Rethinking Community Relations

Faith, Belonging and Reconciliation in Contemporary Northern Ireland

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CONTEMPORARY Christianity

youthlink

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Executive Summary

This scoping study looks at how faith communities in Northern Ireland can play a more relevant and credible role in reconciliation and community relations today. While the terms reconciliation and good relations are still widely referenced, many people feel that current approaches no longer reflect lived experience or respond well to today's social challenges. The study aimed to understand how people within the faith sector experience and interpret reconciliation and good relations today, and why current approaches sometimes feel disconnected or stalled.

Participants described a society shaped by both old and new forms of division.

Sectarianism still matters, but it does not explain division on its own

Racism, hostility towards migrants, inequality, gendered insecurity, and political polarisation are now everyday realities, especially for young people

Recent racist violence and public disorder were seen as signs of fragile social cohesion

At the same time, the public role of the faith communities and the faith sector, more widely, in reconciliation was widely seen as less confident and less visible than in the past, despite faith communities remaining deeply rooted in local life.

Across all workshops, several strong messages emerged:

Reconciliation language is unclear: People use the word "reconciliation" in very different ways, to mean forgiveness, justice, agreement, personal relationship with God, or simply living alongside difference, and this lack of shared meaning creates confusion and frustration.

Belonging is uneven: Not everyone experiences belonging in the same way; safety, power, class, race, gender, and community background all shape who feels secure, heard, and included.

Faith is credible when it is lived: Faith communities are trusted most when their actions match their values, and when reconciliation is shown through everyday behaviour rather than statements alone.

Divisions have changed: While sectarianism still matters, many people — especially young people — now experience division more through racism, inequality, gendered insecurity, and political polarisation

There is fatigue with process, not with change: People are not tired of reconciliation itself, but they are tired of conversations and programmes that feel repetitive, unclear, or disconnected from real change

The study suggests that reconciliation work is not failing because of lack of commitment, but because of structural misalignment. Reconciliation is often treated as a short-term outcome rather than ongoing work. Policy and funding systems frequently separate legacy issues from inequality, and dialogue from justice. Short-term, output-focused approaches weaken trust and learning over time.

In response, the report identifies five shifts to renew reconciliation and community relations work

Five Shifts for Renewal

In response, the report identifies five shifts to renew reconciliation and community relations work

From Outcome to Ongoing Holistic Practice
Reconciliation must be understood as ongoing, integrated work that shapes everyday life — not a finished result.

From Words to Credible Practice
Credibility grows when actions match values. Statements alone are not enough.

From Parallel Agendas to Integrated Justice
Past harms and present injustices must be addressed together, not treated as separate agendas.

From Assumed Belonging to Active Inclusion
Belonging depends on safety, fairness, and voice. It must be actively created.

From Talk to Impact
Dialogue must lead to visible change. Engagement should influence decisions and make a real difference

This report does not offer a new programme or quick solution. Instead, it provides a grounded starting point for reflection and renewal. It invites faith communities, practitioners, policymakers, and funders to consider how reconciliation can be more coherent, credible, and aligned with lived experience in Northern Ireland today.

1. Introduction

"momentum has slowed"

This study was commissioned in response to growing concern among numerous faith leaders, community practitioners, and youth workers about the state of reconciliation and community relations in Northern Ireland. While reconciliation and good relations remain part of public policy, and church language, there is a widespread sense that momentum has slowed and that existing approaches are struggling to speak to current and emerging social realities.

"the nature of social division... will continue to change"

Northern Ireland continues to live with the legacy of conflict, but the nature of social division has also changed and will continue to change. Alongside ongoing sectarian patterns, communities are facing rising racist violence, hostility towards migrants, widening social and economic inequality, political polarisation, and increasing disengagement. Recent incidents of racist intimidation and public disorder have highlighted the fragility of social cohesion and the limits of existing responses.

"the role of the faith sector in reconciliation and community relations has diminished"

At the same time, the public role of the faith sector in reconciliation and community relations has diminished. Faith communities remain deeply embedded in local life, yet their contribution is less visible in policy discussion and less confident in public debate/discourse than in previous periods. This is reflected in the reduced prominence of reconciliation and good relations within wider policy frameworks, and in uncertainty and hesitancy within the faith sector itself about how, or whether, to engage constructively with contested social issues. Contemporary Christianity continues to draw on the Christian and theological framework of reconciliation set out some years ago by the Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI).

"reconciliation language... does not always resonate clearly across generations or communities"

There is also a growing recognition that reconciliation language, while still used, does not always resonate clearly across generations or communities. Questions have been raised about whether existing

“lived experience of belonging, exclusion, and division”

narratives and frameworks are adequately capturing people’s lived experience of belonging, exclusion, and division in contemporary Northern Ireland.

Taken together, these conditions pointed to the need for a scoping study rather than a strategy or programme. Before developing new initiatives or proposals, there is a need to pause and listen, to understand how reconciliation, faith, and belonging are currently being understood, where confidence has been lost, and what gaps exist between public language and everyday experience.

“there is a need to pause and listen”

This study was therefore designed as a listening and sense-making exercise. It provides a starting point for renewed discussion about the role of faith communities in reconciliation and community relations, and a foundation for more relevant, credible, and responsive work in the period ahead.

2. Aims and Objectives of the Study

This project was commissioned as a short, workshop-based scoping study to explore how faith communities in Northern Ireland can reimagine and renew their role in addressing social division, rebuilding social cohesion, and contributing to reconciliation and good relations.

Rather than starting with a fixed definition of reconciliation or a set of solutions, the study set out to listen carefully to lived experience and to understand how reconciliation, belonging, and division are currently being experienced across different generations, faith backgrounds, and community contexts.

The specific aims of the study were to:

1. Create safe, structured spaces where faith leaders, young people, newcomers, and other underrepresented voices could reflect on their experiences of belonging, exclusion, and division.
2. Explore how faith communities currently understand their role in public dialogue, community relations, and reconciliation.
3. Examine how contemporary issues — including racism, migration, inequality, political disengagement, and unresolved legacy harm — are shaping everyday experiences of social division.
4. Gather grounded insights that could inform future dialogue, practice development, and policy discussion within the faith sector and beyond.

As a scoping study, the object of the research was not to evaluate existing programmes or to produce a new framework for reconciliation. Instead, it aimed to take stock at this time when the language and work of reconciliation appears increasingly fragile. The study therefore focuses on surfacing key themes, questions, and tensions that help explain where reconciliation and community relations work currently feels stuck, and what might be needed to renew it.

3. How we approached the study

The project was led by *Contemporary Christianity*[1], in partnership with *Clonard Monastery*[2] and *Youth Link: NI*[3], with funding from the Community Relations Council through the Community Relations and Cultural Diversity grant scheme. Contemporary Christianity held overall responsibility for project coordination, study design, and reporting. Clonard Monastery and Youth Link were core partners, contributing to governance, access to networks, workshop facilitation and hosting, with Youth Link playing a particular role in youth engagement and delivery.

This study was carried out as a qualitative scoping exercise between October 2025 and January 2026. It was designed to explore how faith, reconciliation, and belonging are currently understood and experienced, rather than to measure attitudes or produce representative findings. The table below outlines the structure and participation profile of the eight workshops, offering transparency about the scope and representation within this scoping study.

Category	Workshops	Participants
Total	8	85
Young People	4	42
Catholic & Protestant Traditions	2	29
Interfaith Background	2	14

Table 1: *Workshop Composition and Participant Representation*

1 Contemporary Christianity is a Northern Ireland–based Christian organisation that facilitates dialogue, reflection, and public engagement on faith, reconciliation, and social issues.

2 Clonard Monastery is a Catholic Redemptorist monastery in West Belfast with a long-standing role in faith leadership, community engagement, and peace and reconciliation initiatives in Northern Ireland.

3 YouthLink NI is the inter-church youth work agency in Northern Ireland, supporting faith-based youth organisations and churches with youth work training, community relations, and peace and reconciliation initiatives.

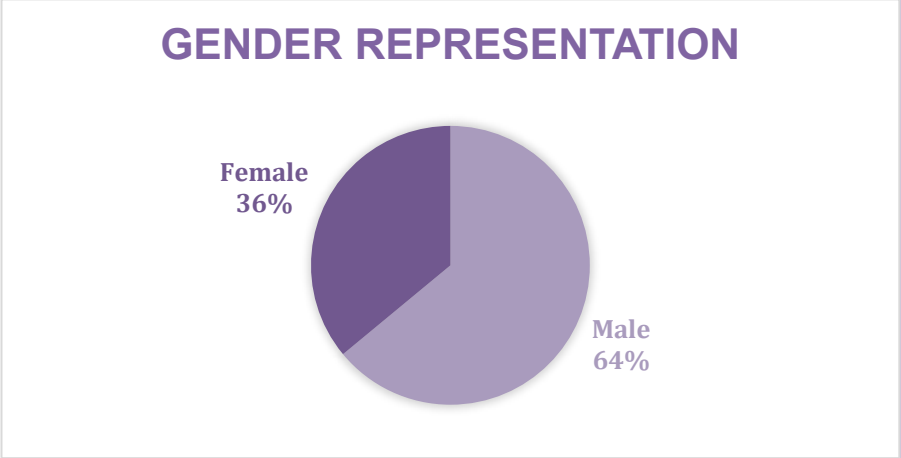

Figure 1: *Workshop Gender Representation*

Participation reflected the networks and timeframe of the three partner organisations. While the study engaged a diverse cross-section of participants, interfaith representation was comparatively smaller, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the scoping phase.

The workshops used a range of participatory methods to support reflection and dialogue. These included small-group discussion, story-sharing, word-association exercises, and visual methods such as Photovoice, where participants used images to express experiences of belonging, exclusion, and reconciliation. Facilitators also used The Light Wheel, a reflective tool developed by Tearfund, to help participants explore how issues such as faith, power, relationships, voice, and social context interact in practice. The Light Wheel[4] was used as a conversation aid rather than an analytical framework, supporting participants to surface both enabling and exclusionary dynamics within their own communities.

The study focused on people's real-life (lived) experiences. Rather than testing predefined assumptions about reconciliation, participants were invited to describe what feels difficult, meaningful, and/ or unresolved in their own contexts. This approach reflects the belief that honest listening is a necessary first step if reconciliation work is to move forward in meaningful ways.

A small number of participants also submitted voluntary written reflections after workshops; these are used illustratively to deepen interpretation rather than as representative data.

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[4] See: Tearfund Learn, The Light Wheel, Available at: https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/series/the-light-wheel

4. Scope and Boundaries of the Study

As a scoping study, the research has clear limitations. It does not aim to be statistically representative, nor to capture every faith tradition or community experience. Its purpose was to surface key themes, tensions, and questions shaping reconciliation and community relations work today.

It does not offer a detailed action plan or new framework. Instead, it provides grounded insight to inform future strategy, dialogue, and practice.

The study reflects the voices of those who participated within the project's timeframe and networks. While a range of perspectives are included, the findings are illustrative rather than statistically representative.

Nor is this an evaluation of success or failure. Rather than measuring impact, the study explores why reconciliation can feel unclear, fragmented, or difficult to sustain — and what this reveals about the current moment.

! **Note:** Where this report raises difficult or unresolved questions, that reflects the reality participants described. Confusion, disagreement, and uncertainty are not weaknesses of the research — they are among its core findings. This study makes those tensions visible so they can be engaged more honestly in future work.

5. What We Heard Most Strongly

Across the workshops, certain insights were voiced with particular clarity and conviction. Despite differences in age, denomination, and background, participants repeatedly returned to a small number of themes that speak directly to the future of reconciliation, belonging, and public faith in Northern Ireland.

5.1 Reconciliation Is a Loaded and Unclear Term

What we heard

Across the workshops, participants consistently returned to the lack of a shared understanding of what reconciliation means. While most participants affirmed reconciliation as important in principle, many found the term itself unclear, contested, or difficult to use meaningfully in practice.

"reconciliation... refers to very different ideas"

In several workshops, reconciliation was described as multi-layered and complex, with participants using the same word to refer to very different ideas — including forgiveness, justice, peace, political settlement, and living well together despite disagreement *(see Figure 2)*. This lack of clarity made it difficult for participants to know what reconciliation work is actually asking of them, or what success might look like.

There was also concern that reconciliation language can feel premature or misleading when significant disagreement, harm, or inequality remains unresolved. Some participants questioned whether the term assumes an endpoint — or a level of agreement — that is neither realistic nor desirable in the Northern Ireland context. Rather than rejecting reconciliation altogether, participants repeatedly called for greater honesty about its limits and about the tensions it contains.

"is it premature while significant disagreement, harm and inequality remain unresolved?"

These concerns surfaced across faith and age groups, though they were expressed differently. Young people often struggled to connect reconciliation language to their lived experience, while some adult participants questioned whether the term itself may now be counter-productive, or in need of careful re-definition.

"theological vs. civic reconciliation"

A small number of post-workshop reflections also emphasised reconciliation in explicitly theological

terms, arguing that biblical reconciliation begins with reconciliation with God and should not be collapsed into political language. While this framing was not widely articulated in the workshops themselves, it highlights an important tension between theological and civic understandings of reconciliation.

Voices from the workshops

> **Not easy to think what it actually means**
>
> *(Interfaith workshop participant)*

> **Reconciliation is misunderstood – It's multi-levelled and complex.**
>
> *(Contemporary Christianity workshop participant)*

> **Oh not, not again!**
>
> *(Word-association exercise, Contemporary Christianity workshop)*

Word associations from the workshops for the word: "Reconciliation":

Figure 2: *Word associations with "Reconciliation" (Workshop Mentimeter exercise)*

Illustrative reflections (post-workshop)

The concerns raised in workshops were echoed and deepened in a small number of voluntary written reflections submitted after sessions. These responses are not representative, but they help to illuminate why reconciliation language feels problematic for some participants.

One participant reflected:

> I wonder if the use of the term 'reconciliation' is counter-productive. I'm not sure there is a common understanding of what it even means in our context, or even if it is a realistic or wise aim.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

Another wrote:

When we use ‘reconciliation’ as our starting language it can feel as if it assumes a conclusion that we know we do not want or to which we could never agree.

(Post-workshop reflection)

When I think of the group, I suspect terms were thrown around as if we all understood them to mean the same, but I’m convinced we were not all on the same page.

(Post-workshop reflection)

These reflections reinforce the workshop finding that reconciliation language often compresses deep disagreement, rather than creating space to address it.

What this tells us

This finding shows that reconciliation cannot be treated as a shared or self-evident concept. ***Confusion, disagreement, and discomfort about what reconciliation means are not obstacles to be overcome before the work begins — they are part of the work itself***.

If faith communities want to renew their role in reconciliation, they need to be honest that people do not all mean the same thing when they use the word — rather than pretending, or assuming, that everyone agrees, or relying on language that no longer connects.

5.2 Belonging is Experienced Unevenly and Often Shaped by Power and Safety

What we heard

Across the workshops, participants spoke about belonging as something that cannot be assumed. (See Figure 2 for word associations for the word 'Belonging'). While community and faith spaces are often described as welcoming in principle, many participants described experiences where belonging felt conditional, uneven, or dependent on who you are, where you come from, and how safe you feel.

"belonging felt... dependent on who you are, where you come from, how safe you feel"

For young people in particular, belonging was closely linked to personal safety, especially in relation to racism, inequality, intimidation, and gender-based vulnerability. Living in "one-sided" communities was seen to limit interaction and reinforce fear of being targeted. For some, belonging meant keeping a low profile, avoiding certain spaces, or not expressing parts of their identity.

"feeling tolerated is very different from feeling included"

Belonging was also shaped by power and social position. Participants spoke about how class, accent, gender, race, and community background affect how people are treated and whether they feel respected. Feeling tolerated was described as very different from feeling included. Participants were not only describing interpersonal exclusion, but the effects of structural injustice, such as housing insecurity, educational inequality, migration policy, and economic insecurity. These were understood to shape who feels safe, visible, and valued in everyday life. For many, belonging was less about attitudes alone and more about the conditions under which people are expected to live together.

"not only interpersonal exclusion, but the effects of structural injustice"

Participants, largely from an inter-faith background, reflected on a gap between the language of welcome and the reality of this in practice. While faith communities were often described as places that *should* offer belonging, participants acknowledged that inclusion can often have limits, particularly when difference is perceived as challenging or uncomfortable.

"a gap between the language of welcome and the reality in practice"

Figure 3: *Word associations with "Belonging" (Youth Workshop Mentimeter exercise)*

Voices from the workshops

> **"Some lived in one-sided communities that were not friendly to 'the other'**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **Girls were less safe and more vulnerable and felt more pressure today than boys**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **Belonging is not just about being included — it's about feeling secure**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **People look down on you if you're from a poorer background or your accent.**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

Illustrative reflections (post-workshop)

In voluntary written reflections submitted after workshops, participants echoed these concerns and added depth to them. One participant reflected on the emotional cost of belonging that feels conditional:

> I long to live in a place where we can actually talk about our differences without fear.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

> There is a sense that some people have to carry the cost of keeping the peace more than others.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

What this tells us

This finding highlights that ***belonging is deeply shaped by power, safety, and unequal experiences***. For many people, especially young people and those from marginalised backgrounds, belonging is not about participation alone, but about whether they feel protected, respected, and able to be themselves without feeling a sense of fear. Reconciliation and community relations work that does not address these deeply unequal experiences risks reinforcing exclusion rather than challenging it.

Safety concerns affecting women and girls, including experiences of intimidation, silencing, and vulnerability, emerged as central to how belonging is felt, underscoring that reconciliation and social cohesion cannot be meaningfully claimed where safety and voice are unevenly distributed.

Participants consistently distinguished between responses that alleviate harm and those that challenge the conditions producing it. ***Charitable acts of welcome, support, or service were often valued but widely seen as insufficient where fear, inequality, and exclusion are structurally embedded. By contrast, approaches that stand with those most affected, name power imbalances and injustice, and are willing to share risk were described as more credible expressions of belonging and reconciliation***. This can be referred to as a shift from charity to solidarity.

5.3 Faith Is Most Credible When Lived (not just when declared)

What we heard

Across the workshops, participants consistently distinguished between faith as a lived, personal reality and faith as institutional or public expression — that is, churches and faith organisations as formal bodies, their leadership, official positions, and modes of engagement in public life.

"Personal faith... a source of hope and motivation"

Personal faith, embodied in everyday conduct, relationships, and moral integrity, was frequently described as a source of hope and motivation for reconciliation and community life. By contrast, churches speaking as institutions — whether through their leaders or formal statements — were often regarded with greater scepticism than faith demonstrated through consistent, relational practice

"credibility was closely tied to whether faith communities... live out their values in practice"

Across several workshops, participants spoke positively about faith when it was experienced through relationships, everyday interaction, care, and example, rather than through statements or formal positions. This view was expressed most strongly by young people, though similar concerns were raised in other groups. For many young people, in particular, credibility was closely tied to whether faith communities were seen to live out their values in practice. The phrase "practice what you preach" came up repeatedly, capturing frustration with perceived gaps between teaching and action.

"belonging felt conditional on agreement, silence, or avoiding difficult topics"

Several participants emphasised that some of the most significant barriers to faith's reconciliatory role lie within faith communities themselves. Experiences of exclusion related to class, dissent, engagement in reconciliation work, gender, race, and sexuality were described not as secondary issues, but as core reconciliation challenges. Where belonging within faith communities felt conditional, for example, dependent on agreement, silence, or avoiding difficult topics, public commitments to reconciliation were widely perceived as lacking credibility.

"fear of controversy can be experienced as silence... or a lack of moral courage"

There was also recognition that churches and other faith organisations operate within internal pressures. Some participants suggested that fear of controversy, loss of

members, or internal disagreement can make leaders cautious about addressing difficult issues related to justice or inclusion. For some, this caution was experienced as silence; for others, as a lack of moral courage.

In interfaith discussions, participants pointed to another tension. Faith can motivate people to work for peace and belonging, but differences in belief can also make engagement more difficult, both between different faith traditions and, at times, within them, especially when people feel their faith position cannot be questioned or openly discussed. This reinforced the view that the public credibility of faith communities depends less on shared doctrine and more on shared practice.

"differences in belief make engagement more difficult"

Voices from the workshops

> **Church can spread the word, but the Bible isn't always brought into practice**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **There's a big difference between personal faith and institutional religion**
>
> *(Workshop participant)*

> **People are tired of statements that aren't matched by action**
>
> *(Workshop participant)*

> **Faith can bring people together, but it can also keep people apart**
>
> *(Interfaith workshop participant)*

Illustrative reflections (post-workshop)

Written reflections submitted after workshops echoed these concerns and added further depth. One participant wrote:

> What passes for the gospel is not Christ's transformative message of the Kingdom of God coming to earth.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

Another reflected on institutional constraint:

> Church ministers can't engage their congregations on social justice issues without risking their jobs.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

These reflections underline how questions of credibility are shaped not only by belief, but by power, risk, and institutional culture.

What this tells us

This finding suggests that the contribution of faith communities to reconciliation and social cohesion will depend less on public statements and more on consistent, lived practice. Where faith is experienced as relational, honest, and courageous, it retains credibility. Where there is a gap between values and action, trust erodes. ***A renewed role for faith communities will require closer attention to how faith is lived out in everyday decisions and relationships, especially in matters of justice, inclusion, and difficult public issues***.

It also raises deeper questions about how reconciliation is understood theologically within churches and faith communities. ***If reconciliation is treated as a slogan, a past achievement, or a narrow interpersonal idea, it will struggle to carry weight in public life***. A more serious engagement with the depth and breadth of reconciliation theology — including justice, power, and structural inequality — may be necessary if faith communities are to speak and act with credibility.

5.4 The Divides Shaping People's Lives Have Shifted

What we heard

Across the workshops, participants were clear that the nature of social division in Northern Ireland has, and is, continuing to change, even though older divisions continue to matter. While sectarian division remains present, many participants, particularly young people, described economic inequality, gender-based vulnerability, hostility towards migrants, and racism as more immediate features of everyday life.

"inequality, gender-based vulnerability, hostility towards migrants, and racism"

In youth workshops, participants consistently reported that communities feel less friendly and less safe, particularly in relation to race and immigration. Living in communities dominated by a single religious, ethnic, or cultural identity was seen to reinforce fear and limit contact, especially for those perceived as different. Racism was discussed openly and frequently, with many participants describing it as more visible and, in some settings, more openly expressed than in the past.

"judged because of how you sound"

Participants also spoke about how class, accent, and poverty shape people's experiences of respect and opportunity. Feeling judged or looked down on because of where you are from, or how you sound, was described as a real barrier to belonging. For girls and young women, safety concerns were especially pronounced, reinforcing the sense that social divisions are lived and experienced differently depending on gender.

"Safety concerns for girls and young women"

In adult and faith-based workshops, participants were more likely to describe social division in terms of the long-standing Protestant–Catholic divide and the political disagreements linked to it. They pointed to the continuing impact of unresolved issues from the conflict. At the same time, many acknowledged that this way of framing division no longer captures the full picture. While sectarian division was widely seen as still deeply built into Northern Ireland's political system and public institutions, participants recognised that it does not fully explain the range of divisions people now experience — particularly in relation to racism, migration, and everyday exclusion. This created uncertainty about whether existing community relations and faith-based approaches are equipped to respond to newer forms of division without losing focus on legacy harm.

"unresolved issues from the conflict"

"can existing approaches respond to new divisions?"

Voices from the workshops

> **The vast majority felt that things were less friendly than five years ago, particularly in relation to race and immigration**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **Racism was mentioned a lot more than sectarianism**
>
> *(Youth workshop observation)*

> **We're not just dealing with Protestant and Catholic anymore**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

Illustrative reflections (post-workshop)

In written reflections, some participants cautioned against assuming that older divisions no longer matter. One participant wrote:

> I still believe sectarianism is the greatest blight on our landscape, even if it no longer dominates our conversations.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

This reflects a wider tension between recognising new forms of division and acknowledging the continued impact of unresolved legacy issues.

What this tells us

This finding suggests that ***reconciliation and community relations work must hold two realities together: the ongoing impact of historic sectarian division, and the growing significance of racism, inequality, migration, and gender-based insecurity in people's daily lives***. Approaches that focus primarily on historic divides risk missing how division is currently experienced, and therefore risk losing relevance, particularly for younger generations.

Participants in the young people's workshops, those from Black and other racially minoritised communities, and from diverse religious backgrounds, emphasised that racism and migration are not simply additional concerns alongside sectarianism. Rather, they constitute the primary ways in which division, fear, and exclusion are lived and encountered in contemporary Northern Ireland.

This reinforces the wider distinction drawn across the workshops between 'institutional narratives' of reconciliation and the 'everyday realities' through which marginalised communities experience belonging, exclusion, and solidarity.

Many participants were clear, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, that reconciliation cannot be separated from the realities of exclusion and inequality shaping everyday life. In their view, ***reconciliation is not only about improving relationships across historic divides, but about addressing the conditions that continue to marginalise or disadvantage some groups***. Where reconciliation is reduced to dialogue alone, without engaging power, safety, or injustice, it risks becoming too narrow to respond to how division is actually lived today.

5.5 Generations Are Starting from Different Places

What we heard

Across the workshops, differences between young people and older participants were striking — not in terms of values, but in the language, reference points, and expectations they brought to conversations about reconciliation and social cohesion.

"safety, respect, racism, gender, and whether relationships feel real or forced"

Young people tended to describe division through everyday experience: safety, respect, racism, gender, and whether relationships feel real or forced. They were often sceptical of formal reconciliation language and processes, particularly when these felt imposed, abstract, or disconnected from lived reality. Concepts such as "shared education" and "community relations" were sometimes seen as more about appearances than real change, especially when young people felt they had little choice or say in them.

"young people felt they had little choice or say"

"sectarianism has faded from public discussion without being resolved"

Older participants, particularly in faith-based settings, were more likely to frame reconciliation through historic experience — including the Troubles, constitutional division, and long-standing sectarian patterns. Many expressed concern that sectarianism has faded from public discussion without being resolved, and worried about moral amnesia or the loss of hard-won learning from the peace process.

"significant overlap in underlying values"

Despite these different starting points, there was significant overlap in underlying values. Across generations, participants spoke about the importance of respect, honesty, fairness, and the desire to live well together. The tension lay less in what people wanted, and more in how they named the problem and imagined progress.

Voices from the workshops

> **Shared education sucks. Forced and teachers hate it. Relationships between young people are not real or sustainable.**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **Sectarianism has almost disappeared from our conversations**
>
> *(Adult workshop participant)*

> **We want people to listen and not have ideas set in stone**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

What this tells us

This finding suggests that generational difference is less about values and more about starting points. ***Young people and older participants*** often share hopes for a fairer, more inclusive society, but ***approach reconciliation with different assumptions shaped by their lived experience***. Without intentional efforts to build shared language and mutual understanding, these differences risk being misread as disengagement on one side or resistance on the other.

Reconciliation work that does not take generational starting points seriously is unlikely to resonate, endure or be effective.

5.6 There Is Fatigue with Talking, but Not with the Desire to Work for Change

What we heard

Across all workshops, participants expressed a strong sense of fatigue with language, plans, and processes that do not appear to lead to meaningful change. This was not described as apathy or disengagement, but as frustration with conversations that feel repetitive, unfocused, or disconnected from action.

"processes that do not appear to lead to meaningful change"

Young people spoke about feeling powerless within existing political and civic structures. Voting was perceived as ineffective, and political leadership as increasingly polarised and unresponsive. Some felt that opportunities for participation, particularly in electoral politics, public consultations, and repeated reconciliation/peace-building programmes, were often symbolic rather than genuinely influential, with little visible impact on decisions or outcomes. At the same time, this frustration did not reflect indifference or apathy. Young people spoke with energy and conviction about racism, inequality, and belonging, and a clear desire to contribute, but felt restrained by systems that offered limited real influence.

"youth participation... often symbolic rather than genuinely influential, with little visible impact"

In adult and faith-based workshops, fatigue showed up differently. Participants spoke about reconciliation conversations that feel familiar but unresolved, and about initiatives that revisit the same issues without clear direction. Several noted a lack of clarity about the purpose or destination of wider discussions and initiatives, which made sustained engagement difficult.

At the same time, this fatigue coexisted with a sustained commitment to change. Participants did not dismiss reconciliation, community relations, or dialogue; rather, they questioned how these processes are currently practiced.

What they expressed was a desire for engagement that feels more candid, more rooted in lived experience, and more meaningfully connected to the pressures of everyday life. Several emphasised the need for spaces in which people feel psychologically safe to speak

"calls for deeper listening, clearer purpose, and a genuine openness to challenge"

openly, to be heard without defensiveness, and to engage across difference without fear of dismissal.

Across groups, there were consistent calls for deeper listening, clearer purpose, and a genuine openness to challenge, signals not of withdrawal, but of a desire for dialogue that is more accountable, reciprocal, and transformative

Alongside fatigue, participants repeatedly pointed to risk aversion as a deeper constraint shaping reconciliation work. Fear of internal conflict, reputational damage, or loss of influence or support were described as limiting honest engagement within institutions, including faith communities. This was not framed as individual reluctance, but as a pattern within organisations that tends to prioritise stability and maintaining the 'status-quo' over truth-telling, challenge, or deeper change.

"organisations... prioritise stability and... the 'status-quo' over truth-telling, challenge, or deeper change"

Voices from the workshops

> **Oh not, not again**
>
> *(Workshop participant)*

> **Voting will always go the same way — no point**
>
> *(Youth workshop participant)*

> **Politicians are more divided today than ever and that's not helpful**
>
> *(Workshop participant)*

Illustrative reflections (post-workshop)

In written reflections, some participants described this fatigue alongside a clear hope that the work would continue in a more focused way. One wrote:

> I felt that the consultations were just a starting point, and I sincerely hope they lead to further work.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

Another reflected:

> We may feel powerless to do anything about it, even if we want change.
>
> *(Post-workshop reflection)*

What this tells us

This finding suggests that disengagement stems less from apathy, and more from eroded confidence in existing approaches. ***Participants are not fatigued by the issues themselves; rather, they are weary of processes that feel repetitive, or detached from tangible change***. Their frustration is directed at forms of engagement that appear circular, lacking in direction, or disconnected from visible change.

Efforts to renew reconciliation and community relations work will therefore need to demonstrate clarity of purpose, responsiveness, and credible follow-through. Crucially, participants must be able to see how their contributions inform decisions and shape next steps. ***Without that demonstrable link between dialogue and action, trust is unlikely to be rebuilt or participation sustained***.

6. What the Study Helps Us Understand About Reconciliation Now

This study provides us with a snapshot of how faith groups understand reconciliation and community relations. It does not seek to define reconciliation or to introduce a new framework for reconciliation and community relations work. Instead, it brings together what participants shared about their experiences of faith, belonging, and division, and considers what this tells us about how reconciliation is currently being understood and practised — and where it feels strained or misaligned.

Participants' reflections broadly align with well-established reconciliation and peacebuilding thinking, particularly relational and conflict-transformative approaches associated with John Paul Lederach[5], Johan Galtung[6], and Brandon Hamber and Grainne Kelly[7]. At the same time, the study also highlights a significant gap between these frameworks and how reconciliation is often practised. In particular, relational and dialogue-based approaches are frequently emphasised, while justice-oriented dimensions — including power, inequality, and material conditions — are downplayed, marginalised or ignored.

6.1 Where the Work Aligns with Established Thinking

Across the workshops, participants consistently described reconciliation as something that unfolds over time, through relationships, trust, and everyday practice. There was little appetite for the idea of reconciliation as a finished state or a one-off achievement. This strongly reflects established reconciliation thinking that understands reconciliation as an ongoing social process rather than a fixed outcome. This also highlights that reconciliation cannot be reduced to a political programme or short-term agenda. While politics shapes the context, participants consistently described reconciliation as rooted in sustained relationships and everyday practice, not as something that can be declared or achieved through political positioning alone.

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5 Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies.* Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

6 Galtung, J. (1969). 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.' *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), pp. 167–191.

7 Hamber, B. and Kelly, G. (2004). *A Working Definition of Reconciliation.* Belfast: Democratic Dialogue.

Participants also emphasised the importance of relationship-building, dialogue, and everyday behaviour in shaping belonging. Faith was often spoken about as most meaningful when it is lived out through care, consistency, and courage, rather than through statements or formal positions. This aligns with relational approaches to reconciliation that prioritise trust, credibility, and sustained engagement.

There was also broad recognition that reconciliation is more than the absence of violence or overt conflict. Concerns about safety, dignity, respect, and inclusion were repeatedly raised, reflecting long-standing distinctions in peacebuilding theory between stability alone and deeper forms of peace that attend to justice and the lived, everyday experience.

6.2 Where Participants Identified Gaps or Pressures

Many of the themes emerging from the workshops reflect well-established reconciliation thinking, particularly the understanding of reconciliation as an ongoing relational process (Lederach), the distinction between negative and positive peace (i.e. surface stability and deeper justice) (Galtung), and the emphasis on social and structural change within reconciliation frameworks in Northern Ireland (Hamber & Kelly). However, participants' experiences also suggest a gap between these ideas and how reconciliation is often practised. The following tensions highlight where current approaches appear under strain, or where important dimensions are not being held together consistently.

Reconciliation is often treated as an outcome rather than ongoing work

While reconciliation theory foregrounds long-term social transformation, participants expressed frustration at how, in practice, it is often framed as something that can be delivered or completed within short timeframes. This framing sits uneasily with the persistence of unresolved harm and evolving social divisions, and was seen to contribute to fatigue and disengagement.

Relational language is not always matched by attention to power, inequality, and safety

Although relationship-building remains central to reconciliation theory, participants, particularly young poeple and those from marginalised backgrounds, described how reconciliation loses meaning in practice when it does not engage seriously with racism, exclusion, gender-based violence, poverty, or unequal voice. This suggests a gap between relational language and justice-related concerns, and a need to hold these dimensions together more deliberately.

Reconciliation frameworks can feel overly anchored in the past

Established reconciliation frameworks in Northern Ireland rightly emphasise the legacy of the conflict. However, many participants experienced current approaches as too narrowly focused on historic sectarian divisions alone. While legacy harm continues to matter, participants felt that contemporary forms of exclusion, particularly those linked to racism, migration, and economic insecurity, are not always integrated into reconciliation practice.

Language and practice are not always aligned

Reconciliation theory places strong emphasis on credibility, trust, and lived consistency. Yet participants frequently noted gaps between reconciliation language and everyday practice, whether in faith settings, policy frameworks, or funded programmes. Where commitments to inclusion, belonging, or dialogue were not reflected in concrete action, trust and credibility were weakened.

6.3 What This Means for Future Work

Taken together, these findings suggest that work reconciliation itself is not being rejected. Rather, participants are questioning how reconciliation is framed, prioritised, and practised, and whether it is keeping pace with contemporary realities.

The study therefore points to the need for:

- greater honesty that reconciliation is ongoing and unfinished work, not something that has already been achieved;
- a stronger connection between relationship-building and practical action on justice, inequality, and safety;
- approaches that hold past and present harms together, rather than treating them as separate agendas;
- and renewed attention to credibility, particularly within faith communities, where everyday practice matters as much as public voice.

The analysis in this section lays the groundwork for the shifts outlined next. These do not constitute a new framework or prescriptive set of steps; rather, they respond directly to what participants identified as no longer working and where renewed attention or change is needed if reconciliation and community relations work is to remain credible, meaningful, and effective.

7. Five Shifts for Renewing Reconciliation and Community Relations Work

The findings of this short scoping study point to a shared concern across the groups who participated: reconciliation work appears to have become fragmented and increasingly disconnected, across theology, church and denominational agendas, policy, funding, and practice, and is increasingly misaligned with people's lived experience. Participants did not reject the need for reconciliation itself, but questioned how it is currently framed, organised, and lived out. They were clear that the problem is not a lack of initiatives, but the dominance of programme-driven approaches that prioritise activity, visibility, and short-term outputs over sustained relational and cultural change.

The proposed shifts respond directly to that fragmentation. They do not present a new programme or set of instructions. Instead, they outline what emerged from what participants suggested is no longer working, and where renewed attention may be needed. While they are primarily framed around practice, participants were clear that policy and funding structures play a decisive role in shaping what is possible and achievable. They are also not instructions or targets. They are directions of travel, illustrated with practical implications drawn directly from workshop discussions and feedback.

Shift 1: From Outcome to Ongoing Holistic Practice

Participants consistently resisted the idea that reconciliation is something that can be completed, and delivered as a completed task. This assumption was experienced as unrealistic and, at times, silencing. When reconciliation becomes part of holistic practice, it strengthens both relationships and wider social well-being.

This shift reframes reconciliation as ongoing, unfinished work, shared across communities, institutions, and generations. It challenges siloed expectations that reconciliation can be achieved within individual projects, sectors, or funding cycles.

What this could look like in practice

Being honest that reconciliation does not mean everyone agreeing or “moving on”.

Embedding an understanding of reconciliation as a continuous process of renewal, rather than a task that can be completed.

Designing policy, funding, and programmes that allow for learning, revision, and uncertainty and risk.

Treating confusion and disagreement as part of the work, not evidence of failure.

Shift 2: From Polite Talk to Authentic Practice

Participants drew a clear distinction between what is said and what is done. Where theological claims, public statements, or policy commitments were not reflected in everyday practice, credibility was weakened.

This shift addresses the gap between theology and practice, and the tendency for reconciliation to become abstracted into language rather than embodied in relationships, decisions, and institutional culture.

What this could look like in practice

Integrating the practice of reconciliation into theological formation, leadership development, and organisational cultures.

Focusing on everyday inclusion, fairness, and doing the right thing, rather than on public statements or image.

Supporting leaders and practitioners to address difficult issues without fear of being sidelined or pushed out.

Valuing trust built through consistent action and lived example, rather than visibility or public profile.

Shift 3: From Parallel Agendas to Integrated Justice

Participants, particularly young people, described a clear disconnect between reconciliation work centred on conflict-related Catholic/Protestant legacy issues and separate initiatives addressing racism, inequality, migration, and community safety.

In practice, these were treated as distinct policy domains, funded through different streams and discussed in different forums. Many regarded this separation as artificial and constraining, noting that in everyday life such experiences intersect and compound one another. They were clear that reconciliation must engage the social and structural conditions that produce exclusion, not simply seek to improve relationships between groups. Without connecting past harms to present-day injustices, reconciliation risks becoming detached from the realities people navigate daily.

This shift challenges the siloing of reconciliation, equality, and social cohesion, and calls for an approach that holds historical and contemporary harms together.

What this could look like in practice

Embedding and practising reconciliation as a framework that connects past violence with present-day injustice rooted in structural inequality and power, avoiding false choices between “dealing with the past” and addressing current realities or reducing reconciliation to interpersonal repair.

Recognising racism, poverty, inequality and exclusion as issues that directly impact on reconciliation issues, not parallel or secondary concerns, and reflecting this explicitly in peacebuilding and community relations frameworks.

Moving from simply helping people cope with harm to working alongside them to challenge the conditions that cause it.

…

…

Integrating community relations and community development strategies, rather than treating them as separate fields of work (This acknowledges that social cohesion cannot be sustained where material inequality, exclusion, and insecurity persist).

Aligning policy, funding, and accountability so reconciliation, equality, safeguarding, youth engagement, and legacy work intersect within shared, long-term, justice-oriented peacebuilding frameworks.

Shift 4: From Assumed Belonging to Active Inclusion

Belonging is often talked about as if it already exists. But many participants said this is not their experience. For some people, especially young people and those from minority or marginalised communities, a sense of belonging depends on whether they feel safe, listened to, and treated fairly. When power is unequal and some people carry more risk than others, belonging does not just happen. It needs to be built on purpose through everyday actions that protect dignity, reduce inequality, and make it safe for people to take part and speak openly.

This shift closes the gap between claims about belonging and how belonging is actually felt, challenging siloed approaches to safeguarding, participation, and reconciliation.

What this could look like in practice

Making safety, dignity, and being heard part of everyday practice, not something added on at the end (for example, thinking about who feels safe to speak, who stays quiet, and why).

Designing spaces and activities with real differences in mind, including gender, race, class, age, and vulnerability and not assuming one approach works for everyone.

Being honest about who carries the cost of keeping the peace or staying silent and recognising that some people take on more risk than others.

Integrating safeguarding, inclusion, and reconciliation so the same spaces, relationships, and staff can address safety, belonging, and challenging conversations together.

Shift 5: From Talk to Impact

Across the workshops, participants said they are tired of conversations that do not lead anywhere. This is not a lack of interest in reconciliation. It is frustration with processes that feel repetitive, unclear, or disconnected from real change. People want to see that what they say matters and leads to action. If reconciliation work is to regain trust, it must show how dialogue shapes decisions, influences policy, and makes a visible difference in people's lives. Participants also connected fatigue in reconciliation and community relations work not just to practice, but to how engagement is funded and structured. Short-term funding cycles, output-driven reporting, and disconnected/unconnected initiatives were seen as driving repetition without learning.

This shift is about making engagement feel worthwhile. It calls for more focused and joined-up ways of working, across generations and different religious and theological traditions, supported by flexible funding and regular review of policies and practice. The aim is that conversations build on each other and lead to meaningful progress, even if change is gradual or incomplete.

What this could look like in practice

Clarifying upfront why an initiative or conversation is happening, who or what it seeks to influence, and the decisions or processes it connects to.

Reporting back to participants on what was heard and how their input has shaped next steps, policy discussions, or organisational decisions.

Linking local dialogue to wider leadership, policy, and funding conversations so that insights do not remain isolated at community level.

Creating opportunities to share findings publicly, including through advocacy, communication, and engagement with decision-makers, so that local voices inform wider debate.

Designing engagement processes that build over time, rather than restarting from scratch, allowing learning to accumulate across programmes and sectors.

Bringing the Shifts Together

Taken together, these shifts point to the need for greater alignment between theology, practice, policy, and funding. Renewing reconciliation work is less about new initiatives and more about supporting existing efforts with structures that enable learning, integration, and sustained cross-sector engagement. Participants were clear that many of the challenges described in this report are not accidental. They are shaped by wider systems and structures. They are shaped by funding systems, accountability pressures, and policy silos that influence what types of reconciliation work are prioritised and resourced.

This approach does not claim to resolve the tensions outlined in this report. Instead, it acknowledges them openly and uses them as a starting point for reconciliation and community relations work that is more coherent, credible, and rooted in lived experience.

8. What Happens Next

This study marks the start of renewed reflection and engagement, capturing current experiences of reconciliation, belonging, and faith, and identifying where confidence and clarity have faltered.

It does not set out a programme or a set of actions. Instead, it invites faith leaders, practitioners, policymakers, and funders to reflect honestly on their own roles, and on what may need to change if reconciliation and community relations work is to remain credible, relevant and find fresh momentum.

Any next phase of this work will depend on how these findings are applied in practice:

- within and across churches and other faith communities;
- in leadership conversations at local, denominational, and interfaith levels;
- within the youth sector and in intergenerational dialogue;
- and in how policy and funding frameworks support or constrain this work.

This report is intended as a starting point for those conversations.

9. Questions for Reflection and Discussion

The following questions are offered to support reflection and practical discussion across faith communities, interfaith networks, youth organisations, and those involved in policy and community relations. They are intended as starting points for honest conversation rather than a checklist or assessment tool.

1. What does reconciliation look like in our current context right now, and where does the language we use no longer reflect people's lived experience?
2. Who experiences belonging in our organisations and communities, and who feels excluded or unheard? What contributes to this? What gets in the way?
3. How do we respond to both past harms and present-day issues such as racism, inequality, or exclusion — and where do we treat these as separate when they overlap in real life?
4. Where is there a gap between what we say we value and what people experience in practice? What would help close that gap?
5. What small, realistic changes could strengthen trust, credibility, and meaningful participation in how we approach reconciliation and community relations?

Additional prompts for specific sectors

For faith and interfaith leaders:

- How are we creating space for difficult conversations within our own communities?
- Where might internal culture be limiting honest engagement?

For youth organisations and practitioners:

- How are young people's concerns shaping decision-making,beyond consultation?
- Are there safe and meaningful pathways for youth people to shape leadership?

For policymakers and funders:

- How can funding and reporting structures support long-term relational work?
- Where might policy silos be limiting integrated responses to past and present harms?

For community relations practitioners:

- Are legacy and contemporary issues being treated separately in ways that do not reflect lived experience?
- How is learning being shared across programmes and sectors?