

74/87
Church

cc: Mr Hamilton

From: Mr T McCusker

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To: Mr J Walker

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES IN COMMUNITY RELATIONS

1. Following the publication of the proceedings of the Cookstown conference (which are presently being given a wide circulation) we need to consider the implications of the report and to make recommendations to the Minister of State. This short paper is intended for discussion about some possible initiatives and strategies.
2. The conference has illustrated to a wide audience (the leaders included) that there is a large constituency of clergy and laity prepared to develop programmes to link their different congregations. It was admitted and acknowledged at the book launch that those in authority may not have appreciated that there was the level of inter-church activity which Cookstown illustrated and, further, that the climate was right to try new initiatives to bridge the divisions between the churches at community level.
3. Essentially I think we need to consider possible developments by the churches and related bodies,

Government, and the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

4. The Churches

Experience to date has illustrated that in organisational terms the churches need to get their act together. It is not that work to promote community relations is absent, but rather there is no organisation with clear aims and objectives in this area. So while CCCCW, the Irish Council of Churches, the Irish Commission of Justice and Peace, the inter-church meetings, etc., all have reconciliation prominent in their thinking and their dialogue, there is no single body to promote inter-church work at local levels (apart from modest activity by the development officers of CCCCW). But even that work has no strategy or even co-operation and lacks any real sanction to promote community relations between church congregations other than in a very narrow social sense.

5. If the churches are to make any in-roads they must first be persuaded that there is a need for intensive development work at local level and a need for an agreed structure to carry it out. That might be through a reorganised CCCCW or a new body. Whichever body carries out the work, it must operate throughout Northern Ireland and have the authority of the different hierarchies. It must also have endorsement from other church bodies and within a very short time it must establish credibility at local level.
6. If the churches can be persuaded to move along these lines then the recommendations in the conference report on shared facilities etc., can be given some practical expression.

7. Government's Role

The action to date has included 2 meetings with the church leaders, the last one just before the unfortunate death of Cardinal O Fiaich . Following the first meeting each church leader nominated someone to an ad hoc advisory group which the Minister could meet from time to time. That group met twice (the Minister failed to make the second meeting) and was not really effective. They had no authority and no great grasp of what they were supposed to be doing. At the last meeting with the church leaders in May, Dr Mawhinney offered the churches a substantial financial package (around £100,000 per annum) to promote inter-church contact which did not impinge on theology or conscience. CCRU was to take discussions forward with the individual church leaders to agree a programme, but with the death of the Cardinal and the change in leadership in the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, nothing happened. Now that Archbishop Daly has taken up office an initiative could again be considered.

8. Government's role must be as a facilitator or catalyst and at all times must be both sensitive and political. In the broad area of Government action there must be a case for advising Departments that where opportunities exist churches should be encouraged to co-operate. Programmes like ACE and social services are the areas where some inter-church work does take place but many more opportunities could be exploited.

9. Inevitably there must be a substantial funding role, but before going down that path a suitable structure is required. To create the organisational framework outlined above requires initially some informal discussions among a range of interests and CCRU (rather

than NICRC) should act as host for an informal lunch/dinner with 10/12 prominent people from the different bodies to open up the debate and shape the organisational possibilities. We should also include Simon Lee who is very enthusiastic. Following that specific proposals could be suggested to the Minister of State to put to the church leaders at a meeting some time around Easter. In view of the time required to set up meetings with the church leaders it might not do any harm to get an early agreement from the Minister to set the meeting up now.

10. What ever structure emerges it is important to realise that it is not simply a question of dangling money in front of the churches in the expectation that they will co-operate willing just to get it. If that motivation had existed there have been plenty of opportunities for them to get funds from CCRU or the Community Relations Council. All those who have given any serious thought to how the churches can be encouraged to co-operate more effectively believe that an extensive and sustained development programme is required which effectively means a number of people networking different areas to encourage contact and co-operation. In effect the model which is being used with schools to promote cross-community contact and EMU through field officers is the sort of initiative that is required. In reality we are talking about a community development philosophy for the churches and convincing the Minister about that philosophical approach will require some sensitive and articulate drafting and negotiation.

11. The Role of the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

As indicated earlier I am reluctant to give the Council a high profile in the work with the churches. My reluctance in giving them a lead role is based on quite arbitrary views. I think the CRC is not yet sufficiently experienced to take this forward and I still think there is a strong cynicism within the Council about churches and reconciliation bodies generally. CCRU has for some time now taken the lead with the churches and the Cookstown conference and publication was the result of long and painstaking negotiation by CCRU to persuade the churches that it would be possible. The Cookstown conference has helped to change opinion within the Council somewhat, but the continuing inexperience and the general preference for all things secular would in my view inhibit progress in the important early stages. We should, however, involve the Council in all the discussions which we organise and we should also consider having the Chairman present when the Minister of State meets the church leaders later in the year.

Conclusion

12. Whatever suspicions churches may harbour about each other they are probably slight compared to the suspicions they have about Government's agenda in seeking to get them to co-operate. Any developments must be handled sensitively and tactfully and I think a good deal of ground work has to be carried out at official level before we try to get the agreement of Ministers and church leaders on any programme of action. The Cookstown conference and the publication provide a

useful agenda and as it was addressed in part towards Government there is legitimacy for CCRU taking some initiative, and I believe we have the credibility to minimise any reservations in the churches.

13. I am happy to discuss.

[Signed]

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