



CHURCH of IRELAND GENERAL SYNOD
CHURCH in SOCIETY COMMITTEE
Social Justice and Theology (NI) Sub-Committee

Report

One of the most significant projects over the past year was studying, understanding, and responding to the document: “A Shared Future – a consultation paper on improving relations in Northern Ireland”. A group of people gathered across the dioceses in Northern Ireland and spent time looking in detail at this document. We are indebted to the skill and expertise of the Rev Charlie Leeke, Reconciliation Development Officer in the Diocese of Down and Dromore who acted as group facilitator.

The outcome of the discussion can be seen in the detailed report submitted to the Community Relations Office, at the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Detailed Report: Shared Future Response

Q1. Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be for a more shared and pluralist society?

Yes, but going much further to a reconciled society.

We live in constant fear of violence. The cycle of violence needs to be broken by a sustained drive by government and institutions such as church to inject an awareness of options other than violence. Available support of both single identity and cross-community initiatives, that encourage new beginnings, needs to continue and for a long time in an uninterrupted safe environment.

We are a traumatised society (according to international academics studying communities experiencing continued violence) that needs help to acknowledge loss and confront fear; that needs space and time to be listened to; that needs clear information on how to proceed politically, economically, socially, how to re-establish social, cultural and institutional identities and values; that needs to let go of the past and future, and learn to trust. Trust is the one greatest need for a stable society and the most difficult to engender when violence and segregation continue.

At present, politicians feel out of control.

Q2. What do you think should be the main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in society? What are the main problems/issues which stifle good relations?

Trust is the main problem. We all know it is the right path forward. Having made the decision and switched to a positive attitude, we need to see the evidence of reciprocity.

Building good community relations will build trust. It is the journey that we make together, provided that we make it, that will equip us to handle difference and grow in understanding of each other. The opportunities to make these journeys out of mistrust need to be multi-tracked educationally, socio-economically and geographically, happening in the workplace, the classroom, the church, the legislature, the street and in the countryside, the city and the border regions.

Building good community is a huge task. It needs to be the concern of every institution from government to local darts team, from youngest to oldest. There may need to be legislation to curb negative aspects such as aggressive 'in-your-face' political/religious symbolism, leading towards the ideal of the requirement of local and visitor approval. The aim is not to lose identity and colour but to curb offence.

Q3. What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in NI should be?

Sharing, not separation;

Public debate, not neutral silence;

Partnership at all levels;

Integration where possible;

Understanding (through educational opportunities at all levels and ages), acceptance, affirmation and celebration of cultural diversity;

Single identity accepted and given space is essential to the rich tapestry of NI;

Single identity work on building confidence, trust, and sustainable social capital is essential.

A single identity that makes attempts not to damage other identities has a limit to its sharing. Identity is important and behaviour within the identity is important. The recognition that Christian love can be rejected and crushed by an overwhelming 'other' has always caused limitation and reticence. The unconditional love of the Gospel story led to crucifixion and death. The resurrection gave new hope and a new beginning at great cost. The resurrection of NI to a peaceful society may yet be of great cost. The situation may be worse before it is better. This is a realistic view which takes into account the present political vacuum, continuing violence, extant paramilitary forces, persistent targeting of community leaders, information gathering, non-acceptance of the PSNI and the refusal to recognize it without the inclusion of ex-prisoners of paramilitary organizations and the exclusion of former special branch officers.

Partnership is an acceptable way forward, i.e. the partnership of two creative entities exercising appropriate sharing.

Q4. What action needs to be taken at local government and community level to underpin the development of good relations between and within communities? What about Section 75? How could District Councils play a more central role in developing and coordinating action at local level to promote better relations and manage conflict?

In general, Nationalist- and Republican-held councils fund and encourage community relations; Unionist councils are reluctant. The Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council and the churches should challenge Unionist councils to change this unfair and restrictive attitude. The result of their years of inaction has the Protestant population in a bind. They require concentrated resourcing and training in community relations. Leadership levels need to be raised in the Protestant/loyalist population.

Local Area Partnership Councils need to reflect more Protestant participation. There needs to be ownership at every level.

Q5. What functions do you think should be carried out at regional level? Should these functions be delivered within Government or by an independent body, such as the CRC or a new statutory authority?

An independent body such as CRC could best deliver the enormous and long-term task of building comprehensive community relations and sustained development of social capital in NI.

CRC should be monitored and assessed continually by an independent monitor. There should be government accountability to see that it is delivered locally, equitably.

Q6. What action do you think Government Departments should take to improve relations?

Actively and fairly promote social capital; leadership is vital;
Government affirmed in doing this;
Firm legislation on the negative damaging sectarian actions of power groups;
Persist in a policy of promoting voluntary integration though segregation is the reality;

It is not a co-incidence that violence has surfaced in areas of deprivation. Housing, employment, amenities, health, education, law and order (restorative justice), trauma intervention and civic encouragement are needed in these areas. Border areas require much more Government agency attention.

Q7. How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?

A decrease in sectarian and racist incidents reflects improvement. The church needs to be recognized as having a quieting influence in areas of strife. A decrease in flags and emblems in public places and the removal of threatening graffiti would signify improvement. Some significant murals and territorial emblems attract tourist interest but the measure should be the level of threat. Opportunities to learn citizenship should be encouraged at all ages. The churches should also be encouraged to teach citizenship.

Changing behaviours can be monitored. The number of 'communities together' events and the emerging partnerships (sitting on the same committee) in all aspects of community life are indicators of change of attitude.

We need an Oversight Commissioner to see that those who are entrusted to deliver on good community relations and policy do so. We all will benefit.