



Media comment -

And the churches said.....?

by Lesley Carroll

This blog by Rev Lesley Carroll was published days before the joint statement from the Irish churches leaders.

I am frustrated with the public debate. I am looking for something that won't go over and over the same issues in ever decreasing circles of blame. These days I'm an ordinary, two-bit Presbyterian minister. I don't convene any committees and I don't sit on any boards. I've done my time and I know the difficulties.

As an ordinary Presbyterian I want to hear what the churches have to say about the Haass & O'Sullivan talks. Actually I wanted to hear from the churches before we got to draft 7. I want to hear about Twaddell, Welfare Reform, education, food banks, employment, the future of healthcare provision, racist attacks.

When I try to recall the voice of the churches in the public domain the predominant memories are of rampaging earnestness when it comes to sexuality or 'gay' blood. I want to hear about so much more. I want to know that my denomination and other denominations are struggling with what makes Talkback or Nolan or UTV Live. I want to hear a voice into the public debate, not necessarily offering answers but at least setting out issues and the difficulties in resolving them.

Don't get me wrong – I hear some very strong individual voices from church people, for example the Methodist President. I am grateful to them for they bubble a debate among a significant community of people who vote or don't vote, who have opinions and who are looking for a way through the various impasses that confront our society. A big, 'thank you!'

As for the challenges, each denomination contains a cross-section of society. So to speak with one view is difficult. All the voices need to be recognised. And is that any different from a political party? All political parties are driven by their electorate which will, at least from time to time, have a variety of opinions. But churches aren't political parties. Each church has to take account of the pastoral needs of its members and to represent those voices as best they can. But churches are also called to be, as I read the Bible, makers of peace, places where people pray for friend and enemy alike. Churches are tasked with seeking the peace of every City. Does that not make for some difference? Does it not mean that churches can speak with a voice that is both pastoral and energetic with vision?

Or is it the case that these days churches are on their knees praying – Dear God, we have a problem? We do have a problem. It would be good to admit that at least. We have a problem with the diverse voices that make up our society and our denominations, voices that can't harmonise for a way forward. We have a problem with diverse needs that cannot all be met. We have a problem with a public debate that prefers to take a pop at others and even sink into personal attack rather than unravel the issues. We have a problem in the lack of common will and purpose to address issues and find a way forward. We seem to have a problem with truth at more than one level, not just in relation to the past. Maybe, at best, we can truthfully say that we have a problem and we don't quite know how to get through it.

Could common purpose be found in the willingness to find a way through, to build peace with humility, compassion and sorrow for what we cannot do? Is that the most honest position to take? And if it is, can churches, denominations, at least say so? More worryingly, would it be more truthful to say that we don't want to find a way through? We just have to live with what we've got.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.
James 3:17-18

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