PAST/FUTURE/NOW
(n) ireland

A hopeful contribution by Evangelical Alliance NI
Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:18-19

Throughout our 165 year history the Evangelical Alliance has sought to “unite evangelicals to present Christ credibly as good news for spiritual and social transformation.” The Alliance is not unionist, nationalist or party political, but we are hopeful about the Haass initiative. Our members include many from the mainstream churches as well as those from newer, emerging and independent churches. We seek the peace and prosperity of all within Northern Ireland and are more concerned with the character of our citizens than their constitutional status.

On an average Sunday you will find about 200,000* evangelicals in approximately 2000 churches across Northern Ireland. These worshipping communities are in the main, intergenerational and socially diverse. These are people who turn up every week and are financially committed to their church and community. This compares favourably to political parties who have just a few thousand members each.

We don’t claim to speak for all Christians but we do speak for many committed to the peace and prosperity of this place.

* Evangelicals make up 25-33% of the Protestant population (Mitchell & Tilly 2004) applied to 2011 census data.
Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.

Mother Teresa

Foreword
Northern Ireland finds itself in very interesting times. We've had the Good Friday and St. Andrews agreements, power sharing, devolution of policing and justice powers and support for them. There is much to be celebrated. Yet there are more peace walls than ever and growing tensions in the Executive and on the streets.

In this part of the world, aspects of our past continue to hang around our neck like a millstone. In fact it’s not always clear where the past ends and the now begins. We aspire to a better way but too often the past holds our future captive. And not only our future; the past has pre-occupied us to the point of inertia here and now.

Trauma and conflict does that. Our eyes can become so distracted or glazed with tears that we remove ourselves from the present. Like Lot’s wife, we can destroy ourselves by dwelling on destruction. We retreat to familiar territory of them and us, blinded to seeing a way forward. With eyes and hearts fixed on the past, dreams for the future fade and we struggle to maintain a grip on the present. Without change, the now becomes a cycle of groundhog days, a Neverland where we fail to mature, grow and flourish.

But we, an alliance of evangelicals, see things differently. We believe our people’s shared Christian heritage and the indestructible message of the gospel provides a better way. We see a generation of risk-taking peace-makers. There is a desire to continue the journey away from the flawed and failed dichotomy of Catholic vs Protestant. We see cultural pioneers, architects of a new public square re-creating the space of now. A new thing.

We don’t urgently need more political agreements or more peace money from Europe, we urgently need heart change. This is at the very core of the Church - it's life-blood and hopeful legacy.

While we are unapologetically aspirational, we have attempted to be deeply practical. Our humble prayer is that you may find a few of these principles and suggestions helpful.

We have only today, let us begin.
Contents

- **Past:** We cannot change it but we can change how we see and understand it

- **Future:** We set out a new vision for the post-troubles public square

- **Now:** We outline some practical suggestions for a better present.

- **Church:** Finally we look at the specific role of Christ-followers.
The flashpoints change from week to week. Commemorations, flags, parades, inquiries, a hierarchy of victims, the role of ex-combatants. But these are all symptoms. The underlying cause is our community’s inability to move on from/deal with/come to terms with our past. Across the thirty odd years of the modern troubles over 3,700 people were killed with tens of thousands more suffering physical and psychological injuries. In a country with a geography and population this small, a conflict this long and bloody was sure to have profound consequences. Some of the words, actions and attitudes in our community even in recent weeks betray the unresolved trauma of the past.

Some of our difficulties around the past are just incredibly practical. How does any country or individual ‘deal with’ their past? Our past is complicated, irreversible, disputed and growing each day. Added to this we each seek different things from the past – truth, justice, vindication, hope for a better way forward?

There is no single answer or quick fix and still a huge amount of raw pain and trauma. We have identified a few key culture changes required to create a future from our past:-

**Disputed narratives**

Our past is a prologue, still shaping the unfolding story of our lives today. It is a narrative people seem unable and unwilling to agree on. There isn’t even agreement as to where and when our contentious past starts. One thing is clear though, the past dictates our posture towards present events and gives form to our attitudes and mindsets. We are scared by old wounds, some of which are still weeping.

As clear as it seems to each section of our community, the past is not agreed. Ex-combatants, a hierarchy of victims, moral equivalence, who was right and who was wrong, who caused the troubles, legitimacy of the State and legitimacy of paramilitary activity. At the heart of all these conflicting narratives is a fear of the ‘other’. There is a fear that history will record and legitimise the story of the ‘other’ as the ultimate truth. But Northern Ireland is not the only place where the past is disputed. History has always been a story of stories, intimately intertwined while profoundly disputed. Followers of Jesus around the world are well used to holding a radically different world-view to those around us.

We must be aware of the postmodern notion that all stories have equal worth - promoting all stories and views at the expense of truth. The postmodernist argues that what really happened is unknowable and unimportant and on that basis seeks to rewrite history. There have been attempts recently in Northern Ireland to argue that historical facts are unimportant and irrelevant. Instead
each group or individual constructs their own story based on their own incomplete and often inaccurate information. Each of these stories is seen as true as the next, in a world which claims there is no absolute truth.

We cannot change the past but we can change how we see it.

We need to address the fear of the other’s story. We all see the past, future and events of the present differently – no two witnesses recount an incident in the same way. However, this does not mitigate the reality that there are objective facts and other verifiable data alongside personal experience and opinion. We need to learn how to hold these subjective and objective threads in tension.

Victims

Another difficult issue is defining victims. This issue sits right in the difficult area between truth, justice and mercy. Ultimately we need heart change over and above legal process. This is evidenced by the fact that whilst there is a legal definition of a victim, it is not universally accepted. There is then a danger that a hierarchy of victims develops and that those at the top have veto over how the past is dealt with. However if this is true, it must also be acknowledged that many of those most affected by the Troubles are most inclined to forgive.¹ Sir Kenneth Bloomfield (1998) made the case for a more universal approach to victimhood in Northern Ireland by finding “some substance in the argument that no-one living in Northern Ireland through this most unhappy period will have escaped some degree of damage”. Everyone has suffered because of the conflict in Northern Ireland, including those born since the Agreement. No single group of victims should have a veto over the process.

There must also be caution in the use of the terms ‘innocent victims’ and ‘moral equivalence’. From a Christian perspective, all life is precious because we are all made in the image of God. But no one is completely innocent – without any guilt. These points are not made to level the playing field between victims and perpetrators, but to acknowledge our shared humanity.

We must also find new language beyond victimhood. Survivor is a start, but identity is still centred around a tragic event which defines that person. People are much more than the events they’ve lived through and the acts committed by or against them. We encourage the Church to play its role as a place of healing and restoration, a place of new beginnings, identities and relationships.

You can’t be a victim and heal

A J Langer

¹ A practical earthing of the potential of victims as ‘moral beacons’ can be seen in recent research by Professors John Brewer and Bernie Hayes. ‘In two pieces of research undertaken as part of the Leverhulme programme, John Brewer and Bernie Hayes report results that show that victims in Northern Ireland can be moral beacons pointing toward a progressive and shared future. The first has yet to be published but forms part of the working paper recently loaded to the Publications Section of the Compromise after conflict website. It conclusively shows that victims are less punitive toward ex-combatants than non-victims with respect to four popularly canvassed policies. The second piece of research has just appeared in the current issue of the journal Political Studies (volume 61, issue 2, 2013: 442-61), and uses data from the 2010 Northern Ireland Election Survey, which Bernie Hayes was involved with separately. It shows that individual victims - those who had directly and indirectly experienced violent incidences and perceived themselves as victims - were significantly more supportive of power sharing arrangements under the Good Friday Agreement than non-victims. This held true regardless of whether Protestants or Catholic victims are considered.’ – Compromise after conflict
Identity and relationships

‘The Troubles’ centred around broken relationships and distorted identities. All of these issues: parades, protests, flags, symbols and emblems, are intimately connected to our identity and relationships. These are deeply emotive, key to our sense of place and purpose in the world around us. This is gospel stuff, literally. Jesus ushered in a new existence, God’s Kingdom in which identity and relationships are restored and re-defined.

Identity

Symbols of identity are obvious and everywhere in Northern Ireland, including flags, parades and language but it is also much more subtle than that. It’s in the newspapers we read, the sports we follow, the names we carry, even the way we refer to this place. Our identity is so bound up in everything that it would almost be easier in this part of the world if we could just be born again...and ironically that’s the scandal of the Gospel. For Christ-followers, identity is no longer primarily defined by nationality, social status, politics, ethnicity or even what we’ve done in the past. Our identity is found in relationship with God and those around us. Constitutional loyalties are still legitimate but they form a secondary part of our identity.

Can we challenge a culture where identity is too often reduced to national allegiances? We find our identity and purpose in so many other things: faith, family, community and work. Coincidently these are often in short supply in some of the areas worst affected by the recent riots. We need long term vision from Government, civic society and Church to improve wellbeing, rebuild relationships and support healthy families; re-orientating personal and corporate identity around these signs of hope over and above contentious symbols.

Relationships

“It would be a happier world if civil servants were required at the end of every policy paper they wrote to include a paragraph assessing its relational implications for the society they are serving”

Sir Joe Pilling

The quality of people’s social relationships is crucial to their wellbeing. Evidence shows that people need to belong, to have close and long-term social relationships, not simply interaction with strangers, to experience wellbeing. Christians believe that God is a relational being, a community of persons – the Trinity. All human beings are made in the image of this relational God. Fulfilment is found in relationships, with others, and ultimately with God. The biblical concept of shalom encapsulates this idea of human flourishing or wellbeing.

Transforming society is about getting relationships right – with God and others. We must understand the value of relationships in society, articulate a Christian
vision for right relationship and create an environment in which these new relationships can flourish. A truly prosperous society focuses on all that makes life worthwhile – wellbeing, family, relationships and the welfare of others. Christians are called to live, work and advocate for this reality.

Parades and protests must be approached from a place of relationship, community respect, responsibility and wellbeing.

We call for an end to the dangerous desire to dominate this land and its people. We call for an end to internal games, party pride and politicking, which has cost us all so much. We call for humility on the part of all involved.

If we want to see basic civility, good relations and respect on our streets we need to see it modelled in public leadership. We graciously encourage government, civil and Church leaders to lead by example in their relationships. See 'Now' for practical examples of this.

**Framework principles**

*relationship / forgiveness / grace / repentance*

Both Protestants and Catholics share a Christian heritage and understanding of the importance of forgiveness, grace and repentance in the context of relationships. These concepts are central to the Christian faith and to the restoration of broken relationships. We have seen clearly that attempts to move on without a change in unrepentant and unforgiving hearts is like trying to stick a plaster over a cancer.

*Relationship:* To date the headline progress has been made through political and legal agreements and the use of financial carrots or sticks. We need reconciliation of relationship at every level in society. We need our politicians and community leaders to show leadership very specifically by building personal relationships with each other.

*Forgiveness:* To grant free pardon, to give up all claim on account of an offence or debt. A choice to let go of hurt and wrong caused. In this context it is not giving up the pursuit of truth and justice or betraying loved ones but accepting the reality that in this life the truth does not always come out and justice is not always served.

*Grace:* Unmerited favour, giving and getting what is undeserved, not always seeking a pound of flesh, not dragging up the past for political gain, showing mercy.

*Repentance:* Acknowledgement of wrong, remorse, turning away from wrong/sinful/harmful actions, mindset and attitudes, to change direction and seek change for the better.

“Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.”

C S Lewis
We cannot and should not legislate to make people repent, forgive or show grace. However, these principles are vital in some way at an institutional level if we want to empower and lead our citizens on to a better future not dictated by the events of our past. These are heart changes but they could be led by the Church and accompanied by very practical measures.

Repentance is not a popular concept because it involves admitting we were wrong and putting personal responsibility above our perceived rights. Repentance and forgiveness are deeply personal things which Christians understand through personal experience.

If we cannot collectively agree that some things were wrong – murder, sectarianism – then we are bound to live through these things again. Even the most fervent Republican and Loyalist narratives should be able to acknowledge wrongs committed on both sides. On the past, we need at least a joint statement, acknowledging, and turning away from the violence of the past; we need remorse on both sides and distancing from harmful actions and attitudes.

Following this ‘line in the sand statement’ we need a new, shared mindset – a forgiving and gracious attitude (not always dragging up the past or seeking our pound of flesh) to overcome difficulties which will definitely arise. This is about moving beyond constitutional agreements to a place of relationship. Again a practical example is the good relationships commitment we’re calling for at Stormont - an agreement, designed by MLAs themselves to disagree well, to refrain from personal attacks, to treat each other with dignity and respect. If politicians want people on the streets to share, integrate and respect each other they need to be prepared to model it themselves on the Hill.

*The word ‘resentment’ expresses what happens if the cycle of blame goes uninterrupted. It means literally ‘to feel again’. Resentment clings to the past, relives it over and over again, picks each fresh scab so that the wound never heals.*

Philip Yancey

Measures like these are not conventional, not easy to put into a manifesto nor likely to win votes for either side. But we need some sort of institutional framework which interrupts the cycle of blame, to draw a line under the past and begin to shape a new future. This will be incredibly difficult but these are choices that can be made. It is not a quick fix nor a silver bullet but an important opportunity to reframe the political climate and posture for the years ahead. There is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to be a world-leader in relationship restoration.

**Forefathers**

Forefathers are an extremely important part of our collective community culture. Loyalists and unionists celebrate the victories of their forefathers; the siege of Derry, the battle of the Boyne and the Somme through to those in State
organisations like the UDR, RUC and British Army. Forefathers are equally respected in the Republican and Nationalist tradition. From the United Irish Men to the Easter rising through to the more recent Troubles there is a custom of remembering and respecting the Irish ‘patriot dead’. There is also the more contentious act of remembering those who perpetrated terrorist acts.

The Bible talks a lot about forefathers and also the concept of the ‘sins of the father’ - Exodus 34:7, Ezekiel 18:19-20, John 9:1-3. The overall picture of these verses is of a dual reality, where the actions of one generation invariably impact those following. And yet, the picture is also of the grace of God as every new generation can choose a new redemptive way.

Many of our forefathers are long since dead but their grievances live on, profoundly shaping the culture of our entire community. Deeply engrained within the psyche of both sides of our community is a profound reverence and respect for the sacrifices of those who have gone before. Many of our forefathers sacrificed their lives for their cause. It’s time for new sacrifices to be made. These new sacrifices will also cost us our lives – not in the sense of death but a completely new way of living.

At the crux of our inability to move on from the past is fear. Each side is so scared of betraying our forefathers that we’ve forgotten we are forefathers to generations to come. Let’s not become so concerned with cultural preservation that we miss creating new shared culture in the here and now. Perhaps the most profound way to honour our forefathers is to let their victories and defeats rest in peace with them. Can we honour forefathers in new ways, not by picking up their grievances but by taking up a new cause? Can we offer more creative ways of remembering, commemorating and celebrating?
Future

“It is in the shelter of each other that people live”

Irish proverb

We see a flourishing Northern Ireland, a place that is truly at peace built on strong relationships within our community. One community shaped by generosity, hospitality and risk. We dare to see Northern Ireland as a world-leader, a place where broken things are given the opportunity to be made whole and where relationships grow healthier, stronger and deeper.

We see one community.

One community united around their desire for peace, wellbeing and whole-life prosperity.

One community in which all the broken and dislocated pieces get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies.

One community bound in a shared history and a determination for a better future. The community is Catholic, Protestant, believers of all faiths and none, Unionist, Nationalist, Loyalist and Republican, those of all political beliefs and none. Everyone is respected as an image-bearer of God. Everyone has a voice, a vote and a part to play.

One community where all leaders lead by example treating everyone with dignity, respect and kindness.

We see one community brave enough to respect difference.

One community marked by respect for their collective cultures, identities and political aspirations. The principle of democratic self-determination is accepted as the umbrella under which opposing loyalties are accommodated. We see a community more concerned with its character than its ultimate constitution.

One community which respects each other’s flags and symbols. One community where flags can be raised and lowered for a day in celebration or remembrance, not left on lamp-posts as territorial markings.

One community marked by forgiveness.
One community with many differences and disagreements, like any other. But this community thrives on their **agreement** to disagree well - robustly, sensitively, and maturely.

One community which views **hurt**, not as a weapon or an excuse for hate, but as common ground on which to empathise with the other. Where the weak show us strength—where victims and survivors inspire us to show grace.  

One community where all who seek it are given another chance. Where justice is restorative and mercy is outrageous. For in one community an injustice against one is an injustice against all.

One **gracious** and humble community.

One community which is seasoned in giving the gifts of **generosity** and unconditional love; taking the first step, in going the extra mile, being the unlikely good Samaritan and in turning the other cheek.

One community that appreciates the cost of **peace**. Peace is not held lightly or cheaply. We see a community willing to move forward together away from lines drawn in the sand by previous generations. A community committed to creating a post-sectarian space.

One community who **collaborate**.

One community who work together in health, politics, business, education and charity. Sides are put aside. There is a vibrant public square in which there is room for all. We see one community able to hold the tensions of **equity** and diversity. Where everyone is equal but accorded the respect of difference. Rights are vital but they flourish in the context of responsibility. Sectarianism, racism, homophobia, intolerance of religion and poverty are fought together.

One community built on **relationships**. Family, community, institutionally - relationships are prioritised. The importance of good relationships is recognised at home, in school and the workplace.

One community where the **church** leads the way in demonstrating how to love our neighbour and love our enemy, and shows us how to develop new grace-centred relationships.

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2 Brewer and Hayes
One community that welcomes the ‘other’.

One community in which there are no no-go areas. A community which shares space, housing, education and infrastructure. A community without walls both physical and imagined.

One community where everyone can share education. Where the role of parents, Church and state are respected. Where maths and sport, science and economics can be taught in a shared space.

One community that celebrates culture.

One community in which parading plays a positive role in our future, with the loyal Orders moving from a place of cultural preservation to helping to create new traditions for everyone.

One community with a culture of peace, unity and prosperity. Culture therefore that can be celebrated – for example in an annual joint peace parade.

One community respectful of their forefathers but not trapped by the guilt of betraying them. A community more concerned about becoming forebears to new generations to come. We seek to create new culture to be celebrated in years to come, to be cultural architects and cultural engineers instead of simply cultural curators.

This is our vision for Northern Ireland; one hopeful future-facing community. Now is the time to change - not to cling to the past. One community requires belief in a shared peaceful, prosperous and united future. One in which everybody counts and everybody has a role to play.
As President Obama said in his recent visit to Northern Ireland, “this little island, that inspires the biggest things, its best days are yet ahead”. He described the Northern Ireland peace process as a blueprint for ending other conflicts around the world. We can be world-leaders but we still have work to do ourselves. Here are some practical examples of what we can do here and now:-

1. **Groundswell up** – Many have chosen to opt out, but now is the time to speak out and for voices to be heard. There's no glory in complaining privately for a lifetime about the change that never comes. Imagine if every MLA received phone calls, emails and visits from their constituents with a unified call for something better. A generous mandate, given to politicians and institutions, asking them to forgive, to show grace and to repent from the harmful actions and mindsets of the past. A giving of our permission as constituents to break from ‘them and us’ thinking and a clear message not to continue it in our name.

2. **Leadership down** - What if MLAs designed and signed up to a Good Relationships Commitment? Not a legal document but a spirited agreement to treat each other with dignity and respect. In politics it’s natural and healthy for people and parties to robustly disagree. This is not a naive call for niceness; it’s about agreeing to disagree well. It’s about taking a daring step to improve the level of political discourse for the wellbeing of all in our society. It is a challenge to each politician to move beyond legal agreements and codes of conduct into real relationship and a very practical example of cohesion, sharing and integration. It’s about leading by example. We do not dare to dictate the terms of the commitment from the outside but the terms must be meaningful, optimistically ambitious and above party politics. A few simple examples of specific commitments could be: agreeing to refrain from personal attacks, raising issues in private before going public. Could this be an opportunity for Northern Ireland to be a world-leader of everyday politics?

3. **Relationship Proofing** - Could all new policies be ‘relationship-proofed’ for their potential impact on family and community relationships? Policy proofing is a simple but effective tool, which is already in existence here in the form of ‘rural proofing’ which has been used since 2002. In Northern Ireland 4 out of 10 people live in a rural community yet 10 out of 10 people here are affected by the quality of their relationships. Again Northern Ireland could become a world-leader in terms of innovative policy development which not only grows the economy but improves the quality of our relationships - both of which are key to our post-conflict future.

4. **The Past** – Politically, we need at least a joint statement, acknowledging, and turning away from the violence of the past. We need to hear and see humble remorse on both sides and a commitment to distance ourselves from harmful actions and attitudes.

5. **New political mindsets** - Following this ‘line in the sand statement’ we
need a new shared mindset, a gracious and forgiving attitude (not always dragging up the past or seeking our pound of flesh) to overcome the difficulties which will definitely arise. This is about moving beyond enforced constitutional agreements to a place of relationship. (e.g. The Good Relationships Commitment) Measures like these are not conventional, not easy to put into a manifesto nor likely to win votes for either side. But we need some sort of institutional forgiveness, grace and repentance to draw a line under the past and begin to shape a new future. This will be incredibly difficult but these are choices that can be made. It is not a quick fix nor a silver bullet but an important opportunity to reframe the political climate and posture for the years ahead.

6. **Forefathers** - A difficult but brave joint move by leaders on both sides is needed to *give permission* to the community that they no longer have to be trapped by a fear of betraying the past. This gives space to focus on being forefathers ourselves and to creating new things to be celebrated by our children's children over the next 400-odd years. This is still a bit visionary but a start would be introducing some of this language and thinking to politicians and community leaders to help catalyst the cultural focus from the past to the future.

7. **For fathers** - The ‘Troubles’ disproportionately affected young working class men on both sides. A programme is required for young fathers/fathers-to-be in loyalist/republican areas. It would help them look back at the influence of previous generations and determine what impact they want to have on their children's generation. It could conduit their passion and pride for their past into their future.

8. **'Epetition'/civic engagement** - One of the key features of any democracy is the ability of the people to have their voices heard by their government. The recent flags issue has brought this right to the fore of public debate. A very simple way for the public to voice their opinion on an issue is through a petition. In Westminster an online petition system or *epetition* has been set up which allows anyone to start a petition on any issue ([http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/](http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/)). If the number of signatories reaches a minimum threshold the petition is considered for a Parliamentary debate. This could be a very effective way for anyone in society to become a catalyst for change. This feature could easily be added to the existing NI Assembly website and would help to improve communication and increase confidence between community and Government. It could be a useful tool in the *Building a united Community* strategy by giving a voice to marginalised voices and communities. It will increase citizen interaction and could help elected representatives to hear more clearly those issues which are important to the people they represent. This policy has already been implemented effectively by the British and Irish Governments which stands as a credible precedent.

9. **One community** - It is necessary that we speak of the community as one single entity where we do not divide it to conquer the other. We acknowledge that there will always be different sections and fractures

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3 We have conducted preliminary research on costings and processes which can be made available.
within the community but we speak of the community as one. This is a seemingly small step but it affirms our collective humanity and togetherness even in difference. It’s a practical way to shift ‘them and us’ language and thinking towards togetherness. If each politician, community leader, church leader spoke with one voice on this issue it could help to transform our understanding of community.

10. **A positive narrative** – Brian Rowan, veteran NI journalist encourages his colleagues to ‘report the peace with as much energy as the conflict.’\(^4\) The media plays a significant role in our community. It shapes much of the narrative we hear each day. The desire for ‘balance’ often pitches one side against the other in a deeply unhelpful way. As this society continues to transition out of conflict is there a way in which the media can positively shape socio-political issues? This is not a call to air-brush or sanitise or to stop robust political scrutiny in the public interest. But could the media agree to self-assess stories on their contribution to efforts to move on from our discordant past towards a more harmonious future? Similar efforts have been tried in other post-conflict cultures where scars are still healing like India, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina. For the sake of our peace and prosperity we at least call on journalists and broadcasters to give equal time to good news stories. To seek ‘balance’ beyond pitting extreme views against each other and to give voice to the silent majority.

11. **Regular risk-free what-if discussions** - Executive parties should make a public commitment to meet monthly for without-prejudice discussions to deal with unresolved legacy issues. These would begin at the end of the Haass talks. The without-prejudice ‘what-if’ nature allows a new space for creative thinking. The talks would be private, removed from the media spotlight and grandstanding of the Chamber. The regular nature keeps the lines of communication open and builds better working relationships. It also keeps the broad direction of travel moving forward, away from party political cul-de-sacs and stalling. This would show the public their leaders’ long-term commitment to collective responsibility and dialogue. This is a practical example of a sustainable home-grown initiative continuing beyond foreign direct intervention.

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\(^4\) Speaking at CAN Peace III – Beyond Peace, Mossley Mill, 8th October 2013
Church

Followers of Jesus have an important role to play here in moving us all beyond legal agreements and institutions into relationships of grace.

- First, we start with ourselves. There are some things we need to stop doing and some things we need to start. **We humbly accept that at times we haven't always got this right;** we've confused earthly empires with the kingdom of God. Sometimes we've made unhealthy allegiances, sometimes we've been too vocal and at others, deafeningly silent.

- We remind ourselves that **God is not Protestant or Catholic.** He is not conservative, liberal, unionist, nationalist or any other man-made label we try to make stick on Him. We cannot tether God to our limited theology. May he forgive us for making Him into an idol in our image at times.

- Jesus prayed for future believers that ‘all of them may be one’ (John 17:21). Some have been so busy barricading the doors of the reformed Church against Catholic teaching that they’ve failed to notice the **elephant of sectarianism sitting in the pew.** The local Church needs an eternal global view of the Church of Jesus Christ, and His gospel beyond this time and place.

- We will largely continue to worship separately and administer the sacraments to members of our own Protestant and Catholic churches for theological reasons. But **can we create new spaces** to celebrate over a thousand years of shared Christian heritage and to work more closely on common issues like family, wellbeing and sanctity of life?

- Can followers of Jesus lead by **creating a new shared socio-political self-designation** that is neither Catholic nor Protestant?

- Is the flying of flags in Church wrong? Is the playing of a national anthem in Church wrong? Maybe not. But are these things wise? And do they help more people come to know Jesus? **Can we show leadership to the rest of our community by agreeing not to fly flags in our church buildings which can act as a barrier to ‘whosoever’ may come?**

- We need to differentiate political Protestantism from Christian faith. **We must not confuse earthly empires with the Kingdom of God.** We need to bravely call what we see at times as culture and politics dressed in a veil of religion. **At some point we need to have a difficult conversation about the place of loyal institutions within the missional mandate Church.**

- Jesus calls us to **love our neighbour.** The simple act of opening our homes is surely just Christian hospitality but it can also be an intentional

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5 Please note that the ECONI booklet ‘For God and His Glory Alone’ is being re-launched on 10th October 2013. Twenty five years after its first publication it outlines 10 biblical principles which can continue to guide our thinking on these issues – www.contemporarychristianity.net/resources/pdfs/fgandhga.pdf
contribution to good relations. More controversially, Jesus calls us to **love our enemies**. This is so revolutionary to our cultural norm. We inhabit a new dimension of human relationship. It can't be forced or legislated for. It's a work of grace and should be the defining mark of the church.

- As Church in the context of Northern Ireland we move **peace-making from the margins to the mainstream**. We would never consider sending missionaries to Gaza, Bosnia or Sri Lanka without some training in the conflict of that culture. How should we ‘do church’ in our post-conflict culture? There is a tendency here to divide society by Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and Nationalist. Is the way we do Church helping to win people to faith right across society or is the Protestant Church Protestant-centric in their evangelism?

- We need to **learn to be peace-makers** and to then pass on the peace to the next generation. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God; but they'll also be called naive, traitors and worse. Some have risked their reputations for peace-building. There is an inspirational Christian legacy to pass on but there aren't many under-thirties lining up to take on the baton. We need to learn how to pass on the lessons of peace-making to the next generation.

- Decommissioning is thankfully in the past but we need to **continually disarm a suspicious society with our genuine grace and love**.

- Could we, the Church, help the community to creatively **celebrate and commemorate** things that aren't linked to one side beating the other?

- The Church co-works in God's redemption of broken things as a **practical place of hope and healing**. There are joint Church initiatives on addictions and suicide, prayers for healing, debt advice centres, pastoral care and chaplaincy work, care homes, food banks and social enterprises. The Church is bursting with good news stories of physical, social, spiritual transformation. Like the broken loaves and fish, the Church can miraculously stretch a long way. We can better tell these stories.

- We have the opportunity to meet our local MLAs from all backgrounds and tell them what we want to see regarding flags, parades and the past, talk about brave changes. If enough people **give a new mandate** across the country radical things could happen.

- Above all, we need to provide a **hopeful counter narrative** - or as we call it, the scandalous gospel of Jesus Christ. The Christian Church should be the least judgemental, most forgiving, most concerned with injustice. Yet the most full of mercy, most welcoming, most generous, most hopeful and creative places in our community. We forego our rights to fulfil our responsibilities. We take risks in building relationships. We don't forego the pursuit of justice but we rest in the God who will one day judge the earth. We model humility, repentance, forgiveness and grace.
• Conclusion

The people of this place bear scars from the past while striving forward to a peaceful and prosperous future. Getting there will require sacrifice now.

Christians are to seek the peace and prosperity of the place in which they find themselves (Jer. 29). We are to seek new relationships while restoring broken ones, finding our place and purpose in one community. We have on occasions shown glimpses of generosity, hospitality and risk-taking. We need to lean into this more, to model it better to a society in need of hope - so that everyone here can see that they have dignity and identity beyond their national allegiance.

The current Haass Initiative provides us with hope, expectancy and opportunity. These proposals are unapologetically aspirational, but also deeply practical. Our prayer is that this booklet is a hopeful contribution to our past, future and now.

Please contact us for more information, clarification or to discuss further.