

The Irish Churches Peace Project: A Catalyst for Peace¹

Abstract

The Irish Churches Peace Project was an EU funded project undertaken collaboratively by the four biggest denominations in Northern Ireland and the Irish Council of Churches. Over two years it engaged with hundreds of church leaders and church members to stimulate good relations and community engagement, particularly in areas where churches had not previously engaged across community divisions. This article records the methodology developed by the project to encourage and deepen cross community engagement, explores the operant and espoused theologies of reconciliation associated with the project, and highlights key insights as to utilizing the potential within religious traditions for overcoming conflict and division. ICCP's experience is applicable to future projects in Northern Ireland and other contexts in which divisions within communities are sustained by religious difference.

Introduction

The Irish Churches Peace Project (ICPP) was the first major peace-building project undertaken by the four biggest denominations in Northern Ireland (Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland) and smaller denominations represented by the Irish Council of Churches. Its vision was 'a peaceful and stable society, with a shared and better future for all.'² It ran from July 2012 to June 2015 and was funded by a grant of £1.3M from the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). Six Good Relations Officers (GROs) were employed to engage in peace-building activities, largely concentrating on local churches in six indicative areas selected to represent a range of contexts within Northern Ireland. These included urban and rural areas, areas with significant sectarian tension and areas of deprivation.

A detailed set of 31 targets were agreed with the funder in three main areas: facilitating dialogue on good relations, reconciliation and peace work issues; supporting grass-roots peace-building initiatives; and facilitating learning in churches' good relations, reconciliation and peace work.³ All but four of the targets were fully achieved, with eight targets exceeded and over 1,000 people involved in inter-church and cross-community dialogues.⁴

After setting out the background and structure of the project, this article records the methodology ICCP developed to encourage and deepen cross community engagement, examines the operant and espoused theologies of reconciliation associated with the project,

¹ Note: This is the final edited version sent to the editor before publication. The publisher allows publishing downloadable copy of this on any website.

² Irish Churches Peace Project, *ICPP Resource Directory: Church-Led Good Relations* (Lisburn: Irish Churches Peace Project, 2015), 5, <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/ICPP/ICPP-RESOURCE-DIRECTORY-web.pdf>.

³ Irish Churches Peace Project, *Irish Churches Peace Project Case Studies* (Lisburn: Irish Churches Peace Project, 2015), 4–5, <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/ICPP/CASE-STUDIES-web.pdf>.

⁴ Catalyst Consulting, 'Irish Churches Peace Project Post Project Evaluation', June 2015, 46–47.

and highlights key insights for utilizing the potential within religious traditions for overcoming conflict and division. These lessons are applicable to future projects in Northern Ireland and other contexts in which divisions within communities are sustained by religious difference.

Background to ICPP

Although the incidents of overt violence associated with the Northern Ireland conflict have greatly diminished since the ceasefires of the 1990s and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the situation in Northern Ireland can best be described as negative peace rather than positive peace. Negative peace is attained when the direct violence of a conflict is ended, whereas positive peace requires that structural and cultural violence are also ended.⁵ Building positive peace in a context such as Northern Ireland demands ‘a wholesale reordering of social relations.’⁶ The central and most obvious aspect of social relations requiring reordering in Northern Ireland is the continuing division between Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist and Catholic/Nationalist/Republican communities. Segregation continues to be expressed in terms of housing, education and employment. Living in such a divided society affects all individuals and communities, although this is often not acknowledged. As Mitchell observes, religion continues to play a significant role for a person’s place in Northern Irish society in terms of schooling, employment, area of residence and marriage partner.⁷

A normally positive aspect of religion is facilitating bonding and identity within a community. However, as Brewer et al. argue, in contexts of division this normally positive role of religion can exacerbate divisions within the wider community.⁸ Nevertheless, they also argue that the potential within religions to provide bridging social capital should be encouraged, as their influence in strategic social spaces is often significant. In particular, religions can have a role in challenging the terms in which a conflict is understood through the introduction of concepts such as forgiveness, or the challenging of negative mind-sets, such as sectarianism. Sectarianism continues to be a significant feature of the divided society in Northern Ireland⁹ and because of its religious dimension must be considered when addressing the churches’ role in peace-building. The most comprehensive and useful definition of sectarianism has been developed by Liechty and Clegg following a six-year

⁵ Oliver Ramsbotham, Hugh Miall, and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 11.

⁶ John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins, and Francis Teeney, ‘Religion and Peacemaking: A Conceptualization’, *Sociology* 44, no. 6 (1 December 2010): 1019–37.

⁷ Claire Mitchell, ‘Behind the Ethnic Marker: Religion and Social Identification in Northern Ireland’, *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 1 (2005): 5.

⁸ Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, ‘Religion and Peacemaking: A Conceptualization’, 1024–25.

⁹ University of Ulster, ‘Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Review’, December 2018, https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/410227/A-Review-Addressing-Sectarianism-in-Northern-Ireland_FINAL.pdf.

research project involving groups of church-affiliated Protestants and Catholics.¹⁰ It is worth providing their full definition:

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:

- Hardening the boundaries between groups
- Overlooking others
- Belittling, dehumanising, or demonising others
- Justifying or collaborating in the domination of others
- Physically or verbally intimidating or attacking others.¹¹

ICPP actively sought to help church-affiliated people and others in the community explore and learn ways of expressing difference in non-destructive ways whilst recognising the positive aspects of their religious traditions.

Liechty and Clegg utilize the 'Pyramid of Sectarianism' as a model to describe the complicity of all members of society in sectarianism.¹² At the top of the pyramid are the 'mad dogs' who engage in the most extreme forms of violence. Below them are the paramilitaries, then political and community leaders, with normal citizens at the bottom. In some circumstances the lower group will distance themselves from the group above. But the fact remains that the higher group emerges from the lower, and could not exist without permission or support, even if only tacit or implicit. Crucially, if the metaphor is changed from a pyramid to a tent, the central pole that holds up the whole structure is division between the two communities. Much peace-building in Northern Ireland has focused on working with paramilitaries, victims and marginalized communities, but the Pyramid of Sectarianism model makes it clear that the innate sectarianism throughout society must be addressed in order to achieve positive peace.

¹⁰ For a description of the project, see Cecelia Clegg, 'Between Embrace and Exclusion', in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions in Theology*, ed. Joseph Liechty and David Tombs (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2016), 123–36.

¹¹ J. Liechty and C. Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2001), 103–4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 185–95.

For this reason ICPP engaged with various levels of society, including local and national church leaders, laypeople, and local communities.

The churches are inevitably part of this societal system. Their role in providing cohesion within their communities and as an important aspect of peoples' identity has been well documented. For example, a report for the Community Relations Council noted that,

‘churches tend to reflect people’s fears, reflect Community divisions, reflect a community expedience of violence and threat, rather than act as agents of change or transformers of conflict... they are places of ordered calm – a safe space – where we are among our own; our enemies are outside.’¹³

Churches also have a pastoral role for their people, which can often conflict with, or hinder, their potential for acting as bridges between divided communities. Church leaders, at local and national level, can feel obliged to act as representatives for their community and feel pressure to conform to the expectations of their members.¹⁴ They are seen as ‘chaplains to the tribe,’ are not equipped or trained for ministry in a divided society, and their ministry is, therefore, often one of ‘boundary maintenance’ which, in effect, contributes and sustains a situation of ‘benign apartheid.’¹⁵

On the other hand, the positive role of religion within Northern Ireland has also been recognised. An obvious example of the bridging effect of religion has been the ecumenical movement. In her analysis of this movement, Power recognises it as operating at three levels since 1980.¹⁶ The first level has been national-level dialogue between the four main churches, which prior to the mid-1980s concentrated on issues such as mixed marriage and communion but which since then has examined issues such as sectarianism and peacebuilding.¹⁷ However, this national level dialogue has had little impact beyond those already committed to inter-church relations. The second level has consisted of local forms of inter-church relationships, including local ecumenical communities, clergy-led discussion groups and inter-church fora, which have provided opportunities for participants to encounter each other in a safe environment. At the third level, the churches have cooperated in the formation of peace and reconciliation education initiatives, including the Irish School of Ecumenics, YouthLink and Mediation NI. Power argues that the local level inter-church relationships have moved from focusing on traditional themes of ecumenism, such as forms of worship, towards a community relations approach.¹⁸ This arose out of a recognition that reconciliation

¹³ Community Relations Council, ‘Beyond Sectarianism? The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process’, Learning from Peace III (Belfast: Community Relations Council, 2005), 10.

¹⁴ This is reflected in several of the interviews with Presbyterian ministers in G. Ganiel and J. Yohanis, *Considering Grace: Presbyterians and the Troubles* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 306–8.

¹⁶ Maria Power, *From Ecumenism to Community Relations: Inter-Church Relationships in Northern Ireland 1980-2005* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 4–9.

¹⁷ Ian Ellis and Michael Hurley, *The Irish Inter-Church Meeting: Background and Development* (Belfast: Irish Inter-church Meeting, 1998), 57–63.

¹⁸ Power, *From Ecumenism to Community Relations: Inter-Church Relationships in Northern Ireland 1980-2005*, 200–201.

at a community level was the most pressing issue, although it also avoided the resistance to issues such as joint worship among many Protestants. This has perhaps contributed to the perception among some that the ecumenical movement seeks to emphasise unity at the expense of their doctrinal commitments. Brewer, et al. argue that religious actors engaged in peace-building need not deny their religiosity or ‘denude themselves of faith’ as Power implies the ecumenical movement in Northern Ireland has done.¹⁹ ICPP, therefore, deliberately sought to engage those who had felt excluded by the new inclusion of ecumenism and not just those already involved in the ecumenical movement.²⁰ This included those who felt that the differences between churches could not be minimized and those who were concerned that engagement would necessitate a diminishing or denial of their faith.

The project was initiated recognising the previous and ongoing work of the ecumenical movement and some non-church organizations such as the Irish School of Ecumenics, the Corrymeela Community and ECONI.²¹ It also recognised previous ‘single identity’ projects within denominations, such as the Hard Gospel Project within the Church of Ireland and Preparing Youth for Peace within the Presbyterian Church. ICPP was a recognition of the need for churches to work together, and to be seen to work together, for peace.²²

Structure and timing

ICPP arose out of more than 18 months of discussions between the partners in which the unique contribution the churches could make to peace-building in Northern Ireland was increasingly recognised. In particular, it was recognised that the churches represented a unique network consisting of a sizeable percentage of the population, were able to provide safe spaces for cross-community encounter and were able to draw on theological resources in the consideration of issues such as healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace-building.²³

An application for funding was made to SEUPB and after a process of negotiation a letter of offer was issued in July 2012. The letter of offer set out six main objectives, which were broken down into 31 ‘Aid for Peace Indicators’. These effectively set numerical targets including specific types of meetings and conferences, numbers of attendees and publications produced. Funding was provided for six Good Relations Officers (GROs) to work in six exemplar areas selected to represent the range of peace-building contexts within Northern Ireland, including urban, rural, and areas of deprivation. It also included areas where the

¹⁹ Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, ‘Religion and Peacemaking: A Conceptualization’, 1302.

²⁰ Liechty and Clegg highlight hidden dangers associated with ecumenism in Northern Ireland. They note that every new inclusion creates a new opportunity for exclusion and the danger of ‘ecumenical sectarianism,’ where people from what are perceived to be more conservative backgrounds are treated dismissively or patronisingly by those who perceive themselves as tolerant and inclusive. Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 166–70.

²¹ see Gladys Ganiel, ‘Can Churches Contribute to Post-Violence Reconciliation and Reconstruction? Insights and Applications from Northern Ireland’, in *Irish Religious Conflict in Comparative Perspective: Catholics, Protestants and Muslims*, ed. John Wolffe (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 59–75.

²² On the limitations of single-identity work see Geraldine Smyth, ‘Respecting Boundaries and Bonds: Journeys of Identity and Beyond’, in *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions for Theology*, ed. David Tombs and Joseph Liechty (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 141–42.

²³ Catalyst Consulting, ‘Irish Churches Peace Project Post Project Evaluation’, 9.

balance between the communities is roughly equal and where it is imbalanced. A project director, administrator and finance officer were also employed.

SEUPB funding was given through the PEACE III initiative, which was ending in July 2015, effectively setting the end date for the project. The letter of offer was issued in July 2012 with the result that the governance structures had to be set up at the same time as staff were being recruited. The Steering Group overseeing the project was made up of representatives from the partners along with some co-opted members from other organisations. Due to recruitment problems, the full staff team was not in place until June 2013, reducing the effective time for project delivery to two years in contrast to the three years originally envisaged. In spite of this, all but four of the 31 targets were met, with eight being exceeded.

The Good Relations Officers (GROs)

Project delivery on the ground was the responsibility of the Good Relations Officers, each assigned to one of the target areas. As noted above, delays in recruitment reduced the effective time for project delivery and the resignation of one GRO during the project disrupted the continuity of work in that particular area.

The GROs brought together a range of backgrounds and expertise. Some had significant experience in peace-building work, others in community development, while others had worked within churches or Christian organisations. This breadth of experience was helpful in developing a broad range of activities and types of engagement in each of the target areas, with GROs contributing their particular expertise in other areas when required.

The truncated nature of the project, however, precluded an adequate period of training at the outset. In my own case, coming from a background of community development and ordained parish ministry, I was not adequately aware of the intricacies of sectarianism as discussed above and would have benefitted from some induction and training in these areas. Similarly, GROs with community development and peace-building experience discovered that engaging in similar work within church contexts was more challenging than they expected. For example, the ambiguities of theological differences in relation to the conflict added extra complexity to the task. In addition, for most GROs this was the first experience of working closely with clergy and church leaders. They noted particular challenges in contrast to working with other community leaders, including the breadth of responsibility facing clergy, their workload,²⁴ and the tension, noted above, between providing leadership and being pastorally involved in peoples' lives. Since relationships with clergy and church leaders were vital to the success of the project it was beneficial that the team included one ordained person.

GROs also had to engage in considerable self-reflection as regards their own relationship to the issues of the conflict and sectarianism. This is important for all who engage in peace-

²⁴ Community Relations Council, 'Beyond Sectarianism? The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process', 25.

building or research of the conflict,²⁵ but was particularly so for GROs as religion was involved, which obviously impinges directly on one's own identity and worldview. ICPP's experience affirms the need for those involved in peace-building in a conflict with religious dimensions to increase their 'religious literacy.'²⁶

Methodology

The delayed start of the project not only had a negative impact in terms of scheduling but also hindered the development of a coherent strategy at the outset. This resulted in an ongoing and unresolved tension as to whether the project should be primarily considered from a community development or a community relations perspective. In the former, the emphasis would be on encouraging churches to work together and with local community groups to address issues within the community, whereas the second approach would focus on normalising relationships between communities and exploring issues such as identity and reconciliation. The final project evaluation report highlights that this ongoing issue caused some confusion for the staff.²⁷ This tension was, perhaps, inevitable since it was designed into the project, being reflected in specific objectives with their associated targets (see above), and because of the varied background and experience of the GROs.

This tension notwithstanding, a robust methodology was developed for initiating inter-church work in areas where there was 'underdeveloped capacity' for local churches to contribute to peace-building²⁸ and for supporting and developing existing inter-church initiatives. This methodology, along with case studies exploring particular projects, was written up and published as one of the outcomes of the project.²⁹ The methodology evolved through the life of the project and is here presented as a model applicable to other projects seeking to engage faith communities in peace-building work.³⁰

Recognising clergy and church leaders as gatekeepers for their church community, the first step was to engage with them individually, introducing ICPP and discussing the possibilities for that locality. A key task at this stage was to address any concerns regarding such cross-community engagement. Commonly expressed concerns included: theological misgivings around joint worship; personal experience and hurt arising out of the history of the conflict; the experience of negative attitudes from the 'other side'; and fear of negative reactions from

²⁵ For a discussion from a sociologist's perspective see Andrew Finlay, 'Reflexivity and the Dilemmas of Identification: An Ethnographic Encounter in Northern Ireland', in *Researching Violently Divided Societies: Ethical and Methodological Issues*, ed. M. Smyth and G. Robinson (New York: United Nations University Press, 2001), 55–76; See also, Clegg, 'Between Embrace and Exclusion', 2.

²⁶ John Wolffe and Gavin Moorhead, 'Religion, Security and Global Uncertainties' (The Open University, 2014), 2, <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/religion-martyrdom-global-uncertainties/sites/www.open.ac.uk.arts.research/religion-martyrdom-global-uncertainties/files/files/ecms/arts-rmgu-pr/web-content/Religion-Security-Global-Uncertainties.pdf>.

²⁷ Catalyst Consulting, 'Irish Churches Peace Project Post Project Evaluation', 29.

²⁸ Identifying such areas of 'under-developed capacity' and encouraging and supporting work in them is identified as one of the key purposes of the project by the General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches. Nicola Brady Nicola Brady, 'ICPP Article', 27 September 2019.

²⁹ Irish Churches Peace Project, *Irish Churches Peace Project Case Studies*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

within their congregations. GROs emphasised that ICPP did not come with a pre-set programme to be followed, but that ICPP's role was to facilitate the local churches to develop a process to build and strengthen good relations within their area. The GROs would provide advice and support, along with financial resources for activities such as meetings, trips and residential, but control of the speed and direction of the local project would remain with the local churches. It should be noted that this approach conflicted with the pressure on GROs to meet the detailed list of targets set out in the letter of offer.

Addressing theological misgivings around joint worship highlighted the importance of language, particularly with respect to the word 'ecumenical'. For many evangelical Protestants, the term is equated with joint worship, which because of their theological views of the Catholic Church is not something they feel they can participate in. However, for those from a Catholic background, the term is understood to mean almost any form of inter-church activity, ranging from social gatherings to joint worship. Thus, when people said they could not engage in ecumenical activity, others heard that they would not even socialise with them. For these reasons, there was debate among the partners and the programme team as to the benefits and risks of describing ICPP as an ecumenical project. In spite of this, experience showed that all clergy and church leaders, even those with significant theological concerns about some forms of contact, had a theology that encouraged them and their churches to be good neighbours, which implied building good relations with other faith communities in their area.

The second step was to bring the clergy and church leaders together in a series of meetings to develop relationships of trust and to explore the needs and possibilities within their local area. In many locations Protestant and Catholic clergy did not have a history of meeting together. Clergy and church leaders are products of the separation at the heart of Northern Irish society and their training for ministry and ongoing formation for ministry has paid little or no attention to this context.³¹ Therefore, for many clergy this was their first significant opportunity to engage in a meaningful way with committed adherents of the 'other' tradition. GROs structured the conversations with principles very similar to Stendhal's three rules of religious understanding: i) learn from the adherents of a religion, not its enemies; ii) do not compare your best with their worst, and iii) leave room for holy envy.³²

It was important at this stage that the aspirations and fears of each participant concerning the process were openly acknowledged and a consensus reached on the appropriate speed and direction of future progress. An exercise, derived from the four forms of interreligious dialogue, was developed. The four forms of dialogue are the dialogue of life (living and sharing in a neighbourly manner), the dialogue of action (collaborating in programmes for the benefit of the community), the dialogue of theological exchange, and the dialogue of

³¹ Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 306; See also interviews with Presbyterian ministers in Ganiel and Yohanis, *Considering Grace: Presbyterians and the Troubles*.

³² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2019), 65.

religious experience.³³ Participants were presented with the continuum shown in Figure 1 and each was asked to place a mark at the level of engagement at which they would be comfortable.

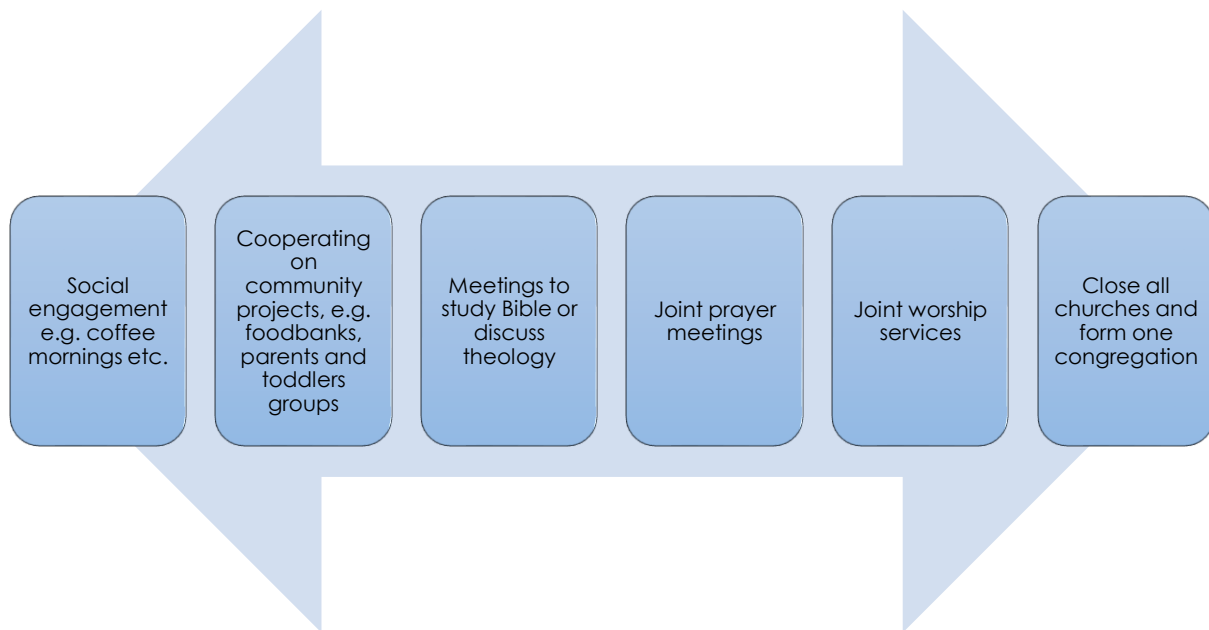


Figure 1: Levels of engagement

Once participants had placed themselves on the continuum, they were asked to indicate where they felt the majority of their congregation would be. This exercise was helpful in determining the appropriate level for engagement in the local area. For example, in many groups several participants were keen on joint worship as a means of building and demonstrating good relations. However, if some participants indicated that they or their congregation could not engage in joint worship for theological reasons, it was clear to the whole group that this could not be on the agenda. Naturally, these conversations had to be carefully facilitated, as the refusal to worship with another group can be an assertion that they are not deemed to be fully Christian, a view which has obvious sectarian implications.³⁴

The third step was to move beyond the clergy and church leaders to begin a similar process of engagement with church members and adherents. Recognizing the pressures and demands on clergy the goal was to identify key people from each church to act as a local planning group for the area. As mentioned above the ecumenical movement has had considerable impact in some areas for many years. In particular, Inter-Church Fora had been established in many localities through the work of the Irish School of Ecumenics. These groups typically

³³ Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, 'Dialogue and Proclamation', *The Holy See*, 1991, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamation_en.html.

³⁴ Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 241–78.

represented those within the churches who had a particular interest in peace-building and reconciliation and these groups had often engaged in innovative ventures. However, they were often on the fringes of the life of the local churches and welcomed the input and support of GROs to help bring these issues into the mainstream. ICPP's primary focus, however, was to initiate and develop peace-building in areas where no such work had previously happened, or among people who had not previously been involved.

The fourth step was to identify specific projects for the local area. Various means were utilised to encourage people from local churches to participate. Several challenges to broadening participation, some specific to churches and others reflective of society in general were identified. First, each local church generally has a busy programme of events and activities for its own members and for the local community. These are often run by a relatively small core group of volunteers who have limited capacity for any other involvement. Second, churches are often focussed on increasing and maintaining their own membership, particularly since the overall trend is of church membership declining. Third, church leaders and church members have come to accept that a 'benign apartheid' in their area is either normal or the best that can be achieved. Thus, churches and their members simply reflect the community around them in the strategy of maintaining the 'level' through avoiding meaningful engagement.³⁵ Creativity was thus needed to encourage involvement and the funding provided by SEUPB enabled a range of activities that local churches could not normally contemplate. It permitted the hiring of attractive, neutral venues rather than hosting events in church premises, which are inevitably perceived as belonging to one side or the other. In some towns, gala-style meals were hosted in hotels to which churches were invited to send delegates. These evenings included facilitated discussions around the tables exploring the state of relations in the area and issues that might be addressed. Residentials were organised, providing the opportunity for groups to spend time with each other outside their normal locality. A particularly effective series of events included local church members and migrants from many parts of the world. The migrants reported that it was helpful for them to understand the nature of the society in which they were now living, while the feedback from Northern Irish people was that the presence of 'outsiders' provided a new and useful dimension to discussions about the conflict and the divisions within Northern Irish society.

The tension between a community development approach and a good relations approach was identified above as a weakness in the overall project strategy. However, within the operating methodology of the project the presence of both strands within the objectives allowed local groups to develop projects suitable to their particular locality. In some contexts the process led to community development activities, for example, addressing issues faced by young families or cooperation on foodbanks. In other contexts activities focussed on building good

³⁵ Finlay, 'Reflexivity and the Dilemmas of Identification: An Ethnographic Encounter in Northern Ireland', 195–205.

relations, addressing issues of the conflict, and becoming familiar with other identities. Several of these projects were written up and published as resources.³⁶

The fifth step in the methodology was to increase the connection and cooperation between the churches and other organisations in the local area addressing similar issues. This generally proved non-controversial in the community development arena, but clergy, church leaders and church groups generally resisted engagement with victims' groups or ex-combatants as they were perceived as being too politicized.³⁷

Operant and Espoused Theology in ICPP's work

Although the issues of peace-building, reconciliation and church relations are clearly theological, ICPP did not address them in an overtly theological manner. This was partly due to its nature as a project funded by the SEUPB, which necessitated the articulation of aims and objectives in non-theological language. A more significant factor was that theological differences and their expression have been an integral part of the division in Northern Ireland, so overtly addressing these at the early stages of building relationships was unlikely to be productive. However, work in the field of Practical Theology has demonstrated that 'practices of faithful Christian people are themselves already the bearers of theology.'³⁸ In particular, the four theological voices model, arising out of theological action research methodology, is useful in providing a theological analysis of the project and its methodology. The four voices of theology are: the operant theology (the theology revealed by the practices of people or groups); the espoused theology (what a person or group states or says); normative theology (sources such as official denominational pronouncements); and, formal theology (the contribution made by academics).³⁹ This model is particularly helpful in giving voice to the operant and espoused theology at grass-roots level and recognising their legitimate role in the overall theological discourse.

A key aspect of ICPP's approach was to give an increased voice to an existing, but perhaps neglected, aspect of espoused theology within Northern Ireland. Within the field of conflict studies it has been recognised that religions contain resources and potentials that can contribute to a conflict, or contribute to peace-building.⁴⁰ In the Northern Ireland context there are obvious dangers towards sectarianism when the espoused theology of a person or group highlights aspects of difference. This has, in fact, become the predominant and habitual stance of many within church communities in Northern Ireland. However, ICPP's experience confirmed the inherent positive resources within the Christian tradition towards peace-building. Almost every individual and church that ICPP engaged with espoused a theology that promoted love for the neighbour and the necessity to live in good relations with others.

³⁶ ICPP produced resources are available at 'Resources - Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter Church Meeting', accessed 17 March 2020, <https://www.irishchurches.org/resources?category=72&type=&years=&denominations=>.

³⁷ Catalyst Consulting, 'Irish Churches Peace Project Post Project Evaluation', 31–32.

³⁸ Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, and Catherine Duce, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 68.

³⁹ Ibid., 49–56.

⁴⁰ Ramsbotham, Miall, and Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 332–46.

Thus, ICPP's approach was to encourage individuals and groups to draw upon these resources within their tradition and to give them an increased voice. As one of the key architects of the project pointed out, the question asked of the 'other' has often been, 'are *they* in Christ, and how should we relate to them?' However, the question that should be asked is, 'because *we* are in Christ, how should we relate to them?'

In parallel to giving increased voice to a neglected aspect of espoused theology, ICPP also engaged at the level of operant theology. The theological action research method has demonstrated the connections and influences between the four theological voices. Thus, espoused theologies highlighting difference and separation have a clear link to practices that perpetuate social divisions. ICPP's methodology of encouraging and normalising sustained and meaningful contact sought to stimulate a positive process in which espoused and operant theologies evolved through a process of theological reflection. Mitchell and Ganiel's research among evangelical Christians in Northern Ireland affirms the significance of providing people with the opportunity to enter this cycle of theological reflection through contact with people outside their own faith tradition.⁴¹ A key element for people whose trajectory is described as moderating or transforming evangelicalism was a broadening of experience and encounter beyond the evangelical community. In contrast, those on a journey of deepening evangelicalism generally made deliberate choices to limit influences from outside their community and tradition. Thus, in the context of a divided society providing sustained opportunities for engagement and cooperative action can be expected to lead to renewed theological reflection and changes in attitudes and behaviour.

ICPP also worked with those who espoused an ecumenical theology and had been engaged in ecumenical activities for many years. ICPP's experience confirmed Power's observation that the focus of such groups had shifted somewhat from theological discussion and joint worship, towards a community relations approach.⁴² Liechty and Clegg's observation that every new inclusion has the potential to create an exclusion was also confirmed, as the formation of an ecumenical group between churches within a locality often caused tensions within the churches. Liechty and Clegg also note the danger of a superior attitude among some who have moved into the ecumenical movement, combined with an attitude of intolerance toward those who hold more restrictive views.⁴³ The tensions between the espoused theology and the actual practice are obvious.

While ICPP's work focussed on the espoused and operant theologies at the grass-roots level, it did so recognising that each of the partner churches had engaged in significant peace-building initiatives and continued to address the issues within their structures. The fact that each denomination was officially involved with ICPP meant that these normative theologies were useful in reassuring potential participants about engagement and the process. The

⁴¹ Claire Mitchell and Gladys Ganiel, *Evangelical Journeys: Choice and Change in a Northern Irish Religious Subculture* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2011).

⁴² Power, *From Ecumenism to Community Relations: Inter-Church Relationships in Northern Ireland 1980-2005*, 200–201.

⁴³ Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 166–70.

collaboration between the churches in ICPP did not just stimulate engagement at grass-roots level, but also provided opportunities for senior figures within the churches to discuss the experience and learning generated by the project. Thus, there was significant potential for the project to have a positive influence on the official theology of, and approach to, reconciliation within each denomination.

ICPP's engagement with the operant and espoused voices of theology at grass-roots level also has potential for constructive conversation with the formal voice of theology. In the area of ecumenics, ICPP's experience highlights that in the process of discovering unity the development of relationships precedes the resolution of theological differences. Newbigin discusses similar insights in the process of the unification of the Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist churches to form the Church of South India in 1947. Newbigin records that it was in the development of personal relationships of trust that unity was discovered and experienced, not in solving significant theological differences. Thus, Newbigin came to see the personal dimension of relationship as being crucial to the ecumenical movement and the 'one spiritual resource by which unity is made possible.'⁴⁴

However, since then the concept of 'reconciled diversity' has largely replaced the ideal of structural unity within the ecumenical movement.⁴⁵ ICPP sought to develop good relations between churches, whilst assuming and affirming their continued, separate existence. In a context of division such as Northern Ireland, 'people need to be standing in a secure place in terms of their own identity before they can risk making space for meaningful connection with the other.'⁴⁶ Volf's 'drama of embrace'⁴⁷ provides a useful model for such engagement. The first move in the drama is the opening of the arms, which demonstrates a recognition of some form of desire for the other and of incompleteness without the other. The second move is waiting, which refuses imposition and recognises the other's agency. The third movement is the closing of the arms, which must be reciprocal and avoid becoming too tight in a 'concealed power-act of exclusion'⁴⁸ if it is to be a true embrace. The fourth act is the opening of the arms, which affirms the continuing existence of the other, respecting their continued alterity. In embrace, their existence is neither obliterated nor absorbed into 'an undifferentiated "we"'.⁴⁹

The relevance and importance of each stage for relations between divided church communities in Northern Ireland is obvious. Together they provide a necessary corrective for those with an espoused theology emphasising difference, which in a context of division can be expressed or heard as a sectarian desire to obliterate the other. They are also a corrective for those with an espoused theology of reconciliation, which can be expressed or heard as a

⁴⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Basis and the Forms of Unity', *Mid-Stream: The Ecumenical Movement Today* 23, no. Jan (1984): 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ Clegg, 'Between Embrace and Exclusion', 134.

⁴⁷ M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 141–47.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

desire to create the undifferentiated 'we'. Clegg notes differing propensities within the two communities regarding ecumenism.⁵⁰ On the Catholic side, the temptation is to emphasise commonality and to minimise the differences, leading to a premature assumption of unity. The temptation on the Protestant side is a persistent focus on the differences and a denial of commonalities.

Conclusion: Transferable Experience from ICPP

ICPP represents a significant effort by churches in Northern Ireland, with support from the SEUPB, to harness the peace-building potential within the churches, recognising their ambiguous role within the history of conflict. Although each situation is unique, some insights from the ICPP experience are applicable to other contexts of community division, tension and conflict in which religion is a factor.

The peace-making potential of religion

First, the project has reaffirmed the potential for religion to contribute positively to building peace, and that the opposite danger of religion being used to reinforce division and sectarianism can be mitigated. Moreover, ICPP has shown that when religious people are encouraged to engage with the 'other' knowing that their own religious convictions will be respected and not compromised, they are often willing to do so. ICPP's experience was that even those with very strong theological opposition to other churches, which could tend toward sustaining division, were also motivated by other aspects of their theology to develop good relations within their town or area. ICPP shows that it is possible to create a process in which people of differing religious beliefs, political aspirations and experiences of conflict can honestly engage with others and experience constructive ways of expressing and dealing with difference.⁵¹

The project has also shown how religious leaders, as gatekeepers of their communities, are a significant resource as their involvement is often an encouragement for members of their community to become involved.⁵² However, the barriers to involvement, such as the demands on religious leaders to function as 'chaplains to the tribes',⁵³ must be addressed.

Releasing the potential is not automatic

Second, while a religious tradition may hold great potential for peace-building it cannot be assumed that the full potential will automatically emerge. A faith-based desire to develop good relations is obviously an important foundation for engagement but does not represent the full potential within the Christian tradition to contribute to peace.

⁵⁰ Clegg, 'Between Embrace and Exclusion', 133–35.

⁵¹ For a model for dealing with differences see Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 216–25.

⁵² Wolfe and Moorhead, 'Religion, Security and Global Uncertainties', 3.

⁵³ Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, 305.

Even though clergy and church leaders have received significant theological training within their traditions, one key lesson from the project is that it cannot be assumed they are fully aware of the potential, even imperative, within their traditions towards peace-building. Church leaders are products of the divided society as much as church members,⁵⁴ and for many most of what they have learned about the ‘other’ religion has come not through engagement with committed practitioners, but from those within their own tradition speaking against them. Theological training programmes for clergy and church leaders do not significantly address these issues or provide theological resources to deal with them. Thus, church leaders often share the same cultural and theological blind spots as their parishioners. For example, Clegg describes how the *Moving Beyond Sectarianism* project revealed that church people did not have categories to think about the Northern Ireland context that were not centred around an individualistic understanding of salvation.⁵⁵ Similarly, although reconciliation is a key Christian theological concept, surveys of church leaders and laypeople conducted by the Irish School of Ecumenics show that teaching and preaching within churches is focused on reconciliation between humans and God and between individual human beings. In contrast, very little attention is given to the concept of reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics.⁵⁶ Also, despite some notable exceptions, the mainstream churches at national and local level have not seen the need for contextualised theological reflection on key themes and have not seen peace-building as a spiritual matter core to their life of faith.⁵⁷ Some of the most notable faith-based contributions in terms of theological reflection and peace-building activity have been by non-church groups such as the Corrymeela Community, the Irish School of Ecumenics and Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland.⁵⁸

Although ICPP went some way in releasing the peace-building potential within the various traditions, the objectives and targets did not adequately focus on the need for theological engagement. The project objectives were focussed primarily on good-relations and community development, not on the development of grass roots contextualised theology, although there was some work with theological colleges and a resource on forgiveness was developed.

The need for a catalyst

Third, a catalyst is required to release the latent potential for peace-building within religious traditions. Deliberate effort is needed in order to overcome the inertia and barriers to engagement, and ICPP represents the first united effort by the churches in this regard. The

⁵⁴ Ibid., 343.

⁵⁵ Clegg, ‘Between Embrace and Exclusion’, 126; The book published following the project contains contextualised theological reflection on themes such as reconciliation, forgiveness and identity. See Liechty and Clegg, *Moving beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict, and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*.

⁵⁶ Gladys Ganiel, *21st Century Faith Results of the Survey of Clergy, Pastors, Ministers and Faith Leaders* (Dublin: Irish School of Ecumenics, 2010), 22–23, <http://www.ecumenics.ie/wp-content/uploads/Clergy-Survey-Report.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Community Relations Council, ‘Beyond Sectarianism? The Churches and Ten Years of the Peace Process’, 7.

⁵⁸ Ganiel, ‘Can Churches Contribute to Post-Violence Reconciliation and Reconstruction? Insights and Applications from Northern Ireland’.

role of the GROs in their exemplar areas was to stimulate and encourage the release of peace-building potential in the various communities of faith in that area. Despite the barriers mentioned above, the general experience was that GROs were tapping into a neglected aspect of churches' espoused theologies, which for reasons such as busyness, fear and lack of expertise had not become part of their operant theology. GROs, with their experience in facilitating sensitive dialogue and in project development, functioned as catalysts and were able to bear much of the burden of administration and organisation, allowing progress to be sustained in their areas.

ICPP was operating in a period after much of the direct conflict has ceased, but in which positive peace remains a goal. This is the period referred to as 'normalisation' in some models of conflict resolution and is prior to 'reconciliation'.⁵⁹ It is arguable that this is a particularly relevant stage within a conflict cycle for such intervention, since there is more likelihood that a catalyst will be effective in producing a positive reaction. ICPP was certainly conceived and designed recognising Northern Ireland's place in the conflict cycle. However, this should not preclude engagement at earlier stages in a conflict, although project design and delivery would have to be adapted to the context.

Developing full peace-building potential

Fourth, unleashing the full peace-building potential within a religious tradition is a process that takes time in order to be sustainable. It demands the creation of new ways of perceiving and relating to other communities, theological exploration, and even changes in the programming of church life. Change for individuals and communities is often resisted, especially when religious beliefs are involved.

Within the discipline of missiology much attention has been paid to the complex relationship between culture and theology, along with the dangers of syncretism and cultural idolatry.⁶⁰ Experience within the world church shows that these issues are never fully resolved and demand constant attention. The relationship is particularly complex in a context of division such as Northern Ireland, where cultural and faith identities are inter-woven. ICPP's experience of including migrants within the conversations echoes the positive role that those from other cultures have in exposing areas in which views and attitudes held by church people reflect the local culture more than the values of the Kingdom.⁶¹ Cultural and theological change is likely to be incremental rather than sudden. It will involve the interplay between the experience of getting to know people from another tradition, engaging with the issues of the conflict, and the re-examining one's own faith and experience as a result.

⁵⁹ Ramsbotham, Miall, and Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 12–14.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Mika Vähäkangas, 'Modelling Contextualization in Theology', *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 98, no. 3 (2010): 279–306; S. B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002); Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks - the Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), 1–20.

⁶¹ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks - the Gospel and Western Culture*, 9.

Sustainability

Fifth, the closure of the project after just two years of full operation highlights the need for a long-term approach to ensure sustainability. The process of theological reflection for individuals and faith communities in the context of a divided society benefits not only from initiation by a catalyst but also from ongoing input and the maintenance of a safe and supportive environment for it to continue. While the process in each location was always determined by the local churches, the ongoing work of GROs was essential in taking the initiative to maintain contact with key people, to arrange meetings and to provide expertise in the form of ideas and support. Unfortunately, due to the late start of the project and the cessation of funding, the project had only two years of effective work. This was not enough time to develop true sustainability in many areas and several initiatives have succumbed to the general inertia that works against peace-building efforts. A significant legacy of the project are the resources published outlining innovative ways in which churches can engage in peace-building. The fact that they remain largely unpublicised and unused because the project no longer exists to use and promote them is a tangible expression of the lack of sustainability. In general, in areas where there was some pre-existing peace and reconciliation work between churches, for example in the form of an Inter-church Forum, some work continues. However, where there was no pre-existing work projects have often not survived the withdrawal of ICPP support, although the relationships developed between people often continue and are significant.

At a national and inter-church level, the lessons gained through ICPP continue to have an ongoing impact. The project has led to increased coordination at denominational level in the areas of youth, family, chaplaincy and public engagement with various social policy issues. The Irish Council of Churches and the Inter-Church Meeting have utilised ICPP's overall methodology and experience in several key initiatives. These have included a seminar bringing together the business community and the churches to discuss the response to a major report on sectarianism⁶² and a dialogue initiative bringing the churches together with leaders of the main political parties to discuss the political and social situation in Northern Ireland resulting from the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly.⁶³

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author was employed as a Good Relations Officer by the Irish Churches Peace Project from August 2013 to June 2015.

⁶² Irish Council of Churches and Inter-Church Meeting, 'Sectarianism in Northern Ireland: A Call to Action' (Belfast: Irish Council of Churches and Inter-Church Meeting, 30 July 2019).

⁶³ Irish Council of Churches and Inter-Church Meeting, 'A Time for Courageous and Compassionate Leadership: Report on the Church Leaders' Civil Society Dialogue Initiative (September 2018 - February 2019)' (Belfast: Irish Council of Churches and Inter-Church Meeting, 14 May 2019).

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