Facing truth: A televised reconciliation in Northern Ireland

by Ronald A. Wells in the June 27, 2006 issue

Desmond Tutu makes headlines, and often changes hearts and minds. In the fall of 2005, the headlines were made in Belfast, where Tutu, former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, was filming *Facing the Truth*, three programs for the Northern Irish BBC that aired in Britain on three consecutive days in March of this year.

The hearts and minds belong to those who suffered and to those who caused suffering during "the Troubles," the period of violent conflict in Northern Ireland beginning with the civil rights marches in the late 1960s and continuing to the political resolution enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. More than 3,000 people were killed during the Troubles, most of them civilians. For the BBC programs the victims or families of the victims were invited to confront either the perpetrator or someone associated with the organization that had sanctioned, planned and accomplished the killing or injury.

The enterprise was a daring idea both for Tutu and the BBC. No British government of either political party has ever wanted a full-blown Truth and Reconciliation Commission like the South African model. That would mean opening up records that no government would allow to be opened. Similarly, Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army would never agree to a full and unfettered examination of their activities.

As a scholar familiar with the Troubles and the peace process, I believe that a TRC may not be needed in Northern Ireland. The institutions of civil society are potentially strong enough to foster some level of personal, social and cultural healing. Parachurch residential communities like Corrymeela in Ballycastle and the Christian Renewal Centre in Rostrevor can provide the safe space for dialogue and forgiveness that only a TRC could provide for a relatively institution-poor society. I've been a participant-observer in these communities and have witnessed the

courage and grace associated with people who come to confront the past, work through it and forgive. My Catholic friends call these people “icons of grace.” Yet the communities cannot reach everyone.

When Tutu agreed to try putting a TRC-type encounter on television, the BBC began recruiting people and scrupulously selecting them. The three programs were filmed at Ballywalter House, a remote country house in rural Northern Ireland, over a six-day period. Two women assisted the bishop: Donna Hicks, a Harvard specialist in conflict resolution, and Leslie Belinda, a British woman whose husband was murdered during the atrocities in Rwanda. Although Tutu was understood to be the chair of the meetings, both Hicks and Belinda were important players, and at times their interventions were crucial.

As I watched the programs, at first I was underwhelmed. While the stories were touching examples of courage and grace, they did not have the dramatic effect that I’d expected. But then, as I watched, I began to recall all the stories of pain and suffering I had heard in 30 years of writing about the Troubles. As Tutu encouraged people to tell their stories and ask their questions in *Facing the Truth*, a phrase or gesture would trigger in me a memory of another story of deep human loss in Ireland, and then another. Eventually I found myself weeping. As Tutu said at one such moment, “This is not something we could have contrived.”

One encounter involved Michael Stone, a Loyalist killer who was seen on the world’s TV screens in 1988. He had attacked an IRA funeral in West Belfast’s Milltown cemetery, the sacred burial ground of the Republican movement. Stone threw grenades and fired a pistol into the funeral party, killing three people. He was arrested, charged with those and many other crimes, convicted on multiple charges and sentenced to more that 600 years in prison. Then, to the dismay and anger of many in the Republican community, he was released in the amnesty after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

One of Stone’s convictions was for the 1987 murder of Dermot Hackett, who Stone alleged was an IRA operative. In the dramatic high point of the programs, the Hackett family confronted Stone. The family entered first, welcomed by the smiles of Tutu, Hicks and Belinda. Viewers then felt the tension rise markedly as Stone walked in, limping. The Hackett women began to sob as Stone sat down. Before Tutu could welcome them and thank them for their courage in coming, one of the women ran out of the room in tears, leaving Hackett’s widow, Sylvia, and his brother Roddy to

confront Stone.

The Hacketts' opening comments revealed their continued and largely unresolved grief about the murder, which had taken place two decades before. They are also convinced that Hackett had not been involved with any paramilitary organization. They had come to the broadcast to clear Hackett's name, to ask the killer why he had done it and what he felt about taking an innocent man's life and leaving his family devastated.

Stone looked menacing, but his sad eyes reflected all that he'd seen and lived in 50 years, 34 of them misspent in prison or when he was a terrorist at large. He told calmly of his upbringing in the Protestant heartland on the mean streets of working-class Belfast, and of joining the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) at 16. He was soon imprisoned on a weapons charge and spent a half year in the infamous Long Kesh prison; he calls it "the university of terrorism," because he was thoroughly politicized there and came out determined to become proficient in all the dark arts of terror.

For the next quarter century he led a double life, publicly a construction worker and family man and, in his off hours, one of the main Loyalist paramilitaries. He fooled even his wife for many years, but when she found out about his double life she left him. A somber Tutu nodded at Stone's admission of his own vulnerability: he knows he is a marked man. For the security of his children and grandchildren he rarely sees them.

As for planning Dermot Hackett's death, Stone described the internally rational world of the terrorist assassin. Relying on intelligence dossiers prepared meticulously by his UDR commanders, he prepared intensively, making several dry runs by following the bread delivery van in which Hackett would ultimately die; he blocked out the reality that the target might be a family man with a pregnant wife and child awaiting his return home from work; he avoided reading the papers or listening to TV reports over the next days, because the stories tend to make a real human being out of what had to be thought of only as "the target."

Bishop Tutu allowed the Hacketts to ask again about the murder. Stone stunned them all by saying, for the first time, that he was not the trigger man that day, though he had intended to be. It was actually his accomplice who had shot Hackett. Stone took responsibility for the crime because he was going to prison for life anyway—and his taking the rap allowed another UDR man to be free to carry on the

struggle. Making eye contact with Sylvia Hackett, Stone said that while he did not murder her husband, he had prepared to do so and took full responsibility for his death.

Tutu then challenged Stone in a way he had not challenged any other participant. He said that the Hacketts needed to know the truth about Dermot's death and asked Stone to affirm that what he had just disclosed was "the gospel truth." Stone glared at Tutu and said, "I may be many things, but I am not a liar." Tutu pressed him further, saying that Stone apparently went out that night believing that a person deserved to die. Stone quickly repeated that in the dehumanized dark world of his activities, Hackett was not a person but a military target. "He was a soldier and I was a soldier."

Donna Hicks noted that Stone had come to this meeting as a human being, not as a soldier. Did he now think Hackett's death was regrettable? Yes, it was regrettable, Stone said, but under the circumstances it was understandable.

Roddy Hackett demanded that Stone say something about the supposed evidence of Hackett's IRA involvement and asked where the dossier was to be found. Stone was kindly toward him, saying that he had no knowledge of how the dossier was assembled or where it was now located. It was not his area of assignment.

At this impasse, Tutu asked Sylvia what she was feeling. Choking back the tears, Sylvia said to Stone, "I pray for you, I honestly do, and I forgive you. I feel sorry for your family, and for your kids who have to grow up knowing what their Dad had done." Leslie Belinda then asked Stone, "Do you see Sylvia and Roddy who lost a husband and brother, or the family of an IRA man?"

Stone paused for a long moment. He said he saw a courageous family who lost a loved one many years ago and is still grieving the loss. He saw bravery too, he said, in the family's coming to confront him in public—greater bravery than he could show if positions were reversed. Then, with a hint of kindness from those ominous eyes: "I appreciate Mrs. Hackett's forgiveness for my part in the murder of her husband."

Tutu sensed that the moment for closure was at hand, and said that Sylvia had suggested she might be able to shake hands if there were an honest disclosure of facts and feelings. Tutu asked if this was that time. "It must come from yourselves. And more than from yourselves; it is God who is present at this moment, this moment we could not contrive, that there is mutual healing of all sides." Sylvia rose

silently from her seat and walked to where Stone was sitting. She offered her hand, then he offered his. For a moment their eyes met. Stone said, “I’m really sorry.” Then their hands unclasped, and Sylvia began to sob and ran from the room, the sound of her heels echoing down the corridor.

Roddy came over, shook hands and said he was glad for the beginning of healing. Stone responded, “I couldn’t have done what you’ve done. You’re a better man than I am. Mrs. Hackett is a better person, and a better Christian too.” Tutu ended by praying that the participants might continue, by God’s grace, in their own healing and in the healing of their land. “It is only because there are people like yourselves that there is hope.”

In summarizing the experience, Tutu said: “We had some extraordinary moments in the week or so that we were here where it was like something divine had intervened, and it was exhausting but eminently exhilarating.”

Some journalists suggested that the three-part program was “reality TV gone mad.” I disagree. I believe that *Facing the Truth* will reach some who still need to know what happened to their loved ones and why they were killed or maimed. It may also speak to those violent men and woman who have their stories to tell, and who need to tell those stories, at least before the hour of their death when they yearn for forgiveness.

At the same time, I share the concern of Healing Through Remembering, a highly respected group in Belfast that fears that viewers of the programs who are still dealing with personal ills from the social trauma of the Troubles will have their experiences revived with no way to find closure and release. The BBC took this concern into account by giving toll-free numbers for people to call if they wanted counseling help.

In all communities of Northern Ireland, people are only a call or link away from personal help, if needed, or from finding a safe place to tell their stories. Catholics in West Belfast know that the priests and brothers at Clonard Monastery are there for them. Protestants respect the Cornerstone Community and the Fitzroy Presbyterian Church in Belfast, while the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland exists to provide resources and staff to “enable people to contribute to conflict transformation and reconciliation.”

The question for Northern Irish people, and for governments in London and Dublin, is how fully and thoroughly to confront a violent past. Perhaps the redoubtable Desmond Tutu has shown a way.