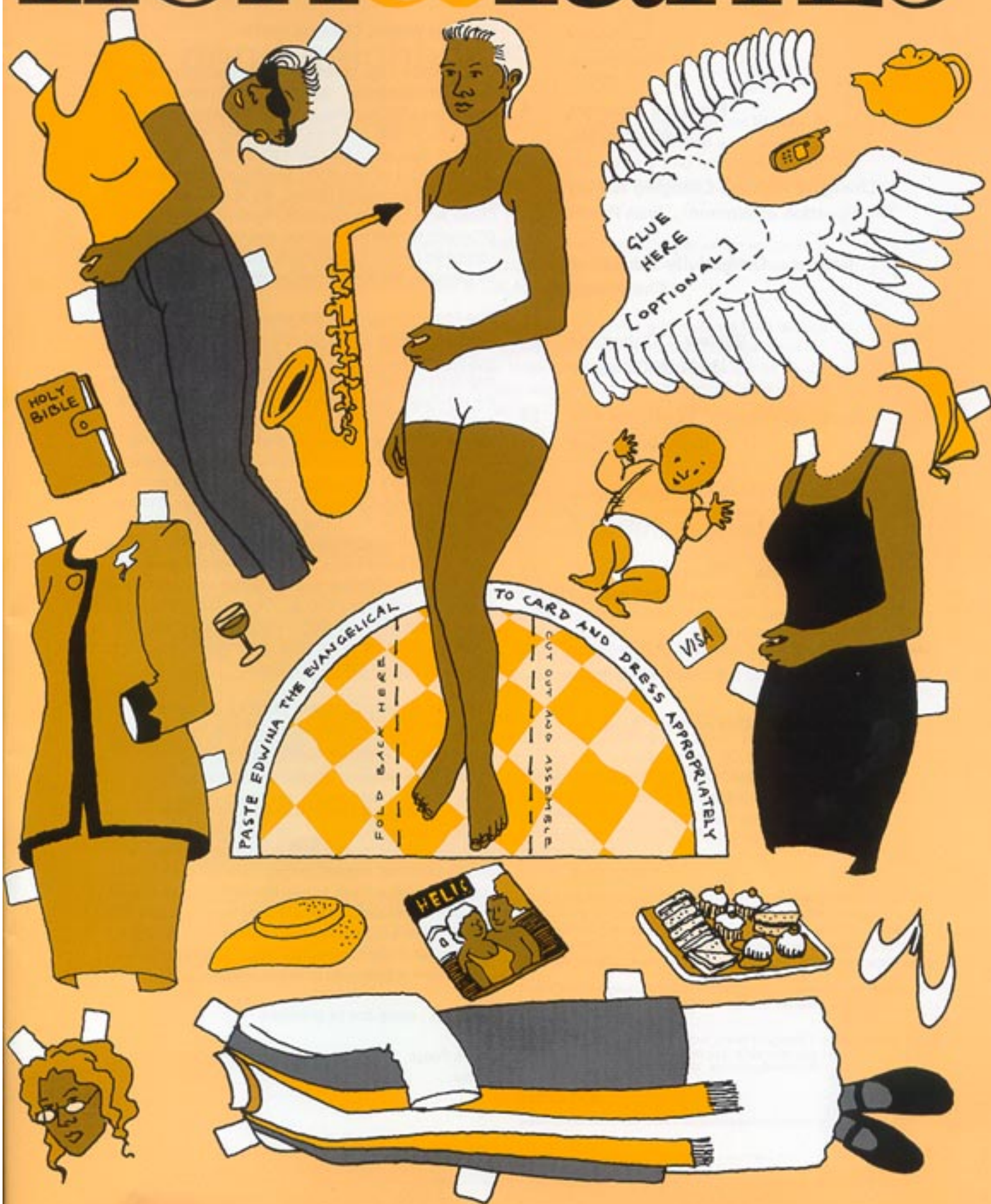


lion & lamb



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Changing Women, Changing Worlds

'This book is a brick through the stain glass window of clerical complacency...' states Malachi O'Doherty of Dr. Fran Porter's forthcoming publication **Changing Women, Changing Worlds**. The book will be on general release from mid May and in anticipation we invited Fran to give us an abridged version of the opening chapter and a brief summary of the overall content. We also asked the Rev Cheryl Reid, Linda McClaughlin, Myrtle Hill and Malachi O'Doherty to review Fran's work and their perceptive comments provide both affirming and critical perspectives on **Changing Women, Changing Worlds**.

Fran Porter's research for this original book involved a series of in-depth interviews with seventy evangelical women about their lives, faith and work. The candour of their response and the writer's astute commentary reveals the significant contribution women are making to church, community and politics in Northern Ireland. However, **Changing Women, Changing Worlds** not only affirms what women have achieved but also considers the implications of women's increasing involvement in the world of work and church. Consequently the book explores important questions on the nature of participation, inclusion, difference, authority, domesticity etc. It asks how a redefining of these issues might influence the structures and practice of churches, evangelicalism and wider civic society. The author considers all of this in the context of a radical change in the position of women in society and the pervasive challenge to attitudes and practices that previously kept women in the background.

Changing Women, Changing Worlds is published by Blackstaff and will be available in mid May from all major book stores. Alternatively, a copy can be ordered from the ECONI office.

Also, in this issue of **Lion and Lamb**: Pastor David McMillan considers a few of David Trimble's recent and controversial statements; Ruth Hutchinson's interview with Christine Bell explores personal faith and the courts of law; Peter Stark, a South African Baptist Pastor reflects on the dilemma of reconciliation and as we have included a full draft of ECONI's statement on the Weston Park Proposals in which we challenge the possibility of 'amnesty' the Government is proposing in this document.

As always - enjoy and be provoked.

Derek Poole
Editor



good neighbours

“Who is my neighbour?” This question was asked of Jesus by a lawyer. Luke tells us that he asked in order to justify himself. Presumably, he already had a definition in mind and wanted Jesus to reinforce his racist, elitist lifestyle. I have been asking myself the same question, but not for the same reason. It’s just over six months since I moved into my new house and I find myself thinking, “Who are these people with whom I share the street? What are they like?”

Does it matter that I know who my neighbours are? I have lived in other houses where we spoke to virtually no one. We kept to ourselves, never socialising, talking only when we happened to meet. It’s the way most people live these days. We’ve lost our sense of community.

Evangelicals have a poor record of community involvement. Reserve is in-built; we tend to keep ourselves apart. Our prime motive in speaking to strangers is to evangelise them. Evangelism is not the only legitimate reason to befriend a neighbour. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us we, the light of the world, bring glory to God through our good works. In Acts 10 we read about Dorcas, whose death devastated her community because she had been full of good works and acts of charity. This challenges me. Would anyone in my street miss me if I was suddenly removed? Would they even know that I loved and served God?

How do we communicate love to our neighbours? At the very least we must get to know who they are. It’s an effort. It’s easier to stay behind our own doors and observe without contact. We can even pray for them without contact. The Lord challenges us to take risks, open our homes and hearts to them and try to show interest in their concerns.

Back to the Bible story. The Lord told the lawyer that, while his primary love must be for God, he must also love his neighbour as well as he loved himself. He went on to tell the story of a ‘good’ Samaritan, where the most unexpected passer by was the only one to show love. He was of a different race and religion, and social convention demanded that Jews were shunned. However, this did not stop him. He not only administered first aid but sacrificed time and money to ensure the victim’s full recovery.

We must consider whether we have become like the lawyer in the gospel story, seeking ways to reinforce our racist, elitist lifestyle. A commitment to peace, justice and reconciliation is not an optional extra for the Christian but a biblical imperative. We tend to live in communities of folk who are of the same ‘religion’ and mindset. The command to love people of ‘the other sort’ has been buried under mountains of suspicion, prejudice and fear. ECONI’s objective is ... ‘to equip Christians to address community division in Northern Ireland and play their part in the long-term task of peace building’. The road ahead is long and probably rough – like the one that runs from Jerusalem to Jericho. Our only hope is that Paul’s wish for the Thessalonians is granted to us.

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.
(1 Thess 3:12)

Ruth Hutchinson
Assistant Editor



I know this is the page that most readers of **Lion & Lamb** turn to immediately they receive the new edition for, besides the striking picture of our illustrious Director, there are usually pearls of wisdom to be pondered and sharp analysis to be considered. I am a little concerned that you may feel somewhat disorientated by the tone and thrust of what follows in this edition. Let me explain.

Recently a decision was made that, since ECONI is a charitable company with a board of directors, the Director's page should become a shared responsibility. All were in agreement and so in this edition the idea of a rotating responsibility for this page is being put into practice. Which got me thinking about ideas ...

A referendum on the border? Now there's an idea! A possible (at the time of writing) second act of voluntary decommissioning? Now there's an idea! Is it the spring equinox manifesting a strange pull on the imagination of those on the hill or is it the brutal reality of political life and survival that prompts such out of character thinking. Clearly it is the latter.

With an election coming up in the South, Sinn Fein have discovered that committing themselves to Stormont has had bigger implications for their political fortunes in the South than in the North. Southern politicians who encouraged and cajoled their Northern counterparts to embrace their Republican opponents in the democratic process are showing a marked reluctance to do any favours in the forth-coming election. Indeed some of the noises coming from Southern politicians are down right hypocritical but at least it is a clear indication that they haven't surrendered the essential competitive component of democracy to flights of ideological fancy. However, it is an interesting paradox that the view emanating from the Republic of Ireland seems to be that the preferable place for Irish Republicans to do their politics is under the umbrella of a British State.

But then maybe that's because the North is part of a modern, sophisticated plural society unlike the 'backward culturally monolithic Republic'! So,

maybe in calling for a referendum on the border the hope is that, having received a verbal kicking in the South, Republicans will think twice about voting for the removal of the border so that there is at least one warm house on the island for those of a pure Republican philosophy to pursue their politics. No, not very likely, and it's hardly the reasoning behind David Trimble's political pre-emptive strike at the recent UUP Council. More likely it is the prospect of the UUP being able to storm the hustings next June, clearly arguing for the maintenance of the Union and making it much more difficult for the DUP to paint Trimble as selling out that lies behind the strategy.

However, the only sense in which the North is part of a plural society is vicariously. Northern Ireland is still essentially a sectarian society bolted on to a larger unit that is culturally, politically and socially of a completely different character. We wouldn't know plurality if it jumped up and hit us in the face. Furthermore, we don't want it. Imagine the Orange Order marching through Bradford or the Sinners marching through Tunbridge Wells! Imagine the churches losing their clout in the corridors of power and Crescent Moons appearing on gable walls. Nah, truth is we don't want to go there because all too often our faith or our politics needs the shelter of sectarianism to give it sense and meaning. A pluralist society like GB or the changing scene in the Republic would leave us feeling like aliens and strangers in our own land. Aliens and strangers? Now there's an idea! (1Peter 1:1-2 & 2:11)

David McMillan



changing **women** changing **worlds**



the question of women

*This article is an abridged version of the opening chapter of Fran Porter's book **Changing Women, Changing Worlds**.*

Women are highly involved in churches in Northern Ireland. Not only do more women than men actually attend church services, but they sustain much of the ongoing work of congregational life. Women also make up the majority of those involved in the community activism that has been a feature of Northern Ireland society over the past three decades. And women participate in political life, their contribution having been given more focus in the peace process of recent years.

All of this activism has been occurring at a time of enormous social change in the lives of women over the past 50 years. Many women are no longer occupied solely with the domestic world of home and family. Changes in educational, employment and economic opportunities, an emphasis on equality for women in social and public institutions, and a recognition of the need for legislation to safeguard women's rights, however imperfectly realised, both reflect and contribute to women's greater involvement in the world outside of the home.

Given this background of women's high community and church participation in a context of social change, what is the contribution of evangelical women to civic life in Northern Ireland? How are they now involved not only in their churches, but in the wider society? What are the issues they face in taking greater participation in public processes? How as Christians do they make sense of the changes in the society in which they live? And what are the implications of all of this for evangelicalism? These questions are the concerns addressed in the book **Changing Women, Changing Worlds**.

These questions are of great interest to many people, but to raise them also causes disquiet. The way evangelicals relate to society is intrinsically bound up with matters of faith. And in an age increasingly finding it difficult to relate to Christianity, to raise the subject of women can appear threatening to evangelicalism. Indeed for some, the social changes of recent decades are 'the sort of thing that has changed the world, and ... turned everything upside down - all the values that we've always respected.'¹ This article outlines such concerns and explains why a focus on gender is needed. But first, it is important to say a word about the term 'gender'.

A Word About Gender

Why have a book about women and then talk about gender? To talk about gender is to acknowledge that humanity is both female and male, to recognise that cultural expectations about the attributes and behaviours of women and men affect the way we experience the world in which we live, and to give attention to this reality. Used this way gender is differentiated from sex, which refers to biological distinction between women and men. Gender speaks of the way any given society believes women and men ought to be and should behave, that is, what is properly feminine and masculine. In many ways and in general usage the terms sex and gender are interchangeable because so much that descriptively may be to do with a person's biological sex is also to do with gender, that is, expectations about being female or male.

Lack of attention to gender usually has meant that much of women's lives and experiences have been ignored or become invisible because, in practice, a person whose sex is not specified has been presumed to be male. The use of 'he' in the generic form is an example of how the male is taken to be representative of women and men, as is the phrase 'the man in the street'. To talk of 'male church leaders' when speaking of the men interviewed in this book may be an unusual experience for men in church leadership who are used to being referred to simply as 'church leaders' in a male dominated arena. However, in the context of this book it is important to distinguish between the comments of church leaders who are female and those who are male. Such matters are addressed throughout this book. For now the point is that speaking about gender is a way of giving focus to women's lives. While it is becoming more common today to have gender raised as relevant when thinking specifically about men, it more frequently occurs in relation to women. This is because, when gender is not given a focus, it is usually women who are invisible and suffer the resulting discrimination or exclusion. In other words, 'in general (as the record of history makes clear) women as a group suffer devaluation and injustice in gender relations more than men do.'²

Changing Women, Changing Worlds focuses on women and in doing so explores their gendered reality. Consequently it is about the way women and men relate together on a personal and familial level and through social

structures and institutions. Hence, it concerns not only women, but also men. Simply to talk about gender is not to presume a particular understanding of how gender is constructed and operates. Indeed it is the subject of much discussion, disagreement and controversy, as will be evident in the book. However, to talk of gender is to affirm that not paying due attention to the reality that humanity is female and male does a disservice to our understanding of ourselves and the way we function in our churches and wider society.

Evangelicalism, Women and Feminism

For the most part, evangelicalism tends not to give much overt attention to gender. While there is some focus in local churches on women as wives and mothers, most evangelical writing does not place a consideration of gender centre stage. Generally, when evangelicalism addresses its own identity, shares its vision, and seeks to be relevant to society, it does not consider the significance of gender, the lived realities of being female and male, in these enterprises. When the subject of women does occur, this is frequently by treating the matter as an 'issue' facing Christians, one of the many secondary matters of differing biblical interpretation that do not threaten essential evangelical unity. Mainstream evangelical opinion, therefore, has tended to set 'the woman question' as something outside its core identity.

One of the reasons evangelicalism has avoided the question of women is because of its association with feminism. And yet it is the expression of feminist concerns that has caused the church in recent years to address the question of women. This has either been directly through Christian individuals who share feminist concerns, or indirectly as a result of social changes in regard to women. Within evangelical literature that does look at this subject a number of authors identify (either directly or by implication) feminism as all or part of the source of challenge to much evangelical understanding concerning women, for which a response is appropriate or necessary.³

The dominant attitude towards feminism among those interviewed for the book is a negative one. One woman's comments are typical: 'Well just that word feminism, to me it's quite a militant term and I don't like it, you know. Um, what else can I say about it? No, I just don't like it.' Even

when women support what they understand feminist ideas to be, which often focuses around sex equality, they distance themselves from the term itself because the negative perception of feminism is so pervasive. This negative perception includes viewing feminism and feminists as aggressive, extreme, anti-male and men-hating, and even a tool of the devil. The term is used as a negative judgement on women's sexual identity, either in terms of their femininity or their sexual preference. In short, feminism has become a term of abuse, a put-down, almost a weapon against women.

Indeed, associated with a liberal social agenda, feminism has taken on a symbolic value in that it has come to represent in the minds of many Christians the dangers of a secular age which has no place for God's law. In particular, there are specific fears for the family, and for the authority of the Bible, which is at the heart of evangelical identity.

The perception of feminism as an extreme position to adopt⁴ has meant that it has become associated with a threat to the family. This was demonstrated in an advertisement placed by the group 'Christians Against the Agreement'⁵ in the run up to the referendum vote in May 1997. In a text entitled 'The Sin of Voting "Yes"' they stated, 'The Bible strongly denounces attacks on the family unit, but the "Agreement" aims to destroy the family by promoting the causes of sexual perversion and feminism'.⁶ In Northern Ireland in particular, perceived threats to family stability are heightened by the particular context of community conflict, which has tended to foster traditionalism in the role of women.

For many evangelicals, the social changes of which feminism is a part also are seen as a threat to biblical authority. Indeed, feminism is seen directly opposing the source of authority within evangelical faith. For to challenge traditional and hereto accepted biblical interpretation is seen as a challenge to the faith itself. And to support a particular stance on women is to support a belief in the authority of the Bible. This sense is captured by one of the men interviewed for the book. While his views on feminism had changed in recent years, he spoke of a time when 'Feminism was an ugly word to me, okay. Feminism spoke of revolution. Feminism spoke of anti-authority, anti-establishment, anti-institution.' This is not the whole picture of evangelicalism in Northern



the question of women

Ireland in regard to women. It does, however, indicate the core concern that the subject evokes for many, namely, the foundation of their faith itself.

Exploring the Question of Women

If evangelicals tend to avoid giving too much consideration to the question of women, partly because the subject is linked to negative perceptions about feminism, why do so now? After all, there can often be disagreement and division, even conflict, when women's position in the church is considered. It can be thought by some that to raise the subject does more harm than good. For others, however, it is a question long overdue for exploration. Whichever approach is adopted, issues surrounding women's involvement in church, community and politics are implicit in the realities of many women's lives.

Evangelical Women: Between Culture and Theology

Regardless of the perception of feminism, and the accuracy or otherwise of that perception,⁷ the position of women within church and society is a current concern. Fairly common phrases such as, 'I'm not a feminist, but ...' indicate that while feminism itself may be disowned, the matters raised by the women's movement are not. As one woman interviewed put it, 'I don't call myself a feminist, but I utterly believe in the equality of women and men.' Another expressed her thoughts about the women in her church: 'Well I certainly wouldn't be, um, er, a women's lib type person, um, by any means, but I look around me - I look around my own church and I see the number of women who have so many gifts and so many talents, um, and really until let's say probably over the past maybe three or four years, um, there maybe wasn't the same opportunity to use those.'

Irrespective of the name given to it, there is a concern over the way women are viewed and treated. There is awareness that women's participation in church and society is not all that it either could or should be. And there is expectation of equality in areas such as education, employment, and law. All of this reflects the social culture that has developed in the past 30 years. For what not all women recognise, although some women do, is that the equality in society which they expect to receive and sometimes actually experience is largely the result of feminist endeavours.⁸

As already noted, questions around women raised by contemporary culture are often avoided because of their

association with negative perceptions of feminism. As Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen points out, 'feminism is a term that many people use imprecisely and very emotionally. And to an extent this is understandable: when new social movements threaten old categorical certainties, it is tempting to dismiss them with a sweeping, pejorative label whose negativity, it is hoped, will persuade movement members to revert to the status quo or at least keep quiet.'⁹ Such 'unreflective name-calling',¹⁰ however, does not change the realities of the contemporary culture. Engagement rather than avoidance was endorsed by one male church leader interviewed: 'I think if - if somebody complains to me about something in the church, say, you know, "I really don't like the worship here", I have a choice. Either I say, "oh you're out of order, you're silly", I ignore what you have to say. My attitude is if somebody makes a criticism there's usually a grain of truth in it. Usually somewhere there's - anybody who's being negative - there's something that's causing hurt, um, and something that needs addressed. Likewise I think feminism, even in its extreme forms, which would make me very uncomfortable from a Christian point of view, they're still actually saying something the church needs to address, and therefore I think whatever happens, any movement that comes along the church needs to say, "well what can we learn from this," um, and that's the way I look at it.'

The notion of women having all kinds of legal, economic and social entitlements on a par with men in society has become part of public rhetoric, regardless of how unrealised it may be in practice. In their belief in various forms of equality for women, evangelical women in Northern Ireland are reflecting the ethos of the culture in which they live. It is a product, in part, of second-wave feminism and the movement for women's liberation, that is, eradicating inequality women experience on the basis of their sex. The negotiation of Christian faith with this culture is something evangelical women are facing, whether consciously or not, through their participation in the church, community and political world. For evangelicals this faith involves not only various theological positions (about gender relations and Christians' relationship to society), but also a sub-culture of its own.¹¹ And for women in Northern Ireland, an additional backcloth is the cultural patterns evident in a society experiencing civil conflict, which have tended to foster conservative gender roles for women. Evangelical women are, therefore, participating in church and civic society and making sense of their lives negotiating between culture

and theology, or perhaps more accurately, between cultures and theologies.

Changing Women, Changing Worlds explores the different areas of this ongoing negotiation. Despite the expectation of equality of opportunity women are still underrepresented in certain jobs, responsibilities and roles in church, community and politics. Chapter two, **The Participation Question**, outlines the current situation of women's involvement in each of these areas and considers the various mechanisms that facilitate women's greater participation in those areas traditionally populated by men. However, while such participation may be achieved, the actual experience for women is not always one of full inclusion. Drawing on women's experiences in new and their more traditional spheres of activity, chapter three, **The Question of Inclusion**, considers a variety of both good and difficult experiences told by the women interviewed. The chapter identifies elements that enable and those that hinder women's inclusion in church and civic life.

One of the pressing questions surrounding women's participation in church and society concerns whether their contribution is different to or the same as that of men. This question is rooted in deeply held beliefs about the natures of women and men, which in turn are intrinsic to our sense of personal identity. Chapter four, **The Difference Question**, explores the significance the notion of difference has in women's church, community and political participation, looking at what can happen when we use differences in status and power between women and men to form our sense of identity.

For Christians, and especially for evangelical Christians, integral to any discussion of women's participation, particularly in relation to the church, is the matter of biblical interpretation. Women's increasing participation in all areas of church and civic life is bringing them into positions of responsibility and authority previously held mainly by men. Entering into these new roles means women (and men) are having to examine their understanding of authority and its gendered application. Chapter five, **The Question of Authority**, investigates this subject and in particular the theological notion of 'headship' with its contemporary understanding and practice, exploring the relevant biblical material.

Domestic needs are very much a factor in women's church, community and political participation.

Traditionally in Northern Ireland domestic care responsibilities for homes, children, husbands and other family members rest in the main with women. Related to the question of women's natures raised in chapter four, the matter of domestic responsibilities is woven into the fabric of women's lives. Chapter six, **The Domestic Question**, explores the practical and personal realities of this for women, including some women's responses that challenge a narrow understanding of female identity.

In the midst of the pressing political focus of Northern Ireland's divided society on the one hand and the general concerns of Christian churches about maintaining their life and witness on the other, the needs, aspirations and gifting of women have often taken second place. Drawing together the themes in the previous pages, chapter seven, **The Question of Priority**, considers the importance of focusing on asking the question of women for women themselves, for men, churches, evangelicalism and civic society.

Real People, Real Lives

In order to find out about the experiences and thoughts of women themselves and of male church leaders about the participation of women in church, community and politics, 70 women and ten men from evangelical Protestantism were interviewed for **Changing Women, Changing Worlds**. Their stories and words appear throughout the book explaining and illustrating the questions it deals with.

While each woman interviewed was initially identified because of her church, community or political participation, in reality many had diverse experience both within and across these boundaries, providing a rich resource of experience and reflection. The picture provided by these 70 women is, therefore, varied, textured and extensive. The interviews were carried out on a confidential basis. The women talked not only about their current occupations but also past experiences. Sometimes they told what had happened to their women friends and colleagues. They narrated their stories and shared their thoughts. Sometimes they spoke of very private things, revealed their joys, fears, hopes, dreams and pain. The aim of the book is to convey something of this rich account of women's reality, focusing on the common themes that are pertinent to exploring evangelical women's church and wider civic participation.

Ten men were also interviewed for this project. All were evangelical church leaders with knowledge and experience

not only of their own current congregation, but also of their denomination as a whole.

The intention of **Changing Women, Changing Worlds** is not to be an exploration of any particular church denomination or congregation, community group or voluntary sector organisation, or political party or form of government. Rather it is to consider the common issues facing evangelical Protestant women in particular, in their participation in church, community and politics. While these issues have a variety of nuances depending on each particular context, there nevertheless remains a core group of questions that are involved in evangelical women's negotiation of the culture and theology that affects their lives. There are, of course, implications for individual religious institutions, community groups and political bodies from exploring these questions. The aim of the book is to make visible and foster understanding of the questions of participation, inclusion, difference, authority, domesticity and priority that concern women in their church, community and political involvement.

Dr Fran Porter was a Research Consultant for the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland in 2000-2001 and is currently a freelance researcher and teacher.

¹ Words of one man to a woman interviewed for this project when he learned she was involved in education specifically designed to foster women's personal growth and development and employment opportunities.

² Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (ed.), *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1993, p. 22.

³ For example, John Benton, *Gender Questions: Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in the Contemporary World* (Evangelical Press, Darlington, England and Auburn, MA), 2000; John Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 3rd Edition, (Marshall Pickering, London), 1999; Nigel Wright, *The Radical Evangelical. Seeking a Place to Stand* (SPCK, London), 1996; Rob Warner, 'Fracture Points', in Clive Calver and Rob Warner, *Together We Stand: Evangelical Convictions, Unity and Visions* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, Sydney, Auckland), 1996.

⁴ Freda Donoghue, Rick Wilford and Robert Miller, 'Feminist or Womanist? Feminism, the Women's Movement and Age Difference in Northern Ireland' *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, 1997, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 86-105.

⁵ This refers to the Belfast Agreement that came out of the multi-party negotiations and was finally reached on 10th April, 1998 which was Good Friday and hence is popularly known as the Good Friday Agreement. It was endorsed by referendum vote in May of 1998 by 71 percent overall, with a small pro-agreement majority among the unionist voters.

⁶ *Newsletter*, 24th April 1998.

⁷ Feminism can be defined as an ideology and practice of women's liberation (not just of equality) based on notion that women suffer injustice because of their sex. There are differences in the understanding of why this liberation is necessary and how it is to be achieved. Hence, feminism is frequently referred to in the plural 'feminisms'. For an outline of feminist thought and a Christian engagement with it see: Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism* (London, SPCK), 1993; and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (ed.), *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1993.

⁸ While second-wave feminism was chiefly a secular movement, many Christians, including evangelicals, were involved in the endeavours of first-wave feminism.

⁹ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (ed.), *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1993, p. 20.

¹⁰ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (ed.), *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan), 1993, p. 21.

¹¹ A variety of evangelical theological positions and manifestations of evangelical sub-culture are provided in Glenn Jordan, *Not of this World? Evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland* (Blackstaff and Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, Belfast), 2001, although gender is not a major analytical component in this contribution on evangelicalism.



delightfully subversive

changing women, changing worlds

Cheryl Reid

Delightfully subversive! Uncannily reminiscent of the first steps in reflecting on the pervasiveness of Sectarianism in our culture, this book raises issues that many of us are vaguely aware of, but which we choose not to explore, for fear of the conflict into which it might lead us. Like an old Stormont government, an appearance of peace leads to an illusion of justice, whereas closer inspection of the evidence indicates that serious questions of equality and justice remain unaddressed.

Whilst women are major contributors to Church and community life, they remain extremely underrepresented in every sphere of public life. The picture that emerges is complex, and the challenge for change is fundamental. Women are excluded because the system was designed by men for men. Women are excluded because those who set up the rules of full time work and both civic and church government were not child bearers and did not take responsibility for care of home and other family. Women exclude themselves because they have more than their share of responsibility for family. Women exclude themselves because to challenge the status quo invites criticism of one's commitment to parenthood. Women are excluded because other women's sexist attitudes reinforce prejudice against them. Women are excluded because to challenge male-dominated language is ridiculed, and inclusive language or female language objected to. Women are excluded because to challenge traditional interpretations of scripture is seen as a betrayal of true Christian faith. Porter's contention is that these interpretations are shaped by a cultural mindset which is hostile to the full equality of women.

And whilst the constitutional wrangling continues in Northern Ireland, any form of subversion of the male-dominated 'evangelical' world-view seems not only

'unchristian' but also treacherous. Yet Fran Porter, with gentle and intelligent listening, blows open the conspiracy of niceness that ensnares women in gender roles which deny them any sense of vocation beyond motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and any other job that men do not wish to do.

The first clear challenge is that so many of us, both women and men, are reluctant even to give the question of women a fair hearing. I find myself guilty on this point. Perhaps there is something innate in women that makes us less competitive than men, less willing to stand up for the same freedom of choices about career and family and the same opportunities as men. Perhaps we are too busy with family and domestic responsibilities (though this can't be my excuse!) to face the disapproval and guilt incurred in challenging the status quo. Or perhaps it is the characteristic of those without power, like the lesser dogs in the pack, to roll over and submit, to look cute if necessary, to make survival possible. Or is it that the profound changes necessary to truly value and empower women simply involve more upheaval than most of us will have the courage and integrity to contemplate? Porter asks us to contemplate the cost to us of refusing to engage in a process of change which has already permeated the stance even of the traditionalists.

Feminists in Northern Ireland, both male and female, tend to avoid the conflict, to concentrate on 'fundamental', rather than 'secondary' issues. And having read this book, I now see as never before, that women are a secondary issue. Women's mental, physical and spiritual health may be put under strain by the unbearable tensions between home and work, between civic and domestic responsibilities, between vocation and drudgery, and the jobs they do may be harder because they are women,

because of the pressure to perform to justify their position and because the systems of power have been designed by men and for men - so that balancing caring and public leadership roles is the exception to the norm. But somehow the harm caused is not generally deemed sufficiently serious to raise the question whether certain inherited interpretations of Scripture are in fact good interpretations.

In reaction to this devaluing of women, the whole shape of the book is clearly and refreshingly built on the foundation of listening to women (and some men), and then its structure perceptively reflects the various aspects of the experience.

The Question of Women

The Participation Question

The Question of Inclusion

The Difference Question

The Question of Authority

The Domestic Question

The Question of Priority

Deliberate or not, there is a chiasmic structure to the book: the chapter on 'Difference' is central, with 'Inclusion' balanced by 'Authority' (for which, one may read 'exclusion' from decision making, power, and even participation). 'Participation' in public life is often in conflict with and weighed against 'Domestic' responsibilities. And while the book opens with 'The question of Women', critiquing the perception that women themselves are the problem, and that the problem is typically addressed among sexual matters rather than as social justice, it concludes strongly to question what priority women - and the 'question of women' - are to have, how important they are to God and how important justice for women is to the effective transmission of the Gospel in its fulness.

Difference is 'at the heart of the debate'; it's a reason to make a point of including women, and also an excuse for discriminating against them. Even where inclusion does take place, it seems to be conditional upon women investing in 'soft issues', 'women's concerns', such as health and child care, rather than hard, tangible or constitutional areas. And there is at least the perception of a double-bind: that whatever issues women take an interest in will be seen as secondary, whereas whatever the men do will be seen as mainstream. Such disinterest in issues of concern to women is perceived as disdain for women themselves.

In what way are men different from women? Why are

women treated differently from men? Why do they experience the world differently? These, and the whole nature versus nurture debate, are not addressed fully. Biblical arguments are succinct and perceptive, but this is not the main focus of the book. (The main summary of differing biblical positions comes in chapter 5 on Authority.)

The book is not prescriptive, but asks pertinent questions and leaves conclusions to be drawn. It avoids the strident character so feared by women - and men - and associated with a negative understanding of feminism, but challenges winsomely and intelligently many of the presuppositions which are taken for self-evident truth in much of what passes for discussion of 'the question of women'.

For me, the impression left is of a fascinating contrast between the quality of relationships that some women and men are clearly enjoying in practice and the theological position they still articulate, in spite of evidence to the contrary. Whilst for some, the theology seems to be harmless (even practically irrelevant) to others; it is a source of damage and hurt. But in all cases, transition is underway.

Porter points out that even conservative evangelicalism has had to adapt its arguments in the light of a changing world: Where once it was possible to deny the spiritual inferiority of women, as well as differentiating both their role and nature from that of men, now spiritual equality is affirmed, whilst maintaining male authority. Similarly, in the view of one interviewee, feminists are now speaking in 'more measured, wise and accessible tones'. Porter herself says:

'It may be that those advancing the cause of women do not need to be as forceful in their viewpoint because of the current climate. Or it may be that some of those listening are now able to hear what is being said because they have become accustomed to ideas that thirty years ago were simply too alien.'
(Chapter 7: Priority)

Style Warning: **Changing Women, Changing Worlds** does not lend itself to speed-reading, partly because of Porter's own style, but mainly because much of the book contains verbatim testimony, which must be taken slowly to hear the witness. This has the virtue of making the book a practical exercise in Listening. Both men and women, who take the time, will find a window opened on a wall we didn't even know existed!

I said it was subversive. How our culture attaches negative connotations to the word! But if Christ subverted of social and cultural norms which were unjust, shouldn't we? Porter does us a favour by helping us listen to who we are, what we're here for and for whom.

Cheryl Reid is associate minister at Gilnahirk Presbyterian Church, Belfast, and a member of the ECONI Board.



opportune

changing women, changing worlds - review

Linda McClaughlin

Christians today need to be thinking deeply and biblically about the many issues facing twenty-first century society, not least the issue of gender. **Changing Women, Changing Worlds** provides a window into women's reality, raising questions that have implications for evangelicals and evangelicalism. This book is opportune because evangelical literature has been characterised by a lack of informed consideration of gender issues.

The writer helpfully suggests several explanations for the absence of gender awareness. The question of a woman's place in evangelicalism generally is perceived in a negative light and therefore viewed as 'problematic'. Also the placing of this issue in either a sexual or social context, or the negative attitudes regarding feminism, undoubtedly colours one's interpretation. **Changing Women, Changing Worlds** offers a readable and informative overview of the common issues facing evangelical women particularly in their participation in church, community and politics. The writer makes a case for a visible awareness and understanding of gender concerns with questions relating to participation, inclusion, difference, authority, domesticity and priority.

She has researched women's experiences by means of in-depth interviews and has used the analysis of her findings to focus on common themes pertinent to exploring evangelical women's participation in church and wider society. Her many quotations of these experiences allow women to speak for themselves but, at times, the quotes render the text tedious. The claim that this is a rich account of women's reality could have been more clearly substantiated by a statistical analysis (in table form) of the interviewees. This would have enabled the reader to evaluate the breadth in scope of age, marital and maternal status, geographical location and denominational affiliation. In chapter two, the writer is to be commended for her clear outline of the current situation regarding women's involvement in church, community and politics. She then examines the different measures that facilitate women's involvement in male roles as traditionally perceived. In chapter three, elements that enable, and those that hinder women's inclusion in church and civil life, are identified. Moreover it is inferred that a fuller 'inclusion' of women in church and society will demand both affirmative action and a change in discriminatory mindsets.

An exploration of the significance and notion of gender difference is then made and it is surprising that the writer insists in this area 'some women are their own worst enemies'. While it is further claimed that the emphasis on gender 'difference' has resulted in a marginalisation and devaluing process for some women, it is also noted that, for others, the concept of 'difference' is perceived positively. In chapter six the practical and personal realities of domestic responsibility are discussed. However, her investigation, in chapter five, concerning the question of 'authority' merits further comment. While recognising that the writer is giving an overview of concerns, this chapter falls short of presenting an adequate reasoning and discussion on the complex subjects of 'headship' and 'authority'. The writer clearly illustrates that no consensus exists amongst evangelicals on the question of 'headship' and 'authority' in church and society, but her summary statements give insufficient indication of the breadth of scholarly opinion on this complex issue.

In conclusion **Changing Women, Changing Worlds** is a well-written overview of the related questions that concern women in the church, community and society. This is a commendable book for the evangelical community to read as a further step to becoming more aware of the realities of women in church and society. The next step in the process, that of the practical outworking of these implications, will be a major challenge. The writer is to be congratulated for paying due attention to the reality that humanity is female and male. Not to do so would be disadvantageous 'to our understanding of ourselves and of the way we function in our churches and wider society'. It would be sad if readership of this work were to be limited to those already aware of the gender issues and decided as to their position.

Linda McClaughlin is a part time teacher. She has recently completed a Master of Philosophy degree on a critical analysis of the biblical teaching on the status and role of women.



faith in practice christine bell

Christine Bell is Professor of Law at the University of Ulster (Magee Campus). Previous appointments include Director of the Centre for International and Comparative Human Rights Law, Queen's University, Belfast and a lecturer in jurisprudence. She is a member of the European Commission Committee of Experts on Fundamental Rights and a current member of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. A qualified barrister, she practised as an attorney in New York from 1990 to 1992.

Professor of Law

We began our conversation by talking about Christine's current position as Professor of Law. What does this entail?

There are three parts to my job: teaching, research and administration. The first brings involvement with students, we have new degree programmes - this is their third year. The first graduation class will be this summer. But a big part of my job is also research, and then there's the administration that comes with a management role.

Jurisprudence – what is it?

When you look up jurisprudence in the dictionary I think it says 'study of law,' but people usually use it to mean theory of law, looking at how law works, the relationship of law to society and politics, moral issues in law, what is justice, what are rights, what is equality? When I finished my law studies that was my real interest. How did law work and what did it do? What was its connection to justice? That interest was both practical and theoretical.

I always studied a lot of jurisprudence writings by abstract, but students hate abstract stuff, so I have

always taught it through very concrete, practical examples, starting with the practical and working through to the ideal. When I came back to Northern Ireland, I got involved with the Committee on the Administration of Justice, and developed a practical interest in human rights. I now am looking at the legal status internationally of different peace agreements, and it's not so much human rights any more but international law. So I still view myself as doing jurisprudence, but my title tends to be international law. To my mind a lot of the big debates in international law are about the relationship between law and politics. For example, in the war against terrorism at the minute, is there an international law or is America just off on a spree of its own? Those types of issues are at the heart of traditional jurisprudence studies, and I'm using international law as the vehicle to look at that in my research.

A Law Career – why?

I was a kind of all-rounder at school. I always had a broad range of interests. I knew the type of things I wanted to do, but not really what actual job. I always liked law programmes on television; I advise people now that if they like the law things on television they probably will like the study of law. It happened that I got a chance to go away for a law weekend at Cambridge. Our school got two places, where there were law lectures, and I really enjoyed them. I applied for both law, and music. But the grades were higher to get into law and I got a place at Cambridge. From the first day I loved law. I was worried about studying just one subject, because I always like to do a whole lot of things. Even three A levels to me was quite narrow, but actually law has a lot of different subjects in it. There's constitutional law, that's like history; we did Roman

law; law of tort, which is suing people; criminal law, which is kind of like you see on television; international law which is almost like international politics. There are just so many different topics within law that you can really explore a lot of different areas.

New York Attorney

I practised law for two years in New York. I got a scholarship to do a Masters degree at Harvard for one year, and it was a fantastic year. I met people from all over the world, and it was very exciting to be there, because the iron curtain came down and the South Africa peace process started. And then I got a chance to study for the bar in America, through the offer of a job in a big law firm in New York. So although I had always been very determined to come back home, it just seemed like the time wasn't right, so I stayed away. It was a kind of unsettling time in that it was a great experience and I loved it, but I was keen to come back. I had a feeling that the longer I stayed away the harder it would be to return. I now look back and think I shouldn't have panicked. I should have been happy for anything up to five years, but I really thought that, as each year went by and I was more entrenched in my job, earning my salary there and having my friends there, I might end up settling down there. That decided it for me. A job came up lecturing in jurisprudence in Queen's, which was what I'd always wanted to do, and although I would have liked to stay a little longer in New York at that stage, I thought, "Well this is exactly what I want to do, and I'll go for it, and if I get it that means I'm meant to come back." I did get it, so did return to Belfast.

Personal Faith

The phrase 'meant to come back' led nicely to a discussion

about personal faith. I asked Christine how she first came to faith.

Well, my parents were Christians, and I was always a member of the Fitzroy Church, in fact my grandfather was the minister there. So on both sides of my family there's really a long tradition of faith and connection with the church. I went to Sunday School and Crusaders and Bible study groups, and through that came to faith at a very early age, but I think a lot of people experience what I did, where you're somehow not meant to have any doubts but you do, and you come to faith in ways over and over again. I suppose that was my experience. I would have always been known as a Christian, and quite an evangelical Christian at school. I was always in the Scripture Union and involved in those things. And if I look back I'm sure I was quite irritating as well. I was always trying to convert my non-Christian friends, and they were very tolerant of it – I think I was probably quite an annoying person! When I went away to university, I maintained that. At Cambridge there's a strong Christian Union, but I did have some doubts there. It's a very male environment. It was almost more conservative than a lot of churches would be. So I actually got quite involved with a church on the edge of the city, that didn't have a big student population, and that was a way of escaping. And also I found with the Christian Union, and I think I've found this all the way through my life, that to be accepted as a mainstream member you have to be at lots of meetings and be very visible. And if you're at those meetings you find that you've no connection with anyone that's not involved there. I was a person with a lot of interest in sport and music and the students' union. So I always felt I was in this funny position. Members of the Christian Union liked me and knew I was a Christian, but felt that I was maybe not as committed a member as I should have been. At the same

time they acknowledged that I wasn't a 'wet' Christian, as they used to call them, because I did all these other things. I suppose it was being in the world and not of it, and I've never really found that there's an ideal balance for that. My experience has been that you tilt too much one way or the other. That's my present experience. I'm probably even now tilted more in the world than out of it, with a cost to my spiritual life and my connection with a faith community.

Does faith inform work as well as shape life?

Yes. I feel very much so. I would have times when I would be closer to God and times that I'm further away, that's one of the things that has always surprised me. Even when I'm at my furthest away, things I do are fundamentally shaped by my faith. The decisions I make and how I approach moral dilemmas shape my life in how I deal with people. I try to treat them as real people. You know, now I'm in a management role, I'm balancing a lot of things and watching people who through work are coming under stress. I try to step back from the situation and understand what motivates the other person. I think that my faith really informs that.

In terms of human rights issues, a lot of the issues I've been involved in now really would be seen as quite political. But I feel my whole interest in human rights is totally inspired by my faith. The Church's relation to human rights is two sided. To me human rights are a way of secularising a lot of Christian standards. If you look right back to the abolition movement for slavery, it was Christians who 'pushed' it on a notion of equality and how people should be treated. The concern with justice and social exclusion – all trendy words nowadays - are at the heart of both the prophetic voice of the Old Testament and also of Jesus' approach to the New Testament. Now of course you don't get specific answers to concrete problems, but that idea that there should be some minimum standard for how we treat people is where I view my faith and my work coming together.

Ironically enough in Northern Ireland, if you're involved in activism in human rights activity, somehow this places you at odds with the Protestant community. You're not really a proper Protestant. But for me it's a Presbyterian thing. The notion of free choice is at the heart of civil liberties, it's at the heart of Presbyterianism. And it's no coincidence that Presbyterians were at the heart of bills of rights in other countries, promulgating notions of liberal democracy that would enable people to make the type of personal choices that are part of Presbyterianism.

Church Involvement

We next turned to the role that a local church now plays in Christine's life.

At the minute I belong to Second Derry Presbyterian, it's often known as Strand Road Presbyterian. I moved to Derry two years ago, and it's actually the church that's closest to my house. I had intended to visit a number of churches and decide where I would attend, but I went there in the first week and people were very friendly and welcoming. I believe in a connection between where you live and the church. I like that connection, and it being your community church. So I didn't see any reason really to look around further.

Belonging to a local church is important. My job takes me away travelling, so I miss a lot of Sundays. Also I've got a young family, and the whole timing of church is difficult, we have missed a lot of church. I had a feeling of drifting away from the church, how easy it would be! Somehow in my head I thought it would never happen. When I went to Derry I thought, "If I don't quickly join somewhere, actually it might never happen." And then I would really have made quite a big decision without making it. So in a funny way going to Derry was a time of me making a firm commitment to be an active church-goer.

It's important to me that my children know church. And I honestly think that, even had I moved away from my faith completely, for me, bringing my children to church would still have been important because it was such a fundamental part of my childhood, and because it is still part of my identity. I don't mean that in a Protestant cultural way, but just that I am connected, knowing believers, knowing a range of age groups. There are very few organisations where you meet a range of age groups. There are a lot of non-faith reasons why church is an interesting and good place to bring your children for some time.

Also, because of the very varied spheres of life in which I move, attendance at church would in ways be my main point of contact with the traditional Protestant community at large. I don't do it because of that, I don't go to church for those sort of reasons, but that's a dimension that church happens to bring to my life.

Influence of Churches – positive or negative?

I don't think we can say that the church's influence has been good or bad. You can look at what people's impression is of the Presbyterian Church. It might be that for people who don't attend it'll be what the Moderator says, and that's quite confusing to the outside world because the office changes every year and they say quite different things. For the person who goes and is active the church's influence is different. I think in the lives of ordinary people the church has a positive influence. People come to church out of some sense of need and out of some sense of looking for something. When I was growing up that wasn't understood. Now with the whole spiritual vacuum and New Age thing people can relate to Christians going to

church, in ways much more easily than they could in the past.

In terms of the public faith of the established churches I think it's been quite negative. The churches, to my mind, never radically challenge their own communities, and it's interesting if you look at the Bible and Jesus' interaction. He worked beyond the confines of his own community and he didn't condemn different people who were outcasts from society like the woman at the well. The people he condemned were the religious hypocrites from his own church. The people he pushed to the limits in terms of calling them to account were the establishment of his own grouping. Our churches tend to call to account people in the other community. I'm not really informed enough about what the Catholic Church has done over the years, but I do think the Protestant churches in particular didn't push their own community. They rather saw themselves as representing their community and their community's interests. Now I think there's a role for that in humane terms, to speak where you see there's a need, but I also think the church is very slow to accept its prophetic leadership voice. For example, there was a fear of ecumenism, that it would water down their beliefs rather than saying "Look, we can actually be quite secure in having dialogue with people from different backgrounds." In the context of the troubles, that was a failure.

Finally we asked Christine to talk about the issues she felt were facing Northern Irish churches in the coming months.

I think the biggest issue for the church is relevance - relevance about day-to-day life, relevance to other members and to people that aren't, relevance to the context - the political context in the small 'p' world. That maybe isn't issues like marches, it's issues like whether they have jobs, or what parenting skills they have - a whole range of things. Churches are struggling to be relevant, and I think they're also struggling about their message. I think all the different established churches are struggling with a liberal world where there are no clear boundaries and where the only universal truth is that there is no universal truth. That's very difficult because churches are founded on the basis that there is one quite definite universal truth, and they know what it is and other people don't. But that is not resonating as they are faced with issues about how we should treat people, how we open our doors, and what our theology is. In deciding how to be relevant they need to decide what bits can legitimately be modernised or changed, and what is the core principle at the heart that cannot. It's not obvious which is which, and there's a debate about it.

Secondly, as regards relevance, increasingly churches are disconnected from their local communities. There may be shifts. Maybe they're not in a residential area when they used to be, maybe there have been popula-

tion shifts, and maybe it's because fewer people are going to church. There are all sorts of reasons why churches are disconnected, and different churches have different approaches to it. Some start to re-engage with their local community saying, "We have a relationship to where we are geographically." Others accept the fact that people are more or less commuting to them, and work on that basis.

Thirdly, churches face a challenge as regards relevance to the wider social and political context. Should they engage and risk getting their hands dirty, or should they stand apart from current political debates? To engage means coming to some consensus about how the Bible and faith might be relevant to current issues. Often the attempt to find consensus is difficult, at times ill informed, resulting in a few very general and vague points. However, not to engage can leave the church on the outside of the most fundamental moral debates of our time. In my experience the church is quite bad at harnessing the expertise of its general membership who are working with issues on the ground, but seldom make it to the policy committees where official church policy is decided.

Finally, churches have to remain relevant to the day-to-day problems that people face in their own attempts to lead the Christian life. These are often mundane problems of how to make time for spiritual life, or how to cope with the conflicting pressures of work, family and job. They also include a range of problems such as marital issues. Too often the church has been responsible for giving bad advice in difficult areas, or no advice in mundane ones.

Once again we are indebted, this time to Professor Christine Bell, for her willingness to be interviewed. We wish her continued success in all she does.

Ruth Hutchinson
Assistant Editor



ANTJIE KROG

peter stark

A South African Pastor's Response

Now that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been finalised, the unanswered question regarding the process has to do with reconciliation. Has the goal of reconciliation as essentially purposed in the new South African constitution been realised? Furthermore, has the church in South Africa been an effective counterpart in the role of national reconciliation?

From all of the books published in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I was fascinated to discover a unique contribution from the perspective of an Afrikaner woman, Antjie Krog. Antjie is an accomplished poet and journalist who covered the whole process of the TRC for the South African Broadcasting Association.

Country of My Skull is her memoir.

This is a poem that Antjie wrote in response to the moment where Desmond Tutu presented the TRC's final report to then president, Nelson Mandela.

so much hurt for truth
so much destruction
so little left for survival
where does one go from here?
voices slung
in anger
over the solid cold length of our past
how long does it take
for a voice
to reach another
in this country held bleeding between us?

As I reflect, from a pastoral perspective, on the unique insights of this woman, I am deeply ashamed of the conclusion that she draws regarding the ineffectiveness of the South African church in its failure to follow through in the reconciliation process. *'What is indeed not visible in South Africa is reconciliation as a mysterious Judeo-Christian process.'*

By its very definition, the TRC purposed to establish the truth regarding the dehumanizing atrocities committed by all South Africans in response to the apartheid era. The intention was to provide a structural framework through

which the ultimate goal of restorative healing could take place for all South Africans. The final clause of the Interim Constitution of 1993 **On National Unity and Reconciliation** reads as follows:

'The adoption of this constitution lays the sure foundation for the people of South Africa to transcend the division and strife of the past which generated gross violations of human rights, the transgression of humanitarian principles in violent conflicts and a legacy of hatred, fear, guilt and revenge. These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding, but not for revenge, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimization.'

'Ubuntu' is a principle of African justice whereby punitive measures for the contravention of justice will only be resorted to once the opportunity for restoration has been provided. This principle is a wonderful opportunity for the church to facilitate social restoration from a biblical basis where the destructive cycle of revenge, retaliation and recrimination can be broken. So important was this commission, that the establishment of the TRC was approved during the first session of the new South African parliament, in October 1994.

While the contribution of participating church groups most certainly influenced the transitional government's motivation for the TRC, there appears to be an inability in the church to capitalise on the momentum of the TRC. This inertia is a major dilemma that now faces our socially disorientated church. This is a great pity as the heartcry behind the objective of the TRC provided the church with a wonderful opportunity to redress its culpability in silently ignoring the violation of human dignity under the past apartheid era.

Michael Cassidy, in his book **A Passing Summer** anticipated this dilemma before the transition:

'In alienated societies, reconciliation has to find its ways into structures. We mustn't imagine that just removing injustice is the whole story. All that social justice does is to make social peace possible, but it is not inevitable.'

I reflect on the implications of this dilemma for the local community of 'Christ followers' of which I am a part, more than that, entrusted with the responsibility of nurturing. I must acknowledge that the 'inevitable' of social peace is eluded rather easily, as we rest on the weak glimmer of past glows from God's gracious interventions in our land. I sense an insidious streak of disillusionment, even a loss of hope, as I reflect on the closing chapters of Antjie's second edition:

'The TRC's failure to interact successfully with the ANC led government has done the process more harm than all the other criticisms and mistakes put together. It blocked the growth of something important. It allowed the healthy stream of accountability that was starting to flow through the country to dry up. It curtailed compassion. It left us stunted. We are no longer a country becoming.'

Listen to her questioning:

*'What does one say now in the face of all of this two days after September 11? What does one do with the possessive pronoun, which refuses to change, with the instilled values of racism and intolerance? How does one find the past tense of the word 'hate'? How does one undo the brutalised blood into milk and dreams? What does one do with pain that does not want to become language - cannot become language? How do we become released into understanding, into becoming whole among others? How do we make **whole**?'*

Perhaps the answer lies in an observation Antjie made as a result of listening to the multitude of personal testimonies delivered through the truth hearings:

'The first casualty of conflict is identity, and redefining identity is a fundamental step towards reconciliation... A group that neglects this essential stage is likely to become frozen in a permanent quest for identity that often expresses itself in rigid and aggressive forms of ethnicism or nationalism.'

The Christian's identity must surely rest in what we have been called to become in Christ, not in what we are as a

product of our past. We are products of our future and the opportunities which our Sovereign Lord presents in the present moment are opportunities which have to be grasped. As the church we are, at any time and in every time, presented with a 'kairos' moment to demonstrate a counter-culture. If the opportunity is not seized to demonstrate Christ, reconciler of humankind to God and reconciler of person-to-person, then the legacy we bequeath can only be '*...a country held bleeding between us*'.

As we redefine our identity as Christ followers in local churches, my prayer is that we would not make the same mistake as in the past - a church silently indifferent at best, or a protagonist of sectarian conflict at worst.

Peter Stark is a Baptist minister in Johannesburg, South Africa. His wife was born in Northern Ireland, and he is a regular visitor to the Province.



thought provoking

changing women, changing worlds - review

Myrtle Hill

This is a highly readable book which is original and engaging, and which deals with issues of relevance to men and women outside as well as within religious institutions.

Based on interviews with 10 male religious leaders and 70 women aged between 24 and 77, all from the evangelical Protestant community, the book focuses on three areas within which women operate with varying degrees of (in)visibility – church, community and politics. In the context of rapid social change affecting all areas of life, the author addresses six main questions: Participation, Inclusion, Difference, Authority, the Domestic Question and Priority. While there is inevitably some overlap when discussing these issues, the structure is clear and facilitates discussion of the many parallels within the different areas of women's experience. Indeed one of the real strengths of the book is the confident and smooth way in which Fran Porter deals with the interactions and interrelationships of various aspects of life and experience: theology and popular attitudes, family background, denominational differences, employment, political involvement, activism, conservative or liberal attitudes. In a tightly-structured narrative which explores the 'gendered reality' of women's experiences, she traces the roots of the problems with considerable sensitivity, paying due attention to the complexities and diversities of the lives of men and women and of the faith which is central to their experience.

The position of women in religious life has in recent decades been the focus of a great deal of scholarly work,

both historical and contemporary, reflecting the centrality of their involvement, the importance of their influence, and the traditionally patriarchal nature of those institutions within which they practise their faith. Too often, however, the views and perspectives of women themselves are missing from these accounts and analyses, making Porter's contribution particularly welcome. Whether discussing the conservative or progressive female church worker, and negative or positive responses to institutional religion, she integrates the voices of individual women into the text, validating their experiences as they negotiate 'between culture and theology'.

While, as Porter suggests, many religious leaders have recognised the need to address ideas of equality, and to bring experience within churches closer to the expectations of everyday life in the twenty-first century, others continue to resist modernising influences. Perceiving such a process as a threat, opponents of change often turn to biblical authority to justify their position. From the first chapter of Genesis to the letters of Paul, examples can be found to justify the notion that women's inferiority is divinely ordained. However, Porter demonstrates that the nature and language of debates on biblical interpretation have moved on considerably, with many evangelicals distancing themselves from this traditional stance. Unfortunately, this seems to have made little overall impact on male-female relations within, or indeed outside, churches, as she goes on to point out that even where there are notions of equality, decisions made by men still

carry more weight.

The process of negotiation is a recurring theme in this work, and not only within churches and homes, or in community, political or religious structures. Popular ideologies and assumptions, which underlie and reinforce traditional attitudes to women, also present obstacles needing to be challenged and overcome. I therefore felt that the chapter on 'The Question of Difference' was particularly significant. The extent to which the difference between male and female attributes and characteristics should be celebrated or minimised is a debate which has exercised feminists throughout the 'second wave', and one which carries important implications for how women and men relate to each other. However, Porter does not dwell on the theoretical concepts, but on the significance attached to the notion of difference, and whether it helps or hinders women. Acknowledging that sexual difference is only one of many points of diversity, she discusses both negative and positive experiences. For example, several women spoke of the different qualities they believed they could bring to their work, which their male counterparts could not: *'Women have a different perspective on life than men have, you know... women do have much more of an ability, I think, sometimes to be able to come alongside people and listen, and understand.'*

On the other hand, it appears that perceptions of women's 'unique' qualities tend to restrict them to certain, usually pastoral, areas of work, a 'separate sphere' in which they

can all too easily become marginalised. The experience of a majority of interviewees suggests that, even when presented positively, difference for women equates with subordinate or inferior positions.

The combination of feminist theory, feminist theology and Christian tradition which Porter incorporates in this work is all too rare. Faith and feminism are most usually discussed as opposing and irreconcilable concepts. While the religious world views feminism (as indeed do many in secular society) as 'negative and troublesome', feminists are often equally anti-religious. As one Christian feminist put it:

*'It is as if religion belongs only to another era of Western history, a period prior to women's relative emancipation; as if religion is so unequivocally bad for women that studying it (or, God forbid, practising it) threatens one's integrity as a feminist.'*¹

Given the importance of religion to the lives of many women, whether or not they are actively involved in the life of their church, this mutually dismissive tendency is, at the very least, unhelpful. As Porter's work shows, it is impossible to separate the spiritual and secular worlds, in both of which women's status is subordinate and inferior. This book contributes to a greater understanding of the interaction of both worlds, and to the roots of that subordination. Its accessibility in terms of language and presentation is thus important, and it is to be hoped that it



thought provoking

Myrtle Hill

enjoys a wide readership.

Throughout this work, the author has been at pains to contextualise her discussion of women's experiences and the final chapter, which deals with priorities, reinforces how critical this is. In trying to find ways forward, she states, it is necessary to consider how important the issue of gender is, given the wider range of divisions within society in Northern Ireland. Whether in community, politics or church, women, she argues, come far down the list of concerns, following constitutional and sectarian issues or the decline in congregations. Indeed, perhaps more significant than how they are prioritised, is the fact that they are not perceived as 'an intrinsic part of church and civic life, ... but as an optional extra'. Women, on the other hand, as Porter points out, do not have the option to ignore the question of women because they 'live the question'.

This is an important and thought-provoking publication, demonstrating the interlocking oppressions faced by many women, the struggles for equality in a range of settings, and the diversity of perceptions and experiences. For while some resent their frustrated aspirations, others speak of their sense of satisfaction and fulfilment. The last words, reflecting her aims and aspirations, belong to the author:

'Exploring the question of women is not simply focused on overcoming the more negative aspects of women's experience. It is also about constructive, honest and just Christian ways of relating between women and men in church, community and political arenas. In other words, it is about the kind of Christian community and civic society we wish to envision and bring into being.'

Dr. Myrtle Hill is Director of the Centre for Women's Studies at Queen's University, Belfast.

¹ Michelle M Lelwica, 'From superstition to Enlightenment to the Race for Pure Consciousness: Anti-Religious Currents in Popular and Academic Feminist Discourse,' *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall, 1998), pp. 108-23, pp. 108-9



smashing clerical complacency

changing women, changing worlds - review

Malachi O'Doherty

I did not open this book expecting to be surprised or enlightened by it. The easy sexism of men in the churches is obvious everywhere, indeed so obvious, that I wondered why anyone had taken the trouble to analyse it. You hear it in the way clergymen use the word 'Ladies', as if somehow the word 'women' is troublesome for them. They justify it, I expect, by saying it is more respectful, but it is not respectful of womanhood; it is respectful only of an idea of femaleness as something ethereal.

Policemen, I've observed, shirk the word 'women' too and often fumble when using a sentence in which it might arise, and then settle for 'female'. Again, womanhood is being sanitised, made fragrant. I imagine the word 'Ladies' to suggest some pine disinfectant spray obfuscating womanly reality, while the word 'female' has of it more a hint of the more practical resort to carbolic.

Are clergymen afraid of women? I believe they are. I believe I see it often when I watch them in their natural habitat. I also observe the woman of the species deferring routinely to the man, even when the man is not always fragrant with intelligence and does not impress.

The mystery for me was that anyone should want to write a book which records this conspicuous reality. Had Fran Porter phoned up a local newsroom and declared that she had unearthed a scoop, that men in the churches are disdainful of women, I doubt if the editor on the other end of the line would have shoved back the eyeshade in astonishment and barked orders to minions to clear the front page.

What Fran has done is to record the minute detail of how

this sexism operates. It is in the language used by men; it is in the way they conduct meetings by addressing the other men for serious points and treating the contributions of women as a slightly bothersome intrusion. It is sometimes by sexual harassment, smuttiness in their humour which they would trust other men present to enjoy. It is not for the ears of the 'ladies' of course, but if they hear it and remark on it, they can have it explained to them that this is how men talk.

I did not enjoy reading this book, in that it was academically methodical with little wit, that it described the familiar and that there was so much of it. The strictly literal representation of the - you know - speech mannerisms of interviewees was distracting and seemed unnecessary. Yet perhaps the need for that degree of detail is implied in the nature of its findings.

If the woman's voice is never properly heard, if her every complaint about the indifference of men is belittled and disregarded, dismissed as loony feminism or unladylike emotion, then perhaps what is needed is not another story but a body of evidence. This book is a brick through the stain glass window of clerical complacency about the way women are relegated within the churches and demeaned.

No one will enjoy reading this; not the common reader curious about church life, not the churches which are analysed in it, not even, I suspect, the women whose position is so well explained, but it was not written to be taken lightly. This is for women who feel demeaned to take and slam down on the desks of clergymen, the proof they can shove under their noses that women are having a hard time.



smashing clerical complacency

Malachi O'Doherty

'So you think I'm a whinging biddy, do you?' they can say, 'Well, recognise yourself in this.'

Still, the book reads too much like an academic thesis. Fran Porter has an invaluable resource of women's stories and she could have marshalled it more accessibly for the non-academic reader.

It will surprise some readers that Fran even raises the question of whether men have a divinely ordained authority over women. Is there not a real world out there where such ideas are not even given house room? I suppose if you are committed to seeing truth in the Bible, then you have to contort yourself to rationalise how the Bible might mean things which to the plain reader it doesn't.

The question for women challenging the authority of men is how far they will take this into challenging the theology that endorses it, and whether they can be happy in the churches once they have progressed along that line of reasoning. If I was a woman and thought God had given men authority over me then I would have to conclude that God was wrong.

Some women are concluding that men do have biblically ordained authority over them, and the most radical claim these women seem able to make is that men should exercise that authority with a little more civility and consideration.

The more challenging idea, that women have specific gifts - are more compassionate, for instance - is also used to demarcate areas of responsibility between men and women, and the author found people of both sexes in the evangelical churches who approved that. (I suppose when a man is being compassionate he is exercising the femi-

nine side of his nature!) It is a rationale which serves to keep the woman in her place by paying her a compliment.

Women interviewed were often wary of being thought feminist, a word which associates in their minds with stridency and probably lesbianism. They are not about to start dressing for church in denim dungarees, but this is just another way in which they are hampered by stereotypical thinking. The problem for women and men in the churches, I think, is that they are hampered by notions of respectability, and behind respectability the real question is always sexual honesty. Feminism changed the sexual behaviour of women, and one supposes - while finding it difficult to imagine that there is another - that the nice women in the churches don't want to take that route to freedom.

The writer clearly empathises with the evangelical perspective and seeks a solution to these problems which is consistent with evangelical faith.

Your reviewer does not, and thinks that women who are still discussing whether God wants them to obey men have a long way to go.

It is hard not to conclude from this book that it is time that women in the churches learnt some bad manners.

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WESTON PARK PROPOSALS

Submission to the Northern Ireland Office

Our organisation, ECONI, aims to apply the Christian principles of peace, justice and reconciliation to all aspects of life in Northern Ireland. In pursuit of that aim we have released public statements and made submissions to a wide range of bodies on matters relating to the developing political process.

One of those public statements, *A Time to Decide: Responding Biblically to the Agreement*, was issued in April 1998 in response to the Belfast Agreement. The purpose of this statement was to enable Christians from the evangelical tradition to reflect on the issues raised by the Agreement within a biblical framework. For many within that community, while the Agreement raised many issues, the most important of these was the provision for the early release of paramilitary prisoners. Other aspects of the Agreement may have been politically unpalatable, but this provision was – in the eyes of many within the unionist community – morally unacceptable and was therefore a decisive factor in shaping their attitude to the Agreement as a whole. For that reason, in May 1998, we issued a second statement *Releasing the Prisoners*, which addressed this question directly.

In that statement we argued that:

The Agreement is not offering prisoners either an amnesty or a pardon. Sentences will not be cut short, prisoners will be released on licence—if they re-offend or fail to meet other terms of their licence, they will return to prison. In the past, early release has been an accepted part of the judicial system.

We further argued that this approach was compatible with biblical principles of justice and mercy:

Biblical justice is broad in scope and restorative in intent. God does justice by restoring broken relationships. God has ordained government to do justice in society. Justice is about more than crime and punishment.

Human justice is an imperfect reflection of God's justice. Morally, if justice were fully done in this community, more than the prisoners would be guilty. In the end God will do justice for all of us. Justice and mercy are not alternatives. God's justice is merciful in its intent and exercise. Human justice best reflects God's justice when it too is merciful in its intent and exercise.

We concluded that:

This is not a simple or easy decision. Society

must never trivialise criminal offences. We believe, however, that when the purpose is to establish a framework of peace and reconciliation, the early release of prisoners on licence is compatible with biblical understandings of government and justice.

Our argument was not simply a pragmatic one, but recognised the legitimacy of the principled opposition to the early release proposals. This opposition was premised on the conviction that a fundamental requirement of the state is that it uphold justice. Our argument was that the ways in which justice could be done and be seen to be done within a moral framework were broader than those allowed for by those who opposed the provision.

It is our commitment to this fundamental requirement that has led us to challenge the proposals contained in paragraph 20 of the Weston Park Document concerning the pursuit of members of paramilitary organisations on ceasefire.

The suggestion that members of paramilitary organisations on ceasefire 'against whom there are outstanding prosecutions and in some cases extradition proceedings' will no longer be pursued is not, to our mind, a 'natural development' of the provisions of the early release scheme, but a denial of it.

While the document does not use the word 'amnesty', what is on offer is clearly amnesty by another name, and as our public statement cited above makes clear, the early release provisions of the Agreement were 'not offering prisoners either an amnesty or a pardon,' but were, instead, applying the established judicial principle of early release on licence to paramilitary prisoners on the grounds that the organisations of which they were members were observing ceasefires. It was on that basis and on that basis alone that we concluded that 'the early release of prisoners on licence is compatible with biblical understandings of government and justice.'

We argued that the early release scheme was compatible with a Christian view of justice because those released were released from prison but not from the judicial consequences of their actions. However, it appears to us that the provisions of paragraph 20 of the Weston Park Document have precisely the opposite effect—the only release is release from the judicial consequences of their actions and the just demand that they be called to account for their crimes against this community.

In our statement of September 1999 in relation to the

WESTON PARK PROPOSALS

British Government's response to paramilitary activity, **An Expression of Concern**, we asked:

Has the process—with its aspiration to a just society—abandoned the requirements of justice in pursuit of that aspiration? Is the process driven solely by pragmatic considerations at the expense of any moral dimension?

Paragraph 20 raises for us the same questions.

As well as matters of principle we should not ignore the practical implications of these provisions. At a time when paramilitary organisations that claim to be on ceasefire are actively fomenting or engaging in violence, the wisdom of setting aside the pursuit of any form of justice is questionable. What comfort does such a perspective bring to those communities that already suffer under the power and influence of paramilitary organisations? What consequences flow for the ability of the government to hold to account those prisoners released on licence who get involved in paramilitary activity? How can the provisions of paragraph 20, described by an NIO spokesman as being about 'putting a line under the past' (Henry McDonald, 'Fury as IRA Fugitives Win Amnesty' **The Observer** 20 January 2002), be reconciled with the provisions of paragraphs 18 and 19 of the Weston Park Document concerning the 'investigation of allegations of collusion'?

The biblical principles that govern our thinking allow for the inevitable pragmatism and ambiguity that marks all human relationships. However, those principles also warn us that there is a cost to all of us and to society in setting aside the moral dimension to our relationships. If we aspire to the implementation of an Agreement, the goal of which is a just society, we do well to attend to the consequences of setting aside the pursuit of justice.

Already we see some of those consequences in the increasing alienation of a broad swathe of the unionist population from the Agreement. Nor is this limited to those who voted against the Agreement. As Lady Sylvia Hermon noted in her speech to Fianna Fail in Dublin pro-Agreement unionists are becoming an 'endangered species', a consequence of the sense that the Agreement is not being implemented in a sensitive and fair manner.

We are encouraged that this problem is being recognised by the Northern Ireland Office. As Dr John Reid noted in his speech at the Institute of Irish Studies at Liverpool University in November 2001, the unionist community 'feels itself isolated with its foundations eroded, victims of violence who are witnesses to a stream of 'concessions' to the 'other side'. The Secretary of State suggested that each community needed to become a persuader to the other in pursuit of a vision of

an inclusive society.

However, the Secretary of State did not address the role of the British Government in persuading unionism that the Agreement is being implemented in a fair and sensitive manner. It is only as unionists become persuaded of this that they will have the confidence as a community to be persuaders of their nationalist neighbours. We would suggest that the proposals contained in paragraph 20 of the Weston Park Document will do nothing to persuade unionists of this and will simply be seen as another 'concession' to the 'other side'. As noted in the Alliance Party's response to the Weston Park Document, 'This proposal was not contained in the Agreement...It marks a substantial revision of the Agreement in order for other parties to live up to commitments they made in the Agreement.'

We do recognise that there is an outstanding issue that needs to be dealt with in relation to the different categories of persons whose status is addressed by paragraph 20. However, we are strongly opposed to the method proposed in that paragraph. We would suggest that those who have previously been convicted should surrender themselves to the authorities and be formally released on licence. We would also suggest that those who are wanted for crimes but have not been convicted should be required to surrender to the authorities and should be placed on trial with a view to passing a suspended sentence or being put on immediate licence.

Only through some such mechanism is it credible to claim that the treatment of these individuals is consistent with the terms of the Belfast Agreement. Only so is it possible to name the violence of the last thirty years as criminal acts of no legitimacy or justification. Only so is it possible to hold to account those guilty of crimes against this community.

The Secretary of State is correct to challenge the political, community and church leaders of Northern Ireland to argue for a new, inclusive vision of Northern Irish society. However, as the responsible authority, there is an onus on the British Government to demonstrate and uphold the values that underpin a fair and democratic society. Chief among these is the pursuit of justice. However, the provisions of paragraph 20 of the Weston Park Document fly in the face of any credible notion of justice.

March 2002



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by Fran Porter

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