

Very Rev Dr Norman Hamilton
Reconciliation Reframed
David Stevens Memorial lecture – 13 January 2017

1. Let me start by saying the obvious... but sometimes the obvious needs to be said... It is an enormous privilege to be invited to give this address this morning in memory of David Stevens whose contribution to promoting the welfare of all the people of this land has still not been fully appreciated. Thank you so much for coming.
2. At the outset, I do want to make it absolutely clear that my comments this morning are entirely personal, and that I am not speaking on behalf of the CRC or the Presbyterian Church. Nor am I an academic or a sociologist. However, my comments are born out of being both an ordinary practitioner, an ordinary Presbyterian minister, and an ordinary Christian pastor who has spent 25 years living and working in this area. I have also had the privilege of wider experience, and for whom the ongoing challenge of embedding reconciliation in our society is a very real and ongoing passion. I come at this subject from 'the street' as it were.
3. This is a public event, sponsored by the Community Relations Council, and even though we are meeting in the grounds of Holy Cross Monastery, this is not quite the place to explore the spiritual dimensions of reconciliation which were so well articulated by David Stevens. There are many public figures who, like myself, also come at the subject with an acute awareness that reconciliation is not only about politics and public policy, but also has profound theological and Christian dimensions. I will not be exploring that territory this morning, but for those who are interested, I can do no better than point you to a series of essays and articles written by a wide variety of public figures and produced last year by the Evangelical Alliance with support from the Community Relations Council entitled 1916-2016 The Rising and The Somme. A most challenging and uplifting read!
4. Little did I think when I was working on the initial draft of this address that the title I had chosen – Reconciliation Reframed – would be so apt this morning, or that I would be rewriting substantial sections of it this week.
5. The events of the past month and especially of the last few days have taken the need for civic reconciliation to a completely new level. Events have reframed it in a very public way, for no longer can it be largely confined to community relations work, public policy as in TBUC, or dealing with the past. We now have the obvious need for reconciliation to be put at the heart of restoring government. I find it striking that the language and tone of public and political discourse in recent times has been that of aggression, disillusionment, despair, scandal, horse trading, blame, counter blame, and the likelihood of weeks – perhaps even months – of negotiation. Maybe I have missed it, but I have heard little or nothing about the common good, about apology, about trusted relationships, consensus or generosity of spirit. That is deeply worrying – even if we accept that there is a measure of 'rough and tumble' in our particular brand of adversarial politics.

6. So what might 'reconciliation reframed' look like? Obviously I don't have all the answers ... indeed I am very conscious that my contribution may be very small, but a million small steps, as well as few big ones, could take us a long way.

7. The first thing that needs to be reframed is the language of public debate, both in politics and in the media. In recent times we have heard language from too many of our leaders that, quite frankly, is atrocious. I fail to see how the building of a united community is helped by language that is abusive, demeaning and sometimes downright vulgar. But equally, silence has not always been golden. There have been times when sections of wider society should have spoken, but did not do so – and I do include the faith sector in that. Silence creates a vacuum which can be filled with obnoxious noise rather than wisdom.

8. Reframing the language is easier said than done, for words betray underlying attitudes. And in a society that has been shaped by war and aggression, changing aggressive attitudes will be a long term process. We now seem to have aggression built into the DNA of our society, and taking it out will not be easy. To get there, we need a new quality of political, civic, and religious leadership that emphasises generosity of spirit as well as justice; that seeks the flowering of positive peace as well as valuing the need for truth and transparency; that sees leadership as a precious gift and privilege to be well stewarded, and not squandered.

9. I want to turn now to the area of the making of public policy, and once again the language in use has not been serving us well. I suggest that here too it needs to be reframed with a great deal of care and precision. Since there is no clear and agreed definition of reconciliation, the resultant wooliness ensures that little or no substantive, clear discussion can take place. The term 'reconciliation' now often covers only what the speaker wants it to convey, or the hearer takes it to mean. In some contexts it means nothing more – or less – than 'community relations work'. In others it means a politically led initiative towards a policy goal. For some people it has a highly pejorative meaning attached to it which involves setting aside the need for justice for the horrors of the past, in favour of an unacceptable goal of working with enemies for a contaminated future. To some, it can only be a reality when remorse and repentance for what was done in the past are obvious, and then forgiveness can, at least in principle, come onto the radar. For others it simply means the giving and receiving and earning of respect, and the emphasising of parity of esteem.

10. This confusion leads me to suggest that when the term 'reconciliation' is used in politics or community relations work, it should be explicitly and consistently described as 'civic reconciliation'. This will distinguish it from what might be called 'person to person' reconciliation, where the primary - or even the main - emphasis is on the restoring of fractured relationships rather than on developing a programme, a policy, or an initiative.

11. Let me tease this out a bit more... Civic reconciliation can be worked out in several ways

12. Firstly - in 'Political' reconciliation – where elected leaders move to set the past aside in order to address either a new common threat or a new common opportunity. For example – the much improved relationships between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Similarly between the USA and Japan as shown recently by the visit there of President Obama; and of course between the former World War 2 enemies of France and Germany as they have worked together to shape the European Union. Key to this happening, and being accepted, is that a new generation of leaders emerges, who have no direct involvement in, or direct culpability for, past horrors. Conceptually, they cannot really apologise for what they did not do. Politically, they cannot disown their past either. However, they see current needs and opportunities as the vehicle to bring them together in common cause – with the past simply sidelined - perhaps permanently.

13. That new generation of elected leaders has not emerged here yet. But it will, and they may well be inclined – or even compelled - to go down this route because of the circumstances in which they will find themselves. But here and now, there are thousands of victims and survivors who are our fellow citizens, and to whom the current generation of leaders has a clear obligation to serve well. How that is to be done remains both complex and divisive, which is why a high degree of reconciliation is needed amongst political leaders to make worthwhile progress.

14. Secondly, civic reconciliation can, and is, worked out in 'Community relations' activities, where divided communities meet each other in order to build a better future together. They discuss their differences, but manage to reach a position where they can work together for their shared common good, without denying the reality of difference and pain. They usually retain their own identity and re-tell their own story. Inter church forums are often part of this type of work, alongside a multitude of community relations and community development groups.

15. These two approaches do not generally place a high degree of emphasis on agreeing a common story about the past, nor see a need to apologise or offer restitution for any wrong done (even if it is acknowledged). Yet, while this is happening, individuals and even some communities may well feel marginalised, and their sense of injustice and hurt increases. This was put to me graphically by one community leader who said.. *Norman, reconciliation is not on our radar* – and then he added – *nor will it ever be*. No-one should try to force person to person reconciliation on him or on anyone else. The pain is too deep. Yet, action is still needed to try to ensure that there is a worthwhile future for our children, and that they do not become the new long term carriers of hurt and division. So it is very important to reframe the language we use so that these differing understandings and content of reconciliation are clear all the time. This would open the way for better public discourse around civic reconciliation to take place, without in any way compromising the need to properly recognise and honour the legitimate needs of victims and survivors.

16. However, even wide ranging discourse with political leaders, community leaders, and victims and survivors, and the programmes that can and should be in place for their support, are not of themselves sufficient to build a cohesive and reconciled society at peace with itself and filled with energetic hope for the future... There are many many thousands of ordinary people like you and me who are not part of these discussions and programmes, yet long for civic reconciliation to take root and help build a better future for us all.

17. I am suggesting this morning that it is much too easy to put civic reconciliation in a silo, in the hope or expectation that it will grow of its own accord, nurtured by those who are enthusiastic about it. This will simply not work. Back in 2004 Brandon Hamber and Grainne Kelly spoke in what was, and still is, a seminal paper on reconciliation, of the need for *'Significant cultural and attitudinal change'*... and I have already commented on that. But they went further, and called for *'substantial social, economic and political change: where the social, economic and political structures which gave rise to the conflict and estrangement are identified, reconstructed or addressed, and transformed.'* I feel deeply unqualified to explore this area in any detail. I do know however, that doing so will bring us into seriously contested space. We have had a glimpse of that even this week. I sense however, that this is an area where our colleagues in the academic world could help a lot, if they were so minded. They could approach such work not only as academics, but also as citizens making their distinctive contribution, and do so in language and with analysis that would help the rest of us to understand, and come to terms with the complexities and nuances of reforming and reshaping some key areas of public policy.

18. Such work, and the ensuing discussion, even though it would take some time, would massively reframe the general understanding of what is needed for civic reconciliation to take deep root, and would help move us away from tribal and partisan politics.

19. Finally, I also want to float again an idea that I believe has great potential for embedding civic reconciliation amongst us. I am of the view that all public policy should be checked for its likely contribution to building a reconciled community. This is not a new idea, but it is one that has had very little 'traction' largely because, I suspect, there is such little enthusiasm for deep reconciliation right across our society. But that deficit can – indeed must - be remedied, and helping to make it happen is a task and a calling for many of us in this room and in wider society. Equality screening is very important. I might even suggest that reconciliation screening is even more important, so that the potential for marginalisation, disillusionment and previously unidentified and unintended consequences is identified at an early stage and addressed.

20. Bringing all this together, I suggest, as a working descriptor, that

Reconciliation, both civic and personal, is about working to reduce and eliminate suspicion, distrust and broken relationships of all kinds; and to fill the resultant space with new healthy and trusted relationships that enable concern for the common good to flourish.

21. In a memorable sentence in yesterday's Irish Times, the much respected journalist Eamonn Mallie wrote: *Our society is crying out for humanity and hope*. He is absolutely right. I suggest that cannot come, and will not come, unless deep seated reconciliation is put at the heart of our incoming Executive and at the heart of public policy. In the current quagmire, that is surely not too much either to hope for - or pray for.

Thank you very much.

Norman Hamilton

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