

Transcript of talk by Mark Howard, Chair of Hoylake Vision
St Luke's Church
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A common question I find people asking me is “why do you do it?”

I have thought a lot about this and may be helpful if I try to answer that here.

For about 15 years, from the mid-eighties, I was lucky enough to travel a lot around the world as a photojournalist.

I went to many countries experiencing huge economic challenges as well as ongoing political strife or even armed civil conflict; Bolivia, Haiti, Fiji, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka and, closer to home, Northern Ireland, among others.

In all those places I met genuinely altruistic people from grassroots to senior government levels who were deeply involved in community capacity building, conflict resolution and reconciliation and so much more.

These were ordinary people achieving extraordinary things, often at great risk, and against all the odds.

More than once I heard this little nugget of wisdom: “We have two ears and one mouth; we should communicate in those proportions. That means listening to others more than we speak.”

Everything is possible when meaningful conversation starts to bear fruit.

I'm also reminded of a quote from the Brazilian archbishop Dom Helder Camara:

'Opening ourselves to ideas, including those with which we disagree, this is what the good traveller should do. Happy are they who understand the words: 'If you disagree with me, you have something to give me.' If those who are with you always agree with you before you open your mouth, they are not companions but shadows. When disagreement is not a form of systemic blocking, when it rises from a different vision, it can only enrich us.'

I think most people would agree that diversity of thought, belief and opinion, and the freedom to express those without fear of being libelled, slandered, intimidated or even threatened, is something that free democratic societies should celebrate, not suppress.

But at the same time we can be reluctant or even fearful to express an opinion if it seems to "go against the grain" of what we understand to be "popular opinion".

Alternatively we can be overly ready to express an opinion that we hold to be 'true', without having first opened ourselves to listening to those with whom we may disagree.

We're certainly naturally inclined to surround ourselves with people who agree on most things. We can be under an illusion that our 'tribe' has it all right when others do not.

The reality is, if we're to be honest about community and democracy, we're not "as one" on all matters and that should not be a problem. Because if we can't agree to disagree gracefully, then we do ourselves a great disservice. For me, alarm bells ring loudly when someone says to me "we should all be on the same page".

What is meant by that?

I think it is a sign of a fear of change; and change is synonymous with new ideas that risk threatening the status quo.

If communities are to survive and thrive they need to embrace and celebrate diversity, not cover it up or pretend it's not there.

In my professional life I have seen how fear has deep roots in communities, and how it is in fact this fear which holds communities back and will ultimately threaten community cohesion if it is not addressed.

I'm not talking about ethnic, racial or religious diversity; I'm talking about diversity of thought or opinion on the many issues that matter to us at a global, national and local level.

And while it important to respect tradition and listen to those with valuable experience, that has to be done within an ever-changing context.

That means also listening to new ideas, ideas from people whose lived experience may differ from ours, people who may see things in a different way,

Then we really are as free and democratic as we would claim to be.

So that's why I do this, because making a neighbourhood Development Plan – an NDP – is about listening to as many voices as possible, giving form to those ideas, having a conversation, which means listening again, changing the ideas and the vision in line with that feedback, and finally going through rigorous independent scrutiny and a referendum.

Making an NDP is democracy in action and I urge you all to take part in it.