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The Church in Northern Ireland Today - The Test Of Change

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It is often said that the Northern Ireland population is one of the most politically-aware groupings in western Europe. Certainly our history over the past 30 years bears ample testimony to the role of politics in all our lives. At times of absence of political activity when political violence has occupied our attention just as now with the nurture of the tender plant of devolution political considerations have dominated life.

It is of course arguable whether much of what we experienced prior to the Good Friday Agreement could qualify as political experience as that phrase is normally interpreted. However designation of people in terms of party political allegiance has never been absent from the life of this community. From the cradle to the grave we have become a politically aware people simply because so much of our lives depend on the necessity to succumb to one or other tribal political philosophies.

Frequent recourse to the ballot box has punctuated our progress not alone in terms of an election of individuals to office, but to record community opinion. Deep in our consciousness are questions of identity and that identification is as much about what we are not as it is about who we claim to be.

Perhaps it is not inappropriate to think in terms of the endless, though often unconscious, search for identification even more than to dwell on political awareness. The one can and does substitute for the other, certainly prior to the Agreement, yet again one is conscious that identification in this community is often expressed in the negative - we are what we are because of what we are not...

When we turn to the question of the Church in this community the generalisations with which we began become even more pertinent. Identification is again the key. Community consciousness is again the motivation. Definition of Church allegiance is again often expressed by what we are not rather than by what we claim to be. We are a society with a religious consciousness. However that consciousness cannot be considered in isolation. Traditional means of analysis simply do not apply here.

We proclaim ourselves a Christian society - yet so much of what passes for religious identity is divisive and has more to do with political orientation than daily practice of religious faith. To be born into a home which has allegiance to one of the reformed traditions in Northern Ireland has in general an assumption that one grows up under the influence of some form of unionism.

To be born into a Roman Catholic home involves the party political influence of either nationalism or republicanism. One may well regard such generalisations as inevitable. However what is not inevitable are the allied assumptions that because of



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such historical trends a Church will inevitably or without question reflect such political views on every occasion.

For the purposes of a paper of limited length on this occasion generalisations are inevitable. Generalisation is dangerous on any occasion - but do I need to remind this audience that generalisation has a lot to do with perception - and perception can become reality in an instant in Northern Ireland? A majority of people in this society perceive the official structure of their Church as an extension of their political identification - whether we like it or not. This raises many issues of a practical as well as a theoretical nature.

For example - is there efficacy in the perception that a reformed Church in Northern Ireland is merely unionism at prayer? Is there accuracy in the perception that Roman Catholicism in Northern Ireland is nationalism or republicanism at prayer? In any society, in any country, people do not change their party political identity when they enter a place of worship. What makes our situation here significant is the expectation that obsession with party politics involves inevitable support for a party political stance by the individual Church. It may be a cheap journalistic jibe but how much truth is there in the comment that it is a Protestant or a Roman Catholic, a unionist or a nationalist God who is prayed to on a Sunday?

A Church has the duty to take seriously and reflect honestly the genuine concerns of its members. This is the essence of the Gospel of social concern. But there is a higher duty for the Church. That is the duty to reflect and pronounce the Gospel of Christ whether that means support for a particular outlook in society or a pronouncement which runs contrary to popular belief. The cost in that can be great. But the call of Christ cannot and must not be sectionalised.

Few will deny that in this time of change in Northern Ireland the Christian Church faces its own crisis of confidence. Despite the admirable record of pastoral care and pastoral ministry during the years of widespread violence - a record which I feel has not yet received the recognition it deserves - the real test for the Church today is to move from the religious pastoral agency of support to a people in trauma to a prophetic voice of integrity in a society which is changing so rapidly. Has it the ability to bring the true dimension of Christian faith and Christian prophecy to a people whose real need is the management of change? In that process let us all acknowledge that 'religious' sectarianism with its political overtones continues to be the most significant ingredient in too many parts of Northern Ireland.



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To illustrate how I see the Church in Northern Ireland confronting the needs of the present let me turn to one area of great concern to all the Churches in Northern Ireland and an area which holds the real key to our future as a community.

One of the greatest challenges facing any community is the education - not just of its children - but of all age groups.

The Churches have an honourable record of service in education through their work in schools and universities today and the challenge to the Churches and to every other group in society here, is to be willing to be involved as partners, pioneers and enablers of education for lifelong learning. Each stage of life provides us with different challenges which require new competencies and life skills.

In respect of employment there are very few, if any, occupations left where retraining and learning afresh is not required and at an increasing rate in contemporary society.

The task of education in developing personal life skills cannot be dumped - as every deficiency in society seems to be dumped - on today's school curriculums and the teaching profession. Both the curriculum and the profession are genuinely in overload.

We need more community education and in parenting skills particularly. Governments and local administrations may operate schemes which target social deprivation and educational under-achievement in schools but you don't have to be an educational expert or psychologist to know that the child who has a parent really interested in his/her reading skills, will tend to get a head start. That child will benefit more out of formal education than a child who is deprived of such parental support. There are cycles of social-deprivation caused by long-term unemployment which are related directly to educational under-achievement and lack of literacy skills.

Despite our many excellent schools in Northern Ireland there are still too many adults who cannot read or write. Adults, who as parents, therefore cannot provide the basic educational nurture which give their children the start in life they need. This deficit should be high on any list of priorities at Stormont.

We need to put more resources into adult education, adult literacy and family education - through funding local schools and FE colleges and in working partnerships with the widest range of community groups possible. Education should be on the agenda of every social group in Northern Ireland, from the local darts team to the Department of Education.



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The principal answer to discrimination in housing in Northern Ireland was to build more houses. The principal answer to discrimination in employment in Northern Ireland is to provide enough jobs. The answer to social deprivation is to break that cycle - through above all else the provision of appropriate schemes of community-based education.

There are too many schools in Northern Ireland locked up when parents are available to learn. There are too many Church Halls over-used for social recreation and under-used for second or third chance education. The Open University, countless extra-mural courses, the Workers Educational Association, and FE Colleges tackling adult illiteracy, have all shown us different successful models. We need more models in operation and in greater variety to meet society's needs.

I look at an organisation within my own denomination, the Mothers' Union, which engages at parish level in providing parenting courses. I look with admiration at the work of Michael Quinn and the Family Caring Trust based at Newry - whose work is being used by small groups from all the world faiths and major agencies like Barnardos throughout Great Britain. They too are showing us the way to nurture this society's prime asset - our people.

Thus far I have deliberately avoided schools. Important as they are, as I have indicated, they are not the only providers of education. For the most part, the real challenges to this society are created by those for whom formal education has not been a success.

Maybe we need to spend less time debating about provision of Controlled Maintained and Integrated schools. Indeed despite the forthcoming debate on selection and the Eleven Plus - two concerns often confused as one - could I suggest to you that the real debate about education has not started and effectively that is:

How can we provide a range of options or tracks which enthuse many more children and young people to acquire the necessary qualifications and the vocational opportunity which they want to pursue?

We are all agreed that we have good grammar, secondary and primary schools. I don't know anyone in the education service who is not involved in the quest for all-round improvement. But for any youngster to sparkle, there must be a skilled teacher or mentor who has something to offer which that youngster finds irresistibly attractive. If you feel you are having a life that is fulfilling - then you know that happened to you at sometime in your life and maybe even more than once.



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We need to find more bonafide alternatives. We need to applaud and affirm our plumbers, electricians, food technologists and maintenance operatives - in the same way that we do our doctors and dentists.

The challenge to a Christian community and to its Church is to enable each child, each young person and each adult - at no matter what state in their life - to discover their "giftedness". Education, formal and informal, is about the enablement of that gift and its use on behalf of the community more so than personal self-aggrandisement.

This to me is a bigger challenge to education than sectarianism. Most of our schools are attempting programmes of Education for Mutual Understanding and appreciation of our diverse cultural heritage. All are required to deliver the Common Core programme in Religious Education. We are at the forefront of this form of teaching tolerance in the world today. The Churches in Northern Ireland can take real satisfaction in their encouragement in this regard.

Recognising this, in an initiative for the Millennium - this time the four main Churches and the Jewish community have launched a website - Faith in Schools - to build on the success of the common RE programme, to enable its development and to support the teaching of tolerance. It is already one of the largest RE websites in Europe and it is growing weekly.

Education is a challenge which does unite us - we all want what is best for our children. We need to be careful as a community however, about creating too many competing demands especially if we are reluctant to pay more taxes to meet the immense needs which genuinely do exist in education. We cannot afford not to meet these needs. Sectarianism is fed more so by unattainable opportunities than by schools which seek to respect people's convictions and to cater for different people's preferences.

Surely a prime agenda for the Church in Northern Ireland at this time of change in our society lies in the encouragement of a really enlightened attitude to the education of the next generation.

I end with a repetition of the underlying theme of my thesis in this paper:

Can the Church in Northern Ireland grasp the challenge to be the prophetic voice of Christ in a society which wants to progress but is going through a period of immense change?



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Can the Church find the degree of faith and confidence to be equal to the needs of this hour?