



PLACE FOR HOPE the need for reconcilers

by Hugh Donald

A call to reconciliation has been a recurring theme in the past year. It was the focus of the Queen's Christmas message as she reflected upon the Christmas truce in 1914, "a reminder to us all that even in the unlikeliest of places, hope can still be found."

It has been one of the three priorities identified by the Archbishop of Canterbury for his tenure, expressed in the belief that living reconciliation can transform our world. Within Scotland, the current Moderator of the Church of Scotland, John Chalmers, made it a central theme in the context of last year's Scottish referendum.

Within the Anglican Communion, our Primus, David Chillingworth, has played an integral part in *Indaba*, a process for achieving mutual understanding in the midst of differences and disagreements.

Reconciliation is passionately desired in many parts of our world where conflict prevails. It is relevant within our own personal lives, in our families, in our churches, and in our communities where we see broken relationships and a need for healing and forgiveness. Within our churches, 'Love thy neighbour' may be easy to say on a Sunday but much less easy to put into practice if 'thy neighbour' is very different from me, expresses different views, has a different lifestyle or theology.

Place for Hope was formed in 2009 in recognition that our churches are not immune from conflict and that there was a pressing need to develop the spiritual and practical resources to enable the ways of reconciliation to be embraced.

It has its origins in the Church of Scotland, where in a report to the General Assembly in 2008, the considerable personal, organisational and spiritual cost of congregational conflict was highlighted. From this, a team of mediators was trained to walk alongside churches facing conflict. Some of this has included:

- Being a sounding board to equip ministers;
- Bringing together individuals where relationships had broken down;
- Addressing divisions that had occurred resulting in polarisation within the congregation.

Sometimes this can feel like putting out the flames of the conflict without necessarily addressing the root causes and preventing future conflict. Whilst conflict often manifests itself in personality differences, the deeper causes point to the need to address our differences in much healthier ways. At a time in our Western society where church is in a time of transition, disagreement is a reality that should be embraced and explored rather than denied. Perhaps it is time to challenge systems and processes which focus on the language of 'rights and positions' and encourage movement towards embracing a language of 'interests and needs'.

This is where Place for Hope resides, and much of the growth of our work has been in equipping and training ministers and people within churches in the skills for facilitating difficult conversation and navigating through times of transition. Within

the Scottish Episcopal Church the opportunity arose to help facilitate the cascade conversations on human sexuality. Rather than being a decision-making process, the focus was on offering a creative space in which there was the opportunity to listen compassionately, hear each other's stories, seek understanding, and thereby enable and deepen personal relationships. No process is flawless, but what we sought to do was demonstrate a way in which gracious conversation could be enabled around an issue which has been the source of division and difference.

Place for Hope has recently come out from under the umbrella of the Church of Scotland and has been registered as an independent charity. Our trustees have been drawn for the skills and gifts they bring to our work from across the denominations. But its primary objectives remain the same: (i) to establish a community of people across our churches who are committed to the work of peacemaking and reconciliation and (ii) equipping the people within our churches with the means to address change and difference. Along the way, we hope that individuals will see the benefit in seeking personal reconciliation as the foundation for being a reconciling presence within their church and their community; that impaired relationships will begin to be healed; and that our churches will be enabled to be peacemakers within the communities they serve.

To find out more about our work and opportunities for training please contact: hugh.donald@placeforhope.org.uk