



Mid-South Armagh Church Focus Group

26th January 2006

'A Summary of Preliminary Findings & Recommendations'

The Community Conventions

In March 2003, an ad-hoc group of politicians and community leaders, known as 'The Think Tank' met informally to discuss the state and future of local Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities (PUL). The reason we use this term is because the use of any one of these labels over simplifies the issue of interpreting the complexity of political and cultural identity in Northern Ireland and particularly in Protestant communities.

After a few months of discussion it was agreed it was imperative that a programme to 'Transform Loyalist Communities' should be developed. The analysis was based on the belief that whilst many issues of deprivation are common to disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland, there were issues, experiences and dynamics that are particular and distinct to PUL communities. These issues express themselves, for example, around levels of educational underachievement, population decline / imbalance, paramilitarism, physical degeneration, alienation and stigmatisation governed by a sense of loss. The Think Tank believed mainstream Government programmes were failing to effectively address these problems and if transformation was to be achieved it would require a particular focus and special programmes.

The Convention Model

A number of the Think Tank members had been involved with the first Shankill Convention, a community based response to the devastating paramilitary feud. The Greater Shankill Community Convention, held in May/June 2002, was organised around a two-day exhibition emphasising community achievements, involving over eighty local interests, followed by two days of discussions around key local issues facing the community. The agenda was set by the community itself which reflected local ownership of the Convention.

The Shankill Convention succeeded in establishing a new sense of community confidence, a unity of purpose and a resolve to work together. It became a mechanism which the community could use to come together to address strategic issues such as, housing, unemployment and education.

The work begins

The Think Tank believed the process of transformation could be enhanced, in the first instance, by using the Convention model in other PUL communities and they successfully lobbied government for funding to run four pilot conventions across Northern Ireland, the first of which was a successful follow-up Convention held on the Shankill in September 2004. Also that month, the Community Conventions was formally established with a board representative of the different interests of the PUL community. A staff team and base was established in January 2005.

The aims of a Convention?

The aim of the Convention is:

- To encourage and reinforce individual and community confidence
- To improve relationships within disadvantaged Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities and with government
- To develop a positive vision for disadvantaged Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities
- To identify areas for action e.g. capacity building
- To lobby for policy change

The process of developing a community convention is underpinned by the values of inclusiveness and transparency.

Mid and South Armagh

The representatives of Protestant Unionist Loyalist Networking, keen to follow up on the work of previous focus groups, believed a Community Convention was a way forward for P/U/L communities in mid-south Armagh. A Community Convention would enable all sections of the P/U/L community in the area to come together, to identify their needs and to ascertain what they need to do together and on what issues they need to challenge Government and public sector bodies.

The Protestant Unionist Loyalist Networking (P/UL Networking) has agreed to act as a co-ordinating body for the Mid-South Armagh Convention with the support of the Community Conventions staff team. However, the P/U/L Networking and Community Conventions want to include more local people in the preparations until a fully representative Local Area Committee can be established to oversee the Convention and the implementation of its recommendations.

In the interim and as a result of a series of meetings with P/U/L Networking and Community Conventions it was also recommended that a number of focus groups be conducted in order to get as many local people as possible involved in the planning and preparations not only of the focus groups but the Convention itself in order to ensure everyone's voice is heard.

It is with the latter in mind and following meetings between P/U/L Networking and Community Conventions it was agreed that four focus groups should be organised as soon as possible, these focus groups are to be developed around:

- Youth
- Women
- Churches
- Bands
- Loyal Orders

Church Focus Group

The Church Focus Group, the first focus group to be held in 2006, took place on 26th January 2006 in the Old Courthouse in Markethill and was attended by some 10 Ministers from the target area.

The focus group was co-ordinated by the Community Conventions and facilitated by Cannon Charlie Leeke of the Diocese of Down and Dromore and Mrs Olive Bell of Edgehill Methodist Theological College.

The focus group ran from 1 pm until 3.30 pm and was broken into a number of sections as outlined below:

1. What does a shared future look like to me?
 - Personal Comments on what a shared future looks like to me
 - What would I like a shared future to look like?

2. What does a shared future look like to you within your community?
 - Personal comments on what a shared future looks like within your community?
 - What would you like a shared future to look like within your community?

3. What are your hopes and fears?
 - Personal comments on what your hopes and fears are
 - How can you address your fears and realize your hopes and what help is needed along the way?

4. What are the top five most important issues that you feel need to be addressed within your community?

- Personal comments on what the top five most important issues that you feel need to be addressed within your community
- What or who is missing to enable you to address these issues?

A summary of the main points arising out of the focus group is highlighted overleaf.

The theme of the focus group, 'A Shared Future,' stimulated much debate among the participants and prompted questions concerning where the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community is at the moment, the direction it is heading and what role the Churches can play in moving their communities forward, at a pace with which they feel comfortable. The overarching aim emanating from the participants was that a vision for Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist Communities needed to be developed as this would help to create a 'place' where our children and grandchildren could feel safe and to want to live, work and play in.

However, in terms of initial responses to the questions posed, many of the participants believed a large majority of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist people in Mid and South Armagh and even in broader in terms of Northern Ireland feel resigned to their 'fate.' This feeling of being resigned to one's 'fate,' coupled with mistrust in Government, the political process and its institutions, has resulted in people's confidence, pride and self respect in their Protestant identity, culture and religion to feel threatened and unimportant. There was a perception among the participants that Protestant culture is being repressed by Roman Catholics and Government, which reinforces the feeling that Protestant cultural identity and symbols, which includes industrial symbols such as shipbuilding, engineering and textile manufacturing are declining and being left unprotected from the very 'body' (Government) that exists to serve and protect them.

The fear of decline in one's heritage and cultural birthright also extended to the changes which have taken place within the Police Force and the disbandment of the RIR. Allied to this was the feeling that there was a perceived lack of leadership from politicians, who it appeared to participants played on peoples fears and were the harbingers of doom and gloom.

In terms of looking to the future, the participants stated that for many Protestants/Unionists/Loyalists the future seems bleak, especially when

compared to the 'hay days' of the late sixties and any change, no matter how seemingly insignificant for some, can be a major stumbling block for others on the long road to peace and reconciliation, or to the Government's vision of 'a shared future.' This is mainly rooted in the fact that Mid/South Armagh has suffered the highest level of terrorism per head of population over the last 30 years. In fact, next to Belfast, Mid and South Armagh saw some of the highest levels of violence associated with the Troubles with approximately 378 murders, 1255 bombs and 1158 gun attacks in an area of roughly one hundred and fifty square miles.

More alarming, is the fact that over the last ten years and despite the Peace Process, Mid and South Armagh has experienced a sharp increase in the levels of paramilitary activity by Dissident Republicans. Once again, this only serves to heighten the fear among participants that Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist culture, religion and identity is under threat and that in some areas within Mid and South Armagh, the 'battle' continues.

However it was within this context that it was agreed that the Churches have the capacity to make a major contribution to the community and its infrastructure. In terms of building this capacity and infrastructure, the participants believed that Churches can practically help, through their buildings and halls provide a safe and welcoming environment 'a protective fortress for threatened people' if you like, (Duncan Morrow) to those who have been hurt, those who feel isolated or marginalized and excluded from society, to move forward. Through their strong networks of supporters who can inspire and encourage one another and through their ordained and non-ordained persons the Churches can comfort those who have been hurt, listen to what its people are saying and feeling, help them articulate their needs and aspirations and where appropriate, act in an advocacy role to allow those needs expressed by their community to be addressed by others. Quite simply, the participants felt that the Churches should be viewed as

the influential partners they are, or in some cases, could be in terms of community transformation and growth.

That said however, the participants noted that in the 21st century despite the Churches existing for the benefit of everyone, it needed to be recognized that religion and spiritualism do not just apply in Church, once a week on a Sunday. Moreover, it was felt that congregational members need to see themselves as members of their wider local community- not just as members of their congregation.

In moving the discussion on, it was clear that there was a desire not only to move forward but a recognition that Churches are part of the problem yet struggle to be part of the solution. Unanimously however the participants noted that as a society we need to allow for the atrocities and the resulting pain, hurt and suffering of the past to be remembered in a positive way, although how this could / should be done and the questions of how to move the community forward raised many questions for participants, for example:

- How do you bring a community that has been so deeply affected by the troubles along with you and address the challenges that need to be faced?
- How do you move a community forward yet ensure they do not feel rushed to participate in something for which they are ill-prepared? – Simply to pursue some ‘perfect peace’ or a ‘shared future’ with which they cannot identify?

Finally it was asked,

- How does one create a vision of the future that is realistic yet different from today when no-one knows what that vision or shared future is or might look like or how we can achieve it?

Whilst rhetorical questions, they were no less thought provoking for both participants and facilitators, demonstrating that while everyone looks to their 'leader' for the answers and direction, they too struggle to provide the solutions.

In some cases this was because they (Ministers) have become disengaged and disenfranchised from their community, society and Government, in many cases because they themselves are the products of a divided community and have become entrenched over the last thirty years in burying their dead and comforting the bereaved and have not had the energy to focus efforts into looking beyond their own community. It should be noted however, that the Ministers of the Church are not alone in this disengagement, as Chris Easton in the Lion and Lamb edition 36 points out ...'the Church has effectively decommissioned itself. It survives on the legacy of yesterday's evangelism by building walls around itself...seeking desperately to cling to what still remains of its inheritance...'

Finally, it was subtly expressed that for those who may have wished over the last number of years to become involved in reconciliation work, there was a very real fear of a backlash from their own congregations and communities which acted as a deterrent in participating in the first instance. However, it could be argued that in this instance the Church was reflecting and perhaps amplifying people's fears, community divisions, experiences of violence and threat, rather than acting or seeing themselves as agents or transformers of the conflict. Alternatively however, it could be argued that the workload of the clergy could have prevented peace and reconciliation work from being 'high on a church's agenda.' On the other hand, there is a 'historical belief that the clergy have taken their lead from the views of the congregation.' That said however, 'in an era of peace, clergy will have to take a leading role in driving the agenda of peace building work,' fuelling the argument that, 'Churches need to become 'proactive rather than reactive.' 'Churches cannot afford to wait until Government groups come to them with a consultation, but must develop internal process by which they come to grips with issues in their own language and according to their own traditions first. Proactive

engagement would allow churches to identify concerns and develop constructive positions prior to consultation, rather than be left scrambling around in a reactive manner after the terms of the debate have already been set.’ (Beyond Sectarianism? The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process).

The focus group concluded with the participants affirming the unique role the Church and they as ‘leaders’ play not only in providing positive and effective social engagement, as you cannot be an authentic disciple of Christ if you are disengaged, but also in terms of helping their communities deal with, heal and move forward from the negative and destructive violence of the past.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that there was strong recognition among the participants that the Churches can still speak for a large sector of people and could mobilize their members around a number of issues, although this influence was perceived to be largely underdeveloped. That said however, it was agreed that if a ‘lasting peace’, a ‘perfect peace’ and eventually a ‘shared future’ is to be built, it must be founded on fundamental transformation and reconciliation at the social, economic, socio-psychological and spiritual levels of the individual.

