

Churches and faith based organisations

...their role in peace building in rural communities

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Rural Enabler Programme
Building Peace Locally

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1

Introduction

This is one of a series of research/discussion papers which highlight the experience and learning from the activities of the Rural Enabler Programme 2010-2013. This paper highlights the work with churches and faith based organisations in peace building in rural communities.

The purpose of this research/discussion paper is to assist churches and faith based organisations, regional and local policy makers, statutory agencies and community/voluntary organisations in the further development and enhancement of work carried through the Rural Enabler Programme. To achieve this, the research examined:

- The work carried out during the lifetime of the project.
- The approach used in undertaking the work.
- The appropriateness of the support and assistance given to churches and faith based organisations.
- The learning achieved to date including barriers to peace building, successful outcomes from interventions and the complexities of working across jurisdictions.
- Future challenges for churches and faith based organisations working in peace building with rural communities.

The methodology used in researching this paper was a desk review of relevant reports, event evaluations, minutes of meetings etc and a series of semi structured interviews with representatives from participating churches and organisations, Rural Enabler staff and members of Rural Community Network's Shared Future Sub Committee. (A list of the interviewees is in Appendix I and the interview questions are detailed in Appendix II.)

The paper also includes a set of contributions by some of the practitioners who participated in the programme, on the following themes:

- The challenges for faith based groups engaging in community development.
- The challenges for clergy in rural communities in relation to community engagement and peace building work.
- How churches can support peace and reconciliation and why 'tolerance is not enough'.

The paper concludes with a series of recommendations for further work based on the experience, learning and achievements of the Rural Enabler Programme.

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Executive Summary

The key learning gained from the work of the Rural Enabler Programme with churches and faith based organisations is as follows.

- 1) Churches are often at the heart of rural communities, involving many people and, as such, have an important role to play. Supporting churches and faith based groups to engage in peace building in rural communities can be an effective way of creating sustainable grass roots reconciliation and community cohesion, given the continued influence and place of churches in many rural communities.
- 2) Creating stronger relationships, networking, co-operation and partnerships between the community sector and the faith sector is likely to enhance community development and peace building in rural communities. Mutual learning and shared resources will continue to result in collaboration and increase overall impact.
- 3) Supporting churches and faith based groups to engage in peace building is long term work that requires attention and sensitivity to building trust and relationships. An open and listening approach is more likely to engage churches that have previously not engaged in peace building work due to theological, leadership or practical concerns.
- 4) Supporting churches to engage in peace building requires a needs led approach due to the considerable differences between denominational and local contexts.
- 5) Building capacity, confidence and an understanding of community development is the foundation for supporting rural churches to engage in peace building.
- 6) Increasing networking, co-operation and partnership is essential in supporting rural churches to engage in peace building.
- 7) Committed and motivated leadership is essential for churches to engage in peace building.
- 8) There are many barriers to churches engaging in peace building. Barriers within churches include declining congregations, limited human resources (fewer clergy and volunteers) resulting in a prioritisation of core (mainly sacramental and pastoral) activities above peace building and limited capacity for new work or innovation. Other barriers include lack of resources, uncertainty on how to engage, fear of being unable to respond well, lack of skills, knowledge and confidence and fear of opposition from within congregations.
- 9) Good collaboration between faith based and secular community development support agencies has the potential to enable churches to become active in community development and peace building for the first time. RCN staff increased their knowledge and understanding of different churches which enabled the REP to engage sensitively. The approach taken by RCN could be shared with urban community development agencies to improve engagement with churches.
- 10) A relatively small amount of grant aid and support can be a catalyst for new peace building initiatives by churches in rural communities.

- 11) The funding mechanism developed by RCN and agreed with SEUPB (involving direct procurement by the funder) is an effective way of providing access to small grants to churches without requiring them to set up a new constituted charitable association.
- 12) If the goal of inter church work in rural communities is peace building, then this activity needs to extend beyond social and spiritual interaction, to develop practical action that reduces sectarian mistrust and divisions and addresses the legacy of conflict.
- 13) The complexity of working across jurisdictions on a cross border initiative is not a major barrier to churches engaging in peace building because most churches are organised/structured on an all island basis and some parishes straddle border communities.
- 14) Supporting rural churches to develop cross denominational and cross border relationships and initiatives can contribute to peace building within communities most affected by the conflict of the past. There is potential to extend this cross border work significantly.
- 15) Providing support to small Protestant churches in border minority communities to engage in wider community development can contribute to sustaining religious diversity in rural communities.
- 16) Although the REP demonstrates that a great deal can be achieved in a short time with a reflective, effective and strategic approach and a motivated staff team, there are inevitable limitations in delivering a short term (two year) project within a context that requires much longer term interventions.

To build on the achievements and learning of the REP the following recommendations are suggested:

Office of the First and deputy First Minister

- 1) To support grass roots peace building in rural communities, there is an urgent need for agreed government policy and strategies to address sectarianism and racism and to deal with the past.
- 2) The proposed Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy should recognise the particular needs of rural communities and the potential role of faith based organisations and rural churches in building a shared future.

Department of Agriculture & Rural Development and Department for Social Development

- 3) DSD, DARD, other government agencies and local Councils with a responsibility for supporting community development and good relations in rural communities should support capacity building initiatives that enable rural churches to engage practically in the community, using the approach of the REP as a model of good practice.

Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and Department of Justice and Equality

- 4) The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Department of Justice and Equality, other government agencies and local authorities with a responsibility for supporting community development and equality in rural communities in the Border Counties of Ireland, should support initiatives that enable rural churches (especially small Protestant churches in border communities) to engage in wider community development, using the approach of the REP as a model for building cross border relationships and sustaining religious diversity in rural communities.

Churches

- 5) Churches which believe their mission includes community development and peace building should develop feasible ways of engaging in the community within their current capacity.
- 6) Churches and inter church fora interested in peace building should commit to, encourage and support the training of church leaders in community development.
- 7) Churches committed to community engagement and peace building should explore ways of working together rather than separately to increase their capacity for community development and peace building in rural communities.
- 8) Inter church fora should continue to explore new ways of engaging in practical peace building actions in rural communities.

Funders

- 9) Funders should consider using the funding mechanism developed by RCN and agreed by SEUPB (i.e. direct procurement by the funder) to enable churches to access small grants for community work without the requirement of constituting a new charitable association.

Voluntary and Community Sector

- 10) Secular and faith based voluntary and community sector organisations should explore the development of strategic partnerships to widen and deepen their potential impact on community development and peace building by working together, as modelled by RCN and CCWA.

Rural Community Network

- 11) RCN should continue to work in collaboration and partnership with CCWA, LINC, ISE and Tearfund to build on the relationships, learning and achievements of the REP to find ways of providing ongoing support to churches and inter church fora in rural communities to engage in community development and peace building.

- 12) RCN should link with the new Irish Churches Peace Programme to share learning, contacts and developments with this new initiative and to offer advice and support to contribute to its potential impact in rural churches.
- 13) RCN, in partnership with faith based community development support groups, should explore with churches the possibility of developing further training in community development and peace building for clergy and lay church leaders in rural communities.
- 14) RCN should share the learning from their work with faith groups during the REP with churches, community development support agencies, statutory agencies, local Councils and elected representatives.
- 15) RCN should build a database of church/faith based peace building initiatives in rural communities.
- 16) RCN, in partnership with faith based community development support groups, should attempt to secure resources to identify and publish a series of faith based models of good practice in peace building for rural communities and disseminate these success stories widely to rural churches.
- 17) RCN should continue to explore and encourage innovative use of church premises in rural communities.
- 18) RCN should continue to lobby for long term funding streams to provide the support required to release the potential of churches to contribute more fully to rural community development in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland.

3

Background

Rural Community Network (RCN) is one of the leading organisations responsible for promoting community development and networking in rural communities throughout Northern Ireland. It was established by community organisations from rural areas in 1991.

RCN secured funding from the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) PEACE III Programme to deliver the Rural Enabler Programme (REP) between January 2010 and March 2013. The Programme aimed ‘to address issues of sectarianism, racism, social exclusion and all other form of rural inequality through challenging the status-quo, assisting, supporting and creating the space for local communities and rural institutions to identify the fears of reconciliation and anti-racism work’. Twelve ‘Rural Enablers’ were employed to work in counties throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. A ‘Rural Enabler for Institutions’ worked with institutions, which were identified as holding significant influence over

rural dwellers, including churches and faith based organisations.

The REP used a community development approach to tackling the impact of conflict and modern day racism within rural Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. The project adopted an integrated and interdependent thematic approach involving one regional and up to 72 local programmes of intervention to address sectarianism, racism, community polarisation, mistrust and hatred.

The REP was a partnership approach between the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Irish Rural Link (IRL) and RCN (the Lead Partner). The partners formed a Regional Management Project Committee together with SEUPB and provided strategic direction for the Programme.

Objectives and impacts of the programme are shown in the table below.

Objectives	Impacts
To increase awareness and understanding of issues relating to sectarianism and racism within a rural context through <i>dialogue</i>	Increased confidence of local communities to engage in dialogue without the need for external facilitation
To increase the <i>capacity and skills</i> of groups and individuals in rural society to address sectarianism, racism and polarisation	Increased capacity and skills of groups and individuals to address sectarianism, racism and polarisation
To increase the <i>potential of sharing of residential, social, environmental spaces and services for the benefit of all in rural society</i>	Assets within the community are potentially more sustainable for future generations with usage by all members of the community

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Activities

The main activities delivered with churches and faith based organisations through the REP were as follows:

(a) Building Connections with Churches and Faith Based Organisations

The REP developed new contacts, relationships, connections and partnerships with a range of churches and faith based organisations at both local and regional levels. Meetings took place between Rural Enablers and church/faith based organisational leaders to build relationships, offer support and explore possible areas of co-operation and collaboration. For example, meetings took place with Down Community Church and other faith based representatives in Co Down. A series of meetings was arranged to discuss and support community engagement and peace building in the Church of Ireland Dioceses of Clogher¹ and Derry & Raphoe.

Strategic connections were built with and between inter church fora in various areas including Cavan, Cookstown, Dungannon, Gilford, Leitrim and Omagh (for more details see section (c)). Strategic partnerships were developed with regional faith based organisations that resulted in improved communication, understanding and co-operation in supporting churches in rural communities to engage in peace building. A particularly strong working relationship was developed with the Churches Community Work Alliance (CCWA). CCWA requested a formal link with RCN and the Rural Enabler for Institutions was invited to sit on the CCWA Board of Directors.

Another strategic partnership was developed with the LINC Resource Centre to develop and deliver a regional initiative entitled the 'Learning Through Engagement Project'. The project aims to develop stronger links between church, faith and community work with a focus on women's groups. The REP has been advising the project workers on the rural groups and the potential for cross-border linkages for the initiative.

Other significant connections have been discussions with the Presbyterian Moderator, supporting the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) with their ethical and shared remembering courses and exploring the issue of education in Community Theology to help congregations to learn more about their neighbours from other denominations.

(b) 'Blessed are the Peacemakers'

Four 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' events were organised to provide an opportunity for sharing and learning in relation to faith based community development and peace building in rural communities.

The four events were as follows:

- 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' in Dungannon in November 2011, organised collaboratively with speakers from ISE, Tearfund, the LINC Resource Centre and the Church of Ireland. Over 50 people, mainly clergy and church fora members attended the event which explored the mission of the church in peace building, the challenges of peace building in a faith context, a good practice example, the text

¹ The Church of Ireland Bishop of Clogher, The Right Revd Dr Michael Jackson, speaking at the launch of the Rural Enabler Programme in Fermanagh said, 'I welcome wholeheartedly the localness of this initiative. I welcome its comprehensive cross border character...I look forward to hearing a lot more...as the Programme does what it sets out to do: enable, equip, encourage, embrace.'

of biblical stories and dealing with the legacy of the past. Discussion questions included 'What are the current divisions/needs of our communities in relation to peace building work?' 'How can REP be of support?' and 'How can a clergy/church forum contribute to peace building in a locality?'

- 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' in Ballymena in March 2012, organised as a Listening Day with CCWA with speakers Derek Poole (LINC), Rev Robert Miller (Church of Ireland), Fr Sean Nolan (Roman Catholic) and Rev Mervyn Ewing (Methodist). 35 people attended from churches and communities from Ballymena and Antrim. Participants discussed the barriers and issues they are facing when engaging in community development and peace building work.
- 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' in Gilford, Co Down in June 2012 was a smaller gathering of 16 people from churches, community, police and Councils. The event explored the issue of peace building and centred on the notion that 'Tolerance is not enough'. Participants explored the challenges of moving from a position where cultural and religious divisions can be tolerated by each side of the divide to a more meaningful position of pushing beyond tolerance to understanding.
- 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' in Fermanagh in September 2012 had a similar programme to the other events with speakers from ISE, LINC and the Church of Ireland. 23 participants from churches and community discussed the challenges and opportunities for churches to engage in community development and peace building.

(c) Offering Support to Inter Church Fora

The REP developed relationships with and offered support to existing inter church fora with members from various rural communities.

This work included supporting:

- Churches Together in Gilford and Tullylish – meeting with the committee about the work they are doing in their area and discussing their ambitions for the future.
- Clones Churches meeting – seven clergy participated in an initial dialogue session and discussed the barriers and difficulties of working in parishes along the Cavan, Monaghan and Fermanagh borders.
- Cookstown Clergy Forum – meeting with representatives to discuss their plans for the future and how their work might impact more on local peace building.
- Dungannon Churches Forum (mainly lay people) and Dungannon Clergy Forum. This involved meetings with the Churches Forum, developing an action plan, trying to bridge the work of the Churches Forum with the work of the Clergy Forum and connecting the group with support agencies. An Interfaith Group from Riverstown, Co Sligo travelled to Dungannon as part of Rural Respect Week to provide an opportunity for both groups to reconnect and further develop their friendships while exploring different church traditions. The groups had a guided tour of churches in Benburb to learn of the history and traditions and discussed for the future.
- Fermanagh Churches Forum and Cavan Inter Faith Forum – supporting and co hosting '1912 – One Hundred Years On', a drama and facilitated discussion (developed by the Centre for Contemporary Christianity) on the events surrounding the Home Rule Bill and the Ulster Covenant in 1912.

- Louth Church Forum – hosting a first gathering of different churches in the Louth area to explore the roles of each of the churches in their communities and discuss how they might learn from each other and how they might link services and work in the future.

Members of Inter Church Fora who attended the 'Blessed Are the Peacemakers' events had an opportunity to hear new speakers and perspectives and to make new connections with other churches and agencies that participated in the discussions.

(d) Supporting Local Church Initiatives

The REP supported the development, funding and delivery of a range of local church initiatives such as:

- The Castlederg Youth Forum/The Youth Board of the Diocese of Derry & Raphoe 'On the Move' village clean up project in July 2012. This project gave an opportunity for young people from different religious backgrounds to work together on a positive local community initiative, to break down barriers and build good relations, reduce community tension and build confidence. The REP facilitated icebreakers and dialogue sessions on the 'role of churches in today's society' and supported cross border links and connections to other churches and statutory agencies.
- The Churches Trail in Omagh was an event during Rural Respect Week where different church leaders welcomed individuals, including young people, to their churches and introduced them to the main components of their faith. REP worked with Omagh Forum for Rural Associations and Omagh Council to present the project to the wider community.
- An OCN accredited training course based on learning from visits to six different institutions, including four churches, was developed with the intention of being rolled out beyond the lifetime of the project.
- Two 'Songs of Praise' events in Leitrim involved church choirs from four different denominations to join together, rehearse together and explore different aspects of their faith together.
- St John's Church of Ireland, Drumshanbo, Co Leitrim was supported to develop a cultural heritage project, to access funding and to become a part of the local tourist trail.

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Approach

Relationship Building

The approach taken was to make initial contact and build relationships with churches and faith based organisations so that appropriate support needs could be explored. The Rural Enablers took an open approach of listening to try to learn about and understand the particular faith context and local needs before offering support. This needs led, community development approach was effective in building trust and credibility, particularly with groups who were cautious and lacking in confidence and capacity to engage in peace building for the first time. There was an open and non-judgmental approach to involve people from any starting point or theological perspective. There was also a willingness to try new things and take risks.

Rural Enablers

An important characteristic of the approach relates to the enthusiasm and commitment of the Rural Enablers. Every Enabler had their own style, local knowledge and experience of working with people to enable them to do something new. Their motivation, patience, skills and personal approach built trust that enabled people to engage with new ideas and activities. The slow pace of development and change at times experienced in churches also required a degree of persistence and resilience. Some meetings resulted in further meetings and good co-operation while other meetings were more difficult to follow up and at times there was frustration at a low uptake of the support being offered.

Existing Initiatives and Partnership

Another important feature of the approach taken was to work within and alongside existing initiatives and organisations rather than duplicate, compete or try to 'reinvent the wheel'. Good working relationships and partnerships were built with faith based community development support organisations such as CCWA, ISE, Tearfund and the LINC Resource Centre. These partnerships combined RCN's experience, knowledge and networks in rural community development with faith based organisations' experience in working with churches to create more effective support for faith based peace building in rural communities. The representation of RCN on the CCWA Board is a significant outcome that will have continued positive impact.

At a local level, the Programme also connected with existing initiatives. For example, in the Ards Peninsula, the REP contributed to the implementation of a series of recommendations from a research project into church and community engagement. A similar example was when the Programme added value to the 'On the Move' youth project in Castlederg by suggesting links to other agencies and by providing a small grant along with planning and facilitation support. There were clear positive outcomes from this approach. Young people who participated in this project indicated on evaluation forms that they had made friends from different backgrounds, worked together for the benefit of the local community and removed barriers between people from different communities.

Capacity Building

The Rural Enablers assisted with building capacity, clarifying goals and planning and acted as a support and catalyst to local churches and inter church fora. Churches with limited capacity were supported to take modest steps, which were achievable, rather than unrealistic major initiatives.

Learning Space

The 'Blessed Are the Peacemakers' events provided space to hear and discuss new ideas and experiences, to listen to and acknowledge differences and to showcase good practice in faith based community work and peace building. This approach offered various church leaders and inter church fora ideas on different ways of engaging in community in rural areas.

Rural Focus

The distinctive rural focus of the Programme was also important as most of the inter church fora tend to be centralised in the major towns rather than in more remote rural areas. The REP provided an opportunity for more isolated rural churches to connect and engage in peace building.

Cross Border

The cross border nature of the Programme was another important aspect of the approach taken. The cross border church connections that were supported enabled some individuals to cross the border for the first time and to become more comfortable to continue do so. The cross border events, which included facilitated discussion and dialogue, provided opportunities for new learning as people heard the stories of other border communities for the first time.

Funding

Caution by funders concerned about restrictions on funding 'the promotion of religion' has been a barrier to churches accessing small grants for community development and peace building.

*'Some churches had to set up new community associations to access funding and some respondents argued that this should be unnecessary if churches can demonstrate transparency and accountability, including separate accounts for community projects.'*²

Recognising this issue, RCN developed a funding approach and mechanism, agreed with the SEUPB, to allow churches to access small grants to contribute to peace building projects without requiring them to set up a new constituted charitable association. This involved direct procurement and payment for goods and services by RCN, for approved costs in a 'Facilitatory Development Grant'.

Critical Reflection

Another important characteristic of the overall approach was a commitment to continuously reflect critically on the work and this resulted in good learning as the Programme developed and clear strategic thinking regarding the most effective approach in different church and theological contexts.

Impacts

It is clear that the approach taken with churches and faith based groups through the REP was sensitive, progressive and effective. In relation to the intended impacts of the Programme, there is evidence that the approach resulted in the increased capacity and skills of churches, faith based groups and individuals to address sectarianism, racism and polarisation. As a result, some church assets within the community are potentially more sustainable for future generations with usage by all members of the community.

² Faith in Community- A Long Term Investment: A report on research into faith based engagement with community issues in Northern Ireland, Macaulay Associates Network, Community Faiths' Forum, 2011.

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Support

‘The support was extremely appropriate. It was just what was needed.’
(External Stakeholder Interview)

The Programme helped to identify the different local support needs and offered to provide appropriate support, resources and small grants depending on the existing needs and capacities and what the group/church wanted to do.

The Programme was particularly successful in engaging with Protestant churches, including congregations with a more traditionally conservative outlook and those with limited previous contact with community development organisations. These churches were supported to develop their thinking, ideas and plans at their own pace.

The presence and accessibility of local Rural Enablers as a resource on the ground proved to be a good support to groups planning and implementing new initiatives. The local knowledge and contacts of the Rural Enablers allowed churches and faith based groups to take steps to begin to participate in mainstream community development structures. This was particularly important for small Protestant churches in the border counties in the South. The small grant element acted as a catalyst for faith based groups who had developed an idea but needed some additional input and money to turn their idea into action.

Examples of other support provided include:

- Supporting and re-energising local clergy fora and connecting existing groups to community development networks with a broader age range of participants.
- Supporting the establishment of new inter church groups such as new cross community networks in Co Leitrim that will be sustained beyond the lifetime of the project.
- Asking challenging questions regarding community engagement and peace building without being confrontational.
- Supporting groups in developing project action plans.
- Supporting CCWA with strategic planning to extend their regional impact in rural communities.
- Providing facilitation support for new conversations and dialogue.
- Community development training and support in using a community development approach.
- Facilitating local clergy to have time and space to discuss sensitive issues regarding shared space in their village.
- Supporting a working group of Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic parishioners in Fermanagh to develop a new joint group with community development outputs.

The evaluation feedback from the 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' events provides a good insight into the appropriateness of the support provided. Most participants indicated that taking part had resulted in increased knowledge, skills and understanding of peace building. Participants commented on how their horizons had been widened by participating in these events. The comments regarding what was most useful included the following remarks.

“ Conversations were purposeful and focused.”

“ I go back to my community involved and very encouraged.”

“ Greater knowledge of the issues around community development in the church.”

“ Confronting the issues related to the Churches becoming more engaged/more engaged in community issues.”

“ It was wonderful to exchange ideas, hear about what has worked and what hasn't and what the potential pitfalls are.”

As a result of connections and conversations at one of the 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' events, Tearfund was supported to deliver community development training with churches in Co Louth which had not accessed such training before.

Feedback from external stakeholders also confirmed that the support provided was appropriate and effective and several interviewees described this as of an exceptionally high standard. However, in relation to intended programme impacts, at this stage it appears that most churches do not yet have sufficient confidence to engage in dialogue without the need for external facilitation. Further support and training over a longer period of time will be required to achieve this impact.

“ Meeting people from a wide variety of church backgrounds and faiths and all working towards the same goal.”

“ New contacts, networks of like minded people.”

“ As I am at the start of setting up a drop in locally and as a church we have identified our mission, this has been a very valuable experience.”

7

Contributors' Perspectives

In this section of the paper, three key contributors to the 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' events reflect on the project and share their perspectives which helped to inform the work of the project over the past two years.

Challenges for faith based groups engaging in community development: Diane Holt

Diane Holt has worked in local community development and community relations in Newtownards in Co Down for the last 14 years as Director of The Link Family and Community Centre in Newtownards. She was a member of the Board of LINC (Local Initiatives for Needy Communities) in North Belfast and was the Chair of the Ards Community Safety Partnership. Over the last 8 years, The Link researched and developed community relations work in Newtownards involving churches and community leaders (resulting in the establishment of Newtownards Churches Forum and Newtownards Community Forum). The Link has also developed cross border relationships both between churches and community groups. She has recently become the Church in Community Advisor for Tearfund in Northern Ireland working across the Province to help churches through a process of engagement with their local communities. She is also a freelance performer, teacher and facilitator through her own business, 'A Voice'. Diane is married to Alan and has two children Sam and Iona.

I need to say at the outset of this article that my experience is gleaned from about 20 years of working with a large number of Protestant churches in Northern Ireland across a number of denominations. My thoughts and observations will therefore be set in this context.

Within the Protestant church culture of Northern Ireland the word 'Mission' itself seems to have quite a narrow definition. Mission for people in the church is about 'preaching the gospel' to the world outside the church walls. It is 'word' focused and has, in the main, included speaking in town squares and market places, going from door to door providing literature and bible tracts designed to persuade people, by the power of word alone, to a faith decision – to become Christians.

Mission in this context is about getting people converted to the Christian faith and normally involves bringing people to a church setting, or in some of the more conservative evangelical contexts to a tent 'mission' in the middle of a field or estate to speak to them the message of gospel to seek to convince them of Christian truths. So I have found when talking to a church about how they feel about beginning to reach out to their community, their first reaction is the question, 'How do we get them in?' This highlights the insular nature of the church mindset.

This question highlights another issue - the sense of 'them and us'. Many Protestant churches are made up of predominantly middle class members whose reasons for attending are varied. In conversation with members and clergy alike, there would be little understanding of being, at the same, time a member of your church and a member of your community. It is almost as if congregational members wear two hats. Whilst in their church, all time and energy is spent in maintaining the organisations and structures of that particular congregation, some of which may have some impact on the congregation and some of which do not. This focus is on the impact and wellbeing of the

congregational members, a bit like a private club which exists only for its own benefit. It has little sense of 'Kingdom Values' or 'community values' or how its existence and activities benefit the whole community. Benefit may only be measured in terms of increased numbers of people coming to the services on a Sunday and coming to faith in Christ as a result of the churches activities.

This also has an impact on the amount of time congregational members have to give to community related activity. Many congregational members are involved in volunteering directly in activities like the church committee, Parochial Church Council, church music group, Sunday school, church maintenance etc. They are also involved in organisations like the Girls Brigade and Boys Brigade, youth clubs, women's groups and groups for older people, which involve people beyond the congregational members. Maintaining all this, in an ever increasingly busy world, leaves little time or energy for holistic community engagement.

Some churches do have a more holistic understanding of mission, which I will call 'Integral Mission'. A respected theologian, John Stott, explains this understanding in an attempt to begin to help the church understand the theological reasons for engaging with their local community.

'His (Jesus) service took a wide variety of forms according to men's needs. Certainly he preached, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God and teaching about the coming and nature of the Kingdom, how to enter it and how it would spread. But he served in deed as well as in word. He fed the hungry mouths and washed the dirty feet, he healed the sick, comforted the sad and even restored the dead to life.'

There is beginning to be a realisation that at the heart of the gospel message is relationship - relationship with God, but also relationship with each other. In the bible it is the 'Great Commission', to go out and preach the gospel

to all nations. However, there is also the 'Great Command' to 'love your neighbour as you love yourself'. Even in churches that are more committed to this more holistic understanding of mission, there are still huge barriers and some of these are attitudinal and therefore take longer to overcome.

Because of the middle class nature of many of the Protestant churches, there is a life experience gulf which exists between people in congregations and those who live in more working class areas. There is also, for many, a belief that real poverty does not exist in Northern Ireland and many of the problems faced by people in disadvantaged housing estates are self inflicted. Assumed laziness is summed up by the opinion that 'If they would just get off their bottoms and get a job, things would be alright!' Therefore we have a 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Those in the Third World, where we have little knowledge of the political system, the corruption of leaders or local conflict are perceived to be in real poverty. Many Protestant churches have mission committees and mission funds but these almost exclusively fund overseas work in areas of poverty. Most of the agencies which the churches support use community development as their way of working – and yet churches do not seem able to join the dots and relate this holistic way of working into their mission locally.

There is no doubt that the particular circumstances of the 40 years of conflict in Northern Ireland and the theological differences between the Catholic and Protestant churches have had a negative impact on church and community engagement.

The first is highlighted by a number of Protestant denominations refusing to engage in any way with Catholic churches in their town. This means that there is little strategic or even joined up thinking amongst churches in the same town. It also does not model good relations even to their own congregational members.

Some churches that do wish to establish relationships with each other participate in ecumenical events, like carol services, which are perceived by the more conservative evangelical churches as 'worshipping' together. However, through my work in the town of Newtownards, research by Macaulay Associates into 'The relationship that exists between churches and between churches and the local community', it was discovered that a larger percentage of churches would work together for community, civic and social benefit than would meet together for what was perceived as joint worship. In Newtownards, there was a Good Friday service in the Town Square, a Carol Service at Christmas and participation at the Cenotaph Service in November. A number of Protestant churches would participate in no human engagement as a church with the Catholic Church, nor even with other denominations, which were considered too liberal in their theology.

The second issue is that many church fora which have come together in towns across Northern Ireland to seek to model good relationships have had little impact on the non-church going population of their town who know little of church life, politics nor denominational nuances. In an ever increasing secular society, church activities which merely enable church members to meet and learn more of each other have had little impact on community development. The churches in the main have focused their learning internally to find out about the denominational difference and similarities and are still relatively ignorant of the needs of those who are disadvantaged. Indeed, in many instances, people from local Protestant congregations with a heart for peace in Northern Ireland and with the best of intentions have sought to reach out their hand to their Catholic neighbour but have found it much more difficult to reach their hand out to their disadvantaged neighbour in the loyalist estate next door to their church.

So another issue is highlighted and that is one of lack of knowledge and skill. If you have no relationship with people from a more disadvantaged community, you will have little knowledge of the specific issues and problems faced by them. Where there is a lack of understanding of the complex issues that make up poverty and the cycle of poverty, which holds someone in its grasp, it is difficult to do anything about it.

Alongside this lack of knowledge is a lack of understanding of community development and a slightly distorted understanding of the servanthood that is taught in the bible. The church often tries to help people, once again with the best of intentions, but in a way that is often perceived as patronising. It does things for people rather than enabling people to develop the skills to do things for themselves. This approach stops people feeling that they have any value or worth and also, when the help stops, leaves those in need back at square one.

An example of this would be the big Streetreach Programme that often sends young people into disadvantaged communities to clean their streets. The young people involved are often only there for a few days or a week - little time to establish relationships. Rarely are the communities asked what they would like help with and, in some circumstances, members of communities have been angry that people seem to think their community needs cleaned up in the first place. The churches need to develop a theological understanding of community development and why it is a more Christian way of supporting those in need. Building the God given gifts and skills of individuals makes them feel valuable again and worth something in life and gives a hope for the future so they can continue to move forward.

I realise that as I am dealing specifically with the issues that churches and faith based organisations face, a negative picture is painted. However, I am also working with a number of churches who are actively seeking to develop an understanding of what exactly integral mission is and how they can develop their understanding and skills to enable them to reach out effectively to show the love of Christ within their local communities. As their focus moves from themselves to others who have many disadvantages in their lives, authentic relationships are established. They begin to develop an understanding of the circumstances, which lead to many of the problems these communities encounter. They draw alongside people to support them and journey with them. The added spiritual dimension which a church and faith based approach brings can offer hope and a future and, as this happens, positive transformation begins to occur. Interestingly the transformation is not only in the local community but also in the churches that are journeying with them.

In conclusion, I feel that the church and indeed faith based organisations have a very important role to play in both community development and peace building in Northern Ireland and that resource and support is needed to enable some of the issues highlighted to be adequately addressed.]

Church and Community Engagement: Earl Storey

Earl Storey was formerly Director of the Church of Ireland Hard Gospel Project. He now runs Topstorey Communications (www.topstorey.org) which specialises in PR and communications planning, community development, reconciliation and leadership training. He serves as Diocesan Communications Officer for the Diocese of Derry and Raphoe and has served as a Church of Ireland Rector on both sides of the border.

☞ A number of years ago a friend organised a weekend trip to the Isle of Mull, off the west coast of Scotland. What made it different was that the journey would be made across the North Channel and then up the west coast of Scotland on two ribs (Rigid Inflatable Boats).

It is an exciting way to travel, albeit a twelve-hour boat journey bouncing over the waves does get tiring. Travelling on such small vessels brought home a lesson. Winds, currents and venturing into unfamiliar territory could so easily knock the boats off course. At the start of the journey, it was vital to have a clear sense of the desired destination - where the journey was meant to end up. It really is true - if you don't know where you want to get to then anywhere will do.

Clergy in rural communities labour under the same burden as everyone else engaged in peace building in our community. The burden is the lack of a government policy framework - an agreed and unambiguously stated destination for peace building, as well as a credible framework for how that journey might be undertaken.

What is the desired destination for peace building work in Northern Ireland? If we don't know what it is and there are no credible plans for how the journey is to be undertaken then peace building on the ground will be a well-meaning but inevitably muddled affair.

What are the key challenges for clergy in rural communities in regard to engaging in peace building work?

There are two things that can cause difficulty for clergy, introducing change or addressing the challenge of peace building. Churches are often conservative organisations that dislike change. Rural communities are also as likely to dislike change. The temptation for leaders will always be to avoid issues that have the potential to cause difficulty.

The nature of community division in rural areas is often quite insidious and unspoken rather than obvious. This can reflect both the character of rural life and the nature of the conflict in the country. The character of rural life is that it is a mixture or interdependence but also where people are guarded about their personal business. This lends itself to the difficulties experienced across Northern Ireland where people with strongly differing opinions regarding religion and politics most often do not discuss them with one another. The result is that difficult issues often are not talked about openly.

The Troubles were often experienced by people in rural areas as something very 'up close and personal'. The interdependence of rural life requires a significant amount of trust between people. Instances of violent death in small rural communities often created not only deep wounds but also damaged trust between communities. Depending on the part of Northern Ireland one looks at it, is often the case that rural churches will have families that have experienced bereavement or injury as a result of our violent conflict. These wounds are often raw and painful not only for the immediate family but contribute to a sense of injustice in the wider community.

Our peace process has not found a way of addressing the violent events of the 30 years of the Troubles. This means that wounds, pain and anger are not addressed. Added to a normal reticence to discuss difficult issues in any event, these wounds stay unaddressed.

The cumulative impact of reluctance to talk about divisive issues as well as the suspicions that remained after violent incidents is sometimes an attitude of 'Whatever you say, say nothing' or 'leave well alone'. This may be a recipe that makes daily life possible but leaves the seeds of mistrust and pain. It can also leave the seeds of potential future conflict.

It is within such a context that rural clergy often work. Unspoken wounds and anger can mean that a desire to reach out to the 'other' community can be viewed with suspicion and even regarded as an act of betrayal to your own community.

Clergy often have a prominent role of leadership within their own community. Studies have noted the inarticulate nature of some Protestant communities. Those communities sometimes look to clergy and 'their church' to articulate their worries and concerns. The danger is that leadership, if it appears in any way challenging and critical of one's own side, or too accommodating to the 'other side' may not be well received.

Personal relationships and trust are vital to successful leadership in rural communities. Inter-community engagement may often be limited. The challenge is to find ways of getting people to engage with one another in a way that takes cognisance of the distance that has to be travelled. Promoting peace building through the medium of community development provides an important opportunity for building good relations. People and organisations can be persuaded to co-operate on taking initiatives that address a practical community need, without the first meaningful engagement having to be a discussion of the impact of the Troubles. As people connect then relationships can gradually be built. Of course wisdom is needed so that engagement on community need does not turn into 'whatever you do don't mention the war' syndrome.

The challenge for rural clergy can be summed up in one word – leadership. Clergy need great wisdom to provide leadership in a context sometimes fraught with pain and raw emotion. Leadership also requires courage. This is the courage to sometimes say or do things that may not always be initially welcomed by the members of one's own community. The challenge for leadership is often to simply overcome their own fear. The challenge of leadership for rural clergy is that they are also pastors to their church members. It may mean disagreeing with someone but being able to visit that person's home at a time of loss or sickness. This interweaving of roles and relationships can make peace building a personally painful process for clergy.

What are the key challenges for those working in Churches at this point in time?

Clergy are trained to be pastors to their people and this is often instinctive to them. However, the role and place of the Church in our community continues to change as people's attitudes to religion and institutions change. Added to the complexities of peace building, the key skill needed for clergy is not only to be pastors but also to be leaders. Leadership is a role that clergy do not always feel equipped for or confident to exercise. The challenge is for churches to train new clergy as leaders and to increase the skills of those already in post.

A number of years ago the author interviewed Jerry Greenfield (co-founder of Ben & Jerry's) about the subject of leadership. Greenfield, at pains to say he was not talking about leadership specifically in a religious or political context, said the following. 'A key role of leadership is to tell your own people the truth about the way things really are on the ground'.

The central message of the Christian faith is reconciliation. In a place where there is a government policy vacuum with regard to peace building, the community needs individuals and institutions that will champion peace building and reconciliation, refusing to allow it to disappear from a public agenda. There are many headline media events that suggest a process of reconciliation. The choreography that these events suggest is not always matched by meaningful inter-community engagement at ground level. The challenge for a champion of reconciliation is to welcome the publicly choreographed PR events whilst ensuring that the challenge of meaningful reconciliation work continues.

The challenges of Christian teaching in a divided community are clear. The centrality of the message of reconciliation has already been noted. Christ summed up the essence of discipleship in Luke 10:27 in two tenets, loving God more than anything else and loving our neighbour as ourselves. His subsequent teaching of the Story of the Good Samaritan established that neighbour included even one's enemies. The implications of concepts such as reconciliation, loving God more than anything else, willingness to love our enemy as well as that of forgiveness are only too clear. The challenge for those working in churches is to have both the courage and the wisdom to not ignore these central themes but to find a way of articulating them and living them out.

The challenge of speaking publicly for peace is one that clergy are willing to rise to. The reticence is sometimes in a lack of confidence or skill. The author, in association with journalists Liam Clarke and Kathryn Johnston, has run a programme *Speaking for Peace in the Public Square* for clergy, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. This aims to give clergy skills in dealing with the media regarding peace building issues. The number and enthusiasm of participants illustrated the willingness of clergy to raise their head above the parapet – it was mostly an issue of confidence and skill.

Reflection on the institution's attitude to supporting peace building, in particular the encouragement or discouragement observed or experienced.

One of the most important things about the Church of Ireland Hard Gospel Project was simply that it happened. The project had the sanction and support of the central decision making bodies within that denomination, namely the Standing Committee of the General Synod as well as the General Synod itself.

The fact that the Church of Ireland so clearly identified itself with a project that had reconciliation at its core made its own statement. It created an atmosphere of permission and safety for members of the denomination to address the issue of reconciliation, with all its attendant difficulties and complexities. It was also aided by the fact that the senior leadership of the Church of Ireland was deeply committed to the issues addressed by the project.

An independent evaluation of the project noted the following:

- The Hard Gospel Project initiated, developed, supported and co-ordinated a wide range of activities involving more than 7,500 people across every diocese in Ireland between November 2005 and December 2008. This is the most substantial denominational church initiative of its kind to have taken place in Ireland.
- The Church of Ireland demonstrated its commitment to the development and implementation of the Hard Gospel Project through the level of time and resources invested in ensuring it made a difference. The project was managed effectively through the Hard Gospel Committee and a high level of activity was stimulated and delivered by the small project staff team.
- A major achievement was to raise awareness of the project and the issues it was spotlighting at all levels of the Church of Ireland. The project provided a range of

opportunities at all levels to address issues of difference, community conflict and sectarianism. Discussion of 'Hard Gospel issues' has become normative within the Church of Ireland. The issues and approaches of the Hard Gospel are becoming mainstreamed into the Church and there has been a degree of culture change towards more open discussion of diversity issues. This enabled the Church to take a series of new initiatives and some of these had an impact in the wider community.

The Church leadership that I have worked directly with since the Hard Gospel Project continues to be deeply committed to the Church making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of our community. The challenge is not usually one of willingness to engage with difficult issues, it is more to do with availability of resources to promote such work. As with anything, peace building work requires time, energy and money. In a recession and with steadily shrinking funding then finding the resources to keep peace building on an active agenda of the Church is a bigger challenge than ever.

Postscript

Stephen Covey's advice that 'the main thing is to *keep the main thing the main thing*' is always relevant. The temptation for any organisation is to become more focused on itself rather than to fulfil its mission. Churches are no different in this regard than any other large organisations. The temptation will always be to become more fixated on a 'steady as she goes/don't rock the boat' mentality, whether at macro or micro level, as being the ultimate measure of success. This is a temptation to be resisted. Having experienced the bloody cost of conflict we realise that peace building is no mere academic exercise. Rather it is a desire to ensure that what we have in Northern Ireland is more than just a breathing space in our conflict but the breaking a historical cycle of bloodshed and division. That will take leadership that is both wise and courageous. 📌

Tolerance is Not Enough: Derek Poole

Derek Poole has worked on Peace and Reconciliation programmes for the last 35 years, both nationally and internationally, and is currently interested in exploring the issue of identity as a cause of conflict. Derek's experience has led him to believe that conflict occurs most often where a person's identity or a national identity is threatened.

Derek is the Director of the LINC Resource Centre in Belfast. LINC (Local Initiatives for Needy Communities) is a community-based initiative and is working for Peace, Reconciliation and Social Justice in Northern Ireland. LINC exists to provide educational resources and mentoring services for community-based conflict transformation and social justice initiatives. Its work currently focuses on supporting individuals and groups engaged in crisis intervention, conflict transformation and community relations as a means of securing long-term solutions to human need for people in conflict.

☞ The following thoughts on Rural Community Network's (RCN) faith based training series, 'Blessed Are the Peacemakers', are informed by a number of pleasing experiences.

Firstly, my participation in the series was in the context of RCN's approach to community relations work. The planning and facilitation of the above programme was highly professional and RCN's commitment to recruiting participants, devising workshops and disseminating event learning was exceptional.

Secondly, as the Director of The LINC Project, I've considerable experience in peace and reconciliation initiatives with local Churches and, I trust, understand the complex nature of this work. Therefore to observe the innovative and imaginative approach by RCN, to a sector that is, by definition, unique to engage with and currently in need of re-envisioning, was a delight. The RCN practitioners understood well the Church constituency, the issues, and

challenges and provided a sensitive and stimulating environment to explore these.

Thirdly, The LINC Project is working in Partnership with RCN in a number of community relations initiatives and our current collaboration in our IFI Funded programme, 'Learning Through Engagement', has been one of the most successful community programmes LINC has delivered. And, in relation to LINC's church and community practice, I consider working with RCN's 'Blessed are the Peacemakers' programme to be a model of two organisations delivering effective faith based community relations training by avoiding repetition of work and bringing added value to our distinctive but complementary programmes.

Tolerance is not Enough

My contribution to the 'Peacemakers' workshops and seminars was delivered under the title *Tolerance is not Enough*. As the title suggests, I was seeking to critique the current climate of peace and reconciliation in post-conflict Northern Ireland and restate the political and theological truth, that the creation of a sustainable peace and a mutually inclusive society necessitates more than a 'culture of tolerance' as a social and ethical foundation. I suggest that tolerance, as 'the putting up with each other' is not only an inadequate and unsustainable basis for the cohesion of a pluralist society but a dangerous one.

Tolerance means 'to bear with or to endure' and implies the enduring of that which is disliked, or inferior, threatening and different etc. Therefore tolerance, as a basis for social relationships, falls way short of Liberal Democracy's vision of a society built on equality in diversity within a mutually respectful civic and legal framework. And for the Churches and Christian social ethics, tolerance is also seen as inadequate, as the hope for 'reconciliation of all things', including one's enemy, demands much more than 'enduring' their existence. In a society that both the Church and State envisions as conducive to social wellbeing, tolerance is ultimately not enough.

However, my argument is also a nuanced one. In the transition from conflict to peace, the achievement of political and community tolerance is no mean outcome and is not to be despised. When we consider the darkest days of the Troubles then the uneasy peace of tolerance is undoubtedly better. Putting up with the 'other', while continuing to dislike or distrust them, is preferable to sectarian violence, intimidation and forced evictions. And tolerance offers more than that. A *Conflict Transformation* model of peace building holds that, on the spectrum of conflict, the end of hostilities and the establishment of a tolerant space is a vital staging post towards a transformed society.

Post conflict tolerance makes possible secession from violence and a space for dialogue. It facilitates the creation of an overarching canopy of political representation, essential as a first step toward a permanent peace. For all antagonists in a conflict must have a political and economic stake in society and the responsibility for the shaping its future. The climate of tolerance, flawed and precarious as it is, provides a social and community context in which the work of healing and the building of new kinds of relationships are possible. As Goethe put it, 'Tolerance should be only a temporary attitude; it must lead to recognition'.

The problem is not the practice of tolerance, as a transitional stage towards the 'recognition' of the 'other' but the acceptance of tolerance as the end result of the Peace Process and the basis on which to build a civil society. In the painful struggle for functional politics, settling for tolerance is an understandable necessity or temptation. And there are political scientists who would argue it's the best we can expect in the first generation of a post conflict environment. But there are more dubious reasons for maintaining the politics of tolerance past its transitional value. Political pragmatism is highly tuned to party survival and domination and a tolerant society is an easier and ironically a more 'politically correct' vote winner than the more complex vision of a pluralist society built on the community relations principles of Equity,

Diversity and Interdependence. Tolerance is, de facto, the politics of our Devolved Government as evident in the shelving of the *Shared Future* document; and the fudge on the *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration* consultation; and the on going disingenuous responses to community based initiatives and experience. At best the acceptance of the status quo of community division could be interpreted as a lack of political imagination and leadership. Or, if one was really cynical, a shared but separate future, ameliorated by an ethos of tolerance, provides a secure voting base for the two main political parties.

The Challenge for the Church

However, it is easy to snipe at the failings of the fledgling Assembly at Stormont. A question raised at the 'Peacemakers' events was 'what is the unique contribution the Churches can bring to peace and reconciliation work and the creation of a politically coherent and socially cohesive society?' We asked, as keepers of a social vision of peace, justice and reconciliation, how do communities of faith respond to the inadequacy of tolerance as a foundational premise for the future? And we questioned the willingness of Churches to engage in community relations with a respectful and relational 'recognition' of the 'other' as a citizen and neighbour.

The answer to these questions must involve some humility. The role of the Church in peace building is like the rest of society, a mixed one, ranging from courageous and creative initiatives to careless indifference and even sectarian divisiveness. Therefore, to speak of the Church's 'unique contribution' is not to imply a superiority of experience, knowledge and ability, for in community relations work the Church in general has little of these. But it is to say that the Church brings (or should bring) something 'distinctive' to the healing of broken and alienated relationships. And if what is now needed, in our process to peace, is a new grassroots initiative to model life beyond tolerance then the Church, at least in theological theory, has a particular contribution to make.

A Virtuous Society

The Church's mission is inseparable from the creation of right relationships built on mutual respect and the common good, what is commonly known as a 'virtuous society'. Since society, by definition, cannot be wholly structured on political policy, human rights legislation and the adversarial culture of law, there is a need for the relational and virtuous dimensions of social cohesion. Good law, informed by social justice, is essential but from Aristotle to Christ to Martin Luther King and a host of others it has been understood that we can no more legalise right relationships than we can legislate for love, truth and forgiveness. We can legally enforce judicial justice; punish discrimination and hate crimes; neutralise symbols of difference to avoid offence; and through law we can impose socially correct behaviour to gain external conformity. However, as Seneca knew, 'Laws do not persuade just because they threaten'. In the contested spaces of community conflict it is difficult to find law that persuades, as this year's riotous events have again confirmed. There is a dark irony in this, for a society based on tolerance needs an industry of law and litigation to manage the intolerance lurking between the cracks, for tolerance is not enough.

The transformation of hearts and minds and the deconstruction of our physical and emotional barriers require, yes, good policy and fair legislation, and also a culture of virtue. A virtuous society is one in which my good is only possible with the common good of the 'other'. In which the 'recognition' of others and their dignity and worth is valued and affirmed. A virtuous society has the moral resources to explore beneath the political canopy of party politics and the holding pattern of tolerance to rebuild empathetic human relationships on the social virtues of honesty, humility, generosity and reciprocity. The values of virtue can address what politics and tolerance cannot – the legacy of mutual hate and hurt and the pandemic of sectarianism that still flows in the social blood stream. We need to invest as much in the nurturing of a virtuous society as we invest in structural and legal change.

The violence of The Troubles has left a moral blight on many of our communities and eradicated the language of virtue from hearts and homes. But that does not mean there is no longing or passion for change. It is surprising where newness can come from and many courageous initiatives have emerged from the most marginal of places and people. For the Churches are not the only communities with a premium on virtue. But the world of brokenness is the 'natural' ground for the Church, at least in its vocation if not always in its practice, and the promotion of community virtue is essential to a Christian vision of social transformation. For a truly just society is held together not only by rights and law but by relationships and virtue.

The irony is that churches, with a peace and reconciliation commitment, may have been more proactive and engaging during the worse days of the conflict and have possibly lost something of the energy and urgency of that work. But Churches continue to have a seminal role in working at the margins – creating experiential programmes for human encounter, facilitating painful but vital conversations, crossing borders and boundaries to build networks of caring and trusting relationships. Churches have the theology and language of healing, forgiveness and reconciliation and some faith communities have hard earned experience in peace building and mediation. If tolerance is not enough, what does life beyond tolerance look like and will the Church contribute actively contribute to that transformation.

Rural Community Network created the context and conversation in which these disparate thoughts and challenges were explored. In their organising and facilitation of the 'Peacemakers' workshops they modelled the virtues of a 'virtuous society'. Through their attitude and practice, they made difficult conversations possible, managing diversity with generosity and respect and ensured reciprocity of participation and opinion. I trust they will be able to continue their innovative programme in the coming years. 🍷

8

Challenges

The Programme was able to identify many of the future challenges and barriers to peace building facing churches and faith based groups in rural communities.

Fundamental challenges highlighted by participants in the 'Blessed Are the Peacemakers' discussions in Dungannon included:

'We are speaking a different language to the outside community and even our churches are separated. We need to change our language so that the wider community understands what we are about.'

'Churches tend to look from the inside out and try to fit the community into the existing church structure, but that's not working any more. We need to consider how we can fit the church into the wider community.'

'Church has to become more relevant.'

'The significant risks that still exist for those who make serious attempts to engage in peace building.'³

The main challenges identified during the course of the programme were:

Fear

- A fear of not being able to respond appropriately.
- A fear of upsetting lay members and lay church leaders.

- A fear of stepping out into 'the world' and not being acknowledged.
- A fear of the possible repercussion of 'going out on a limb' in terms of peace building.

Capacity

- Churches that are struggling to survive, prioritise looking after their own members and maintaining traditional activities rather than looking outward to the wider community.
- A lack of confidence and skills in community engagement.
- Few churches have the resources to develop projects on their own, indicating that working together is a more sustainable approach.
- Successful community development work in churches is held up as the exception rather than models of good practice.

Leadership

- A dependency on clergy (rather than lay church leaders) who may either drive or resist community engagement, depending on their personality, personal beliefs and approach.
- A tendency for clergy to prioritise traditional ministry over community engagement and peace building because this work is within their comfort zone, their area of competence and there is no opposition to this work among church members.

3 Review of 'Blessed Are the Peacemakers', Linda Gould, 2012.

- The Programme found it particularly difficult to engage Roman Catholic clergy, explained partly by an increasing workload on a reduced number of Parish Priests whose main priority is internally focused on sacramental and pastoral work, leaving little time for peace building.
- The busyness of existing church activities leaves little time available for training and engagement of church leaders in community development and peace building, where these are regarded as secondary priorities to internally focused activities.
- A continuously changing leadership because clergy can move churches on a regular basis.

Theology

- The level of engagement in community development and peace building is often dependent on how this work is understood and prioritised within the particular theological understandings of individuals, congregations and denominations.
- Many conservative evangelical Protestant churches do not wish to engage in any activity they perceive as involving 'joint worship' with Roman Catholic churches (and some other Protestant churches).

Church Culture

- There is a generally conservative and risk averse culture within rural churches resulting in caution around change and engaging in new activities.
- There is a culture of churches operating separately in local communities. There tends to be little strategic working together unless this is externally facilitated.

Sustainable Support

Another major challenge with the Rural Enabler Programme affecting the work with churches was the short-term nature of the Programme. The Programme concludes with clear evidence of unfinished business and a possible loss of learning and knowledge as the project closes and the work, which has begun, ceasing prematurely.

There was potential for a great deal more to be achieved, building on the learning and relationships built with churches and faith based groups. Although one of the major achievements has been new initiatives that will be sustained, the Programme has only just started in terms of understanding and approach and many rural areas have not yet been impacted. Some innovative new ideas were explored but it was not possible to implement within the lifetime of the Programme.

9

Learning

The key learning gained from the outcomes from REP interventions with churches and faith based organisations is:

- 1) Churches are often at the heart of rural communities, involving many people and as such have an important role to play. Supporting churches and faith based groups to engage in peace building in rural communities can be an effective way of creating sustainable grass roots reconciliation and community cohesion, given the continued influence and place of churches in many rural communities.
- 2) Creating stronger relationships, networking, co-operation and partnerships between the community sector and the faith sector is likely to enhance community development and peace building in rural communities. Mutual learning and shared resources will continue to result in collaboration and increase overall impact.
- 3) Supporting churches and faith based groups to engage in peace building is long term work that requires attention and sensitivity to building trust and relationships. An open and listening approach is more likely to engage churches that have previously not engaged in peace building work due to theological, leadership or practical concerns.
- 4) Supporting churches to engage in peace building requires a needs led approach due to the considerable differences between denominational and local contexts.
- 5) Building capacity, confidence and an understanding of community development is the foundation for supporting rural churches to engage in peace building.
- 6) Increasing networking, co-operation and partnership is essential in supporting rural churches to engage in peace building.
- 7) Committed and motivated leadership is essential for churches to engage in peace building.
- 8) There are many barriers to churches engaging in peace building. Barriers within churches include declining congregations, limited human resources (fewer clergy and volunteers) resulting in a prioritisation of core (mainly sacramental and pastoral) activities above peace building and limited capacity for new work or innovation. Other barriers include lack of resources, uncertainty on how to engage, fear of being unable to respond well, lack of skills, knowledge and confidence and fear of opposition from within congregations.
- 9) Good collaboration between faith based and secular community development support agencies has the potential to enable churches to become active in community development and peace building for the first time. RCN staff increased their knowledge and understanding of different churches, which enabled the REP to engage sensitively. The approach taken by RCN could be shared with urban community development agencies to improve engagement with churches.

- 10) A relatively small amount of grant aid and support can be a catalyst for new peace building initiatives by churches in rural communities.
- 11) The funding mechanism developed by RCN and agreed with SEUPB (involving direct procurement by the funder) is an effective way of providing access to small grants to churches without requiring them to set up a new constituted charitable association.
- 12) If the goal of inter church work in rural communities is peace building, then this activity needs to extend beyond social and spiritual interaction, to develop practical action that reduces sectarian mistrust and divisions and addresses the legacy of conflict.
- 13) The complexity of working across jurisdictions on a cross border initiative is not a major barrier to churches engaging in peace building, because most churches are organised/structured on an all island basis and some parishes straddle border communities.
- 14) Supporting rural churches to develop cross denominational and cross border relationships and initiatives can contribute to peace building within communities most affected by the conflict of the past. There is potential to extend this cross border work significantly.
- 15) Providing support to small Protestant churches in border minority communities to engage in wider community development can contribute to sustaining religious diversity in rural communities.
- 16) Although the REP demonstrates that a great deal can be achieved in a short time with a reflective, effective and strategic approach and a motivated staff team, there are inevitable limitations in delivering a short term (two year) project within a context that requires much longer term interventions.

10

Recommendations

To build on the achievements and learning of the REP the following recommendations are suggested:

Office of the First and deputy First Minister

- 1) To support grass roots peace building in rural communities, there is an urgent need for agreed government policy and strategies to address sectarianism and racism and to deal with the past.
- 2) The proposed Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy should recognise the particular needs of rural communities and the potential role of faith based organisations and rural churches in building a shared future.

Department of Agriculture & Rural Development and Department for Social Development

- 3) DSD, DARD, other government agencies and local Councils with a responsibility for supporting community development and good relations in rural communities should support capacity building initiatives that enable rural churches to engage practically in the community, using the approach of the REP as a model of good practice.

Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, and Department of Justice and Equality.

- 4) The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, Department of Justice and Equality, other government agencies and local authorities with a responsibility for supporting community development and equality in rural communities in the Border Counties of

Ireland, should support initiatives that enable rural churches (especially small Protestant churches in border communities) to engage in wider community development, using the approach of the REP as a model for building cross border relationships and sustaining religious diversity in rural communities.

Churches

- 5) Churches which believe their mission includes community development and peace building should develop feasible ways of engaging in the community within their current capacity.
- 6) Churches and inter church fora interested in peace building should commit to, encourage and support the training of church leaders in community development.
- 7) Churches committed to community engagement and peace building should explore ways of working together rather than separately to increase their capacity for community development and peace building in rural communities.
- 8) Inter church fora should continue to explore new ways of engaging in practical peace building actions in rural communities.

Funders

- 9) Funders should consider using the funding mechanism developed by RCN and agreed by SEUPB (i.e. direct procurement by the funder) to enable churches to access small grants for community work without the requirement of constituting a new charitable association.

Voluntary and Community Sector

10) Secular and faith based voluntary and community sector organisations should explore the development of strategic partnerships to widen and deepen their potential impact on community development and peace building by working together, as modelled by RCN and CCWA.

Rural Community Network

11) RCN should continue to work in collaboration and partnership with CCWA, LINC, ISE and Tearfund to build on the relationships, learning and achievements of the REP to find ways of providing ongoing support to churches and inter church fora in rural communities to engage in community development and peace building.

12) RCN should link with the new Irish Churches Peace Programme to share learning, contacts and developments with this new initiative and to offer advice and support to contribute to its potential impact in rural churches.

13) RCN, in partnership with faith based community development support groups, should explore with churches the possibility of developing further training in community development and peace building for clergy and lay church leaders in rural communities.

14) RCN should share the learning from their work with faith groups during the REP with churches, community development support agencies, statutory agencies, local Councils and elected representatives.

15) RCN should build a database of church/faith based peace building initiatives in rural communities.

16) RCN, in partnership with faith based community development support groups, should attempt to secure resources to identify and publish a series of faith based models of good practice in peace building from rural communities and disseminate these success stories widely to rural churches.

17) RCN should continue to explore and encourage innovative use of church premises in rural communities.

18) RCN should continue to lobby for long term funding streams to provide the support required to release the potential of churches to contribute more fully to rural community development in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic of Ireland.

Appendix I: Interviewees

- 1) Neville Armstrong, Rural Enabler - Fermanagh
- 2) Jude Cumiskey, Rural Enabler - Down
- 3) Eileen Gallagher, Irish School of Ecumenics/RCN Shared Future Sub Committee
- 4) Diane Holt, Church in Community Representative, Tearfund/Board Member of Churches Community Work Alliance NI
- 5) Libby Keys, Rural Enabler Staff Mentor/RCN Shared Future Sub Committee
- 6) Aedin McLoughlin, Rural Enabler - Leitrim
- 7) Earl Storey, Church of Ireland Diocese of Derry & Raphoe
- 8) Ann Ward, Rural Enabler - Tyrone

Appendix II: Semi Structured Interview Questions

- 1) What has been your experience with the Rural Enabler Programme in relation to churches and faith based organisations and peace building in rural communities?
- 2) How appropriate was the support and assistance given to churches and faith based organisations in their peace building work within the Rural Enabler Programme?
- 3) What impact has the Rural Enabler Programme had on church/faith-based peace building in rural communities (i.e. successful outcomes)?
- 4) What, if any, were the issues in working across two jurisdictions on this type of work?
- 5) What are the barriers and future challenges for churches and faith based organisations working in peace building with rural communities?
- 6) What would you say has been the key learning from this work to date?
- 7) What needs to happen next and in the future to build on what has been achieved through the Rural Enabler Programme?

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