

The Churches and Peacebuilding: Past, Present and Future

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This week we are reflecting on Good Friday 1998. But I want to take you back to the afternoon of Good Friday 1988, when 1,500 people started walking from the Falls Road towards the peace wall on the Springfield Road. It was just days after a tragic 14-day period which included Michael Stone's attack on the funeral of three IRA operatives who had been shot dead by the SAS in Gibraltar; and the murder of two plainclothes British soldiers who had driven into the funeral cortege of one of those killed by Stone.

The Cornerstone Community, an ecumenical peacebuilding community, had organized this Good Friday walk to witness together, as Catholics and Protestants, in penitence for sin. The sun was shining when the group set out, bearing a large wooden cross. It took hours for the pilgrims to process through the small pedestrian gate in the peace wall, one-by-one.

Rev Sam Burch, a Methodist minister and Cornerstone leader, recalled:

We carried that cross through the wee door and up the Shankill Road and into Woodvale Park and said our prayers. And it got as black as could be and a torrential rain came down, soaked us to the skin. And the sun came out and there was a triple rainbow. I don't think I'd ever seen a triple rainbow. Of course we said, "The Lord has answered us."

I've written a fuller account of this day in my biography of Fr Gerry Reynolds, an organizer of the walk and one of our island's leaders in faith-based peacebuilding. The rainbow on the Good Friday walk may seem insignificant when compared to the mayhem of the previous days, but I would argue that the performative aspect of Christians from various traditions walking through walls and praying together provides an example of a necessary ingredient for peacebuilding: Hope.

A Christian understanding of hope is quite different from the word's contemporary connotations, which often imply wishing that something will happen in a vague or

unfocused sort of way. In contrast, a Christian understanding of hope is a determined insistence that doing the right thing – even if it is a small thing – day after day, year after year, will result in perseverance over sin or evil (to use theological vocabulary).

I tell this story to set the scene for my remarks on the churches and peacebuilding: past, present and future. I want to begin on a hopeful note, because at times my remarks will not be particularly hopeful. But part of hope is recognizing the challenges and then mobilizing to address them, so recognizing these less hopeful aspects is necessary.

So, to begin with the past ...

We all know that the relationship between religion and violence on this island is complicated, to say the least. While the Troubles were not a religious conflict in the sense that protagonists were fighting over doctrines or beliefs, we can describe the violence as sectarian. Sectarianism is more than simply prejudiced attitudes or bigotry (though it may include these); it is also an all-encompassing system that structures society, politics and economics. Sectarianism is experienced at the levels of ideas, individual behavior and social structures (Brewer 1992, 352). These structures produce and reproduce inequalities and power imbalances. As significant social institutions, the churches have been bound up in producing and reproducing sectarian ideas, behaviors and social structures – for centuries. Indeed, at times the churches have been blamed (almost entirely) for sectarianism. To do that would be to claim too much significance for the churches, but to not acknowledge their contributions to sectarianism would also be an error.

Due to limitations of time and of the human spirit, I will not dwell on churches' contributions to sectarianism, during the Troubles or in the more distant past. I will simply say that the churches' responses to the violence of the Troubles were mixed. Some prominent Christians – clergy and lay – demonstrated exemplary leadership in peacebuilding. Their labors have been relatively well documented, to the extent that Scott Appleby, in his important book *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, published in 2000 and including several case studies, described Northern Ireland as 'saturated' with peacebuilders inspired by their faith.

Some were active behind the scenes, like Redemptorist Fr Alec Reid, in facilitating secret talks that helped pave the way for the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. Others witness

was more public, like Fr Gerry Reynolds and his collaborations with Presbyterian Rev Ken Newell; Presbyterian Rev Lesley Carroll and her work with Dr Geraldine Smyth OP; or Methodist Rev Harold Good, who served on the Shankill, as a Corrymeela leaders, and along with Reid later witnessed paramilitary decommissioning. Former Irish President Mary McAleese's faith – and commitment to ecumenism – provided high-level leadership by example.

Organizations like Corrymeela, Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, and the Irish School of Ecumenics also developed peacebuilding programmes – and inspired sympathetic individual Christians to prioritize building better relationships across many sectors of society. Still others, especially clergy whose duties included comforting the bereaved and conducting funerals, played the role of 'first responders' in providing pastoral care and comfort in the aftermath of countless tragedies (Ganiel 2023).

As John Brewer (2011) and others (myself included) have observed, the groups and individuals most active in peacebuilding often operated on the margins or fringes of the Christian denominations themselves. Brewer has called them 'mavericks' to emphasize the unique character of their contributions – and to highlight the hope-filled courage it took for them to do what they did. In contrast, the churches as institutions often condemned violence but did not prioritize active peacebuilding initiatives, meaning that their contributions were limited.

But what of the churches' contributions to peacebuilding *after* the Troubles? The work of peacebuilding does not end with a peace agreement; rather in some ways, a peace agreement can be considered the *beginning* of peacebuilding. So, I would like to reflect on the period since the Agreement as a sort of 25-year present, and analyse the churches' contributions during this time.

Overall, faith-based peacebuilding seems to have declined since the Agreement. While some organizations, like Corrymeela, continue their work; others have scaled back their programmes or disbanded, usually due to lack of funding. New initiatives have been created, like the 4 Corners Festival in Belfast; or the new partnership between St John's Catholic Church on the Falls and St Matthew's Church of Ireland on the Shankill. But there is

little evidence that younger generations have been inspired by their churches to prioritize peacebuilding.

In a 2021 article for the *Glencree Journal*, Nicola Brady and I evaluated church-based peacebuilding 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. These programmes received funding from various sources, including the EU, Irish Government and the Executive Office. But when the funding ran out, the churches opted to discontinue the programmes, choosing to put their own monies elsewhere. So, we argued that the effectiveness of these programmes was limited by a lack of financial investment by the churches themselves. In addition, these programmes tended to appeal to the 'mavericks' who were already engaged with peacebuilding. Vast swathes of the people in the pews remained unaware of them, indicating insufficient communication between institutional churches and their own grassroots.

Yet it could be argued that these programmes – especially the intentionally inter-denominational Irish Churches Peace Project – helped create a foundation for more focused cooperation among churches, at least at a national level. Lessons and connections from the Irish Churches Peace Project transferred to the work of the Irish Council of Churches and the Irish Inter Church Meeting (the island's main national level ecumenical structures), leading to new initiatives, including the formalization of what is now referred to as the Church Leaders' Group. This group includes the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, and the President of the Irish Council of Churches.

Among the Christian groups that are presently active in peacebuilding, a key theme has been their focus on our island's need to face up to its troubled past. Indeed, it could be argued that their most important contribution in the present has been to remind us that our island's future depends on the outcomes of our debates about the past.

Moreover, the Christians involved in these initiatives believe that Christianity can provide useful resources for dealing with the legacy of the past, including encouraging practices of lament; and providing rituals and stories that promote healing, forgiveness, and hope.

In a 2021 article in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, I profiled the efforts of Corrymeela, the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Meeting, and the Church Leaders Group to bring the past into debates about the future. I argued that ultimately their effectiveness might be determined by their ability to extend debate about dealing with the past to both sides of the border, and on the churches' willingness to address their own past failures, including their contributions to division and violence, and the legacy of church abuse, especially of women and children.

The churches, it must be said, have been slow to acknowledge their role in producing and reproducing sectarianism. Their most comprehensive confession ever for their historic contribution to division and violence came in the Church Leaders' Group's 2021 St Patrick's Day statement. Set in the context of the decade of centenaries, it read in part:

[We will be required] ... to face difficult truths about failings in our own leadership in the work of peace and reconciliation. As Christian churches we acknowledge and lament the times that we failed to bring to a fearful and divided society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God, made in His image and likeness. We have often been captive churches; not captive to the Word of God, but to the idols of state and nation.

This confession did not receive the media coverage and public attention it might have had it come 50, 25, or even 15 years ago – this is a sign of increasing secularization and the churches' declining influence.

But later in 2021, the Church Leaders' Group attracted more attention than might have been expected when Irish President Michael D Higgins declined their invitation to attend a service of reflection and hope on the centenary of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland. The controversy provoked by Higgins meant that far more people on the island were paying attention to what was said and done at the service at St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral in Armagh.

During the service, Church of Ireland Archbishop John McDowell said:

... as a church leader I am sorry that as disciples of Jesus Christ, we didn't do more to become peacemakers, or at least to speak peace into the situation. Too often we

allowed the attitudes around us to shape our faith, rather than the other way around.

As apologies go, this (taken together with the St Patrick's Day Statement and other words spoken in Armagh) is relatively robust. It could be argued that it provides a foundation for the churches to engage in dealing with the past with more credibility.

Catholic Archbishop of Armagh Eamon Martin signaled that intent in January this year during a service to mark the centenary of the Irish Council of Churches and the 50th anniversary of the Irish Inter Church Meeting in Belfast's St Anne's Cathedral. Speaking in a context in which almost everyone in Northern Ireland is opposed to the British Government's pending Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, he said:

It may seem ambitious, but might we in the churches offer to help develop an agreed truth recovery process to address the legacy of pain and mistrust that continues to hang over us? And, might our churches, also work together to create spaces for dialogue at parish, congregation and community level, so that all voices can be fully heard about the kind of society and values we want for our children and grandchildren? The churches have no desire to dominate such conversations. We are merely servants.

Although some reporters followed up by asking Archbishop Martin to publish the churches' proposals for a truth recovery process, no such proposals exist. Martin was not suggesting that the churches could organize or run a truth recovery process on their own, a point he expanded on during an address at Queen's University on 1 April 2023. Rather, Martin explained:

I made that call in St Anne's Cathedral ... because I believe now is the time to engage much more widely in cross-community conversations and dialogue about how we can sensitively heal the wounds of the past and present and address the restless yearning for clarity that still imprisons so many families here.

Martin noted that groups like Healing through Remembering and the WAVE Trauma Centre are already engaged in valuable work in this area, including facilitating conversations. He emphasized that any expanded process should be victim-centred and therefore driven by

what victims want to get out of it – recognizing that victims are not uniform in their desires. But the logic of his offer of church involvement seems to be that churches have a key position within civic society that enables them to provide safe spaces for these conversations to take place. And it is true that despite secularization, the churches remain the island's largest voluntary organizations, with potential for mobilization.

But, of course, it remains difficult to see how many people who were involved in violence could be compelled to take part in conversations in a way that might prove satisfying for victims, thereby promoting healing. It also is not clear that the churches would be viewed as safe spaces for everyone, due to the unresolved legacy of church abuses. While various church leaders have apologized for institutional abuse, there is still a sense that they have not gone far enough. In that light, I would go further than Martin and argue that conversations about the past should extend beyond the Troubles in Northern Ireland to include the legacy of colonialism on the whole island, including how that created conditions in which churches were given extraordinary power and, sadly, were corrupted by it.

So, to conclude: what of the future? The present activism of faith-based peacebuilders, and Archbishop Martin's recent words, alert us that our failure to deal with the past is in fact preventing the future. 'Preventing the future' is the title of a 2005 book by Tom Garvin, which explores why the Republic of Ireland remained so poor for so long. In it, Garvin focuses on the internal political dynamics that prevented the emergence of a modern economy, including the influence of the Catholic Church. Stuck in old ways of thinking, it was only when Irish policymakers made the hard decisions to modernize education and economic policies that the country began to prosper.

We face a future of hard decisions about dealing with the past. The current legacy bill seems like a mechanism to bypass the hardest decisions. It could be easy to lose hope. But if the churches and church leaders – at national and local levels – can help convince us that bypassing these hard decisions is in fact preventing a better future, that could be their most lasting contribution to peacebuilding.

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