THE ROLE OF PEACE AND RECONCILIATION GROUPS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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At the last count there were over 100 organisations in Ireland (mainly in Northern Ireland), dedicating themselves in some way to peace, reconciliation or community relations work (Hinds 1994). As a direct result of the conflict in Northern Ireland, a great wealth of indigenous community responses have developed engaging many significant issues, particular sectors or groups of people and involving different practices and approaches to conflict resolution. Given its relatively small size in terms of population and territory, it’s hard to imagine another region of conflict which has generated such a dynamic response.

Despite the numerous attempts at local conflict resolution over the years by this body of practitioners, little effort has been made to define and assess conflict resolution work in a systematic manner. There are a number of practical explanations for this which might have a resonance with other conflict regions. Most practitioners in the field would accept that because the work tends to be activity centred, labour intensive and under resourced, especially as regards personnel, to take time out for strategic planning or long term reflection is considered a luxury which few can afford (Bloomfield 1994). Additionally, practitioners may be so closely involved in the work that they have difficulty finding the appropriate broad perspective from which to indulge in such evaluation and planning.
If it is generally accepted that groups have not had the capacity to analyse their own work, there have been even fewer opportunities for practitioners to comment on the work involving the entire region.

The typology developed by Mari Fitzduff was the first serious attempt to define and categorize conflict resolution work in Northern Ireland. It is generally agreed that this pioneering effort has had a significant impact on practitioners in Ireland and indeed further afield. Without going into the typology in any depth it is important to note two significant points. First, Fitzduff’s work helped to take the competitive element out of the different approaches and interpretations of community relations/conflict resolution work and it helped introduce a notion of complementarity. This has allowed groups to respect each others methods and areas of work, to recognise that different approaches are legitimate and that perhaps a single approach to conflict resolution in Northern Ireland maybe too simplistic to make any real sense.

The second significant point relating to Fitzduff’s typology was its capacity to alert the peace and reconciliation groups to the notion that other forces, structures and initiatives outside purist conflict resolution practice were needed to bring about the prospect of a regional peace settlement. These included community development, economic regeneration, the adoption of pluralist environments, the development of trusted and accessible security forces, and so on.
What this paper will attempt to do will suggest a different categorization, thematic in nature and based on the actual activities of peace and reconciliation groups in Northern Ireland and considers the impact of the various categories on inter-communal relations. The paper also observes the strengths and weaknesses in the four different approaches and suggests what part they play in the transformation to a more peaceful and just society.

The characterization is probably more like a caricature and is not intended to be dogmatic, merely useful to glimpse some further understanding of peace or community relations activities and further, to instil a spirit of critical thinking and debate among those who organise such activities. The second part of the paper intends to sketch some key issues of current concern which need to be addressed if peace and reconciliation groups are to play a more significant role in the future development of a peace process.

Categories

McAllister's contemporary analysis identifies four main groups: the "Confronters" who believe in taking the war to the terrorists and endeavour to embarrass them out of their behaviour; the "Big Bang Theorists" who believe that if enough people can be mobilized in a significant action, the violence will have to stop; the "Prayers" who believe, primarily, in bringing it all to God, without whose intervention all attempts at peace building will be limited; and the "Relaters" who believe in the importance of building relationships across the community so that trusting networks can be established as a foundation for lasting peace.
Confronters

Confronters are characterized by their highlighting of particular paramilitary activities - these can be punishment shootings, punishment beatings and exclusion from communities as well as bombing campaigns and killings. Confronters are a comparatively recent phenomenon among the peace movement and have tended to specialize in particular themes or issues. For example, the Peace Train Organisation was formed as a result of a concerted IRA bombing campaign to disrupt the main Belfast to Dublin railway. Families Against Intimidation and Terror was formed by families of victims who suffered punishment shootings at the hands of paramilitary organisations because of alleged deviant behaviour.

Despite their lack of numbers those engaged in this type of work are extremely active and committed and undertake considerable risk in tackling paramilitary abuses in such a direct and public manner. Confronters tend to organise public campaigns, harness the attention of the media and attempt to embarrass paramilitary organisations out of their particular violent behaviour. For many years, groups like the Committee on the Administration of Justice have monitored the performance of the judicial system, the security forces and emergency legislation in relation to international standards of human rights but no such systematic monitoring was ever made of paramilitary activity. Confronters therefore, have a very important role to play in highlighting human rights abuses conducted by paramilitary organisations.
Confronters have a definite place within the "peace mosaic", they are concerned about issues of justice and basic human rights, they address those elements in society committing acts of violence and bring the full horror and hurt inflicted upon victims to a wider audience. Confronters play a useful role in shaking a community from comfortable indifference or apathy in case society becomes accustomed to an acceptable level of violence.

Groups that confront tend not to talk to paramilitaries for fear of giving some sort of legitimacy to their philosophy or actions. On the contrary, paramilitaries are viewed as illegitimate groups with no community mandate. There is no need therefore to exercise forms of mediation or conflict resolution between warring parties, in many ways confronters are declaring their own war, a propaganda war against paramilitary organisations.

The activities generated by Confronters can challenge the notion of community support for campaigns or acts of violence, they can question the use of political violence and expose the inconsistencies and contradictions of those engaged in violence for political ends. For example, the Peace Train Organisation successfully highlighted the contradiction of a republican paramilitary group fighting for some form of United Ireland, demolishing the only tangible rail link between North and South. Families Against Intimidation and Terror successfully exposed the hypocrisy of organisations who are fighting for some form of justice but who continually dispense summary and barbaric punishments within the communities they purport to defend and protect.
Another strength inherent in the activities of such groups many of whom are victims or families of victims of paramilitary violence, is the encouragement it provides for victims to speak out and to become involved in a variety of practical ways.

In some instances local communities have mobilized in response to paramilitary shootings. In 1990 a local community, Cooley, Co Louth united in their revulsion of the killing of a local man by the Provisional IRA. The local man was shot and killed because an arms dump was discovered by the Police on his farm, the implication being that he informed the Police of its presence. The community demonstrated their disgust at this action by mass demonstrations, by reprinting posters of the dead man which were then displayed all over the locality and by isolating those within the community that were known to have strong republican connections. When communities begin to resist and counter the influence of paramilitary organisations in a concerted way the control exercised by such groups over communities is seriously diminished, but further examples of communities reacting in this way to paramilitary organisations who have a degree of credibility and control within the community are few and far between.

Undoubtedly confronters are right to suggest that a portion of paramilitary activity is about intimidation, control and the promotion of fear, but, to brand all paramilitary activity in this way is not useful. In fact, the more paramilitaries are portrayed as being sub-human, parasites, immoral and illegitimate, the harder it will be to understand and finally come to terms with this phenomenon in our society. Paramilitary groups grow out of intense political and social conflict, their members come from within communities who can constantly legitimize their presence and support their actions. There are examples in
recent history when paramilitary groups have mobilized massive emotional and political support - the 1981 hungerstrikes mobilized hundreds of thousands of nationalists to the campaign for political status for paramilitary prisoners, resulting in the election of Sinn Fein candidates to Westminster and initiated the electoral success of republicans in local elections which has remained constant to the present day. The Ulster Workers strike of 1974 saw paramilitary organisations playing a key role in bringing down the Power Sharing Executive and it was evident that paramilitary activity and intimidation received large scale public support from the loyalist community.

Surveys have revealed that in general, paramilitaries in Northern Ireland are not very different in personality, background or intelligence to other people. The image of "thugs" or "monsters" committing mindless acts of violence has not been borne out by the evidence available.

In many respects the confronters analysis is too simplistic and convenient and denies other forces that have helped to shape the emergence of paramilitary groups - social conditions, community alienation, security force harassment, political philosophy and the need for community protection. The physical force of tradition in both mainstream republican and loyalist political philosophies is strong and deeply rooted in our culture and it will remain there for many years to come. By demonizing members of illegal organisations we conveniently isolate them from our minds so perhaps we do not have to take responsibility for their actions. So how far do such tactics, public embarrassment and counter propaganda prove effective in decreasing the levels of violent behaviour? More importantly, do such tactics or approaches make it easier or harder for paramilitary groups
to stop. Perhaps the louder we shout at such people the harder it will be to talk to them at some stage in the future.

"Big Bang Theorists"

Big Bang Theorists are characterized by large demonstrations, marching for peace and usually condemning those engaged in violence and sometimes politicians for failing to arrive at some agreed solution to the conflict. Invariably these demonstrations are organised in the wake of a notorious atrocity and thrive on the emotional fallout from these events. This approach argues that if enough people can be mobilized in a significant action the violence will have to stop. Many people will remember the early demonstrations of the Peace People which engaged thousands of individuals from both traditions and which created such an optimism for the peaceful resolution of the "troubles". Last year Peace '93 mobilized thousands of people particularly in the Republic of Ireland in the wake of the Warrington bombing which claimed the lives of two small boys. Lurgan Inter-friendship was formed after a series of sectarian killings in the locality and their activities were characterized by large scale local demonstrations demanding an end to political violence.

One of the strengths of this approach is its capacity to engage and involve a lot of people from all parts of society. It can and does muster substantial cross-community support and involvement and the activities and actions generate powerful sentiments and expressions for peace. One of the achievements of this approach has been its capacity to provide a traditionally divided community with something to unite about in an intensely public and physical way.
The sheer weight of numbers engaged in demonstrations serve to demonstrate the community's desire for peace and puts distance between those engaged in violence and the communities from which they come. A further useful factor of the activities of the Big Bang Theorists lies in the profile of the demonstrations which raises the general awareness in peace or community relations work, and, for many individuals attendance at such gatherings can be the beginning of a more focused commitment to work for peace in their home, workplace, church or professions. The activities of the Big Bang Theorists can be a formative influence on those who attend such activities and inspire people to become involved in more mainstream community relations work.

These periodic public expressions of disgust at inter-communal violence and desire for a peaceful co-existence can to a degree, shake public apathy and hopelessness. On many occasions these public expressions have provided a channel for ordinary people to do something positive however small. Their activities can be an antidote to hopelessness, it can raise moral, particularly, in difficult times of heightened sectarian tension.

Such gatherings can put pressure, however temporary, on paramilitaries and politicians and community leaders to react to the essential demands of an end to violence and the engagement in "talks" to resolve the constitutional impasse.

Essentially, these messages are the lowest common denominator around which the two communities can agree. Thereafter, there appear considerable differences on how to achieve a peaceful settlement and what the actual terms of the peace settlement should entail. Over the years the public demonstrations have not mobilized enough opinion
which encourages political leaders to compromise or to adopt more consensual type
processes which might allow accommodation to materialize.

In one sense the involvement such demonstrations allow participants is of a one off and
superficial nature. Emotions can quickly fade as the latest atrocity becomes yet another
in a long list of tragic events and statistics. John Dunlop, the former moderator of the
Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland argues that you cannot build peace on the last
atrocity.

Traditionally it has been impossible to sustain mass movements for peace and as the
numbers attending or responding to the call for yet another public demonstration
gradually reduce, groups are forced to address the issue of how to sustain the momentum
and translate emotion into energy and practical activities. The experience of groups
captured in this dilemma of translating emotion and enthusiasm into practical energy and
long term involvement in conflict resolution or community relations work suggests that this
is extremely difficult.

Big Bang Theorists aspire to the notion that the failure to arrive at an end to the violence
and political conflict is someone else's fault - usually paramilitaries and elected
representatives. Their attention, if not blame, is clearly focused on someone else's
shoulders. It seems to be difficult to channel such events into more practical steps of
action. Action, which allows society in its different structures and groupings to construct
ways to be more deeply engaged in community relations work. It does not suggest that
responsibility for the conflict lies on everyones shoulders.
Historically speaking, electoral support for politicians and political parties has remained constantly high despite the public desire for leaders to engage in a peace process. Paramilitary support might suffer some short term damage from the public abhorrence at particular actions or atrocities, but they have enough hard core support to overcome such short term set backs.

"Prayers"

Prayers are characterized by their organised times of prayer, fasts, walks and special services drawing people together from both sides of the divide. They are ultimately concerned with the spiritual dimension which has an impact on all peacemaking activity. God will primarily be the main agent in healing community divisions.

Many commentators on the Northern Ireland conflict have expressed surprise that not more peace and reconciliation work is being undertaken by the churches themselves. They envisage the Christian outlook as being naturally disposed to this work. The New Testament, they argue provides ample case studies of Christian witness to reconciliation work (Mason, Porter, Baker). This Christian perspective has brought many individuals and groups into the peace and reconciliation spectrum, producing many initiatives over a period of years, some predating the current spate of conflict. Many of the Prayers see themselves following in Christ’s footsteps, the role of the reconciler is a natural one for them to adopt. Many clergy and committed lay people have been drawn into community relations and conflict resolution through this experience and their presence permeates through into other categories of community relations work.
The broad range of interdenominational communities that have established themselves - Christian Renewal Centre in Rostrevor, the Currach Community, the Columbanus Community, the Solas Community and the Cornerstone Community all in North Belfast, Corrymeela and Columba House in Derry, for example, see themselves as beacons of hope, their symbolic example of co-existence, illuminating a stark, sectarian landscape.

These groups also bring to bear a moral imperative, a strength of conviction and commitment to reconciliation work which can be reinforced and sustained by religious faith. Their religious convictions ensure that they redress other inequities and social evils and much of their work is not confined to a Protestant/Catholic interface, many like Corrymeela and the Columbanus Community have developed a holistic approach to the theme of reconciliation.

To work for a spiritual as well as a social and political renewal involving Protestants and Catholics strikes a strong cord with many people in Northern Ireland. But to imply that the heart of our problem is a lack of faith, or the presence of Evil and what must be experienced to overcome these intractable problems is a spiritual conversion, alienates many others.

The ecumenical vision, while attractive to some, is something to be wary of for the majority of the church going population in Northern Ireland. Ecumenists in a Northern Ireland context paint a vision of ultimate unity between denominations and it is this vision which can limit their appeal. Unity implies a fusion and loss of identity, of separateness, collusion and compromise. In a conflict where the mainstream churches are part of the
conflict and assist in sustaining the battlelines of separation and segregation, ecumenists are a distinctive minority and many interdenominational groups operate outside the established church structures because they blur the edges of denominational identity. It is ironic that the work of such interdenominational groups inspired by the Christian message of reconciliation is marginalised in the very constituency where you might imagine they would be most effective.

For Prayers to become more effective they need to be involved and accepted as part of mainstream church structures and not operate outside them. Recent developments suggest that established groups may not have the credibility to reach more mainstream, evangelical or fundamentalist audiences and that groups from within those constituencies with sound theological credentials are the ones which will develop the debate and discussion in a single identity context (ECONI, Scripture Union Northern Ireland).

**Relaters**

Relaters are characterized by long term peace activists. They work at all levels of society, bringing people from different traditions together. Relaters try to improve communication, dispel stereotypes, reduce prejudice and build relationships. Relaters accept the divided nature of Northern Ireland society which in many cases prevents any quality contact between conflicting communities (Fitzduff 1994). In fact, the communities have successfully created ways to ensure that they do not have many natural channels through which they can communicate (Harris 1972). Areas of territory, political and denominational allegiance, educational systems, social and leisure patterns, sporting activities, cultural festivities and divided workforces have all successfully combined
to minimize substantial contact and segregation is the norm.

Relaters therefore see their role as providing safe opportunities for conflicting groups or communities to exchange information, to have sustained contact with each other in order to achieve a mutual understanding. For relaters, only through contact will fear, suspicion, misinformation and prejudice be countered over the years relaters have developed many approaches or models, some indigenous and some imported, which allow for a meaningful communication process to develop.

Many relater groups are in the "contact business", they range from holiday schemes to a variety of destinations some exotic some local, which entail a minimum amount of contact and conflict resolution process to highly structured and intense programmes which follow a prescribed and rigid model of conflict resolution. A definite contribution to improving inter-community relationships by the relaters has been the development of many methods and models, experientially tested, in conflict resolution.

Apart from the development of techniques to handle inter-group conflict and communication, relaters have also created neutral venues or space where individuals and groups feel secure to openly address issues of division. In a landscape were few natural venues exist, these spaces are essential to stimulate and sustain communication between distant communities. Much of the practice of reconciliation work occurs in safe centres away from the sharp interface areas and although this is a natural response to the lack of such space on the ground and particularly relevant in areas which experience the greatest degree of tension, there is a danger that people presume that community relations work
can only take place in far off centres away from the harsh reality of everyday sectarian existence. It may be equally important to develop ways which ensure that community relations work is sustained within communities despite the lack of neutral spaces for inter-community gatherings.

Some relaters can also feel that they can have dialogue with all protagonists without precondition, including paramilitaries. This ability to talk to all parties can give them an aura of neutrality and credibility, a rare commodity in Northern Ireland.

One of the drawbacks of the relationship approach is that it suggests no quick fix solutions. This type of peace building is "the long haul", relaters are working towards the generational, and not immediate change. Although this is perhaps realistic, and there is a great deal of academic and scientific evidence to back this up, it is also demoralizing for communities forced with a continuing recipe of ongoing sectarian strife.

Many of the participants effected by the relater’s processes are involved as individuals or belong to small sub-groups within communities. Many relaters focus on the development of individual friendships and relationships and over the years there has been a consistent lack of engagement in bringing strategic groups or institutions within the traditional blocs together. Perhaps until such strategic work is developed the relationship approach may take even longer to take full effect. While it is necessary and desirable for work to occur between individual participants of groups, say, for instance pupils from Protestant and Catholic schools, relaters need to develop simultaneous programmes which effect the schools as institutions. Schools which develop a more accommodating and
inclusive ethos will be better support structures within which the individuals can develop a greater sense of cultural diversity.

Sometimes the variety of models and methods on display create a competitive environment in which practitioners protest that their methods are superior to others. Further, the terminology or jargon evolving can sometimes create confusion and erect a barrier between the relater and the community with whom he or she is trying to engage. It is a general experience in Northern Ireland that the further the terminology and the processes are removed from the natural cultural context, the less relevant and effective the processes will be in practice. In many areas the terms peace, reconciliation, community relations, prejudice reduction or conflict resolution will not be appropriate. Some relater groups from the early seventies have evolved particular contact scenarios involving young people and children especially. In some cases what has developed are programmes which are practised on participants where the model engineers attitudinal change and in effect where the relater groups work on communities and not with them.

The relationship with the participant groups suggests that the fault for inter-communal strife and intolerance is their's and that relater can do something to the community in order to make it right or acquire a true perspective, free from prejudice. In my experience very few programmes actually empower communities to continue and sustain the work within their own segregated environments.
Empowerment

It may be useful to concentrate on a number of themes which would be significant if peace and reconciliation groups are to play a more significant role in the development of a future peace process.

I suspect that too many reconciliation groups still see themselves as interveners in a problem of which they are not a part. An attitude of working with the unenlightened in order to educate them has significant ramifications in the relationships they develop with their client groups and will undoubtedly limit the effectiveness of their work. A recent conference of Protestant and Catholic community groups living on both sides of the peace lines in Belfast openly questioned the relevance and credibility of peace and reconciliation groups.

A new phase of the work of peace and reconciliation groups should therefore involve empowering communities to realise their own potential, to realise what they should or could be doing in their own local context. Groups should act as catalyst, facilitator, and empowerer of skills, methods and strategies. Groups are well placed to act as a resource but at some stage allow communities to do their own community relations work. For many groups this will require a radical rethink of their activities and their methods.
New Constituencies

A further significant issue which has been long identified by observers of the peace movement is that it engages with those who want to be engaged. The audiences or client groups are in someway self-selecting and while it is important to support those who feel comfortable to become part of this work, it is essential that groups place some energy into developing and targeting new audiences and constituencies. The vast majority of public, voluntary and private institutions in Northern Ireland are not involved in mainstream community relations work, and while there has been significant progress in drawing many organisations to address sectarianism, there are vast tracks of territory as yet uncharted and unexplored. In many ways peace and reconciliation groups have the competence and experience necessary to address this work but whether they have the capacity, appetite and awareness to respond to this challenge is as yet undecided.

Extremists

If the latest developments in the peace process are contemplating scenarios which allow for the participation of Sinn Fein, what signal does that send to the peace and reconciliation sector? In practice the movement has been selective with whom it deals and sometimes its language and approach has marginalized its perceived relevance to certain communities. Discreet mediation between paramilitaries and political parties has occurred but mainly through individual figures. But if in Northern Ireland we are now able to contemplate scenarios of inclusiveness, who will be best placed to work with the extreme elements that are being enticed in from the cold. Many of the activities of Confronters and Big Bang Theorists will not be relevant in a new era of an evolving political peace process.
Extremists can also be represented by marginalized groups within society and this theme cannot necessarily be confined to those groups who have engaged in some sort of military struggle for political ends. There are political, social and theological extremes in Northern Ireland many of whom are intertwined and linked. By disengaging from one, groups may also be distancing themselves from other marginalized areas and groups. The challenge for the peace and reconciliation sector will be to develop more creative responses and ways in which they can engage with the marginalized and alienated of our society.

The challenge to groups who have been working towards peace in Northern Ireland will be to **review** their work in the light of critical analysis and changing political landscapes if they are to be a relevant and realistic force for positive change.

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