

# Report

## Where to next for Reconciliation in Youth Work?

**A round table discussion held in partnership with Youth Link and Youth Action<sup>1</sup>**

**By: Dr Cathy Bollaert and Dr Martin McMullan**

**Date: 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019**

**Venue: Belfast**

Envisioning a future to which all can aspire is integral to building a peaceful and thriving society. However, with the current political impasse and lack of a Northern Ireland Executive, as well as with the current Brexit negotiations taking place, the society is standing at a crossroad of an uncertain future. This has the potential to negatively impact on building the confidence of young people to deal with the legacy of the past and build their view and hope for the future. As Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland continues to deal with the legacy of the Troubles, and in the interests of building a shared and peaceful future in which all the members of the society can flourish, there is a need to keep a spotlight on reconciliation within the youth work sector and explore the question of where to next for the reconciliation within the youth work sector.

In seeking to address this question, Youth Link and Youth Action facilitated a workshop with youth workers and other stakeholders, including funding and statutory bodies. The workshop began with an overview by Dr Martin McMullan of where youth work is at in relation to reconciliation. Drawing from his PhD research findings Dr McMullan explored the relevance of sectarianism and separation within young people lives and the extent to which youth work addresses these issues. This was followed by a short synopsis around the definition of reconciliation by Dr Cathy Bollaert which drew on her own work on the common good and on Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly's (2004) definition of reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> This definition of reconciliation includes the following five pillars:

1. Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society;
2. Acknowledging and dealing with the past;
3. Building positive relationships;
4. Significant cultural and attitudinal change; and
5. Substantial social, economic and political change.

Using this definition as an evaluative framework, participants self-evaluated where they thought youth work was at in relation to reconciliation. The findings of this process were used as the basis for breakout sessions in which groups discussed what they saw as the priorities for reconciliation in youth work going forward. This report provides an overview of how participants evaluated the position of youth work in reconciliation and the priorities for reconciliation they see youth work over the next several years.

---

<sup>1</sup> The organizers would like to thank the Community Relations Council, NI for their contribution to making this event possible.

<sup>2</sup> See further: Hamber, B. and Kelly, G., 2009. Beyond coexistence: Towards a working definition of reconciliation. In: J. QUINN R., ed, Reconciliation(s): Transitional justice in postconflict societies. Montreal: McGill University Press, pp. 286-310.

## A self-evaluation of reconciliation in Youth Work

Using the definition of reconciliation set out by Hamber and Kelly as an evaluative framework, workshop participants assessed youth work's contribution to reconciliation in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland. This was carried out using a Likert scale and series of qualitative responses. The findings of this process are outlined below:

1. *Developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society:* Participants agreed that work is being done to develop a shared and inclusive society. However, it was felt that more emphasis is given to looking at difference rather than at celebrating similarities. This acted as an impediment to developing a shared vision of society. One of the challenges raised was that if we don't have a shared narrative of the past and if we are still living separately, how then can we have a shared vision of the future? The need for more training on cultural awareness and acceptance was also recognised.
2. *Acknowledging and dealing with the past:* There was a consensus that youth work struggles with this aspect of reconciliation. This was seen to be impacted by the perceived inability of politicians to deal with the past and compounded by the lack of a shared narrative across the society in relation to the past. However, there was also an acknowledgement that engaging with issues of the past was dependent on individual youth workers. While some youth workers did engage with this issue (at their own discretion) more space for these discussions is needed. Moreover, there was a strong agreement around the challenges that young people have in being able to recognise the impact the past has had on their lived experience and the way in which this has become normalised. There was agreement that more opportunities were needed for young people to engage with the legacy of the past.
3. *Building positive relationships:* Participants felt that this is an area of reconciliation which youth work does well as this was core to good youth work practice. As a result of this work young people were now more able to move freely and safely within the society. However, there was also agreement that a focus on building positive relationships needed to move beyond the traditional lines of division (Catholic and Protestant) and include those from other cultural backgrounds.
4. *Significant cultural and attitudinal change:* There was a feeling among participants that the distance travelled in relation to this pillar over the last 15 years was minimal due to what was perceived as the rise of sectarianism in some areas. It was also recognised that this is long-term work and while progress has been made in that young people are, for example, now able to travel to different communities and engage in various cross-community festivals and sports activities, to see significant change requires a long-term view and long-term investment in young people.
5. *Substantial social, economic and political change:* Among the participants there were a range of views from those who felt that youth work was very limited in its ability to affect such change to those who felt that youth work had been instrumental in promoting social change. Examples included youth work's influence on social issues such

as homelessness and other equality issues including LGBTQ+ rights. There was also a strong feeling that to affect change it needed to start at the top levels of political decision-making.

### Where to next for reconciliation in youth work?

Using the assessment of reconciliation in youth work, participants were asked to engage with what this meant for how reconciliation in youth work should be prioritised. An analysis of the discussions highlighted the following themes:

1. There is a need in youth work to move beyond the binary Protestant / Catholic divide which keeps people separated. While not forgetting the historic divides, the future of reconciliation in youth work needs to be more inclusive of those from other cultural backgrounds and/or those who don't identify within the traditional lines of division.
2. The intergenerational aspects of reconciliation were also recognised as a key priority for reconciliation in youth work. This includes working with parents, families, schools and others who are involved the life of a young person. More 'joined-up' thinking was required in this regard. Related to this, the need for discussions around the transgenerational impact of the Troubles was also recognised.
3. The future of reconciliation in youth needs to focus on addressing shared issues (such as the environment, equality issues, health etc) rather than focusing specifically on identity issues. However, it was agreed that a focus on a shared concern does not exclude a cross-community dimension to youth work. Rather, it can work to enhance and make work aimed at addressing sectarianism more effective. In addition, it was noted that when engaging with identity this needs to move beyond the single identity (Catholic / Protestant) and needs to be inclusive of multiple identities including gender, sexuality, nationality etc.
4. The need for training in reconciliation work was highlighted as an important need within the youth sector. Training would include issues such as how to manage / engage in controversial topics, increasing understanding about different perspectives of the past, addressing traditional understandings of nationality and competing nationalisms, the definition of reconciliation, and the importance and benefits of reconciliation both in youth work and for society at large.
5. The short-term nature of funding was recognised as a challenge to promoting reconciliation in youth work. To this end, the need for more long-term and sustainable funding was identified as integral to shaping the reconciliation agenda going forward.

### Conclusion:

The workshop provided an important space to engage with the challenge of reconciliation in youth work and for the members of the youth work sector to reflect and evaluate its own practice in relation to reconciliation. Certain areas, such as providing the space to build positive relationships with the 'other' and contributing to social change, were identified as areas in which youth work is doing well. However, there was acknowledgement that youth work could do more to 'de-normalise' the current culture of violence in Northern Ireland by engaging more with the impact of the Troubles in the lives of young people while also looking to build a shared and inclusive vision of society based on the common good. Further to this, five key thematic areas for moving forward with the reconciliation agenda were identified including the need to widen and deepen our understanding of identity, working intergenerationally, the need to focus youth work on key thematic issues (such as the environment) that unites young people across traditional divides, the need for more training in reconciliation, and need for sustained longer-term funding. Finally, the currently political impasse

and the uncertainty raised by Brexit, the collapse of the shared government, and growth of globalisation were seen as key challenges to moving forward with reconciliation. Despite these challenges there was a strong agreement for the need to keep reconciliation work on agenda of youth work. Youth Link and Youth Action have both developed various resources to support this agenda.