



**IRISH
CHURCHES**
PEACE
PROJECT

TOWARDS GREATER UNDERSTANDING

DIALOGUE RESOURCE

The Irish Churches Peace Project is a collaborative partnership between the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Irish Council of Churches.

Copies of this resource may be requested from the Irish Council of Churches and are available for download through their website, as detailed below.

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March 2015

The views and opinions expressed in this resource do not necessarily reflect those of the European Commission or the Special EU Programmes Body.

Introduction

One of the Irish Churches Peace Project's (ICPP) aims is to support fresh opportunities for people from different faith backgrounds to come together in a safe place to learn more about each other.

Within many of our communities there are divisions, mistrust, a lack of understanding of the 'other' and a legacy from many years of conflict. It is, however, necessary to work together to strengthen the wider community, to support jobs and services, create shared space and secure a peaceful society.

Real peace implies something deeper than polite acceptance of those who are different. We need to discover who the other person is and reveal who we are.

This programme is a template to help people increase their understanding of each other's beliefs and traditions. It is not intended to be a complex exploration of theological issues, nor is it an attempt to resolve inevitable differences of belief.

The sessions are designed to encourage participants to go on a journey of discovery together and to learn from each other.

In developing relationships across cultural, political and religious boundaries, we will begin to see afresh God's work in the lives of others and also in our own. Ray Davey, founder of Corrymeela said: "If we Christians cannot speak the message of reconciliation we have nothing to say."

Note: Elements of this resource have been adapted from *Bridging the Gap* by Johnston McMaster and John Kyle.

This programme can be used with a group from two or more different church traditions. It aims:

- To develop new relationships between churches that will contribute to building cross-community understanding.
- To enable participants gain a better understanding of each other's faith traditions and church practices.
- To provide a safe space for participants to discuss contentious local or regional issues.
- To identify areas of common peace-building activity locally which could be developed after the dialogue programme.

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to be as flexible as possible. It can be used:

- With a small or large group, although the suggested maximum number of people is twenty (see below).
- Over four to six sessions. A day away or residential may be an option during or at the end of the course.
- With a facilitator. It is important that the facilitator is comfortable talking about faith issues and is able to ensure balance in the conversation. Good facilitation is the key to creating safe space and enabling deep conversation.

Small or large group?

Discussion happens best in a group of eight to twelve people in a circle format. If your group is larger than this we strongly suggest setting up the venue 'café style', that is, with people seated around tables, or in small groups, of ten or less. If refreshments are served as people arrive, sitting in small groups allows conversations to happen from the beginning, creating the right sort of atmosphere for the rest of the session.

The questions and exercises have been designed to generate discussion and to increase shared understanding. They explore people's thoughts, experiences and understanding of the 'other', rather than asking people to demonstrate their knowledge.

Venues

It is important that the venue is a place where the whole group is comfortable. Nothing should be assumed and a local community hall, church hall, restaurant, hotel or council premises could be ideal. There should be minimal disturbances, and tea and coffee helps people relax.

The programme suggests visits to the church buildings of some of the denominations in the group. This will normally start on week two of the programme. For some participants this may be the first time they have visited some of the other denominations' buildings.

These visits will be hosted by the respective church leader and will include opportunity to ask questions. The tour will be followed by the group meeting in the agreed venue, which may be the adjoining church hall if available, for the main discussion.

These visits should be planned and organised well in advance so that details can be given to participants.

Outline for a Session

Each session should take 2 to 2 ½ hours.

Always include an introduction and a conclusion. The purpose of the introduction is to set the scene and ensure people are comfortable. The conclusion ensures that people are aware of the next steps and are not leaving with unresolved issues or concerns.

- Tea/coffee on arrival (15 mins)
- Short tour of the church (30 mins)
- Welcome and introduction (15 mins)
- Discussion and exploration of the topic (1 hour)
- Closing circle (10 mins)

A weekly evening session often works best for church groups, but this course could also be done over a weekend residential or two full days.

Session 1

Our Spiritual Communities

Programme

As this is the first session it is good practice to invite the clergy from the churches represented to say why they are supporting the programme and what their expectations are regarding it. Light refreshments on arrival or a simple meal may work well on the first or last evening.

Welcome and introduction

Welcome and introduce the facilitator, the course and explain the format of the session.

Ask participants to discuss the following in pairs:

1. Their name and the church they belong to
2. Their expectations of this course
3. Their favourite hobby or way of relaxation

Ask everyone to introduce their partner and their answers. This may take some time depending on the group size but it is important to help people feel at ease in a new setting.

The facilitator should note all the expectations on the flipchart and comment on them in relation to the aims of the programme. It is useful to do this so that everyone is clear about what will, or will not, be covered during the programme.

How do we talk to each other?

The aim of this series is to allow conversations to take place between people of different backgrounds, so that greater understanding and relationships can develop.

It can be difficult for people to move beyond polite conversation to constructive and genuine engagement with people from different backgrounds.

Ask the group the following questions. You may want to split into smaller groups which can feed back the results of their conversation:

1. What are the subjects that you fear might cause controversy between the various groups taking part?
2. If good relations are to develop which of these subjects must be addressed? Which can be avoided?
3. What are the dangers of addressing these subjects?
4. What are the dangers of ignoring them?

In the large group ask people to suggest some ground rules which could help constructive conversations about sensitive issues to take place. Write suggestions on a flipchart and use them to develop a group agreement about how conversations will take place throughout the series. Do not accept suggestions without ensuring there is complete agreement in the group.

This agreement should be written on a piece of flipchart paper and be displayed during each session to remind people.

The following guidelines are taken from Community Dialogue and could be used to prompt suggestions from the group.

- Treat what you hear in confidence.
- Others have the right to believe and feel differently from you.
- Others have the right to express their beliefs.
- You do not have to respect beliefs that are wrong to you.
- Treat others with the respect you expect yourself.
- When others share do not interrupt, show respect and wait until they finish.
- Do not represent the views of a wider group, share your own views.
- Do not pressurise anyone into speaking.
- All participants' views and ideas have value.

(Taken from <http://www.communitydialogue.org/content/ground-rules-dialogue>)

Our faith communities

This first session aims to set a context for subsequent sessions by encouraging people to discuss their spiritual backgrounds. Emphasize that people should only share what they are comfortable sharing.

Ask people to get into groups based on the church they belong to, or identify with. Distribute flipchart pages and ask the groups to note their responses.

1. Why do I belong to my church?
2. What do I know about the origins of my spiritual community/church?
3. What are the practices of my church? E.g. worship services, weekly activities, prayer meetings, sacraments, rituals.

Facilitate a feedback session in the large group.

Closing circle

Ask two questions in a closing circle and give everyone an opportunity to respond.

- What was positive about the evening?
- Were there any issues not addressed tonight that you would like to be discussed?

A simple technique to help quieter people in the group to speak is to use a 'talking piece' (e.g. a stone, a feather, or a book). As the talking piece is passed around the group the person holding it is encouraged to share their thoughts. If they do not want to speak they simply pass it on. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak.

If the series includes visits to churches announce the time and venue for the next session.

Session 2

Sharing our Spiritual Journeys

Programme

Tea/coffee on arrival.

Tour of church

If the group is visiting one of the churches allow time for people to look around. Begin the conversation by asking people what they notice in the building. What is different from their own church? What is similar? The points of difference and similarity can be explored with the clergy person from the church.

Welcome and introduction

Begin the session with an icebreaker exercise (see Appendix A).

The purpose of this session is:

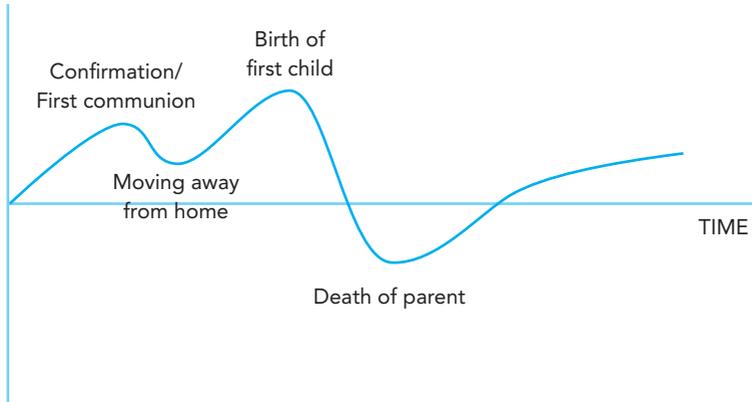
- To give participants time to reflect on their own spiritual/religious journey and then to share it with others. This can be rewarding as we become more aware of God's goodness and presence in our lives and also of the diversity of means that God uses to communicate with us
- To explore the similarities, differences and diversity of those spiritual/religious journeys

Plotting spiritual journeys

This exercise encourages people to share their own spiritual journey. It is important to reassure people that everyone has a unique story to tell. People may find it hard to think in terms of their 'spiritual journey', in which case it might be appropriate to ask people to think instead of the significant events in their lives. Encourage them to consider how these events have affected their faith.

Give each participant a piece of A4 paper and ask them to draw a horizontal axis to represent time and a vertical axis to represent positive or negative states. Each participant should plot the significant points of their spiritual journey, or their significant life events. See Figure 1 for an example.

Figure 1: Plotting a spiritual journey



It is helpful if the facilitator has their own spiritual journey plotted out in advance and shares it with the group as an example.

Organize people into pairs or small groups and encourage participants to share the key moments from their journey with each other.

Discussion

In the large group facilitate a discussion on the sharing of spiritual journeys. Use the following questions to generate discussion:

1. What are common themes in the experiences shared?
2. What are the differences in the experiences shared?
3. What events, circumstances or people positively influence our spiritual journeys?
4. What events, circumstances or people have a negative effect on our spiritual journey?

Closing circle

Ask two questions in a closing circle and give everyone an opportunity to respond.

- What was positive about the evening?
- Were there any issues not addressed tonight that you would like to be discussed?

A simple technique to help quieter people in the group to speak is to use a 'talking piece' (e.g. a stone, a feather, or a book). As the talking piece is passed around the group the person holding it is encouraged to share their thoughts. If they do not want to speak they simply pass it on. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak.

If the series includes visits to churches announce the time and venue for the next session.

Session 3

Our Cultural Traditions

Programme

Tea/coffee on arrival.

Tour of church

If the group is visiting one of the churches allow time for people to look around. Begin the conversation by asking people what they notice in the building. What is different from their own church? What is similar? The points of difference and similarity can be explored with the clergy person from the church.

Welcome and introduction

Begin the session with an icebreaker exercise (see Appendix A).

The purpose of this session is:

- To consider our own cultural identity
- To explore the different cultural traditions represented in the group
- To recognise the positive and negative aspects of culture

Our culture is a bit like the accent we speak with; it is something we notice in other people but do not think about in ourselves. We often only think about culture when we encounter another culture. Even then our attention is often on how different the other culture is, not on our own culture.

Culture - What is it?

This is a word association exercise. Ask participants to call out what comes to mind when they hear the word 'culture'. Write responses on a flipchart, for example: values, music, language, dancing, common habits, food, flags etc.

Our cultural identity

Ask people to get into groups based on the church they belong to, or identify with. Distribute flipchart pages and ask the groups to write words or statements that describe their own culture, both positive and negative. They should then write words or statements which describe their perception of the 'other' culture.

Feedback in the larger group. Explore the following questions:

1. Did the way in which other groups defined their culture match your perception of them?
2. Did their description of your culture match how you feel about your culture?
3. What are the areas of similarity and difference between the cultures represented in the group?

My experiences of culture

Write the following questions on a flipchart and give people time to reflect personally. Distribute paper for people to note their responses.

1. Where did you grow up? What were the cultural traditions and values in your family?
2. What was your faith/church experience growing up? What were the political views/traditions in your family?
3. When was your first experience of cultural difference? Was this a positive or negative experience?
4. What other experiences have you had of engaging with cultural difference?

Invite participants to share in pairs.

Then invite people to share in the larger group. Facilitate a discussion around personal experiences of other cultures.

Cultural identity

In church-based groups ask participants to discuss:

1. What are the symbols of your culture and how do they reflect it? (E.g. flags, music, language, dance, sport)
2. What aspects of culture do we share or have in common?

Feedback in large group and discuss the commonalities and the differences.

Closing circle

Ask two questions in a closing circle and give everyone an opportunity to respond.

- What was positive about the evening?
- Were there any issues not addressed tonight that you would like to be discussed?

A simple technique to help quieter people in the group to speak is to use a 'talking piece' (e.g. a stone, a feather, or a book). As the talking piece is passed around the group the person holding it is encouraged to share their thoughts. If they do not want to speak they simply pass it on. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak.

If the series includes visits to churches announce the time and venue for the next session.

Session 4

Our Political Traditions

Programme

Tea/coffee on arrival.

Tour of church

If the group is visiting one of the churches allow time for people to look around. Begin the conversation by asking people what they notice in the building. What is different from their own church? What is similar?

The points of difference and similarity can be explored with the clergy person from the church.

Welcome and introduction

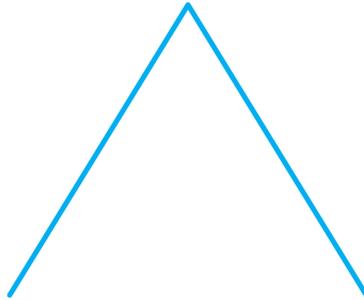
Begin the session with an icebreaker exercise (see Appendix A).

The purpose of this session is:

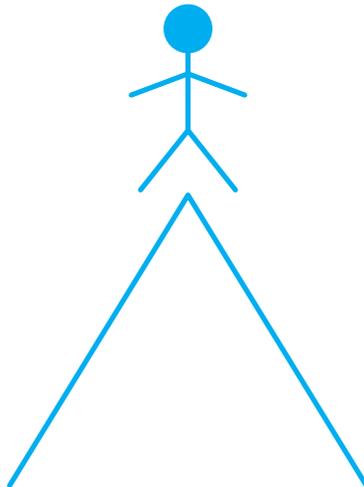
- To consider the things that hold communities together and what pulls them apart
- To explore how political views and faith interact
- To encourage honest sharing, whilst recognising that different political views will exist within the group.

Northern Ireland as a 'Hinged Society'

Draw a step-ladder on a flipchart as shown below:

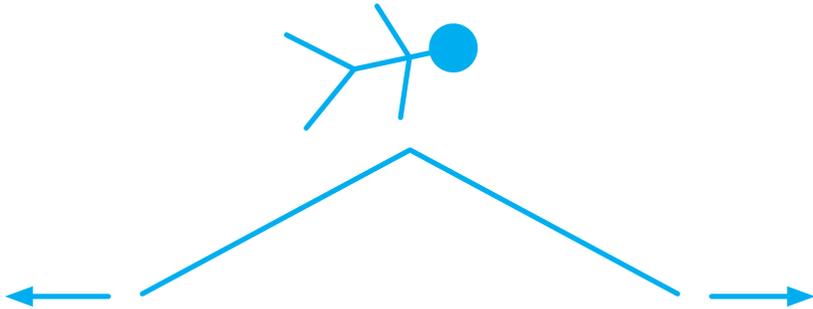


Now draw a person at the top of the step-ladder:

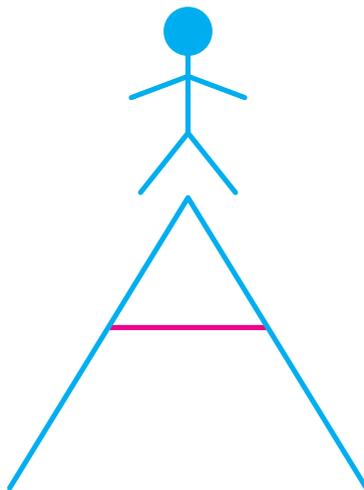


Ask the group what essential piece of the step-ladder, as it is drawn, is missing? What is likely to happen to the person on top of the step-ladder?

The answer is that there is nothing holding the two sides of the step-ladder together. When the person climbs the ladder the two sides are likely to be forced apart and the person may have a bad accident:



The step-ladder needs something to hold the two sides of the ladder together if it is not to collapse when weight is put onto it.



The two sides of the step-ladder represent the two main communities in Northern Ireland, often described as Protestant-Catholic, Nationalist-Unionist etc. In the following discussion encourage the group to focus on the local situation in their areas and not just the national context.

In each community some people are closer to the hinge joining the two parts of the step-ladder. These people have regular contact with people from the other community and have developed relationships with them. People who are further from the hinge have less contact with people from the other community and fewer relationships with them.

In small groups ask participants to consider the following questions:

1. How close to, or far from, the hinge are you? Where would you like to be?
2. What hinders you from having contact and building relationships with people from the other community? What can be done about this?
3. What are the things that have forced the two communities apart in the past? Examples might be disputes over flags, interpretation of the past, particular acts of violence, political issues etc.
4. What things tend to keep the communities apart now?
5. What are the things that have prevented the communities from pulling apart in the past? Examples might be personal relationships, contacts between community leaders and groups, reactions against acts of violence, etc.
6. What things tend to keep the communities from pulling apart now?
7. What might be done to strengthen the ties and relationships between communities?

Invite people to feedback in the larger group.

Church, politics and good relations

In church-based groups ask people to answer the following questions:

1. How does your Christian faith influence your political views?
2. How have churches contributed to building cross-community relations?
3. What teachings or values in your church tradition would encourage involvement in building good relations?
4. What hinders your church from involvement in building good relations?
5. As a result of this course, are there any practical steps that you personally would like to take? That you would like your church to take?

In the large group discuss what this group, or the churches, could do to promote building good relations in the area.

Closing circle

Ask two questions in a closing circle and give everyone an opportunity to respond.

- What was positive about the evening?
- Were there any issues not addressed tonight that you would like to be discussed?

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A day away or residential event somewhere of shared interest is a good way to finish the course and help people develop relationships that have been formed.

Appendix A

Suggestions for Ice Breakers

1. Sculpting Exercise

Designate each corner of the room as one of the four options for each topic. Ask people to go to the corner that best describes them:

- Favourite food: Chinese, Italian, Indian, home cooking
- Favourite music: classical, country and western, Irish traditional, jazz
- Country you would most like to visit: USA, France, India, Australia
- In your family are you: the youngest, oldest, middle, only child
- Do you vote in elections: always, sometimes, never, occasionally

2. In pairs share a memorable holiday

3. Invite participants to write their name on the flipchart and say something about it, e.g. where it comes from, reasons they were given the name, its meaning, etc...

4. Ask everyone in the group to say who they would like to have dinner with and why.

5. One person holds the end of a ball of string, says their name and then tosses the ball to someone else without letting go of the string. The person who catches the ball repeats the process. Continue until everyone is holding a piece of the string and a 'spider's web' has formed. Reverse the process to untangle it. Before throwing the ball back, the person throwing should try to remember the name of the person they are throwing to.

6. The Telephone Game: a facilitator begins by whispering something into the ear of the person beside them. They in turn whisper it to their neighbour. This continues until it comes back to the facilitator who shares the words they have just heard and what they said at the start. Usually the last whisper bears no resemblance to the first whisper!



The Irish Churches Peace Project (ICPP)

Who are we?

The ICPP is a collaborative partnership between the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Irish Council of Churches.

What are we about?

The vision of the ICPP is to deliver a series of initiatives throughout Northern Ireland and the Border Region to support *“a peaceful and stable society, with a shared and better future for all”*. Its work is accordingly focused on promoting reconciliation and the emergence of a shared and peaceful future.

How are we funded?

Funding for the ICPP in the period July 2012 to June 2015 has been provided by the European Union’s PEACE III Programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.





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ICPP is supported by the European Union's PEACE III Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body