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**Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow**

## **To combat crime we must challenge prejudice**

Hate crime is nothing new. Ancient Chinese texts recorded that General Ran Min ordered the extermination of all people with racial characteristics of high-bridged nose and bushy beard during the fourth century AD - and reportedly 200,000 were massacred. In the 13th century Jews were removed from many countries across Europe on the basis that they murdered Jesus Christ. In the last century, Nazi's tried to wipe out entire groups of people based on their identities – Jews, Communists, members of the Gay community, those with mental impairments. Closer to our own time, we have only to think of Pol Pot's killing fields, Rwanda and former Yugoslavia to remind ourselves of the depravity which can be demonstrated and sadly "justified" just because one group hates another group.



Amongst the long list of things on which I am sure we can agree - hate crime is unacceptable. It is an attack on a person's humanity, their identity as a human being, and so must be challenged. Hate crime takes many forms. Incidents may involve physical assault, destruction of property, bullying, harassment, verbal abuse or insults, or offensive graffiti or letters (hate mail) and, increasingly, cyber assaults. In a recent life and times survey, 42% of pupils stated that they had witnessed racial harassment while at school. Hate motivated incidents are significant in number in N Ireland, with the majority still linked to sectarianism where 4 people every day reported such an incident during 2013/14. Almost 1,000 race incidents were recorded in 2013/4 (3 a day) and almost 700 race hate crimes recorded (2 a day).

Hate crime doesn't only affect the victim, it causes fear amongst the community from which they come from and as a result, it diminishes us. At a wider level, it damages the quality of life here in Northern Ireland, it erodes our international reputation and causes untold damage to our economy. Of course it needs a robust response from the policing and justice system, but it doesn't, and can't stop there.

So, given that dealing with hate crime itself is a matter for police and the courts, that's where it should sit in terms of criminal justice. However, trying to understand why it

happens, to inform and support society's efforts to bear down on hate crime – that's everyone's business. There is an existential element to all this - how often do we ask ourselves the question "do I have negative attitudes towards others just because of who they are?"

The most recent Equality Commission "Do You Mean Me" survey highlighted the fact that 30% of all respondents felt that some forms of prejudice are acceptable - equivalent surveys in other parts of the UK show similar results. This is a fascinating finding and I am interested in drilling down into it.

It could mean that we feel potentially threatened by particular groups and, therefore, more defensive. It is also true that while some attitudes have hardened, particularly in relation to those most marginalized and vulnerable – Travellers, those with mental ill-health, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people – we should also recognize that many people, in most cases the majority, did not express any negative attitudes towards these groups.

Although all expressions of prejudice do not necessarily turn into unlawful behaviour, negative attitudes do, too frequently, lead to discriminatory behaviour.

Changing behaviours, so that unlawful discrimination is avoided, is a core challenge for all of us. Achieving change in our society will take work from everyone – the Executive, government departments, employers, service providers, representative groups, the media and ourselves as individuals.

As a mature society we need to be able to name prejudice and discrimination when we find it, without the fear of intimidation or reprisal. Together we need to help raise awareness of the protections available to victims of prejudicial attitudes and behaviours and help them report those incidents as appropriate. We should all actively reject the prejudice and hostility that can lead to discrimination, harassment and physical attacks. Combating negative attitudes requires a collective response – and the responsibility is on all of us to act within our own spheres of influence.

The question remains....do we take this seriously as we try and build a shared and better future together? It needs a response from all of society – from all of us. We cannot enjoy the luxury of the bystander. As we have been reminded evil happens when good people do nothing.

*First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a communist;  
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a socialist;  
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a trade unionist;  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--  
because I was not a Jew;  
Then they came for me--  
and there was no one left to speak out for me*    **Rev Martin Niemoller**



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog *"Here's the thing..."*

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