

GENERAL SYNOD 2007

Address to CHURCH OF IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD

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**By Rev Doug Baker, Presbyterian Church USA Regional Liaison for Ireland and
the United Kingdom and consultant to the Hard Gospel Committee**

I have been involved as a companion on the journey of various Church of Ireland processes and committees that have resulted in and overseen the Hard Gospel Initiative for over six years now.

At the worst of times, it has been like hitting one's head against a well constructed brick wall - with CAUTION written across it in large letters. And I can assure you that in terms of checks and balances the Church of Ireland is secure. There is no danger of any half-baked idea, fanciful whim or farcical exercise whisking it away on some wild goose chase.

At the best of times, though, it has been an immense privilege to be alongside committed individuals and groups within this denomination prepared to embark on a journey of profound obedience to God. It may have begun in some people's minds as a journey away from any vestiges of sectarianism in your own structures, statements and actions. But it has long since become so much more than that. The Hard Gospel Initiative is a journey toward a society in every corner of this island – as God's love would make it. It is a journey of attitudinal change in the hearts and minds of individuals and of cultural and institutional change within this church – for the sake of societal transformation on this island – in line with the life you believe God intends.

The Hard Gospel initiative is not driven by the negative impact of sectarianism, nor by the priorities of any community relations agencies, but by the gospel.

Matthew 28 calls us to *go into all the world and make disciples* – those who not simply believe in but walk in the way of Christ, learn his ways of thinking and acting and incorporate them into their own lives – *teaching them to observe all that Jesus has*

commanded. When asked, what the greatest commandment is, Jesus responded - to love the lord your God with your whole being and to love your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus was born into a world full of divisions – between Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinners, rich and poor, female and male. He carried out his ministry where racial and religious prejudice ran deep and all kinds of barriers had become part of the accepted fabric of life. But in stark contrast and open defiance of these established patterns, Jesus challenged them in the stories he told and more importantly repeatedly crossed them himself. Jesus was a great mixer and a breaker down of walls. Looking at the too-often fragmented reality of the parishes, districts, nations, island and world in which the Church of Ireland exists – contexts in which division along social, political, religious, racial, age, gender, and theological lines flourish – and then looking at the ministry of Jesus – it is clear that being HIS disciples involves reaching out, associating with those who are not like us, loving those we may not like, looking out for the interests of those who don't necessarily look out for ours. It is a Hard Gospel to live – but it IS gospel, “good news,” because it is the way God gives us to move beyond conflict, and division and enmity - and toward Shalom – profound peace.

The vision of a Shared Future outlined by the Northern Ireland Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister in 2005 reads as follows:

“The establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence.”

It is aspirational, intended to lift the gaze of a society still coming out of conflict toward the destination it might seek to reach - and it is intended to offer some pointers for the action needing to be taken in the present to get there.

It is a good statement, but it is not very original. Most of the concepts in it are borrowed from the biblical language of Shalom – of life where enmity is no more, where justice rolls down like waters, where neighbours and strangers are recognized and cared for as brothers and sisters.

You would be right in thinking the Shared Future document sets out a challenging agenda for government in Northern Ireland, but what about Ephesians 1, which

declares that God has made known his will to us for the fullness of time – to unite all things in Christ. What an agenda – what a vision - for us to be called to participate in and journey toward!

The Hard Gospel Initiative is part of what follows from having our gaze lifted not just by Ephesians 1 but by the whole of Scripture to the great ends toward which God is working - and then looking around at what needs to be changed here and now. That is why it applies to both parts of this island equally.

New Testament scholar Walter Wink writes:

History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being.

Hope imagines its future and then acts as if that future is irresistible.

(Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press 1992)

Years ago I came across a sketch which depicts beautifully what he means. The sketch shows a gardener watering a small sapling. Attached to it – for future use - is a hammock with the other end around a large tree. What I love about this character is the way in which his vision for the future and practical action in the present connect:

There has been plenty of vision offered to the Church of Ireland in relation to the Hard Gospel Initiative. What is needed now is a rapid multiplication of practical action consistent with this vision – a virtual soaking of seeds and saplings already planted.

I have been invited to comment on what failure and success might look like with regard to the Hard Gospel Initiative:

FAILURE would be to think, because of short-term external funding and contracts for staff, that this is a short-term initiative that is almost half-over and soon the Church of Ireland will be able to return to normal life.

FAILURE would be for the wider church to look primarily to the three person Project Team or the Hard Gospel Committee to take most of the initiative in identifying and spelling out steps to take in implement this vision - or wait for additional ideas and materials they will continue to produce, when what has already been given to every parish in ‘*Life Beyond Boundaries*’ and ‘*Loving Our Neighbours*’ provides more than enough by way of ideas and tools to get started now on this journey where they are.

FAILURE would be for the Hard Gospel Project Team to do some really challenging and interesting things in various settings, and build some important relationships with groups beyond whom the Church of Ireland normally relates to well, but not find ways of bringing the wider church into that process, or involving a wide range of church members engaging in those new and deeper relationships with others, or imparting skills to a host of members who will continue Hard Gospel kind of actions long beyond the staff team's employment.

FAILURE, above all, would be realising the task outlined in the Hard Gospel Initiative is too big to get your head around let alone accomplish and, therefore, not do anything about the parts you do clearly understand and can do something about.

SUCCESS on the other-hand, would involve:

A recognition that the ministry of reconciliation comes hand in hand with following Jesus Christ and, therefore, an explicit commitment being made by the General Synod and those in leadership at all levels to long term peacebuilding over decades across all of the fractures which blight life for us and for those around us – as a core mission component of the Church of Ireland;

An integration of the themes and priorities of the Hard Gospel into the ongoing work of every board, committee, and agency of central church structures, and of every group in each parish – so that whenever the Hard Gospel staff, committee and name fade from memory in the Church of Ireland its essence remains;

(A recognition that when we focus primarily on whether or not some other individual or group are “in Christ” and then decide how we will relate to them based on the answer we arrive at, we are asking the wrong question. Instead the primary question that springs into our mind will become “How does my being in Christ influence how I relate to this neighbour – whoever they are.”)

Success will mean the action of moving outside of our walls and normal routines to purposely meet and understand those who are physically near us but with whom we simply don't relate at any depth - being replicated in dozens of settings in every diocese.

Success will include the commandment to love our neighbour being included in every confirmation class in parishes in all 32 counties, not just with concrete examples of

how the Church of Ireland is living out love for neighbours but also explicit opportunities for those preparing for confirmation to engage firsthand in some way with neighbours who are different to them and learn by experience that this is an important part of what following Christ involves.

Success will involve committees within the central structures looking around their meeting tables and knowing that they need others who are not currently represented there to join them – not to fulfill any political correctness - but because they simply can't do their job properly without them: That you can't effectively plan for an all-Ireland church with representatives from three large dioceses; or for an all-age church with no one under forty present; or utilize the diverse gifts God has given the church with only a token number of women or lay members invited; or address issues that affect those far beyond the Church of Ireland with no voices from outside it present.

Success will mean welcome signs appearing outside churches in the languages of all those they want to attract, Church of Ireland buildings being used as often by non-members as members, and Church of Ireland leaders and Synods speaking out on behalf of the concerns of 'other' groups as frequently and loudly as their own.

Success will involve the culture of 'not discussing difficult issues openly within the Church of Ireland' – which I am continually being told about by you - being changed and new levels of understanding and trust being developed between those of different churchmanship. Given that it has not been possible to elect Bishops in the Northern Ireland dioceses through the normal process for several years now, it is clear that the theological or churchmanship divide is a serious one. Put bluntly, success will mean facilitated dialogue occurring between those who wear black and those who wear coloured stoles, enabling them to see beyond those images and theological labels and understand what makes each other tick as people and trust each other enough to affirm each other and work together in ministry.

Success will also mean Church of Ireland groups moving beyond polite dialogue with those of other denominations, faiths, and political outlooks and addressing real issues which do divide them – and in so doing becoming a witness to the wider society (and perhaps the wider Anglican communion) that addressing disagreements through

dialogue and finding ways to accommodate difference is possible. (Holy Family – Fortwilliam Macrory)

According to Paul in Romans 8, the transformation of creation is somehow tied up with the revealing of the children of God. You know how when a new baby is born people come to ooh and ah and say “He has his father’s nose.” “She has her mother’s eyes.” As the child gets older it might be “She has her grandmother’s musical talent.” “He has his uncle’s sense of humour.” Family resemblances are recognizable. In the Beatitudes Jesus declares, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called – recognized as - children of God.*” (Mt 5:9) Could it be that part of what is required for the transformation of Ireland, north and south, as it groans under the weight of all that diminishes the peace God intends, is simply for members of the Church of Ireland to comprehend and live out more fully their true identity as peacemakers - to really get busy engaging in the family business.

Success for the Hard Gospel Initiative will mean going out from this General Synod with your gaze lifted high to the kind of positive peace God intends and your sleeves rolled up to engage in practical action consistent with it now where you are.

Can the Church of Ireland do it? Absolutely. There is a high level support from key leadership and there is plenty of easily identifiable action for every person here to get on with now.

Will the Church of Ireland do it? I don’t know. That really is up to you.