

Building Peace: Christians and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

By Eric Getty
Williams College

In the late afternoon of January 9th, 2002 as schools began letting out after the first day of the term, two angry women, one Catholic and one Protestant, confronted each other in front of the Holy Cross Primary School in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast. The confrontation quickly escalated to involve the people nearby, and soon a bottle was thrown. As the tension exploded crowds began to gather around the scene, and people dialed up their mobile phones to activate calling networks of both communities, alerting their friends that it was time for a riot. In minutes carloads of youths were streaming into the neighborhood, followed quickly by armored land rovers filled with riot police. The rioting that ensued was some of the worst that had ever occurred in North Belfast and grabbed headlines worldwide. A few days later, a Catholic employee for the Royal Mail was gunned down as he arrived at work, and the Red Hand Defenders declared open season on all Catholic school teachers. This too, filled the headlines. It seemed to the world that once again Northern Ireland was descending into chaos.

What happened after all of this went largely unnoticed by the outside world, however. On Friday, January 18th, between the hours of 12:00 and 2:00 PM, all shops, government offices, buses, trains, and mail ground to a halt, and people filled the streets outside of City Hall in Belfast to say that they'd had enough. Sectarian violence and intimidation had to stop. Everyone had a fundamental right to go to work without fear of death. The cold rain was ineffectual in keeping people away, and the crowd was so thick

that one could not move or get close enough to hear what the speakers were saying. But it didn't matter, just as long as you were there.

Here in America, and in other parts of the world, our perceptions of Northern Ireland are almost entirely dictated by the media. Riots, carefully orchestrated by the combatants to include dramatic scenes of burning cars and crying children, make a much more colorful story than a peace rally. All that we know about the "peace process" is of contentious negotiations and political wrangling. If one is slightly more interested one might even know something of the various parties and of the key players in the political scene such as David Trimble, John Hume, Ian Paisley, Gerry Adams, and others.

Generally speaking, most would understand the conflict there as being a religious issue, having something to do with groups of "Protestants" and "Catholics," with little understanding of what, exactly, those groups care about. Others, particularly in America, may say that the conflict is one between colonizer and colonized, and that it is a struggle for the ultimate unification of a divided Ireland. The former perception is overly simplistic, and fails to understand the fundamentally unreligious ethos of the conflict on the streets or the sheer complexity of competing ethnic and national identities. The latter is dangerously unbalanced, overlooking the long-standing nature of the divisions, and that people of both communities share many of the same economic and social grievances coupled with the same siege mentality.

Few would deny that the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was a momentous achievement of diplomacy, and its approval by 95% of voters in the Republic of Ireland and 71% in Northern Ireland testify that the people there want peace.¹ However, there is also considerable substance to the doubts, pessimism, and dissension surrounding the

agreement, and the rise in violence in recent months is a sure testimony that something is fundamentally wrong with the “peace” in Northern Ireland as it is currently being developed. Part of the problem is in how the divisions are understood, and part is in the fact that the peace process lacks a sufficient element of reconciliation or social change, which places it on shaky foundations at best.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the importance of the work of Christians in this volatile context. The fact of their importance presupposes the central role of religion in the Northern Irish context. To this end I am in agreement with historian John Hickey insofar as I believe that religion has had a central role in the formation of national and ethnic identities.² Furthermore, society in Northern Ireland has not joined the rest of Western Europe in the post-Christian age. While secularism is quickly taking hold, Northern Ireland is still a church-going society in the way the US was 50-60 years ago, and some clergy are continuing to wage the battles of the Reformation of 500 years ago. In 1995, approximately 34% of the population of Northern Ireland actively attended Catholic churches, while approximately 18.6% attended the Church of Ireland, and 22.4% attended the Presbyterian church. That is a total of 75% of the population which attended church at one of the three largest denominations, and that does not include Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and the many smaller independent churches.³

Given that the societal boundaries are drawn primarily along sectarian lines, these high figures can be rather discouraging to the peace builder. One would think or hope

¹ George Mitchell, *Making Peace*, p. 188.

² John Hickey, *Religion and the Northern Ireland Problem*, p. 39.

that if such high numbers of people attend church, the effect would be a very peaceable society that actively and positively engages with social problems. However, the Rev. Kenneth Newall, a Presbyterian pastor active in cross-community work, states that in most of the mainline denominations, only 10% of clergy are involved in reconciliation efforts. He cites three reasons why clergy have been generally disengaged with society. One is that pietist theologies, which look no further than personal salvation and holiness, fail to provide the necessary impetus or conviction on social justice or peacemaking, and thus leave Christians neutrally disengaged from society. The second is that the clergy themselves are products of the divided community, and thus it does not occur to them to question the system. Finally, many clergy may be personally interested in reconciliation, but fear the backlash that such work would bring from their own congregations and communities.⁴

Thus, the ethos of most churches towards society can tend to be fundamentally neutral and disengaged, while at the fringes there arises those who are actively hostile towards the opposite community and thus effectively define the religious dialogue. One observation shared by many clergy and active laymen is that throughout the Troubles of the past 30 years, churches concentrated on burying their dead and comforting the bereaved, and hence put little time into looking beyond their own community. While this is perfectly understandable, the effect that the Troubles had was to silence those voices within the church that could have had the most positive effect.

³ John Dunlop, *A Precarious Belonging: Presbyterians and the Conflict in Ireland*, pp. 8-9. Percentages are taken from numerical attendance figures provided by John Dunlop, and assume a population of 1.5 million.

⁴ Rev. Kenneth Newall, interview, 1/8/02.

The potential of this was shown historically in the activity of Presbyterians within cross-community movements such as the United Irishmen in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the involvement of Protestant Christians in the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Protestant activists who sought to end the structural inequality faced by Catholics in the 60's were excluded by Sinn Fein/IRA, who attached Republican symbols and political ideology to the movement and made it impossible for a civil rights activist to believe in the legitimacy of the government.

On the other side, the Catholic Church has openly opposed the IRA throughout the 20th century, continually asserting that involvement with it is a mortal sin. However, with a more monolithic church structure, Catholics are more centrally organized and cohesive than the divided Protestant community. The Catholic community has defended the structural segregation of society in Northern Ireland, beginning with the education system and extending through the sports that they play. The parents of a Roman Catholic child will have difficulty arranging for his or her first communion unless they have attended the Catholic school system, preventing any cross-community contact from a very early age.⁵ Rather than play football and rugby like the rest of the UK, Catholics in Ireland gravitate towards Gaelic sports that fit their perceived ethno-religious identity, such as Gaelic football, hurling, and camogie.⁶

This tendency highlights the point that while religion and historical religious conflict has provided the ideological framework for the Northern Ireland problem, the divisions are much more complex. As with the above example, ethnic and cultural

⁵ There are indications of a relaxation of this requirement, and the existence of integrated schools with even representation in the student population testify to this. Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) curricula have been widely disseminated in Catholic, state, integrated, and special schools.

⁶ Hickey, p. 39.

identity also lies at the root of the problem. It is also a conflict of opposing nationalisms: Irish nationalism coupled with Catholicism and Gaelic culture, versus Ulster Unionism coupled with Protestantism and British culture. The opposition of these two camps over several centuries has led to deep-seated resentments and hurts that run both ways, and is expressed in the way that each side uses history as a weapon and as a tool to justify communal claims. It is important to note that, as Michael MacDonald points out, there is no correlation between religious fervor and political commitment:⁷ Northern Ireland is a place where there are such concepts as the Protestant atheist and the Catholic Jew. To further complicate the picture, it is important to note that there are also a few Nationalist Protestants and even more Unionist Catholics.⁸

There are many more complexities to the situation in Northern Ireland than I can address here. However, hopefully the picture that I have given so far sets up a framework by which we can evaluate the work that Christians *are* doing in the post-Good Friday Agreement society. Given the religious backdrop of the conflict, Christians have a unique role to play not only in providing positive and effective social engagement, but in contravening the negative and destructive voices and theologies of the past.

From this point I will be operating on two important assumptions regarding the understanding of the conflict. The first is that, especially since the Good Friday Agreement, it is no longer constructive to understand contemporary Northern Ireland in terms of settler colonialism or in any way that would tend to assign illegitimacy to the cultural aspirations of one community or another. Rather, to properly understand each

⁷ MacDonald, p. 9

⁸ Gareth Higgins, interview on 1/17/02.

community, it must be recognized that the identity of each is inextricably linked to the region. Each side must come to see that their futures are mutually dependent.

My second assumption is that, on the street level, the conflict is in fact *anti-religious*. Most of the people who participate in violent activity have never set foot in a church, especially on the Unionist/Loyalist side, and there is unambiguous hostility towards faith and religion by paramilitaries of both sides. As demographics shift in urban areas, churches are left isolated in the midst of “enemy” neighborhoods and die out over time, while inner city churches have declined to the point that what scant attendance there is is entirely elderly. This leaves little Christian presence in the lives of the young, poorly educated, and unemployed residents who are the most likely to participate in violent activity. This fact necessarily shapes the approach that churches and faith-based groups must take as they seek to minister in tough neighborhoods.

I have chosen to break down Christian peace-building efforts based on the model proposed by John Paul Lederach. There are three main components to this model. The first is that all peace-building efforts have to have a long-term vision shared by both parties. The second is that efforts should be conducted within a pyramidal structure. Finally, lasting peace must be founded on fundamental transformation and reconciliation at the social, economic, socio-psychological, and spiritual levels.⁹ The second component is particularly useful as a way of classifying the various peace-building activities that are taking place primarily in Belfast.

The pyramid is made up of three levels: top leadership, middle range leaders, and grassroots leaders. In the context of Northern Ireland, in the top level are the political heads of state and party leaders, who were largely responsible for bringing about the

Good Friday Agreement. The next level down includes church leaders, scholars, humanitarian leaders, NGO's, and academic and/or religious organizations. At the grassroots are various community leaders and charitable organizations.

So far, the peace process has taken place largely in the top level of the pyramid, and not enough of it has trickled down to the grassroots level where the peace either stands or falls. It is this tremendous gap that Christians in Northern Ireland are trying to fill. What I hope to provide is not an exhaustive account of every instance of Christian cross-community work or peace building, but rather a sketch of how Christians are working in various sectors to fulfill a need in society or to build a foundation for long-term reconciliation. I will begin in the middle range sector and end with grassroots work. It should be noted that the examples given here are primarily working from the Protestant community, although many of them are ecumenical or cross-communal in purpose and outlook.

Some of the most useful work in the area of conceptualizing sectarianism in its social, psychological, and theological aspects is being done by the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE), based in Trinity College, Dublin. Their resource packet, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, is a product of research carried out by Dr. Joseph Liechty and Dr. Cecilia Clegg and published in a book of the same title.¹⁰ Their findings have been put in the form of a resource packet that is to be used by churches, encounter groups, and schools as a way of walking people through a process in which they confront their own sectarianism and build relationships with people of the opposite community.

⁹ Colin Knox and P-draic Quirk, *Peace Building in Northern Ireland, Israel, and South Africa*, pp. 24-26.

¹⁰ Yvonne Naylor, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: A Resource for Young Adults*, a project of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin.

Moving Beyond Sectarianism is conceptually very broad, as it seeks to define sectarianism in all of its inceptions and consequences. Thus, it can easily be used as a starting point from which to evaluate many other peace building programs, both Christian and secular. The packet begins with a rather long definition of sectarianism, which effectively sums up their stance and assumptions:

“Sectarianism is a system of attitudes, actions, beliefs, and structures at personal, communal, and institutional levels which always involves religion and typically involves a negative mixing of religion and politics, which arises as a distorted expression of positive human needs, especially for belonging, identity, and the free expression of difference, and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating.”

Of particular importance here is that “sectarianism is a system” into which everyone in Northern Ireland is born and contributes, consciously or not. The system of sectarianism is pyramidal, containing four tiers that range from the worst offenders at the top to the most “innocent.” The key to understanding the system, however, is realizing that no one is innocent. At the pinnacle are the “psychotic killers,” followed by paramilitary groups, then politicians, community and religious leaders, and at the base of the pyramid are ordinary citizens. People in each tier are generally disgusted by and condemn the actions of the people above them on the pyramid, but nevertheless remain an integral part of the system.¹¹

A common example of how the sectarian system is perpetuated occurs when a Catholic family chooses to move away from a predominantly Protestant neighborhood or vice versa due to fear or intimidation. In this case, their legitimate fears and desires for safety and security have served to reinforce the sectarian social order.¹² Sectarianism is also reinforced by the use of divisive language or unclarified truth statements, by choices

¹¹ Naylor, p. 63.

¹² Naylor, interview on 1/7/02

on where to shop or where to send the children to school, or by flying a particular flag or painting a lamppost or curbside in national colors.

In order for a process of reconciliation to go forward, it is necessary to make fundamental changes to the ideological voices that feed division and form collective identities based on “what we are not.”¹³ In Northern Ireland, history is used as a weapon by both sides as each side roots its national/communal identity in a history of collective suffering at the hands of the other community. Coupled with this is a blindness to the pain that it has inflicted on the other side—“A divided society produces divided memories.”¹⁴ Thus, Protestants will tend only to remember the 1641 Rising, in which Protestants were massacred in an Irish Catholic rebellion; and Catholics will tend to focus on the 1649 massacres at Drogheda and Wexford at the hands of Cromwell’s Protestant New Model Army. A constructive use of history must take into account *both* of these events and thus acknowledge that each side has a place in history and that they share a common destiny.

Even more important than the use of history, theology in Northern Ireland has also been based on “what we are not,” and thus creates sectarianism at the deepest roots of a community’s identity. *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* identifies three foundational doctrines which can lead to sectarianism if they are combined improperly. The first of these, the doctrine of Providence, is the belief that God is at work in the world and that His will can be discerned through the signs of the times. The second is that there is “one true church, outside of which there is no salvation.”¹⁵ The final doctrine, “error has no right,” states that heretics have no right to hold or express their beliefs and therefore can

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

be coerced by the state.¹⁶ The first two of these doctrines are not inherently sectarian as long as they are properly clarified and expressed within the context of relationship. However, when these two are combined, it is possible to make the leap that “God is on our side.” When all three doctrines are put together, it could lead people to believe not only that “God is on our side,” but that “God wants us to suppress others.” The last two combined could lead people to the stance that “tolerance is a deadly vice, and error must be suppressed.”¹⁷

All of these theological assertions have historically been firmly part of the mainstream churches. “Error has no right” in particular can explain the violent history of Christianity during the 17th century, in which each side demanded religious toleration for itself but refused to extend the same right to others when in power. This created a dynamic in which taking power meant the total annihilation of one’s opponents. It is this historical backdrop that still scars Northern Ireland, and these are the same battles that have been drawn out into the 21st century.

At this point I must reemphasize my belief that at the street level, the conflict is anti-religious. Thus, church doctrine is not something on the minds of the people burning cars in the street. Sectarian theology must be understood for two reasons, however. One is that the 17th century conflict had a considerable doctrinal content, as alluded to above, and the second is that such language is still very strongly asserted in many conservative churches today. The religious backdrop persists, and many unchurched combatants still have enough religious vocabulary to use scripture out of context for political purposes. Thus, while it may be ambiguous, there is still a connection between the fundamentalist

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

who proclaims that the Pope is Antichrist and the thug on the street who wants nothing to do with a church of any kind. Both are part of the same system and perpetuate the divisions in their own sphere.

It is not necessary to totally revamp foundational theologies or for all churches to adopt the same doctrine. Rather, churches and individual Christians need to carefully examine the types of truth claims that they are making. A truth claim that is not inherently sectarian may become dangerous, divisive, or deadly if it is not clarified or stated within the context of a relationship of trust and understanding. Thus, to say that “we are right and you are wrong” can be harmless if spoken in a context of understanding, but can kill if spoken in a context of suspicion and hostility.¹⁸

Other issues that churches need to address concern the abuse of scripture, feelings and expressions of superiority and self-righteousness, and the “religious national” heresy, in which national identity is elevated to become part of a church’s identity, resulting in a subversion of the church’s fundamental mission.¹⁹ In order to combat sectarianism in the churches, it is therefore necessary to recapture traditions and doctrines so that they can be used in a constructive, pro-active way. In other words, traditional, widely acknowledged authorities that have in the past led people into sectarianism can be used to lead them in constructive engagement.

As a major example that occurred recently, the *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* packet cites the shift of Sinn Fein from the politics of force to those of consent. Because Sinn Fein held considerable sway over Republican opinion and politics, it was able to bring many around to the view that a united Ireland can only come about by consent as

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

opposed to violent coercion. On the Protestant side, the work of Evangelical Contribution in Northern Ireland (ECONI) is effectively challenging evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants to actively engage with society in a constructive way by demonstrating that there is a Biblical mandate to do so. Because it does this while remaining firmly in the evangelical movement, it is able to speak to this section of society in a way that other groups cannot.²⁰ I will deal with ECONI in much more detail below.

The Irish School of Ecumenics also offers several courses on cross-cultural topics in various neutral venues throughout Northern Ireland. It also offers a Certificate of Reconciliation Studies at the University of Ulster. Together these programs are primarily targeted to an audience of young adults, in the case of *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, and adults of all ages for any of their other materials. However, the purely voluntary nature of these courses must assume an implicit selection bias, in that those participating in most of these programs offered by ISE would already be people predisposed towards reconciliation. Nevertheless, ISE has provided religious leaders with an essential framework with which they can understand and approach sectarianism in their own sphere of influence.

Further educational materials are available from the Irish Council of Churches' Peace Education Program, which has formed an Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) curriculum that has been widely accepted in state, Catholic, and integrated schools alike. Unlike the ISE, the Peace Education Program is essentially secular in its content, and works closely with various government agencies as it disseminates the materials to schools that have expressed interest in adding the program to their

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

curriculum. The materials themselves are designed for children as young as primary 1 (the US equivalent being pre-school or kindergarten), and shift in focus for older students. For instance, the primary 1 material focuses on emotional awareness and social skills through story books and through interactive classroom activities involving teachers and parents. The primary 7 material contains a special unit on “People For Peace,” and highlights historic personalities who are peaceful role models, such as Martin Luther King and Mohandas Gandhi.

The Irish School of Ecumenics and the Irish Council of Churches are what I would classify as “upper middle level” leaders in the Lederach peace-building pyramid. They work closely with official government channels to change the hearts and minds of school children and to equip adults who are interested in reconciliation work. The Corrymeela Community is another group that has had a long-standing and well-respected presence in Northern Ireland. Located in Ballycastle on the north coast, it offers a haven for groups and individuals who want a brief escape from their own community context so that they can gain perspective and meet people from the other side. It has also been used as a neutral venue in which political leaders could meet and talk through their differences. It offers a wide range of services, including publications and classroom materials. Some of its principal activities include retreats for youth and families, during which participants encounter people from the opposite community in a non-threatening environment while receiving counseling on their own hurts and prejudices. It also addresses schools in assemblies or runs days of classroom activities designed to teach children how to deal with conflict and sectarianism. In this area Corrymeela works with

the EMU program mentioned above, and conducts training sessions for cross-border and cross-community educators.

Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI) is another leading body involved in the conceptualization of theology and sectarianism. ECONI functions primarily as a think-tank, with the mission of challenging evangelicals, who make up 12-18% of the population in Northern Ireland, to formulate a relevant response to the political and social situation.²¹ The genesis of the organization was in 1988, when a series of small-group Bible studies for clergy and laymen, entitled *For God and His Glory Alone*, was published and signed by 200 evangelical leaders. The title of the studies was meant to make an explicit statement in contradiction to the slogan “For God and Ulster,” thus challenging the traditional tendency for evangelicals to identify themselves with Unionism and to place their commitment to their community above their commitment to Christ.²²

As Program Manager Derek Poole describes it, ECONI is about “Evangelicals asking questions of themselves and their approach to society, traditions, and culture.”²³ Since 1988, what began as a series of meetings and seminars developed into a trust in 1994. ECONI is a “single identity” organization, with its target audience primarily the Protestant community. The idea behind this is that Evangelicals need to “sort our own house out” rather than someone else’s. In this capacity, it addresses several major problems within Protestantism, especially in the Evangelical movement, and then seeks to provide insightful, nuanced, and Biblical responses.

²¹ <http://www.econi.org/about.mission.html>

²² Derek Poole, ECONI information seminar, 1/17/02

²³ *Ibid.*

The first major problem within the Evangelical movement was that “Evangelical commitment had become synonymous with British and Unionist identity.”²⁴ Thus, the church became allied with a particular social order and lost its ability to critique it from a prophetic standpoint. The Gospel was effectively “co-opted into political/nationalist agendas.” With the realization that the church needed to regain its voice and make the Gospel relevant to the entire society came the conviction that there needed to be a great deal of repentance for the wrongs committed against the Catholic community by the Protestant side. Derek Poole states that this was something that had already been happening in the hearts of many individuals, but they had been afraid to be forthcoming about it until ECONI emerged and confirmed to them that this was indeed the right thing to do.

While ECONI challenges the unholy marriage of faith and Ulster nationalism, it also seeks to address the tendency of many evangelicals to separate themselves from society, what Alwyn Thomson calls the “politics of holiness.”²⁵ Many fundamentalists believe that by cooperating with non-Christians or heretical Christians in public endeavors, they would appear to be sanctioning their errors. They see their mission as being primarily to “live uprightly before others” and to preach the Gospel when the opportunity presents itself. “Opportunities” may include publicly “exposing” the errors of other Christians and “revealing them for what they really are” (i.e. Catholic

²⁴ <http://www.econi.org/about.mission.html>

²⁵ Alwyn Thomson, *The Politics of Holiness*, pp. 33-35.

sympathizers or ecumenists).²⁶ Many churches and individuals had thus remained silent at best when it came to speaking prophetically on social ills.²⁷

The people at ECONI are Evangelicals who have come to believe that social justice and reconciliation are an essential part of living the Gospel. Highly influenced by the martyred German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, they seek to ask themselves, “what does it mean to follow Jesus in Northern Ireland?” They believe that the Bible does have something powerful to say about their situation and in the pages of scripture find that crossing boundaries was an essential part of Jesus’s ministry. They look to the Good Samaritan passage (Luke 10:25-37) to find that Jesus’s definition of “neighbor” is in fact one’s enemy, and while acknowledging that yes, we do have enemies in life, it is the calling of the disciple of Christ to love them.

The practical work of ECONI is divided into three sectors, which are continually growing and changing.²⁸ The first is the Programme for Christian Peace Building headed up by Derek Poole. This program is currently seeking to promote more coordination and cooperation between churches involved in peace building efforts. It is in contact with approximately 350 Protestant ministers at one level or another, which is about a third of Protestant clergy in Northern Ireland. It is also in contact with many of the key players within the Roman Catholic Church. This program has operated on a “skin of the teeth”

²⁶ Cecil Andrews, Takeheed Ministries. Interviewed on 1/20/02.

²⁷ There are two types of fundamentalism that have had the effect of perpetuating sectarian divisions from the Protestant side. One is pietist and forgoes social and political activity, and has no implicit hostility towards other people, but is nonetheless strictly anti-Catholic and anti-ecumenical in its theology. The other, exemplified by men like the Rev. Dr. Ian Paisley and less so by the Orange Order, has closely tied fundamentalist Protestantism with an Ulster nationalist identity. A plaque displayed in the front of Paisley’s Martyr’s Memorial Free Presbyterian Church in Belfast proudly declares “For God and Ulster” whilst the Union Jack and the Ulster flag are displayed on either side of the pulpit.

While Protestant sectarianism tends to be very “in your face,” Catholic sectarianism is generally more subtle and soft-spoken, but equally as divisive. Conservative Catholics who believe in the one true Church, outside of which there is no salvation, often see Protestants as heretics outside of the grace of God.

²⁸ Information for this section provided by Alwyn Thomson, interview on 1/22/02.

basis for the past few years, and developers are now hoping to improve in the area of coordination by establishing a common pool of course materials for churches and clergy that could be drawn from according to individual needs. Last year the Programme for Christian Peace Building held a clergy day in Derry, in which clergy from all denominations were invited to come and discuss issues of societal change and be able to talk in a safe space.

A second program run by ECONI is called Transforming Communities, which offers two courses and a summer school, all dealing with cross-community issues. The six-week “Journey in Understanding” course gets students to look at the culture, history, and politics of both communities. “Bridge Builders” is a ten-week course that is designed to build on the first one and it suggests ways in which participants can move beyond the sectarian framework. It takes a very practical approach by placing people in cross-community projects such as Habitat for Humanity, which operates extensively in Northern Ireland by taking integrated teams on trips outside of Ireland and following them up with domestic projects.

The summer school offers three courses: “Encountering Protestantism,” “Spirituality for Social Engagement,” and “Faith and Politics.” The first of these seeks to address the tendency of many who have come to recognize their own sectarianism to react harshly against their culture. The course fosters understanding of Ulster Protestant culture without taking a condemnatory stance, and involves activities such as attending bonfires and parades on the 12th of July, on which Protestants traditionally celebrate a 17th century military victory over Catholics. “Spirituality for Social Engagement” tries to move Christians beyond the pietist individualism that has historically characterized

Evangelicals and establishes a Biblical and theological mandate for social justice and reconciliation. “Faith and Politics,” as its name suggests, tries to show why faith should be politically engaged and how it can do this.

The final, and to date the largest, sector of ECONI’s activity is the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Northern Ireland, known as “The Centre” for short. The problem that The Center seeks to redress is that Evangelicals have on the whole been poor at Biblical and theological reflection. What’s more, seminaries in Northern Ireland do not offer courses that directly address the issues that Christians must face there, and thus there is no obvious environment for “credible academic thinking” on the connection between faith and society. The Centre is growing to fill this gap, and has become the largest branch of ECONI, using the most time and resources.

The Centre is basically a think-tank, which conducts extensive research on a variety of topics and churns out publications in the form of books, pamphlets, articles, and the quarterly periodical, *Lion and Lamb*. It has also become involved in educational issues through the European Union’s Socrates Project, through which it is cooperating with Lutheran groups in Sweden and Latvia. On the front burner at the moment is the human rights debate, which is currently in the consultation stage as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission seeks to formulate recommendations for Westminster on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Alwyn Thomson is conducting extensive research and is engaging with the political process through writing, speaking, and discussions with politicians. Another current two- to three-year project, entitled “Embodying Forgiveness,” addresses how various Christian traditions approach the question of

forgiveness in relation to certain contemporary issues. It will culminate in a series of papers by commissioned authors and two conferences in September and October of 2002.

Within the churches themselves, there are several outstanding individuals who have courageously stepped across the communal divide and built solid relationships and friendships. One of these, the Rev. Kenneth Newell of Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, was in 1999 the first Protestant ever to receive the Pax Christi International Peace Prize, awarded by a Catholic organization. Rev. Newell shared the prize with Fr. Gerry Reynolds of the Clonard Monastery. The two were recognized for the foundation of the Fitzroy/Clonard Fellowship, which seeks, through the study of the Bible and through social action, to tackle many of the issues that divide Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.²⁹

Newell's journey began in the 1960's, when he was a chaplain in the Orange Order and held very strong anti-Catholic beliefs. The turning point came for him when, as a divinity student at Cambridge, he traveled on a theological tour of Roman Catholic and Reformed churches in the post-Vatican II Netherlands. While attending a Roman Catholic mass he was deeply moved, and says that getting away from Northern Ireland was a key factor in his change of heart. He worked as a missionary in Indonesia and West Timor during the 1970's, and had the opportunity to cooperate with many Catholics in the mission field. On his return to Belfast in 1976 he immediately began cooperative work with St. Malachy's Church. While speaking on the BBC about his commitment to peace building in 1981 he was heard by people at the Clonard Monastery, and their cooperation began soon after.³⁰ During the tense years leading up to the 1994 IRA cease-

²⁹ <http://www.fitzroy.org.uk/index2.htm>

³⁰ Ronald A. Wells, "Fellowship Without Borders," *Christianity Today*, Dec. 4, 2000.

fire, Newell took part in a series of secret meetings with paramilitary leaders, including Gerry Adams and the Sinn Fein leadership. He remains convinced of their commitment to a peaceful solution in Northern Ireland and, like those at ECONI, espouses a strong belief in the theology of reconciliation and the inseparability of the Gospel from social engagement.

Rev. Dr. John Dunlop is another Presbyterian minister who has helped to lead the Presbyterian church in its social witness in Northern Ireland. A former Moderator, and now the Co-Convener of the Church and Government Committee of the General Assembly, his voice is widely respected by leaders of both communities. Through his involvement in the Interchurch Committee on Northern Ireland in the USA, he has been called to the White House to endorse the churches' "Call for Fair Employment and Investment" in Northern Ireland. He too, cites positive experiences working with Catholics in the mission field (in Jamaica) as being formative of his current approach.

While an effective cross-community leader who is involved in the ecumenical Antrim Road Clergy Fellowship, Dr. Dunlop is also a voice for the Presbyterian community, whose story has often been forgotten in popular perceptions of the conflict that tend to pit Anglicans of the Church of Ireland against Catholics. Historically, Presbyterians were often a bridge community between Anglicans and Catholics, being between them in the social and legal pecking order. Today the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is heavily involved in reconciliation efforts. The General Assembly regularly offers pronouncements, comments, and recommendations on political developments. Dr. Dunlop is passionate about peace and justice, and because of this he is candid when he

speaks of the role of the church in the peace process and the concerns he has about the Good Friday Agreement as it currently stands.

He feels that the releasing of paramilitary prisoners following the Agreement was a very high price to pay for peace. Since 1998, there has been a dramatic increase in drug crime and smuggling perpetrated by paramilitary mafias, which heavily influence many working class urban areas. Dunlop also wonders whether the power-sharing Assembly has actually institutionalized sectarian divisions. Because the political parties are formed along sectarian lines and only represent the interests of their constituencies rather than any particular political stance, the current political structure may actually be reinforcing and increasing an already-bad situation of self-segregation. Nevertheless, he says that the power-sharing assembly may be a “necessary interim arrangement to foster the politics of cooperation at the level of the Executive.” At the street level, the newly strengthened paramilitaries have continued their intimidation campaigns as they shore up their territories within the cities. These territories then become fiefdoms rife with drugs, smuggling, and corruption. The churches are being pushed out of these environments, while at the same time people are subject to an endless cycle of poor education, unemployment, violence, alcoholism, and drug abuse, all exploited by paramilitary groups.

The lack of hope or reconciliation of any kind on the ground level is reflected at the political level, where there are an insufficient number of national public figures who espouse reconciliation, and there has not been an equivalent to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Northern Ireland. Gareth Higgins, a young, energetic

Christian social activist who recently received his Ph.D., notes these facts with disdain.³¹ Higgins is a co-founder of the Zero: 28 Project, which conceptually seeks to fill the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Northern Ireland. The project is named the way it is because “everyone’s phone number in Northern Ireland begins with 028,” which symbolizes that “we actually have a lot more in common with each other than we have in common with anyone else in the world.” In fact, he believes that the peace process has neglected to deal comprehensively with the issues of sectarianism, reconciliation, and peace at the grass roots level, focusing instead on political stability at the elite level. He notes that in all of the political wrangling people forget that “violence is the enemy,” and that the conflict isn’t as black and white as “awful Brits, poor Catholics.” Justice will not be done until they see that the conflict is much more complex than that. He also believes that people need to come to recognize the many shades of identity that exist in Northern Ireland, and points to himself as an example. His family heritage is very diverse, with Protestant, Catholic, English, Scottish, and Irish ancestry in his blood. His cultural identity does not therefore fit with either the Irish Catholic or the British Unionist political identities. He further notes that the society is not merely divided between Protestant and Catholic, but that there are also Protestant Nationalists and Catholic Unionists.

The Zero: 28 project is just returning from a brief hiatus since its first inception in 1998, and the team has spent the time reconceptualizing it. At the moment one of the primary target populations is the middle class of both communities. Never short on sound bytes, Higgins proclaims that “the great antidote to activism is affluence,” and that “we can’t be authentic disciples of Christ if we are disengaged.” He has learned these

³¹ Gareth Higgins, all following material from interview on 1/17/02.

things from his own middle class upbringing, in which he never went to the Falls Road until he was 20 years old. The Zero: 28 Project is about creating a non-sectarian political activism that will give a voice to the vast constituency that shares the same vision for peace building but has no political party to represent it. In its original form, it featured political discussion events held in nightclubs, a newsletter, and a lobbying campaign encouraging politicians to take risks for peace. It advocated compromise on such issues as the Garvaghy Road parades controversy.

In the short term, Zero: 28 plans to have a program that will directly address the conflict in people's lives and challenge them on their need for healing. Dr. Higgins identifies three levels at which the conflict in society must be addressed: 1) people's ideas, perceptions of history, and response to violence; 2) their individual behavior, expressed in the people they meet, where they choose to work, and what boundaries and taboos they place on their conversations; 3) the polarization, tribalism, and lack of vision of the political parties, which represent ethnic groups rather than moral visions. Dr. Higgins notes that the peace process primarily deals with the third of these components, and that in an inadequate way.

Ultimately, the Zero: 28 Project will encourage participants to stretch themselves well beyond their comfort zones in order to cross boundaries, forge challenging relationships, and be politically active through campaigning and lobbying. Activities will include round table discussions with politicians, during which people will be able to freely ask the burning questions that they'd always wanted to ask. The project will most certainly have a theme of "humorous non-violent resistance," a tone set by the creativity and energy of those leading it.

All of the groups and individuals described above fit into the second tier of Lederach's peace-building model. To a certain degree, they form a bridge between the grassroots and the top of the pyramid. The concerns voiced by the people working at this level highlight the glaring inadequacies of the peace process, and particularly the effect these failures have at the grassroots level. I will now turn to two important Christian endeavors that are working in the middle of the toughest neighborhoods of Belfast, endeavors that are essential to the survival of the peace process itself.

The Silverstream Housing Estate is located in Ballysillan, one of the most violent and troubled neighborhoods in North Belfast.³² It is entirely controlled by Loyalist paramilitary groups like the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), who often engage in violent feuds over drug territory. In the heart of this area, located adjacent to the local paramilitary office where people go when they need help with employment or housing, is one of the "blue houses." These houses, located throughout Northern Ireland, are widely known on the streets to be safe havens, places that will draw anathema to those who harm them, and whose workers are respected and protected, not because they are feared or have power over others, but because of the warm, accepting, and valuable presence that they have in the lives of young people in the neighborhood.

The "blue houses" are community centers run by Youth For Christ, an international Christian missionary organization founded by Billy Graham. They are manned entirely by volunteers who give of their lives to offer hope to those who otherwise would have none in an area where churches have little or no effective presence. The drop-in center in the Silverstream Estate is run by Miriam McAlister and a small

number of volunteers. Because of the highly ghettoized social structure in North Belfast, it can serve only the youth in the very immediate vicinity. Even Protestant youth from outside the Silverstream Estate venture out of their territory at their own risk. It is a very popular hangout, nonetheless, as it gives kids someplace to go after school and at night, instead of being out on the streets where they are liable to be involved in violent activity. Many of the kids who come there have a history of drug abuse, violence, and poor school attendance. The drop-in center seeks to provide a mentoring environment, where volunteers are there to be a listening ear and to provide counseling when needed.

Each night the drop-in center has a different program or activity or a different age group. On Wednesday nights is a kids' club for children of ages ranging from four to nine, while there are two girls' clubs on separate nights, which provide counseling on family relationships, drug addiction, and basic Christianity, and provides opportunities for trips away from Northern Ireland. These trips are often done via one of Habitat For Humanity's many cross-community mission projects. Last year, two girls from Silverstream took part in the Creative Crosslinks program, in which they traveled with a team of short-term missionaries to a deprived area outside Durban, South Africa. This proved to be a life-changing, perspective-altering experience for them which enabled the girls to see the world outside of their own volatile and broken environment. The house also has nights for boys and for teenagers over 14. These nights often feature guest speakers such as ex-paramilitaries who have since turned to Christ and reconciliation and away from violence.

Through this center, Youth For Christ has provided an invaluable service and source of hope for the children and youth of the Silverstream Housing Estate. The

³² The following account from interview with Miriam McAlister, on 1/22/02

alternative for these kids is all too often driven home, such as last May when a man was killed outside of the center during a battle between two feuding paramilitary groups as the young people inside sheltered from the gunfire. The kids who hang out there are considered to be the toughest, most dangerous, and at-risk kids in the area, and the volunteers there are encouraged that they nevertheless return week after week. Some of these kids have hope of becoming effective leaders in the future.

At the opposite end of the city on the Lower Ormeau Road is the Mornington Community Project.³³ Lower Ormeau is a predominantly working class Catholic neighborhood and has recently been the scene of much tension and violence during the marching season as the Orange Order attempts to march past the Catholic housing estates. It also suffered from a 42% unemployment rate in 1992, although among 18-25 year olds it stood at 65%, figures which testify to the deprivation of the area.³⁴

It is against a backdrop of sectarian strife and inner city poverty that the Mornington Community Project has sought to minister. It is an inter-denominational, Christian organization that sees the alleviation of socio-economic disadvantage as an essential part of living the Gospel in the world. As such, it is attempting to meet almost every conceivable need of the people there, and it is cross-community in nature in that it addresses Catholic deprivation while challenging middle-class Protestant volunteers with the demands for social justice.

Mornington offers a impressive array of services to the people of the area. The center of the project is the Gaslight Coffee Shop, which offers good, inexpensive meals and provides a relaxed environment where people in the community can meet and talk

³³ Account from interview with Ken Humphries, 1/22/02

³⁴ Mornington Community Project Limited, *Project Profile*, pp. 1, 2.

with staff and volunteers. It also continually employs six trainee staff who receive critical catering training and work experience, after which nearly all will secure permanent employment.³⁵ Through its employment training courses and Jobskills Programs, Mornington has made a dent in the unemployment figures in the area. Out of 397 people who participated in them, 100 found work, 138 went on to further training or education, and 159 returned to unemployed status.³⁶

Through the “Action for Community Employment Scheme” (A.C.E.), volunteers were able to carry out several community service projects, such as neighborhood clean-up, installing smoke alarms and doing repairs and improvements in the homes of senior citizens, and organizing community social events. Mornington provides an outreach to children and youth, as well, through after-school homework clubs, mothers and toddlers groups, and young men’s and young women’s clubs. Staff are always available to offer advice on welfare, health, and legal matters.³⁷

Essentially, the Mornington Community Project has become a nucleus for the Lower Ormeau area, and it offers almost every service for which there is a need. Much of the funding for the project has come through the European Union and the local government. Given the integral role that it is playing in community development, it may be surprising that it is currently on a shoestring budget because their funding has been “decimated by unwarranted fluctuations in related government strategy, and by unethical, politically motivated manipulation of funding structures.”³⁸ To put the wording into common language, the authorities have been reallocating funds to community centers run

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

by political parties. These parties are using the money to shore up their own territorial constituencies, and the money is not resulting in a fundamental change in attitude on the part of the paramilitary combatants in spite of the liberal sounding language of their political leaders.

This disturbing reality brings me back to the wide and dangerous gap between the “peace process” taking place in the political arena and the peace building efforts taking place in the middle and grassroots sectors. One short drive through Shankill, Ardoyne, Ballysillan, or Lower Ormeau will immediately tell that the peace has never truly come to these places. Christian leaders fully recognize this and are deeply alarmed. There has been an insufficient amount of effort on the part of the political leadership in Northern Ireland to take up the vital responsibility for leading the way in reconciliation. This year’s statistics tell the story: 66% of people “now live in an area where the resident population is either 90% Protestant or 90% Catholic.” That is up from 63% ten years ago. 62% of residents in areas divided by “peace walls” feel that relations have worsened, while 68% of 18-25 year olds have never had a meaningful conversation with a person of the other community. 62% say that they have been victims of physical or verbal sectarian abuse since the IRA declared a cease-fire in 1994. Only 5% of Catholics and 8% of Protestants work in an area dominated by the other group.³⁹

These figures tell the tale of a society being increasingly driven into enclaves, and no theory of “benign apartheid” can be an acceptable answer to the problem. Separation and avoidance is not true peace and will only deepen the fear, suspicion, and hatred felt between the two groups. Politicians have delivered a political settlement, but it will not last unless the deeply felt divisions, injustices, and hurts are confronted and overcome.

The Good Friday Agreement may in fact have deepened mutual resentments in the inner city areas. Dangerous terrorists and criminals were given their freedom in exchange for a cease-fire by the paramilitaries, while the political fronts for paramilitary groups are now enjoying unprecedented government patronage and legitimacy. This has led to increased ghettoisation of the urban landscape and rule by sectarian mafias, who are pushing drugs into schools and providing dubious employment for the uneducated and unemployable.

The Agreement needs to go farther, because lasting peace can only come about through reconciliation. But what exactly is reconciliation? It is a long, arduous, and painful process by which individuals make their peace with their enemies. It is a slow process that begins with toleration and ends with acceptance of the other group. The cross-community efforts by groups like Corrymeela, ECONI, Habitat For Humanity, Youth For Christ, and the Mornington Community Project have been highly effective in their own spheres. But their spheres are small, and there are hundreds of spheres waiting to be filled.

At the top level, there needs to be a place for the non-sectarian visionaries of Northern Ireland to have a voice in the political realm. At the moment, there are not enough prominent leaders who have acknowledged the need for individual or communal reconciliation. Loyalist leaders have often failed to recognize the importance of the fact that their community has inflicted centuries of structural deprivation on their Catholic neighbors, creating a situation where an entire population does not feel welcome in the society. Republican leaders have never extended apologies or condolences to the bereaved families in the Unionist community who have suffered at the hands of the IRA and the INLA. Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern have portrayed their governments as

³⁹ "Belfast dives into new sectarian rifts," *Belfast Telegraph*, January 4, 2002.

innocent peace brokers, failing to acknowledge the historical role of Britain and the Republic of Ireland in fuelling conflict in Northern Ireland. The result is that victims are marginalized and people feel that their voices have not been heard. It has been said in recent days that political violence is the voice of those who feel that they are being ignored.

When policy makers continue to reduce and reallocate the funding of essential peace builders along political lines without developing a comprehensive reconciliation strategy, the peace process begins to look politically and ethically dubious at best. We can only hope that the voices of those who are challenging the society to take risks for peace will be heeded before the Good Friday Agreement runs out of steam. And “risk” is the operative word, because true reconciliation is painful and requires a fundamental reorientation of the way people relate to each other in society. It is the only true option for a lasting peace.

Works Cited

- Dunlop, John, *A Precarious Belonging: Presbyterians and the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press Ltd, 1995.
- Hickey, John, *Religion and the Northern Ireland Problem*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984.
- Knox, Colin, and P·draic Quirk, *Peace Building in Northern Ireland, Israel, and South Africa*, New York: St. Martin's Press, LLC, 2000.
- MacDonald, Michael, *Children of Wrath: Political Violence in Northern Ireland*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986.
- Mitchell, George J., *Making Peace*, New York: Knopf, 1999.
- Mornington Community Project Limited, *Project Profile*.
- Naylor, Yvonne, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: A Resource for Young Adults*, Dublin: Irish School of Ecumenics, 2001.
- Staff Reporter, "Belfast dives into new sectarian rifts," *Belfast Telegraph*, January 4, 2002.
- Thompson, Alwyn, *The Politics of Holiness*, Belfast: ECONI, 1998.
- Wells, Ronald A., "Fellowship Without Borders," *Christianity Today*, December 4, 2000.
- Websites:
- <http://www.econi.org/about.mission.html>
- <http://www.fitzroy.org.uk/index2.htm>
- Interviews:
- Cecil Andrews, Takeheed Ministries, 1/20/02.
- Rev. Dr. John Dunlop, Rosemary Presbyterian Church, 1/16/02
- Gareth Higgins, Zero: 28 Project, 1/17/02.
- Ken Humphries, Mornington Community Project, Ltd., 1/22/02.
- Miriam McAlister, Youth For Christ Drop-in Center, Ballysillan, 1/22/02.

Yvonne Naylor, Irish School of Ecumenics, 1/7/02.

Rev. Kenneth Newall, Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, 1/8/02.

Derek Poole, Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, 1/17/02.

Alwyn Thomson, Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland, 1/17/02, 1/22/02.