

Report of “Building Peace From the Ground Up”

online conference day on 13 March 2021

On 13th March, Church and Peace and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (England and Scotland) held their now traditional early spring joint conference – this time as an online event. Over fifty participants took part, including one who got up at 6 am on the East Coast of the USA and one whose day with us finished at 10 pm in Pakistan.

Antje Heider-Rottwilm, chair of Church and Peace, welcomed us on behalf of both organisations. She reminded us that we had always looked at peace in the broadest sense – not just militarism, but also climate change, racism, and political developments. Today, we were looking at the way peaceful co-existence is being endangered by hate-speech. Antje recommended a book highlighting the link between blasphemy and hate speech. (**Gerd Schwerhoff: Verfluchte Götter**) People are tempted to defame and devalue others who don't share their faith – this occurs in all religions and is present in both the Old and the New Testaments. We can be very sensitive when our own god is attacked, but aggressive to others who worship differently. Antje closed her introduction by quoting a prayer offered by Rev Inderjit Bhogal at the Church and Peace conference in High Leigh in 2018, which includes:

*God, bless us with a holy anger
that rages against injustice, hatred, terrorising war and violence,
and sheds tears for those who are hurt or killed.....
Bless us with a wholesome thirst for righteousness, justice and peace,
and the conviction that we can make the world a better place
without resorting to killing machinations or machines.
Teach us the art of forgiveness and reconciliation,
and how to restore respect and confidence in relationships.*

The day was filled with inspiring keynote speakers and workshops.

The first keynote speech was from **Lisa Cumming, director of the Quaker nonviolence social change programme Turning The Tide**. Lisa asked us to think about whether we were living in hateful times and reminded us that the Quaker thinker and academic Adam Curle had pointed out that we need to transform unpeaceful relationships into peaceful ones, and also to transform the conditions we live in so that they are unfavourable to violence. A rap poem gave us the insights that “violence first of all begins with silence” and then we find it in the words; that politicians brandish views which take away from people not only their human rights but also their right to be human; that the climate of hate is a collective mood; and that we can't fight violence with silence.

As we were in the UK, it was relevant to reflect about how far along the fascist route we have moved, identifying enemies, appealing to the in-group (usually the majority group), destroying truth and replacing it with power. Many of those present knew the poem by Michael Rosen which includes the lines: Fascism arrives as your friend/It will restore your honour,/make you feel proud,/.... Remind you of how great you once were/ ... remove anything you feel is unlike you..... It doesn't walk in saying/ “Our programme means militias, mass imprisonments, transportations, war and persecution”.

There seems no doubt that we are in hateful times in the UK, where far-right language can now be found in the mainstream, and can also be observed in other parts of Europe as has been reported in the Quaker Council for European Affairs' *Anti-Migrant Hate Speech Report* from 2018.

It is easy to think that we are the good people, but in fact we all have a capacity to harm and hurt – when we refuse to listen, when we project blame without self-reflection, when those of us with a capacity to oppress refuse to acknowledge this. We also need to expose how deeply racism is embedded in the structures of institutions – *“If we assume there must be an identifiable racist, then we will never solve the problem.”* (Angela Davis).

Lisa challenged us to think about how we can tackle hate without mirroring it – the “two hands of nonviolence” say: Stop what you are doing! But also: “I won’t let go of you or cast you out of the human race.” Which of those hands is more dominant in our own actions? There are imaginative ways to respond – Lisa told us about a mosque in Bradford which welcomed people from the English Defence League with tea and biscuits and an impromptu game of football. This type of very brave response is not always going to be possible, but there are also ways of creating a visible symbol of what we are in for, not only what we are against. It is important to get people out on the streets if there is a threat of organised racism or fascism, and this is particularly powerful when faith groups are involved. An inter-cultural, inter-faith web of connections can create spaces where people build up trust, and which can hold strong like a spiders’ web.

The final word went to American Quaker Bayard Rustin (echoing an injunction from the Jewish Book of Ethics): *God does not require us to achieve any of the good tasks that humanity must pursue. What God requires of us is that we not stop trying.*

In the following discussion, which focused mainly on how to confront hate in public, Lisa advised us to do our own mini-risk assessment but also to plan, practise, and train so that you don’t respond just in the heat of the moment. There are many resources online.

Lisa’s presentation was followed by a choice of three workshops:

Worship workshop with Jan Sutch Picard (Iona Community)

This was a time of poetry, reflection and prayer with Jan Sutch Picard from the Iona Community. The workshop provided space for Jan to share poems and prayers and the stories behind how she created them. A run of poems took workshop members through every stage of attending a protest outside Faslane and ended up with the sharing of a ‘post arrest’ affirmation of faith. Participants were then invited to read through the universal ‘prayer for peace’ and consider what words, images or music they would use to convey one element of the prayer in an act of worship. The mix of poems sharing Jan’s experiences and the stories people shared alongside their words from the Prayer for Peace meant it was a very powerful workshop that brought human emotion central to all that was considered.

Workshop Responding to hate speech with Erin Green (Pax Christi International) and Bob Shine (US New Ways Ministry)

Erin gave us the background to the work of the World Association for Christian Communications study of online hate speech. We looked at some definitions of hate speech

and at the “Pyramid of Hate” which starts with biased attitudes and can end up with genocide, and thought about ways to respond. Bob then gave us some shocking information about the role of some of the churches in the USA, where some Catholic organisations are using people’s resistance to Pope Francis’ liberalising tendencies to condone and even promote hate speech and violence, while at the same time some Evangelical Christians are more extreme than Catholics, and also have much more money. We need to differentiate between conservative groups and hate groups – but the conservative groups refuse to challenge the extremist groups. Bob’s view is that the USA has a long and under-reported history of domestic terrorism, and that the attack on the Capitol on 6th January 2021 was a natural development which should not have surprised anybody. He emphasised the importance of personal relationships and not giving up on anybody who is tempted to espouse such views, but rather treat them as people who can be encouraged to walk away.

In the group, the feeling was expressed that social media has coarsened the debate and generated huge polarisation. We have to address situations where one side is using evidence, the other side is using emotion.

Workshop Lobbying for a Better World with Andrew Tomlinson (Scottish Parliamentary Engagement Officer for Quakers in Britain)

We discovered that 8/10 of us had some experience of lobbying, often by writing letters to our Members of Parliament (MPs) and inviting them to meet with us. Sometimes our letters are not answered and meetings are refused but we feel that such lobbying is a natural part of the democratic process.

We were invited to consider if our lobbying provides a true representation. Do statements on behalf of interest groups and organisations represent the actual views of those affected by government decisions? Do our MPs or local councillors distinguish such representation from the developed concerns of a group of constituents? We were asked to consider whether our lobbying might be best done involving people with direct experience of an issue, not just others doing on their behalf.

Andrew suggested 4 key points:

1. Culture should be taken into account, as culture is upstream of politics.
2. Bear in mind that the views of people at the extremes of an argument might be less easy to change than those in the middle.
3. Use evidence and/or stories of people when making your case.
4. There may be key moments when the possibility of change is greater; prepare and plan so that you are ready for such moments.

In the UK there is a very useful website www.theyworkforyou.com which not only allows you to track the voting records of all MPs but also allows you to sign up for an alert when a particular issue is discussed in parliament. It would be useful to know if similar websites exist in other countries.

Our afternoon began with a keynote address by Rev Dr Sharon Prentis, Intercultural Mission Enabler and Dean of Black & Minority Ethnic Affairs for the Church of England in Birmingham

How do we make the church a place of peace in a fractured world? Sharon proposed to consider “Peace in Three Dimensions”.

She reminded us that the very first church in the New Testament was a diverse church within the context of empire. She illustrated this with an image of colours which are all individual, but together make a beautiful whole.

Last few months have been challenging for many communities and fault-lines in our society have been revealed – we have seen a rise in tribalism, populist and divisive politics. How do we speak out about the systemic violence which dominates our lives?

Sharon’s three dimensions are in, out, and up.

Church is not just the building. We each have an internal life, an inner room. How do we inhabit that inner room? How does our worship shape the way we see others? What are we being called to at this time? In our ways of being contemplative together, how do we hear the deep lament of this kairos moment?

Moving Out – what does that mean? The great commandment from Micah - do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God.

Each of us has an Identity, and the grounding of our being is love, which enables us to develop resilience, to be prophetic in the way Micah speaks about. In our contemplation, we have a change from thinking about God to being with God. The place where we are with God is where we sense the call to go out and speak against injustice.

What do peace and reconciliation mean for us? If we are to be an intercultural community we are being called into a sense of being interdependent. Acknowledging that difference is something that is god-given but that difference causes dissonance and makes us wrestle with what it means in terms of our identity, belonging, power, our ways of being. What does it mean to be a radical inclusive community based not just on equality but on equity – this was explicitly modelled by Jesus. This is not comfortable. The pandemic has highlighted the differences in our communities and the way some parts of community have suffered more – this has not been in the forefront of our theology in the past. What do we mean by sacrifice? What do we mean by inclusive communities?

Jesus is a person of the margins. Al Barrett (who spoke at our Birmingham Regional Day Conference in 2019) has co-written a book (*Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In*) emphasising the intention to be transformative with those who are at the edges. What if the edges where there is no peace, become the centre of what we are and what we do? What does this “Kin-dom” of God mean? What if we are seen to be one another’s sisters and brothers? How will that affect our structures?

Sharon challenged us to consider how we exclude people who live with other ways of being, how we normalise situations and forget that changing the world to be better takes a radical courage which comes at a cost. If our identities in wider society are so enmeshed in structural privilege, might that affect the ways we seek to live as Christians? Do we keep asking ourselves if we are complicit in these structures?

We need to risk hope, learn to disagree in ways which are mutually respectful. The Church is a place which enables, encourages and affirms – but sometimes we can’t see that or we have a history which makes it difficult.

We need a compelling vision of an incarnational way of living which impacts others around us – we need richness and depth of interior life. How do we inhabit that “inner room”?

Sharon’s address was followed by a discussion around issues of theological diversity (which we need to live with and embrace) and how to unite diverse people around a common cause, when we know that some people have to prioritise their basic needs and also often don’t see “people like me” in activist groups. We need to create spaces of contact for people of very different backgrounds, and where everybody can feel safe.

This session was once again followed by a choice of three workshops:

Open Space

This was conceived as being a space where participants could raise things which had arisen for them in the course of the day. In the event, most of the time was spent in discussion with Jugnu Bruce Herman, who joined us from Pakistan. His description of the situation of the Christian community in Pakistan shocked the group – he described their struggle with the radical Muslims who have designed the current discriminatory laws. Christians work in menial jobs, suffer severe poverty, and are not allowed to set up businesses outside their own areas. Attempts to link with Muslims are hi-jacked by radical groups who promise young women and girls money and status if they convert to Islam. The church leadership is too frightened to do anything.

The discussion focused on how we might support Pakistani Christians, in the first instance through prayer, informing our churches here of the situation, and articulating our support. Some practical suggestions were made which will be followed up by individuals. We were told that Church leaders in Pakistan might respond more to approaches from outside the country rather than to the sufferings of their own congregations.

The group then picked up on Sharon’s comments about the cost of discipleship. Transforming unjust structures of society is a struggle - we need to be continually asking ourselves the question about what we must give up so that others can enter into the “Kin-dom”.

The group also discussed Christian CND and the change in awareness of environmental concerns; and the feeling that post-modern society has lost the glue which holds us together, the glue being God, and that we need to follow Jesus by calling people by their name.

Learning from Luton Workshop with Rev Peter Adams of St Mary’s Peace and Reconciliation Centre

Rev Peter Adams shared his experience of a decade of community work in Luton. He talked key events in the rise of the far-right, centred on Luton, and what local community members had done in response. Sometimes ‘being in the right place at the right time’ helped challenge hate or defuse a situation, other times long (quiet) weeks of activity building up a network of connections would enable Christian and Muslim communities to work together to resist hate/the far right and stand up for peace. Following on from his presentation a time of question explored a range of topics, including what he learnt from observing community relations in Northern Ireland and if the pandemic was laying similar foundations for community violence.

Practical Steps towards Real Anti-Racism, Workshop with Rev Winnie Gordon of the Unitarian Church and Rev Dr Jill Marsh, Mission Enabler for the Northampton Methodist District (and speaker at our Church & Peace zoom discussion in December on “Dismantling White Privilege”)

Winnie Gordon revealed how, although visibly presenting as black, she comes from a remarkably mixed family where there has been intermarriage of African, Chinese, Irish and Jewish heritage. In self-identifying exercises carried out in the group of a dozen participants, nobody identified themselves as white, a fact which was used to demonstrate the “invisibility” of whiteness to those who benefit from its privilege. Winnie introduced the group to **“Me and White Supremacy”** by Layla Saad.

Jill Marsh pointed to Layla Saad’s use of the reference to the “appalling Silence of Good People” from Martin Luther King and also recommended **“How to be an Anti-Racist”** by Ibram Kendi, which refers to how we need to view our race as a peelable name-tag rather than a deeply ingrained characteristic.

The risk of complicity in racism was explored, with individual participants referring to having found themselves in difficulty when addressing such issues as patients asking not to be assisted by a black nurse, or fellow-travellers abusing people who spoke other languages or fellow industrial workers demonising “coloured” immigrants for taking their jobs. But the risk of complicity went along with a feeling of the risk of calling out racism. One participant likened this to the risk of coming out as Gay.

In answer to a question about the complicity of a number of black government ministers in the UK, Winnie Gordon suggested we could just ignore them. Jill Marsh felt angry with them but her anger was tempered by the feeling that black people are actually at greater risk in calling out racism than are white people. An Irish participant pointed out that she could escape from the adverse effects of being Irish in Britain because of being white, whereas black people are confronted with perceived difference all the time and have nowhere to hide. A British-origin participant now living in Hungary felt that in Europe it would be a help if diversity were dealt with through a model of integration of differences within a broad constitution rather than assimilation to a common culture, as in the USA.

The Closing Plenary was brief as we all felt very overwhelmed by the experiences of the day, for which we were thankful. We owe a huge vote of thanks to our speakers and our workshop facilitators, who shared their riches with us. The conference closed, as it had begun, with prayer.