

LEADING A POSITIVE TRANSFORMATION

Reflections by Rt Revd Alan Harper, OBE,
Church of Ireland Bishop of Connor

PRELIMINARY

I offer two opening observations which I believe provide a part of the context of the issues we are addressing today.

First, the compound experience of trauma, threat, instability, distrust, distress, fear, insecurity, physical danger and loss is the shared experience of not one but two whole generations of people in Northern Ireland : the generation born since 1968 and the generation whose adult lives have been lived since 1968. There is not one traumatized generation but two!

Second, in the context of community trauma there are two distinct sets of people : those who have the economic power to exercise choice, and those who do not possess that power. As a generalization it is evident that community trauma is experienced disproportionately by those who lack the economic power to exercise choice. It is around this latter group in particular that I shall focus much of what I want to go on to say.

Before I do so, however, I want to link back to what Professor Putnam has said about

Social Capital

The Churches have the capacity to make a major and sustained contribution to the exploitation of Social Capital. The Social Capital we are able to contribute comes in three categories enabled by a fourth, viz

1. Physical buildings, largely churches and halls but including other buildings which can be employed as a physical resource for the community;
2. Networks of people, that is individuals who know and (hopefully) respect each other and therefore have the capacity to seek from each other mutual support and inspiration;
3. Ordained and non-ordained persons with leadership skills and other capacities dedicated to sustaining the local church community but also to reaching out into the wider community. Churches also have the network capacity to access and deliver training and motivation to enhance capacity within the community;
4. The three above are shaped and enabled by a fourth component, namely a **vision** of what community can and should be through the work of the Holy Spirit and a commitment to live that vision and make it a reality.

The Churches should be viewed, therefore, as potentially powerful partners in community transformation and there is a further reason why this is so:

The Churches are rooted permanently in the community. Their memberships are 'of the community. Their loyalty is to God in Christ and to the people to whom God sends them. They are people committed to the long haul. In many places they are the only institutions within the social infra-structure that model permanent commitment. Where

government initiatives and the attention of NGOs tend to be severely time limited, this is not the case with the Churches.

It is also important to say this : the Church exists for the benefit of all, whether they show interest in it or respect for it or not. Part of the vision of what it is to be Church is that of being the Servant of God by serving all people because all people are loved by God and He desires only their well being.

A Servant and a Listening Church

In order to be a Servant Church, the Churches are committed to listening to the people whom we serve. There is a particular obligation on us to listen to those who are, or perceive themselves to be, injured, marginalized, overlooked or excluded. In the light of the most recent street disturbances and a summer of continuing instability, certainly the Church of Ireland has renewed its commitment to listening to what ordinary people are saying and feeling. The exercise has no, repeat, no political, party agenda, but as a society we need to hear what hurting people need to say; if possible to help them articulate their needs and aspirations; and, where appropriate act in an advocacy role to enable those needs to be addressed.

Already, and we have only begun the current process, it is clear that people in working class Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist areas feel seriously disadvantaged, alienated and isolated from the political process. It is the perception that Government pays more attention to some political parties and significantly less to others. There is a high level of anger and that anger may be growing.

There is a perception that policing is not 'even-handed'. I am not arguing here that such a perception is justified but I am reporting what is a widespread perception. Important and long established cultural identity markers are perceived as being deliberately undermined and rightly or wrongly the PSNI and the Parades Commission are seen as being complicit in this.

I could go on at great length and in some detail, and no doubt others here can do so with more eloquence, but I do not want to overstate the minutiae of disillusionment. What I want to point to is what I perceive as first and foremost a major failure in communication and leadership. I am concerned that violence and the exploitation of victim-hood are perceived as having been rewarded and that the way to success is deemed to lie through playing up the negative rather than building on the positive. I believe that such an approach is dangerous and harmful. **If you emphasize the victim status of an individual or a community you encourage a dependency outlook. It is time that Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities were encouraged to step out of a can't-do and into a can-do mode. Furthermore, I want to insist that this is not, first and foremost about money it is about attitude and intentionality.**

That being so, I want to welcome the setting up of the Task Force announced by David Hanson this week so long as he does not simply think that the solution to community dis-ease lies in funding and 'the effective delivery of public services'; and also so long as the Task Force is prepared genuinely to listen to the community and respond to the issues that are actually being raised rather than to imaginary ones.

I have a further comment to offer in this general area. If government is genuinely committed to listening carefully, developing a harmonious dialogue and partnership with stakeholders, and responding to the genuine needs of the community no matter how inadequately they may seem to be expressed, there will have to be some permanence built into such an engagement. With the greatest respect, NIO ministers come and go with dazzlingly short incumbencies and, with each move, the ministerial emphasis seems, however marginally, subtly to shift. We actually need consistency and the opportunity to develop personal rapport, and that takes time and effort. Certainly this is a significant aspect of the 'downside' of direct rule.

I can commit the Church of Ireland, at least in my diocese, to being reliable but not uncritical partners in attempting to address the needs of the community and I am confident in indicating that the Archbishop shares that commitment. I can also say that, in my personal opinion, major emphasis needs to be placed on building, or re-building human capacity within the community, together with a renewed commitment to restoring the quality of the built environment.

Let me say what I mean. It is a matter of real concern that levels of educational **achievement** and levels of educational **aspiration** within Protestant working class communities are tragically depleted. The path out of dependency, low self-esteem and hopelessness must incorporate the path of education. The first step along that path is the encouragement of a genuine hunger for education in its broadest and richest sense. People need hope, but they also need the capacity to transform hope into reality.

Furthermore, it is now long past time that an immense and concerted effort was put into transforming the derelict built environment characteristic of many Protestant working class areas. If people are to conduct their lives in dignity they require homes and an environment which honour their dignity. The Greater Shankill area has been emptied of people, from c70,000 residents down to c20,000. The landscape is scarred by undeveloped derelict sites. It has been so for too many years. The condition of the urban environment must be addressed with the utmost urgency, if necessary involving the employment of temporary, cosmetic solutions until permanent ones can be agreed and implemented.

The response of the Churches

What have the churches to offer? I have spoken of the Churches in the context of Social Capital. I want to refer now to recent examples of specific initiatives that the churches have taken.

There is, I assume, general awareness of the danger that is posed to individuals, families and communities by drug and alcohol abuse. Building especially on the experience of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland with their residential facility at Carlisle House there is now a Working Party drawn from the four main churches seeking to address the problems of drug and alcohol abuse among 15-25 year olds in Northern Ireland. We are looking at the possibility of providing residential care, after care, community outreach and long term support for young people and their families falling victim to abuse and addiction. It is a massive and very challenging problem made significantly more difficult by the alleged involvement of paramilitaries in trafficking and supply. There is a 'black hole' in statutory provision for young people as there is

another 'black hole' constituted by the absence of any statutory provision of psychiatric services for people between the ages of 14 and 18 years. The churches together are committed to finding ways to meet these challenges.

On a much smaller scale, for the past two years a team of Community Coaches from Liverpool Football Club, in association with the Church of Ireland, have run Three Day Soccer Schools in the Upper Shankill and this year also in Ballymena, Larne and Carrickfergus. Three days doesn't sound like much, but for literally hundreds of children the summer holidays have been transformed. The coaching is as much about lifestyle as it is about soccer skills and every child received a memento. This year the message was as follows :

- Show racism the red card
- Give bullying the boot
- Kick drugs into touch
- More important than being a good footballer is being a good person
- You'll never walk alone

Every child went away with a certificate and a wristband. On the wristband it says, 'With God you never walk alone'. Out of that initiative a team of once ordinary, now extraordinary people, is developing a vision to engage with young people on one of our most socially deprived estates. Not everyone is aware that 80% of the Youth Work undertaken in Northern Ireland is sponsored or undertaken by the Churches : that is the level of engagement and commitment we have.

One of the most heart rending aspects of life in Northern Ireland at the moment is the number of people, especially young people, who attempt or succeed in ending their own lives by suicide. Each year since AD2000 more people in Northern Ireland have died as a result of suicide than have died on our roads. Our suicide rate is significantly higher than that in GB. The churches through the work of self-help groups like PIPS are committed to the patient work of comforting and supporting the bereaved and getting alongside the potential victim. It is demanding and often harrowing work, much of it taking place in the wee small hours. But members of our churches are there because we firmly believe that there is a better way. I could go on to mention 'After Schools Clubs', Child Contact Centres and a wide variety of other initiatives. These are intended merely as small examples chosen to demonstrate that Positive Transformation is what the Churches are all about.

**+Alan Connor:
22 October 2005**