



An unflinching view of intergenerational trauma

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Gladys Ganiel and Jamie Yohanis

Considering Grace

Presbyterians and the Troubles

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Considering Grace is a gritty and poignant exploration of how the Presbyterian Church in Ireland tried – and often failed – to hold their people together during the Troubles. It is a story of two ecosystems –

a church suffering unbearable pain, and a church taking risks to build peace. Intertwined and in tension with one another. The two parts of the whole held together by faith and community, but also by omission. An awkward silence on a violence that was impossible to bear.

The book is based on interviews with 120 Presbyterians from border counties in Ireland, north and south. This borderlands location is a somber backdrop to each story. Every interviewee had family members or colleagues killed during the Troubles. Many lost parents or children. As a result, the book is a brutal and unflinching account of intergenerational trauma. Ganiel and Yohanis unravel how this trauma played out in various people's lives – Presbyterian ministers, victims, members of the security forces, loyalist ex-combatants, those impacted by loyalist violence, emergency responders, peacemakers and politicians.

Nearly every interviewee talks about their experiences as vivid and ongoing. Ganiel and Yohanis' writing does well to communicate this visceral quality to the reader. For example, they introduce Neil – a member of the security forces left in crippling pain after he was shot. He can no longer sit on a hard church pew. Neil does not feel that the Troubles are over. Gladys and Yohanis write how Neil points to his own heart – “[t]he Troubles are in here.”

A pattern that repeats across nearly every story is ‘she neither expected nor received counselling.’ Reading today, it is staggering how far people were left to privately deal with their losses. Many leaned heavily into their faith. Using prayer to cope. Bible passages to make sense of things. They were supported through the community of church and their ministers' pastoral care. For others, faith was a complicated proposition to their pain. There was anger with God and loss of belief. They could not love their enemies nor forgive them. Others again described their faith as easing the desire for retaliation. It stopped them from joining loyalist paramilitary organisations. Interviewees felt that God would deal with their perpetrators, and this eased them a little.

The accounts of Presbyterian ministers as ‘first responders’ are striking. From identifying bodies,

sitting with grieving families night and day, mediating physical violence, to making public responses to the conflict – all of these became the job of ministers, who had perhaps joined the clergy envisaging a very different kind of life. Some clergy faced physical threats and some were exiled. Most were just exhausted. One church had a contract with local glaziers to come in every Monday to fix the windows that had been broken at the weekend. Such was the level of normalcy of this deeply abnormal situation. The emotional toll of the work was relentless.

And it was against this backdrop that those who tried to forge peace and reconciliation within the church had to operate. The book details a lot of cross-community co-operation in individual church settings. ‘Peace agents’ pop up throughout the pages, ordinary Presbyterian members who were charged with forging relationships with Catholics on the ground. Ground-breaking organisations, such as ECONI and Corrymeela, make regular appearances. As well as the many clergy who quite literally put their lives on the line, preaching about peace, meeting with republicans, challenging ‘For God and Ulster’ narratives, and mediating around contentious parades. But most of this work went on under the radar. It was not in church bulletins. It was too upsetting for victims. Too dangerous for the people involved.

There are times in the book when the historical spirit of Presbyterian radicalism bursts forth. This is not expressed in constitutional politics, which the modern PCI has steered clear of. Instead it emerges as ecumenism, peace-building, going out of one’s way to be in relationship with Catholics. This is radical in a different way from the Dissenters of the past. But no less progressive in the context of the Troubles. A senior church figure, Lynda Gould, asks at one point, ‘who are the keepers of the story of the common good within Presbyterianism?’ And I suspect that the answer is that Lynda herself, and the other quiet peacemakers featured in the book, are the keepers of this story.

Considering Grace is a deeply humane book. Stories are told plainly and factually. There is just enough detail to grasp the depth of the interviewees’ trauma, without invading their privacy. Regardless of readers’ political persuasion, it would be impossible to be

unmoved by their collective lament. The Presbyterian Church did not have a settled voice during the Troubles. It has been criticised for going too far with peace-building and not going nearly far enough.

Should it have done more to build peace? Unquestionably the answer to this is yes. The book supports John Brewer’s view that the church often stood back and left it to mavericks to forge relationships with Catholics, nationalists and republicans. It did not fully support the work. And so, while the Presbyterian Church tried to absorb the pain of its members during the Troubles, it did not do enough to transform it.

However, as Ganiel and Yohanis reflect, this may have been too much to ask - particularly from the victims of violence. Some victims could and did engage in peace building work. But it made many feel hurt and abandoned to see the church reach out in this way. This tension remains unresolved - and the book is explicit in allowing space for that friction. Letting stories of pain sit beside stories of peace activism, knowing that the two may never be reconciled.

The question now is what the church might learn from its experiences? The struggles the current Church faces are very different from during the Troubles. It has declining numbers and has been undergoing a conservative turn. It is a place where women clergy often feel undermined. It seems not to know how to love its LGBTQ+ members. But it is a broad church. It has always been big enough to include both keepers of the radical story of Presbyterianism, and those who crave traditional theology. But can the modern church hold these in balance?

The book offers no comment on this. Other than a call for the Church to acknowledge the suffering of its people and to be self-critical. The fact that the PCI commissioned this book themselves, and were prepared to look their congregations’ pain in the eye, is itself a sign that this hard work is conceivable. And, of course, as the book invites, the Church must ‘consider grace.’ A task which is ‘difficult, but humanly possible.’ This may be as good a map for the future as any. ■