



PROGRESSIO
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A question of commitment

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Cover photo: Doña Catalina, a 78-year-old Honduran woman who became a national figure in 2003 after taking part in a 175-mile-long march protesting against destruction of the environment. She said: 'It is up to all of us to do something to protect the environment and the life we have – for the happiness of Honduras, the air, the water, for all the children who are growing up in this country. For the future. What else do we have?'
Photo: Vanessa Kurz/Progressio

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'Commitment'? It is a fashionable word nowadays. It is blazoned in the most unexpected places: a coffee firm's van proclaims it is 'Passionate about coffee, committed to service!'; a bank poster shouts in capitals 'WE'RE COMMITTED TO CUSTOMER SERVICE!' Many businesses and organisations (including Progressio) now draw up mission statements setting out their vision and values; and on the international scene, leaders at the G8 Summit in Edinburgh in July 2005 declared their 'commitment to Africa', which, however, depends on Africa's 'commitment to good governance'.

So, the word is everywhere, but what does it mean and is it even necessarily and always a good thing? After all, some people are totally committed to gambling.... Hitler was totally committed to the extermination of the Jews.... As Gitta Serenyi has pointed out: '[Saddam Hussein] considers himself a positive man who did positive things for his country.'¹

By what standard can we judge these various commitments? The people of Israel were set one by God: 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live....' (Deuteronomy 30:19). Our commitment must then be a commitment to life and blessing. The litmus test is the question: 'Is what I am proposing to do life-giving, life-enhancing?' We need to be able to see a commitment to what is life-giving underpinning whatever particular cause or organisation we want to become involved with, or whatever career we embrace, because it has touched our hearts or aroused our enthusiasm. 'Before one is a writer, one is a citizen.'²

The commitment to life behind Progressio's claim in its mission statement that it is 'committed to tackling poverty and exclusion and to bringing about lasting change' is evident because we can see the vision worked out in practice. The same could be said about top quality coffee or efficient service. But what about the G8 'commitment to Africa', when they have done nothing about the genocide in Darfur? In fact, France (and China, not one of the G8), who have oil interests in the region, told Kofi Annan they would veto any Security Council move to impose sanctions on Sudan. And the United Nations itself appointed the Sudanese government to a three-year term on its Human Rights Commission!³

Commitment to life means commitment to change

Tackling poverty and exclusion, indeed enriching life in any way, means changing things for the better, making another world possible – local, national or international. But it is change that is precisely the problem for those whose vested interests are linked, not to change, but to preservation of the status quo.

Tragically, a commitment to bringing life out of a death-dealing situation can *cost* life. 2005 saw the celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the murders in El Salvador of Archbishop Oscar Romero (24 March 1980) and the four North American women Ita Ford, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel and Jean Donovan (2 December 1980), who were working in El Salvador alongside the poor. But failing to change the status quo *also* results in death, in many forms, ranging from starvation and preventable disease to terrorist atrocities. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, in a ‘Thought for the Day’ on BBC Radio Four’s Today programme, has spoken about commitment in relation to terrorism. He said:

Sadly, those who organise terror have explained why they do what they do. You love life, they say. We love death. That, they believe, is why they will win. In fact, it is why they will lose.... May God help us to ensure that death shall have no dominion; and may he open our eyes to the real challenge that faces us, which is to write the poor and underprivileged into the book of life.

Baptism by the people

That last phrase beautifully describes Oscar Romero’s commitment in his last years as Archbishop of San Salvador before his assassination. As a bishop he had been conservative, cautious, more at ease with the powerful than with the poor. Not too much in line with the direction from Vatican II, he was very nervous on the subject of involvement with social issues. He was the preferred choice, as successor to Archbishop Chávez, of the military president, General Molina, and of the coffee barons, who expected him to deal with what they saw as dangerous social activism among the clergy, and to keep the church well away from controversial political and economic issues.

In a conversation in Rome with the Jesuit priest César Jerez, Romero explained what had drawn him away from the kind of church supported by the rich and powerful and towards the kind of

church advocated by the Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965): a church that makes its own 'the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.'

I was born into a poor family. I've suffered hunger. I know what it's like to work from the time you're a little kid.... When I went to the seminary and started my studies, and then they sent me to finish studying here in Rome, I spent years and years absorbed in my books, and I started to forget where I came from. I started creating another world. When I went back to El Salvador, they made me the bishop's secretary in San Miguel. I was a parish priest for 23 years there, but I was still buried under paperwork. And when they sent me to San Salvador to be the auxiliary bishop, I fell into the hands of Opus Dei, and there I remained....

Then they sent me to Santiago de María, and I ran into extreme poverty again. Those children who were dying just because of the water they were drinking, those *campesinos* killing themselves in the harvests.... You know, Father, when a piece of charcoal has already been lit once, you don't have to blow on it much to get it to flame up again. And everything that happened to us when I got to the archdiocese, what happened to Father Grande [Rutilio Grande, the Jesuit priest who was murdered in 1977] and all ... it was a lot. You know how much I admired him. When I saw Rutilio dead, I thought, 'If they killed him for what he was doing, it's my job to go down that same road....' So, yes, I changed. But I also came back home again.⁴

From then on, the commitment Romero had made since childhood to serve God in the priesthood expressed itself in the commitment to the life of the poor, to giving a voice to the voiceless.

Some people reach this stage as the result of a long, perhaps painful, process; some as the result of a pivotal moment in their lives. Some, like Oscar Romero, experience both, which is what makes him so human and lovable. A Salvadorean priest, Inocencio Alas, describes the moment, during the Mass for Rutilio Grande, when Romero finally changed the focus of his commitment for all to see:

As the Mass began, I noticed that Monseñor Romero was sweating, pale and nervous. And when he began the homily, it seemed slow to me, without his usual eloquence, as if he was reluctant to go through the door of history that God was opening up for him. But after about five minutes, I felt the Holy Spirit descend upon him.... Thousands of people were applauding him, and something rose within him. It was then that he crossed the threshold. He went through the door. Because, you know, there is baptism by water, and there is baptism by blood. But there is also baptism by the people.⁵

The four North American churchwomen also experienced a 'baptism by the people'. They arrived in El Salvador at a time when the repression was intensifying and the church had become a major target. It was their presence among the poor and suffering people of El Salvador which enabled them to overcome their fear and hold fast to their commitment. Margaret Swedish of the Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico, based in Washington DC, recalls the impact their lives had on her:

Maura, Ita, Dorothy and Jean came into my life because of the December 2 event, and changed me, and my faith, for ever. I have no idea what my life would have been like without them. They shaped so much of it, created a framework of meaning in which I lived for these past 25 years.... There was a particular moment in time in El Salvador in 1980 when their lives there, and their deaths, took on extraordinary meaning, opening up a view for us, a new vantage point from which to look at our world, a whole new reality of the world's passion and suffering, and of the action of God within it. Writing of this in the very first days after the murders, Jon Sobrino declared that 'with these four women, God has passed through El Salvador.' ...

But as their story unfolds in our lives, they are telling us something more, something with far greater ramifications; for within and beyond El Salvador, they are showing us something important and inescapable about our world ... how to *be* in it, how to live in a world marked by violence and poverty, where the image of God (in which we humans have been created, after all) is

under assault every day; they tell us about how to live at a time in history when we can see dark times coming, when we struggle through confusion, fear, and a sense that things may be falling apart all around us, for these are the dynamics that marked the times in El Salvador in which they made their commitment to stay and walk with the people.⁶

Two weeks before she was murdered, Jean wrote to a friend in Connecticut:

Several times I have decided to leave El Salvador. I almost could except for the children, the poor bruised victims of this insanity. Who would care for them? Whose heart would be so staunch as to favour the reasonable thing in a sea of their tears and helplessness? Not mine, dear friend, not mine.

And Maura:

My fear of death is being challenged constantly as children, lovely young girls, old people, are being shot and cut up with machetes and bodies thrown by the road and people prohibited from burying them.... I want to stay on now. I believe now that this is right.

Dorothy wrote to a friend when the danger was closing in on the mission team:

We talked quite a bit today about what happens IF something begins. Most of us feel we would want to stay here. We wouldn't want to just run out on the people.... I thought I should say this to you because I don't want to say it to anyone else – because I don't think they would understand. Anyway, my beloved friend, just know how I feel and 'treasure it in your heart'. If a day comes when others will have to understand, please explain it for me.

Ita and Maura travelled to Nicaragua in November 1980 to attend a regional assembly of the Maryknoll Sisters. At the closing liturgy on 1 December, Ita read a passage from one of Romero's final homilies:

Christ invites us not to fear persecution because, believe me, brothers and sisters, the one who is committed to the poor must run the same fate as the poor, and in El Salvador we know what the fate of the poor signifies: to disappear, be tortured, to be held captive – and to be found dead.

The following day, 2 December, she and Maura boarded a plane to return to El Salvador. They were met at the airport by Dorothy and Jean. After leaving the airport, their van was taken over by members of El Salvador's National Guard. They were taken to an isolated location, where they were raped, shot, and buried in a shallow grave by a road.

The option for the poor

These women identified with the poor of El Salvador to the point that they gave their lives for them, just as Oscar Romero had done. All of them, according to the criterion set out by Jesus – 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13) – may rightly be considered martyrs. As individuals they put into practice the 'option for the poor' which the Latin American bishops adopted as a commitment of the church at their conference in Medellín in 1968, in the spirit of Vatican II. Long before Medellín, Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth and, reading from the prophet Isaiah, proclaimed the option for the poor, once and for all: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed....' (Luke 4:18-19).

Medellín was, nevertheless, immensely important. The 130 bishops dissociated themselves from the continent's rich and powerful élites and placed themselves firmly on the side of the continent's poor and oppressed, working for effective change and promising sustained education for liberation. Not surprisingly, there was strong conservative pressure to maintain the status quo at Medellín and subsequent Latin American conferences:

The change which took place at Medellín horrified many conservatives. The papal delegate to the Medellín conference,

Cardinal Antonio Samoré, was so appalled at the direction taken by the bishops that he decided to return to Rome early. While waiting to leave, he retired to his room and refused all contact with the delegates. It was only a determined harangue through his closed door by Bishop Ramón Bogarín of Paraguay that persuaded him to return to the meeting rather than denouncing it in Rome.⁷

At Puebla in 1979, no liberation theologians were invited but they managed to be influential unofficially:

[The] bishops rejected the schema proposed by the conference organisers, and adopted a methodology which made the lived situation of Latin Americans, rather than doctrinal reflection, the basis of their discussions. At Santo Domingo [in 1992] by contrast, the assembly was never able to achieve full control of its proceedings, and there was a war of attrition between a large group of bishops and the conference organisers which lasted throughout the conference.⁸

The resulting document, although it, too, reaffirms the option for the poor, depicts the activity of the church itself as ‘fundamentally hieratic, cultic, not in the world’:

This even affects the calls for social action, where the Vatican changed the bishops’ text, which had called for the Church to be involved in work for human rights. The altered version reads: ‘pastors must encourage the laity to be involved.’⁹

It will be interesting to see how the 2007 conference turns out. Austen Ivereigh, writing about it in *The Tablet*, stresses that the church ‘needs to trust in events and witness rather than in speeches and documents.’ The conference ‘needs to tell a story which not everyone may like, but which strikes the human heart in the metropolitan salons as much as the shanty towns.’ The Latin American church must ‘exercise its own freedom in reflecting, theologically and pastorally, on local issues; a repetition of Santo Domingo ... would be a disaster.’¹⁰

Models of church

The question that arises after Vatican II and the Latin American episcopal conferences in Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo therefore is: what model of church enables us to express our commitment to life and blessing? The pyramid of power model, or the community, the people of God, model? A church committed to preserving its own life and structures, or one which embraces the option for the poor and accepts that such a commitment is meaningless without lasting changes, economic, political, social, environmental and also theological?

The reluctance of the traditional church to allow more than a minimum of change to take place is strikingly shown in the experience of Honduran peasant activist Elvia Alvarado. In the early 1980s she began working with mothers' clubs organised by the Catholic church: 'At the meetings we'd talk about our problems and try to help each other out. We also did practical things like distribute food to malnourished children, grow gardens, and go to talks about food and nutrition.' Fifteen mostly illiterate women went on a training course:

[The teachers] said it didn't matter how much formal schooling we had, that we all had lots of practical knowledge and we all had something to offer.... We worked hard all week, talking about our experiences as women and mothers. We talked about the most serious problems in our communities – the lack of good drinking water, no health clinic, no transportation, things like that. And we talked about how we could solve some of these problems. It was something completely new for us.

They felt that the church had opened their eyes. Elvia was one of the five women chosen to organise women's groups in remote communities:

Our main job was to organise the women so we could distribute food to the most malnourished children.... Then we were supposed to help them set up a feeding program.... We set up a tremendous women's organisation throughout Comayagua.... Then all of a sudden the Church pulled the rug out from under us. It stopped the program and took away all the funds.... The

Church forged the path for us, but they wanted us to follow behind. And when we started to walk ahead of them, when we started to open new paths ourselves, they tried to stop us.... They wanted us to give food out to malnourished mothers and children, but they didn't want us to question why we were malnourished to begin with. They wanted us to grow vegetables on the tiny plots around our houses, but they didn't want us to question why we didn't have enough land to feed ourselves.... The very same Church that organised us, the same Church that opened our eyes, suddenly began to criticise us, calling us communists and Marxists.¹¹

As Bishop Helder Camara famously said: 'When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food they call me a communist.'

The same kind of thing happened in relation to the Base Christian Communities. We remember the young Honduran theologian Nelly del Cid, whom we met in El Salvador, telling us how, when the Base Communities first started, Bibles were being distributed for next to nothing for them to use. But when it was realised that poor people were using Bible study to illuminate the reality of their own lives and think how they might change it, the price of Bibles soared to unaffordable levels! Elvia and the Base Communities continued to read their own reality in the light of the Bible, and vice versa, in spite of increasing repression from those defending the pyramid of power model.

The Quaker model

Back in the mid-17th century the established Church of England also was committed to close ties with the structures of power rather than to enabling people to live in the spirit of Christ. Many Christians 'suffered from a deep spiritual disturbance.... The Christ they were offered was too small. He was in the Book and not in the world, and too many clergy wished to keep him there. So, at a deep level many thousands of people were in despair.'¹²

George Fox, founder of the Quakers, spent years searching in vain to satisfy his spiritual hunger, exploring the ideas of all the different new religious movements which arose in that disturbed period. He wrote in his Journal in 1647:

I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition', and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.

His conviction was that 'Christ has come to teach his people himself' and that every human being contains a potential Seed, or Inner Light, 'that of God', capable of responding directly to the Spirit of Christ. Therefore there is no need for 'steeple-houses' or for clergy as intermediaries. Every person can be a minister and Quaker meetings are held in silence, out of which anyone present can speak if the Spirit moves them. So early Friends refused to pay tithes, refused to take up arms, refused to doff their hats even to the King (because they gave equal respect to everyone), refused to swear oaths (because the Bible says Let your Yea be Yea and your Nay be Nay) – plenty of reasons why they were frequently thrown into jail, had their goods distrained and even sometimes lost their lives. Luckily, by the 18th century they came to be respected for their integrity and good works and inspired such trust that some of them became early bankers!

Quakers believe that 'Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it.' 'Friends maintain that expressions of faith must be related to personal experience.' George Fox challenges us, 'You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst *thou* say?' Friends express their commitment to life not in articles of belief but in testimonies: the most important are those to truth, peace, honesty and simplicity. They also seek guidance from a little book of *Advices & Queries* – a favourite query is: 'Are you open to new light, from whatever source it may come?' Favourite advices are 'Let your life speak' and 'Live adventurously'. Like the Catholic bishops at Puebla they base their thinking on the reality of 'the lived situation' rather than on 'doctrinal reflection'.

Coming back to life through story

The openness and acceptance of diversity in the Quaker model of church means that many people come to Friends after life-destroying experiences in very dogmatic and restrictive churches. A moving

example is that of the American 'theatrical performance activist' Peterson Toscano. When Peterson was 15 he had to face the conflict between commitment to his evangelical Christian faith and his realisation that he was gay which, according to his church and all those he gathered around him meant that he was sinful, and neither God nor decent people could love him. He was told that the church could 'turn him from gay to straight' through an 'ex-gay ministry' programme. Over the next 17 years, while becoming an actor and a teacher, he attended a series of evangelical, pentecostal and charismatic churches and, at great expense, went through several 'reparative' processes aimed at changing his sexual orientation even if it required 'casting out demons'. He even married but although he loved his wife and had struggled so hard to be 'normal' the burden of living against his true nature became so heavy that it led to everything in his life collapsing. In his own words he 'felt filled with shame, hopelessness, self-loathing and fear'. He spent two years at an intensive residential 'ex-gay' programme, where he began to look deeply into himself, giving him the courage to begin to 'come out' as a gay man, which he feels was a spiritual process:

It meant that in spite of what the conservative church said, in spite of what many of my friends thought, in spite of what I thought my God had to say about it, I had to be honest with myself and acknowledge that I had these same-sex desires. Even if it meant I would have to go to hell for it, integrity was more important than living a lie.

Eventually he started teaching in an independent private school, and joined the Quakers, finding in both contexts the respect, affection and support which enabled him to trust people again, open his heart in a new kind of commitment to God and look back with forgiveness and understanding at those whose rejection of 'lived reality' did him, and many others, so much damage. As a very accomplished actor he is now committed to combating homophobia by opening eyes and hearts through hilarious one-man shows based on his experiences. It has been said of him: 'Toscano's unique story-telling neither attacks nor forcibly instructs, but rather invites audiences to sift through various accounts and move beyond issues to the underlying human stories.'¹³

Respect for the lived reality

A commitment to looking at the world through rigidly dogmatic spectacles, refusing to see the lived reality of situations, seems also to lie behind many international tragedies such as those we witnessed in Latin America. A friend who worked in a camp for Salvadorean refugees in Honduras told us he once had to show round a visiting official from the US State Department. At one point the official asked, 'What's that big building over there?' 'It's a communal kitchen.' 'Hah!' said the official, 'so you're teaching them communism, are you?' The dogmatic story-line maintained by Washington was that the conflict in El Salvador was something stirred up by communists from inside and outside the country and that unless it was crushed, the United States itself would be in danger. Some excellent US diplomats and other experts reported the truth of the situation but that was not acceptable to the ideologues. (One recalls that during a speech by Democratic president Harry S Truman, campaigning for re-election in 1948, someone shouted, 'Give 'em hell, Harry!', to which he responded, 'I don't give them hell. I just tell the truth and they think it's hell.')

However, from 1980 onwards, the American people began to hear for themselves the underlying human stories of Salvadorean refugees fleeing in ever increasing numbers from the terrible military repression supported by the US government. The American faith communities awakened to the shocking reality that the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) was rounding up hundreds of refugees and sending them straight back to almost certain death. Gary MacEoin, a faithful witness of this period in El Salvador's history, and a participant in the Sanctuary Movement, writes: 'The instinctive response was the only one open to people of faith, a response that in addition resonated with the deepest traditions of the United States. This abomination could not be allowed.'¹⁴

Churches in Arizona began by trying to help the refugees in lawful ways but that was not enough. Jim Corbett, a Quaker who knows the Arizona desert like the back of his hand, came to the conclusion that 'if God was calling the community of faith in Tucson to serve the needs of refugees, the most basic of their needs was to prevent their being intercepted where they were most vulnerable,'¹⁵ at the Mexican-US border, and he started bringing them across safely. The Session of Southside Presbyterian Church, after four hours of prayer and reflection, voted to give hospitality to these 'illegal' refugees, accepting Jim Corbett's statement that 'when the government itself

sponsors the crucifixion of entire peoples and then makes it a felony to shelter those seeking refuge, law-abiding protest merely trains us to live with atrocity.¹⁶

To begin with they acted secretly but soon realised that if they were to influence public opinion and perhaps change government policy, they needed to publicly declare their right to aid fugitives from government-sponsored terror and their belief that INS actions were contrary to US law, international law and God's law. Almost the entire congregation voted to declare Southside Presbyterian Church a sanctuary for refugees from Central America and Pastor John Fife wrote to the US attorney-general to inform him and explain their reasons. From that moment the Sanctuary Movement spread like wildfire, not only in faith communities – whole cities declared themselves sanctuaries. The leaders were indicted, some went to prison, but Gary MacEoin concludes: 'The administration's assault on the Sanctuary Movement has both strengthened and expanded it.' He describes the effect of the movement on the Americans taking part in it:

Personally enriched by the witness of the poor, who, coming out of a condition of hopelessness, retain a spirited, vital flame of faith and hope, they not only are committing themselves to solidarity with their oppressed sisters and brothers but are acquiring a new vision of their role in life.¹⁷

Everybody is called

US evangelical leader Jim Wallis, to whom we will return a little later, was active in the Sanctuary Movement and wrote of it: 'We do not know when the poor will see justice, but we do know that our God stands among the poor and invites us to join him there. The time has come for us to take personal responsibility.'¹⁸ In our own country there are everywhere inspiring women and men committed to taking personal responsibility and to opening up new possibilities in their lives and the lives of others. We asked a few of those we happen to know to tell us how they arrived at that commitment.

Mildred Nevile, retired director of CIIR

Mildred described her commitment as resulting from a series of four conversions, or awakenings. The first of these took place at her Confirmation at the age of 14. She told us:

To my surprise, because I don't remember having been a child who was particularly interested in religion, I felt quite excited by the idea of being confirmed. For the first time I was conscious of Jesus as a hero, somebody to be followed. I took the name of St Paul for my confirmation because I was enthralled by his commitment to spreading the gospel and the way he gave his whole life to this. I was at school during the war and that had an enormous influence on me. Although, looking back, we had a rather simplistic view about the whole thing, nevertheless there was this great sense of a battle going on between good and evil, and that our part was to be crusaders for the good.

On leaving school Mildred worked with various youth organisations and through the World Assembly of Youth encountered the Young Christian Workers:

My contact with them was a second conversion and much more specific in terms of a call. The movement was founded in things like the value of work and of human dignity, in situations that really put dignity to the test. I felt that I would like to direct myself towards working in that kind of field. In fact, I then worked for seven years with the Young Christian Students, a self-managed youth movement which used the methodology of See, Judge, Act to bring about change within the student environment.

My third conversion happened while I was working for The Sword of the Spirit [the organisation out of which CIIR emerged] in 1962 I think. There was an international, UN-initiated, Freedom from Hunger Campaign, and we did a great deal of work to try and get the Catholic community in this country to put all its energy and weight behind the national campaign, not to have a separate, parallel campaign. Then, for the first time, I learnt that poverty doesn't just happen but is caused, and that we are part of the problem. This was not yet an option for the poor, but it was a revelation and a shock.

The next awakening, perhaps, was 10 years later, when I visited Vietnam for CIIR to see if we could find openings for qualified volunteers within the British volunteer programme. Saigon was an extremely frightening place to be, but what it gave me was a totally different insight into and experience of the meaning of

solidarity. What made sense to the Vietnamese people was not the donor agencies offering gifts of money but the people who had stood side by side in solidarity with them, in the chaos, in the confusion, in the mess; who, in some way, had been willing to share their experiences. I think if I hadn't had that experience, and it was a real transformation of my understanding, I would have found it harder, as director of CIIR, to really understand the developments that were taking place.

Running through this history has been an ever-changing understanding of what it means to be a Christian and what my commitment is to. When I was at school, the Catholic church was still very much a segregated, parallel society and Catholics were encouraged to keep themselves to themselves, in some ways feeling elite and set apart and in others inferior and marginalised. (I understand now a little of how Muslims may feel, within the present situation.) My passion was the belief that everybody is called to lead their own vocation, and all Christians are called to be priests and to minister to the world within the world; and that it's the world that matters. If Jesus died for anybody, he died for the world, not just for Roman Catholics. So there was an imperative need for a re-identification of the church with humanity, which I think Vatican II brought about.

Brian Phillips is senior lecturer in human rights practice at Oxford Brookes University and, since 1996, has been deeply involved in the Quakers' Former Yugoslavia Programme, supporting local initiatives committed to building a culture of peace and human rights.

The concept of 'being evangelised by the poor' is very meaningful for Brian in relation to his own faith-based commitment to becoming a human rights activist. 'In regard to the violation of human rights, it's a similar process of being evangelised by the suffering of other human beings.' In the context of the violations and their consequences that he saw in the course of his work in Bosnia-Herzegovina, he spoke of his sense of 'people experiencing a kind of crucifixion':

In the case of the Bosnian Muslims, I could see a kind of Christ-experience in their stories, and that was, I suppose, the equivalent

of being evangelised by the poor.... I had a very strong sense of the spirit of Christ being located in that suffering alongside those people – [which] is perhaps somewhat ironic coming from a Christian background, and experiencing that more profoundly than anywhere else among a Muslim people. It changed me, it made its mark on me, made it impossible to disengage at any point or in any way, so that even now, some years after the conflict, my commitment to trying to place myself in whatever way I can alongside those people has not changed, nor can I see it doing so.

Brian told us that he had been strongly influenced by the Latin American liberation theologians:

Figures like Oscar Romero made a very deep impression on me and had everything to do with the choices I've made both professionally and personally in my life. When I was a young man I spent one summer working in Lima with a group of people from the Maryknoll order who were living and working in one of the enormous shanty towns.... To go into that kind of poverty and see the choices that individuals had made, on the basis of their faith, to live alongside those people, had an enormous impact on me.... I think, though to a lesser extent than those extraordinary Maryknollers that I had the good fortune to know, I have tried to live that out in the context of my work in a place like Bosnia – that expression of solidarity, that commitment over the long term to follow people in their work, in their witness, to stay with them, particularly at moments when they may feel they have stumbled and failed. That seems to me to be an essential part of commitment, that continuity, that longevity.

In preparing his students to take up that commitment, Brian defines his profession of human rights practice as 'fundamentally being about carrying other people's stories ... being a porter of other people's pain and suffering.' That weight of stories can be a heavy responsibility but can also offer profound spiritual insights such as the declaration by the sister of a young 'disappeared' Bosnian man that 'forgiveness is the best revenge'. There is also joy in seeing the commitment of courageous small peace groups gradually bearing fruit.

Lema Hasad and Faizullah Khan work with Faith In The Future (FITF), a unique Muslim-led community regeneration organisation in Hackney. FITF's core areas of work are neighbourhood renewal, provision of learning opportunities, and capacity building of faith and black and minority ethnic organisations. Its mission statement says: 'Inspired by our Muslim heritage, our vision is to work with faith communities to help create an inclusive society, which can prosper together in harmony.'¹⁹ Interestingly, they use the Reflect, Respond and Participate approach to adult learning and social change developed by Action Aid in, among other countries, El Salvador.

Lema has worked with FITF since it became an independent organisation five years ago. Having started as a tutor in English for Speakers of Other Languages she is now the project manager.

'To begin with,' she told us, 'I didn't even know what regeneration was':

But as time went past I developed interests other than the teaching side of it. So I would often stay on late and ask Tara, my line manager, what type of work she was doing, what was all this about. I started to think, 'Well, why am I here?'

In 2002 it was suggested to Lema that she might investigate the possibility of FITF becoming a sub-contractor for the newly founded Learning Trust:

I went along and I got the application forms and I'd already been watching Tara do them, so I understood what the gist was. So I filled one out and I worked until about 11 o'clock at night, and the next day we nearly got run over trying to drop off the application in time, and it was successful. We managed to get £10,000. I'll never forget that, it was the first application I'd ever done in my life. And then I was given the opportunity to manage that delivery and it just went from there.

Now I am committed, but there were times when this place was in serious trouble. I could have gone, but I didn't. I feel that I owe people something, and I owe FITF something, because you know I have done well. I think it's who we help, genuinely, that has kept me here, it's the people that are here. I mean we help so many,

women especially. There are so many people that I've seen walk through this door, and if we weren't here I don't know what would happen to them. So that's what keeps me going. I sometimes think that God put me here for a specific reason and that's the reason why I can't leave.

Lema gave us an example of what makes her hard work worthwhile. One of the ways she supports young people is by helping them fill in job applications.

The other day I had to wait for a train at Liverpool Street so I went to get a coffee in Starbucks – and the gentleman serving me looked a bit familiar. He says, 'Do you remember the job application you did for me for Starbucks three years ago?' I did remember because this kid, he was such a cheeky sausage. He'd never see his counsellors on time, he'd go for interviews late, he just wanted to keep signing on. And then when he turned 21 they terminated his benefit. He was supposed to come in at 11 to do the application and as usual he didn't turn up, so I said, 'I'm not doing it' – I remember I was going up the stairs and he was following me with a pen and paper to help him. And now here he is at Starbucks and he goes to me, 'I've been working for three years. I'm now getting married. I managed to rent my own place.' I tell you I nearly started crying, I was so happy for him. That's just one person that we helped and it took three years for it to come back, but honest to God that day made me see my job in a completely different light. I think that makes it worthwhile to be here.

There's a saying, I don't know who ever said it or if I'm saying it right, but it's 'To change one life is beginning to change the world.' So let's see what happens!

Faizullah Khan has many commitments. He is Councillor for Hackney Downs and Cabinet Advisor for Older People. He is also a peace activist who in December 2004 took part in a joint mission to India/Pakistan by representatives of the Indian and Pakistani diaspora living in the UK, US and Canada, to promote peace between the two countries and show solidarity with like-minded people in the region. But it was in his capacity as a board member of FITF that he told us what commitment means to him, in the context of his Islamic faith:

We live in a society where commitment is essential for every human being. Commitments could be personal, individual; commitments could be to the community. From person to community, that is one degree higher commitment, because you can only commit yourself to community when you are selfless. Selfish people will remain at the individual level because they will be all the time feeding their hungers of various kinds, whether it is wealth, position, power, sex or anything. But if a person's services are available for the community in which s/he lives then obviously s/he is a selfless person committing her or himself to a greater task.

This commitment finds another level when one is making oneself more selfless and available for a whole nation. But still to me the best commitment, the highest level, is making oneself available to the cause of humanity. That is the level which to me, in my faith, is the purpose of the creation of human beings as Allah intended. In our own language we say that not a single religion teaches hate. The prophets that we revere in the faith of Islam were always preaching humanity from God, from Allah, they were all telling the same thing, in all communities to which they came. Be at peace with yourself and you will be at peace with others, neighbours, community, humanity, and this will distil and spill over to other creations as well, the whole creation of Allah, whether it is cattle, whether it is beasts, or flowers or trees or shrubs. So you need to be at ease with yourself in order to instil this peace.

Faizullah explained that Islam teaches that in everything we do or say in our life we are creating our own Paradise on the one hand, or our own Hell on the other. We make choices in the same way that we use a remote control to access different programmes, and eventually we shall be held accountable for those choices:

If your commitment has not progressed from person to community, to nation, to humanity – you are still stuck and not yet the person Allah wants you to be. If you do the right things, you are creating your own Paradise, you are planting trees, you are planting gardens, you are creating palaces there. But greed is the driver for all the mischievous things. Greed creates a kind of

artificial hunger for wealth, for power, for position, and creates an unsustainable position for individuals, communities and nations. Unless we tackle that we will not be able to have a society which we all the time crave to achieve.

A more positive path?

It is widely proclaimed these days that the US government and big business are the major occupiers of that 'unsustainable position', committed as they are to furthering the interests of the rich at the expense not only of the poor but of the whole planet. It is therefore important to remember and honour the many Americans whose commitment has brought about enormous changes in the past. There are powerful beneficent influences at work there now, which might possibly swing US policy onto a more positive path.

One such influence is Jim Wallis, 'the major prophetic evangelical Christian voice in the country,'²⁰ who, with his nationwide Sojourners network of progressive Christians, has been campaigning for decades to persuade the 'religious Right', who often won't talk about anything but abortion and homosexuality, that the priorities for Jesus and for the books of the Old Testament are issues of poverty and injustice. In his book *God's politics*, Jim Wallis urges voters to measure candidates' policies 'against the complete range of Christian ethics and values':

We will measure the candidates by whether they enhance human life, human dignity, and human rights.... Do the candidates' budget and tax policies reward the rich or show compassion for poor families? Do their foreign policies include fair trade and debt cancellation for the poorest countries? ... Do the candidates' policies protect the creation or serve corporate interests that damage it?²¹

After the 'reality check' provided by hurricane Katrina in relation both to poverty and to the effects of global warming, more and more American voters may be inclined to take those questions into account. Jim Wallis wrote:

Out of the terrible tragedy of the Gulf Coast hurricanes has come a teachable moment: the beginning of a national dialogue on poverty in our midst and how we can overcome it.

But teachable moments require good teachers, and we find ourselves positioned now, as never before, to live our prophetic faith, and speak truth to power.²²

Unhistoric acts

The changes that Faith In The Future is bringing about in Hackney depend on the participation of the 'ordinary' people in the community. If Jim Wallis can help to change the commitments of those in power in the United States (and we pray he may do so) that is an enormous undertaking, but it depends on the participation of thousands of other unknown people in countless different ways. George Eliot ends her novel *Middlemarch* with a beautiful tribute to the little people of our world: 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.' It is good that *The Guardian* newspaper has instituted, on its obituary page, largely devoted to the great and the good, a section entitled 'Other lives' – short obituaries sent in by readers remembering the 'unhistoric acts' of friends, relations, colleagues.

Bob Geldof extols 'doctors, teachers, priests, nuns, aid workers, advisors – superhuman people, good people, dedicated lives in relentlessly harsh environments who believe life is best experienced by helping others.'²³ For Nelson Mandela, the heroes are 'those simple men and women who have committed themselves to fighting poverty wherever that is to be found in the world.'²⁴ Elizabeth Johnson urges us on All Saints Day to celebrate 'those nameless saints who raised a little hell in defense of the vulnerable and the growth of justice.'²⁵

And Jesus himself tells us that those who will inherit the Kingdom are the nameless many who gave food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison: 'as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Matthew 25: 40).

Open eyes, ears and hearts

One only has to read the papers or surf the internet to find encouraging stories of commitment by a wide variety of people. It

seems that the extreme poverty they saw in Kenya had a powerful effect on the cast and crew of the film 'The Constant Gardener':

The seven weeks of shooting in the summer of 2004 changed the lives of everyone involved. The Hollywood stars felt they had seen something extraordinary. By the time the filming wrapped up, cast and crew were determined to help the local people where they could and promised £75,000 of their own money to set up the Constant Gardener Trust.

They did not just give money. 'In Kibera ... the crew built water tanks so families had access to clean water, a bridge so the locals would not have to wade through a filthy stream to get to a health clinic, and a new classroom at a local nursery school.'²⁶

When it is a question of a 'personality' making a commitment to something life-enhancing, the story may get a mention in the mainstream press among all the more 'newsworthy' tales of violence and scandal. So it is cheering to read in the journal *Positive News* only reports about the many creative projects which are touching the hearts and attracting the commitment of 'ordinary' people of all ages around the world. The article 'Pick a dream and make it happen' in the Autumn 2005 issue tells how in 1998 a six-year old Canadian boy listened to his school-teacher telling how in Africa many people had to walk miles each day just to get water. He started raising money by doing chores, but when he realised he couldn't raise enough all by himself he started giving speeches at local service clubs and churches. He has now raised over a million dollars, built 169 wells and provided clean water for 300,000 people. '14-year-old Ryan is still determined to continue on his path until he reaches his dream – to provide clean water to everyone in the whole world.' 55-year-old Scottish water engineer Jim Rae gave up his job in the swimming-pool business to go and tackle the same problem in Gambia, starting a charity which digs and cleans wells in rural communities. 'What Jim's story tells us is that although youth involvement is important in creating global change and peace, engaging and caring for humans and human communities is not about age, it is about heart!'

Many of the stories told in *Positive News* concern projects to help protect the environment. Protecting our planet is an issue that should unite everyone in the world, and, as Hans Küng says in the

introduction to his 'Declaration of the religions for a global ethic' (commissioned by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions and endorsed by the Parliament in 1993): 'Numberless women and men in all regions and religions strive to lead a life that is not determined by egoism but by commitment to their fellow humans and the world around them.' These two commitments are inseparable: we have given many examples of the first, now we turn to the second.

The blue planet

In the early 1990s a movie entitled 'Blue Planet' was shown at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington. Filmed by astronauts in orbit around the earth, the movie showed our planet as a small blue and white marble revolving through the black void of space. It showed the green and brown shapes of the continents, the blue of the oceans, the swirling patterns of the clouds, even the lights of cities like jewels in the night. Then the camera zoomed in to show the sad reality: smoke from a burning rain forest, sludge from the mouth of a river, grey polluted air over a city, a storm blowing away topsoil, animals ending up with no habitat, people crammed into slums, hungry children.... This blue planet, humanity's only home in the vast cosmos, is being wrecked by us.

Elizabeth Johnson in *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* sees the poor and the earth as being the twin related concerns for humanity at this time:

Liberation ethics in our age has to come to grips with the plight of poor people, with their power as a locus of theological insight, and with the essential need to include their well-being in the vision and action of the gospel. In a similar way, being converted to the earth requires that we extend the justice model to embrace the whole earth.... [M]aking a preferential option for the poor includes other species and the ravaged natural world itself.²⁷

We said earlier that commitment has to be life-giving, life-enhancing. The naturalist Aldo Leopold gives us a standard by which to judge our dual commitment to the poor and the earth: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the life community. It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise.'²⁸

What is the relationship between humankind and the planet?

What responsibility have we for the survival of our planet? Elizabeth Johnson writes:

For all our distinctiveness, human beings are modes of being of the universe. Woven into our lives is the very fire from the stars and the genes from the sea creatures, and everyone, utterly everyone, is kin in the radiant tapestry of being.²⁹

We are modes of being of the universe, with a difference: we are the universe *reflecting on itself*. 'Man is only a reed,' said Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century (*Pensées*), 'the weakest thing in nature – but he is a thinking reed.'

Four centuries later, Jonathon Porritt elaborates on that theme:

We are the first species (as far as we know) that is able to reflect upon where we have come from and where we are headed. We are, therefore, able to conceptualise the necessary conditions for our own survival and, in the light of that understanding, so shape our living patterns in order to optimise our survival chances.³⁰

Since all the world is kin, Elizabeth Johnson rejects the kingship model (hierarchical dualism, that sees humanity separated from the earth and placed in a position of absolute dominion) and the stewardship model (which keeps the structure of hierarchical dualism, but calls for human beings to be responsible caretakers or guardians of the earth and all its creatures). She presents the kinship model as the truest way to relate to the cosmos:

It sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life. Because we are all mutually interconnected, the flourishing or damaging of one ultimately affects all.³¹

An empowering moral

One thing that nowadays enables us to put our mutual interrelatedness into practice is the world wide web, which gives us information from all over the world and through which we can discover and get in touch with networks of beneficent activists. For instance we keep in touch with Jim Wallis's *Sojourners* through their

weekly Sojomail which comes over the e-mail and that led us to a website called 'Common Dreams news center: Breaking news and views for the progressive community'.

We had been intending to end this Comment with the story of Rosa Parks, who died in October, as an example of how one 'ordinary' woman's action in refusing to give up her seat in the bus to a white man turned her into 'the mother of the civil rights movement' – an example to us all. But an article in Common Dreams, 'The Real Rosa Parks' by Paul Rogat Loeb³² (another powerful beneficent influence in US thinking), pointed out that the standard version of her story, which we had known and seen repeated in her obituaries, totally neglects the context of that 'pivotal moment' and distorts its significance. Far from being an 'ordinary', uncommitted, woman who suddenly found courage to revolt, she had been active for 12 years in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. 'This in no way,' Loeb stresses, 'diminishes the power and historical importance of Parks's refusal to give up her seat':

But it reminds us that this tremendously consequential act, along with everything that followed, depended on all the humble and frustrating work that Parks and others undertook earlier on. It also reminds us that Parks's initial step of getting involved was just as courageous and critical as the stand on the bus that all of us have heard about.

Focusing on that one dramatic action of one individual gives the impression that Rosa Parks acted almost on a whim. Her real story, Loeb tells us, 'conveys a far more empowering moral':

She begins with seemingly modest steps. She goes to a meeting, and then another, helping build the community that in turn supported her path. Hesitant at first, she gains confidence as she speaks out. She keeps on despite a profoundly uncertain context, as she and others act as best they can to challenge deeply entrenched injustices, with little certainty of results.

A whole chain of influences and actions lead up to the day on the bus:

Being aware that such chains exist, that we can choose to join them, and that lasting change doesn't occur in their absence, is one of the primary ways to sustain hope, especially when our actions seem too insignificant to amount to anything.

We said earlier that 'Everybody is called'. That means not only people of faith but also those of none. To them Dom Helder Camara wrote, 'If you feel in you the desire to use the qualities you have, if you think selfishness is narrow and choking, if you hunger for truth, justice, and love, you can and should go with us.'³³

Notes

- 1 Gita Serenyi, 'Believing he did no wrong', *The Guardian*, 20 October 2005.
- 2 Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, speaking on the radio.
- 3 Johann Hari, 'The century's first genocide is nearly over', *The Independent*, 4 October 2005.
- 4 María López Vigil, DLT, *Oscar Romero, Memories in Mosaic*, CAFOD, 2000, pp158-159.
- 5 As above, pp117-118.
- 6 From 'Love casts out fear' – presentation for Cleveland [diocese, USA] 25th anniversary commemoration, 2005.
- 7 Francis McDonagh, 'The Santo Domingo Conference' in Gustavo Gutiérrez et al, *Santo Domingo and after: The challenges for the Latin American church*, CIIR, 1993, p6.
- 8 As above, p17.
- 9 As above, p25.
- 10 Austen Ivereigh, 'A tricky tango for the bishops', *The Tablet*, 29 October 2005.
- 11 *Don't be afraid, gringo: A Honduran woman speaks from the heart – The story of Elvia Alvarado*, translated and edited by Medea Benjamin, HarperCollins, 1989, pp13-17.
- 12 John Punshon, *Portrait in grey*, QuakerBooks, 1984, p35.
- 13 Sources: personal letter and his own website www.petersontoscano.com
- 14 Gary MacEoin, 'A brief history of the Sanctuary Movement' in *Sanctuary: A resource guide for understanding and participating in the Central American refugees' struggle*, edited by Gary MacEoin, HarperCollins, 1985, p14.
- 15 As above, p19.
- 16 As above, p20.
- 17 As above, p28.
- 18 As above, p174.
- 19 Faith In The Future Annual Report, 2004.
- 20 Cornel West, quoted on the cover of *God's politics* (see note 21).
- 21 Jim Wallis, *God's politics: Why the Right gets it wrong and the Left doesn't get it*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, p.xxiii.
- 22 E-mail from Sojourners (www.sojo.net) on 17 November 2005.
- 23 *The Rough Guide to a better world and how you can make a difference*, Department for International Development, 2004.
- 24 As above.
- 25 Extract from 'Friends of God and Prophets' in *The Women's Christian Year Book 2000*, Canterbury Press, 2000.
- 26 *Independent on Sunday*, 23 October 2005.
- 27 Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, Paulist Press, 1993.
- 28 Quoted in Elizabeth Johnson, as above.
- 29 See note 27.
- 30 Jonathon Porritt, 'How capitalism can save the world', *The Independent*, 4 November 2005.
- 31 See note 27.
- 32 Published 31 October 2005 by www.commondreams.org
- 33 Dom Helder Camara, *The desert is fertile*, Orbis Books, 1974.



A question of commitment

Commitment is a fashionable word nowadays – but what does it mean, and is it even necessarily and always a good thing?

In this Comment, Marigold Best and Pamela Hussey argue that our commitment must be to what is life-giving and life-enhancing. Drawing on inspirational examples, from Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador to the ‘unhistoric acts’ of ordinary people around the world, they show that a commitment to life means a commitment to change ... and change can sometimes cost lives. This thought-provoking Comment challenges people to live out this commitment in their own lives – ‘Everybody is called’, they write, to help change things for the better, and make another world possible.