

Rethinking Community Relations:

Faith, Belonging and Reconciliation in Contemporary Northern Ireland

Summary Report



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About this Report

This report summarises the findings of the research project into Reconciliation in Northern Ireland, run by Dr Cathy Bollaert and others from Contemporary Christianity, Youth Link and Clonard Monastery with funding from the Community Relations Council.

It is based on the full report by Dr Bollaert, and has been compiled by Jamie Platt, Youth Link's Good Relations and Church Engagement Manager.

The cover image is from a picture by Frances Price, Art UK © 2026 DACS, of "*Hands across the Divide*" Derry/Londonderry, by Maurice Harron.

Introduction

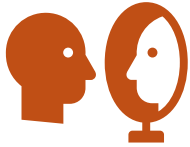
Northern Ireland is still shaped by its past, but the ways people experience division today are changing.

Many young people, faith leaders, and community workers feel that the language of *reconciliation* and *good relations* no longer fits their everyday reality. While these ideas are still used in policies, churches, and programmes, they often feel repetitive, unclear, or disconnected from real life.

This study was carried out to pause, listen, and learn. Instead of creating a new programme or solution, it asked:

- How do people actually experience belonging and exclusion today?
- What feels broken or stuck in reconciliation work?
- What role can faith communities realistically play now?

The findings show that people still care deeply about change, but they want reconciliation to feel real, honest, and relevant to the pressures they face today.



What does life in Northern Ireland look like now?

Participants described a society shaped by both old and new divisions.

Sectarianism hasn't disappeared. Political division still shapes institutions and public debate and unresolved harm from the conflict continues to affect trust.

Now, especially for young people, the issues have progressed and changed:

- Racism and hostility towards migrants
- Feeling unsafe in certain areas or spaces
- Gender-based insecurity, especially for women and girls
- Poverty, inequality, and being judged by class or accent
- Political frustration and feeling powerless to influence change

Recent racist violence and public disorder were seen as warning signs: social cohesion feels fragile. Many young people said things feel *less friendly* than even five years ago.

“We’re not just dealing with Protestant and Catholic anymore.”



Reconciliation Feels Confusing

Across the workshops, people used *reconciliation* to mean very different things:

- Forgiveness
- Justice
- Peace
- Agreement
- Living alongside difference
- A personal relationship with God

Because there is no shared meaning, the word often creates confusion or frustration. Some people felt it:

- Assumes everyone should move on
- Sounds like pretending things are okay when they're not
- Feels disconnected from inequality or harm that still exists
- Is an unattainable goal

Young people, in particular, struggled to see how reconciliation language connects to their lives.

“Oh not, not again.”



Belonging Is Not the Same for Everyone

Belonging was one of the strongest themes across the study. People agreed that belonging is not automatic and not equally shared.

Belonging is shaped by safety; both physical and emotional. Safety looks different depending on people's race, gender, class and background. For some participants, belonging has felt conditional; depending on who you are and where you come from. It is determined by who has the power and whose voices are loudest; whether people feel listened to or ignored.

Participants also made an important distinction; being tolerated is not the same as being included. Faith communities desire to offer belonging and be welcoming, but it has limits where there are challenges or discomfort.

“Belonging isn't just being included — it's feeling secure.”

Young people spoke honestly about fear; fear of racism, intimidation, of being targeted, of being unsafe, of not being taken seriously. To belong, they often felt they needed to stay quiet, hide parts of who they are, or avoid certain places or groups.

Acts of kindness or welcome were appreciated — but many said they are not enough when inequality and fear are built into everyday life. This is where many participants spoke about the need to move from charity to solidarity.

From helping people cope... to challenging what causes harm.



Faith Only Matters When It's Lived

Participants made a strong distinction between personal faith (how people live, treat others, and act) and institutional faith (church statements, leadership, public positions) Personal faith was often described as hopeful and motivating. Institutions were met with more scepticism — especially when words didn't match actions, difficult issues were avoided and inclusion felt conditional.

“Faith can bring people together, but it can also keep people apart.”

Young people were especially clear, “Practice what you preach.”

Some people said the biggest barriers to reconciliation are inside faith communities themselves; including the pressure to stay silent to keep the peace, to hold onto their members, and fear of controversy or disagreement.

Faith was seen as credible when it is courageous, consistent, stands with people at risk and is willing to name injustice.

“People are tired of statements that aren't matched by action.”



Generations Are Starting from Different Places

Young people and older adults often share similar values and ideals for fairness, respect, honesty and wanting to live well together. But they start from different experiences.

Young people were focused on everyday safety, racism and inequality, authentic relationships and feel powerless in politics and decision-making. Many felt that voting and consultations are pointless and never change anything. Reconciliation programmes feel tokenistic; like an item on a government, funder or school checklist.

“The vast majority felt that things were less friendly than five years ago, particularly in relation to race and immigration.”

Older participants were focused on the legacy of the conflict, dealing with the fear that sectarianism is being forgotten; not resolved. Many were worried about losing learning from the peace process and potentially repeating past mistakes.

“I still believe sectarianism is the greatest blight on our landscape, even if it no longer dominates our conversations.”

This creates a tension as generations are often misread as either being “disengaged” or being “stuck in the past.” The need to be open minded, to listen and to genuinely value the other perspective is important.

In reality, it’s about different starting points, not different hopes.



People Are Tired of Talking — Not of Change

One of the strongest messages was that people are not tired of reconciliation. They are tired of repeated conversations, lack of clear direction, short term projects and processes that go nowhere.

Young people spoke about frustration, not apathy.

“We want people to listen — not have ideas set in stone.”

Many also named risk-aversion as a problem:

- Organisations afraid of controversy
- Leaders worried about backlash
- Stability valued over honesty

This leads to safe talk, not real change.



Five Shifts to Renew Reconciliation Today

The study doesn't offer a new programme. Instead, it points to five shifts in how reconciliation is understood and practiced.

Shift 1: From Outcome to Ongoing Practice



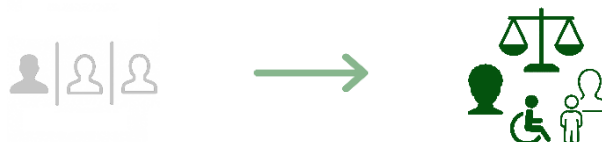
Reconciliation is not something you finish. It requires being honest that disagreement will remain, confusion is sometimes part of the work and we need to develop and fund ideas that will allow learning and change over time.

Shift 2: From Words to Action



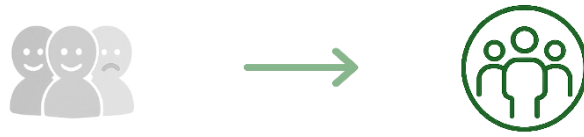
Reconciliation must be visible in everyday behaviour. This means matching values with action, supporting leaders to be able to speak honestly, and be more focused on doing the right thing, instead of public image.

Shift 3: From Separate Issues to Integrated Justice



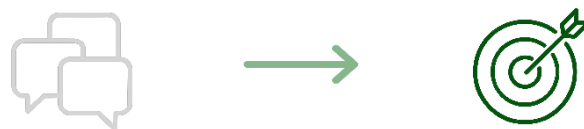
Past harms and present injustices are connected. We must link sectarian legacy with present-day injustice like racism, poverty, and inequality. We should challenge the conditions that cause harm, not just cope with them.

Shift 4: From Assumed Belonging to Active Inclusion



Belonging doesn't just happen. Belonging is prioritising safety and giving people a voice. It is about designing physical and emotional spaces with difference in mind; linking safeguarding, inclusion, and reconciliation.

Shift 5: From Talk to Impact



Dialogue must lead somewhere. We need to be clear about why conversations are happening, actions, how we give and receive feedback and how people's input shapes decisions. Engagement needs to feel worthwhile.



What Happens Next?

This report is a starting point, not a conclusion. It invites people from a range of backgrounds to water, to reflect honestly on where confidence has been lost, where language no longer fits and where change needs to happen to rebuild trust.

- What does this look like in your current context?
- Who belongs, and who feels excluded? Why?
- How do you respond to both past harms and present-day issues?
- Where are the gaps in what you say you value, and what you actually do?
- What small changes could you make to strengthen trust, credibility and meaningful engagement?

Reconciliation in Northern Ireland is not over — but it must evolve.

If it is to matter to people today; it must be honest, courageous, rooted in lived experience, and willing to deal with the hard things.

Further Information

To view the full report, please scan the QR code on the left, or visit www.ContemporaryChristianity.net/rethinking-community-relations/

For further information on this research, or working with groups on peace and reconciliation, please contact Contemporary Christianity, Youth Link, or Clonard Monastery.



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