

Proper formation will help define true vision for Justice and Peace

Archbishop Peter Smith recently picked up on a column that I wrote for the Universe back in July questioning the lack of spiritual formation going on in the justice and peace movement.

The piece followed on an extraordinarily successful National Justice and Peace Network Conference looking at the issues of food security and the environment.

The conference was well attended, with internationally renowned speakers like Vandana Shiva and Shay Cullen taking part. The event was a real cause for hope and unity. There have been other more encouraging developments since, with Live Simply about to launch its Catholic Social Teaching website. When the site goes live at the end of November it will provide an important resource that can help with that formation process.

The need for a formation process struck me again recently when in conversation with a friend of mine about a justice and peace group that we had both been involved in. The group had achieved a number of things, converting the parish and then the local borough to fair trade, setting up a support structure for a refugee centre and helping with people being detained without trial in this country. So there was plenty of action going on. What was lacking was formation in the faith. The underpinning as to why this was going on at Church sector, rather than elsewhere.

The lack of formation often means that, as in the case of the group mentioned, the roots are lacking so it ceased to endure. CAFOD used to be a big backer of the pastoral cycle style formation with its experience, analysis, reflection, action and celebration methodology. This though has declined over recent years with a greater emphasis on the postcard style campaigns that involve simple actions to put pressure on decision makers in society.

The present leadership of the NJPN don't seem to get the need for formation, which is strange given that for a number of years Rosemary Reed was employed as the fieldworker to do exactly such work around the country.

There seems to be a belief that the role of network revolves almost entirely around running the annual conference. There have been some regional meetings arranged with invited

speakers but no ongoing process. No doubt, part of the reason for this development is the very limited NJPN resources.

The change and reduction in funding from CAFOD last year made things a lot more difficult. In these cash strapped times it is a shame that the institutional church cannot find resources for this important work, just a few of those pounds raised for the Pope's visit could go a long way in the justice and peace world.

The resourcing point accepted, though, there does need to be a serious reflection on the role and purpose of the NJPN. When the structure was established it was not in order to run one major conference each year with a few satellite meetings throughout the year. *It's mandate was to support and strengthen the work of social justice across the land, through liason and co-operation. Surely formation must have a role to play in this?*

There also needs to be some serious political analysis undertaken. While much effort goes into putting on the annual conference, there has never, to my knowledge, been any discussion as to where the movement stands on general political developments. There are obviously plenty of people involved in justice and peace who are active in single issue campaigns, trade unions, on local councils and some as MPs. Yet there is never a debate about the political situation of the moment. This is incredible when you think NJPN has existed through the birth of Thatcherism, its neo-liberal child new labour and now the Con/Dem coalition. All this has gone on without a serious political debate regarding what the response to these developments should be.

This lack of political analysis brings me back to Archbishop Smith's talk to the justice and peace community in Southwark. He quoted my piece at some length but didn't really address the question of formation. The response he was suggesting to the challenge to "analyse what is going on in the world and work out a process as to how to inculcate transformative kingdom values into that world" was engagment with the Big Society agenda of the Coalition Government.

On this issue Archbishop Smith seems to be echoing a uniform position coming out of the Bishops Conference for England and Wales, namely that the Big Society is a good

thing with which the Church should engage. This may well be so, but there needs to be a little wariness regarding the subject. Just because the Big Society has borrowed some language from Catholic Social Teaching like solidarity, subsidiarity and community does not make it reflective of transformative kingdom values.

The launch of such a programme at a time of austerity and cuts should set alarm bells ringing. Were it being launched at a time of prosperity there would be more credibility. Critics argue that it is nothing more than a way of appealing to people's charitable nature in order to get them to do work that was previously done by paid employees.

The position of the Church should be that of a constructive critic, yes the Big Society may offer something that can be engaged with for the common good. But it might also be a very destructive programme aimed mainly at cutting costs and jobs. Only time will tell as to which way it will go.

Perhaps another area J&P activists should be looking toward rather than the Big Society should be to oppose the savage cuts that the Coalition Government recently announced in its spending review. These cuts with their emphasis on reducing welfare for the poor and cutting public sector jobs amount fairly and squarely to dumping the cost of the banking bail out on the backs of the poor and vulnerable. If we are to be a Church that makes a preferential option for the poor, we cannot sit by and let this happen.

This is the area where justice and peace activists can join with the trade unions, disability and elderly groups, students and other bodies set to oppose this very unjust settlement. A proper analysis of the politics of the present political agenda as well as equipping activists with the theological formation to take on this work would definitely mark a way forward for the justice and peace movement.

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