

violence and their families cannot be burdened with the demand that they forgive those who have perpetrated crimes against them.³³ So, too, those who have suffered deeply through violence have their own particular needs: “for justice, for the seriousness of the harm to be acknowledged, for compensation, for apology and repentance from those who have done them wrong, for their stories to be heard.”³⁴ In this there is also recognition that forgiveness should not be approached in an atomized way, but rather as part of a wider process of reconciliation and peace building.

It would seem that in geopolitical situations of transition out of protracted conflict characterized by ethnic, political, and religious intransigence, the negotiation of new relationships must be conducted along different tracks, on multiple levels and drawing in protagonists from the widest possible range of sectoral interests and competencies. John Paul Lederach’s work sheds much light on the field of conflict transformation and its processes. Conflicts, he tells us, characteristically take as long to wind down as they do to escalate. We must recognize the need for dedicated painstaking work rather than look for the quick fix. In this sense, he speaks of the need for “decade-thinking.”³⁵ Such a recognition has been borne home with sobering insistence, from the first flush of euphoria over the Good Friday Agreement, through the revoking and reconvoking of ceasefires, the establishing, decomposing, and reconstituting of the Northern Ireland Assembly, all against the drumbeat of continuing low-intensity conflict and civil disruption over the “right to march” or over the contested scope of police reform, and the intermittent high-profile crisis points where David Trimble negotiates his survival as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party on the knife-edge of a deeply split party and bitterly divided loyalties.

It is becoming increasingly evident that while politicians and leaders of state broker the nature and scope of new power relationships and interests, any new political and judicial arrangements must be embedded in their

3. Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, *Forgive Us Our Trespasses: Reconciliation and Political Healing in Northern Ireland* (1996), 8 (see n. 14 below).

4. *Ibid.*

5. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, 1997), 77. Lederach sees reconciliation as a social space where people and paradoxes are brought together in an integrative “process-structure” approach to peace building, with a range of time-frame-related strategies. Relationships are seen as key (73–85).

acceptance by local communities, and that the political strategies will succeed only if some counterbalancing weight and vitality is allowed to the role of groups and movements in civil society—officially through the second chamber or Civic Forum (which was established in October 2001) and in the unofficial networks of relationship within and between communities. More will be said of this later, but it is apposite at this point to situate the quest for reconciliation and peace within this complex and precarious sociopolitical context. So, too, any theological attempt to raise questions about forgiveness or about the role that churches might exercise in encouraging reconciliation must reckon with this complexity while refusing to let it paralyze or overwhelm.

For Christians the metaphor of a pilgrim journey suggests itself as a way of moving forward in faith.⁶ Rooted deeply in the Judeo-Christian self-understanding and tapping, albeit by different roots, into both the Catholic and Reformed traditions, the pilgrim journey motif underscores the invitation to be converted in mind and heart, restates the promise of forgiveness, and invites communities to be reconciled through sharing with strangers the bread of suffering and hope.

W.R. Rodgers speaks of such a journey beyond narrow identifications with one’s own place as the way to discover more fully the strange richness of one’s own plural identity:

Strange that, in lands, and countries quite unknown,

We find, not other’s strangeness but our own;

That is one use of journeys; if one delves,

Differently, one’s sure to find one’s selves.

O in what wildernesses of one another

We wander looking for ourselves!

This journey into self-discovery is somehow shaped by discovery of the other. Rodgers portrays this journey into the wilderness as a passing out toward the possibility of relationship. We shall look more closely at the

6. Cf., e.g., Robin Boyd, *Ireland: Christianity Discredited or Pilgrim’s Progress*, Risk Book Series (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988).

7. W. R. Rodgers, “The Journey of the Magi,” in *W. R. Rodgers: Poems*, ed. Longley, 59–63.