From Divided to Diverse Society: Reflections on Sectarianism and Social Diversity from the Churches Sector

Fran Porter

'I think we have an opportunity – paradoxically in a way – in Northern Ireland, an opportunity as we try to emerge from our own dysfunctionality and divided and contested community to be even more embracing than two traditions. There is a potential in Northern Ireland to create a kind of Northern Ireland that has never existed before. (Interviewee, Faith in a Plural Society *Project)*

Introduction

Northern Ireland is changing. It is experiencing an increase in social diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion and sexual identity. Emerging out of a paradigm of sectarian division between two populations, Northern Ireland is a society that now recognises the presence of minority populations.

This article explores how Northern Ireland's past and present experience of sectarianism impacts on how those in the churches sector and wider society respond to minority populations. It draws on material from the Faith in a Plural Society research project[1] carried out for the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland[2] that explored the responsibilities of Christians as individuals, as local church communities, and as church institutions in an increasingly diverse society. Specifically, it focused on the values, attitudes and practices of the majority churches sector towards members of three minority populations in particular: minority ethnic populations; minority

religious populations; and populations with minority status because of their sexual identity. Minority ethnic populations include foreign nationals, refugees and seekers of asylum, immigrants and people from minority ethnic backgrounds for whom Northern Ireland is home. In the context of Northern Ireland, minority religious populations are those who belong to world religions other than the Christian religion. Minority populations of sexual identity include people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT).

Of course, people may belong to more than one identified population at a time. While being part of a majority population, a Christian may also be part of a population with minority status in terms of ethnic and sexual identity. It is also the case that neither majority nor minority populations are in and of themselves homogeneous, something reflected in the use of the word 'population' rather than 'community'. In addition, talking in terms of these identities does not imply that people wish to understand themselves only or primarily in these terms. They are, nevertheless, in Northern Ireland society, part of their identity and impact on their lives. It is these facts about people's lives, particularly for members of minority populations, that mean they may be vulnerable to disadvantageous or harmful treatment in a society in which there are individuals or systems that are prejudiced against people on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or sexual identity.

It is something of an understatement to say that Northern Ireland's increased social diversity has not been met with an unqualified welcome. Racism, homophobic actions and hostility to members of minority religions are the more overt manifestations of negative reactions to social changes that are occurring.[3] To consider the responsibilities of the churches towards minority populations is, therefore, not an exercise in the abstract; members of minority populations in Northern Ireland may well have to deal with adverse attitudes and actions that are detrimental to their physical and social well-being. In exploring the role and responsibility of the churches as a majority population in Northern Ireland in protecting the participation and well-being of diverse minority populations, the focus of the research was on the churches rather than the members of minority populations, while taking seriously the lived realities of the latter.

So the research explored living in a diverse society through issues of equality, human rights, sharing social and public space, sharing religious space, issues of prejudice, sectarianism, privilege and social responsibility. This article reports the findings concerning sectarianism.

Research Method

The research was carried out through four main means:

i) Review of key civic and religious concepts. The research explored current understandings of the civic concepts of equality, human rights, and tolerance alongside religious ideas of human personhood, social justice and truth that inform Christian approaches to society.

ii) A consideration of institutional initiatives. Existing activities or initiatives within and between the institutional churches (as distinct from activities or initiatives at local levels) that addressed relationships with minority populations were reviewed.

iii) Church Leaders Survey. A quantitative survey of attitudes and activities of clergy, ministers and pastors in local congregations. A questionnaire was sent to all clergy, ministers and pastors serving in local congregations in Northern Ireland in October 2007.[4] This questionnaire asked about these church leaders' relationships, attitudes and practices towards minority populations of ethnicity, religion and sexual identity.[v] The response rate for the surveys was 21.5 percent or more than one in five of all local church leaders. Responses came from across denominations allowing for analysis of the data by denominational groups. Other Churches refers to any church apart from the Catholic Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland or the Methodist Church in Ireland.

iv) In-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with 50 individuals (14 women and 36 men) to explore in more depth the values, attitudes and practices of the churches in regard to minority populations. The majority of these interviews (41) were conducted with church leaders and church members who were engaged in some way in responding to the presence of minority populations in Northern Ireland. While the focus of the research was on the majority population of the churches, nine interviews were carried out with people who were specifically identified because of being part of one of the minority populations involved in the research.

For the most part, contributors from the churches sector are referred to simply as interviewees and occasionally a denominational affiliation is indicated. The term Protestant is occasionally used to describe an interviewee and is inclusive of all Protestant denominations, including the three largest (the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist

Church in Ireland). In instances where several quotations which are variously attributed are used to discuss a particular matter, no inference about the origin of contributions termed simply 'interviewee' can be taken.

Present reality

While Northern Ireland may be 'post-Troubles', sectarianism remains enmeshed in the life of Northern Ireland. The pervasive presence of sectarianism was underscored by interviewees:

> 'We are left with basic sectarianism, you know, and it's not confined to loyalist areas or working-class people, it's there in all our people and I'm constantly shocked how the very best (in inverted commas) people in our church actually are really quite sectarian if you scratch the surface, at least that's very often the case.' (Interviewee)

> 'That whole idea of benign apartheid, [we don't want] to give that air space, because that just leaves the most vulnerable people to pick up and deal with all the problems that are there. And actually, if it's in the community all that's happening in the interface areas is that it's coming to the surface, but if it weren't in the community there would be nothing to come to the surface on the interface areas. People away from the interface like to think that it's [a working-class] problem but it isn't really, it's the society and it's also the nature of human beings, there will always be a them and us but rather than them and us in opposition, if it's them and us working together we can create a good future.' (Interviewee)

> 'People who are victims of sectarianism have difficulty in seeing that they can be perpetrators of it as well. We're not ready to accept our place as perpetrators as well as victims of sectarianism, you know, or to see that actually perpetrators are also victims of sectarianism, you know, that's the difficulty.' (Interviewee)

Interviewees spoke of how the current reality of sectarianism is bound up with responses to minority populations:

> 'I do have a feeling of – disillusion is not the right word – but just this awful sinking feeling that all the preconditions for conflict are still here. You know, we haven't solved the hurts of the past, we haven't brought people together so that they can understand why things happened and understand each other's grievances and spiritual and life journeys and unless we do those sorts of things then really cycles of

conflict occur. Although things are very positive, and I'm not being negative, I am frustrated that people think that things are over and they don't have to do anything. I think that there's a fallback position that people have gone into and I think that the danger with that from an inter-ethnic point of view is that if they haven't got the curiosity and the wish to explore each other in terms of our community conflict and actually wonder, well what made all this happen, what do they believe and what do they think and do they really think that about us, … [then] I can't honestly think they're going to make those explorations they really need to do to make this a cohesive society in terms of understanding why migration happens.' (Church of Ireland interviewee)

'It was pretty obvious if you were going to have new people in the country that we already had a big, big problem and still do with sectarianism. Now people who divide the world into them and us were now going to be faced with another group of people who are not us and become them.' (Catholic interviewee)

'It would be a problem [*that immigrants are Catholic*] and it will be a problem to a very small minority of our congregation. This congregation is made up of some people who have that very narrow-minded view of religion and of tolerance in society and it's stick to your own kind.' (Protestant interviewee)

'The Catholic community has been pretty welcoming [of foreign nationals]. Maybe I don't see a problem because most of these other people are Catholics…The grounds on which our community wouldn't be able to accept them are more economic and social problems, but nothing to do with the Troubles … I suspect that the Protestant community has had more of a siege mentality than the Catholic community – is that me [being] fair, saying that?' (Catholic interviewee)

'[Some foreign nationals are] more likely to be Catholics. Now that doesn't mean a strong RC identity but there's a feeling [among the Catholic population] that they are really us, really part of us.' (Protestant interviewee)

'[Foreign nationals in the area] were associated with the Catholic population and that actually created more problems. So there was greater animosity from the Protestant population.' (Presbyterian interviewee)

'It's almost like people just back off when you hear sectarianism, well they think, you know, we're into the peace process now, sectarianism's

> not an issue anymore. But it big time is and people … think [of] sectarianism in terms of Catholic/Protestant within the Christian tradition, but they don't see … sectarianism is about religion, you know, just not denominations within the Christian faith. Sectarianism exists right throughout the world and it's a global phenomenon.' (Church of Ireland interviewee)

The Church Leaders Survey explored the extent to which respondents thought that Northern Ireland's history of sectarianism has led to a lack of constraint in expressing negative and socially unacceptable views about people from minority populations (Table 1).

Table 1
It has been said that Northern Ireland's history of sectarianism has led to a lack of constraint in expressing negative and socially unacceptable views about people from minority populations? Do you …

	Presby-terian Church in Ireland %	Catholic Church in Ireland %	Church of Ireland %	Methodist Church in Ireland %	Other Churches %	Total %
Strongly agree	6.9	8.3	9.9	21.4	8.9	9.8
Agree	43.1	48.3	40.7	46.4	26.7	41.3
Don't know/ no opinion	31.9	35.0	34.6	21.4	42.2	33.9
Disagree	16.7	8.3	13.6	10.7	15.6	13.3
Strongly disagree	1.4	0.0	1.2	0.0	6.7	1.7
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Half of church leaders believed that the sectarian legacy has led to a lack of constraint in voicing of negative views about minority populations (10 percent strongly agree and 41 percent agree). Methodist ministers stand out in that not only were there more of them of this opinion (68 percent) but they also more strongly agreed, which at 21 percent is at least twice that of any other denominational group.

Fewer leaders overall disagreed with this statement (15 percent) than responded 'don't know/no opinion' on this question (overall one third at 34 percent). Leaders of Other Churches had the highest proportion in this category with 42 percent, while only 21 percent of Methodist leaders felt that they had no opinion or did not know.

Capacity

The pervasive background of sectarianism impacts on the ability of the churches sector (and wider society) to respond to increasing social diversity. Given the demands of dealing with past and present realities of sectarianism, the Church Leaders Survey explored church leaders' opinions about the influence of the Troubles on the responses of churches in Northern Ireland to minority populations (Table 2).

Table 2
Which of the following options comes closest to how you think the Troubles have affected the capacity of the churches to respond to minority populations?

	Presbyterian Church in Ireland %	Catholic Church in Ireland %	Church of Ireland %	Methodist Church in Ireland %	Other Churches %	Total %
The Troubles have made the churches more open to people from minority populations	12.0	40.0	17.3	14.3	14.6	19.9
The Troubles have made us wary of people from minority populations	12.0	5.0	14.8	10.7	16.7	12.0
The Troubles have left us feeling that we do not have the resources to reach out to people from minority populations	6.7	10.0	7.4	10.7	6.3	7.9
The Troubles have meant we have little awareness of the presence and needs of people from minority populations	49.3	30.0	39.5	42.9	35.4	39.7
Can't choose	20.0	15.0	21.0	21.4	27.1	20.5
Total	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

With the exception of Catholic clergy, more church leaders from each denominational group, ranging from one in three (35 percent) of leaders of Other Churches to half (49 percent) of Presbyterian ministers, felt that those in the churches have little awareness of the presence and needs of people from minority populations compared to the other statements. For Catholic clergy, the majority opinion (40 percent) was that the Troubles have made the churches more open to people from minority populations, although almost a third (30 percent) thought that lack of awareness is the consequence of Northern Ireland's experience of sectarianism.

Catholic clergy excepted, few believed churches are more open to people from minority populations. Around one fifth (denominational groups ranging from 15 to 23 percent) believed either that the Troubles have made people more wary of people from minority populations or that the churches lack capacity to respond to increasing social diversity. Overall, one in five (20.5 percent) of church leaders were not able to choose an option.

Hence, with the exception of Catholic clergy, a clear majority of church leaders see Northern Ireland's experience of sectarianism as having negatively affected the capacity of the churches to respond to Northern Ireland's increasing social diversity.

Interviewees echoed three out of four of these opinions – openness, wariness and lack of awareness – as factors in responses to minority populations not only from the churches sector but throughout Northern Ireland society.

That people were **open** was unexpected for one Catholic interviewee: 'I'm surprised at what seems like an openness after so much narrowness and fighting for our rights and all this stuff.'

The idea that this openness had developed out of learning that had come from addressing sectarianism was a common theme:

> 'Reaching out … across the religious divide … has been a thread that has continued to run through in all sorts of ways – I think it broke down barriers in people's minds about the others whoever the others were, and made it easier for them to welcome people of other nationalities'. (Interviewee)

> 'Sectarianism and racism … the root of those things is the same. It's about … how humans divide and how we tend to group ourselves off and how groups then behave. So I think it is … a natural kind of progression of groups behaving that way if we see ourselves as different from [minority ethnic] people.' (Interviewee)

> 'It was a natural development for [reconciliation]. Sectarianism would be a first challenge but that the second challenge was how we related to minority ethnic people.' (Interviewee)

> 'We're learning things about, for example, the Catholic community that we never fully understood and that was that, you know, with their educational background, with their political background they can't have any other kind of aspiration than an all-Ireland identity simply because of that – that's their ethnic roots, that's their religious roots, that's their political roots and then also their perceived injustices that have been perpetrated against that community – some real and maybe some not so real – but that's a reality. And so I think that's filtering through and people are talking more and we're seeing political leaders talking and seeming to understand each other and respecting each other's point of view. So I think that should make it much easier for us to cope with Chinese people because we've got to realise they are coming from a different background, or Koreans or Polish or Portuguese [people]. So if we have begun to grapple with the Irish question then it should make us much more amenable to cope with the other different traditions and ethnic groups that are around today.' (Interviewee)

When talking about what they were taking from their experience of building cross-community relationships into how they responded to Northern Ireland's social diversity, one interviewee reflected, 'The one thing that would strike me [about relating to social diversity] is you've got to take risks. You gotta engage in conversation with people and talking doesn't cost anything, I mean a cup of coffee, you know. There are theological boundaries that are going to be difficult, – but I have still found that, you know, talking to another human being at an acceptable social level over coffee or some sort of setting, discussion, discuss stuff, and sometimes when you see people's eyeballs and you feel their heartbeat they are – easier for us to understand them, but take risks. Don't let fear stop you.'

This confidence is not unanimous. The idea that many in church and society were hesitant or **wary** was also expressed:

> 'The sectarian element is certainly a feature in all of us and I think it reflects certainly our difficulties in dealing with people who are different from us. And also I think that this is probably worse in the Protestant community … we seem very anxious to find people who are like us, who are the same as us, people who we identify with. It doesn't matter if that is in our churches, in our housing areas, in a whole range of ways, you know. People are different and rather than saying, "Wow, this I can learn from and experience new things from", we say, "Oh, I'll just be careful. I'll be polluted in some way in my thinking or my purity might be distorted". And that probably goes back to the insecurity again.' (Protestant interviewee)

> 'I think that Protestants, unionists in particular, are always insecure in their identity so there is a sense in which we really don't know who we are… I mean, who are we is a big issue for many of us. Are we Irish, British, Northern Irish, Ulster, Ulster Scots? Where do we actually belong? Who are we? … I think the kind of Irish nationalist republican community have a much securer approach to their identity and they know what they are. They may not be where they want to be, but they are Irish. They have an Irish identity. They are least threatened and because they have been, you know, on the side of being the victim, there's a sympathy with the victim, so I think there's a sense in which anybody who becomes a victim [then] there's a sympathy in the broad nationalist republican community which does not pertain to the same extent in the unionist community.' (Protestant interviewee)

> 'Traditionally sectarianism, I think, obviously is a manifestation of our fears, insecurities and uncertainties about who's going to take us over and who's going to mistreat us and who's going to misunderstand us and who's going to disturb our way of living. That's the way the traditional sectarianism operated… But we now have this new group who are also making us feel insecure, some of us feel insecure, and that they become the group that we are suspicious of, uncertain, will they take our jobs? Will they take our places in school? You know, there's an element of fear there.' (Interviewee)

> 'There's more of a suspicion. You know, the suspicion has sort of shifted from Catholics and Protestants to this other population who are coming in. So I see a suspiciousness around.' (Interviewee)

Given that, as one interviewee put it 'our default disposition has got something of a segregated mindset in it', another interviewee, worried about the level of racist attacks, explained, 'I fear that people having maybe accepted that one enemy or one form of enmity may be drawing to a close, looked for another form of enmity.' Certainly, in a divided society, the sense of personal and communal security that comes from the solidarity of a homogeneous community identity is threatened by the presence of those with different identities, even if not belonging to a group's principal 'other'. Members of minority populations are therefore, in the words of one interviewee, 'coming into what is already a contested space', be it in terms of resources, territory and even premises for religious use. As one interviewee explained, they were aware that for some people in Northern Ireland the peace process has gone in a direction they never anticipated. After more than 30 years of suffering 'at the hands of republicanism', which included economic deprivation, they were told 'under the peace process it's going to get better and for many … areas, it hasn't and one of the reasons it's not getting better is because of this influx of people who are stopping it getting better because they are taking a lot of our jobs and our houses.'

One interviewee thought that, for many, churches had functioned as safe spaces that kept everyday realities at bay: 'During the Troubles that became a protective world, maybe the only place in the week where you didn't really want the Troubles to be … you might really be irritated when the [leader] banged on about forgiveness because you just want a peace to get your head showered.' As another interviewee observed, the insularity of church traditions is 'probably a structural thing within Northern Ireland in that we've had to live a certain way and because we've had to protect ourselves and that's traditionally how we've done it and that's how we've had to do it. But we don't know how not to be that people, I think.'

This insularity is in part connected to a general **lack of awareness** about minority populations. 'I think in many ways we still are very closed really and that probably is because we are quite divided', said a Presbyterian interviewee, 'but [also] because we are quite insular and everybody kind of gets on with their own kind of thing. I think because life has been quite one-dimensional … especially in a rural church … and everything is associated with that church and that denomination and that ideology and that sense of national identity and

all those kind of things. I think it does make you – it means that society is just very white and one-dimensional.'

One interviewee recounted their struggle during the Troubles to find any information about homosexuality, something prompted by learning that a family member was part of the lesbian and gay population: 'I didn't understand, and although I was trying, I was picking up literature and I knew that there were things that were being written … I kept thinking, is it because it was a criminal offence at one time, is that where the secrecy was coming from? And the other thing was the society that we were living in here, it was quite, you know, abnormal society. You know, with the conflict here, things like this were all sort of brushed under the carpet type of thing and maybe they didn't really know, you know, what the issues of homosexuality were, I just didn't know.'

For another interviewee, 'I think the Troubles was blamed on so much, it was the alibi for everything... I didn't go to school because of the Troubles and I beat my wife because of the Troubles and I didn't get employed because of the Troubles and I committed crime because of the Troubles and the Troubles was all of that. It was our short-hand for so much and then that is gone … And the racist issue – the difference then surfaced as it's not the green and the orange – it's everything else! And we'll start picking on these, or just the whole issue of being different has posed all of those questions and I think that this whole sexual orientation comes into that in the sense that those issues would have not surfaced because there were all those other issues... that prop has gone, that flag of convenience has been removed and then we have got all this other surfacing.'

Among interviewees there was broad agreement that the context of sectarianism is bound up with how Northern Ireland is responding to social diversity and that it is part of Christian faith and practice to engage in the work of building healthy social relationships:

> 'We have been shaped by our context, we have been shaped by the politics [of] identity, we've been shaped by opposition and identities and contested this, that and the other, and that's the big block to the embrace of diversity or pluralism.' (Interviewee)

> 'We haven't learned how to disagree with each other in a way… We don't know how to disagree and sometimes it's easier just to not say anything for a quiet life. But we have to learn the skills and we have to be educated.' (Interviewee)

'[The] historic divide in Northern Ireland is only part of a human issue about how we live together with other people in society which if you are a person of faith, I speak specifically of Christians, is something that is clearly, in my understanding of Christianity, central to Christian ethical behaviour.' (Interviewee)

'I think that one of the things we need to teach people is how to start looking at other faiths and other issues of morality, sexual identity, ethnicity, looking at them through graced eyes. We have never done that. How do you teach people that language if it has never been part of their background, where they have always known a world that if you analyse the culture it is a culture of animosity – it is Protestant versus Catholic, unionist versus nationalist, British versus Irish. How do you turn it round where you can say, "How can I appreciate what is here? Let me also then move down to the things that disturb me, but not start with those and come to a more balanced view." So we are at a very, very early stage and the danger is that we start to judge churches and communities who haven't had even five year's education in how to look at people through graced eyes.' (Interviewee)

'I think we have an opportunity – paradoxically in a way – in Northern Ireland, an opportunity as we try to emerge from our own dysfunctionality and divided and contested community to be even more embracing than two traditions. There is a potential in Northern Ireland to create a kind of Northern Ireland that has never existed before.' (Interviewee)

Conclusion

The pervasive presence of sectarianism, past and present, remains the background against which Northern Ireland's newer social diversity is emerging. Parallels between the dynamics involved in racism and sectarianism are frequently identified. However, the Catholic religious identity of a substantial number of members of minority ethnic populations means that sectarian meaning may be given to ethnic identity compounding, or perhaps shaping, expressions of racism. In these instances, addressing racism involves engaging sectarian attitudes and actions.

If the church leaders surveyed have an accurate sense of how those in the churches sector are impacted by the Troubles, one of the biggest factors to be dealt with is the lack of awareness by many in Northern Ireland of the presence and needs of members of minority populations. Past and present realities of living in a context of sectarian conflict may well absorb the energies of those in the churches sector in terms of addressing individual, community and cross-community needs, some of which will manifest as frameworks of caution and self-protection.

While the negative fallout of sectarianism on minority populations is perhaps more readily identified, there is a notable amount of learning about dealing with social conflict that exists within the churches sector as it does throughout wider society. Paradoxically, therefore, Northern Ireland is both disadvantaged and advantaged in the task of accommodating social diversity. The disadvantage is in the legacy of hostile ways of relating in personal, social and institutional contexts that permeate current individual and social relations. The advantages are that there are rich resources that can address various forms of social diversity that are not only about dealing with difference, but about learning to live with deeply-rooted disagreements over that difference.

Notes

1 A 16 month project (February 2007 – May 2008) made possible by a grant from the Community Relations Council under the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Counties with the aim of promoting research on the 'Rights and Codes of Conduct for a Diverse Society – Protecting Minority Participation.'

2 The full research report 'Faith in a Plural Society: The Values, Attitudes and Practices of Churches in Protecting Minority Participation' is available from www.contemporarychristianity.org.

3 See Booroah & Mangen, 2007; Clarke, 2003; Coleman, 2003; Connolly, 2002, 2005; Connolly & Keenan, 2001; Diversity Matters, 2004; Gilligan & Lloyd, 2006; Jarman & Monaghan, 2003; Jarman & Tennant, 2003; Lister, 2003; McVeigh, 2006; Quiery, 2002; Youthnet, 2003.

4 A total of 1,385 surveys were mailed. There were 297 completed eligible responses by 30 November 2007.

5 The survey mainly asked questions concerning lesbian women and gay men.

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