

## CHALLENGED BY DIFFERENCE: THREAT OR ENRICHMENT?

In welcoming everyone to DROMANTINE this afternoon, I should like to thank each and every one of you for coming and for making time to be here together with us and with one another. This is an exploration in faith. This is an expression of hope. This is a pledge of love. It is the first time that churches in Ireland have organized this sort of conference. Our hope is that we will come to know each other better, even in the relatively short period of twenty-four hours before us, and that we will be able to create and sustain bonds of affection with one another. We will look at ourselves, we will look at one another and we will look at today's Ireland for tomorrow.

We have come to explore *together* the challenge which difference brings, difference from one another, difference as something which can unite even more than as something which divides. For in our own histories, in our own stories, in this country we have regular and daily reminders of the use made of difference wilfully to divide person from person. And this we want to challenge radically and carefully in a way that is both human and Christian.

We have come as long-term residents of Ireland and also as more recent residents. Together we want to share experiences of threat and enrichment relating to who we are and to who we want to become in today's Ireland. I want to encourage all who are here that in being here we are in this together. We acknowledge at the outset the racism which there is within ourselves and accept that challenge to recognize reality and to change what is wrong. We acknowledge at the outset the difficulties which our own preoccupations with *ourselves* present as a threat to others. And we acknowledge the enrichment in human terms which the friendship with people different from ourselves can and does bring – along with the positive surprises and the invitations to maturity which such friendships offer.

I myself want to encourage you all to relax into this Conference. It is indeed *our* Conference and that we should realize and remember. I say this because none of us ought to feel exposed in any way. I want us to build and share a trust in one another, one which will grow as we grow through knowing one another and one another's stories better. We do all of this against a back-drop of a society which is changing, an Ireland which daily is different. For all of us – together or apart – this is a new time, a new venture as we move into a future which is different from what we have previously known. In Northern Ireland where we are holding this Conference we are conscious of both the strains and opportunities which the prospect of lasting peace and fresh definition of community brings. In the Republic of Ireland we are acutely aware of significant social and human problems emerging in a time of much-trumpeted international prosperity. We are acutely conscious of the problems there are to be a church, to be the churches in all of Ireland now.

And I think that it is worth acknowledging that this reflects and is reflected in the title: *Challenged by difference: threat or enrichment?* There are many threats, there are many fears, there are many difficulties, there are many outrages and all of them have their prejudices but all of them likewise have their opportunities for enrichment. It is the willingness to move in good faith from the one to the other, from threat to enrichment, in ways which are honest and appropriate, which will transform our society for good and for tomorrow.

The origin and genesis of this Conference lies with a small group of people who never really thought of themselves as taking responsibility in this sort of public way. The background to it lies in painstaking and detailed consultation and research undertaken by Fee Ching Leong, a Commissioner of The Churches' Commission for Racial Justice through Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. In so many ways the Conference is a testimony to that combination of human concern and scholarly detail which Fee Ching brought to bear on the questions surrounding racism in Ireland from a Christian and a theological perspective. I wish also publicly to acknowledge the sustained contribution of Arlington Trotman of The Churches' Commission for Racial Justice. Without Arlington's strong and gentle genius we should not be here today either.

The intention is that the Conference will be followed by further meetings, in various parts of the country. Our hope is that those who are here will be able to attend those meetings and that they will also afford an opportunity to those who have not been able to be here to be part of the continuing process of being *Challenged by Difference*. We who have had the privilege of organizing the Conference intend to follow up the implications of our outcomes for the churches in Ireland with The Four Church leaders whom we hope to meet in the New Year. In all of this and in other aspects of the organization of today, I am indebted to Dr Scott Bolt who has come to us through the good offices of The Irish Inter-Church Meeting and who will continue to work in this whole area for another six months. In this way I hope that you all will be able to have the confidence that the churches have affirmed what we are about to begin.

To some of us addressing this theme:

*Challenged by Difference: Threat or Enrichment?*

might seem to be a most obvious thing for churches to do. Our concern is to agree with you that it is vital for members of churches in Ireland today to develop what I might call a fresh theology of hospitality. This is something generous, something practical and something for others. We exist for those whom we do not know every bit as much as for those whom we do know. The church of God has never been only for those on the inside. That attitude is and remains a scandal and an affront to God and neighbour alike. I say this for Biblical reasons. The direct question which Jesus answered in the life He lived which became the Gospel was the following very open question: *And who, then, is my neighbour?* Not only is the question open but so is the answer. The only person not to *pass by on the other side* is the noble but despised Samaritan. It is our conviction – and we have indeed been given every encouragement to think so – that what we are embarking on today is not just another thing which the church is picking up from what others are doing round about but is, in fact, part of its core identity. And it is just that because it is for all of us a journey of self-understanding and of a new self-definition in those three virtues: faith, hope, love.

As for the Conference itself there is a broad and varied programme before us. I hope that there is indeed something for everyone. From the outset I should like us all to agree and accept that everyone here can feel that there is scope both for agreement and for disagreement; there is no question too stupid to ask; there is every opportunity to be honest and to build on that honesty as a platform of trust; there is confidentiality and there is not secrecy.

It is my pleasure to introduce to you some of the people who will be addressing us and whom we will all get to know during today and tomorrow. I begin with the Group with whom I have had the pleasure to work over the past months:

(1) Anne Bennett, Alan Martin, Bridghe Vallely, Gordon Gray, Joan Roddy, Katherine Myer, Margaret Boden, Rob Fairmichael, Sahr Yambasu, Arlington, Trotman, Anthony Joseph and many others.

(2) The Revd Dr Kenneth Newell, Minister of Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, Belfast is a person of tireless generosity. His willingness to go the extra mile is already legendary in his own lifetime. Father Phil Sumner, St Patrick's Parish, Oldham comes to us with significant practical experience and skills in the recognition of difference and in the integration into a worshipping community of those who are different from one another. The Revd Kathy Galloway from Iona Community draws together the sense of worship and gives it expression in a way which is challenging and enriching not least in that it addresses the tradition from within the tradition. The Revd Dr Sahr Yambasu, our keynote speaker, knows what it is to come to Ireland, to work here and to lead in faith. He is Methodist Minister in Galway, a charge shared by Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Ireland. Michael Earle is the energetic and passionate driving force within today's Irish Council of Churches.

(3) There are indeed other people here whose practical experience we have enlisted for the Workshops on Friday and Saturday. We shall meet them as the days progress. Finally I wish to introduce Dr Scott Bolt whose organizational skills and easy personality mask a mountain of hard work which produces good results.

Before handing over to Scott I wish to offer to you a prayer which I myself wrote for the year 2000 and I feel that it is as appropriate to what we now are to do as it was to the ushering in of the third millennium:

*God our Father, you guided the people whom you had chosen through the wilderness to the land of promise. Travel with us in your Spirit as we follow the way of your Son into a new time of opportunity and service. Equip us with the humility to be courageous, the honesty to be forgiving and the love to be compassionate. This we ask in the power of the Trinity. Amen.*

May God, in blessing us, bless all those whom we bring in these days in our hearts to this Conference.