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Press Releases

Melanie Verwoerd to Launch HTR Conference Report

Melanie Verwoerd, a former South African ambassador to Ireland who was actively involved in the movement to end apartheid in her native country, will be the guest speaker at the launch of the latest report from Healing Through Remembering (HTR).

The "Storytelling as the Vehicle?" conference report will be launched at the HTR offices in Belfast on Monday 19 June 2006.

The report features the three papers presented at the "Storytelling as the Vehicle?" conference last November. The conference was organised by Healing Through Remembering in conjunction with its Storytelling sub group.

The papers are "What is Storytelling?" by the HTR Storytelling sub group; "Rights of Memory" by Kevin Whelan, Smurfit Director of the Keough-Notre Dame Centre in Dublin; and "Dialogue Towards a Culture of Peace" by Samson Munn, a founder of The Austrian Encounter, a project which brings children of Austrian Holocaust Survivors together with children of Austrian Nazi perpetrators.

Healing Through Remembering is an extensive cross-community project made up of individual members with different political perspectives and social experiences. They have come together over the last five years to focus on how to deal with the past relating to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

The Storytelling sub group is one of five sub groups involved in the work of

Healing Through Remembering.

Storytelling is one method which many believe can help both those telling their story and develop understanding in those listening. The sub group is examining the possibility of a collective storytelling and archiving process relating to the conflict and the values, principles and definitions of storytelling. Up to now it has published an audit of storytelling initiatives related to the conflict, followed by last November's conference. Claire Hackett, who is chair of the Storytelling sub group says; "Storytelling is a valuable way for people to get a sense of control over their lives. It is important that we recognize the different needs people have, whether that is about being listened to, or about their suffering being acknowledged or because by telling their story they can emphasise the need for justice. Storytelling and narrative are an essential part of what we need to do to deal with and learn from the past."

In the report, Kevin Whelan, who has lectured in over a dozen countries says no one has the right to tell people to forget their memories and move on. Individuals and communities have a right to memory. These stories and testimonies about the past are an important link to the future.

Samson Munn emphasises that many people can experience healing through storytelling. Referring to Whelan's point on rights to memory, he adds that people also have a responsibility to listen and that this process of dialogue and listening helps develop understanding and respect - reconciliation need not be the end goal.

Melanie Verwoerd completed a four-year term as South African Ambassador to Ireland in the middle of last year. She is married to Wilhelm Verwoerd, a grandson of Hendrik Verwoerd, the main architect of apartheid, but has always been a fierce critic of the system.

In 1994, with the end of apartheid, she was elected an ANC (African National Conference) member of South Africa's first democratic parliament, committing herself to reconciling differences and rebuilding relationships

between the people of the country. Melanie is the presenter of the "Spectrum" programme, which broadcasts on Sundays on RTE Radio 1.

The programme investigates Ireland's response to its changing ethnic and cultural makeup. Through debate, comment and analysis of the international context, it explores how the country is coping with its new multiculturalism.

19/06/2006

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