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Friday, March 13, 2009

Churches urge clear message of peace



Soldiers salute as the coffins of British soldiers Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar leave the Massereene Barracks in Antrim following a service yesterday. Photograph: Cathal McNaughton/Reuters

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FIONA GARTLAND

CHURCH LEADERS in Northern Ireland have urged people to send an unambiguous message of peace and unity in the wake of the murders of two soldiers and a policeman in Northern Ireland.

They have asked that people wear purple ribbons in protest at the murders and as a sign of their desire to work together. They have also called on their congregations to pray for an end to violence this weekend.

Cardinal Seán Brady, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland; Church of Ireland Primate Archbishop Alan Harper; the Rev Alan Ferguson, Methodist President; and the Right Rev Donald Patton, Presbyterian Moderator, were joined in their call by the Rev Tony Davison, president of the Irish Council of Churches, and the Rev Stephen Cave, national director of Evangelical Alliance NI.

In a pastoral letter, to be circulated to all congregations, the church leaders said the community was shocked and hurt by the murders of Sapper Mark Quinsey and Sapper Patrick Azimkar at Massereene Barracks and of Constable Stephen Carroll in Craigavon.

"Across the community people have been united in anger, sympathy and revulsion, but underlying the raw emotions has been a firm determination not to go back to what we all thought had been left behind," they said.

They commended politicians “for their resolute leadership” and they offered their full support to the police service.

Speaking at joint press conference yesterday, Cardinal Brady said peace was a fragile thing that had to be supported.

“It is not enough to shake our heads in revulsion, we need to express that in concrete forms and that is why this call to prayer is very important,” he said.

He called on those responsible for the killings to stop the senseless violence, saying that it would not succeed. He also said people should examine their consciences about celebrating St Patrick’s Day if they had blood on their hands.

Mr Patton said evil once again stalked the streets and a minority of people were “seeking to plunge us all back into the abyss”. Those close to “people who are thinking evil and doing evil” needed to tell them to stop, he said.

Dr Harper said he had been approached by numerous people in Dublin who expressed their revulsion at the violence.

“In every part of this island, not just in Northern Ireland but everywhere, there is that same solidarity and determination that what has been in the past will not be part of our future,” he said.

Mr Ferguson urged people to source ribbon or wear something purple over the next few days as an indication “they did not want to go backwards”.

The church leaders called for prayers for the families of Constable Carroll (48), and for Sapper Quinsey (23) and Sapper Azimkar (21).

A service of remembrance was held for the two soldiers at Massereene barracks in Antrim yesterday.

Several hundred people attended the private service, including some of their colleagues from the 38th Engineer Regiment who had not already been sent to Afghanistan, and soldiers from other regiments in Northern Ireland.

Local clergy also attended, as well local Assembly member David Ford, senior police officers and other local representatives.

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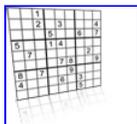
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