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# THE CHURCHES, RECONCILIATION AND ADDRESSING THE LEGACY OF INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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# THE CHURCHES, RECONCILIATION AND ADDRESSING THE LEGACY OF INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## Abstract

This article explores the role of churches in Northern Ireland since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, focusing on their efforts to promote reconciliation and address the legacy of intercommunal violence. The first part analyses initiatives that took place between 1998 and 2015, including the Methodist Church's Edgehill Reconciliation Programme, the Church of Ireland's Hard Gospel project, the Presbyterian Church's Peacebuilding Programme, and the Irish Churches Peace Project. It argues that their effectiveness was limited by a lack of financial investment by the churches themselves and by insufficient communication with their own grassroots. The second part analyses two post-2015 initiatives that attempt to address the limitations of previous projects: The Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's 'Considering Grace' project. The Church Leaders' initiative is potentially strengthening the churches' collective voice on key issues, as it moves beyond joint statements to facilitating public dialogues. Considering Grace is attempting to address the communications failures of prior projects through a grassroots-level, facilitated dialogue on the legacy of intercommunal violence, framed around the concept of 'gracious remembering'. It is too soon to evaluate the long-term impact of these initiatives. But it is significant that both have prioritised facilitated dialogue as a means to promoting reconciliation and addressing the legacy of intercommunal violence.

**KEYWORDS:** *Churches, reconciliation, dialogue, legacy/dealing with the past, Northern Ireland.*

## Introduction

More than two decades after the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), Northern Ireland remains a very fractured society. Across political and civic leadership there has been a failure to engage fully with the opportunities offered by the peace process to heal societal divisions. Given the extent that religious identity has been intertwined with conflicting national identities and the social structures of segregated communities (Ganiel 2016a), the churches have faced calls from within and beyond their membership for greater leadership on reconciliation and addressing the legacy of intercommunal violence. In this article, we analyse churches' work in these areas since the Agreement.

In the first part, we consider the period between 1998–2015, examining a range of initiatives at denominational and inter-church levels. We argue that their effectiveness was limited by a lack of financial investment by the churches themselves and by

insufficient communication with their own grassroots. In the second part, we discuss these projects' relationship to two post-2015 initiatives: the Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's 'Considering Grace' project. The Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative marked a new approach to peacebuilding from the island's inter-church structures, while Considering Grace is the most extensive legacy project attempted by any faith-based group on the island. We argue that in different ways, the Church Leaders' initiative and Considering Grace project address the shortcomings of previous contributions. The Church Leaders' initiative modelled a streamlining and potential strengthening of the churches' collective voice on key issues, moving beyond joint statements to facilitating public dialogues. The Considering Grace project recognises the communications failures of previous initiatives. It addresses this through a grassroots level, facilitated dialogue on the legacy of intercommunal violence, framed around the concept of 'gracious remembering'. While it is still too soon to draw definitive conclusions about the long-term impact of these initiatives, it is significant that both have placed facilitated dialogue at their core.

As a caveat before proceeding, we confess that both of us are deeply involved in the projects we describe: Brady as General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches and Ganiel as the principal researcher on Considering Grace. While our involvement undoubtedly affects our enthusiasm, we invite readers to judge our conclusions based on the evidence we provide.

### **Churches, reconciliation and the legacy of intercommunal violence, 1998–2015**

Throughout the Troubles, a range of churches, faith-based groups and individual faith leaders engaged in peacemaking, facilitating secret dialogues and creating public inter-church initiatives (Brewer et al. 2011; Wells 2010). Sandal (2017, 116–17) suggests that, in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, churches increased their engagement in conflict transformation by taking part in consultations with political leaders and paramilitaries. High-profile demonstrations of outreach by church leaders across traditional community divides, like the meeting of the Catholic Primate Cardinal Seán Brady with Democratic Unionist Party Leader Reverend Ian Paisley, undoubtedly had wider impact (Barnett 2006). Yet this and similar initiatives, including joint statements by the churches, could be dismissed as 'speechifying', lacking deep or long-lasting impact (Brewer et al. 2011, 31–32). Contrary to Sandal, Ganiel and Brewer (2018) suggested that churches retreated from peacebuilding after the Agreement, noting a reduction of grassroots reconciliation activity. They argued that a disconnect between initiatives at denominational, leadership level and local congregations limited institutional learning and militated against whole-church strategic commitments to reconciliation.

During this period, the three largest Protestant denominations developed dedicated peacebuilding programmes. The first and longest-running was the Methodist

Church's Edgehill Reconciliation Programme (2004–2014), based at its theological college in Belfast. It worked with young offenders, loyalists/republicans, and minority ethnic communities; and offered a joint theology degree with the Catholic Mater Dei Institute. The Church of Ireland and Presbyterian Church both established three-year, denomination-wide initiatives launched in 2005 and 2006, respectively. Both the Church of Ireland's 'Hard Gospel' project and the Presbyterian Church's 'Peacebuilding Programme' sought to equip their local congregations to engage in reflection and dialogue about the causes and consequences of societal division and take action by reaching out and forming partnerships. Despite positive outcomes reported by participating congregations, the initiatives were discontinued when external funding ceased, rather than being integrated into the church structures in a lasting way. There is also evidence that the programmes appealed to people who were already enthusiastic about peacebuilding, rather than stimulating more people in the churches to become involved (Ganiel 2021). The Catholic Church did not establish comparable initiatives, although there was significant activity through the Clonard Peace and Reconciliation Mission, established during this time by Redemptorist priest, Fr Gerry Reynolds (d. 2015) in Belfast (Ganiel 2019); and the ongoing work of the Irish School of Ecumenics, which was founded in 1970 by Jesuit priest, Fr Michael Hurley (d. 2011). Both initiatives remain active.

A similar disconnect between leadership and local level limited the wider societal impact of the high-level dialogue taking place in the national inter-church structures: the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) — whose membership comprised Protestant, independent and Orthodox churches — and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (IICM), which brought together representatives of the ICC and the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. Power (2008) attributed some of the limitations to the lack of agreement about whether ecumenical dialogue should be purely theological and working towards church unity, or partly theological and partly social. While a certain fluidity in interpretation may have helped keep people round the table, Power concluded that this was a barrier to action and resulted in a separation of theological ecumenism from community relations, underlined by the establishment of two separate departments of the IICM — Social Issues and Theology. There was no mechanism to disseminate the learning from this work to local level. While local inter-church forums existed in many parts of Northern Ireland, these were not formally connected to church structures (Power 2006; Ganiel 2016b, 192–209). In addition, reconciliation and addressing the legacy of intercommunal violence were only part of the ICC/IICM remit. Unlike the denominational programmes, these ecumenical bodies addressed a number of concerns beyond these issues.

In 2012, the Church of Ireland, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches, together with the ICC, secured funding from the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) under its Peace III Programme for the Irish Churches Peace Project, a peacebuilding programme that operated at both the leadership and local levels. McDowell (2021) explains that the centrepiece of the project was the provision of support in the form of a Good Relations

Officer in six target areas where there was little evidence of cooperation between local churches. The project was overseen by a Steering Committee that included senior clergy and senior executives of participating churches, and the thirty-one categories of target outcomes agreed with the funders included strands aimed at church leadership. Some of the tensions noted by Power in her analysis of the national inter-church structures continued as McDowell (2021) highlights 'an ongoing and unresolved tension as to whether the project should be primarily considered from a community development or a community relations perspective'. For example, the priority placed on reconciliation and dealing with the past varied across the target areas. This meant the project faced the same challenge Power identified in the earlier work of the ICC/IICM; ambiguity as a barrier to action. However, target outcomes were fully achieved in all but four areas and exceeded in eight strands. For McDowell, this underlines the importance of structural support to equip local congregations for peacebuilding.

But like the earlier denominational initiatives, these support structures did not continue when the funding ended in 2015. Ultimately, the effectiveness of all these programmes was limited by a lack of financial investment by the churches themselves and by insufficient communication with their own grassroots. But some people in the churches learned from these limitations. For example, at an inter-church level, McDowell notes that lessons and connections from the Irish Churches Peace Project transferred to the work of the ICC and IICM, leading to structural reform and new initiatives. That year the IICM was reformed to replace the two separate departments for Theology and Social Issues with a more flexible model of working groups, thereby eliminating the problematic division noted by Power. The meetings of the Four Church Leaders — the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, together with the Presbyterian Moderator and Methodist President — were expanded to include the President of the ICC, becoming the Church Leaders (Ireland) Group (McCullagh 2016). At a denominational level, at its 2016 General Assembly the Presbyterian Church unveiled a 'Vision for Society' statement that prioritised peacebuilding and the creation of a reconciled community. Its 'dealing with the past' task group also announced a major research project, which would later become known as Considering Grace. Considering Grace is the most extensive denomination-wide initiative to focus primarily on dealing with the legacy of intercommunal violence. It is also taking specific steps to address gaps in communication between leadership and the grassroots.

### **Churches, reconciliation and the legacy of intercommunal violence, 2015-onwards**

The strengthening of the Church Leaders Group's connection to the national inter-church structures, described above, allowed for greater integration of this work with the wider network of relationships managed by ICC and IICM. The Church Leaders Group also began to move beyond the 'speechifying' critiqued by Brewer et al. (2011) to facilitating political and civic dialogues. This included a series of public statements on reconciliation and the need for political stability in Northern Ireland. A consultation

with faith-based charities in September 2015 resulted in a joint statement entitled 'Instability is erasing hope from people's lives' (Moriarty 2015) and a further statement welcoming the 'Fresh Start' agreement that was reached later that year (Taylor 2015). Behind the scenes, the Church Leaders Group had been meeting with representatives of the individual political parties to share concerns arising from the pastoral experience of local churches and encourage politicians in the negotiations.

When the institutions collapsed again in January 2017, the Church Leaders Group undertook a consultation with local churches and faith-based charities and later shared these concerns with political leaders and the media (Breen 2017). By September 2018, negotiations for the restoration of the devolved administration were in a state of long-standing paralysis. The Church Leaders Group took the initiative to invite the leaders of the five largest political parties to a joint meeting in the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church in Belfast. It was the first time party leaders had been in the same room in eight months. This was followed by meetings with the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Tánaiste and Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs the following month.

Church leaders asked how they could support efforts to restore the institutions. Party leaders replied that the invitation to this type of dialogue might be extended to other groups of elected representatives since, in the absence of the institutions, the spaces in which cross-party groups could reflect together on societal challenges had been significantly restricted. The Church Leaders Group designed a proposal, with the support of the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland, for four regional dialogue events which brought together approximately 120 civil society representatives, with a cross-party panel of elected representatives, between December 2018 and February 2019. Two representatives of the Church Leaders Group chaired each of the regional events, but the role of local churches was supported with local church leaders recruited to act as facilitators of the round table discussions. A report of the findings, 'A Time for Courageous and Compassionate Leadership' was presented to the party leaders, together with the Secretary of State and Tánaiste, during the next round of negotiations in May 2019 (Church Leaders (Ireland) Group 2019).

We cannot offer definitive conclusions on the role that the Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative played in helping restart the political process and in reminding political leaders of the need to promote reconciliation and address the legacy of the past. But through this initiative, the role of the churches was evolving from one in which individual denominations contributed as participants in significant consultations, as described by Sandal, to a more proactive contribution in which they collectively took the initiative to facilitate dialogue on the unfinished work of peace, and attempted to shape the tone of wider public conversation.

## Considering Grace

Considering Grace is an ongoing project of the Presbyterian Church. It was conceived by the Church's Council for Public Affairs 'Dealing with the Past' task group, whose motion for a research project involving interviews with 100 Presbyterians was passed at the 2016 General Assembly. The project was in part a response to the 2014 Stormont House Agreement proposals on dealing with the past, which encouraged communities to gather stories. From the task group's point of view, the effort to gather stories reflected the idea that sharing stories could promote healing and forgiveness within the church's own congregations; and help the church contribute to wider discussion on the legacy of intercommunal violence. The task group was also motivated by a sense that the church's previous peacebuilding projects had not connected adequately with grassroots Christians, in part because the stories of many people who had served and suffered during the Troubles had not been adequately acknowledged by the church or wider society. From the start, the project was designed to appeal to a wider grassroots base than had been engaged by the denomination's previous peacebuilding programme, through the very effort to gather those untold stories.

But in line with previous denominational initiatives, there was no commitment from the church itself to fund the project, which raised questions about where addressing the legacy of intercommunal violence was situated within the church's priorities. Funding was finally secured from the Irish Government's Reconciliation Fund, in partnership with Queen's University. It covered the employment of Jamie Yohanis, who worked alongside Gladys Ganiel at Queen's, conducting and transcribing interviews. The Queen's researchers and the task group, which included serving and retired clergy and laity, identified categories of interviewees: clergy, victims, security force personnel, emergency responders, health care workers, grassroots peacemakers, politicians, those affected by loyalist paramilitarism, those who left Presbyterianism, and 'critical friends' from outside the denomination. Altogether 122 people were interviewed (including 50 women and 77 from border counties).

So far, the primary output of the project has been a book written for a popular audience, *Considering Grace: Presbyterians and the Troubles* (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019). *Considering Grace* is primarily a book of stories, presented as far as possible in people's own words. The concluding chapter advances the idea of a 'gracious remembering' that ponders the human cost of violence, gives victims a public voice, is self-critical about their own and their communities' actions, and listens to alternative perspectives and interpretations of the past (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, 242–43). But the task group recognised that a book, in and of itself, is of limited impact. So, Dave Thompson was employed to produce study resources based on the book for congregations/small groups and for trainee ministers (Presbyterian Church in Ireland 2020). The resources are the product of focus groups facilitated by Thompson in six different locations throughout Northern Ireland. Most groups met over three evenings and discussed materials and questions from the then-unpublished *Considering Grace*. The resources are organised

around the themes that emerged from the focus groups: lamenting, ministering, remembering, praying, forgiving, seeking a more reconciled community, and challenges to the church. The grounding of the resources in the focus groups was a conscious effort to avoid a 'top-down' denominational initiative on dealing with the past. It is hoped that grassroots Christians will use the prompts in the resources to facilitate dialogue and shape their own responses to addressing the legacy of intercommunal violence, appropriate to their local contexts. The funding for Thompson's work and the production of the resources came from an anonymous donor. But the church has invested in promoting the book and resources, organising five regional book launches in November 2019 and a half-day conference on 'Considering Grace: Unpacking the Impact', which was scheduled for March 2020. The conference and dissemination of the resources were postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but work will resume when conditions allow.

## Conclusion

Despite a range of denominational and inter-church initiatives in the years after the Good Friday Agreement, it has been argued that churches 'are missing their opportunity to help build peace in Northern Ireland' (Ganiel and Brewer 2018). The main limitations of these initiatives were a lack of financial investment by the churches themselves and inadequate communication with their own grassroots.

Yet two recent initiatives – both of which emphasise the importance of facilitated dialogue – indicate that churches may be learning from the limitations of their previous efforts. The Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative saw the churches moving beyond joint statements, which have limited impact, to facilitating public dialogues with political and civic leaders. Having said that, it is likely that grassroots Christians of most denominations remain relatively unaware of the activities of the Church Leaders Group. Others, including a significant subset of conservative evangelicals within Protestant denominations, might even oppose this inter-denominational cooperation (Ganiel 2016a; Brewer et al. 2011). At the same time, the Presbyterian Church's Considering Grace project has recognised the failure of previous initiatives to facilitate communication between denominational leadership and the grassroots. It directly addressed this by using grassroots, facilitated dialogue to produce study resources based on the project. Facilitated dialogue will remain at the project's core going forward. In addition, the themes explored in the resources, particularly around pastoral care and lament, will perhaps be even magnified by bereavements during the pandemic. At the same time, Considering Grace has relied on external funding. As with previous church-based peacebuilding projects, this raises questions about the Presbyterian Church's commitment.

In sum, it is significant that both the Church Leaders' civil society dialogue initiative and Considering Grace build on previous peacebuilding efforts, attempting to address

their shortcomings. And both initiatives have made facilitated dialogue central to their work, signaling its importance as a methodology for promoting reconciliation and addressing the legacy of intercommunal violence. The long-term impact of these initiatives remains uncertain, but at the very least, in these cases the churches are showing signs of learning from the limitations of their own past efforts.

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