

# 101st ICC Annual Meeting

In the welcome to **'From Every Nation? A Handbook for a Congregation's Journey of Inclusion'** it mentions Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr's quote: 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice'. One of Dr King's qualities was his ability to create a tangible, substantive strategy for racial justice in both Church and society in the USA. Dr King's plan for this was the 'Beloved Community', which had five defining characteristics:

1. The Beloved Community was a practical, realistic, and achievable society built on justice, equality truth, dignity, respect and peace.
2. In the Beloved Community, conflict still existed, but it was resolved peacefully, non-violently, and without hostility, ill will, or resentment.
3. In the Beloved Community, all human life was valued and of inherent worth, as were animals and ecosystems.
4. In the Beloved Community, kindness, compassion, and love for all life motivated one's actions.
5. Finally, in the Beloved Community, the commitment to unconditional and all-inclusive kindness and goodwill allowed it to become "an engine of reconciliation."

Having read this handbook, I think there are several aspects of it that remind me of Dr King's notion of a 'Beloved Community' in terms of its practical approach, and vision. Christians often use the terms 'vision' and 'dreams' interchangeably. Most of us remember Dr King for his 'I have a dream' speech, which he delivered at the 'March on Washington' on 28 August 1963. Interestingly, after delivering his 'I have a dream' speech, some of his detractors denounced him as a 'dreamer' who needed to wake up to the fact that most African Americans were living through a nightmare. So, being a dreamer is sometimes a pejorative term; contrast this with those who have visions – they are 'visionaries', which is a more positive term. Dr King was also a visionary who had a vision of what the USA could look like if it adopted his model of a Beloved Community.

In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, Habakkuk 2:2 says: 'Then the LORD replied: "Write down the vision and make it plain" ...'. I believe that it all starts with a vision – a vision of what you would like the Church or society, or even the Church and society to look like. Far too often, when it comes to racial justice, what we see are churches, organisations, and governments responding to an event by putting certain activities in place. We saw a lot of this after the killing of George Floyd, which the Church called a *Kairos* Moment. It was also a time in which everyone was in a tizzy as to how they should respond. (My diary became very full at that time – I had to turn down invitations from churches and parachurch organisations who wanted help with racial justice.)

The problem with this reactive approach is that it is impossible to turn these *Kairos* or key moments into movements for change. This is due to the inability to define 'what racial justice looks like in church' – and to delineate 'what the traits of a truly, racially equitable church, are'. I think that this handbook provides this blueprint.

I always say that racial justice 'is everyone's business' and 'is unfinished business'. It is not just for Catholics as opposed to Protestants. And it is not just for some Presbyterians as opposed to *all* of them. Likewise, it is not just the 'hobby horse' for a few in a church, but for *everyone* in that church. Racial justice is for *everyone*, all of the time – no exceptions! It does not matter if your church is monocultural – it is still an issue because, as this handbook points out, both Northern Ireland and the Republic are becoming increasingly diverse as a result of various forms of migration. This trend is set

to continue, which means that areas that are now homogenous, and *ergo* have churches that are likewise, will in all likelihood, become diverse, sooner or later. How should they respond to this development? Well, this handbook provides many answers.

This is particularly important for monocultural areas and churches. Some of the most racist places and churches that I have visited have been in the parts of England that were 100% White. They were White and wanted to stay that way! These are churches that often have little time for 'community sponsorship' or any refugee-related family support schemes. As I always say, 'just because you don't have a Black face, doesn't mean you don't have a problem with race!'

And while we have 'Racial Justice Sunday', which is the second Sunday in February, every Sunday should be Racial Justice Sunday – it should be embedded within the life of every church – akin to a 'golden thread' running through everything. One of the great things about Racial Justice Sunday is that we get to celebrate the diversity that exists in humanity. While there is only 'one race, the human race', God in his infinite wisdom, created us in his own image, which we read about in Genesis 1: 27, but ensured that we are all not the same. However, while 'Special Sundays' like Racial Justice Sunday are important, they should never become 'tick-box exercises' that allow churches to 'mark something off' as being done – I will explain the myriad dangers of this in a moment.

Racial justice is unfinished business on this island because this handbook provides cogent evidence of the racism and discrimination in so many sections of life here. In a previous life, I was an education policy officer for the social policy think tank, *Race on the Agenda*. I think that one of the challenges you will face in your context is how do you keep 'race on the agenda' to ensure that all the best intentions and wise words found in this handbook result in tangible transformation. This is never easy. All those churches and parachurch groups that I mentioned a few minutes ago – the ones that were chasing me down after the killing of George Floyd, had racial justice officers, and racial justice procedures, prior to Floyd's demise. (They had established these roles, and policies after previous key moments such as the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, to tackle racism in church and society.)

My house in southwest London is small, but my back garden is relatively large. The grass in my garden grows very quickly, as do the weeds. I can spend several hours tidying it, and afterwards, I often spend the same amount of time admiring my handywork. But here's the thing; if I leave it alone for around four weeks, especially in summer, I'm back to square one – it is a complete mess! For me, this is an analogy for racism. Around 15 years ago, a lot of the English churches and parachurch organisations decided to dispense with their racial justice roles, and ignore their policies, as they believed that 'race' was no longer an important issue in church (or society). They had moved on. After all, did not the election of Barrack Obama as the USA's first Black President prove that we were living in a 'post-racial' world? I would argue that they took their proverbial eye off the ball. The sad truth of the matter is that racism never went away, and in some instances, it morphed into aspects of 'populist nationalism', the 'hostile environment', the 'culture wars' and issues linked to 'immigration'. The problem was that the Church did not have the people or resources in place to address these matters when they occurred.

For me, one of the starkest, and most disappointing aspects of this 'new racism' is the way certain words and terms that had been discarded into the 'dictionary dustbin' have been rediscovered, and dusted down. We have a leading British politician saying: 'All I want is my country back.' The same person alleged: 'Islamists controlled London, and its Mayor Sadiq Khan, and the Labour Party leader, Keir Starmer.' Moreover, a leading donor to the same political party said that Dianne Abbott, MP, made him 'Want to hate all black women,' and that 'she should be shot.' The other appalling aspect is the way certain politicians, opinion formers and commentators use terms like 'freedom of speech', 'banter' or 'plain-speaking' to defend what is hurtful, hateful language. What is more, a lot

of this fire is turned on asylum seekers and refugees, some of the most vulnerable and voiceless people in our community. They are 'low -hanging fruit' – you can criticise them, firm in the knowledge that they cannot vote, and that such invective is often a vote-winner with some of the electorate.

That is why I welcome the clear, unambiguous references to asylum and refugee matters in this handbook. There is currently a negative discourse regarding migrants on these islands, and I believe that the churches have a role in changing the narrative from hostility to hospitality. But here's the thing; it takes courage and persistence to do this. This handbook mentions being 'anti-racist', and it takes real bravery to call out or challenge racism wherever or whenever it rears its ugly head. What is more, this work will take time; there are no easy answers or quick fixes – it is akin to turning around a massive ocean liner, all the while trying to ensure that it does not capsize.

As this handbook points out, we often see the Church as the answer, but sometimes it is part of the problem. Given your unique history on this island, I don't need to tell you this! Some of the work I do at CTBI looks at the role the churches played in African chattel enslavement, which is truly appalling, and this requires lament as well as repair to address the damage done. However, as this handbook notes, the Church also played a key role in ending slavery, which means it was also part of the solution. That is one of the reasons why I welcome the solutions-driven nature of this resource – it equips Christians and the Church with the requisite tools to carry out this racial justice work.

Often many Christians don't engage in these matters because they do not feel equipped to do so. And because they don't want to say the 'wrong thing' and offend people - they steer clear of getting involved. If Christianity is for *everyone*, it behoves us all to engage in this matter. As this handbook points out, the Bible can be translated into different languages and dialects so that it becomes accessible to everyone. As Christians, we need to learn from the Good Book and study the language linked to racial justice, so that we can do likewise! What is more, this handbook explores these matters within an all-Ireland context. While it is good to know what the other nations have done to address these matters, as well as other countries, it is important that you have an all-Ireland related solution to a situation that is impacting these shores.

I would like to end where I started, which is with the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr's quote that the 'arc of the moral universe is long, but bends toward justice'. My question is, what is our role within the parameters of this moral universe? I would argue that our role is that of justice seekers; the people of God who are part of that curvature that wants to see justice for those who are denied it, for whatever reason. There are around 130 references to justice in the Bible, 115 of these are found in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, all of which bear witness to the fact that we worship a God who is a God of justice. This chimes with the "Four features of justice" paradigm, which state that:

1. There is a God of justice who is active in the world
2. The word of God has the power to change lives
3. God redeems and restores the victims of injustice
4. Christians are to embrace the biblical call to justice

What is notable about this model is that three of the features focus on who God is, and what he stands for. The fourth focuses on us, and how we, if we truly love the Lord, must follow his example, and do justice. Here's the thing, justice is something you do – you don't talk it! That's why the Prophet Micah says in 6:8:

'He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you

but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?’

I believe that this handbook provides an excellent outline that shows us how to be justice-seekers when it comes to racial justice. Let us pray for the requisite wisdom, courage and persistence to complete the work that is charted in this resource.