



FAITH PERSPECTIVE -

Where are today's strong leaders to build on our hopes from 20 years ago?

by **Alf McCreary** in the **Belfast Telegraph**

Most people can recall what they were doing when the historic Good Friday Agreement was announced on April 10, 1998.

I was in the midst of a career turning point as I prepared to leave Queen's University after 14 crowded years as its first **information** director and return to full-time writing.

My first reaction was that the GFA would make life less difficult at Queen's for the new vice-chancellor professor George Bain compared to his predecessor Professor Sir Gordon Beveridge.

Sir Gordon was a good man, but too sensitive for the academic jungle at Queen's. He and I had to face huge PR problems including the dropping of the national anthem at Queen's, as well as a fair employment imbalance, but somehow we managed to pull through.

However, my overriding emotion on April 10, 1998 was one of **relief** that the GFA was signed and that this might herald the beginning of the end of Northern Ireland's self-inflicted crucifixion.



The late senator Gordon Wilson

I did not think of the collective role of the churches, but of the individuals who had given the churches a path to peace.

One such person was the founder of Corrymeela the Rev Dr Ray Davey, a Presbyterian minister who was light years ahead in his hard-headed **vision** of reconciliation.

He and colleagues like the Rev John Morrow, another Presbyterian, were not supported wholeheartedly by the rank and file of the church - many of whom regarded reconciliation as a sign of **weakness** rather than of strength.

Another Corrymeela veteran, the Rev Harold Good, worked hard for many years, and still does, to build bridges.

He became Methodist president and deservedly was awarded the World Methodist Peace Prize.

The late senator Gordon Wilson, another Methodist, spoke out powerfully for a "lack of ill-will" after his daughter Marie, and 10 other innocent people, were murdered in a no-warning IRA explosion at the Enniskillen Cenotaph in 1987.

Sometime later a frail Gordon Wilson had the courage to confront Provisional IRA members in a hideout in Donegal.



He was distressed by the hard faces he encountered, but we will never fully know how much his agony as a bereaved father helped to pave the way towards peace.

The founder of Corrymeela the Rev Dr Ray Davey

Many others played a courageous role, including the

Protestant clerics who showed leadership by secretly meeting Provisional IRA leaders at Feakle in Co Clare in 1974. The meeting ended in farce when the Gardai raided the hotel where they met, and the Provisionals made a hasty retreat.

The church leaders included the Presbyterian general **secretary** the Rev Dr Jack Weir, the Anglican Bishop of Connor Arthur Butler and Canon Bill Arlow, assistant secretary of the Irish Council of Churches - all of whom were criticised for their initiative.

In another context, Archbishop Robin Eames, the Anglican primate, and Dr Cahal Daly, his Roman Catholic counterpart, also showed steadfastness in displaying publicly their solidarity, but this was sorely tested during one of the terrible Drumcree stand-offs.

Another former Presbyterian moderator, the Rev Dr Ken Newell, formed a productive peace-making initiative with Fr Gerry Reynolds of Clonard.

It is invidious to mention individuals because I am sure that there were and are people I have inadvertently left out.

However, it is sufficient to note that there were many clergy and laity in the churches who contributed individually to making peace a reality.

Sometimes all the credit is given to the major politicians like Sir John Major and Albert Reynolds, as well Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern, Bill Clinton, George Mitchell and many others, including John Hume and David Trimble.

However, let's not forget the clerics and church members who also played their part and are often overlooked still.

The search for a lasting peace goes on and we still need strong leadership from all sides - including the churches - to prevent our hopes from 20 years ago being buried in the ashes of sectarianism which has been the plague of Irish and Anglo-Irish history. Sadly, where are the big leaders today?

