

# Edgehill Theological College Reconciliation and Integration Partnership Project



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## Project Aims

The Edgehill Theological College Reconciliation and Integration Partnership Project is based in Edgehill Theological College located in Belfast, Northern Ireland and is a ministry of the Methodist Church in Ireland. The Programme is supported by the European Regional Development Fund under the Peace III Programme.

The Reconciliation Programme seeks to educate and inspire Church leaders (clergy and laity) and those in training to respond to the challenges of difference and diversity by being furnished with the tools for reconciliation and integration through theological learning and reflection, personal engagement and practical experience. This work is complemented by practical outreach initiatives with marginalised groups (i.e. young offenders, ex-combatants, loyalists/republicans, minority ethnic communities). The Programme has found that by making use of creative approaches (such as those used in Theatre of the Oppressed drama workshops) participants are able to engage more readily with issues around identity which in turn lead to addressing attitudes of sectarianism and racism.

## Guiding Principles

- A. That people are basically similar to one another.
- B. That conflict is normal and a continuous feature of any relationship, though mostly the issues of conflict are not openly addressed between people.
- C. That it is not surprising that many folks turn to aggression or violence in the face of conflict.
- D. That peace itself can be boring unless we have some purpose or activity to be involved in while we are at peace – either with ourselves, with another, in society or between countries.
- E. That a fact of life is that there are facts of life; for example, if someone hurts another person, that act is complete and is a fact. There is nothing that can be done to take away the fact of that action. What we are always left with is the question of how we will respond to what happens in life.
- F. That peace-building and forgiveness and reconciliation are usually difficult and people often want to avoid the work that is required to pursue them.

G. That in any situation there is always hope.

H. That anything we communicate will require you to adapt it accordingly to your situation to make it relevant and worthwhile.

I. That in every situation there is no one best model or approach to apply to it.

J. That in any of this work there should be flexibility, a willingness to drop what you have planned to respond to a more pressing or important need and that any work, you do will always be limited but can be significant.

K. That forgiveness seems to be very widely misunderstood and is important in any relationship.

L. That it doesn't take many folks to make a big difference (positive or negative) to a situation, issue or community.

M. That we have listed too many assumptions already and it's likely that you are losing interest in them.

### **Engaging Conflict**

#### Conflict is Natural

The potential for conflict is always present. In all our relationships there are differing needs, opinions, values, interests and desires, therefore, there must be conflict. If each person is unique, then each shall see the world differently. As much as we may think we need to avoid conflict it is impossible. We should not think of conflict as being wrong or shameful, when it is natural and normal in all our relationships.

#### Conflict can be Constructive

Though conflict can often be destructive when handled poorly; we, however, envision conflict as an opportunity to transform us. Conflict is an opportunity to build something constructive that can result in more intimate relationships and more healthy communities. When handled appropriately conflict can be a life-giving experience, though it often is messy.

#### We Only Know Part of the Truth

In all conflicts, whether we are active participants or outside observers, we only understand part of the truth. We bring our own life experiences and baggage that have shaped our perspective of how we view a conflict. When engaging in conflict, we must be open to hearing a new 'truth' or new story. We must learn to hold in tension our own truth along with the humanness of the other in the conflict.

#### Relationship Building

Relationship building is at the heart of the Programme. The focus of all of its activities is on initiating, maintaining and/or building relationships. In many cases, for significant progress to be made in the process of reconciliation, fostering relationships needs to be the first priority. Focusing on reconciliation in the first instance can discourage people from engaging in the process, either because they fear what they may have to confront or they are unsure about what the process may entail. Encounters and relationships provide the framework and the context for mutual understanding and respect to emerge and for reconciliation to be considered and pursued.



It is important to remember that peace-building and reconciliation work are not simply what happens in the moment of specific activities or sessions, but it is extended through how those activities are planned, organised, reviewed and, critically, through who is involved. Wherever possible, the Programme works on a relational, inter-church basis and has been driven by an ethos of partnership and collaboration.

A key lesson learnt by the Programme is the importance of finding common interests and concerns that will bring people together from different communities, traditions and cultures. The focus of most of the work remains on generating opportunities for relationships amongst and between people and communities who would not otherwise ordinarily meet.

### **Hospitality and Peace-building**

Hospitality and peace-building are not often seen to be related to one another, but the two have an interesting connection. Hospitality is the relationship between people (often a 'guest' and a 'host') which includes a reception and welcome of guests, visitor or even stranger, and hospitality is more than just 'hosting' someone. Hospitality involves showing respect for the guest, providing for their needs and treating them as people of value.

Think of a time when you've been shown hospitality. What did it feel like? What specific things did the person extending hospitality do to make you feel welcome? What didn't they do? How did the hospitality you received help you to feel welcome?

How might hospitality be a key component to building-peace? Where there is hospitality it is difficult to find hostility. In the midst of difference or even disagreement, hospitality might be



extended as a way to make connections with 'the other' and show respect by welcoming and treating 'the other' with acceptance and dignity.

While it might seem easy to extend hospitality to friends and family, it can be more of a challenge to be hospitable to the 'strangers' among us, especially to those who are different from us and particularly to those whom we have related to as enemies. Hospitality isn't reserved for the familiar. What do you think? What does hospitality have to offer peace-building? What does peace-building have to contribute to hospitality?

### **Welcoming the Stranger**

Who is the 'the stranger' in your community? And who might 'the other' be in the context of where you live?

Might it be the person next door who speaks another language, looks quite different and is new to the country? Perhaps it is the person living on the other side of the city who speaks the same language but claims a different religious or political affiliation?

Over the centuries on the island of Ireland, migration has tended to be a one-way process as thousands of people left each year seeking to begin lives in other countries. Today, people are still leaving, but people have been arriving in increasing numbers, especially over the last twelve years. Reasons for migration vary; some people are drawn here for economic reasons, educational opportunities or relationships, while others arrive seeking protection from countries torn by war or natural disasters. Others come here as missionaries or are invited because of their skills, expertise or wealth. For more information on migration, visit <http://www.embraceni.org/category/information/>.

### **Ideas for increasing cultural and ethnic awareness**

- Visit the cultural centres of minority ethnic communities to learn and to affirm their presence as part of a shared society.
- Celebrate festivals such as Chinese New Year, Eid, Chanukah and Diwali.
- Hold celebration meals such as harvest suppers where you might invite people from a minority ethnic group to cook with you.
- Encourage racial awareness and anti-racism training in your congregation or area.
- Visit cultural centres together, for example, people from a rural background anywhere in the world, will find something in common at somewhere like the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.
- Find ways of celebrating and honouring the achievement of individuals and groups from minority ethnic populations in your community.
- Use any forum, inter-church groups, Community Safety Groups, District Policing Partnerships, to make sure that even minor acts of racism are taken seriously.