

## **Facilitating Conversations on Reconciliation, Belonging, and Community Relations**

This focus group is designed to help faith communities and related organisations explore how reconciliation and community relations are experienced today, and how faith can play a more relevant and credible role in responding to contemporary divisions in Northern Ireland.

The session prioritises lived experience, honest listening, and collective reflection. It recognises that while sectarianism remains significant, people increasingly experience segregation through racism, inequality, gender division, political polarisation, and exclusion. The aim is to reflect on what feels meaningful, difficult, stalled, or hopeful, and to identify what needs to shift for reconciliation work to regain momentum and impact.

### **Preparation**

We recommend the session lasts for approximately 1.5-2 hours. An ideal group size is 8-20 participants depending on their age and ability. Where possible, include diversity of age, gender, background, role, and experience. Make sure to remove barriers to participation by accommodating different needs and abilities. Young people's voices are particularly important as they can give insight into current issues and their hopes for the future.

You'll need:

- A large, accessible room with space to move around
- Printed photos (for the photo reflection activity)
- Flipchart paper and markers

Facilitators Tips:

- Create a safe, respectful environment where disagreement is allowed but personal attack is not.
- Be attentive to power dynamics, especially where leaders or professionals are present.
- Avoid rushing participants toward consensus or solutions.
- Treat the session as listening and sense-making, not decision-making.
- Acknowledge that some conversations may bring up pain, anger or trauma and signpost to relevant support if required.
- Language like reconciliation and peacebuilding means different things to different people, particularly across age demographics.
- Approach this topic positively – you may sense fatigue or apathy during discussions but this is often frustration, not a lack of desire for change.

### **Session Outline (90 minutes)**

#### **1. Welcome and Ground Rules (5 minutes)**

Explain why the session is taking place, how the information will be used and that participation is voluntary and confidential. Agree a simple group contract, including respect for different experiences and views, speaking from personal experience, and confidentiality. Make it clear that there are no right or wrong answers. If the group don't know each other, you may also want to do introductions.

#### **2. Energiser: Community Relations Pictionary or Charades (10 minutes)**

This works well with younger age groups. Participants draw or act out community-related words (e.g. Protestant, Catholic, peace walls, protest, church, hate crime, politician, riot) and the rest of the group have to guess what they are drawing/acting. Keep the tone light and playful, not mocking. Avoid reinforcing stereotypes – if they use a stereotype to communicate their word, it's ok but make sure you talk about it.

#### **3. Photo Reflection: What Does Reconciliation Mean to You? (5 minutes)**

Lay out a selection of photographs on the floor (people, places, everyday scenes, symbolic images). Ask participants to choose one image that represents what reconciliation means to them and share briefly why they chose it. Their interpretation can be as literal or metaphorical as they wish. Note the diversity (or similarity) in how people understand reconciliation.

#### **4. Walking Debate: Is Your Community Better or Worse Than Five Years Ago? (15 minutes)**

Label one side of the room “Better” and the other “Worse”. Read out words such as: Safe, Welcoming, Friendly, Diverse, Supportive, Hopeful, and ask participants to physically position themselves along the spectrum. Ask for some feedback from participants and ask gentle probing questions. Emphasise that different experiences can exist in the same place.

#### **5. Story Circles: Tell us about a time when... (15 minutes)**

Split into small groups of around 4-5 people. Provide some discussion cards around belonging and ask each person to discuss one.

- I felt welcomed and included.
- I felt unwelcome and excluded.
- I felt I belonged.
- I felt excluded.
- I felt uncomfortable around others.
- I feel comfortable around others.

#### **6. Wheel Conversations: Exploring Holistic Wellbeing (30 minutes)**

This activity explores how different aspects of life interact to shape belonging and reconciliation. This activity uses Tearfund’s Light Wheel as a conversation aid. Set up six stations for each theme with a flipchart page, markers and prompt questions. Split into 6 groups who will rotate around each station every 5 minutes. Participants should discuss the prompt questions, write down key points and consider where they think their community is on a scale of 1-10. A low score indicates challenges and exclusion whereas a high score feels enabling and positive.

[add link/QR code: [The Light Wheel - Tearfund Learn](#)]

#### ***Health and Wellbeing***

How does mental health and resilience affect reconciliation?

Who struggles most to cope, and why?

#### ***Power and Influence***

Who has a voice? Who does not? How can we empower others or ourselves?

Where does leadership help or hinder?

#### ***Faith***

What is the role of faith and church in reconciliation?

Where do the actions of faith communities align with their values?

#### ***Social Networks***

Who feels protected, supported, or excluded?

How do relationships shape belonging?

#### ***Resources***

How do poverty and inequality affect reconciliation?

What barriers limit reconciliation work?

#### ***Capabilities***

How does education, hope, and opportunity shape the future?

Who feels stuck, and who feels able to move forward?

#### **7. Reflection and Evaluation (10 minutes)**

This section sums up learning during the session and suggests some goals or actions to progress to. You can choose from options below depending on what is most appropriate for your group.

- Word Association: Ask participants to share one word or phrase for “Belonging” and “Reconciliation.” Note differences and tensions.
- Two Stars and a Wish: Ask participants to share two things currently done well in Northern Ireland for peace and reconciliation and one thing that could be better or different.
- From Talk to Impact: Ask participants to identify one local decision or practice that could realistically create positive change.

Close the session by explaining what will happen with the insights and how participants will be informed of next steps.

### **What Happens Next?**

After the focus group, organisations should consider:

- Sharing key themes with participants and key stakeholders.
- Reflecting on where their own practices lack impact.
- Identifying one or two concrete changes.
- Using insights to inform funding bids and strategic planning.

*For further information on working with groups or using this facilitation guide, please contact Contemporary Christianity or Youth Link.*

*Contemporary Christianity*

*Tel: 028 9066 3145*

*Email: [info@contemporarychristianity.net](mailto:info@contemporarychristianity.net)*

*Youth Link*

*Tel: 028 9032 3217*

*Email: [info@youthlink.org.uk](mailto:info@youthlink.org.uk)*

*Developed by Jamie Plant, Diane Holt & Cathy Bollaert*