

Belfast: Theological Reflections on Violence and the Responses from Ireland

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Everything has its time
The Lord of time is God.
The turning point in time is Christ.
The right spirit of the time is the Holy Spirit.

Karl Von Hase (grandfather of Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

I should like to approach the situation in Ireland in terms of a movement from violence to peace, and more specifically to view the current stage of that process as a kairos moment, in relation to the dynamics of identity and change, particularly as these relate to the churches and to theology.

We are accustomed as Christians to approach change in its radical sense in terms of the New Testament idea of the "kairos". This word is counterposed with the word "chronos" which defines time in its chronological, linear sense, of one moment succeeding another with certain predictability. A kairos time suggests a moment in and out of time, when history is dramatically interrupted by some transcendent order, the in-breaking of an opportunity that is somehow "other". It is a defining moment, calling for decisiveness because the future depends on it. It urges upon us the need to discern God's purposes in history, and in a way that opens the church to let go of the safe and accustomed, and to confront a moment of truth. In Luke's gospel, Jesus speaks strong words to the religious leaders who fail to recognize the kairos:

When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "it is going to rain," and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat," and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present kairos (Lk 12:54-56).

In Ireland today the kairos on our horizon is the kairos of peace. The people of Ireland have lived through thirty years of violent conflict, in the context of a centuries' old and recurring history of political and nationalist struggle.

The word "peace" is semantically elusive to some, it suggests weakness; others see it as no task for the faint-hearted. Some view it as priceless, for others it smacks of a cheap sell-out. For some it is the fruit of victory over enemies—the Pax Romana—whereby domination maintains a cycle of alienation until violence once more erupts. But peace, understood in terms of the biblical shalom is rather an eschatological vision of flourishing life and well-being, embracing all nations and peoples, including even the created world of flocks and herds, birds, fish and the land itself. Shalom is both gift and promise by which poverty and every kind of social exclusion can be overcome. So far such a vision of shalom has barely been glimpsed by Christians in Ireland. At this defining moment when boundaries are being re-drawn, and the opportunity for solidarity and inclusiveness, freedom and justice stands before us, how do we read the signs of the times? What does the "peace kairos" demand of us as churches?

The Present Context in Ireland—Caught Between Two Worlds

For much of the last three years, the people in Ireland have been living between violence and peace. We have known the enormous relief of the cease-fires, but the violence has not gone away. There has been Drumcree with its associated and intimidating protests and boycotts; there has been no respite from the punishment beatings and the drug-related vendettas. We have witnessed, particularly in recent months, a new wave of sectarian murders and bombings of town centers, that threatened to suck the community back into the vortex.

But so too there have been huge public displays of protest and small, continuous processes of peace-building. Over all, folk have gone about their business with a certain amount of ease. Checkpoints have been removed and border roads re-opened. American investment and EU structural funding have supported social and economic renewal. At the hard-core

political level, both British and Irish governments have committed themselves with energy and a sense of urgency to forging an inclusive constitutional settlement in 1998.

To this end we have had the Framework Document and more recently the controversial Propositions of Heads of Agreement, on a new balance of constitutional structures, and requiring consent by all the people concerned. Political gamesmanship inside and outside the all-party talks process has slowed the process infuriatingly but there seems, nonetheless an inching forward, as parties argue and bargain the piece out. The movers and shakers in civil society have created spaces for new kinds of dialogue within and between different cultural and church groupings at community level.

First, we had The Opsahl commission - a citizens' inquiry on a way forward for Northern Ireland¹, generating a wave of initiatives on civic participation and engagement for change - *Democratic Dialogue, New Agenda, Community Agenda, A Believers' Inquiry on the Role of Believing Communities in Building Peace in Ireland*. We had the Parades Commission Report and the doubtful apparatus set in place to mediate contested claims to march or not march. Police reform is being discussed. The civil liberties organization, Committee on the Administration of Justice have brought out their research report, *Human Rights on Duty* on how police reform might significantly contribute to the peace process². The Inter-church Group on Faith and Politics have engaged the issues of the release of political prisoners and of parity of esteem. The Irish School of Ecumenics has developed various adult education and research projects bringing people together to address issues of violence or sectarianism as these affect them in their daily lives and as members of churches. There is much to celebrate in the range and creativity of such initiatives.

Yet, even in the first year and a half of the cease-fires, the sense of crisis did not disappear. In a strange way, it was as if we were still attached to

¹ Andy Pollak, ed, *A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland*, Lilliput Press Dublin, 1993.

² Máry O'Rawe and Linda Moore, eds., *Human Rights on Duty: Principles for Better Policing - International Lessons for Northern Ireland*, CAJ Publications, Belfast, 1997

violence or were even dependent on it. We had perhaps become so accustomed to violence as to define our identity around violence and in terms of violence. There is a sense of being disoriented without it almost preferring the consolidated alienation of violence to the risk of dialogue and relationship.

So also, as the violence has subsided, the layers of pain in the community have been revealed again. We encountered the persisting reality of the victims and the need to acknowledge their pain and their sense of bereavement. As their struggle for sheer survival eased up, their grief or anger lay exposed, and the resentment over the futility and loss was stirred up. The sense that everyone else seemed to be moving back to normal sometimes evoked feelings of abandonment and betrayal. Had not a whole generation missed out on its youth? What about the "disappeared" dead whose families are denied the consolation of a decent funeral? And still the cancer cells of violence find new mutations which continue to gnaw at the fabric of community and society. The recently formed forum for Victim Support Hearings has its work cut out for it.

One recurring comment from different quarters is, "We do not want peace at any price." Sometimes, the apparent stubbornness conceals a desire to be loyal to one's own tradition, an anxiety about betraying the dead, or simply the self-protective adjustment to "living and partly living" over the numbing years of the troubles. Perhaps, in psychological terms, there is a realization that some suffering runs so deep as to call for more than human healing. Perhaps, in theological terms, behind those words, "not peace at any price", lies a refusal of "cheap grace", and the intuitive knowledge that peace without conversion to community is a dead end, that Christ's peace is a peace that the world can never give.

In this time of ambiguity, we experience ourselves like Matthew Arnold, "caught between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." So too we are confronted with the inner as well as the outer challenges involved. When the checkpoints and barricades come down the fence inside ourselves still has to be faced. In his poem, "The Fence", Scots poet, Iain Crichton Smith acknowledges the ambivalence which any new freedom evokes:

What bows us down
is the invisible fence
at which we buck
then subside to a slow walk

dignified, honourable,
the wiry ethics
that we have created
in the middle of the fresh air.³

Ireland is still negotiating a kind of passage to peace, involving cultural political and psychological dimensions, but also posing a deep theological challenge. There is a direct challenge to the churches themselves as to how to read and respond to the peace kairos. It is my belief that for Christians and churches, this kairos includes a call to more authentic ecumenical relationships with one another. To the degree that our church identity is characterized more by sectarian than ecumenical terms, we cut ourselves off from Christianity's original vision, mission and identity - to be one with Christ in his reconciling the world to God's love, through self-emptying and the forgiveness of sins.

To affirm that reconciling love in our lives is to know our need of conversion. Such conversion will involve us in a three-way process or movement that touches every level of our identity as Christians, communities and as churches. The dynamics of this process of conversion includes three moments that are and which may be correlated to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. They can be described as:

- 1) the moment of attentiveness and critique
- 2) the moment of surrender and letting go
- 3) the moment of decision for relationship.

³ Iain Crichton, "The Fence" *Ends and Beginnings*, Carcanet, Manchester, 1994, p. 85.

I shall explore these now in relation to the kairos in Ireland as moments which are part of the whole process of peace and peace-building, with a particular focus on theology and the churches:

Attentiveness and Critique - The Theological Way of Faith

The first moment of engaging the kairos is one of critique and attentiveness towards the thought-patterns and practices that distort our Christian identity. A church needs to recognize the limits and potential of its particular confessional culture, its prevailing "dogmas", its manner of worship and pastoral practice, or its ways of exercising authority, and its behavior towards outsiders. Such attentiveness and critique is paradoxically a way of being faithful to who we are. Although it may seem negative, it is a stance of faith that opens us to listen to the "more than" which is at the heart of our life, discern the arrogance hidden in our own assumptions, be alert to whom we have written out of our agenda.

As official institutions, the churches have derived from the conflict a certain importance as a rallying power, and have not played a significant role as agents of change. Churches have not come to the fore in fostering attentiveness to the signs of the times, nor sufficiently self-critical vis-a-vis the sectarianism which pervades social and church life. Inter-community leadership has come rather from community organizations and bodies in civil society, and from some Christian peace and reconciliation groups on the boundaries of the institutional church, and from some individual church leaders. Research by Duncan Morrow and others has shown that the institutional churches in their own structure and practice mirror and institutionalize the political and community divisions, and that the theological attention of the clergy was focused on the defense of clear doctrine rather than on change. Those clergy who were interviewed usually expected "the others" to change first. Cross community social relationship

was, on the whole, deemed sufficient, inter-church relationship avoided or discouraged.⁴

We must not be simplistic about this. It is a huge risk for churches as institutions to be active in the peace process. Looked at from a sociological perspective, conflict usually acts as a cohesive force, and this has been true for churches in Northern Ireland. Robin Boyd pointed out some time ago that churches, by acting as chaplains to their respective tribes, have sustained a division, both in political and church matters. This was not, and is not, a totally negative judgement, given the oral exigencies in neighborhoods broken by grief and fear. Often pastors were the ones who had to bear the grievous news of a loved one murdered, support the bereaved, mediate with police and army, visit prisoners, conduct funerals in times of severe community tension. That kind of ministry takes its toll. But in the end such ministry can be as much about binding up identity as about binding up wounds. For the churches to change the focus of their attention to inter-community and inter-church relationships would risk a loss of the kind of internal cohesion that they have known in the times of conflict. To cease to be agents of identity in favor of being agents of conversion would require of churches a readiness to transcend their own institutional weight and to risk their own stability. At conscious or unconscious levels, churches know that to risk ecumenism is to risk cohesion and identity. Normally, that is too high a risk.

Without however, being naïve, we can retrieve from within the biblical and theological tradition, resources that will sustain people in the time of crisis. Churches need to be attentive to the "dangerous memory" within their biblical, theological and ecclesial tradition. One thinks here of the prophetic tradition, or the wisdom tradition developed in dialogue with other churches and secular views, whereby we are open to be transformed through the dialogue and to forge together a fresh language and a new story. In this sense, Isaiah 49 is a text worth retrieving.

⁴ Duncan Morrow, *The Churches and Inter-Community Relationships*, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 1991, pp. 8, 121ff.

Cyrus's decree has gone out and Israel's exile is over. We read of Israel's transition from a long period of suffering into an expected period of peace and security. The resonance of home, of reclaiming the land, of re-establishment and restoration perhaps speaks to our contexts too. But when we listen more attentively, we see that all is not rejoicing. Dreams dreamed in suffering come down to earth in a confusing and ambiguous reality. Only a small band of disciples remains and their confidence is flagging. The vision of a homeland restored gives way to disenchantment. Somehow it has come to seem paltry. All that suffering over a tiny tract of land. The prophet is confused, divided within himself. He ponders God's word of comfort, "You are my servant (Israel) in whom I will be glorified. "But he is also disillusioned-" I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Return, homeland, peace have withered on its branch. Now, amazingly, the prophet can no longer speak words of consolation to his own people, but is called to turn outwards beyond his own to the stranger and alien.

"Listen to me O coast-lands, and hearken you peoples from afar." Called to speak to a chosen people, now at the very point of entering into his own, he is called out from them. Peace and salvation will be revealed in a turn outwards beyond his own, beyond tribe, land or romantic attachment to a destiny. Just as God is calling Israel to restore the Temple to its former glory, "to bring Israel back to him, and that Israel might be gathered unto him", God seems to be saying - Your horizon has been too narrow. God's purposes for you extend way beyond your comforting dreams. It is time to enlarge the space of your tent.

Churches today face a critical choice, The days of mission to their own are numbered, and yet to take a stronger lead in inter-church Reconciliation will be to risk their own confessional coherence and security at least in the short term. Churches cannot function without institutional structures and laws. But they are to live by faith knowing that there is no salvation through their own law and institutional divisions. They need to be sustained in this kairos moment by calling upon the resources of those among their body who are practiced in the art of attentiveness and critique. There are individuals and groups who have that capacity and do provide a prophetic ministry in

church and society. But the churches as churches have often been slow to acknowledge them to meet and dialogue with them and to seek ways of co-operating with them in the process of peace-building. The churches need to attend to the critique from the boundaries and include the perspectives of groups who, because of their less formal nature, have a different kind of experience of Christian life and a greater scope and flexibility in crossing boundaries. Churches can be renewed by such critique from outside and inside their own membership—from women's organizations, community development groups and cross-community reconciliation projects.

There is no shortage of examples of Christian organizations on the edges of official church life. One could mention Corrymeela, the sister community of Iona from which it drew originating inspiration. Another example is Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, whose members meet on a regular basis. The group endeavors to study the signs of the times, to stay engaged with political parties and with church leaders, and on an ongoing basis produce pamphlets offering politico-theological reflection on contested issues, such as parity of esteem, parades, difficulties arising from different confessional approaches to remembering and burying the dead.⁵

The churches need to be generous and self-limiting in supporting the work of these and other such groups, not just as an ethical challenge "out there". By opening to the dangerous memory within their own tradition, they will discover what it is to be a people of faith. At stake here is not simply the agenda of the feminists or the "peaceniks" or the "ecumaniacs". At stake is the very life and being of the church as people of God, as a *koinonia* community. At stake is the core of the Christian faith - faith in the universal call to holiness, faith that Christ's reconciling power can break down the wall that separates us. There is a radical and risky challenge here, in this first moment and movement of the *kairos*. It is a call to lose one's life so as to find it.

⁵ Cf. *Doing unto Others: Parity of Esteem in a Contested Space*, Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, Belfast, 1997

Iain Crichton Smith's poem, "A Day Without Dogma" is not addressed necessarily to churches or to theologians, but his warning that "dogma is a measure of our inability to live" is highly relevant to the shaping of a more vital and inclusive vision:

The world is without dogma. Out of our fear
we raise ideologies...
Out of the fear of the spontaneous,
the untitled contemporary,
the untheological grass
which the breeze combs back with a tenderness
which is indescribably poignant...

Butterflies swarming in the air,
I greet you.
As also the unflagged territory of the buzzard,
of that sparkling air without insignia.
It is time to pull down the walls,
it is time to capture the dogmas and bury them in the wilderness...
It is time to turn the blow lamp on dogma and inhabit this blue.⁶

Much of what has been observed above occurs at the level of insight. Words like insight, judgment, critique have figured. We have spoken of the need, and the inherent difficulty for churches to be attentive to critique from the boundary, to open to a more ecumenical vision. Yet new visions in themselves will sustain neither social change nor Christian conversion.

Surrender and Letting Go - The Theological Way of Hope

There is need for a second step - a surrendering to the feelings of loss, pain, or even outrage which the new vision may evoke. This step turns us towards a long journey. It is a journey into the human heart and it is measured by pain. In this time in Northern Ireland, even as a new constitutional scenario

⁶ Iain Crichton Smith, "A Day Without Dogma", *ibid.*, pp.22-24.

takes shape, as a new language of inclusiveness and equality is given form in civil society, there is among churches and Christians still a deep fear of surrender. This surrender is about letting go to a new theological and ecclesiological identity rooted in the acceptance that we are God's people in Christ, willing to give an account of the hope that is in us.

There remains, as we have already suggested, an enormous well of pain in the community - the pain of absent loved ones, wounded bodies and minds, unhealed memories, feelings of betrayal or bitterness at the sense of injustice from whatever quarter. What is the role of the churches in the face of this overwhelming burden of pain or anger? Surely it is to help people to express what is tearing them apart, or burdening them, or to express the glimmerings of hope that spark within the human spirit. Is it not the churches' role to drink from the wells of their own tradition and allow that source to be interpreted afresh for a new time. The churches could play such a key role in enabling a fresh language of lament, protest and hope, by releasing the psalms into the actual situations of struggle and hope in which people daily find themselves.

Both Protestant and Catholic communities have been trapped in different ways by a sense of their own victim-hood, and have often characterized themselves by a sense of paralysis. Once more, there are powerful biblical resources to hand. One thinks of the Israelites under Pharaoh. They had become so used to their enslavement that it had come to represent normal reality. It was only when the king of Egypt died, we are told, that the Israelites "groaned under their slavery, and cried out" (Ex 2:23). They lived in a state of monotonous hopelessness until something inside them broke down. God was beside them in their hopelessness but they did not know it until they groaned and cried out. It was as if the God of hope could not help them in their despair until they acknowledged their pain and need. Their pain became God's compassion, their liberation was at hand.

In November 1993, following a state of atrocities that included the bombing of people on the Shankill Road, and the killings at Greysteel and Loughinisland", there was an upsurge of pain in the whole community. Something inside the community broke. The Trade Union movement sought to cooperate with interchurch groups who had been involved in the work of

reconciliation at community level, to organize rallies of protest, demanding "Peace by Christmas". These rallies created a space and ritual where people could overcome their sense of helplessness. In that ritual, anger and lament could be expressed. A new sense of hope was born - that people could change the events of their history, by crying out for something radically different and new. Out of that big event, many smaller initiatives and processes were engendered, and many people were aroused from their apathy. Nine months later came the first cease-fire.

People desperately need ritual and symbolic ways to express their anger and pain, their longing for healing and forgiveness. More often than not it is through community groups in civil society - among women's groups, cross-community meetings and unofficial interchurch processes, rather than through churches or inside churches, that spaces have been cleared for such symbolic and quasi-liturgical expression. One such initiative of local poets and artists - *An Crann/The Tree* - has set itself to help the victims of violence to find their voice; to bring together into a public space some of the painful memories or fragile hopes of the community - expressed in story, music and visual form - so that due commemoration and celebration can be assured. How is it that there is a dearth of such symbol and ritual in our churches?

I think of one exceptional church-based ritual that is etched in my memory. It was an interchurch service for Good Friday, in 1995, the first year of the cease-fires. Under the title "Counting the Cost", it went out live on television all over Ireland. It brought together Christians from Dungannon in mid-Ulster to join Christians of Tullamore in southern Ireland, for a common commemoration for Good Friday. These Christians had come to the cross, to remember and name everyone who had died over a quarter century of violence. In the public expression of pain, there was also a profound sense of healing and hope, as the names written on small white crosses, were spoken and carried with great tenderness to the empty cross.

The churches need to wake up. Who more than the churches are schooled in the language of ritual and story, and in the symbols of life, death and resurrection? Yet, so often the forms of worship going on in our churches

fail to connect with the actual reality in people's hearts and lives. The treasures of our traditions are wrapped up in a napkin as if to be preserved intact, rather than encountered with creativity and infused with the longings of our life. Dorothee Soelle speaks of the need for suffering to go beyond "mute pain", to find its voice in "a language of lament", "a language that at least says what the situation is."⁷ Such Psalmic language must be recovered in our liturgies. We need as never before; inclusive rituals that will sustain us on the journey of peace-making, enabling us to share each other's grief or anger, and experience the power of the Spirit hovering over the chaos of our feelings and bringing us to birth. It is as we surrender to this birth that God forms us into a people of hope.

Decision for Relationship - The Theological Way of Love

For churches seeking to respond to the peace *kairos*, the third moment is the step of decision for relationship. Theologically, it is the way of love. The challenge to the churches here is about taking upon themselves in a meaningful way, the living of the peace *kairos* in their own relationships as churches. I have intimated that the churches at some level fear the risk to their own identity and cohesiveness. But they will increasingly lose credibility as churches if they turn that challenge over to others and turn away from it themselves. Hans Kung asserted in Ireland in 1989 that there would be no peace in the world until there was peace among the churches. It was a word of judgment. What does it mean for churches to recall in worship the peace that is Christ's gift to the Church, that they pray for peace or offer to one another the sign of peace?

At issue here is whether or how far churches will admit that the depth and extent of their relations to one another has anything to do with the creating of peace in society. Recently, an officer in one of the churches in the United States phoned a colleague in Belfast to ask her if relationships between the churches in Ireland had any bearing on the peace process, since she herself

⁷ Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, Dalton, Longman and Todd, London, and Fortress, Philadelphia, 1975, pp. 7-71. See also, Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, T&T Clark Ltd, Edinburgh, 1989.

was puzzled by claims to the contrary made to her by some Northern Ireland clergy. They had assured her, in fact, that dialogue between the Churches there had absolutely nothing to contribute to the search for peace. I found that saddening. My colleague (who is a Presbyterian minister herself), strongly resisted this claim. I found that gladdening and closer to the truth.

Allowing for the fact that churches move slowly, churches themselves nevertheless need to recognize that Christians are seeking and finding ways to meet and speak to one another and co-operate on issues of peace, justice and reconciliation. One such occasion was the recent "Prayer Breakfast" in North Belfast. Significantly, however, it was not a church initiative. It was sponsored by a local hotel and organized by a group of Christian community workers who wished to engage with other Christians and with clergy and political leaders, in a manner beyond what their own churches would allow. For them such engagement and seeking for mutual understanding had everything to do with the peace process and everything to do with being a Christian. I know of another case where members of a County Antrim congregation have recently had to seek ways to participate in ecumenical initiatives in their area without the support of and in spite of their minister. Such events demonstrate that the increasing diversity within as well as between our churches is significant in the seeking of reconciliation.

We do need to be sensitive to people's conscientious difficulties. But conscience should not be understood as a private refuge for keeping ourselves to ourselves or for holding oneself excused. One can helpfully adduce here Terence McCaughey's interpretation of conscience as "consciousness of the other".⁸ In theological terms, the encounter with the otherness of the other belongs at the heart of our encounter with the transcendent otherness of God. We are at a critical moment of decision as to whether as churches we consolidate our doctrinal stand-offs and church divisions, by refusing relationship; or whether Christ's gift of peace and his

⁸ Terence P. McCaughey, *Memory and Redemption: Church, Politics and Prophetic Theology in Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1993, pp. 87ff.

commandment to love one another implies a call also to the churches to heal and strengthen their relationships with one another. Without doubt there are persisting fears and suspicion of one another, based on old polemic, stereotyping and ignorance which serve to block positive relationship and love. Our identities as Protestants and Catholics are inevitably bound up with one another. The decision for churches turns on whether that reality can be creative rather than destructive of peace and love; whether we turn from or towards the loving Christ who reaches out to his Church, revealing God's loving divine will in all its strangeness, in and through relationship with one another.

It can be asserted that the fullness of the peace *kairos* for the churches turns on this moment of decision for relationship with one another. It implies a conversion to community, a conversion to love as Christ loves. In this context four identifying dimensions or characteristics can be spelled out in relation to the current situation in Ireland:

No one has the monopoly of peace, for it is first of all, complex and multi-leveled, holding in tension the many and the one. It cannot be grasped or be reduced to either or absolutes. Peace does not mean the desire for the kind of harmony that would smother the instinct for difference, but will attempt to hold together in creative tension diversity in unity, pluralism within a larger whole. This is proving to be a painful reality to engage in Ireland, where, traditionally, majorities imposed their ideologies on minorities. This tendency to "totalize" out of one's own identity does not easily give way to the accommodating of difference and seeking of consensus. But we are daily learning that peace demands no less.

Second, the peace *kairos* is dynamic always capable of being re-imagined and of reaching out beyond the immediate horizon. To speak of the peace process in Ireland should not be to justify delays and procrastination, but to journey forward in risk and trust. Peace is about a way of traveling, where the means and the goal of peace are one. In the current talks process this tension is proving hard to hold, especially among the younger parties with paramilitary connections. It will be necessary both to acknowledge the tension and to find ways of transforming it. It is noteworthy that in Scotland in recent weeks, there was a strong political lobby against the authorizing

of air attacks on Iraq. I know of some Christians and groups here who were working night and day on that. On this issue in Ireland, there was comparatively little engagement, little evidence of peace groups looking beyond the Irish horizon to see some dynamic connection between the local and global quest for peace.

Third, the peace *kairos* is relational. Peace as an individualist pursuit or an in-group absorption in so-called "single identity" work is inadequate. It is rather in the give and take of dialogue and relationship, in the knowing and not knowing who I am and who we are, that we constitute one another. There is a way that I need the other to become who I am. In allowing the other to be other, and to put me in touch with the otherness within myself, my own identity can be strengthened within a community where otherness is trusted rather than perceived as a threat.⁹ In Northern Ireland, the Women's Coalition have become both a symbol and a catalyst for the realization that whatever our differences of background and outlook, the way forward will be through the process of sustained and sustaining relationships with one another.

The fourth quality of peace in this *kairos* sense is that it is not just a nice idea or theory, but needs to be embodied in words, deeds, processes and structures. Hence the inadequacy of the notion of peace as the absence of violence and the significance of the more creative expressions of peace-building. So too, it is relevant that the talks process move beyond agenda-setting and "talks about talks" and move to real substance and engagement with issues. From this perspective too, one sees the necessity for there to be a constitutional content to the peace, as well as expressions and gestures of peace and peace-making at every level of civil society.

One could usefully ask churches and Christians to take these four dimensions or characteristics of peace - many-in-one, dynamic, relational and embodied - as criteria for assessing their relationships with one another, to probe whether their interaction and dialogue manifest the kind of character that they often urge upon politicians. If politics is the art of the

⁹ Cf John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, Faber and Faber, London, 1961, pp 27-28, 94 and *passim*.

possible, why should not theology be the art of the impossible - "for nothing is impossible to God". There are theological touchstones and criteria which can give Christian substance to these four characteristics. There are understandings of God as trinitarian, or as one who journeys with us, and is known by faithful love, a God who is made flesh in our world which bear closer attention by the churches as they seek to understand their role in the process of peace-building.

Famine-Time: Giving the Stranger a Place

There is no knowing the end of what might be undertaken by the churches together, both in the interests of peace and of coming to a fuller realization of what it is to be Church, in Ireland today. God's love in us is endlessly creative. To conclude, I suggest just a few ideas and questions in regard to faith and worship which may contribute to the overcoming of violence.

It is often said that ecumenical occasions of worship are nondescript affairs, neither fish nor flesh nor good red herring. Maybe it is time to be a little more open with one another as to what would help to change this - better preparation, more imagination, greater frequency? One simple alternative that neighboring churches might undertake would be to invite, on a regular basis, representative groups from the other tradition to share as guests in our confessional worship, with the freedom that characterizes the children of God. We need to worship inside each other's churches so that we allow our attitudes to those other Christians to be shaped by their self-understanding, and their way of celebrating word and sacrament. We can sometimes sing from the same hymn-sheet. We can together be touched by "the same accidents of the everyday", the cares and hopes, the confession of sin or thanksgiving in common prayer, without forfeiting the treasures of our own particular tradition. In being inclusive and giving the stranger a place, the very character of the worship could be renewed and deepened. As they become more at ease with this practice, visiting guests might be invited to take part for example through reading the Scripture, leading prayers or bearing the offerings or gifts. The presence of strangers in our midst would be ecclesially transforming. In the process, we would become more sensitive to the deep connections between worship and the rest of life,

more imaginative in the possibilities for further exchange and expressions of solidarity and working together for justice.

Finally, we do well to re-iterate the question as to who is the outsider, who is rendered invisible? Whose are the absent voices whether in our worship or in the political process? In this time of kairos and crisis, what role might there be in God's scheme of things for the one who is a stranger or outsider to us, and for the one who is a stranger or outsider within our particular tradition, or indeed within our own heart.

In the First Book of Kings when crisis and famine strike the land, the prophet Elijah was sustained by a foreign widow woman. When the stranger knocked, the temptation to close her heart and her door, must have been strong. There was not enough to go round. But, instead, she dropped her plan for one last meal with her son, the ancient ritual of bread and oil for the last journey. In Elijah's being welcomed by the widow of Sidon, we recognize that recurring biblical theme - God's blessing poured out in hospitality to the stranger, God's promise endlessly renewed:

For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied, and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth' (1 Kings 17:14).

As we church people acknowledge the famine of our own resourcefulness and our own failure to recognize and act on the kairos, we may manage to gather up a few sticks of hospitality, and acknowledge that we rely on grace and need the graciousness of strangers to turn enmity into love.

Maybe, the symbol of famine is the apt one with which to conclude this reflection on the challenge to churches and to theology of this peace kairos, which is also a moment of judgement. As we church people confess the famine of our own resourcefulness and our need of help to kindle and share the resources we have, God's Response to us may well be through the ones we regard as strangers and outsiders. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words from quite another strike home but with unsettling effect:

We are once again being driven right back to the beginnings of our understanding. Reconciliation and redemption, regeneration and the Holy Spirit, love of our enemies, cross and resurrection, life in Christ and Christian discipleship - all these things are so difficult and so remote that we hardly venture anymore to speak of them ... It is not for us to prophesy the day (though the day will come) when men will once more be called to utter the word of God that the world will be changed and renewed by it... it will shock people and yet overcome them by its power; it will be the language of a new righteousness and truth, proclaiming God's peace with people and the coming of his kingdom.¹⁰

Boston: Violence, Youth, and the Church in the Inner City

Rev. Eugene Rivers

Youth are more at risk now than they were 30 years ago. The world is more violent and young people are less optimistic about the future, because the world is a world of diminishing resources. Compared to previous generations. Young people are now living through the information revolution which is so dramatically transforming our understanding of reality. This generation is poised to greet a world at the beginning of a new millennium which is infinitely more complex than anything their predecessors experienced in absolute terms. This is a more complex, more violent world. It is a less hopeful world.

To call this generation a lost generation is, however, meaningless. Every generation since the turn of the century has been called the lost generation by the older folks. Each younger generation has their generation-specific set of delusions. My generation thirty years ago had illusions about transforming American society. We achieved less than we wanted and did more than we thought. The same will be true of this generation. What is eternally true to some degree is youth is wasted on the young, which is to say that the young will simply repeat in a different guise the mistakes made by their predecessors. That is a lesson of history - there is nothing terribly mysterious about that. But nobody can blame them for the crisis this generation is facing now. Well-known macroeconomic and structural forces have radically transformed the inner-city neighbourhoods. This situation breeds violence at an unprecedented scale.

Both conservatives and liberals in the United States of America have racialized violence; violence equals young, black males in the inner-city. There is some truth to that, because it is exactly young black males who are systematically marginalized and excluded in this country. But it is a partial truth. Conservatives and liberals simply exploit it, but do nothing to correct it, or will not make resources available to reduce it. The logic is very simple, with the persistent poverty of black and brown serving a variety of crucial ideological functions. Conservative policy elites perceive, correctly,

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Selected Writings*, ed Edwin Robertson, Fount Classics, Harper Collins, 1995, pp. 156-7.