

A Parable of Possibilities: The Forthspring Story

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Origins

In telling the story of any organisation there is rarely, if ever, one place to start. As good a place as anywhere to start the story of Forthspring is with Sydney Callaghan. Sydney was the minister of Springfield Methodist from 1986 to 1992. By the time of Sydney's arrival on the Springfield Road major changes had taken place in the area. It moved from being a relatively prosperous, settled and mixed community to a site of ongoing violent conflict. A long peace wall divided the Protestant and Catholic communities and the Springfield Road became increasingly Catholic. These changes were a consequence of the violent conflict that had engulfed the North of Ireland and the ongoing trend of decline in traditional manufacturing industry. They impacted negatively on the communities on and around the Springfield Road and on the congregation of Springfield Methodist. A congregation that had been part of the Springfield Road from the 1920's onwards. Faced with the dual challenge of ministering in an increasingly divided society and to a declining congregation, Sydney proposed the bold approach of using the church site to provide much needed community facilities and open the church up to the local communities, including the Catholic community. His preferred option was for the church to share the site with a new local post office. However, this did not happen and the church continued on an increasingly polarized and desolate Springfield Road which more often resembled a war zone than a city throughfare.

Sydney's missionary outlook was fuelled by a lack of tolerance for the divisions and bitterness of the North which, no doubt, owed much to his upbringing in Dublin where he experienced life as part of a Protestant minority, rather than a majority.

On Saturday 8th December 1973 James Gibson, a greengrocer, was shot and killed in his shop on the Stranmillis Road in Belfast. The inquest into his death was told that there was no motive for the attack apart from Mr. Gibson being a Catholic.

Sydney arrived in the shop minutes after the shooting. He was then minister of

Donegall Square Methodist Church and lived in Chloreen Gardens, nearby the Stranmillis Road. Sydney wrote an open letter to the killer which was published as the Belfast Telegraph's editorial on 11th December 1973. He says to the killer: *'I was in Jim Gibson's shop a few minutes after you left. I wish you could have shared what took place so that you might never forget....As I knelt on the floor beside him some of the blood from the wounds you had caused spilt on my hands. There was no difference between his blood and mine – although he was 'one of the other sort'. But then maybe you could have seen a difference for maybe you are the sort of person who says you can recognize the difference between 'our sort and their sort'. As I offered a prayer at the request of his pregnant wife I didn't hear a voice indicating that the God to whom I prayed was any different from the One we both worshipped in different ways Sunday after Sunday.....As we waited in the hospital while the doctors fought for his life I didn't notice any difference in the tears we shed as we prayed for strength and consolation. Neither was it any easier or the grief any the less when we gathered the family together with the mother and broke to them the news that Daddy was dead.'*

Forthspring at its best remains shaped by Sydney's righteous anger and vision – as an organisation it is opposed to separation and segregation, it is committed to ending divisions and supporting people to live at ease with each other and it believes in treating all people with dignity and respect. It strives to be an organisation that is not content to let things be, refuses to accept division and hatred and cherishes the common humanity which binds us all together.