

HILLSBOROUGH AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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In Professor Elaine Graham's book 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place - public theology in a post-secular age' (SCM 2003 978-0-334-04598-4) she writes about the role of the Church of England in the work of the Hillsborough Independent Panel which she describes as 'a vivid example of speaking truth to power'. The Panel was set up in 2010, 21 years after the Hillsborough disaster in which 96 Liverpool football fans were killed. Throughout these two decades the families of the 96 were the ones that had tried to speak truth to power but felt that their appeals and their questions had fallen on deaf ears. Their one consolation was a drama-documentary called "Hillsborough" by Jimmy McGovern and a book written by Professor Phil Scraton called 'Hillsborough: the Truth' (Mainstream 1999 978-1-84596-495-5). Meticulously researched they both challenged the prevailing view that the fans were responsible for their own death and catalogued a series of alleged failures which showed that this was a disaster waiting to happen. Professor Scraton, whose book was itself a cogent speaking of truth to power, was appointed to the Hillsborough Independent Panel where his knowledge and expertise contributed significantly to the delivery of the Panel's terms of reference. Also, appointed to the Panel was Katie Jones who had led the research for the Jimmy McGovern drama documentary. She brought the same energetic intelligence to the Panel's research. She died tragically young in 2015.

The purpose of this essay is to highlight the role of the Church of England in the Hillsborough Independent Panel. There is a danger in doing so as by concentrating on one element it can distort the narrative and obscure the significant parts played by others. Nothing should ever detract from the role of the families and the survivors without whose anger, determination, patience and endurance there would never have been any redress for their 96 loved ones. These virtues (yes, anger is a virtue when it is deployed against injustice) were anointed by a dignity that graced their grief. It is rare for anything to be achieved by a single person performing as a soloist. Even when the dynamics of a culture push an individual to the forefront that narrative is always woven out of the many stories of others who have played their own part. Thus, the work of the Hillsborough Independent Panel was the summation of the efforts of expert colleagues and of a dedicated secretariat who worked together to deliver the Terms of Reference, that had been shaped through consultation with the Families. In so doing it led to the quashing of the verdicts of the original inquests and to the appointment of a new Coroner, Lord Justice Goldring, to oversee new inquests in 2013. After the longest inquest in British Legal history on 26th April 2016 the Jury overturned a verdict of accidental death and unanimously exonerated the fans of any responsibility and by a majority of 7:2 returned a determination of 'unlawful killing'.

What follows in these pages is a reflective narrative about my own roles as Bishop of Liverpool (1998 - 2013) and as Chair of the Hillsborough Independent Panel (2010 - 2012). I offer it as raw material for those who wish to explore and research the role of the Church of England and one of its pastors in contemporary society. It is necessarily selective and descriptive but seasoned with observations where appropriate. Any student of this subject will need and want to supplement it with other accounts. I offer it chronologically.

I became Bishop of Liverpool in 1998. Part of my preparation for coming to the Diocese was reading Blake Morrison's 'As If' (Granta 1997 978-1-84708-417-0) a moving and disturbing account of the trial of the juveniles Robert Thompson and Jon Venables who had murdered the two year old child James Bulger. This and other tragedies such as the Heysel Stadium and Hillsborough made me think that here were a people 'of sorrows and acquainted with grief'. A bishop is a pastor and either through natural disposition or through their training as a priest reaches out to people in their grief. 1999 the following year would see the 10th anniversary of Hillsborough. I was visited by Trevor Hicks and his former wife, Jenni Hicks, (of the Hillsborough Family Support Group) whose two daughters Sarah and Victoria had died at Hillsborough. They asked if I would preside at the Annual Service of Remembrance in the Stadium at Anfield. They shared with me the path they had travelled over the previous ten years and made me aware of the unresolved questions about the disaster, the unrequited grief of the families, the continuing pursuit of truth and justice and the open wound in the City that had yet to heal.

I readily agreed for several reasons. As a pastor I was affected by their grief. My predecessor the Rt Rev David Sheppard and his Catholic colleague the Most Rev Derek Worlock had presided at memorial services in both the Church of England and Catholic Cathedrals and accepting their invitation seemed a proper continuity. My reason for doing so was built on how the Church of England understands its own role as the Church for England. The Kingdom of God is not just the Church but the World. Nothing not even human indifference diminishes the sovereignty of God and His rule over the earth. God came for the whole world whether we believe in him or not. Or go to Church or not. When a person calls on a Vicar or a Bishop they are not asked whether they are a member of the church or even whether they come to church. The only question is 'where do you live'. If you are in the parish or the Diocese the Vicar and the Bishop are there to serve you in that corner of God's earth for which they are pastorally responsible. It is rather quaintly known as 'the cure of souls'.

Not everybody understands this, and not everybody in the Church either understands or appreciates this dimension of mission. Church members can sometimes complain that they do not see enough of their Vicar or their Bishop and feel that they have a prior claim on their ministry. But a Church that is Established and integrated into the fabric of the nation both locally and nationally has a particular responsibility to serve the whole community and not just the congregation.

I attended and took part in the 10th, 15th and 20th anniversaries of Hillsborough at Anfield. The Anniversary falls into two parts. The first is a Service of Remembrance with the reading of the names of the 96, prayers and the singing of 'Abide with Me'; the second part has the shape of a Rally when the leaders of the Hillsborough Family Support Group and other invited guests address the gathering on the struggle for truth, justice and accountability for the 96.

The 20th anniversary was greatly anticipated. Over 30,000 people came to Anfield. There had been anniversaries for other major disasters such as the Bradford Stadium, Lockerbie, Kings Cross, Piper Alpha, 7/7 and the Marchioness. Yet none has attracted such vast numbers. It says something about the density of the solidarity on Merseyside and the fact that no family in the region was left unaffected by the 96 deaths. It says something too about how football binds people together in passionate loyalties and in the hero worshipping of both players and managers. Raymond Boyle in his chapter on religion in his thesis 'Football and Cultural Identity in Glasgow and Liverpool' (University of Stirling 1995) shows how 'the continued interest and popularity of football in these cities is An indicator of the importance of ritual and spectacle in urban life.' With its power to bind people together football has a religious dimension. At the Hillsborough anniversaries the religion of prayer and hymns blends with the religion of player and chants. 'You'll never Walk Alone' is both a spiritual and a sporting anthem. But if sport has the religious effect of binding people together it also has the religious force of dividing people and appealing to different tribal loyalties.

I presided at the 20th anniversary jointly with the Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Liverpool, Tom Williams. His ministry had been as a parish priest in Liverpool whose population is predominantly Catholic. He knew and was known by the people. As we came out on to the pitch I said to him that I hoped that during the 'Rally' nobody would mention the name of the Prime Minister. Gordon Brown had said recently that there would never be another enquiry into Hillsborough and this had gone down badly with both the families and the fans. I said that he would be boo-ed. Tom was not so sure. I deferred to his knowledge of the people. In the event, Andy Burnham, the Secretary of State for the Department of Culture Media and Sport, was invited to the podium. He started to read a speech and mentioned the Prime Minister. A lone voice from the stands interrupted him with a shout "Justice". Then the whole crowd got to their feet and joined the chant, "Justice for the 96!" If you had rehearsed the crowd they could not have chanted in greater unison. I was sat at the front facing the stands and vividly remember feeling the force of the protest. The crowd was emotional and angry. Andy Burnham was deeply affected by the reaction of the people and on his return to London persuaded the Prime Minister to respond positively to the call that there should be a fresh examination into the issues surrounding the Hillsborough disaster. Local MPs such as Maria Eagle and Derek Twigg together with Andy Burnham and others such as Lord Wills who was also a Minister would be able to testify to the difficult discussions that went on within Government and to the political dynamics that eventually led to the decision by the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, to announce the setting up of the Hillsborough Independent Panel.

Senior Civil Servants such as Ken Sutton who headed up the Panel's Secretariat were intimately involved in devising a unique instrument of investigation called 'The Hillsborough Independent Panel'. I was initially approached by Ken Sutton and along with other City leaders was consulted about suitable names, including Senior Church figures that the Home Secretary might approach to serve on the Panel. Liverpool had a religious heritage which with its two Cathedrals dominating the sky line is more pronounced than in most English cities. Ken visited me three times and on the second he asked if I would be prepared to serve on the Panel myself, on the third he asked what my response would be if the Home Secretary were minded to invite me to Chair the Panel. I said that I would need to consult my colleagues as I would have to shed some responsibilities which would have an impact on them. And that I would want to consult the Archbishops. I assessed the opportunity pastorally and personally. I knew that for the City, for the families, the survivors and the fans the setting up of a Panel would bring a degree of hope in their struggle to hold people accountable for the tragic events of Hillsborough. As a pastor the invitation appealed to my sense of calling to help those who for two decades had felt that they were victims of an injustice. Further down the line I came to realise more fully that this was a significant opportunity for the Church.

In the Hillsborough narrative the families of the 96 felt let down by the police, the press, politicians, parliament and even the judiciary. So where does a community turn when it has lost trust in its primary Institutions? It could be said that the Church should be included amongst those who let down the families of the 96. In the days immediately following the disaster the vast majority of Liverpoolians turned, as they always have at times of crisis, to the Church to provide a focus for their grief and despair. And the Church and its Leaders responded sensitively and magnificently. Chaplains worked ceaselessly at the hospitals in Sheffield, local clergy sought to bring comfort at each of the funerals, ecumenical church leaders made themselves available to families and the memorial services in the two Cathedrals provided solace for Liverpool and across the nation. The Ecumenical Church Leaders led the service at Anfield on the first anniversary on Easter Day 1990. However, many in the Church in the following years came to accept the stories that were told in newspaper, inquest and Enquiry and it should not be a surprise that the Hillsborough Family Support Group did not see in the Church and its Leaders a natural ally in their campaign for truth and justice.

The repeated requests of the families was for truth and justice. These are pillars of the Christian faith. But the Church like all Institutions has been blighted by individuals within it who have betrayed those values of its founder. Nevertheless in Liverpool in spite of its own share in these betrayals the Church has a reputation for championing the dispossessed. When it was mooted to the families that my name was in the frame as Chair the reaction was nevertheless mixed. There were other candidates who were more familiar with the Hillsborough narrative whom some of the families favoured. The decision to appoint me as "Chair" of the Panel was, I am told, a recognition that I was uniquely well placed to combine forensic and objective skills with a pastoral sensitivity. Both would be needed if the Panel process was to escape from the previous patronizing approach of those in authority, including some of the earlier attempts to review what had happened.

When it was announced on 16th December 2009 that I was to Chair the Hillsborough Independent Panel there were questions about why it was not to be a Judge-led Enquiry. The Terms of Reference were set out:

The Hillsborough disaster was a personal tragedy for hundreds of people and an event of major national and international significance in the subsequent minimisation of safety risks at football matches and similar sporting events.

As such, Government and local agencies in South Yorkshire are committed to maximum possible public disclosure of governmental and other agency documentation on events surrounding the disaster.

The Hillsborough Independent Panel has been appointed to oversee this disclosure process, consulting with the Hillsborough families and statutory agencies where necessary, and to carry out the associated activities outlined in the panel remit below.

Exceptionally, the independent panel will be provided with access to Hillsborough documentation held by Government and local agencies relevant to events surrounding the tragedy in advance of the normal 30-year point for public disclosure.

The fundamental principles will be full disclosure of documentation and no redaction of content, except in the limited legal and other circumstances outlined in a disclosure protocol.

The remit of the independent panel will be to:

- oversee full public disclosure of relevant government and local information within the limited constraints set out in the accompanying protocol;
- consult with the Hillsborough families to ensure that the views of those most affected by the tragedy are taken into account;
- manage the process of public disclosure, ensuring that it takes place initially to the Hillsborough families and other involved parties, in an agreed manner and within a reasonable timescale, before information is made more widely available;
- in line with established practice, work with the Keeper of Public Records in preparing options for establishing an archive of Hillsborough documentation, including a catalogue of all central Governmental and local public agency information and a commentary on any information withheld for the benefit of the families or on legal or other grounds;
- produce a report explaining the work of the panel. The panel's report will also illustrate how the information disclosed adds to public understanding of the tragedy and its aftermath.

Although there was never any explicit specification that the Chair should have pastoral skills, I found that from the start I was drawing upon my pastoral experience. Ken and I debated how the Panel would engage first with the families. He and his team had worked extensively with them in the consultation process leading up to the announcement. We decided that the Panel would meet each other for the first time on the very day that we met with the families for the first time. We had barely seen the colour of each other's eyes before we met the three family groups. The distrust of those in authority was endemic. We had to demonstrate to them that the Panel had not begun to form a view about anything or anyone before meeting them and listening to their concerns. We began each of the three meetings by keeping a time of silence and at the outset of the meeting with the Hillsborough Family Support Group, naming the 96 loved ones

Jon-Paul Gilhooley

Philip Hammond

Thomas Anthony Howard

Paul Brian Murray

Lee Nicol

Adam Edward Spearritt

Peter Andrew Harrison

Victoria Jane Hicks

Philip John Steele

Kevin Tyrrell

Kevin Daniel Williams

Kester Roger Marcus Ball

Nicholas Michael Hewitt

Martin Kevin Traynor

Simon Bell

Carl Darren Hewitt

Keith McGrath

Stephen Francis O'Neill

Steven Joseph Robinson

Henry Charles Rogers

Stuart Paul William Thompson

Graham John Wright

James Gary Aspinall

Carl Brown

Paul Clark

Christopher Barry Devonside

Gary Philip Jones

Carl David Lewis

John McBrien
Jonathon Owens
Colin Mark Ashcroft
Paul William Carlile
Gary Christopher Church
James Philip Delaney
Sarah Louise Hicks
David William Mather
Colin Wafer
Ian David Whelan
Stephen Paul Copoc
Ian Thomas Glover
Gordon Rodney Horn
Paul David Brady
Thomas Steven Fox
Marian Hazel McCabe
Joseph Daniel McCarthy
Peter McDonnell
Carl William Rimmer
Peter Francis Tootle
David John Benson
David William Birtle
Tony Bland
Gary Collins
Tracey Elizabeth Cox
William Roy Pemberton
Colin Andrew Hugh William Sefton
David Leonard Thomas
Peter Andrew Burkett
Derrick George Godwin
Graham John Roberts
David Steven Brown
Richard Jones
Barry Sidney Bennett
Andrew Mark Brookes
Paul Anthony Hewitson
Paula Ann Smith
Christopher James Traynor

Barry Glover
Gary Harrison
Christine Anne Jones
Nicholas Peter Joynes
Francis Joseph McAllister
Alan McGlone
Joseph Clark
Christopher Edwards
James Robert Hennessy
Alan Johnston
Anthony Peter Kelly
Martin Kenneth Wild
Peter Reuben Thompson
Stephen Francis Harrison
Eric Hankin
Vincent Michael Fitzsimmons
Roy Harry Hamilton
Patrick John Thompson
Michael David Kelly
Brian Christopher Mathews
David George Rimmer
Inger Shah
David Hawley
Thomas Howard
Arthur Horrocks
Eric George Hughes
Henry Thomas Burke
Raymond Thomas Chapman
John Alfred Anderson
Gerard Bernard Patrick Baron

It was a pastoral acknowledgement of the families' grief individually and collectively and a signal to them that the Panel would exercise its forensic responsibilities sensitively.

It surprised some Panel members and those unfamiliar with the history of the struggle for accountability that we had to engage with three separate groups. Hillsborough Family Support Group, Hillsborough Justice Campaign and Hope for Hillsborough. Whenever that point was expressed and whenever tensions emerged between the three I would often offer a pastoral observation: ‘many marriages do not survive grief so why should friendships, especially those forged through grief’. It is a feature of other disasters that different groups emerge after the tragedy with similar tensions. Anger is one of the symptoms of grief. Flashes of misplaced anger can be dumped on relatively minor disagreements which escalate out of all proportion and aggravate division. Whenever tensions between the family groups impacted on the Panel our response was informed by this pastoral understanding. Our Terms of Reference required us to keep all the families and their concerns at the centre of our work. We had regular meetings with them throughout. I chaired a sub group of the Panel which had particular responsibility for family liaison. I sensed something of a breakthrough in our relationship when family members began to volunteer ‘this is the first time we’ve really been listened to’, ‘this is the first time that anyone has ever taken us seriously’.

The skill of listening was implicit in the Terms of Reference. After over 20 years of trying to speak truth to power the families had developed a sixth sense about who was really listening to them. Attentive listening is a pastoral attribute and in retrospect I see that it was my responsibility as the Chair to encourage the Panel to engage in such attentive listening first to the questions that the families raised and secondly to the answers that came out of the newly accessed documents.

Often those aggrieved who have suffered a miscarriage of justice call for a judge-led enquiry. Understandably in a judicial system which has been guilty of failure you want that same system to undo the injustice. But judicial enquiries necessarily involve interviewing people under oath which has implications on cost and time as suspects and witnesses engage lawyers. Some enquiries have taken over ten years and cost in the region of £200 million. From the point of view of the aggrieved justice is further delayed and denied. And although set up to satisfy their longing for justice the families often feel alienated by the process. A Panel operates differently and herein lies its uniqueness. The two that I have Chaired (Hillsborough Independent Panel and Gosport Memorial Hospital Independent Panel) include in their Terms of Reference the requirement to consult with the aggrieved from the outset. Indeed, early consultation shapes the Terms of Reference. Once the Terms have been agreed the Panel members are recruited on the grounds of appointing experts with the appropriate expertise to deliver the terms of reference. The Panel’s task is to listen to the families and interrogate the documents in the light of their questions. The information forthcoming from the disclosed documents is then scrutinised, analysed and interpreted by the Panel’s experts who produce a Report. The centrality of the families’ interests is further assured by the Families First principle where the Report is shown first to them before being laid before Parliament. The fact that the families have little trust in authority makes them fearful that those with power, especially those who might be indicted, might try to alter the Report before publication.

Shortly after the Hillsborough Independent Report was published I did an interview for the BBC on Radio 4's Sunday Programme (a weekly religious news and magazine Programme) and sought to explain the process. I received a letter from the Oxford theologian Professor Chris Rowlands, Canon Theologian of Liverpool Cathedral, who commented on and commended the principle of putting the families at the centre of the search for truth and justice. He saw it as an example of liberation theology whereby putting the victims of injustice at the heart of the process of investigation was in itself the beginning of their liberation.

Part way through our work when we had accessed some 400,000 documents and had begun to analyse them we were scratching our heads wondering how these things could have come about. We coined the phrase which never appeared in the final Report that has been on our lips ever since: 'this is the patronising disposition of unaccountable power'. When people in authority exercise power with little or no accountability they do so often benignly. But sometimes less so. It is the lack of accountability that can make their actions patronising, making decisions about other people and not listening attentively to their needs and concerns. Justice requires us to elevate the object of the verb to parity with the subject of the verb.

In the opening of the Preface to the Hillsborough Report I quoted from Lactantius and his Institutes (a 4th century Christian apologist from North Africa): (2003 Liverpool University Press ISBN 13978-0-85323-988-8 Lactantius Institute. © Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey) to which Professor Rowlands had drawn my attention. 'The whole point of justice consists precisely in providing for others through humanity what we provide for our family through affection'.

A good parent elevates the needs of their offspring to at least the level of their own or higher. Therein lies justice within the family or household. Thus a just society is one in which those who have power are at pains to elevate the needs of the powerless to the same level as their own.

For the three months leading up to the publication of the Report I read every day Luke Chapter 18 1 - 8 and the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge.

"Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' "

Hitherto I had always thought that this was a Parable about prayer. But there are several more points to this parable. One of them is about justice denied. Justice is mentioned five times. Jesus told it into a world where there was so much injustice that he knew people would be sorely tempted to give up believing in a God of justice and throw in the towel. Like the widow pleading with the judge who did not give a damn about God or other people to grant her justice, the women left bereft by the death of the 96 for two decades had begged for people to listen to their pleas and grant them justice for their loved ones.

As we finalised the Panel's Report we debated long and hard about the most appropriate place to publish it in the presence of the families. We wanted a building in which we could protect the privacy of the families and allow them to absorb the Report's conclusions with dignity. It needed also to be a place where the families could remember their loved ones with reverence. We anticipated a massive media interest and knew that the building would need to be versatile enough to allow us to corral the media away from the families until they were ready to meet them. Various buildings were considered - the new museum, the Town Hall, St George's Hall.

After consultation with the families and detailed discussion the Panel unanimously settled on the Church of England Cathedral. It fulfilled all the criteria. There was also a consonance with my own position both as Chair of the Panel and Bishop of Liverpool. For the Cathedral is the seat of the Bishop and the public symbol of his ministry. Furthermore, given the Book of Remembrance for the 96 held in the Cathedral and its history in hosting a memorial service for those killed and affected by the tragedy there was a strong sense of continuity within the Hillsborough narrative. In my opinion the Museum would have given out the message that the Report was about history, whereas the Panel already knew that its message would also be about the present and the future. In the event, St George's Hall became the venue for the Vigil organized by the City Council for the families, survivors and fans immediately at the end of the day after the Panel had reported.

Many people commented on the media pictures of the Cathedral as the families entered and left and at the press conference held in the Lady Chapel. The scale of the building seemed commensurate with the weight of expectation. The building is also known around the world and given the international renown of Liverpool Football Club seemed a fitting icon for its global reach.

The sacredness of the space seemed appropriate to the sanctity of the 96 lives lost in tragedy. It seemed to me that the religious character of the building gave the day a dimension that transcended the mundane in which the police, the press, politicians, parliament, the judiciary and even the world of football had been found wanting. And elevated the proceedings to the eternal values of truth and justice for which the families had longed for decades. The newly appointed Dean of Liverpool, Pete Wilcox, observing the families listening to the Panel members summarising the Report felt it was like 'looking through a window on to heaven'. Here in the House of God, I felt, truth was calling out to justice.

The day began with the Panel addressing the families and summarising their Report. When the Panel's medical expert, Dr Bill Kirkup, reported that the postmortem documents indicated that many of the 96 might have lived had there been an emergency response appropriate to the disaster, three people fainted.

After the briefing we gave each of the families' representatives a copy of the Report. We were fulfilling the promise that they would be the first to read it in its entirety. Because of the history of distrust we had assured the families that the final Report would not be altered by those in authority. Not even the Prime Minister, whom I had met the day before, had seen it beforehand. At my meeting with David Cameron where I had outlined the work of the Panel I was impressed by his grasp of the detail and by his coining of the phrase that the families had suffered 'a double injustice' - the injustice of the tragedy and the injustice of the subsequent failures to address their concerns down the decades. It was a phrase that the Prime Minister went on to use in the House of Commons on 12th September which we were able to relay live to the families in the Cathedral. I sat with them as they listened both to the Prime Minister and to the House of Commons debate that followed. Both exceeded the families' expectations. After the two Press conferences - firstly by the Panel and secondly by the families - and an opportunity for the families to question the Panel about the Report, I thanked them all for their remarkable forbearance during a gruelling and harrowing day. I then added that I would now go to the Chapter House at the other end of the Cathedral which had been turned into a Chapel for the families to use throughout the day, and remember with reverence the 96 and pray that truth and justice would prevail in God's world. At the conclusion of the Panel's work this was the first time I mentioned God publicly. Over the years some families had shared with me privately their difficulty in believing in God given the tragedy they had suffered. Yet on this day I found that during the hour I spent in the Chapter House nearly all the families followed voluntarily to kneel or to stand or to look upon the Book of Remembrance. There was a solace in the silence. Kneeling in the Bishop's Stall I found my heart both heavy and light. Heavy with a renewed sense of the families' reawakened grief; light with the hope that at last truth, unshackled, was calling out to justice in the House of God, the Cathedral.

On a personal note when people asked me how I felt during it all I compared it with taking the funeral of a member of your own family when you tighten the valve on your own emotion. Some days later when the pressure had lowered I found myself unexpectedly in tears. It was a moment of catharsis for me yet incomparable with the emotions felt by the families for whom the 12th September 2012 was a bitter-sweet day. Sweet for it was at last a vindication of their search for truth but bitter for it was yet another re-living of their loss and grief. My own reaction expressed both the forensic and pastoral roles I had inhabited as Chair of the Panel. The conclusion of the Panel's work helped me and my wife to see it as the climax of my ministry as Bishop of Liverpool and to put in place plans for my retirement the following year on reaching my 65th birthday.

The Attorney General, Dominic Grieve MP, read the Panel's report and made an application to the High Court to re-consider the verdicts of the original inquests. The Court quashed the verdicts and ordered new inquests.

To my surprise a new role began to emerge for me. The day before the Panel reported I had met with the Prime Minister in Downing Street to appraise him of the Panel's work. Then two days after the publication he rang me to enquire after the families and to seek my advice on how the Government could ensure that the Panel's work could be taken forward in the journey from truth to justice. Some months later the Prime Minister visited Liverpool on political business and expressed a wish to meet with the families face to face but away from the media glare. I was asked to host and to Chair the meeting at Bishop's Lodge. The families had various concerns about different aspects of the investigations which they shared frankly with me and robustly with the Prime Minister. What was evident was that although the families were encouraged by the fact that new inquests had been instigated they still understandably had no confidence in the Authorities to deliver justice.

There were extensive discussions between the families' legal representatives and the Hillsborough team at the Home Office who liaised with the three investigative authorities - the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) and Operation Resolve, the police investigation in part supporting the Coroner's investigative team. Through an iterative process in which I myself was involved the different parties coalesced around the concept of establishing a Forum in which the families could engage with the various investigations. The terms of reference which were agreed by all parties including and especially the families were as follows:

- To provide clarification for the families and survivors on areas of investigation by the IPCC, Operation Resolve and (as necessary) any prosecutorial matters by the CPS.
- To facilitate an exchange between families, survivors and the investigation teams regarding the progress of investigations
- To facilitate understanding of the processes and add to public confidence in the investigation.
- To identify and quickly address issues raised
- To ensure that the group has the opportunity to shape the agenda of these meetings as well as the IPCC, the CPS and Operation Resolve.

It was proposed by the Home Office team and concurred with by the investigative agencies and agreed by the families that I should be the Chair of the Forum. The families had confidence in me having chaired the Panel that had delivered the Report. I accepted the invitation of the Home Secretary to be her Adviser on Hillsborough and in that capacity accepted the invitation to Chair the Forum.

This summary does not do justice to the complexity of the negotiations or to the tension that frequently erupted. The purpose of this essay is to examine the role of the Church. The significant point is that this work continued after I had vacated my See as Bishop of Liverpool which I have done with the blessing of my successor, the Rt Revd Paul Bayes. Chairing the Forum required the trust of the families. That was a 'sine quo non' especially given the history of distrust in authority. But the Chair also needed to have the confidence of the CPS, the IPCC and Operation resolve. Clearly my own involvement in the Panel brought its own commendation but it was I believe also built on a recognition of the way a Bishop occupies a civic role not just as a leader of the Church but as a leader in the wider community.

The meetings of the Forum have allowed the families to express emotions that they were not allowed to show in Court. They have given them the opportunity to articulate their concerns. I cannot hide my admiration for the families who for a quarter of century have fought for truth, accountability and justice. Through adversity and their own endeavours many of them have become expert in the Law. Yet in spite of living for years with the issues and knowing the legal arguments inside out I was able to observe how dis-empowered they often became in the presence of authority. Chairing the Forum I often found myself articulating questions on the families' behalf and pressing the professionals to clarify or to address the real questions the families were asking. The various authorities were at pains to make themselves available and accessible to the families within the constraints of the Coroner's Court. But the truth is that those of us with power seldom fully appreciate the dis-empowering power of our own authority to those who are without it. The fact that the Church could have a role as an advocate for the powerless, a voice for those who felt strangled by the weight of the institutions who had failed them in the past has made me re-evaluate the role of the Church in the contemporary world.

The Church can be tempted to think that its mission could be advanced by short term initiatives that are Smart - specific, measurable, achievable, realistic targets. But the Gospel is about relationship - human and Divine. Relationships do not have short cuts. They take years to build. Of course, there can be epiphanies in both human and divine relationships when in an instant you know the other as intimately as you are known. But mostly a relationship is grown through shared experiences, reciprocal openness and mutual trust. In a human relationship it may take years before one may talk with another about God in a way that respects their history and their integrity.

I conclude with an episode from my relationship with Margaret Aspinall (Chair of the HFSG) whom I have asked permission to share this story.

Five years after I began my work with the Hillsborough Independent Panel and 16 years after I became Bishop of Liverpool I was in a small meeting with Margaret on the second anniversary of the publication of the Hillsborough report, 12th September 2014. We were reminiscing about the day of the Report. Margaret shared with me how she would never forget the three words with which I had opened the proceedings. “You said ‘I know you are all wondering if we have found anything that tells a different story.’ Then you said ‘And we have.’ And with those three words, Bishop, our world changed forever.”

For me the Gospel of the Christian faith is about the world changing, about a new world coming, a world of truth and justice. I then told Margaret that every day for three months I had read a passage from the New Testament. I reached for my hand-sized Bible in my brief case, laid it between us and read the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge from Luke 18. Although I was reading it I heard it as I had never heard it before. It was as if it were being told for the first time to and about Margaret and her plea and that of all the families of the 96, ‘grant me justice’.

Only Margaret can say what that Parable means to her. For me it was the glass through which to see the Kingdom of God. In a world where justice is so often delayed or denied here’s a story of hope that God is coming with a whistle to his lips ready to call out the injustices. For the families the whistle finally blew on 26th April 2016 when 27 years later the Jury returned its determination of ‘Unlawful Killing’. The following day in Parliament the Home Secretary announced to the House of Commons that she was asking me continue to work with the families to collate their experiences and to bring a Report before Parliament so that we might learn from all that they have endured.

It strikes me that fairness on the playing field without which competitive sport loses all its meaning is but a microcosm of life itself which becomes meaningless if ultimately there is no justice.

The Right Reverend James Jones

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6,800 words

