

Speech by John Hume MP MEP
Concern Universal 25th Anniversary Seminar
Saturday 15th June, 2002

I am delighted to take part in this very timely seminar and to offer my thoughts about the future direction for the Concern Universal organisation as you meet to celebrate your twenty-fifth anniversary.

In general terms, this is a time to reflect on the work you have carried out over the past quarter of a century. What started in 1976 has become an extremely effective international organisation dedicated to tackling poverty, injustice and human rights abuses around the world. The track record of achievement held by Concern Universal speaks volumes for the hard work and commitment of its membership.

This is a time as well for identifying new challenges and new directions. If there is one certainty in this world, it is that there will always be injustice, there will always be wrongdoing. And in that light, there will always be a need for organisations like yours and others to have the courage and the compassion to take a stand for the values of equality, justice and respect for human dignity.

I want to make a very specific point today. I want to speak about the importance of youth in addressing the concerns of the world. When we watch television or listen to the radio, we can see and hear day in day out the savage impact of war, of violence, of poverty, of exclusion. We could easily be put off acting to address these wrongs, thinking there is nothing we can do. But then, from time to time, we see examples of courage and conviction that make us realise that not only is it right to take a stand, but to do so can make a real and lasting difference.

Take, for example, the situation in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. The civil rights movement of which I was a member was born of the fundamental injustices

in our society. It was born to tackle head on the injustice discrimination, of exclusion and of sectarianism prevalent in our society. Inspired by the American dream of Martin Luther King, we stood up for the values we believed in and we made a real and lasting impact.

More than thirty years later, the fundamental nature of society in Ireland, North and South, has changed for the better through the Good Friday Agreement, though we are ever conscious of the residual hatred and bigotry that resides in the hearts of a minority of people. The road to peace and stability is long and testing, but that should only make us more determined, not deterred.

Just as we in Northern Ireland, in spite of a prevailing atmosphere of political sterility and awful violence, managed to map out a better way forward, so too can the same be achieved in other areas. We have a valuable lesson to give to the world – conflicts can be ended, political stability can be achieved, equality and justice can prevail.

Martin Luther King's example taught me of the value of non-violence; of the potency of peaceful protest; of the power of a dignified and determined campaign for a better world for all people.

Dr King's message was quite profound in its simplicity. He believed that each and every human being should be guaranteed equality, justice and respect, no matter their class, colour, creed or continent.

I passionately share that belief. I know you do too. I believe that in the diversity of all people lies the fundamental key to our unity. We are all different, each and every one of us. But those differences are not – nor should they ever be considered – a source of weakness or a reason for deepening divisions. And they should certainly

never be used to justify the use of violence. Difference is a positive and healthy component of any outward-looking, forward-thinking and modern society.

Six months before his assassination, Martin Luther King addressed a group of young Americans with a message that I believe is as powerful and as relevant for you today as it was for that group in Philadelphia then. He said, and I quote:

"I want to suggest some of the things that should be in your life's blueprint. Number one should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth, your own somebodiness. Don't allow anybody to make you feel that you're nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth. And always feel that your life has ultimate significance... Be the best of whatever you are."

This is the unique blend of challenge and opportunity that lies ahead for each of you. This is my message to the young people, not just those who are here today, but to all young people. Take a stand for the causes you believe in and you will make a real and lasting difference.

Congratulations to Concern Universal at this time of celebration and renewal. I will you all the very best over the next twenty-five years as you continue to work tirelessly to improve the lives of so many people in so many parts of the world.