

15.02.2012: “We are a beloved community. We can disagree with each other with loving kindness”

“I took the view that the church had to change - or it was going to die. In this area in the recent past about three or four churches closed down. So I worked with the people here doing everything they wanted me to do. But then I decided that that wasn't going to work. I had to be different.

I got a musical director in - music is a great way of changing a church. Some of the older members weren't happy, but we began to see the choir developing. But you only grow a choir from the pews. We also said that because of the inclusive nature of the church, to join the choir you didn't have to subscribe to any theology or creed. And we've grown the choir from about four to about 25 people. Last year we performed on BBC Northern Ireland.

And now they're really quite serious about coming a noted choir in the city of Belfast.

So that was one part of our outreach programme was music. Out of that some people came into the choir who would not have been religious people. But they have stayed with the church and occasionally attend services. We even have a Jewish cantor who occasionally sings with us. So it's been really positive.

5.00: Four years ago, a number of Church of Ireland ministers were going on Pride, they were marching on Pride carrying the banner Changing Attitude Ireland, which is specifically aimed at the Anglican church to change the attitude towards LGBT people.

So I said I'd go on it with them, but none of the ministers wore their collars. But the best political collar you can make is to wear your collar. And here was a minister walking with the gay people wearing his collar, while there were other ministers on the side of the road with placards calling them sodomites.

Gay people realised there was somebody who was going to be an advocate for them, a campaigner for them. Then we started an outreach programme from here - four years ago we held the first LGBT Christmas Carol service in here - and it was packed and that happens every year. Then we hold a Pride service in here.

And then on Maundy Thursday we're getting seven ministers from different churches and were going to wash the feet of gay people in the church and we are going to seek their forgiveness. We are going to ask the gay people to forgive the church for the damage we've done to them. We think that's a very bold statement.

Since early 1993 I worked with loyalist paramilitaries by accident - I was still a trade unionist in Dublin and a lay minister in the Dublin church. And I met with David Ervine who had spent five years in jail for planning a bomb and then he went into Loyalist politics. When I met him he was still a member of the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force).

He brought me with him to meet up with the UVF high command. At the time I thought it wasn't the wisest thing I did but I did it, and they bought me up the Shankill Road.

Although I'm a unitarian minister, I come from an Irish catholic nationalist background. So for the Protestants here I'm still a southerner, who comes from a nationalist background. But I went to meet with the loyalist leaders. And that was early 1993 and I worked with them from then right up to the ceasefire.

When the IRA called their ceasefire three weeks afterwards. Three weeks afterwards the loyalists called their ceasefire - helped them do the working on it and introduced them,

opened up doors into the Irish government and arranged for one or two unofficial meetings, and then I worked right up with them until the decommissioning of weapons.

Some of them have joined the church now I've become a minister up here.

Some of them are now trying to set up a theatre company to tell their story. One of them has written a play. It's not a great play but it's a start. It's going to be based very much among what we would call marginalised communities. Because these are communities that have been left behind a little bit. Because anybody that's been smart out of the peace process has made a lot of money.

In a way we have a peace industry here. Where people were good at setting up bodies and get lots of funding for lots of different things. I have never received one penny for any of the work I've done. I've never looked for it. But I've worked closely with these people. And I've bought them all along this road, and now we're working with them to help set up this theatre group.

They are all ex-prisoners. Every one of them. Some of them are ex-lifers, let out after the Good Friday agreement. One of them stabbed a man to death. Another shot dead two Catholics. Some of the people I spoke to know one of the people who killed one of my closest friends.

But as Christians we are called upon to work with these people. Because when we love God, we say blessed are the peacemakers. We often think the peace makers are peace campaigners, whereas I have to say I met more egos in peace campaigning than I ever met amongst loyalist paramilitaries. I met people who really believed that they were sent by the divine to bring peace.

But peace only comes when the protagonists engage. Not when you let off white balloons. It's when you get those who are doing the killing to engage, that's when peace begins. It took us 30 years in Northern Ireland to realise that.

We have been able to bring people in from the cold and use church as a place where people can have dialogue - that's the way we see All Souls functioning. A while ago we held a BBC-sponsored debate on assisted suicide in the church - it does not mean I support assisted suicide. But if we cannot hold debate about these things in a church or in a university, then where else can you?

Whether it's abortion, or euthanasia, all those things should be discussed. because those are the big moral issues confronting people of faith. If we run away from them, we leave that territory to other people. We do have a moral imperative to have a discussion on these issues. We're not afraid; our faith is firm enough that we're not afraid to discuss those issues. Your faith must be weak if you can't discuss those issues.

The building is our greatest asset - but it's also our greatest liability. We have to raise money to keep it. But it's also about what we're doing outside. While we're speaking, there are people out there in the community talking to people - that's what All Souls is about.

We have three or four people here who would consider themselves humanist - but they like the community atmosphere and they like the feel of the place. The church is only a part of what we do, it's important we do things out in the community.

25:00: For the first three years I really stood still so that I could attend to the needs of those already here. But then I started to introduce changes. And it really does take that much time. Our long-term members have been completely supportive of us. The gay issue would have

been difficult for them - but they've taken that on board. Now, they've made friends with people. If people are brought gently along - they may not understand everything you are saying - but they understand not be judgemental.

If you understand why somebody is doing something then you get some idea where people are coming from. Then you can begin to empathise. Sometimes we disagree with somebody because of what we think they said.

Because we have quite an eclectic mix here, we use the term that we are a beloved community. You can disagree with each other with loving kindness. And the other person's opinion is valid.”