



HardGospel
Love God • Love your neighbour

Life Beyond Boundaries...

A Theology of the
Hard Gospel



www.hardgospel.net

Authors

Anne Brown
Richard Henderson
Earl Storey

contents

- 2** Foreword
- 3** Introduction
- 5** The Hard Gospel and the Good Samaritan
- 8** The Hard Gospel - A Shared Future?
- 12** Hard Gospel - Hard Questions
- 14** Conclusion
- 15** References
- 16** Appendix
- 17** The Hard Gospel - A Theological Statement
- 18** Acknowledgements



foreword

**The Most Reverend Dr Robin Eames,
Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland**



“The Hard Gospel is one of the most vital projects ever undertaken by the Church of Ireland.”

“It represents a sincere and prayerful self-examination of how this Church approaches difference at all levels in its daily life. It involves examination of attitude, organisation, activities, contact with society, influence and leadership. It touches Church life at its most potent and realistic point - the local scene in a parish. It asks hard questions - and expects hard answers. But it calls for action, change and serious readjustment. Above all it represents for me the sincerity and integrity of internal

examination on the same basis the Church has often demanded of society. We are in other words doing unto ourselves as we have asked of others.

The Gospel imperative demands much of believers. It is a ‘**hard Gospel**’ when we take it seriously. Yet the path to Calvary was not easy. We cannot expect that a Church response to that imperative will be easy. But we have no alternative if we are to maintain honesty and integrity as part of the Body of Christ in a divided world and society.”



1. introduction

1.1 The Background

The late 1990s in the island of Ireland were a time of challenge and change for many people and organisations. As an institution with a wide and diverse membership, the Church of Ireland was thrust into the limelight by events at Drumcree with the challenge of how, as a Christian church, to deal responsibly with the problems arising out of sectarianism in a divided society. In 1997 the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, the Church's governing body, overwhelmingly adopted a motion that the Church was opposed to sectarianism. It started a process of self-examination with the intention of determining how "to promote, at all levels of church life tolerance, dialogue, co-operation and mutual respect between the churches and in society".¹ So began a challenging and demanding journey for the Church of Ireland as an institution and as a membership to determine how, rather than being perceived as contributing to the problem, to become instead an integral part of the solution.

1.2 The Sectarianism Education Project

The Church of Ireland Sectarianism Working Party's work from 1997 led to the setting up of the Sectarianism Education Project in 2001 with the aim of assisting parishes throughout the island of Ireland to increase their capacity for dealing with sectarianism and difference and of exploring how dealing positively with these issues would have an impact on decision making within the Church. Rather than proceed with this at a theoretical level, it was decided to commission a wide ranging research project throughout the Church of Ireland to ascertain the attitudes, needs and experiences of clergy and lay people on these issues. This turned out to be what has been described as "possibly the most comprehensive piece of research ever attempted in one Christian denomination/church in Ireland, and has involved people at all levels of the church."²

1.3 The Scoping Study Report

The outcome of this research was the Scoping Study Report entitled “The Hard Gospel: Dealing Positively with Difference in the Church of Ireland”.³ This report was presented to and received by the General Synod in 2003. The significance and importance of the report resulted in it being distributed to all the dioceses in the Church of Ireland for information and for consideration of the implications of the study. It gave rise to much discussion and reflection within the Church. This nationwide process was described in the Church’s Standing Committee Report of 2004 as being “without precedent in the life of the Church of Ireland”.⁴

Although originally intended to investigate the issues of sectarianism and religious and political differences, the scoping study disclosed a deep desire within the clergy and lay membership of the Church for open debate and guidance on how to deal with the many issues of “living with difference” which now exist in our rapidly changing societies in the north and south of Ireland. In recognition of this it was decided that, whilst dealing with sectarianism would remain a major thrust of the project, the original initiative was too narrow and that a strategic vision for the future was required.

1.4 The Hard Gospel Process

The remit of the Sectarianism Education Project was widened to consider how to deal with difference in many and diverse areas including relationships with minority ethnic groups and people of other religions and issues of sexuality and gender. In determining what to call the expanded initiative the words of a retired rector quoted in the Scoping Study Report proved inspirational. He said “I want to see a return to the hard gospel... that you love God and love your neighbour as yourself.”⁵ So began the “Hard Gospel” process which, as the Standing Committee of the Church points out, conveys the willingness of the Church of Ireland to be challenged by the Gospel.⁶ This process is being overseen by the Hard Gospel Committee which has secured funding for the Project. A Director and two Project Officers have been appointed and commissioned by Archbishop Eames, the President of the Project. The Hard Gospel Project is now underway.

The challenge of the Hard Gospel Project for the Church of Ireland will involve:

- Investigating how to deal positively with difference in both church and in society;
- Examining current policies and practice in both central institutions and parish communities; and
- Endeavouring to make dealing with difference a priority for the Church in understanding its ministry and in the allocation of time and resources.⁷

In seeking creative and faith-driven ways of dealing with difference the Hard Gospel Project will continue the heart-searching and critical reflection which has already begun in the Church of Ireland. It will have an impact not only on the Church internally as an institution and membership but also externally in how the Church and its members relate to and deal with the very real and difficult issues facing our rapidly changing and increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith societies in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It will examine not only the profound questions of faith which arise for Christians in what has been described as the “vertical” relationship in loving God but also the practical implications of these questions in the outworking of their faith in their “horizontal” relationships through the command to “love your neighbour”.

2. the hard gospel and the good samaritan

2.1 Background

Two great commandments, given such ringing endorsement in the life and death of Jesus Christ, are paramount for all Christians. They are binding for all believers and liberating, though often hard to put into practice. They can be put very simply:

to love God with everything you are and have...
and to love your neighbour as yourself.

These two commandments have indeed inspired many wonderful and ultimately fulfilling lives of devotion to God and neighbour; they have borne witness to the best expression of Christian identity, modeled on the love that Christ taught and demonstrated.

But preoccupation with religion, and religious identity, has often led to distortions: to a narrow vision of God and wrong attitudes to our neighbours. These in turn have led to neglect, caricature, exclusion, hatred and violence. It is good news (the Gospel) when these attitudes begin to change, but it is hard. Loving God includes, to use the words of Christ, learning to 'love our enemies'.

Mindful of this reality, the Hard Gospel challenges us to understand afresh what it means to love God and our neighbour as ourselves - and, crucially, what we should do about it. There can be no true love without knowledge: so we need to know more of God, we need to know who is our neighbour, we need to know what love means and how it should be expressed.

We also need to learn how rightly to know and love ourselves - to know and understand our true identity, in the context of a sustained and loving relationship with God and our neighbour. So questions of "love" and "how to love" may appear complex yet their practical outworking may be clear enough.

We have chosen the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan to express the Hard Gospel because it takes us to the heart of the matter. It distils the core questions of love, divine motivation and belonging to each other

- and reveals their distortions against a backdrop of accumulated religious, cultural, historical and political difference. Only by rediscovering the primary concerns can we derive a correct understanding of our responsibilities and rights - the proper expression of our identity. The story is to be found in St. Luke's Gospel, Chapter 10, verses 25-37 and is set out in the Appendix in which the background to the troubled relationships between the Jews and the Samaritans at that time is briefly outlined.

Most of this passage is in the form of parable. A parable is a story to lay alongside our present thinking and experience - in our day to question, challenge, rebuke, correct and inspire. It is to start us thinking, and leave us thinking. But this is not enough: as we begin to see the answer, we are told without delay to put it into action. We are to "walk the talk".

As such, the comments on the story that follow are largely in the form of questions - but many are questions that require action.

Questions are also posed by the lawyer in the story. These are:

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Who is my neighbour?"

Christ answers with some dialogue, a wonderful parable, further dialogue and then a command.

What the lawyer learns is what we need to learn; in the church and in the law of the land. The developing law and government policies are discussed in Chapter 3, so here we focus mainly on the church.

2.2 The Dialogue

1. When the lawyer asks about eternal life he is asking about things that have enduring value. Eternal things are not futuristic; at the very least, they begin here and now. In a world that enjoys instant fixes and has only limited forward thinking, these issues



Used with permission

should surely remain the preoccupation of the church and government, but how should these be expressed?

2. Christ responds, "What is written in your law?" - to the lawyer this would have meant the religious law of the time. Christ is inviting us to search our own religious tradition; we are to question our sources, attitudes, motivation, behaviour and foundational documents.

Have we woken up to the implications and challenge of what we profess?

3. The lawyer, in apparently general terms and in the best of his tradition, responds with the unencumbered command to love - to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself'. But Jesus does not want generalities. He is going to make the commands specific. There is something to do, not just talk about because, to Christ, love is not sentiment but action. He answers, "Do this and you will live".

Are we living out this Hard Gospel in this way through the doings of our regular church life?

4. Knowing what is already written in his own tradition, the lawyer is uncomfortable with this Hard Gospel and wants to justify himself. So he asks, "Who is my neighbour?" Does his discomfort stem from trying to justify a position he knows is untenable? Is he unwilling to look under the encrustations of his tradition? Is he looking for loopholes in the implications of his religious tradition and identity? Has his tradition been seeking some limit to the range of neighbourliness?

Does his discomfort strike a chord and reveal ours?

5. Alternatively, the lawyer may be modeling what we should be doing - asking in all honesty how ancient truths should be expressed in modern and changing times. Where his self-questioning has not resolved the issue, he is asking Christ to help him work it out.

What would this mean for us? What would we ask Christ? Indeed, has he already answered? It appears so in the parable that follows.

6. It is interesting to note that the lawyer only asks about loving our neighbour. He does not ask about loving God.

Is this because it is easier to say we love God, and get the ritual right, than to put this love into action among our neighbours?

2.3 The Parable

1. Rather than give the lawyer a definition or another rule or regulation, Jesus tells a parable to make the commands specific to a set of circumstances which provided an opportunity. Jesus illustrates rather than legislates and, through this, appeals to instincts of mercy, to conscience and humanity - within, but also beyond, the religious tradition.

Love may start within tradition, but ought it to be limited by it?

2. The man in the parable falls among robbers on a dangerous road. He is beaten up and left half-dead. The priest and Levite (both religious men of their time) may have been so rule-bound and loftily disposed that they could not respond to the wounded agony and impending death of the man on the ground. Did over-fastidious love of God (or the things thought to be of God) prevent them from showing love and compassion to a person in need?

Has this been true of us?

3. Perhaps the priest and Levite are afraid of a trap and dare not get involved. Perhaps they fear losing religious integrity or physical safety. Does over-cautious love of self prevent them showing love to a person in need? Though this opportunity must surely have appealed to their human compassion (as it did to the Samaritan), it was apparently not strong enough to override their fear for personal safety or the integrity of their religion. What limited them?

What limits us? Is it fear? If so, fear of what? Is the negative role fear plays in the spoiling of our attitude and the limiting of our actions revealed by how we treat our neighbour?

4. Both the priest and the Levite see, but do nothing to help, the dying-but-saveable man. It is the heretical Samaritan - the religious "enemy" of the traditional Jew, who does the right thing under God. He is the religious and cultural "other", identified by the fact that he was not "one of us." Why does the Samaritan help? Perhaps he is less encumbered by religious codes, and is thus freer to be motivated by pity rather than propriety. Is he the one who practices the spirit of the law - rather than keeping its letter? More than this, is the Samaritan ('unclean' in the religious terms of those days to the priest and Levite) the one who, in fact, fulfils the law? How humbling must it have been for the lawyer to be told, in effect, "You, the

Jewish expert in the religious Law should follow the example of the 'unclean' Samaritan?"

Are there those outside the church, perhaps in secular law, who are showing us the way to act?

5. Thus "neighbour" is implicitly defined in the parable - and the Samaritan represents the person who we perceive as "different" from us or who we cannot live with. A neighbour is also the one seen to be in need - particularly where there is an opportunity to do something about it. The parable moves from the question, "Who is my neighbour?" to the sharper question of personal responsibility: "Whose neighbour am I?"

Who are our neighbours and whose neighbour are we?

2.4 The Command

1. The Samaritan goes way beyond what might be thought of as the human call of duty. He provides for the man with absolute and thoroughgoing generosity, reminiscent of the grace of God. This is not just First Aid, but salvation - ensuring complete recovery to wholeness.

Do we go beyond mere gestures of neighbourliness?

2. Returning to the lawyer, again Jesus encourages self-questioning: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour...?" It has to be the one who had pity - more than that - the one who did mercy. The lawyer's answer is correct and Jesus instructs, "go and do likewise".

What does it mean for us to "Go and do likewise".

3. The Samaritan or good neighbour was the person who saw past the culture, the traditions, the religious differences and the issues of identity to the reality of the other person.

The expression of love cannot be governed or curtailed by questions of race, colour, creed, even heresy. All the opportunities for being neighbour happen in the discomfort of the exposed road - a highway for all, and between places of safety. No-one is behind walls, all are travelling.

The process above describes the position of the Church of Ireland as it embarks on the Hard Gospel Project. We are to question Christ, to question ourselves, and to act.



3. the hard gospel - a shared future?

3.1 The Challenge and the Hope

In the Hard Gospel Scoping Study Report, the authors referred to the hope that:

“members of the Church of Ireland would be equipped to become more confident in their inclusive Christian identity, engage in good citizenship, make a positive impact on society and experience the freedom to be truly Christian and part of a diverse but unified church”⁸

In order for this vision to turn into reality it is clear that the Church of Ireland as an institution and its membership as citizens each have a very important role in society to-day. As explained in the Introduction, through its involvement in the Hard Gospel Project the Church has committed itself as an institution to addressing within its own structure the issues and challenges raised in the Scoping Study Report. It is also committed to establishing initiatives to equip and encourage its clergy and members north and south,

first to challenge sectarianism and negative ways of dealing with difference in our communities and secondly, to be proactive in “articulating and living out a positive alternative”.⁹ This is the challenge and the hope of the “Hard Gospel”.

3.2 Living with Difference in Ireland – North and South

Many of the issues raised in the Scoping Study Report have in recent years been mirrored in society generally. Since the “Good Friday Agreement” or “Belfast Agreement” was reached in April 1998 many people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have been building on the work done over previous years to endeavour to reduce and, if possible, to eliminate sectarianism and other forms of discrimination in society.

3.3 A Shared Future?

In March 2005 the UK Government published “A Shared Future”¹⁰ in which it set out its policy and strategic framework for good relations in Northern Ireland. Its vision for the future is

“a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society firmly founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust and the protection and vindication of human rights for all”.¹¹

This vision is to be founded on “partnership, equality and mutual respect as a basis of good relationships”.¹² If citizens will have respect for diversity and acknowledge their interdependence as citizens then, the framework document asserts, there is the possibility of a normal and equitable civic society. This is a vision or hope for the whole island of Ireland that few people would not aspire to.

3.4 Legal Developments – North and South

In the Good Friday Agreement the UK and Irish governments and the parties representing the people of Northern Ireland affirmed their commitment to work towards the establishment of a society which is reflected in the vision of “A Shared Future”. In order to ensure that these commitments would be translated from rhetoric to reality, the Agreement provided for the establishment of the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland to replace the various existing bodies which previously had responsibility for the promotion and protection of human and civil rights. The role of these extended and enhanced Commissions established by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is to ensure that existing laws, policies and practices are reviewed and screened and that future legislation and policies operate to protect and uphold human rights and equality. Each organisation also has a role in advising the government and statutory bodies and in providing information to the public and promoting awareness of human rights and equality issues.

The Good Friday Agreement provided for comparable steps to be taken by the Irish government to strengthen the protection of human rights and equality in the Republic of Ireland and provide new equality and human rights legislation where necessary. In 1999 the existing Employment Equality Agency was replaced by the Equality Authority which was given a greatly expanded role and functions relating to outlawing

discrimination in work and many other areas. As a direct result of the Good Friday Agreement, a Human Rights Commission was established in 2001 with responsibility for promoting and protecting human rights.

Over the years an ever expanding armoury of anti-discrimination legislation has been enacted for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland by the respective governments to protect citizens’ human and civil rights. The Human Rights Commissions, the Equality Commission and the Equality Authority have also been active in pursuing their respective responsibilities.

3.5 Responsibilities of Public Authorities – the Equality Agenda

To ensure that it would lead by example, the UK government agreed in the Good Friday Agreement that it would “put its own house in order” in Northern Ireland. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 provided the statutory provision now known by those working in any area of public life as the “section 75” obligation. This legislative provision contains a two-fold obligation. First, in section 75(1) it requires designated public authorities to carry out their duties in such a way as will “have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity” between wide ranging groups of people. There is the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- a) between people of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- b) between men and women generally;
- c) between people who have a disability and those who do not; and
- d) between people who have dependents and those who do not.

Secondly, section 75 also provides that those public authorities must have regard “to the desirability of promoting good relations between people of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group”.

In order to ensure that the section 75 obligations are met, a public authority must put in place an Equality Scheme which confirms its commitment to its statutory equality obligations and operates as a plan for the performance of these duties. The Scheme must be approved by the Equality Commission which exercises a monitoring and supervisory role to ensure that the requisite standards are met.

The two-fold section 75 obligation on public authorities produced within central and local government, non



departmental government bodies and many other institutions and organisations in Northern Ireland a growing culture of and respect for equality for all citizens, tolerance of diversity and intolerance of discrimination. The obligations are not only prospective but require a review of policies and practices already in existence. In reviewing and screening existing policies and practices and in devising new ones, a public authority must take into account the equality issues mentioned above. In order to do this it may have to carry out an “Equality Impact Assessment” to ensure that the policy under consideration promotes equality of opportunity and good relations. To ensure transparency, public authorities’ Equality Schemes and the results of Equality Impact Assessments must be published and made available for public scrutiny.

Although the Republic of Ireland does not currently have a legislative provision similar to section 75 in relation to public authorities, pressure is growing for the enactment of such a provision. A report entitled “Equivalence in promoting equality: The implications of the multi-party agreement for the further development of equality measures for Northern Ireland and Ireland” has been recently published as a joint initiative by the Equality Authority and the Equality Commission.¹³ In this it is argued that the Good Friday Agreement imposed an obligation on the Irish government to provide for the “equivalence of rights”, in other words to ensure that an

equal level of protection of equality rights to those in Northern Ireland will pertain in the Republic of Ireland. This may, the report argues, include in due course the government imposing responsibilities on public authorities similar to the Northern Ireland section 75 obligation.

3.6 The Responsibilities of Organisations and Individuals

In the private, community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, organisations and individuals (including churches and church members) are constrained in their behaviour by the existing anti-discrimination legislation even though section 75 as such does not apply directly to them. The state does recognise that some of the issues raised or dealt with by anti-discrimination legislation cause difficulties for religious organisations because of the very nature of religious beliefs and some exceptions or exemptions are granted in the anti-discrimination legislation in areas where these are considered to involve genuine issues of faith. These generally arise with regard to equality of opportunity in areas relating to religious belief, gender and sexual orientation rather than in the area of developing good relations.

3.7 The Community Relations Council

In order to facilitate and encourage the promotion of good relations through the private, community and voluntary sectors at both community and individual levels, the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland has, in the “A Shared Future” strategy framework, been given an enhanced role with a range of responsibilities including funding initiatives and giving guidance and support for those committed to working to improve relationships in the community. The fundamental principles of equity, respect for diversity and interdependence are its watchwords for the promotion of good relations. In addition, the newly constituted Council will provide a forum which is to be broadly representative of civic society where dialogue can take place between people of different faiths and cultural backgrounds.

3.8 The “New Others”

Prior to and immediately following the Good Friday Agreement much effort was channelled into promoting reconciliation and learning to deal with difference in the area of sectarianism. Indeed, the Church of Ireland Sectarianism Education Project, out of which the Hard Gospel Project has developed, was engaged in work in this area. Historically, throughout Ireland “the others” have been seen in the context of Catholics and Protestants and religious and political differences. However, there have for many years been settled minority ethnic groups with different cultures and traditions whose needs and rights must not be overlooked. These groups include Travellers and Indian, Pakistani and Chinese immigrants. Furthermore, in recent years in Ireland, north and south, there has been a significant change in demographic trends with many people coming from other countries of Europe and beyond to find work or seek asylum. There is a growing diversity of cultures, traditions and nationalities which has presented challenges far beyond the traditional divide between Catholics and Protestants with racism now raising issues similar to those faced through sectarianism. Furthermore, the number and variety of faith groups throughout the island of Ireland is growing rapidly bringing a whole new dimension to the concept of understanding diversity and religious tolerance.

In the Republic of Ireland in January 2005 the Irish government published its strategy document “Planning for Diversity. The National Action Plan Against Racism”.¹⁴ Its aim is not only to enhance protection and redress against racism for minority ethnic groups but also to raise awareness of diversity in society and to facilitate full participation and inclusion of minority ethnic people

in Irish society. The Republic’s National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) has been working to “develop an inclusive and strategic approach to combat racism by focusing on its prevention and promoting an intercultural society”.¹⁵ In pursuance of these aims it has established a Training and Resource Unit to train government and non-government organisations and other groups and a Community Development Support Unit to provide assistance and support to community organisations working with minority ethnic groups. It has also been working with the Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) to develop strategies to address racism.

In recognition of the rapid increase in minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland since the end of the Troubles, in July 2005 the UK government published “A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010”.¹⁶ This is to complement the “A Shared Future” framework in promoting, in particular, good race relations. Among the six aims of this strategy is the aim:

“to promote dialogue between, and mutual understanding of, different faiths and cultural backgrounds, both long standing within Northern Ireland and recent arrivals to these shores, guided by overarching human rights norms.”¹⁷

Many institutions and organisations (including the governments and the churches) are still playing “catch up” in understanding and addressing the challenges of what is rapidly and increasingly becoming a multi-cultural, multi-faith island.

3.9 A Role for the Churches

The public agenda strategy documents make it quite clear that there is a role for the churches in promoting good relations and building and developing relationships in the community. Furthermore, in March 2006 a research report entitled “Faith as social capital: Connecting or Dividing?”¹⁸ was published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This explores what it refers to as the important role of faith communities as partners with government in the achievement of social and community cohesion.

It must, of course, be recognised that many of the clergy and members of the Church of Ireland north and south have in their own ways both privately and publicly been working towards such a vision for many years. In its “A Shared Future” document, the UK government acknowledges that it must support and learn from organisations (including those which work on a north/south basis) which have been working for peace and reconciliation for years.¹⁹



4. hard gospel - hard questions

4.1 The Challenge – In Society

In “A Shared Future” the government calls upon “every individual and organisation in Northern Ireland”, including therefore the Church of Ireland and its members, to play their part in achieving a stable and fair society.²⁰ There is no doubt that change is required in society and that churches must positively engage in working to achieve fairness and equality in society or risk being seen as increasingly irrelevant, or worse, being perceived as contributing to the problems.

It is clear from the Sectarianism Education Project started in 1997 and the 2003 Hard Gospel Scoping Study Report that change is also required and desired within the Church of Ireland. “A Shared Future” points out that

“Real change will require leadership, vision, institutional commitment and long-term policies to promote and sustain change.”²¹

This reflects the challenge which the Church of Ireland has already given to and which has been embraced by the Hard Gospel Project. The Hard Gospel programme approved by the Standing Committee of the Church of Ireland confirms that “The Church of Ireland wishes to make a creative contribution to the new and diverse society which is emerging in Ireland, north and south”.²²

4.2 The Challenge – in the Church

The remit of the Hard Gospel project is to give leadership to the Church, its clergy and its members. Whilst maintaining a distinct Church of Ireland identity, it aims to develop policies and practices to educate, facilitate, equip and encourage those dealing daily with division, discrimination and diversity. In addition, it will review existing Church policies and practices to ensure that they do not inhibit or restrict progress in this regard.



In effect, a “Hard Gospel Impact Assessment” will be carried out on structures, policies and practices within the Church of Ireland. This will include identifying and re-evaluating policies and practices which are based primarily on culture and tradition.

4.3 The Way Forward

The Hard Gospel project will build on the institutional commitment already given by the Church of Ireland to embrace change where it is required so that it may make a positive contribution to the promotion of good relations throughout the island of Ireland. The Hard Gospel leadership has already communicated to the governments north and south the commitment of the Church of Ireland and the Hard Gospel programme to engage actively and contribute constructively as a stakeholder in working towards a stable and fair society. This will include engaging in and developing dialogue and constructive relationships with those of different religious beliefs and diverse political opinions and working in partnership with others in order to deal positively and constructively with many kinds of difference.

In participating in the development of a fair society, there will, without doubt, be issues where matters fundamental to the Christian faith are under consideration and on which the Church’s view may differ from those of the respective governments or those of different religions or, indeed, of no religious faith. The Church of Ireland is giving a commitment as a Christian church to engage in dialogue and the building of good relations with those of different views. In return, the Church must also be entitled to parity of esteem and to receive respect for its point of view and convictions from those who do not agree with it rather than finding itself marginalised or ridiculed.

The Hard Gospel Project will also encourage the clergy and members of the Church, through their commitment to the principles of the Hard Gospel properly understood, through loving God and their “neighbours”, to engage in what has been referred to as “active citizenship” and become more involved in working towards the transformation of local communities and the building of peaceful neighbourhoods based on mutual respect and understanding of difference.

5. conclusion

In the public arena, change is generally based on policies espoused by the government of the day or arises from the practical application of legislation or the law as interpreted through the decisions of courts and tribunals. The policies which are put into practice by governments, to be effective, may need to be given the force of law, non-compliance with which will bring sanctions. Anti-discrimination legislation, the section 75 obligation in Northern Ireland and the development of the laws relating to the protection of human rights are each a case in point. The legal imperative makes it clear to citizens and organisations that sectarianism and discrimination are unacceptable and the law endeavours to promote equality of opportunity and good relations between people of all religious beliefs, political opinions and racial groups.

The whole culture of central and local administrations in Ireland north and south is increasingly being given an overarching framework of what is known as “the equality agenda” or “mainstreaming equality” with the aim of promoting equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence as citizens.

Christ’s response in the parable of the Good Samaritan to the lawyer’s question was “What is written in your law?” The Church of Ireland is not subject to the section 75 equality and good relations obligations although the Church and its members north and south are of course subject to the civil and criminal laws of their respective jurisdictions. However, through the Sectarianism Education Project and, subsequently, the Hard Gospel programme, the Church of Ireland has publicly acknowledged the overarching and fundamental moral principles of both the spirit of “the law” and the Christian imperative to “Love God and love your neighbour”. One task of the Hard Gospel project is to help translate these principles into practice by encouraging and empowering the Church and its members to show the love of God in action and become more actively committed to overcoming sectarianism and dealing positively with difference in society.

In the story of the Good Samaritan the power of Christ’s message came from the fact that the good neighbour was one of “the other sort”. In those days a Samaritan

was a person disparaged by the religious establishment of the day and yet, in our times, “the Samaritans” are universally recognised as one of the most caring and compassionate organisations working in society to-day.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Church of Ireland faced ridicule and criticism through its connection by implication and proximity with the sectarian issues at Drumcree. Through painful self-examination, the Church has used this experience to respond responsibly and creatively to the challenges posed by sectarianism, the issues of living with difference and the many changes occurring in society to-day.

The Hard Gospel Project calls on the Church of Ireland as an institution to take an effective leading role in building good relations and as a body of Christian people to continue to make a positive, constructive and active contribution to society as citizens of what is now a rapidly changing multi-faith, multi-cultural island of Ireland. In so doing the Church of Ireland will be entitled to be seen, not as a Christian church unprepared to deal with difficult issues but as a Church prepared to show the love of God in action.

references

1. Sectarianism Working Group Report 1998. Appendix E of Standing Committee Report 1998, Church of Ireland, Dublin, 1998, para 1.0.
2. [The Hard Gospel: Dealing Positively with Difference in the Church of Ireland. - A Scoping Study Report to the Sectarianism Education Project](#). Gareth I Higgins and Research Team: Michael Blythman, Cathy Curran and Sarah Parkinson. General Synod of the Church of Ireland, Dublin, 2003, p 13.
3. Ibid.
4. Standing Committee Report 2004, Church of Ireland, Dublin, 2004, p 251.
5. [The Hard Gospel: Dealing Positively with Difference in the Church of Ireland. - A Scoping Study Report to the Sectarianism Education Project](#). Gareth I Higgins and Research Team: Michael Blythman, Cathy Curran and Sarah Parkinson. General Synod of the Church of Ireland, Dublin, 2003, p 2.
6. Standing Committee Report 2004, Church of Ireland, Dublin, p 252.
7. Ibid.
8. [The Hard Gospel: Dealing Positively with Difference in the Church of Ireland. - A Scoping Study Report to the Sectarianism Education Project](#). Gareth I Higgins and Research Team: Michael Blythman, Cathy Curran and Sarah Parkinson. General Synod of the Church of Ireland, Dublin, 2003, p 5.
9. Ibid.
10. [A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland](#). Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), Belfast, 2005.
11. Ibid., p 3.
12. Ibid.
13. Colm O’Cinneide. The Equality Authority, Dublin, 2005.
14. [Planning for Diversity. The National Action Plan against Racism](#). Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Dublin, 2005.
15. <http://www.nccri.ie/nccri-about.html>
16. [A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010](#). OFMDFM, Belfast, 2005.
17. Ibid., p 33.
18. Robert Furbey, Adam Dinham, Richard Farnell, Doreen Finneron, Guy Wilkinson with Catherine Howarth, Dilwar Hussain, Sharon Palmer. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, 2006.
19. OFMDFM, Belfast, 2005, para 2.8.17.
20. Ibid., para 1.2.2.
21. Ibid., para 1.4.1.
22. [The Hard Gospel Programme](#). Appendix B to Standing Committee Report 2005, Church of Ireland, Dublin, 2005, p 256.

appendix

Jews and Samaritans had a troubled history. Deep divisions between these two neighbouring peoples had arisen over the centuries. The fault lines of disagreement could be traced along those of racial purity, doctrinal disputes and a long historical sense of betrayal.

Luke 10:25-37¹

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' "

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."



¹The Holy Bible. New International Version. 1984. Zondervan Publishing House.

the hard gospel - a theological statement

Opportunity as well as challenge arises for the Church of Ireland, and all other Christian churches, in addressing two profound questions:

1. How should we as a Christian church regard ourselves and our role in a rapidly changing, multi-faith and multicultural 21st century Ireland (north and south)?
2. How should we as individuals in the context of 21st century Ireland (north and south) regard ourselves and our responsibilities as:
 - a) Individual Christians
 - b) Members of the Church of Ireland
 - c) Citizens of a wider community and society - living with our diverse "neighbours"?

The Hard Gospel Project represents a commitment by the Church of Ireland to examine not only the challenges of faith which arise for Christians in the "vertical" relationship in loving God but also the practical implications for the outworking of faith in "horizontal" relationships as expressed in Christ's command to "love your neighbour".

The Hard Gospel Project is the Church of Ireland's response to the challenge to speak truth to ourselves, as well as to the world we live in. Its core aim is clear - to strengthen the church for effective witness in a divided and changing society.

What is represented in the Hard Gospel Project is a belief within the Church of Ireland that any Church is strengthened by asking itself profound questions, and understanding and engaging with the communities in which it lives.

In the words of Archbishop Eames;

It represents a sincere and prayerful self-examination of how this Church approaches difference at all levels in its daily life. It involves examination of attitude, organisation, activities, and contact with society, influence and leadership. It touches Church life at its most potent and realistic point - the local scene in a parish. It asks hard questions - and expects hard answers. But it calls for action, change and serious readjustment ...it represents for me the sincerity and integrity of internal examination on the same basis the Church has often demanded of society. We are in other words doing unto ourselves as we have asked of others.

Our vision is a Church of Ireland which takes a positive leadership role in addressing the issues of sectarianism and dealing with difference that face the rapidly changing societies across the island of Ireland in the 21st century and a membership who contribute constructively to the development of transformed communities through reflecting and outworking Christ's command to love God and their neighbour.

acknowledgements

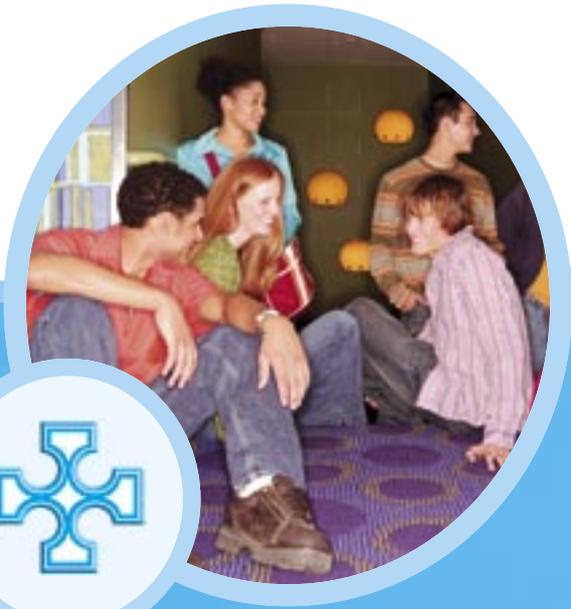
The Hard Gospel Project is grateful for generous financial assistance from Church of Ireland related sources including the Priorities Fund, the Community Bridges Project of the International Fund for Ireland, the Republic's Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund, and the Community Relations Council.

authors

Anne Brown LL.B., B.C.L. (Oxon). Policy and research consultant. Member of the Church of Ireland and Coleraine Multicultural Forum.

Richard Henderson is Bishop of Tuam, Killala and Achonry. He has recently published *The Jealousy of Jonah* (Columba 2006).

Earl Storey is Director of the Hard Gospel Project.



The Hard Gospel Project

Church of Ireland House, Church Avenue, Rathmines, Dublin 6

Tel: 00 353 1 412 5606 **Fax:** 00 353 1 497 8821 **Email:** info@hardgospel.net

www.hardgospel.net