

Beyond *Sectarianism*?

The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process

Vol 1


Learning From Peace II







Community Relations Council

This publication is the first in a six volume series of reflections on the contribution of the EU Peace II Programme to the development of Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. Each volume in the series will focus on a specific aspect of Peacebuilding.

 All publications in this series have three sections. In the first section (colour coded Yellow) you will find the thoughts of a selection of the guest speakers at a seminar which was held to discuss the theme. In the second section (colour coded Blue) there is a record of the ideas and issues that emerged during the seminar. The third section (colour coded Purple) is devoted to an overall reflection on the theme under consideration.







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Designed and published by Profile Publishing
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Introduction



Jim Dennison
Director – European Programme

Last year, CRC, as part of a project sponsored by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), embarked upon the delivery of an ambitious project to organise and co-ordinate a series of events addressing critical issues within and beyond the current EU PEACE II Programme. Entitled

“Learning from Peace II”, the project’s aim is to examine aspects of the impact and implementation of peace-building work in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland and to harness and disseminate the lessons learned.

All good programmes and projects should quantitatively and qualitatively assess the inputs and outcomes of activities undertaken. Although funding bodies and funded projects gather information on the participation and impact of work at particular levels, there has not (as yet) been a co-ordinated attempt to gauge the impact the entire Programme is making across the range of constituent sectors. This project attempts to apply this co-ordinated approach by organising a series of events which will ultimately evaluate and assess the impact of the Programme. It is also intended that it will provide feedback on performance, suggest areas for further engagement and development, challenge assumptions about peace-building work, as well as help identify weaknesses, gaps and intended or unexpected successes. The project will not focus on the administration of the PEACE II Programme, but rather on the impact it is making on peace-building and reconciliation work.

The first event in the Series, ‘Beyond Sectarianism? The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process’ – was held on Friday 15 October 2004 in Portadown. This is the publication relating to that event. It is not a written regurgitation of the day, rather a document encompassing key inputs, underlying themes, salient issues, topics for debate and the opportunity for contributors to more fully expand upon the Churches involvement in reconciliation work over a number of years. This will form the first of six volumes and will contribute towards the publication of overall findings across a range of themes. I hope you find it both challenging and thought provoking.

I’d like to take this opportunity to thank all of those involved in the staging of this event: Fr. Tim Bartlett for his keynote speech and Dr. David Stevens for his keynote speech and written submission; Dr. Geraldine Smyth for chairing the panel debate and for her written contribution; Diane Holt from The Link Family and Resource Centre, Newtownards and Fr. Sean Nolan (speaking about the Aughnacloy and Truagh Schools Project) for their case study presentations; David Porter from the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland for his presentation and facilitated session on the findings of EU Programme-funded research entitled (‘The Future of the Church in the Public Square’); the Advisory Panel (Eileen Gallagher, Johnston McMaster, David Porter, Doug Baker, Duncan Morrow, Jacqueline Irwin) for their advice and guidance; Sean Pettis, Events and Seminars Manager for his untiring work and all of CRC’s EU Programme Team for ongoing help and assistance.

Foreword



Duncan Morrow
Chief Executive Officer of CRC

The Churches and Peace Building in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties: Learning from PEACE II.

What do churches have to do with peace in Ireland?

In any project about peace-building in Northern Ireland, the question of the actions and attitudes of faith communities, and in particular the dominant Christian churches, is immediately to the fore. In Western European terms, Northern Ireland remains a notably church-going society. While there is no doubt that attendance has declined from the near universal attachment to church which pertained in the 1950s, (especially amongst the young), the cultural, social and spiritual life of the north of Ireland cannot be understood without proper references to churches. This inter-twinedness of church and community is, of course, not unique to Ireland but part of our wider European cultural inheritance. More specific to Northern Ireland, however, is the fact that religious difference defined the Northern Irish conflict in the everyday language of the street. Religious denomination is and can be used as a proxy for political identification: in the language of the media, where Protestant and Catholic

labels have been attached to murdered and murderers on a daily basis for generations; and in the language of international relations. Historically in Ireland, it is impossible to finally separate the political from the theological, even if they are not absolutely or finally identical. And this inter-twinedness of faith and politics with Britishness and Irishness must undoubtedly allow us to ask in what direction the churches intend to point and lead in the context of moves towards peace and disarmament? Finally, the actions of churches in Ireland are important to their brothers and sisters outside. The wider commitment of Christianity to peace and justice is under scrutiny to an unusual extent. What the churches do in Ireland, for better or for worse, also defines the story of global faith when it finds itself with a legacy of violence, hostility and injustice. So whether one approaches learning about conflict and steps beyond conflict in Northern Ireland as a citizen, a sociologist, a politician, a cleric, a journalist or a soldier, what churches do, did and will do to make peace matters.

The PEACE II programme and the wider peace process

The PEACE II Programme, like its predecessor PEACE I, presupposed that a spiritual shift in Northern Ireland had already been made: a shift from conflict to a decisive and widespread willingness to seek and make peace on the basis of values and laws which reflect the democratic aspirations of Western Europe. Indeed, to some degree or other, PEACE II in particular presumed not only a spiritual change but a decisive political shift following the Belfast Agreement of 1998

“whether one approaches conflict in Northern Ireland as a citizen, a sociologist, a politician, a cleric, a journalist or a soldier, what churches do, did and will do to make peace matters”

and the referendum which followed it. In making this presumption, the PEACE Programmes were no different to many other programmes, governments and political leaders at that time.

The measurement of progress is, however, seriously compromised if the presupposition turns out to be only partially true, if at all. If the spirit and politics of peacebuilding is presumed, then the overarching aims of the PEACE II Programme – to deal with the legacy of conflict and take the opportunities of peace - are a matter of leaving violence and division behind and advancing on the basis of a new spirit of co-operation. The goals of the programme can then be conceived of as milestones on a progressive march and progress can be measured as a matter of arrival within time and budget. If they are not, then measurement cannot be simply a question of acting in a context of deeper, prior decisions, but of creating and sustaining the context in which the option for non-violence, the rule of law and human and civil rights for all are kept alive.

In reality, things have been much messier. While there is no doubt that a decision was made in Northern Ireland to move from open conflict to negotiation after 1994, the Agreement made in 1998 has not proven to be the decisive and definitive end to political mistrust that its supporters hoped. Instead of an Agreement in which ‘everything was agreed’, critical elements of the deal – in particular the arrangements for policing, the disbandment of paramilitary organisations including the full decommissioning of weapons and less immediate but still dangerous issues about what sovereignty mean in terms of flags, emblems and national identity- were subject to uncertainty. As things have turned out, doubts arising from these unresolved matters had, by 2005, made political co-operation impossible and had resulted in a new scepticism and mistrust between groups in politics. While the peace process did have a marked impact on the level of directly political violence and on the level of economic confidence, peace remained a precarious experience marked by growing political polarisation on the steps to be undertaken to resolve the impasse. At the same time, there was no evidence of any widespread feeling that political polarisation should mean a return to the politics of the 1970s.

The PEACE II Programme has inevitably been challenged by this ambivalent and changing context. Instead of playing a supportive role within a wider and agreed political framework, PEACE II became an inter-governmental and international means to invest in the future, sustaining the vision of a shared peaceful future through practical change even while the legacy of the past continued to create major political difficulties. Instead of going with the grain of presumed political progress, PEACE II was sometimes a pioneering advance - investment in a shared and stable society, seeking means and mechanisms to support reconciliation on the ground while the

political difficulties were resolved. Progress was measured in terms of establishment and survival in hostile soil rather than flourishing and multiplication.

Instead of elaborating an already clear local vision, PEACE II became one of the vehicles whereby difficulties were discussed, small steps taken and change made possible. What certainly disappeared, however, was any notion of simple progress, led by political leaders, undoubtedly disappointing the hopes of PEACE II's initial designers. Furthermore, and this will be explored in future seminars, the design of a programme based on the presupposition of stability may have been different to a design which might have emerged to support exploratory and developmental approaches to peace. In particular, and with reference to this document's exploration of the role of the churches, the presupposition of a spiritual choice for peace in Ireland may have been premature and the churches role in, or at least in dialogue with, the programme correspondingly smaller than it might have been.

The Churches and PEACE II

In many ways, the churches in Ireland appear to have shared the presumption that peace is no longer primarily a spiritual matter, seeing instead a project consisting largely of practical steps to support agreements already made. Certainly, the expansion of investment under the EU Programmes to include substantive investment in infrastructure and economic development as well as the concerted effort to address disadvantage and social exclusion meant that large areas of public activity which had previously not been directly connected with peacebuilding was suddenly attracting the lion's share of financial support.

In many ways this has been a healthy

development, especially against the backdrop of a chronically weak private sector economy in Northern Ireland and protests about over-reliance on clerical leadership coming from many community groups. Denominational identity in the past had often meant restricting access to one side of the community or the other. The desire to reach unexplored margins and to democratise both the social economy and community development undoubtedly led to a preference to support groups which had strong community roots. The wider collapse in church authority, particularly arising from the child-abuse scandals within the Roman Catholic Church, and the desire of governments to engage Sinn Féin and loyalist groupings directly rather than provide services through acceptable intermediaries like churches undoubtedly fuelled this development.

In a context where a willingness to explore, expand and build on common goals can be presumed, such changes can be readily aligned with democratisation and economic normalisation. If, however, peace is still to be explored and developed, it is essential that participating institutions, groups and people can continue to address outstanding issues of forgiveness, justice, peace-building and mercy. Secular groups can be equally as culturally exclusive as those led by churches. By focussing on the economic and on social development, the relative absence of faith-based groups in PEACE II may actually have contributed to these core questions receiving inadequate attention at precisely the point when they, rather than any problem with GDP or with social participation, were the primary obstacles to progress.

It may be, on the other hand, that churches were rightfully relegated to a role as lesser partners in social and economic projects and that the difficulties lie in failing to make the bridge between the wider programme and the underlying ethics and spiritual challenges of



peace-building. This may be true also of politics, where the programme existed without direct reference to political progress, even at inter-governmental level.

The sheer bureaucracy required to administer a programme of the scale of PEACE II diverted everyone away from overarching goals and focussed minds on operational delivery. As a result, the important absence of churches is not so much in church participation in PEACE II Programmes but in any worthwhile dialogue between faith communities, the participants in the programme and wider society about the ambiguities of peacemaking, about the resistance to real integration with former enemies and about the fears which underlie political polarisation. The result by 2005 is a strange hybrid where huge structured change has been engineered by legislation and investment like PEACE II, but that the obstacles to real stability lie in matters less easily accessible to cash or coercion. And these are precisely the areas where the faith communities have their strongest base – in the voluntary commitments and relationships of everyday life. The weakness of churches in that ongoing conversation may say something about the waning influence of church at community level, an absence with profound sociological and cultural consequences in Ireland.

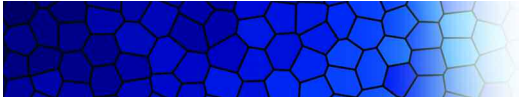
Conclusions

By looking at the role of churches in peace building, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), responsible for administering PEACE II, and the Community Relations Council (CRC) were anxious to explore this largely unresearched area of the peace process. In establishing the seminar, it became clear that churches had played a much smaller role in the programme than might have been expected, especially in comparison to previous public investments. In general, churches were concentrated in lead roles only in the area of direct reconciliation and with community work

in the border Counties of the Irish Republic. More widely, churches participated in numerous community development initiatives and in youth work and social economy programmes as partners rather than overt leaders.

Nonetheless, what became and becomes clear through this exploration, is that the language of churches and faith communities in peacebuilding, which has been and still remains so significant, for better or for worse, in the moral and spiritual frameworks which many bring to their lives and work, had begun to diverge significantly from the language and expectation of secular groups. The challenges arising out of this dialogue run in two directions: to the Churches in relation to their relevance and continued commitment to peacebuilding, and to the wider society in relation to the seriousness with which social and economic programmes can ever really tackle the human obstacles to peacebuilding.

The challenge of finding a proper balance between secular states, religious communities and the requirements of economic and social development do not allow for the simple answers of some commentators. Differences of faith and the need to find a language, spirituality and experience of peacebuilding which engage those differences in mutual endeavour are vital issues across the globe. But it is surely at a time when a society is trying to learn how to do what it does not know how to do that critical concepts like faith, hope and love have an essential value. It is to be hoped that the reflections and learning from Northern Ireland, and from this process in particular, can make a contribution to development of further programmes to support peace building not only here but elsewhere.



David Stevens
Leader of The Corrymeela Community

‘The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process’

Background

Religion plays a profoundly ambiguous role in conflict situations. On the one hand, it can encourage hatred; anti – Catholicism is particularly potent in Northern Ireland, and has political consequences. Churches can reinforce community division and harden boundaries; Catholic views and rules on mixed marriage and the importance of church schools have had significant consequences in Northern Irish society. Religion can give divine sanction to nationalisms, political positions and violence.

On the other hand, religion can be a force for restraint and this has been generally true in Northern Ireland. Without the churches the situation would have been a lot worse; the preaching and living out of non-retaliation, forbearance and forgiveness have had real social consequences. The churches opposed those who espoused violence and the gods of nationalism. Churches working together have been a force for good; they have helped lessen the religious / political symbiosis. The developing pattern of church leaders and others meeting together over the last thirty years in Northern Ireland, of clergy visiting

victims of violence together, has been a significant public witness. Churches have been encouragers to politicians seeking political compromise. There have been individuals and groups working for peace and reconciliation. Contacts were established by church groups with paramilitary organisations; clergy and others acted as go-betweens. The Irish Council of Churches, together with the Roman Catholic Church, have had a peace education programme working in schools, and so on. And, nevertheless, the picture is

“The churches opposed those who espoused violence and the gods of nationalism. Churches working together have been a force for good; they have helped lessen the religious / political symbiosis”

very mixed and deeply ambiguous. Some black, much grey, a little white. Churches are part of the problem and struggle to be part of the solution.

The problem is that politics appears to dominate the churches more than vice versa. This is one very significant factor in inhibiting churches in being agents of co-operation and



raises profound questions about what is more important - religious commitment or political commitment. In theological terms, we are talking about the issue of idolatry.

Churches tend to reflect people's fears, reflect community divisions, reflect a community

“The problem is that politics appears to dominate the churches more than vice versa.”

experience of violence and threat, rather than act as agents of change or transformers of conflict. Thus the Protestant Churches in Northern Ireland often talk about law and order, reflecting a community under siege, and the Catholic Church often talks about justice, reflecting a community feeling of victimisation. Churches not only reflect people's fears; they can also amplify them (witness the role of the Rev Dr Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland).

Local churches, in particular, often reflect a sense of fear and threat. They are places of ordered calm – a safe space - where we are among our own; our enemies are outside. They are 'protective fortresses for threatened people' (Duncan Morrow). On the other hand they may be places that assume a symbiosis between religion and national identity, e.g. Catholicism and Irishness.

Responding to the Situation in the Northern Ireland Community

Up to the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, churches' archtypical position was opposition to violence. It was a situation of moral clarity. In the period up to the Good Friday Agreement, churches encouraged politicians to keep talking and were generally supportive of the agreement without telling people how to vote.

Alongside that, there were groups and individuals talking to or acting as intermediaries for paramilitaries or paramilitary related groups: individuals such as Alex Reid, Roy Magee and Archbishop Eames and groups like ECONI and the Methodist Church. There was a task of bringing people in from the margins.

Post - Agreement

This is a period of increasing moral murk, of high politics involving a limited number of groups and the issue of trust (or lack of it). Other issues include dealing with the past, victims, policing and loyalist alienation. Protestant clergy have got involved in the Loyalist Commission. Clergy have played a significant role in dealing with the issues in North Belfast (e.g. the Holy Cross dispute) and have been active in East Belfast. The Roman Catholic Church has had a significant involvement in the issue of policing and the change into the PSNI. However, we have an increasingly privatised middle class, who do not want to be involved in politics and issues of peace and community relations. They want to be left alone and there are many of them in our churches. They want comforting piety, rather than prophetic challenge.

The 'Reach' of the Churches

The churches are present in every community in Northern Ireland. Much of the voluntary effort in this society is focused around churches and they contribute enormously to social capital. This work is not dependent on public money in the main, which virtually every other sector and group in Northern Ireland is.

The managed end of European money will leave most church voluntary effort unaffected, which is more than can be said about most of the voluntary and community sector. However, those church and faith-based organisations who have been involved in

peace and reconciliation work, and who are reliant on European Peace money, face a bleak vista. Grant aid brings captivity – those who receive it don't in the main want to bite the hand of the giver. Churches are probably least in captivity. They have a tradition of moral reflection and of social care; they have a story of care, forgiveness and reconciliation that should be in a position to hugely contribute to human flourishing and much more could be made of it. The churches' record in Northern Ireland is not disastrous and there are bright spots, but it should be a whole lot better. We tend to reflect the society rather than try to be the transformers of it.

Conclusion

In particular, the churches were a force for stabilisation during the 'Troubles'. The Catholic Church was seen as an alternative to physical force republicanism. We are now in a different world where churches are not needed in the same way by government. The name of the game from 1994 was the inclusion of Sinn Féin, old loves could be disregarded. A DUP / Sinn Féin dominated executive will not have any great love for the mainline churches.

This is a time of moral murk and grey times – a world of paramilitary crime and associated activities – and it is hard to bring moral judgement to bear on the present political issues.





Diane Holt

Community Relations / Development Officer for The Link Family and Community Centre, Newtownards. The Link receives funding from the E.U Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, administered through the Community Relations Council.

CASE STUDY:

The Practical Challenges to Peace Building

The Link Family and Community Centre Community Relations and the Churches in Newtownards

Background of The Link

The Link Family and Community Centre is an independent Christian-based community development organisation working alongside disadvantaged groups and communities in Newtownards.

It began in 1997 as a social action initiative of Regent Street Presbyterian Church, and later became an independent, interdenominational group running a wide range of community projects including initiatives dealing with:

- community relations
- youth
- addiction
- parent and toddlers
- senior citizens

In terms of community background, Newtownards has a large Protestant community (86.2%) and a small, but stable Catholic community (8.2%).

Background to The Link's work with the Churches in the town

It was always hoped that The Link would be a project supported by a number of churches in the town, but the journey towards that goal has been a slow and difficult one.

The issue of alcoholism in the town of Newtownards, particularly "Street Drinkers" led to 14 local churches responding to a letter from The Link suggesting that working together around this issue would enable Christians in the town to have a more effective "witness". Churches Help on Addictions Team (CHAT), a Wednesday night drop in for those with long term problems with addiction to alcohol was the practical outcome. This drop in initiative has not only given support to a number of individuals with alcohol addiction, it has also enabled positive relationships to be developed between members of congregations across a wide denominational spectrum, from Gospel Hall right through to Church of Ireland and Independent Fellowship.

At the same time the Community Relations/

Development Officer of The Link was often asked by representatives from community and voluntary groups why there was no representation from the churches within community structures.

Inter-church Group

There has been an Inter-church group in Newtownards for about 14 years. The churches involved have worked together for a Carol Service at Christmas, the Annual Remembrance Day service and a Good Friday service in the town centre. There are 28 churches in Newtownards, but only 9 churches participated, including the one Catholic Church in the town. The clergy meet together once every two months.

Research

The Link felt it was important to explore the relationships between the churches more fully, and as a Community Development organisation, were keen also to explore the churches relationship with the local community. Funding for this research was acquired from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the following question explored;

"What are the causes and consequences of the barriers and divisions between the churches, and between the churches and the local community in the Newtownards area?"

It is important to examine some of the findings of this research to understand the strategic direction of the community relations work of The Link in relation to the churches.

In terms of the Inter-church group it was noted that:

- ongoing contact involving all 28 churches in Newtownards does not exist
- the majority of churches have low levels

of active co-operation with other churches

- most Protestant churches have no contact with the Roman Catholic Church
- a significant number of clergy have never met each other
- most Protestant churches do not wish contact/co-operation to include "joint worship".

Some of the quotes relating to the findings in the Inter-church section of the research begin to give some insight into how the Inter-church group and indeed churches coming together for worship activities is viewed, by those both within and outside the Group itself:

"Newtownards is seen as predominantly Protestant so inter Protestant relations are seen as most important." (Semi-structured interview)

"The Inter-church group could be doing more. It's getting better but it's a bit polite with nice meetings and cups of tea." (Semi-structured interview)

"What would the churches get together for? I wouldn't see value in coming together unless we had the same agenda. A spiritual coming together or worshipping together would cause confusion because it will suggest that our beliefs are the same." (Semi-structured interview)

The nature of the present relationships between the churches has arisen for a number of passive reasons:

- Local history and tradition (it's always been that way) being the main reason given.

Other reasons in order of importance were:

- Heavy clergy and laity workload
- Competing priorities
- Theological

The findings relating to Church-community relations confirmed the importance of the churches modelling good relations within the Newtownards community:

- Church relations can have an impact on wider community relations

There were some strong quotes backing up this finding,

"How can you expect people in the community to have cross community contact,

"How can you expect people in the community to have cross community contact, when the churches don't have cross community contact."

when the churches don't have cross community contact." (semi-structured interview with Community Group leader) and "It has a profoundly negative impact. If churches sustain people in being passive about their local community and peace-building it is raising people up to be disengaged". (Semi-structured interview)

Findings revealed that the churches relationship with the community "is generally poor".

"Ideally there would be some mechanism to bridge the gap between the churches and the community sector and there would be good information and communication between churches and community groups." (semi-structured interview)

But an encouraging finding was the fact that there was a "widespread desire for increased church involvement in community/social issues." This is not true for other parts of Northern Ireland where the community, represented by the community and voluntary sector, has given up on the churches.

Newtownards Churches Forum

One of the main recommendations of the research was the formation of a Churches Forum for Newtownards, with a social, community and civic remit. To date, 19 of the 28 churches have either participated or expressed an interest in participating. At their first meeting in May 2003 they put together a set of aims and objectives:

Aim

To improve Inter-church and Church-community relations in Newtownards

Objectives

1. To gain a better understanding of each other.
2. To gain a better understanding of the community.
3. To be a collective voice and presence in the community.
4. To develop and share skills and experience.
5. To initiate practical action when appropriate.

The denominations represented on the Forum are:

Presbyterian
Methodist
Church of Ireland
Catholic
Elim Pentecostal
Independent Evangelical
Independent (House) Fellowship
Reformed Presbyterian
Non-Subscribing Presbyterian

They have been meeting on a quarterly basis since that time, facilitated by The Link, and have planned a programme of developing both internal relationships and increasing their knowledge about the needs and mechanisms

of the local community. Clergy workload continues to be a challenge, although there has been an average of 12 clergy at each meeting. They are about to move to taking more responsibility for the Forum themselves by electing a Chair and developing practical mechanisms for the development of communication with the community. For example, the local Community Safety Partnership and the Community Network have asked for representation from the Churches Forum. The Forum is also hoping to make a decision about the involvement of laity, either on the same Forum or as part of a separate Lay Forum. However, there is unanimous agreement that positive relationships and understanding between clergy have been developed by participation in the Forum.

Importance of Churches in Areas of Weak Community Infrastructure

It is important to highlight, once again the large Protestant majority community in which The Link works and say that our experience is within this context.

The Link has been involved strategically with the Ards Development Bureau and Community Network over the last five years and has been seeking to involve churches which are within or on the fringes of areas which have been identified as having low or weak community infrastructure. There would appear to be a larger incidence of these areas identified in predominantly Protestant communities. Although there are many issues which lead to an area being identified as having weak infrastructure, generally these areas have a lack of local community participation or cohesion in seeking to find a local community answer to difficult situations. The Community Network was funded through Peace money from Europe, to work in 6 identified areas in the Ards Borough. Two of these areas are the West Winds Estate and Comber.

Churches have in the past been excluded from the equation in terms of infrastructure and yet are structures within communities which are often the most permanent and long-standing. The Link has utilised this fact and has sought to enable churches to engage more effectively with their local communities to give support and leadership.

There is no one model for this work. In the West Winds Estate, representatives from the church are involved in the local Residents' Associations, a Day Care Centre and the local play group and the church is now used for meetings of the West Winds Development Association which acts as a Forum for all of the groups. The minister of the church sits on this Forum and has acted as advocate for the community on a number of issues. In the Bowtown Estate, the clergy of the four churches surrounding the estate have actively sought to work together to heal relationships and build a bridge between statutory agencies and local community activists. Two members of the clergy have now been included as office bearers on a new Residents' Association. In Comber representatives from churches have been participating on a forum group called

“Churches have in the past been excluded from the equation in terms of infrastructure and yet are structures within communities which are often the most permanent and long-standing.”

Connecting Comber which is seeking to discover the needs of the area and collate a community directory which includes church activities.

Another Model – Comber Churches

An inter-church group similar to the Newtownards group existed in Comber, but the Baptist and the Independent Christian



Fellowship did not participate over the issue of worshipping together. The Link, in partnership with The Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, facilitated work with the clergy of all of the churches on the social/community needs of Comber and the wider social issues in society. The clergy agreed on the importance of this work, but decided that their workload was such that unless laity were involved, it would not move forward.

This has led to the establishment of a Laity Forum for Comber Churches on which all of the churches, except the Gospel Hall and Free Presbyterian, participate.

Learning and Conclusions from the experience of The Link:

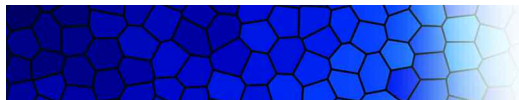
- It is difficult to involve certain churches in any joint work;
- Substantially more churches will get involved in joint work with a social, civic and community remit;
- Congregational members need to see themselves as members of their wider local community – not just as members of their congregation;
- Churches can still have an important role in their local community infrastructure and this involvement often leads to natural growth within participating congregations as relationships are developed externally;
- Churches can still have a prophetic voice and offer leadership within their local communities on issues with which even government departments are struggling;
- The gulf between the "haves" and the "have nots" is an important community relations issue as well as a social issue. (Many congregations have a high proportion of people from a more middle class background and therefore a lack of knowledge and experience of the needs

of some of the more marginalised parts of their community.)

- Clergy workload reduces ability to participate in the peace-building process effectively.

Some questions to ponder...

- Do members of churches see themselves as part of the local community? For example, members of churches often have a leading role in a community or statutory organisation in their local community, but rarely represent their church in this role. This leads the community to conclude that the churches are not involved at any level in community, or indeed are about the needs of the local community.
- Have the mainstream Protestant churches abandoned their working class communities? If this is the case, how can they begin to support them?
- In a consumer society is volunteerism dead? What will this mean for how churches, who rely heavily on volunteer participation, operate in the future?



Former Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland Research Officer **Alwyn Thompson** conducted the Church in the Public Square project, with research assistance from **John Kiess**. Current Research Coordinator **Ben Walker** and Assistant **Derek Keefe** edited the above presentation of its findings. The research was presented by **David Porter**, Director of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, at the churches conference in Portadown. This research was funded by the EU Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, administered through the Community Relations Council.



**CENTRE FOR
CONTEMPORARY
CHRISTIANITY
IN IRELAND**

BIBLICAL FAITH
FOR A CHANGING WORLD

The Church in the Public Square

With funding from the EU Peace II Programme, administered by the Community Relations Council, the Centre for Contemporary Christianity recently conducted a research project which led to the publication of a report entitled, "The Church in the Public Square". The following paper presents the findings of that project along with some subsequent reflections and recommendations.

Aim

The aim of this project was to facilitate understanding about the role of churches in public debate in Northern Ireland, in relation to three specific areas:

1. The churches and community relations
2. The churches and human rights
3. The churches and politics

Sample and Questions

Field interviews were conducted with representatives of churches and the three identified sectors in an attempt to capture what they perceive the role of the church to be in these areas, how church contributions

have been heard and received within each sector, and how conversation between churches and these sectors can be improved. The questions that guided our interviews fell under three categories:

- Knowledge
- Perceptions
- Expectations

Findings

Perspectives of three identified sectors' representatives:

a. Awareness of church contributions
Most respondents were not aware of any substantial church contributions.

- 84% could not name a specific document, or a particular stance a denomination took on an issue.
- Only 33% could recall an instance where a church individual spoke out about a particular issue.
- Few respondents (25%) could cite an example of the church being proactive and approaching them about a particular issue.
- The majority of respondents (75%) could identify individuals to whom they could go to get an opinion, but did not



know how to get a definitive denominational stance on a particular issue.

- Most respondents (66%) had less knowledge of church contributions than other "sectors" (trade unions, lobbyists, etc).

b. Openness to church contributions

All respondents said they were open to

“Respondents almost unanimously agreed that churches are ineffective in engaging their point of view.”

church contributions (although there was no consensus as to whether this contribution should be institutional or individual). Most respondents said they believe the church should be participating, and welcome greater input.

- Although open to church contributions, over 70% expressed deep concern that churches still do not know how to engage in a positive, non-divisive way.
- Most respondents acknowledged a sense that churches bring an ‘agenda’, but this was not viewed as a phenomenon particular to churches.

Respondents agreed that there is more they themselves can do to partner with churches, and expressed a willingness to explore what this might look like.

c. Effectiveness of church contributions

Respondents almost unanimously agreed that churches are ineffective in engaging their point of view. Although church submissions or public statements were perceived to be no more or less professional than the next group, these contributions rarely translated into workable suggestions or policies.

Contributions have:

- lacked strong statistical or other empirical support
- failed to be couched within the existing rubrics and protocols (such as international human rights standards, etc)
- been too technically theological and difficult to understand (“Christianese”)
- been fairly limited in mandate (speaking for a church, or at best, a denomination but not a larger cross-section of wider church opinion)
- been ad hoc and reactive, instead of rooted in an identifiable commitment to a coherent programme or strategy

d. Church influence in society

There was a strong recognition among respondents that churches can still speak for a large sector of people, and could mobilise their members around a number of issues. This influence was perceived to be largely undeveloped.

e. Distinctiveness of church role

Several respondents acknowledged that the churches have a deep root into the community that, if harnessed, would be extremely valuable. The church’s ability to put a human face on public debate was cited by many to be its most valuable, and unique, contribution. Others mentioned the church’s preferential option for the poor, and the opportunity churches have to reverse sectarianism by creating safe space for dialogue and forgiveness.

f. Differences among the perceptions of the three identified sectors

- representatives in community relations were generally more aware of church contributions than the other sectors
- human rights respondents tended to be the least aware of church contributions, and perceived the most church resistance to their agenda

Perspectives of church representatives:

a. Awareness of church contributions

There was no consensus view on whether the identified sectors were aware of church contributions. Some respondents were quite confident their contributions have been heard, others did not think the church has done enough to even be noticed.

b. Openness to church contributions

Most respondents feel a "polite" acceptance by the identified sectors. There is some suspicion about how serious their contributions are taken. For example, a submission to the Bill of Rights consultation might be received and documented, but some wonder how significantly these submissions register with Commission members.

- Representatives sense that government and human rights groups still associate churches with sectarianism and divisiveness
- Representatives do not feel the identified sectors would be interested in any kind of sustained partnership with churches

c. Effectiveness of church contributions

Most respondents described a breakdown in the civic life of churches, and acknowledge that the churches have not been effective in putting forward a coherent perspective in public debates. There is a spectrum of opinion about what the role of the churches should be, from committing more of their energy to their local communities to serving as outright lobbyists.

- Successful contributions tended to be associated with courageous individuals, such as Cahal Daly or John Dunlop, not corporate bodies
- Submissions to consultations by churches are not viewed as particularly accessible or compelling

Churches choose not to communicate or "sell" their successes (in the often mundane work they perform in the areas of community development, dealing with trauma, providing leadership in neighbourhoods, ecumenism and peacebuilding).

d. Access to churches

Some respondents felt confident that organisations know where to go for their views, others strongly disagreed. Some observe a tendency among organisations to go to traditional figures (archbishops, etc) instead of seeking out people who might have a better grasp on the issues.

- Respondents did not perceive themselves to be any less accessible than other "sectors" (trade unions, lobbyists, etc), nor did they perceive themselves to be any less professional

f. Distinctiveness of church contributions

Among various examples of potentially distinct contributions the church could offer

"Some respondents felt confident that organisations know where to go for their views, others strongly disagreed."

wider society, respondents included:

- A large constituency to mobilise around issues
- Ecumenism and cross-community work
- Personal contact and care for people
- Risky truth-telling
- Preferential option for the poor
- Prayer and healing

e. Suspicion of human rights 'agenda'

Most respondents expressed some reservations about a human rights agenda, to

the degree that it gets pushed in opposition to some values of the church (community, trust, etc).

- There is a particular wariness of individualism and the severe litigious character of the human rights worldview
- Respondents could not cite examples of churches and human rights groups

“To consider *the* future of *the* church in the public square is, in many respects, a misleading enterprise.”

actually dialoguing about these differences, but were open to the prospect

Reflections

"The world needs the church, not to help the world run more smoothly or to make the world a better place for Christians to live. Rather, the world needs the church, because without the church, the world does not know who it is."

Stanley Hauerwas¹

RE-IMAGINING THE "PUBLIC"

Multiplicity of public spaces

To consider *the* future of *the* church in the public square is, in many respects, a misleading enterprise. There is no *one* church, but many churches, and no *one* public square, but many public spaces. It is easy to regard the public square as something analogous to the Forum in Rome, a place where, upon entrance, citizens stop being "private" and start to exist as "public" beings. For our society today, this strict public/private dichotomy is unhelpful. There is no *one* Forum, but instead manifold public spaces: city council meetings, universities, newspapers, television, lectures, neighbourhood meetings, human rights

consultations, and also more mundane spaces such as parks, malls, rugby matches, the internet, theatre houses, and poetry readings. There are many places where we exist "publicly".

The church as public space

The data gathered from this project suggests that conventional thinking, both in and outside churches, is still captive to the idea that churches have to "walk to the Forum" before they can become "public". Churches, however, are, in their very being, already profoundly "public." As organic institutions that gather people together through practices, rituals, songs and preaching, churches themselves constitute social space where individuals can encounter one another, form relationships, confront difference, and negotiate their responsibility to one another. In baptism, marriage ceremonies, funerals, caring for the poor, hospitality, or helping families deal with trauma, churches provide ways for people to connect, and explore alternative ways of being social together. The narrow private terms in which religious devotion is typically construed obscures the public character of church life.

Moving beyond false dichotomies

A promising way forward out of this impasse is for churches and other sectors to collectively re-imagine what it means to be "public." There can be no denying that a number of public spaces are public because they are linked to the state, but action and engagement with the political, social and economic issues of Northern Ireland does not begin or end there. The churches can make powerful arguments about social policy by simply being the church, modelling the kind of relationships that create a just order. Churches exist publicly before heading to the "Forum." Churches in themselves are public spaces.

RE-VISIONING THE CHURCH

Embedded and belonging

In theological terms, churches in Northern Ireland still suffer from an anaemic ecclesiology. That is, they have not yet begun to take the potential of their own corporate culture seriously, which would help facilitate attempts to engage publicly. A major part of this task is helping churches recognise that they are already embedded in the everyday life of the community, and should understand their practices at the church level as analogical answers to political and social issues (accepting the stranger, offering forgiveness, preaching the Word, speaking on behalf of excluded members of society, etc). The scope of their work does not end with the church walls. The church as embedded public body is not absolved from engaging directly with governments, human rights organisations and community relations groups. Engagement with public issues like poverty alleviation, peacebuilding, and education should grow out of the life of the church for the sake of the community to which it belongs and serves.

Distinct and redemptive

However, the pursuit of these commitments does not necessarily have to be translated to register with policy makers. Re-thinking what is "public" in terms of multiple spaces means there is more than one place, and more than one language by which churches and other sectors can dialogue about building a peaceful, thriving Northern Ireland. As the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas notes, the church has its own distinct language and mission that must be maintained:

"The church does not exist to ask what needs doing to keep the world

running smoothly and then to motivate our people to then go and do it. The church is not to be judged by how useful we are as a supportive institution and our clergy as members of a helping profession. The church has its own reason for being, hid within its own mandate and not found in the world. We are not chartered by the Emperor."

A proper understanding of the church as public space, then, entails neither the domestication nor politicization of the church, but the acknowledgement that the church has a redemptive purpose all its own with respect to the community, namely that we are called to pour ourselves out on its behalf, a point understood well by American Catholic theologian George Weigel:

"The church capable of proposing to 'the world' that it consider the possibility of its redemption in Christ is emphatically not conceived in mundane terms as another voluntary organization with a political task. Rather, the church that can ask the world to consider itself redeemable (and redeemed) is a church that conceives itself eucharistically as the Body of Christ. And as Christ's Body, such a church would share Christ's destiny, which is not a destiny to power, but rather a destiny in which 'being given' means being broken and shared out." ²

RE-NEGOTIATING THE SQUARE

Dialogue

Our data suggests there is a willingness on the part of human rights groups, politicians, and community relations organisations to explore what a deeper partnership might look like. Relieved of the illusion that there is hostility to this conversation, churches must move forward and create a space for conversation and exchange.



Leadership

But who is to speak the church's distinctive word in such spaces? In the past, churches have been far too reliant on clergy and denominational higher-ups, ignoring those in the pews who spend their days in public careers and possess the inside knowledge and expertise such positions provide. The

“This over-reliance on clergy and under-utilisation of lay expertise may go a long way toward explaining the reported language and miscommunication issues”

Catholic Church has done a better job than Protestant churches at giving a voice to these valuable lay professionals.

This over-reliance on clergy and under-utilization of lay expertise may go a long way toward explaining the reported language and miscommunication issues, as well as the general ineffectiveness of church proposals. Churches must differentiate between effectually speaking their distinctively redemptive word into issues of public concern and the indiscriminate application of theological jargon as a panacea for all the world's ills. They cannot do this unless they entrust lay leaders who possess the expertise to know the difference with the responsibility of leading the churches in public engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of our reflections on this data, we offer some recommendations to the churches and leaders in the public sector in hope of forwarding this conversation and making church contributions to the public life of this community more effective:

1. Cooperation among the churches

Churches must cooperate with other churches and develop a voice that speaks with a wider mandate.

2. Risk taking partnership

Partnerships between churches and other sectors of the public square must be explored and developed. Toward this end, churches must give a compelling account of why their social commitments matter for other public sectors and demonstrate that it is in the best interest of these sectors to be in partnership with them.

3. Empowerment to build confidence

Churches should be empowered by the realisation that the nature of their work and mission is already public, and celebrate and be encouraged by the contributions they are currently making to the public good. As one respondent told us,

"I think the churches are being unduly modest. I've heard the proportion estimated (I can't even remember now exactly), but well over half of all the youth work in Northern Ireland is done by the churches. If you were to put a monetary value on that, it would be immense, but because it's done by volunteers and because it's been done for decades and it's still being done in it's own quiet way, the government departments forget about it, whereas "secular"-based youth clubs or various children's charities make a big noise, and rightly so, about their social benefit."

Churches can and should give themselves more credit for the "public" work they are already doing, and this should give them confidence for even greater involvement.

4. Moral conversation

Churches should attempt to facilitate a serious moral conversation on key issues, being careful not to get bogged down in small, overly particular matters. Many respondents view the cultivation of a moral vision as an important contribution the church can make to the community, which is looking to the church to provide this.

This could involve the exploration of how

theological concepts such as 'redemption' could have salience in the wider culture. At the very least, churches should have more public debates about what 'redemption' means in Northern Ireland.

5. Model community

Churches have the opportunity to model practices of forgiveness right in their own communities. Ethical tensions and conflicts offer churches the chance to adopt biblical stances ("in church space we can accept enemies") as alternatives to typical public responses, making 'real' and personal what is often impersonal at the political level.

6. Accessible communication

Churches should create a formula by which public statements of churches are made accessible, and develop publications that document what they are already doing as a way of raising awareness and making their work more accessible to the broader community.

They must also utilize the in-house expertise of members working in public roles to discover the most creative and effective avenues of engagement, and to assure that their language conforms to accepted rubrics and can be understood by other parties in the conversation.

7. Proactive not reactive

Churches cannot afford to wait until government groups come to them with a consultation, but must develop internal processes by which they come to grips with issues in their own language and according to their own traditions first. Proactive engagement would allow churches to identify concerns and develop constructive positions prior to consultation, rather than be left scrambling around in a reactive manner after the terms of the debate have already been set.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Perceptions

Churches are saying their contributions aren't taken as seriously as others, and there's no genuine interest in any real, sustained partnership. Is this true? Representatives of the three identified sectors say the church tends to contribute in divisive, negative ways. How do you respond to this perception?

Language

There is an expectation that church contributions should get in line with existing rubrics and protocols and speak the language of universal human rights. Must churches speak this language? How should different public languages be negotiated?

Church as public

What does it mean to be "public"? Can church space be a kind of public? Can churches contribute in alternative ways, beside the conventional submission of papers?

*The Church in the Public Square project was conducted by the **Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (Centre)**, a ministry of **ECONI** since 1999. From April 2005 **ECONI** will be no longer and the organisation will move forward under the name of the Centre.



Sean Pettis
CRC's EU Events and Seminars Project Manager

Round Table Reflections – Highlighting the Key Issues

The 'Learning from Peace II' Project is not just about experts sharing their experience and knowledge with relevant audiences. It is about creating an environment that truly embraces the shared experiences, both positive and negative, that those involved in the Peace Programme have encountered over the last ten years. In order to foster this shared learning and create a pathway of good practice for the future, CRC strives to provide opportunity for all participants to share their experiences of the Peace Programme. In this seminar, "**Beyond Sectarianism?: The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process**", the participants were given the opportunity to question the key note speakers and share their opinions and experiences through round table discussions (the results of which were fed back in plenary).

What follows are the critical themes and issues that emanated from the event's feedback sessions.

'The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process'

Chaired Panel Discussion

The primary themes here related to Fr Tim Bartlett's remarks around the issue of church society being in conflict with secular society and the relationship between ecumenism and community relations.

- There were differing views about how church society should engage with secular society in a way that would be conducive to both. It was argued that now the tables have turned and secularism has more of a power base, this inequality has made it more difficult for church society to engage more fully with wider society.

Some felt on the issue of ecumenism, that some sort of redefinition or greater clarity of its meaning was required in order to make it more acceptable to all. If it is viewed as a 'church union', then it is less likely to be widely acceptable. An emphasis on 'building better relationships on a cross church basis', it was argued, seems more appropriate. It was felt the relationship between ecumenism and community relations also would benefit from being both related and distinguished.

Practical Challenges to Peace Building Work –Round Table Discussions

The questions for discussion were posed by Duncan Morrow and revolved around what the churches' opportunities now are in the post agreement era and what should mark the right relationships with secular society? The following points were noted.

- Whilst congregation numbers are steadily diminishing, by and large churches are still respected in the wider community. Churches need to use this position to help forge relationships between those who are divided and to speak out against issues of social inequality.
- Generally speaking, churches have become increasingly middle – class and disengaged from wider society. This has led to a 'gulf of experience' between those actively involved within church and those outside of it. For the church to become a real player in promoting change, it needs to educate itself to the issues facing wider society, particularly the young and the working class.
- It was widely felt that the work load of clergy prevented peace and reconciliation work being high on a church's agenda. If more is to be done, clergy will have to be freed up to engage fully in this work. This also led to some comment around the belief that historically, clergy have tended to take their lead from the views of their congregation. In an era of peace, clergy will have to take a leading role in driving the agenda of peace building work – "It is a gospel imperative". It was recognised that many church members are involved in community / voluntary work, but not with their 'church hat' on. In order for the church to engage and

be seen engaging, congregations will have to take on some of the burden.

- There was a diverse spectrum of views expressed on how the church should engage with secular society, although what was unanimous is the belief that it has to happen. However, the motivation behind this clearly showed a lack of coherence. Some felt that secular society is "superior and self righteous, as it undermines equality and the rights of other faiths and ideologies", other views were less extreme and called for church society to, "humble itself and listen to the spirituality within secular society". A recurring theme of concern was how the church could engage with the paramilitaries, particularly over the issues of criminal activity. This accompanied debate around whether church society should engage as a moralising, evangelising force, or simply work alongside secular society, as a force promoting human rights and equality.

'Renegotiating the Public Square' – Centre Research Presented by David Porter.

Following David Porter's presentation of the Centre's research, a series of questions were posed to the round tables.

- 1) Perceptions: Churches are saying their contributions aren't taken as seriously as others and there's no genuine interest in any real, sustained partnership. Is this true? Representatives of the three identified sectors say the church tends to contribute in divisive, negative ways. *How do you respond to this perception?*
 - The issue of the relationship between church and government was a recurring theme in this discussion. Some felt that the government wanted the churches to



be a moral voice. Yet, when the church does speak out, government often criticises their comments as negative and divisive. It was felt by some that this attitude was something akin to government wishing 'to have their cake and eat it'. Debates also arose about how strong a base the churches have to be involved in the public domain, bearing in mind people feel they have become remote and disengaged. There was, however, a feeling that churches have to enter public life and that they should be building relationships to allow this to be more effective and credible. On the same token they should be a 'critical friend' of government, not being afraid to challenge where it is deemed necessary.

2) Language: There is an expectation that church contributions should get in line with existing rubrics and protocols and speak the language of universal rights. *Must churches speak this language? How should different public languages be negotiated?*

- It was widely felt this aspect of the research has highlighted a crucial, yet

age old challenge for churches; namely, the ability to speak the message of the gospel in a way that everyone can truly hear. Human Rights are one of the prominent themes of today, and it is through this medium, many felt, that the church must speak. The issue of Human Rights is, it was argued, compatible with that of the gospel.

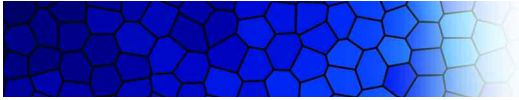
3) Church as public: *What does it mean to be "public"? Can church space be a kind of public? Can churches contribute in alternative ways besides the conventional submission of papers?*

- It was largely felt that the churches tend to stay on the fringes and only contribute to public debate now and again.

It was argued that church space is in essence 'public', yet the many issues already covered may well be hampering the churches ability to exist in this way. It could be more proactive in moving into the public space, if clergy attended more lay conferences / events, allowing people to see the church in a different light.



L-R:
Fr Sean Nolan,
Sean Pettis,
Diane Holt and
Jim Dennison



Dr Geraldine Smyth O.P.
Senior lecturer with the Irish School of Ecumenics.

PEACE TEN YEARS ON: AND WHERE ARE THE CHURCHES NOW?

(1) THE BROAD CONTEXT

A fine biography of Eric Gallagher, exemplary citizen, Opsahl Commissioner, and inspired Methodist leader has just come off the press.³ It is an authentically crafted narrative of the life and lifetime of a peacemaker. Through it, we encounter a story of conviction, courage, and compassion that holds a place for all and challenges us all. One book often recalls another. This one puts me in mind of *Christians in Ulster*⁴, that incisively conceived text by Eric Gallagher and Stanley Worrell, in which the authors asserted the "Irish question" as "the ultimate challenge to Christianity", and lamented that the churches' habitual stance in the face of anything that seemed to threaten the maintenance of their traditional rights and influence over all aspects of public life and the mending of divisions, was one of drawing back from every issue that called for "institutional sacrifice."

The authors did acknowledge, as do I now, the positive role of churches especially in the realm of pastoral care - comforting the afflicted, mediating between divided communities, or in calming troubled waters

when communities were strained to breaking point. There remain many unknown stories of such Christian men and women, including leaders, who risked censure from without and threats from within in stepping across a boundary as an expression of care for the other community in a time of sorrow, or through simple gestures of friendship, encouraged their own community to keep the other in view. Energy for newness will come, I believe, not alone from admitting our failure as churches - our betrayals of one another and our lack of socio-political engagement beyond the confines of cultural tribe - but also by willingness to affirm quiet progress and small steps in the direction of intercultural and interchurch reconciliation personally and institutionally.⁵ Some have indeed found it within them to take the longer view, and prophet-like, remember the future.

This is no matter merely of setting out the credit and fixed assets as a *pro forma* requirement before posing a critical and self-critical view of the contribution of churches to reconciliation. Both dimensions can be recognized without either cancelling out the other. Cliché though it be, the rhetorical question, "To what even more horrific depths



might society have sunk without the restraining influence of church leaders?" - does throw up some encouraging illustrations? Who knows the good wrought by those church leaders willing to be go-between people who introduced into hardened stalemate scenarios an alternative way of seeing towards a just and inclusive society; those who knew when diplomatic tact and when evangelical boldness was

In recent years, prompted by successive summers overshadowed by the grim events at Drumcree, the Church of Ireland has engaged its own discomfiture at the public linking of cultural religion and sectarianism with its church and property

required, in addressing those in high places and those on the margins of society, prising open a breathing-space in situations of impasse. How much worse could things have been had it not been for pastoral leaders who publicly remembered the suffering of those in other communities, creating a sanctuary of hope by renewing the gospel witness of the liberating power of forgiveness and love. Names like Roy Magee, Ray Davey, Gerry Reynolds, Alec Reid, Shirley and John Morrow, John and Diana Lampen, Noreen Christian, or Trevor Williams come to mind, and many besides. So also, organizations like the Irish Interchurch Meeting, the Irish Council of Churches, Corrymeela, or the Irish School of Ecumenics.

In recent years, prompted by successive summers overshadowed by the grim events at Drumcree, the Church of Ireland has confronted its own discomfiture at the public linking of cultural religion and sectarianism with its church and property. Courageously, the Church of Ireland then embarked on a stringent internal debate and independently-

conducted evaluation, subsequently publishing the report and instituting a process for ongoing reflection and action to tackle sectarianism and engage in peacebuilding at every level of church life.⁶ The Roman Catholic Primate, Archbishop Sean Brady, for his part and ahead of any Nationalist politicians, called time on Nationalist reluctance to join the police, declaring it was timely so to do and to work with their Unionist neighbours to ensure a new and shared future for all. Recently too, as the peace process fell on turbulent times, with the repeated collapsing of the power-sharing executive under contesting calls for a photographic record of decommissioning; and for more immediate total dismantling of army establishments. While joining in widespread calls to Republicans, whatever their much-vaunted democratic mandate, to sever ties with paramilitary or criminal activity that is immoral and socially destructive, church leaders have consistently urged political figures to persevere towards removing obstacles, making mutual accommodations, and taking the necessary risks to build trust. Such occasions where churches played an irenic role are historically noteworthy. So too, the efforts of many Christian individuals and groups who work without trumpeting it before them, to build bridges of peace and ecumenical relationship, are praiseworthy. Here I simply cite examples, not with a view to offering a place in the sun for churches but to encourage those with influence to affirm more visibly their commitment to reconciliation, as belonging to the very core of their evangelical mission. But it is also salutary to take a more testing look at how we as churches have been content to play the restraining role, without making periodic counter-cultural moves of living into a bolder pro-social vision of reconciliation, involving authentic relationships of personal surrender and institutional self-sacrifice.

(2) THE PAST DECADE: REFLECTING ON REFLECTIONS - THE CHURCHES' SECTOR MEETING IN PORTADOWN

The Need for Integrated Approaches - Including "Decade-thinking"

In contexts of transition out of protracted conflict, an imaginativeness is required that can see a way of peace beyond quick fixes, or above any slick manoeuvring towards an imposed solution from the side of the victors. John Paul Lederach has advised the need, in such circumstances, for "decade-thinking" within an integrative approach to peace-building that operates on long-range processes in time (past, future and present); engages across different sectors; and includes processes which engage the critical potential at different levels: constitutional-politics; civil society bodies and grassroots initiatives (Track One, Two and Three diplomacy).⁷ Constitutional arrangements must be embedded in civic culture and given expression through inter-community visions and action. Unless grounded in a "lifeworld", and nourished by dialogue across such intersecting needs and interests, the thin soil of constitutional agreements and mechanisms prove too arid to sustain a new socio-political paradigm.

And so, one decade after the 1994 ceasefires, the Community Relations Council is to be congratulated (and through them the EU Peace II Programme), for staging opportunities for respective sectors to undertake a self-critical review of their role in peacebuilding. Taking the churches' conference in Portadown as entry point, and making reference to several consistent strands of observation emerging there, I will offer some general critical comment and draw out further lines of reflection, keeping in mind the interplay of theological, political and social terms. Elsewhere in the volume are varied accounts from the contributors and organisers, so this selective highlighting can be tested against that fuller discourse.

Conflicting Impressions and Views

There were some chiding words at the Portadown conference at the churches' failure to generate and sustain such visions of social inclusion and change following upon the Belfast Agreement. Their slowness to read the signs of the times for a future beyond division, was spoken of as was their failure to notice or support prophetic initiatives of peace-building beyond their sphere of control. This was counterbalanced (though not cancelled out) by the profile given to case studies of church-community projects and leaders that exemplified imagination and courage. Presenters spoke of their desire for or appreciation of church support or partnership, while explaining that the initiative had been undertaken in response to the needs of young people or of a recognized lack in the local community. Such initiatives were not linked to the agenda of any one church nor under the jurisdiction of the churches. Conversely too, there was an example of a church-led initiative in education, which demonstrated some institutional self-transcendence through a focus on community need and the fostering of cross-community relationships.

Churches and the Public Sphere

In his presentation, David Porter reported on research undertaken by CENTRE on the churches and the public square. This raised questions as to what it means for the church to be public - entitled or called to contribute to the public discourse, social policy and on action linked to citizenship and social change. The observation was also made, that in the perception of many, the churches have tended to stay on the edge, chipping in occasionally, but not real players so to speak, and that to take their place, they need to be become proficient in the language of human rights and the equality agenda, and to be ready to play a collaborative rather than leading role, alongside other bodies, contributing from their particular angle.

David Stevens posed the issue of all our complicity in the status quo, asserting that we are all part of the prevailing "moral murk" and need, at some level, to acknowledge that complicity and take responsibility. There is a need to break with inherited certainties, and with a certain humility, challenge our own moral smugness, even as we struggle for justice, truth and reconciliation in a society that seems set to keep ferretting out newfound obstacles.

Some claimed that secular groups were not above using the churches when it suited, and marginalising them when they didn't conform to the secular agenda.

Churches and Secularization

Fr Tim Bartlett, with concurrence of others across denominational views, asserted that churches should resist secularization, and make common cause against its all-encroaching domination. Some claimed that secular groups were not above using the churches when it suited, and marginalizing them when they didn't conform to the secular agenda. Regarding the role of language in social transformation, some asserted that the church should maintain its own specific language of evangelization and community. There are complexities here, however, which require further clarification and nuance, and these will be addressed presently.

Ecumenism Avoided

Ecumenism came in for the typical gesture of despatch: tried and found wanting in the usual passing sentence (pun intended) as another past-its-sell-by date; a failed grand scheme of church institutions, better replaced with churches' promotion of community relations. With a certain predictability were dropped the unexamined epithets about the irrelevance of ecumenical relationship, with little attempt to probe for possible

interconnection between a social ethic of inclusiveness and an ecclesiology of reconciliation – surely first cousins rather than estranged enemies. One must ask if there is not a broken integrity here, so long as the churches can point outwards to how other organizations should be embracing change while holding themselves excused. Is there not a blind spot in the failure to recognize that the churches' sectarian structures can too be "occasions of sin", and that in the avoiding of serious theological and ecclesiological reflection on their divided relationships, the churches are failing to examine their own consciences, given past or present complicity and given the grace entrusted to them to be "ambassadors of reconciliation" (2 Cor 4).

As well as a failure in relationship, is there also a failure of truth here, a culpable myopia? There seems at least a blind-spot, which accounts for the non-recognition of the many energetic interchurch activities across the North, ranging from Churches' Fora, interchurch youth structures, and ecumenical adult education programmes enthusiastically supported by Christians of different persuasions, who actually find meaning in theologically reflecting with others on matters of religion, violence and peace; on inclusive justice, religious experience and political ideology; on the biblical challenge of welcoming those of other world religions, and other neglected minorities in our midst – people with disability, the Travelling Community, or homeless young people, for example. Participants have brought interchurch encounter and exchange way beyond the pseudo-ecumenism of the token gesture, to new realizations both profound and creative of what it is to be the church that Christ intended, in a oneness that makes room for the needs and gifts of the other. And while so called ordinary Christians are so responsibly engaged, through substantive projects of ecumenical friendship and study, oftentimes clergy persist in replaying the

caricature in deformed reductions, without troubling to see how things may have moved on, blanking from view the unsuspected new embodiments of churches as no longer strangers but pilgrims.

Call to Bridge Gulfs of Experience and Broaden Scope

In a concluding paper, Duncan Morrow pointed to new opportunities for the churches, to the degree that they are willing to be agents of change, protesting against social inequality and in being prepared to overcome the "gulf of experience" between those inside the church (largely older and middle class) and those outside the church (working class and youth). This will only be redressed by listening and by educational processes on those issues of actual concern. Also important to note were the many references to the work overload of clergy, which makes burn-out a worrying hazard, and prevents them from giving priority in their ministry to peacebuilding. This surely intensifies the urgency of broadening the ecclesiological base of structural responsibility, with increased ceding of roles of leadership in this field to lay-folk who are highly competent, and often already involved though without formal commissioning and support from their churches.

Concern was voiced as to who really wields influence, although there was neither coherence of perception nor consensus of judgement as to how the churches' sector had helped or hindered the journey to peace. But the underlying realities of the theologically conflicting understandings of the nature of the church's relationship to the public sphere, the diverse ways whereby religion negotiates its relationship with modernity, and the diverse views on whether interchurch relationships have public significance, were not grappled with. As to resources, we heard on the one hand that the churches' sector needs to bestir itself out of attitudes of easy entitlement

and a leisurely self-indulgent "take as long as you like" kind of pace. But conversely there were expressions of assurance that the Special EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation wanted to be of practical support to the churches, and that a limited extension of EU funding was likely. This double view does however raise the hard question as to whether, as long as churches themselves do not attribute a higher priority in its own decision-making, funding and assigning of personnel to peace and reconciliation work, these matters are ever likely to move beyond the periphery of church commitment. While also wishing to insist that those who have persevered in the work of peace-building and have shown strategic intelligence and creativity in communicating that vision, deserve the practical support of church, state and funders alike, the churches should be ready to take some questions as to whether their belief in reconciled relationships might not be more than skin-deep.

'there were underlying issues who really wields power and influence, and no coherence of perception nor consensus of judgement as to how the churches' sector had helped or hindered the peace process'

(3) AFTER THE CONFERENCE: CONTINUING THE JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

Breaking With the Cycle of Conflict: a Christian Imperative

In reviewing the political change over the last decade, to say that the churches have played little direct role in the achieving of such political transformation is hardly an understatement. What has been their social-political role? What, if anything, have they learned from secularization and modernity about the respective roles of state, society and church or about the changed public



significance and social forms of the Church? Where do they find their place within contemporary society in Northern Ireland in this post-conflict period? In exploring such questions, we need to take account of the socio-politico-religious context, and also take account of the way religion functions in what Frank Wright termed an "ethnic frontier society" – one in which relationships have fixated negatively in over-against relationships of mutual deterrence. Whether turning upon views of the legitimacy of the state, human rights, cultural esteem, or political gain of any kind, within this pattern one group seems axiomatically structured in political opposition

separation, shunning, exclusion, punishment rituals, 'turf' warfare and vindictive murder. The temporary respite which succeeds the feelings of shock, catharsis and satisfaction, propels the relentless cycle of mimetic revenge without the promised redemption.¹¹ Churches in Ireland must keep scrutinizing their own life and witness for any covert tendency that sanctions or fails to interrupt this pattern. Condemning violence "out there" is not only futile, but fuels what it condemns. It is imperative that we all discover how we collude in tolerating violence - through segregated religious and social practice, and through clinging to identity-forming symbol structures which feed ancient rivalries through appeals to distorted memories of biblical chosen-ness as the basis for exclusion of others or parades victimhood as glory, and resistance as sacred liberation.

Violence cannot deliver peace, and the self-defeating mechanisms of the sacral power of cultural religion which keeps sectarianism in place need to be exposed and repudiated.

to the other group, each harking to Dublin or London in political terms, and, in religious terms to its respective "cultural church" for comfort.⁸ For much of the past century, social, economic and political relationships have been constrained by the recurrent threat of conflict, re-inscribed with religious justification - whether through appeal to the Exodus-Promised Land-Covenant tradition on the part of Protestant Unionists⁹, or to the Victim-Resurrection-Martyr tradition on the part of Catholic Nationalists.¹⁰ In such instances, selective memories are mythically laden via quasi-religious re-enactments. But, even in lull periods, it was but the "tranquillity of mutual deterrence" that passed for peace.

Violence cannot deliver peace, and the self-defeating mechanisms of the sacral power of cultural religion which keeps sectarianism in place, need to be exposed and repudiated. It is painfully easy to identify our latter-day Northern Ireland equivalents of ancient mimetic rivalry and victimization in sectarian

Sustaining Peace – a Counter-Balancing Imagination

The conflict-centred perspective has long since determined the paradigm of peace in the Western world. And while the churches alongside others have specific tasks in order to break with the cycle of violent rivalry, this will not suffice. The risk is all too evident that we become what we hate, ever more fixated on personal or group rivalry, seeking to disarm violence with its own weaponry. What is necessary is to summon up alternative visions of a peace-filled society, where love, not enmity is the sustaining vision of a possible alternative.

In these ten years, this has proved stubbornly difficult, and will remain so unless people find the courage to release one another from the imprisoning paradigm of conflict, make the imagination of peace the starting point, and from there begin to fill out that space of vision with rituals of healing and affirmation, with symbolic gestures of atonement, and covenants that promise relationship through the strange harmonies of difference, and

make space for the others in our midst. It is time to retrieve repressed biblical symbols of shalom, hospitality rituals of shared meals, and memories of conversation with "forbidden" strangers. There are necessary cultural transitions to be enacted which can accommodate diverse identities and encourage self-definition beyond old invocations of temple or homeland towards the risk of participating in God's New Creation (15:49;REV2)

(4) SOCIAL VISIONS AND SOCIAL FORMS OF CHURCH

Churches in the Public Sphere: A "Special Interiority" and a "Specific Openness"

Churches need to reclaim their social vision and examine their own conduct as social entities and sacred institutions which have long served to re-inscribe with mythico-sacral potency the historical patterns of mutual hostility. This very mythico-sacral potency has tended to disguise from the churches that they have frequently operated less out of a gospel vision of service and leadership, than as social entities centred upon their own self-interests.¹² It is vital that we acknowledge the ideological interests and sociological dynamics that come into play in our particular context in which, often, the present and future are held captive by a closed view of history, and ancient time is allowed to suffocate living space. Here, we seek specifically to find some new perspective on the church within a society in transition. How can the church open up to a new era, seeking new and meaningful social locations, reshaping a theological discourse that is authentically in touch with politics and life?

Martin Marty, a Lutheran theologian much engaged over many years with issues of public theology, garners an insight from Pope John Paul II, setting out a paradoxical, yet helpful key to this dilemma – named by more

than a few in Portadown. It points a way for churches who are seeking to play their part in building a better world, neither dominating others in the secular sphere, nor abdicating their commitment to Christ's mission under pressure of secularist assumptions and dictates.

In this view the church possesses both a special interiority and a specific openness.¹³ Thus the special interiority relates to its focus on Jesus Christ, and the shared gospel faith of its members down the ages and across the world. This interiority opens them to communion with God, and its special language relates to confession of belief, to acts of worship and a life of witness. If this were its only mode of being and language, the church would assume the character of a sect, engaged in insider-code, taken up with its inner relations and survival, keeping its back to the world. However, the church is also endowed with the gift of openness to the world, operating not wildly, but with a certain discipline. Thus, it is a specific openness which does not break with its own integrity. To be open without discrimination runs the risk of cultural assimilation or of being swept askew by the prevailing fashion. (Those who marry the spirit of today risk widowhood tomorrow!). While called on to guard against squandering its heritage to *secularism* – operating as a self-referential system – there is also a responsibility to be constructively engaged with processes of *secularization* – open to the signs of the times and creatively contributing to change in the light of the gospel. This distinction was not adequately asserted at the conference, and I would protest that churches could do better in seeking a foundation for relating to other churches, than in striking camp together on an anti-secularization front, or in beating a retreat together behind the trenches. The church, to be true to its own mission, must, paradoxically, risk itself towards new calls and horizons (cf, Isaiah 49; Matthew. 24).¹⁴

Isaiah saw no contradiction in this, but urged the people: "Widen the space of your tent, stretch out your hangings freely, lengthen your ropes" (Is 54:2), while warning of the need of supportive structure and discipline – "Make your pegs firm, or you will burst out to left and right" (Is 54:3).

Institutional Crisis as Opportunity?

A number of conference participants expressed concern at dwindling church membership – some with a sense of confusion, others seeing there an indication (not entirely unwelcome) of the demise of the old Christendom church. It may yet prove to be a case of institutional crisis provoking new opportunity. There are statistics aplenty to support the impression of falling practice - in church attendance and participation in church-related recreational or voluntary activity. Nevertheless, prophecies of 20th century secularists that religion would soon be seen offstage by secularist modernity have not come to pass.¹⁵ Three things are clear from such surveys: a) a continually strong avowal of religious experience as central to people's lives; b) an increased questioning of institutionalized religious practice and authority; c) a "thin" rather than "thick" Christian culture (adducing Clifford Geertz's terminology), espoused without formal knowledge of Christian teaching, with only a tenuous practice of personal prayer and public worship, and a significantly decreased involvement in voluntary outreach and social concern. By implication, historic church divisions will be less justifiable on theological merits (whether on the basis, ironically, of the wider success of ecumenical dialogues, or by default, because of the trend towards doctrinal ignorance and apathy). In particular, the more negative playing out of such division is already coming to be viewed more as badge of cultural identification than as theologically substantial.¹⁷ If crisis opens the way to opportunity, it will not be without cost to churches – obliging us to dis-identify from

institutional patterns now in sclerosis; not without surrender of a less culturally-determined pattern of denominationalism; open for listening and imaginative reflection, lending a more confident flexibility to church life, and bringing interchurch relationship closer to people's experience - often adrift but not willing to return to inauthentic institutional forms; searching for forms of community to support or stretch them in their hearkening after relationship with a transcendent yet caring God; yearning for a spiritual home without fences, and for the freedom which sends them out to others in socially responsible engagement.

(5) Three Dimensions: Truth, Belonging and Social Freedom

Movements of De-centring and Re-Centring

In the remainder of this paper, I offer some proposals in that direction, using a framework which takes the three human realities of the need for truth, belonging and social freedom as points of reference. In terms of this framework, one can also search out the conscious and unconscious ways in which such cultural dynamics are translated into three analogous theological and ecclesiological deformations: which fail in faith, by making truth-claims in dogmatic absolutes rather than in humble searching; which refuse the invitation to hope, by portraying group identity in custom-made tribalism rather than as living icons of community; and which privatise the practice of love into endless individualist or consumerist options which are a travesty of freedom and overshadow the suffering plight of those disadvantaged by the current disposition of power and resources.

Such deformations of truth, belonging and social freedom call churches to a three-fold movement of de-centring and re-centring, involving first, self-critique and an ecumenical

recognition of other churches and traditions; second, symbolic actions of repentance and empathy towards other churches and traditions; and third, a conversion from privatised self-preoccupation to a more willing interdependence expressed in gestures of hospitality and social justice towards others, including the "new others" recently come to live and work among us. In this movement, churches are drawn beyond passive legitimization of violence to an active reconciling role in the building God's rule of peace on earth.

"Living with/in Truth"

The Church is a community open to the search for truth. Its creeds have served its members as a common confession of the trinitarian God thus giving meaning to all who follow the way of Christ as the truth for their life. For Václav Havel, "living with/in truth" was a cornerstone of both his political and spiritual commitment.¹⁸ Truth, it is said, is the first casualty of war, and it eludes the grasp of those intent only on rationalized absolutes. It is not only politicians who have refined the art of combining the evasive answer with the self-justifying explanation. Across the board in public life there is all too often a thoughtless tenacity in holding to received opinion in preference to the vigour and joy of faithful searching.¹⁹

It is often remarked that the churches in Ireland have lacked prophetic vision, adopting an approach to truth that has encouraged acquiescence, while phrasing certain beliefs in ways that could be read as legitimating regnant ideologies of Orange and Green.²⁰ On the Roman Catholic side, conservatism was consolidated by an absence of adult formation in biblical and theological understanding, and an approach to doctrinal teaching that relied on unquestioned propositions. For Protestants, truth claims were rooted in biblical claims to righteousness, interwoven with a history that

dramatized triumph and superiority in quasi-sacral terms. These were delineated in reciprocal antagonism and religious absolutes which slid adroitly into the discourse of political dogmatics, bolstered by trans-generational stories of "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories"²¹, in which one's own religious truth claims were cast as totally right and those of the other, unquestionably wrong. Thus, denominationally-favoured doctrines and accounts of history written to the bias of one's own cultural and political view were assigned totalizing power.

I have referred above to the misguidedness, in my view, of churches' chafing against secularization and ecumenism. In 1993, the Opsahl Commission challenged both Catholic and Protestant churches to make some self-limiting moves towards the other for the sake of contributing to peace and reconciliation. This was seen to involve respectively re-visiting doctrinal claims which reinforced cherished absolutes, whether in regard to Roman Catholic impositions upon interchurch marriages, or Protestantism's historic formulations against the Roman Catholic Church.²² The hand of Eric Gallagher is again discernible. As far back as 1964, he had penned the following incisive denunciation of turning beliefs and doctrines into a battleground. His words are as sharp now as they were prophetic then:

Let us remember that our adherence to our beliefs and doctrines must never mean a... sense of superiority over our Roman Catholic fellow-country-men. They are neighbours in the New Testament sense as well as in the civic sense... In this province there is much for us to do together – there is the greatest evangelistic task this century on our doorstep. I cannot believe God is calling us to that task and asking us at every turn to maintain our religious guerrilla warfare... A gospel of reconciliation will never be preached effectively by those

who have no desire for reconciliation amongst themselves.²³

Here is language of an unmistakably evangelical spirit, transparent and accessible to any "worldly" conversation partner, boldly classifying the refusal of relationship with other churches as "religious guerrilla warfare." Not a much quoted text. It is indeed time for visions beyond one-eyed absolutism, for positive acts of recognition of the other and for relations that allow for self-critique, dialogue and mutual accountability, not least in the search for truth and in educational endeavour.

Zygmunt Bauman, writing as a sociologist, confronts the challenges of modernity and postmodernity in terms of the anthropological need for truth and meaning. His insights may be used aptly here to summarize this section. Speaking of truth as a social relation, he contends that the pursuit of truth in recent centuries as a fallible "design for certainty" has been a project of dominance and the subjugation of otherness, justified in terms of order overcoming chaos, but leading to ever greater ambivalence.²⁴ We are currently witnessing the collapse of many such certainties in Ireland, in the face of which, and as the level of social anxiety rises, those in positions of political or religious power have a critical role to play as interpreters of change and loss in the light of a gospel. It is this gospel which speaks of losing one's life in order to save it, whose salvation comes by way of the total self-surrender of Jesus on the cross so that all would enjoy the fullness of new life. It is a costly gospel.

Vulnerability as the Condition of Hope:

In this post-conflict situation, Christians should be able to look to their leaders for guidance in interpreting the dissolving security and for encouragement in their grieving. Good Christian leaders will encourage them in their struggle to find a way through the experience of desolation, finding hope in Jesus who

walked the way before them, and solidarity with those who have suffered similar experiences of loss. Surely Christians who look to biblical revelation and to the churches' spiritual practice for support in such times of need, should be able to expect those churches to lay open to them the ancient psalmic tradition of lament, protest, and resistance. Is there not a solidarity in suffering that can yet be found in such church-sponsored rituals of communion in shared cries and compassionate silence? Hope can open a way through the impasse, when, in purely pragmatic terms, there is no way. More will be said on the *Healing Through Remembering* initiative, specifically in terms of the churches' role in the wider social arena, contributing out of their special interiority, yet in forms of partnership with other public bodies and civic initiatives.

In the contemporary resurgence of identity politics from the Basque country to Belfast, wise community leaders can help their people steer a course between the known and the unknown. Churches need to be bi-lingual - confident in the identity-forming processes of their own symbolic practice - yet able to communicate with those whose grammars of confession, celebration and witness are different. Walter Brueggemann, adverting to a paradigmatic biblical story of the Israelites besieged by the Assyrians (2 Kings 18-19), develops the double metaphor in this regard of an intimately coded language for use "within the wall" of the community under threat, and a different more public language of communication "across the wall" with those (erstwhile enemies) with whom the leadership must parley, for the sake of the well-being of the people and the interests of peace. I have also suggested that the church is called to live by a specific openness - an inward and outward orientation. Churches today are equally liable to lose themselves in sectarian self-identifications, or through acculturation to ideologies such as materialistic consumerism.²⁵

There is scope here to make but brief observations on the role of churches in identity- formation, identity-securing and identity- transcendence. Embattled communities typically cultivate identifying features to distinguish themselves over against each other as chosen fixations. As formal institutions, churches have identified with their respective political culture - Nationalist or Unionist and have derived some self-importance as rallying-powers in beleaguered times, often oblivious of their contribution to the sectarian dynamics of avoidance and antagonism. Thus, for example, much of the social activity of the churches is linked to denominational space - tribal in consequence, however unintended. While there are indeed valid arguments on behalf of the continuing available choice of denominationally-based education, speaking at a conference sponsored by the Faith and Politics Group, 7th March 2000, former Taoiseach Garrett FitzGerald observed:

While it is true that at the highest level the main Churches in Ireland have endeavoured to ...cooperate in rejecting and resisting violence, on both sides there has also been a far too ready political identification with their own flocks, which at times has involved unambiguously political statements by one or other Church. Moreover insistence on maintaining religious divisions in society e.g. through the educational system, together with the Catholic Church's insistent application of its mixed marriage code, even in the muted form that this now takes, have been most unhelpful in Northern Ireland.²⁶

FitzGerald urged that these divisions ought not to be exacerbated by appeal to religion, and that "Christian Churches should be healing forces rather than ancillary sources of continued bitterness and division." He went on to ask whether, "in these areas of deep-

seated division the various Churches...are doing as much as they might be expected to do as Christians to heal divisions and to practice the Christian love they preach" (p. 22).

The research of Cecelia Clegg and Joseph Liechty²⁷ demonstrates the churches' negative role in securing sectarianism, despite their strenuous disavowals. One way of construing this is to see the social form of the church in the North as captive to its divided history and not yet willing, really to share religious and social space. Returning to work in the North on the 'Partners in Transformation Project', I put a question to someone who has been consistently engaged in the interrelated fields of community relations and theological reflection on reconciliation, as to whether there were any signs of churches' visible commitment to reconciliation across community boundaries. There was a long pause. Then in a tone suggesting that it gave her no pleasure to admit it, she conceded: "The churches just aren't there." Here too there is loss – and cause for lament.

In Partnership for Social Freedom: Reconciliation in the Public Sphere

In this post conflict period, Northern Ireland has more fully experienced many aspects of modernity which, the Troubles had disguised. It is now witnessing the privatization of religious freedom, pluralism in social choices and the professionalization of public action. There, as more widely in the West, leaders are judged, not alone on their capacity to "function" in a professionally competent manner within their own sphere, but also on their ability to perform effectively and with public impact - acting as representatives and contributing in a society where influence is no longer determined by social stratification and knowledge controlled by established elites.

Churches are slowly realizing they do not hold sway over the total realm of people's lives,

that their members are caught into a complexity of commitments, but, as Duncan Morrow noted, too slow to realize the potential for enriching both church and society of this diverse expertise within their own congregations which they could call into play in the devising of new patterns of intercommunity and interchurch action. Those in pastoral leadership must be aware that they are no longer seen as "up there", but as socially located - alongside politicians, educators, the media, social movements and the leisure "industry" in appealing or competing for people's loyalty and participation. They can no longer expect to be the controlling centre, as an unassailable given in the lives of their congregations, still less in the public sphere. If the churches are to be able to exercise their role as churches in what one theorist has referred to as our "runaway world", they need to gain some purchase on what is happening at this deeper structural level in the social system, to accept that they are part of that whole process of upheaval and transformation, not apart from it.

As long as churches are unwilling to risk themselves in involvement in relationships beyond their sole control, or afraid to give a lead in projects that require ongoing critical self-reflection, or that would demand sustained relationships with neighbouring churches in response to community crises or new expressions of shared life, they will be less the Church for that refusal. As witnessed at the conference, some individual churches and Christian-based partnerships, encouraged by EU-based support for endeavours of social inclusion, diversity, and equality, and helped by available facilitation, have already made significant joint efforts in overcoming sectarianism, and in nourishing civic vitality.²⁸ But these are still the exception, when the key to a way forward for churches is via partnership and participation. Grasping after denominational autonomy or control may have more to do with modernity's vision of

private freedom, dis-embedded individualism, and unaccountable power than with an evangelical vision of reconciliation and justice announced by Jesus as the sign of God's reign on earth.²⁹ Churches have something to learn from the perseverance of community-based projects, which have often opened a way for others - including churches and organs of state - to follow.

The published report of the *Healing Through Remembering* project represents a salutary gathering together of proposals for public rituals and processes of truth recovery, the healing of memories, and the honouring of those who have broken new ground in the process of acknowledgement, reconciliation and justice.³⁰ Such recommendations emerging from the consultation process as - memorials, an annual Day of Reflection, public and collective commemorations, social policy, education initiatives, community and intercommunity interactions, represent a wealth of ideas for thoughtful, compassionate engagement from many individuals and organizations.³¹ Kevin Mullen, a priest deeply involved in the trauma of the people of Omagh was one of the commission members. The "Four Church Leaders" gave interviews, and there were submissions from the Irish Council of Churches. A few theologians made submissions and some have raised the need for serious, sensitive redress of the neglect of this matter in their writing and other public media. What appears lacking is a sense of integral involvement on the part of the churches. The question again arises whether church groups, which did make submissions were marginal rather than central to the respective churches' structures of political and social responsibility, carrying little institutional weight. The vast majority of submissions came from civic rather than ecclesial bodies, and were couched largely in a language devoid of religious resonance. Did the

churches, as churches, once more miss the moment?

Given the nature of the issues and given the traditional role of churches in the "cure of souls", in the practice of symbolic rituals of the transformation of death to new life, this must give Christians pause: why the absence of an overtly religious idiom and of any specifically church-related role or proposal? Was there a fear that church practice would appear inadequate alongside other professionals, or so imprisoned within denominational structures in the face of tensions and delicate choices regarding inclusion and exclusion, or sharing of platforms or rituals which would expose political ambiguities and embarrassing theological differences within their own ranks? Or worse, the cost might entail loss of members, or necessitate compromise of dearly-nursed but non-essential custom? Were the churches perceived to be too politically aligned, or again unready to make the necessary "institutional sacrifice"? Or, are they deemed marginal to the main issues, out of touch, offside? Have they been replaced, having long since vacated the public space, thus leaving less self-conscious secular groups to shoulder responsibility for rituals of repentance, forgiveness and the restoration of justice?

More Questions than Answers, and a Long Way To Go - Together

Whatever the answers to these questions – and one suspects that they will be complex rather than simple answers, posing further questions – the involvement of the churches in public enterprises of reconciliation and the creating of a hospitable society will involve playing a modest but distinctive role, relating out of their "special interiority" and "specific openness". Church folk have much to learn about such collaboration across the wall; much to practice in terms of solidarity alongside other groups, cooperating to build a robust common ground wherein diversity and

freedom can express themselves, and advocacy is undertaken with and on behalf of forgotten people. The challenges inherent in the *Healing Through Remembering* Report, or the Opsahl Commission (which more than a decade ago noted the churches insufficient will to change), confronts us once more, as did Eric Gallagher and Stanley Worrell's words twenty years ago. While churches continue to act as if they were at the centre, often, in fact, they are on the side-lines, making arcane signals, unaware that the rules of engagement have changed, and that once-key players have been "relegated". Churches are not enough present at the heart of the human action and passion, in the zones of marginality where people cry out for meaning, for belonging and a life that would exchange the seductions of private freedom or closed systems that oppress the weak, for a just and inclusive social order. The distinctive Christian voice has fallen as silent as Zachary's. But where is the new birth?

Paul's image of the church as one body with many members and different functions, under the power of the Spirit working unto good (1Cor 13:12-31) means what it suggests. From the overtones of the body politic, we can infer a need for church groups to work in partnership with, rather than in opposition to social movements and public bodies. As they show willing to learn from others, to act in a manner more meek, yet confident in a faith that transcends both themselves and every human structure, others may indeed welcome their contribution of sharing riches that can revitalize communities in their struggle to live with/in the truth, to reconcile and be reconciled, and to find a freedom cross boundaries for the sake of a justice that restores and expands the common good. It explicitly calls them to risk themselves in co-sponsoring projects characterized by openness to the other, in participation and free exchange between centres of power and the sites of struggle.



Perhaps a key question for churches is whether they now batten down inside their chosen ecclesial hold, proofed against the sharp winds of modernity or whether, in risk and relationship they will find themselves on the edge of something quite new, among the marginalized, giving a particular spiritual and theological edge among those who desire to live with/in truth, with a shared sense of life-giving community, in co-creating social processes that are emancipatory, in service of a future shared with others, and recognizing that norms and practice are capable to being stretched to reach those "not covered" by the current system of power relations.

Surely the churches have a vital role in shaping such alternative, open spaces where ideas are never beyond question and the fresh air of dialogue can circulate, where experimental moves are envisaged and pilot projects undertaken – whether in secular life, through the arts, civic politics, education, or community development – or within and between religious communities via internal and ecumenical thought and action. In such ways, some progress can be made on agendas of equality, diversity and interdependence. Without engagement with people in such spaces, churches will continue to fail in the realization of new social meaning, social healing and responsible freedom. The process of emancipation from ideologically-driven interests poses a specific challenge to churches. Since religion has played a part in the shaping of identities around myths of separation and sanctioned violence, churches need to specifically involve themselves in the steady process of retrieving and publicly affirming those repressed memories whose power can sustain visions of love. Specifically setting free a gospel-enlivened imagination, churches together can share contrast-narratives – inviting all without fear or favour into that larger story of the Risen Christ in whose shadow and light Christians profess their hope, and dare to live as if the Resurrection were the ground of that hope.





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¹ Stanley Hauerwas is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

² George Weigel is Director of the Catholic Studies Program and Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

³ See, Dennis Cooke, *Peacemaker: the Life and Work of Eric Gallagher*, Methodist Publishing House, Peterborough, 2005.

⁴ Eric Gallagher and Stanely Worrell, *Christians in Ulster 1968-1980* Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1982.

⁵ Church leaders are aware of the challenges and some at the highest level have dedicated time, attention and shown willingness to cooperate in moving forward on reconciliation. For example, the leaders of the four largest churches, in 2003, sponsored and called together a planning team for a residential conference on the challenges facing them. The report is a testimony to the vision and the searching together, and shows on the part of some, no lack of awareness of the need for change, of courage to change and a readiness to engage with and enlist the help of others in mapping a way together towards a shared future. See *Report of the Consultation on the Churches' Contribution to Improving Community Relations in Northern Ireland: a Shared Future*, Loughry College, Northern Ireland, April 29-30 2003.

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⁷ John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, US Institute of Peace Press, 1977.

⁸ Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: a Comparative Analysis*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1992, pp. 20f.

⁹ See, John D Brewer with Gareth Higgins, *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland: 1600-1998: The Mote and the Beam*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke-St Martin's Press Inc, NY, 1998, pp. pp.22-26, pp. 133ff and passim.

¹⁰ See, Sean Moran, "Patrick Pearse and Patriotic Soteriology: The Irish republican Tradition and the Sanctification of Political Self-Immolation", *The Irish Terrorism Experience*, ed Yonah Alexander and Alan O'Day, Dartmouth, Aldershot, England and Brookfield, Vermont, 1991.

¹¹ Cf., another Girardian analysis of violence in Northern Ireland, which proposes the Christian gospel as a contrast-culture and resource for transformation: Roel Kaptein with the cooperation of Duncan Morrow, *On the Way to Freedom*

(Introduction by René Girard), Columba Press, Dublin, 1993. See also, André Lascaris, *To Do the Unexpected: Reading Scripture in Northern Ireland*, Corymeela Press, Belfast, 1993.

¹² A re-visiting and retrieval of some of our churches' best writings on church and society could put some needed rigour into typical discussion of these matters. H Richard Niehbuhr's *Christ and Culture*, Harper, NY, 1951 comes to mind or a number of texts by Avery Dulles SJ, as for example, his ground-breaking, *Models of the Church*, Doubleday, NY, 1974. These give a useful reminder of the range of possibilities available in the Christian tradition (servant, prophet, herald, institution, for example) – indicating the need for sensitivity to the demands of specific contexts, and for discernment and dialogue, rather than the freezing and imposing a single model of church-society relationship. More specifically on the church as social institution, see Ernst Troeltsch's classic, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2 vols, Macmillan, NY, 1950 in which they author demonstrates how churches and church life operate according to distinctive and interrelated levels and patterns – faith, worship and (the often overlooked) – institutional organization.

¹³ Martin E Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic*, Crossroad, NY, 1981, p. 4.

¹⁴ The Vatican II Constitution on *The Church in the Modern World*, in *The Conciliar Documents: Vatican II*, ed, Austin Flannery OP, Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1975, eg, pars, 44, 57, 75, 76, is a central point of theological reference for Catholics, in giving an account of the relationship between church and society, faith and culture, mission and inculturation. It was indeed out of his radical sense of mission in the world, that Karl Barth – noteworthy for his prophetic "over-against" stand against ideological secular power and ideologically duped religion – asserted the need, nonetheless for Christians to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Gogarten have highly developed theologies of secularisation. For a general overview, see, *A Map of Twentieth Century Theology: Readings from Karl Barth to Radical Pluralism*, ed Carl E Braaten and Robert W Jenson, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995, esp ch 4, "Theologies of Secularization", pp. 94-114. The titles should be in italics except the chapter heading at the very end which is in inverted commas as indicated.

¹⁵ See Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, which demonstrates the necessary distinction between religion in general, and those specific communitarian expressions which are fed by the collective memory and are capable of alternative patterns and mutations (both healthy and unhealthy). Davie adduces interesting evidence of this in European Christianity. In her, *Europe: the Exceptional Case - Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*, Darton, Longman

and Todd, London, 2002, she casts a different light on the possible futures for European Christianity, and not just the predicted ones of secularisation - depending on whether the right choices are made.

¹⁶ Cf two unpublished analyses of the International Social Survey Programme, 1998 – that of Professor John D Brewer (then at QUB), “Patterns of Belief and Observance”, and of Professor Conor Ward (University College Dublin), on “Patterns of Religious Beliefs, Behaviour and Attitudes”, delivered at a conference, in Dublin 2002, on *Church in the Contemporary World*, sponsored by Boston University and the Conference of Religious of Ireland Justice Commission. So also, Desmond O’Connell’s more finely-tuned survey of young educated adults’ religious and moral attitudes and practice, outlined in a special issue of *Doctrine and Life*, Jan 2002, demonstrates that notwithstanding their latitude in the sphere of sexual morality and a diminishing religious knowledge base, the religious character of Ireland’s young people has mutated, but defies the convenient classification of “post-religious”.

¹⁷ It must be remembered that Christianity is not the only religion, present. Both North and South, Churches should be to the fore in showing respect and concern to those who come with different belief systems. Christians should remember that much of the totalitarianism of the past century, whether Christian, Islamic or Hindu in form – has grounded its truth claims in religious symbols, texts, or sectarian tradition. So too have churches chosen different ways of relating to other traditions, ranging from Crusade, to proselytism, to tolerant co-existence, to ethical cooperation, positioning themselves somewhere along an axis from hostility to hospitality.

¹⁸ V clav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Prose*, Faber and Faber, London, 1991, p. 50ff

¹⁹ On the transcending power of thoughtful communication, see, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 84-101, 168.

²⁰ See, for example, Terence McCaughey, *From Memory to Redemption: Church, Politics, and Prophetic Theology in Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1993.

²¹ Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: from Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*, Westview Press, Boulder, US, 1997, pp. 48-49, 81-82.

²² *A Citizen’s Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland*, ed., Andy Pollak, Lilliput Press, Dublin, for *Initiative ’92*, 1993, pp. 120-122. There is a lamentable irony that less than ten years later, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church (despite protest from the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity) sent a “Note” to the Presidents of Conferences of Bishops, containing new reservations in regard to the recognition of Protestant churches as churches “in the proper sense.” This was particularly hurtful to relationships with the Anglican Communion, whom Paul VI had addressed as “ever beloved sister” in 1970.” See, “Note on the Expression ‘Sister Churches’”, *Declaration Dominus Iesus*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican City, June 30 2000. For a discussion of the crux issues, see Adrian Hastings, “Sisters for all that”, *The Tablet*, 21 October 2000, pp. 1410-1411.

²³ Cited in Dennis Cooke, *Peacemaker*, *op cit*, pp. 104-105 (italics mine).

²⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 232-233.

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, “The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic”, in his, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living*, Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 41-69.

²⁶ Garrett FitzGerald TD, “Christian Hope in Europe’s Future”, unpublished lecture, 2000, p. 21.

²⁷ Cecelia Clegg and Joseph Liechty, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, Columba Press, Dublin, 2001.

²⁸ See Northern Ireland Human Rights Act, 1998, especially section 75 on Equality; also, “Progress Report on Section 75”, 1st April 2003-31st March 2004, Equality Office, Stormont, Belfast.

²⁹ Fortwilliam Park Presbyterian Church in North Belfast has given a cross-community lead in opening its doors to Kansas Community Group (Catholic and Nationalist in background), whose Community Youth Club and Women’s Group use the Church Hall for their weekly activities. Collaborative activities may yet emerge.

³⁰ *The Report of Healing Through Remembering Project, June 2002*, Belfast, 2002.

³¹ See also the helpful and sensitively produced publication from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, *Journey Towards Healing: A Faith-based Resource*, Victims Unit, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3SR, Belfast, 2005. From the same source, with a focus on the churches’ sector, and also meriting attention, see, *Our Journey Towards Healing – Mind, Body, Spirit: Seminar Report January 2002*; and the consultative document on *Services for Victims and Survivors March 2005*, on the next phase of policy. It is to be hoped that churches will make thoughtful and engaged responses to this consultative document.



Beyond *Sectarianism*?

The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process

Learning From Peace II

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Learning from Peace II Project

Over the last nine years the European Union has made a tremendous commitment to Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of Ireland. The Peace II Programme, through its support to over 4,000 projects, is delivering real benefits to local communities. Whilst the Programme has achieved much, both in economic and social terms, the reality is that the process of building a peaceful society is a long-term one. No matter what the political difficulties have been, the PEACE Programme has enabled local communities to remain engaged in the process of building a better future for themselves.

The Learning from Peace II Project has been initiated to critically evaluate the impact and implementation of the PEACE II Programme on peace-building and reconciliation in Ireland (north and south), to ensure that the lessons learnt can be disseminated to funded groups, funders, policy makers, Commission representatives, Government Departments and the general public.

This publication, "Beyond Sectarianism?: The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process", seeks to critically evaluate the role of church based peace building work and provide both churches and the wider community with learning that can affirm and inspire peace building work at every level of society.