - June 2003

This report provides some current and interesting data on victims. It also provides useful information on the range of attitudes with regard to remembering and truth telling. The data underline the difficulty in finding an agreed way forward.

Consultation paper on truth and justice. Eolas Project – September 2003

The Eolas Project, a consortium of Republican / Nationalist Victim and Ex-prisoner groups produced this paper after a three-day workshop to facilitate wider discussion. They discuss possible mechanisms for a truth and justice process. Before drafting three models for discussion, some common threads are identified. These include the need for the process to be independent with a major international dimension. The emphasis is for a bottom-up, community-orientated and victim-centred approach. The models seek a balance between an individual and an institutional approach and focus. All models have a definite investigative dimension. There is general agreement that the process should be non-punitive and non-judicial, though there is no consensus on whether or not the process should involve an amnesty mechanism.

About the same time Sinn Fein issued a discussion document on Truth Recovery Processes.

In December 2003 The Church Initiative Group held a two-day consultation under the title "Dealing with the past."

A broad range of people addressed questions about truth, justice and healing from their particular perspectives. A broad cross-section of church people contributed to the discussion. A report is being prepared.

Most recently, Prof. Desmond Rea has contributed to the debate by calling upon the British and Irish governments to set up a commission to look at the best ways of dealing with the past. It was widely reported that he had called for a 'truth commission'. This is not quite correct. He called for a commission (politicians, church and community leaders) to -

- Deliberate and reflect on how to deal with the past
- Consult widely with the NI community
- Make proposals to government (one of which *might* be a truth commission)

He called for the Cory Report to be published but for any inquiries to be stayed until the commission had reported.

THE WAY FORWARD

The variety of responses to Desmond Rea's recent suggestions well illustrates the difficulty in finding any consensus on the way forward. This is not to say that we should give up and so here are some observations and comments to facilitate further discussion

1. There is still a great need for healing. As Des Rea said, 'there is a lot of pain out there.' This is true of individual victims and their families and of society as a whole. It is striking that the WAVE Trauma Centre has continued to see an increase in the number of people seeking help and support in the last two years. Many of those coming for help suffered trauma decades ago.
2. The need for this Trauma support work is ongoing. So also is the need for it to be adequately funded. There will soon be a crisis for many in the field when Peace II funding comes to an end. There are concerns that government are reluctant to provide what will be necessary
3. For some there is clearly a need for some kind of truth recovery process. The reasons for this need are not necessarily clear or simple. For some it is about the hope of finding personal peace and healing. If answers are given to certain questions about the reason for the death of a loved one and the circumstances surrounding the event, then peace might come. It is impossible to predict if in an individual case the truth will help or not. In some cases the truth when it was discovered caused greater hurt than before (at least for a time). Also, there are some who definitely do not want to know any more that they do at the moment.
4. For some others, knowing the truth is about justice and blame. For some this seems to be mostly personal, for others it seems to be also political. The campaign for truth and justice is in a way the continuation of the war.
5. There is no agreement on what a truth recovery process should look like. Indeed, there is not agreement on whether we should have one or not.
6. There is considerable unease with the thought of a series of public or other judicial enquiries that may cost vast amounts of money, take a very long time and in the end produce an outcome that fully satisfies none of the parties concerned.
7. It seems clear that from the general societal perspective there does need to be some way of dealing with the hurts of the past. To ignore what has happened, not to talk about it, in the hope that time itself will mysteriously make things better is almost certainly naive and wrong.
8. There must be a relationship between the healing process and the success of any political process. The two need not be closely linked together but progress in one area will surely help the other.

9. Lack of progress on the political front should not mean that work on the healing process is delayed.
10. In view of the missing consensus, Professor Rea's suggestion – a commission to look at the possibility of a commission, or whatever else might contribute to a healing process – seems to have merit.

CONCLUSION

In view of the lack of consensus on how to deal with the past the following are offered as further steps to be considered rather than final conclusions.

1. At this stage great care must still be taken and any suggested process that does not have very broad consent should NOT be forced through.
2. There is still, and will be into the foreseeable future, a need to support people who have been traumatised as a result of the troubles. This can be very difficult and frustrating work. Those who are doing it, particularly in the voluntary and community sector, should be given adequate, stable and long-term funding to continue with, and further develop this work.
3. Assuming that the above is accepted, we must in conjunction with caring for victims address other issues. One of these is the question of responsibility. In some ways it parallels the issue of hurt. Just as we have all been affected by the troubles - though not to the same extent, to quote Marie Smyth, "in some places the suffering is clotted thick" – so we have all been responsible for the Troubles, but again, not to the same extent. There must be some kind of proper apportionment and acceptance of responsibility. We all must be willing to accept our share, and with humility and repentance contribute to the healing process.
4. The Methodist Church, together with other churches, should continue to prayerfully contribute to the debate on how best to deal with the hurts from the past.
5. While we wait for a consensus on a process that will significantly move us forward (which may or may not come,) we should not be idle. There are a number of things that we as Methodist people could consider. One might be the creation of an archive or chronicle of Methodist involvement including written, oral, pictorial and documentary submissions gathered through a Commission-like process, web-site, and other means of information-gathering. Elements might include:
 - An inventory / roll of those killed / injured with a record of their biography, obituaries and, where possible, the address given at their funeral;
 - A lament through story-telling, poetry, paintings etc by the relatives;
 - The production of a liturgy for healing commissioned by the Church;
 - An opportunity to confess acts of commission and omission and to seek forgiveness, which could be achieved in a number of ways: public, private, individual, collective;
 - A record / appreciation of those who have made a contribution to improve community relations and / or who have been peace-makers;
 - A bibliography of Church statements, Reports and activities;
 - An offering in prayer of a list of the hopes for the future; and
 - Practical suggestions for Church and society, such as increasing and improving counselling services, other support for victims, support for cross-community / ecumenical activities or the creation of a befriending service to accompany those who may attend a truth-type Commission.

The Council on Social Responsibility will continue to consider these issues. We will consult with others (e.g. Faith and Order might help with the production of a Liturgy for Healing.) The Council will also welcome and consider all responses to this discussion paper.