

Response to the Report Launch on 25th March given by Lynda Gould:

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this significant scoping study and to reflect on the question embedded in this report – Community Relations & Reconciliation at a Crossroads: Are We Willing to Shift?

Firstly, I want to affirm the findings as clear and definitive and that is not a surprise – Cathy’s professionalism and academic rigor are evident throughout. The Scoping Study also reflects good facilitation, so credit to Jamie, Diane, and partner organisations for their part in the process.

I found myself continually nodding as I read, hooked from the very first lines. It spoke directly to my own experience in peace building and echoed conversations with fellow practitioners who have long worried that reconciliation remains marginal because it has never truly been brought into the mainstream. What we have in this Report, is the naming of these longstanding anxieties – they have been recorded, examined, and now bear witness to the dysfunction that my generation also tried to challenge. We were motivated by pragmatism and should have invested in the kind of analysis we have here. Consequently, I deeply appreciated the absence of the ‘10 Point Action Plan’ that my generation thrived on. We wrote the courses and programmes that are likely to be the ones scrutinised in the Report, so I am glad that trajectory for recovery lies in the naming of 5 shifts to bring about change. They are ambitious, and while commendable, I am mindful that paradigm shifts are never easy or welcome...

Shift one is a direct response to the failure of short-term, project-based approaches that have failed to transform deeper culture and intergenerational realities. I welcome any approach that will move reconciliation away from being a “deliverable” to being relationship-centred work.

The Report notes that credibility depends on practices that demonstrate integrity rather than rhetoric. Consequently, Shift two seeks to close the gap between what Faith says about reconciliation and what is actually done in everyday behaviour. In Christian churches that gap can be enormous, and much could be learned from the practice of other Faith and Belief communities. Creating a framework for that though, is no mean feat!

The intention behind Shift 3, to reconnect reconciliation with contemporary justice issues such as racism, inequality, migration, and community safety is perhaps the most complex. Legacy sectarian issues have been treated as something separate from present day experiences of racism and inequality - reconciliation must address structural injustice.

Shift 4 calls for a fresh look at the language and culture created around a welcome for the stranger. This has been a positive starting point for Christian faith action, but the Report says that it's not enough. Real belonging requires safety, fairness, dignity, and equal voice – especially for those who carry more risk. Belonging must be intentionally created, not assumed.

Finally comes Shift 5 – it's the 'rubber hits the road moment'! The recognition of fatigue created through repetitive dialogue and disconnected initiatives is insightful; and how this fatigue can be overcome is the big question. I wholeheartedly agree that future participation must lead to meaningful decisions, visible change, and meaningful learning across sectors, but all actions depend on resources... so it's no surprise that funding must shift from short-term outputs to long-term relational work.

This is where the 'rubber truly hits the road' – money! Funding has been an enduring issue – there has been more movement when reconciliation efforts have been externally funded than when faith communities have put their own money on the table – the list of external funders is long –

IFI, DFA, SEUPB, CRC – I'll spare you the veritable alphabet of acronyms! There is much to affirm in what has historically been achieved and what endures. But without consistent internal resourcing, the invisible barriers, hidden limits, and structural obstacles will remain.

One sentence in the Executive Summary summed it up... **“The study suggests that reconciliation work is not failing because of lack of commitment, but because of structural misalignment.”**

Good people have been trying to do the right thing regarding reconciliation, but structures have worked against them – belief and practice are ‘out of sync’ and a ‘realignment’ is needed more than ever. This is the crossroad, and I am not sure if there is the will or capacity to make the shifts outlined in the report.

Over the timespan of the Troubles, the religious landscape dramatically changed. Religion has been pulled in competing directions that distract from its deeper social and moral purposes. These distractions may have a bearing on the ‘misalignment;’ they’ve certainly redefined structural priorities of Christian Churches and maybe those of other Faiths.

As my allotted time rapidly runs out, please permit me a hurried summary of 4 key ideas that might provide a few ‘hooks’ to explain why I think reconciliation has not been prioritised. I recognise some names may not be familiar, but I am confident that their theories will resonate.

1. The “Huxley” Perspective is one of ‘Religion drowned in distraction’.

In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, all control is maintained not by fear but by comfort, distraction, and entertainment. The constant digital stimulation of the 21st century makes religious practice feel “slow,”; faith competes with smartphones and social media, and true meaning-making is sacrificed, becoming **light, casual, and consumer-friendly**. People

dip in and out of religious life instead of committing to community and shared responsibility feels “too demanding.” Reconciliation has been held in check as an optional “programme,” not a way of living.

2. The “Postman” Perspective is ‘Religion turned into entertainment’.

Neil Postman warned of society “amusing itself to death,” trading seriousness for spectacle. Today we see faith feeling equally pressured to be engaging, upbeat, appealing – competition for attention and entertainment-dominating values inevitably create consumers. In this world, faith expressions become performance instead of transformative encounters; sermon making loses depth in favour of “keeping people interested;” and reconciliation, justice, honesty, and healing fall to the bottom of the list.

3. The “Orwell” Perspective reflects Religion shaped by external pressure

George Orwell warned about control through conformity to pressure from powerful institutions who seek to avoid controversy or sensitive topics. Faith institutions sometimes bend to political, cultural, or social expectations, and when this happens, religion loses its prophetic voice. Courage to challenge injustice quickly dissipates and faith leaders then shy away from uncomfortable truths preferring a polite, quiet, and cautious faith.

4. Lastly, the “Marx” Perspective – Religion as comfort instead of change

Karl Marx argued that religion can sometimes “pacify” people, offering comfort without challenging the systems that harm. Faith becomes a source of personal comfort rather than social transformation and spirituality drifts toward self-help and positivity. The inevitable result is that hard conversations about inequality, division, or reconciliation are again avoided.

Although all four highlight different dangers, they point to one core problem: religion risks becoming either too shallow to make a difference or too controlled to challenge the world; religion becomes “feel good” instead of life changing. If Huxley, Postman, Orwell, and Marx are right, reconciliation will be very difficult to embed as a discipleship imperative. Religion now stands at its own equally significant crossroad.

Matthew Fox said **“The system is not working. That is how a paradigm shift begins.”** He’s speaking from a perspective that sees crisis as a spiritual and cultural turning point – a moment when old frameworks lose legitimacy and something fundamentally new becomes possible. This Report describes such a crisis... so maybe there is a just glimmer of hope that a new paradigm can begin. I sincerely hope so.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond.

Lynda Gould

25/3/26