

**The TENTH CATHERWOOD LECTURE in PUBLIC THEOLOGY
JUSTICE, MERCY and WALKING with GOD:
The mission of the church and the future of reconciliation in Northern
Ireland.**

**Response given by Rev. Dr. Heather Morris, President of the
Methodist Church in Ireland.**

I remember going to ECONI meetings- always worthwhile; as I thought about this evening remembered wanting to hear what David would say about the situation current at the time because I knew that his analysis would be insightful and challenging...it still is. So the first word I want to say is thank you.

And in reflecting I must begin with your last line the profound challenge to **“let the church be the church. No-one else can be. It is our only gift to give”**

And when I read and heard those words my heart and mind were hit by twin tracks of hope and fear: let me name the fear first, and you named it too; we are, as church broken. I think that we hesitate sometimes to speak the words which “For God and Gods Glory Alone “ speaks in the public square, words like forgiveness, servant hood, reconciliation, peace, hope; because we are painfully aware that we have failed to live them. But the more I go on the more I am convinced that humbly and with grace and with a gentle strength we need to speak them, and we need to have the courage to wrestle; to do what John Dunlop encouraged us to do in his good natured wrangling with William on Sunday Sequence to ask “what do these principles mean as they work themselves out in the specifics of Northern Ireland?”

We need to live these words. Like you I am a West Wing fan; in episodes like “Let Bartlett be Bartlett” we find the president and his advisers recognising that they have gone wrong and stopping in a context where every pressure is to compromise, water down, and saying no ; we need to remember, be guided by and live in the light of our first principles.

And that is where I come to hope. “Let the church be the church. No-one else can be. It is our only gift to give”. I believe that the church wants to be the church. See that in events like this, saw it last night as Christians gathered to pray for East Belfast; in Hope and History; see it on web sites and blogs; groups of Christians coming together to ask what can we do? Hear it in a willingness to overcome the fear that can hold us back.

I think that your lecture gave us valuable pointers as to what we might do- your thinking gave us insight into what “the church being the church” looks like

1. **The Church being the Church will hold to repentance and responsibility:** the question of whether or not we all need to repent of our individual and corporate part in the past and the present was a vexed question 25 years ago and it is still a vexed question. You drew us to the Cross. Reminding us that “Faith in Jesus invites us to re-narrate our story of the past 40 years in such a way as we deal with our past morally and constructively” It seems to me that we still need to critique our own complicity and repent- and crucially that critique cannot just be about looking back but must propel us to take personal and corporate responsibility for partnering with God in building the future. For the God who calls us to repent meets us in our brokenness and offers forgiveness and a future.
2. **The Church being the Church will be unafraid of thinking theologically:** Walter Brueggemann talks about language on the all as the people of God speak in the public

square; which must be shaped by language behind the wall where we think and pray and wrestle. David called for a new theological revolution. I long for the day when Christians no longer say “I’m not a theologian” We are theologians and we need to wrestle as you have helped us to do tonight with justice and mercy; with what it means to be a citizen, servant, reconciler. I am also reminded as I say this of the person who said its not the things I don’t understand about Christianity that bother me; it’s the things that I do understand, like love your enemies; bless those who curse you; pray for those who despitefully use you- that bother me. We need to think theologically and then act.

- 3. The Church being the Church will have a role to play in shaping moral imagination;** the church can tell stories shaped by Biblical values of what the future might look like. We are a people who have found it impossible to live in the presence of each others stories; and we are met by the God who inhabits our stories and tells stories; stories that touch heart and mind and fire imagination about what the future might be in Gods company. As a community can we move beyond vague talking about a better future to talking in concrete terms about what that future might look like; I long for a future where don’t think is this a protestant or a catholic area; I long for a future in which I want my children to stay here; long for a future where we are secure in our identity and can don’t want to celebrate identity in a way that hurts others; begin to tell those stories and we are brought face to face with the need to hear and understand those with whom we differ; to forgive...The Church has a role to play in shaping moral imagination.

“Let the church be the church. No-one else can be. It is our only gift to give” The church which has the Cross at its heart; the church which loves Jesus; the church which walks humbly; the church which is part of and which points to Christ’s new creation...

Note: This script was only the starting point for Dr. Morris’s response because “I wanted to genuinely respond to David”....so changed quite a bit on the night. I know I cut some sections of this and added a number of points on the night. These notes are not a complete record of the response; the full response is available on the recording of the evening;available on the www.contemporarychristianity.net website.