

## **Racism in Belfast: Up-front and ugly**

Some months ago a friend who had just got out of hospital was reading the papers about the upsurge of racist attacks in South Belfast. He felt so angry, *"It's only a matter of time, Ken,"* he said, *"before somebody gets killed. Some of the Filipino nurses who looked after me in the Royal were the ones chased down the Donegall Road by a pack of thugs."* It was this kind of incident that led The Guardian to label Belfast 'The Race-Hate Capital of Europe'. Sadly, there are chilling statistics to back that up. While racial attacks in England and Wales were running at 12.6 per 1000 of the ethnic population, in Northern Ireland the figure for the same period was 16.4.

Belfast is the epicentre for such incidents, but the virus has spread to Coleraine, Ballymena, Dungannon, Cookstown and Portadown. If it hasn't yet reached where you live, it's on its way. Exploring more deeply into our psyche, Dr Monica McWilliams citing University of Ulster research concluded, *"People here exhibit as much racism as they do sectarianism."*

Recently Anna Mawah Lo of the Chinese Welfare Association told me her story. *"I was walking into Belfast one evening about 5.30 pm when suddenly out of the crowds on the pavement four young men appeared, walking directly towards me. They started taunting me and shouting abuse. I manoevered myself to the other side of the pavement to get past them, but within seconds one of them came up behind me and kicked me ferociously on the back of the legs. I stood there, stunned and shaken. There were lots of people around, but nobody came over to ask me how I was. These men then ran across to the other side of the road and continued to hurl abuse and laugh. Not a soul said anything to them. The general public just walked on by; they didn't even bat an eyelid."*

Jamal Iweida, a Muslim from Palestine, came to study at Queen's in 1995. He writes, *"When I first came here there were no problems. The majority of people were kind. Muslims have been living in Belfast for 100 years and today we are an integral*

*part of the social, educational and economic life. In recent years we have experienced a nastier side to Northern Irish society. Today the one thing I long for is that my children can walk down the street and not be called names or have people set their dogs on them.”*

It would be wrong to exaggerate the overt racism in our community (read again Jamal’s positive comments), but there is a silent racism just under the surface. Recently some Indian friends phoned me in distress. They had gone to live in one of our neat-kept villages. They told me that in the previous 18 months nobody had knocked their door to welcome them to the neighbourhood. I had encouraged them to visit the local churches, naively convinced that they would receive a warm welcome. *“We tried that, Ken.”* they said. *“We visited the Presbyterian church, the Church of Ireland, the Catholic church and a few others, but nobody said hello or asked us how we were. Even the ministers were disinterested, except for one.”* Eventually they asked a man in a local shop why people were distant. *“I don’t like to say this to your face”* he replied, *“but you’re black and people round here don’t like black people.”* Their final question still haunts me, *“Why are church people here so cold towards my wife and me? They’re our brothers and sisters, aren’t they?”*

How should we respond to the emerging racism around us? How should we react when a family near us is intimidated and attacked? Here are some suggestions I’ve been trying to work through in South Belfast.

### **1. Refocus on the life God calls you to live in your community**

Paul pinpoints it in Ephesians 5:1-2, *“As God’s dearly loved children, **live a life of love**. Christ’s love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something out of us, but to give everything to us – himself! Love like that.”* Christian faith is not rocket-science. Those three **L**’s enshrine its essence.

## **2. Assess your emotional involvement with the issue**

Before Haleleni Karanda from Zimbabwe described the hell of racist abuse she had been put through in an estate in East Belfast, I felt emotionally detached from the problem of racism. After hearing her story of windows smashed, doors kicked in and dog's dirt shovelled in piles onto her doorstep, I changed. If **1** represents 'emotional detachment' and **10** represents 'active involvement' against racism, how would you assess yourself on a scale from 1 to 10?

## **3. Change your lifestyle**

Become more socially inclusive. If you rarely have people from different ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds to your home for a meal, why not adopt a different approach? Open your heart and your home. Open yourself to the suffering they have encountered here. There is nothing more powerful than your neighbours seeing you enjoy the friendship of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

## **4. Open up the issue in your church**

Compile a dossier of racial attacks in your area. Share this material with your friends in church. Present it to your minister and church leaders. Ask them to discuss it and initiate a positive response in your area. After all, racism is a serious sin. Would Jesus would be passive towards racism if he lived in your neighbourhood? He does!

Racism in Ulster presents an ugly face. Do Anna Mawah Lo's observations of the people around her the day she was kicked apply to us? "*They didn't even bat an eyelid.*"

