

Modern Leadership Focus Group
Tuesday 27th June 2006
7.30pm
The Old Courthouse, Markethill

Dawn began the evening by giving a brief background to the Community Conventions Company.

Rev Mervyn Gibson, Chair of Community Conventions, gave an overview of what leadership was, in his opinion, within the church, Loyal Orders and communities.

“Within a church, traditionally a minister played a key role in the community, especially in rural areas because they knew everyone. This has totally changed due to sectoralisation of society. The main denominations in the mid 1980s decided to elect out of politics and therefore they were not able to claim they were saying things on behalf of the Protestant community, people therefore felt the church were deserting them. Furthermore the church also opted out of getting involved with community development.

During the Troubles, the churches were seen to ‘close their doors’ and the community felt that it was always a priest on television condemning events but that it was never someone from the Protestant community.

There is, however, still a respect for the clergy but there is no regard for what they said – the clergy lost the right to lead at that time.

There is still a seat at the table for religious representatives within decision making groups for communities. But I have had to warn clergy that we must not think we are the cavalry coming in and rescuing communities – we have been out of the process too long to do that!”

“With regards to the Loyal Orders, in times gone by the Loyal Orders were made up of gentry or politicians so the orders didn’t feel like they needed a voice. Then, during the Troubles, things got messy, by 1972 the paid jobs disappeared and there was no ‘career’ in politics so people opted out, but when they did this they also opted out of the Loyal Orders therefore the organisation was left with no leadership. When new leadership was elected they needed to deal with crisis management due to the Troubles and they had very little or no experience of that style of leadership – they were thrown into a situation which they did not know how to handle.

A good example is city councils – the Roman Catholic community have a theology of ‘community; this can be seen in their political groups, ie the SDLP is made up of barristers and GPs but the Protestant parties are made up of workers from the shipyard

and Mackies. The middle classes moved away from politics because there was no money in it.

The Protestant community has to consider a strategy of where it is going and a training scheme for young people. People are better educated now so everyone has an opinion – the PUL community split over the slightest thing but I also see the fact that we have 53 denominations as a strength.”

“Community leadership. At theological college they tried to teach me theology but I learned to love people from people on the Shankill who didn’t go to church. Pioneers in community development, including May Blood, Jackie Redpath, Jackie Hewitt, Sammy Douglas and others, when they start there was not such thing as community development. These people took risks, and got away with it, generally because people were not interested in what they were doing but now there is a whole sector devoted to community development.

There needs to be a pathway so young people can get a chance. The community sector has shown leadership recently but this needs to be from the lowest common denominator. Real leadership has been stifled because people can’t take risks.

I have three questions – how do we create a pathway where leaders can come through? How can people take risks without getting undermined? And what will leadership look like in PUL communities in the next ten years? The PUL community have not adapted to modern society, we have to come to terms with the fact that we will not have another Carson!”

The audience raised a number of points which Mervyn addressed –

Q - What would the community do if Carson did come back?

A - We are not prepared to be led any more

Q – Has education influenced that?

A – Yes – education is good but it has created the problems that everyone can now debate

Q – We haven’t got to the stage were we can work out our interests – can we work them out and give leaders a mandate to carry through?

A – This is the flipside of the same coin – education enables people to want different things. A Convention aims to unity in diversity. Leadership will come collectively with a change in mindset

Q – If you keep cutting back you will see we want a better system/education etc, there is a competing desire is this the same with politics?

A – Yes, it is the same with politics – there is a need to keep stripping away for a common dominator as opposed to believing a saviour will come along

Q – I believe to get pure politicians interested in pure needs the politicians of the future need to come from communities and be accountable to communities at least once a year – not just every four years when they are looking to be re-elected.

Q – Party politics gets in the way of keeping links with the community. Peoples' needs are changing. We have to make space for young people. You cannot lose contact with people on the ground

Q – Is it really leadership or is it about power? I think it is more power than leadership

A – I agree it was like that at one time but not now. Maybe individuals are interested in power but not organisations. I don't think anyone I have met has a right to be a leader. I take my leadership from people I respect.

Q – The fact is there are things needing dealt with that are not 'nice' issues. Why no-one says things that need to be said is because they will get slaughtered so they think 'why bother'. Unless we have people willing to do that we will not get anywhere

A – Who can say what people want?

Q – If you work with communities and they ask you to say something on their behalf and you get nothing but trouble for doing it why would you do it in the first place?

Q – It is vital for politicians to work closely with community groups but this is not always the case. If organisations have difficulties to address I can go to that community to work with them but I can't be seen to be too closely involved especially at funding times so people don't think groups are aligned to specific political parties. If you do not see politicians regularly enough don't vote them in – it is important for them to have a link with the community

Martin Snodden summed up this part of the evening by saying – “You can say what has to be said in relation to the past but don't forget to look at the future. We are going through the stages of group development as a community and the community needs leaders who can move through the process with the community.

The audience then broke into two smaller groups to look at three questions. Comments from one of the groups are listed below.

What does 'modern leadership' mean to you and the PUL community?

- In PUL communities we cannot go back to how it was in the 1970s and 1980s – we have to look at how to take modern leadership forward. We have to decided do we want to go forward in a peaceful country which is our own – this is up to the PUL community not just one party. PUL communities are standing still because there are too many ideas of modern leadership.
- Our leaders are so busy fighting each other – it is about power and control not the needs of the community. Does this happen in the Nationalist community or are they just better at hiding it? We have to realise this damages our communities.
- I would like to see a leader looking at the bigger issue. The planet is being destroyed. If we do not sort things out we are condemning our children and grandchildren to no planet. If my grandchildren and great grandchildren live for the next one hundred years, I'm holding the next 100 years in my hand – what can I do? While we are bickering the ozone is disappearing and there is global warming. We need a leader to put into context. We have to sort out an agreement together – this is our birthright, I'm willing to share that. If we waste time bickering about politics we are missing the bigger picture. Our conflict is not big compared to other countries. I want to have a life where I can celebrate my identity and not intimidate anyone else.
- A leader should be meeting the needs of any one community at any one time. In rural communities the Loyal Orders and churches are looked to for leadership so there is more community spirit.
- At macro level leadership is going on, this is reflected at the community level. The community is divided and this is reflected within wider politics and effects what goes on down here.
- Change has to come to the ground.
- We need to get leaders trained up.
- A leader has to be of the time and time limited. There is a perpetuation of harping back to how it was – this is always rolled out – the 'Orange Card' – to get votes.
- The purpose of a leader is to be able to persuade.
- Leadership is to try to unite.
- We will never have 100% agreement on anything.
- Leadership is for a leader to know when to say to a community 'no, it is not possible – we need to realistic'.
- We are all leaders – we all have a role to play. We are looking backwards but we should be looking forwards and working together.

How do we create a pathway for our leaders to come through?

- There is no easy way to get there. Most people are doing it voluntarily – they need education/training and to get that training paid for them.
- Leadership that could be there is blocked by the leadership that is there now.
- This is a problem across PUL communities

- Blocking people coming up who don't have baggage of living through the worst of the Troubles.
- What is the average age of District Masters for example??
- Councillors for eg Sinn Fein and SDLP are all young people, Protestant parties are all older.
- There is an exception to every rule – the Unionist party for example
- Lets not forget people at peak in leadership in other areas, how do we get them to engage in this area? Is there leadership out there without us using it or realising it? We need to harness it together. If get blockages, we can not vote for them again but how many of us take this risk and actually do it?
- It is about changing the mindset – the older leaders don't want to move away
- The way forward needs a new way of doing things – working together and not simply putting on the scrapheap
- From a political point of view – I entered politics quite young, the older ones could look at us as a threat but you were not there as a threat. A lot of it is down to encouragement, by my joining I could have encouraged younger people to come on board. You are going to meet obstacles along the way but people must move on. Fresh leadership helps the Unionist community – it can't stand still
- A Protestant thinks that if they work until they are sixty and work their way up the line they are a leader. A pathway is needed, a step ladder to progression, if you have a contribution to make at that time you can come onto the ladder
- We can see young people who would be good leaders but how do we get them there without putting them off?
- I agree with the idea of pathways, for example there are very few old band captains, they are all young people but how do we get them to move into other areas of community development? We don't develop people, for example musical talent

How do we encourage modern leadership without people feeling undermined?

- When you do speak out certain sections will say 'need you to put this topic forward' then you get it in the back, you are trying to reflect the point of view of the community you work in – then they think if you do not do this their point of view is not being put across
- Need to get recognition that what you are saying is the community's point of view

How do we create a so people are given the benefit of the doubt?

- Need to create real vision – need to say we need to make a future we can all share in. Leaders throughout history have all sold a message. We need to be careful we don't say we represent the community. We have to be patient and play our part in that strategy. Bigger issues are crucial, for example saving the planet, then we can filter down to fixing the problems in Northern Ireland
- Within our community there is never just one voice
- When will someone stand up and say 'I may not speak for everyone in the room' but when people say something we can buy into we will give them our support

- Is traditional, for example only ever vote DUP or UUP. There is so much apathy people do not know what direction they are going in
- For lots of us in community development, we work for so many years then get burnt out, how can we identify people who come behind us and how can we bring them in?
- With bands in Armagh, I was told you would not get the two main Kilkeel bands in the same room together!!

Once you get people in the room they realise how much they have in common, the real challenge is getting them in the room

- You have to start with yourself. I think you have to say as an individual 'is this what I want?'
- Need to see yourself as a leader, if don't only one to blame is you
- I was told by a politician 'we are elected representatives so we know what is best'
- Many young people try to bring in a cross community element, maybe we need to concentrate on PUL community
- If we don't reinforce single identity we should not look at that in a negative way
- The media has not been mentioned yet – there are very poor media skills in PUL community
- I did training – we are very opinionated but we don't have a structure. If someone sticks a mike under our nose we do not say 'you need to talk to our press officer' and just talk and end up sounding terrible
- Women in leadership – women are starting to come forward
- In community groups women are the leaders up to a certain level. I think it does become difficult for women with families, some do it for a few years then move out of the sector to start families
- I recently went to a meeting in the Orange Hall – I was the only woman!
- This is an example of Unionism in general – it was always a gentry thing
- I vote whoever does the best for me – this really goes against my husband's family beliefs. Young people, if they vote at all, as their parents who they should vote for. For the last election we ran election awareness training with young people
- There is a generation who will not vote – they are here and now, two general elections down the line and we will be sunk

What would a shared future look like?

- Until we get a shared future sorted out it will dominate politics
- Unless we have a rationale, no good saying we will have the Union for next 50 years – what good is a Union if the planet is not here?
- We have to earn the right to be leaders. It is about persuading people and recognising power, not letting it go to your head
- I think we need a stimuli – a morale imperative. We have to do something – we are drifting along.

Group feedback facilitated by Martin Snodden

- Unionism does not need to go back to the bad old days, it is a critical stage. The Unionist family needs to decide what it wants to see in 2 or 10 years down the line; not protests because these didn't work. Unionism is disillusioned – if we can't agree together how can we run our own country?

Martin – We are saying our future is the same as the present unless we have leadership to create a future with us. What qualities should they have?

- Honesty – to self and others
- Vision
- Ability to listen
- Negotiation skills
- Compromise (and knowing when to)
- Risk taker (calculated)
- Integrity
- Wisdom
- Realism
- Charisma
- Ability to communicate and motivate
- Creditability
- Fair

Martin – How do we get these qualities? You are the leaders. You need to start practising them so that you become a role model for other people. Do we need to identify skills within people we work with and create a mentoring role for future leaders? What would you like to happen from here that you can subscribe to?

- New way of thinking on old problems – not the usual fight or flight option. We need to find a certain way to move beyond that
- Environment – I want to be her for my grandchildren. I want to see us we are realising we need to tackle the real issue – what good is a Union for 100 years? We want to tackle environmental issues but before that we need to resolve NI issue
- We need to come to terms with differences. Need to hear stories of people before we condemn them
- We need to look at ourselves but need to get leaders in place – look for key people in areas to take a role
- How can we put a structure in place that we, as workers in community development, if we see skills in a person, how can we support that person to come through as a leader?

- We elect the same politicians every year so maybe the problem is with the electorate not with the politicians. To get a change the politicians need to come from the community – but I don't know what the structure is for that.
- Politicians are coming from the community. I was brought up and now live in a working class community – I don't see myself as any better. There is an issue with traditionalism – we need to encourage young people coming through with new thinking so we can prepare then for when it is time to take over. People hold onto a position of power
- There are great leaders out there but in different environments – how do we mentor political leaders?
- We need to act out unity. We were brought up in a fractionalised community so we act that out, we need to stop spreading the seeds of division
- We need to do a lot more of this sort of thing – maybe looking at the role of community development workers, sharing, developing and creating more spaces to do this sort of thing

Martin – We should encourage opinions to be expressed! We need to acknowledge the leadership that exists here – taking time out tonight is encouraging. We should continue dialogues if we are in a position to create those spaces and see where it takes us. Look forward to what we can create together