



IRISH
CHURCHES
PEACE
PROJECT

A STEP TOO FAR

A CONTEMPLATION
ON FORGIVENESS

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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Introduction

Most of us at some time in our lives feel that we have been wronged by others in some way. It may be as a result of malicious gossip, a violent act, or even worse.

How do we react in such situations? Do we lash out at the offender? Are we eaten up with the desire for revenge? "A Step Too Far?" investigates an alternative to revenge – the idea of forgiveness.

From Northern Ireland to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, ordinary people share their real life stories and how they view forgiveness. Leading academics also make a significant contribution to the film.

This programme resource uses the film as a basis for a series of three or four sessions, in which participants discuss and engage with the issues raised in the film. This resource is designed to be flexible, with various options for the content of each session being given.

"Watching the DVD these past 3 weeks will continue to impact on my life and my dealings with others, now and in the future."

Course participant

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
- over three sessions or four
- with guest speakers or without

Small or large group?

One of the main aims of this resource is that people discuss the issues of forgiveness raised in the film with each other. Everyone has come across situations in which they have been hurt by others and, thus, have faced the challenge and dilemma of forgiveness. So, everyone has something to contribute to the discussion.

Discussion happens best in a group of ten people or less. 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.

Each small group should have someone who is prepared to lead the discussion and they should be given the discussion questions beforehand.

The facilitator's role is simply to put the questions to the group and to encourage every person's participation. The facilitator should not dominate the conversation!

Using outside speakers or not?

Each of the first three sessions concentrates on a key theme in the film. It is possible to invite people who have some expertise in that theme to come and speak more specifically about it. This has the advantage of adding a 'live' element to the session and for the participants to be able to ask questions.

It is also possible to hold the sessions without any speakers from outside. In this case, some more focused discussion questions for the groups to explore are provided.

Outline for a session

The suggested outline for a session is as follows:

- Tea/coffee
- Welcome and introduction (5 mins)
- Watch episode of film (20 mins)
- Conversation at tables (20 mins)
- Input from speaker/focused discussion (20 mins)
- Reflection (10 mins)

Offering support

Every person has been hurt by other people in many different ways. It is possible that discussing the topic of forgiveness raises painful memories or issues for people. Those organising the series should be aware of this possibility and have a list of resources available for those who might need help or support.

Session 1

Forgiveness Prepared-ness: Nurturing a Culture of Forgiveness

This session focuses on the theme of 'forgiveness prepared-ness'. This comes from the Amish culture, in which forgiveness is a very significant element. In this culture forgiveness is seen as the appropriate response to a wrong that has been done. Therefore, children are taught to forgive each other from an early age. Practicing forgiveness in the small, everyday things in life prepares people to forgive when bigger things happen.

*"What happened was out of my control,
but how I respond is within my control."*

Denise Green on www.theforgivenessproject.com

Welcome and Introduction (5 mins)

Watch Episode 1 of “A Step Too Far” (20 mins)

Conversation at tables (20 mins)

- Introduce each other
- What stood out for you in the film or discussion?
- Was there anything that impressed or challenged you?
- Was there anything that you disagreed with?
- Was there anything that you feel is applicable to Northern Ireland? Or is our situation too different?

Input from speaker/focused discussion (20 mins)

An outside speaker could elaborate on the theme of forgiveness and on the idea of preparing for evil in advance (see discussion questions below).

Focused discussion questions

Forgiveness prepared-ness is thinking about how to respond to painful situations in advance.

Is this being morbid? Or is it being wise?

Would thinking like this create negativity?
Or would it be beneficial?

What would a culture of forgiveness look like in families, communities, churches and Northern Ireland society?

What is the cost of forgiveness? Is it worth paying?

What is the cost of not forgiving?

Discuss the ways in which the Amish community and the family of the gunman fulfil what Jesus said in Matthew 5:43-45. Think how they acted both individually and as a community. How might this apply to our response to the everyday hurts and grievances we experience?

Reflection

There will have been a lot of discussion through the course of the session. The purpose of the reflection is to allow some space for people to gather their thoughts and to consider what they have learned from the experience.

Tell participants that there will be a short time of quiet so that each person can think about all they have heard and said in the session. Invite people to think, "What will I take away from this session?" Allow at least one minute of silence for this reflection.

If the session is being run with a faith-based group an appropriate verse of scripture might be read in the silence.

Session 2

Forgiveness is Good for Me: The Psychology of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is often seen as the person who has been wronged doing something for the benefit of the person who has wronged them. The film raises the possibility that forgiving is actually beneficial for the person who has been wronged.

"I didn't decide not to hate because I'm a good person. I decided not to hate because hating would have finished the job they'd started so successfully."

Survivor of Omarska Concentration Camp during Bosnia war

Welcome and Introduction (5 mins)

Watch Episode 2 of "A Step Too Far" (20 mins)

Conversation at tables (20 mins)

- Introduce each other.
- What stood out for you in the film or discussion?
- Was there anything that impressed or challenged you?
- Was there anything that you disagreed with?
- Was there anything that you feel is applicable to Northern Ireland? Or is our situation too different?

Input from speaker/focused discussion (20 mins)

Appropriate speakers to address the psychological benefits of forgiveness could be people with a medical background (psychologists, counsellors, etc) or people who have personal experience of coming to terms with a wrong that has been done to them (this could be as a result of the Troubles, divorce, crime etc).

Focused discussion questions

Do you think that forgiving, or letting go, is really beneficial for the person who has been wronged?

What might some of the benefits be?

Does saying "I can't forgive until the person who has wronged me shows remorse" keep me under their control? Is my response to what has happened limited by what they do, or do not do?

Are there better words than 'forgiving' and 'letting go' to describe what we are talking about?

What things make forgiving, or letting go, easier?

What things make it harder?

Consider the story of Joseph in Genesis. Many years after his brothers wronged him (see Genesis 37) Joseph has to decide how to respond when they meet again. Read Genesis 45:1-15. Are there resonances between this story and what you have seen in the film? What made it possible for Joseph to forgive? How has Joseph's perspective and understanding of the events changed over the years? Imagine Joseph had chosen not to forgive. What would the effects on Joseph and his brothers have been?

Reflection

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Session 3

Re-mem-bering and Living Memorials: Dealing with the Memories

The Amish chose not to erect an obvious memorial to the girls who were killed at Nickle Mines. Instead they planted a tree for each girl as a living memorial. The families also gather for a meal together once a year. In Northern Ireland the question of remembering and memorials is a contentious one.

The film also talks about the possibility of re-mem-bering, that is, the possibility of creating more positive memories out of painful situations.

"If one can understand why people behave as they do then often the road to forgiveness is opened. Not only is forgiveness essential for the health of Society, it is also vital for our personal well-being. Bitterness is like a cancer that enters the soul. It does more harm to those that hold it than to those whom it is held against."

Terry Waite

Welcome and Introduction (5 mins)

Watch Episode 3 of "A Step Too Far" (20 mins)

Conversation at tables (20 mins)

- Introduce each other.
- What stood out for you in the film or discussion?
- Was there anything that impressed or challenged you?
- Was there anything that you disagreed with?
- Was there anything that you feel is applicable to Northern Ireland? Or is our situation too different?

Input from speaker/focused discussion (20 mins)

Issues of memorials and the past can be very emotive in Northern Ireland. There are various organisations who can provide facilitators trained to lead conversations on these topics. Some of these organisations are funded projects and will not charge for such facilitation.

Focused discussion questions

Do you think that the Amish memorial, a row of trees planted with no explicit reference to the event, was an adequate memorial?

Is it possible for painful memories to be changed, or at least seen in a different light? Have people had any experience of this? What might help this process?

What are appropriate ways to remember painful but significant events?

What are inappropriate ways to remember these events?

Forgiveness is a key theme when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9-15). The word commonly translated 'trespasses' can refer to 'sin' or 'debt'. How is forgiveness similar to and different from forgiving a debt? Does forgiveness apply only to followers of Jesus, or does Jesus' teaching have application in wider society?

Reflection

There will have been a lot of discussion through the course of the session. The purpose of the reflection is to allow some space for people to gather their thoughts and to consider what they have learned from the experience.

Tell participants that there will be a short time of quiet so that each person can think about all they have heard and said in the session. Invite people to think, "What will I take away from this session?" Allow at least one minute of silence for this reflection.

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Session 4

Reflections

This is an optional final session which provides opportunity for further sharing and reflection. Ideas overleaf may be used.

Welcome and Introduction (5 mins)

Reflection wall

Provide post-it notes and pens. Ask people to write things that they have heard or discussed in the previous three sessions that have been helpful, challenging, or which they will continue to ponder. Invite people to stick their notes on a 'reflection wall'. Encourage people to spend time looking at the notes that have been posted.

Interviews

Over the course of the series there are likely to have been particular stories or experiences that people have shared in the small groups. Some of these people may be willing to be interviewed so that the whole group can hear their story.

What next?

Encourage people to think of ways in which action could be taken to put some of the things discussed during the series into practice. Encourage them to think of things they can do personally, and things that could be done in their community or town.

For example, individuals might want to sign up for the 'Forgiveness Challenge' by Desmond Tutu (see Resources section at the end of this booklet). Or, a group of people might organise a series of meetings between different churches or community groups in order to build relationships.

It is good to have some ideas to prompt the discussion, but it is better to allow people to create their own ideas in small groups.

Forgiveness in our church tradition

Read Matthew 5:9-15, Mark 11:25-26, Luke 17:3-4.

Forgiveness was something that Jesus modelled and taught his followers to imitate. Compare the place that forgiveness has in the life of the Amish community with your church community. How is forgiveness taught and practiced within your church community? How could your church community foster a culture of forgiveness? Is forgiveness relevant in the realms of family, work, politics etc.?

Reflection

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Tell participants that there will be a short time of quiet so that each person can think about all they have heard and said in the session. Invite people to think, "What will I take away from this session?" Allow at least one minute of silence for this reflection.

If the session is being run with a faith-based group an appropriate verse of scripture might be read in the silence.

Some useful quotes

"Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."

Anon

"What happened was out of my control, but how I respond is within my control."

Denise Green

"If one can understand why people behave as they do then often the road to forgiveness is opened. Not only is forgiveness essential for the health of Society, it is also vital for our personal well-being. Bitterness is like a cancer that enters the soul. It does more harm to those that hold it than to those whom it is held against."

Terry Waite

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human-being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

*"I can't look at myself as a victim
– it diminishes me as a person."*

Michael Lapsley

"There is a challenging statement about our two communities that we could do well to repeat to ourselves until it sinks in: 'These are my neighbours and, rightly or wrongly, they believe that my community has wronged them more than they have wronged us'."

Alan McGuckian

Resources

The Forgiveness Project Website contains stories about forgiveness from a wide range of situations around the world.
www.theforgivenessproject.com

The Forgiveness Toolbox focuses on seven skills to enable individuals and groups transform the impact of harm and violence and to nurture peaceful co-existence.
www.theforgivenessstoolbox.com

The Forgiveness Challenge. Desmond and Mpho Tutu provide 30 daily exercises to teach forgiveness. There are also extraordinary stories from ordinary people who have been transformed through forgiving or being forgiven, alongside interviews with the world's top forgiveness experts, great spiritual leaders, and well-known celebrities, including Alanis Morissette and Arianna Huffington.
www.forgivenesschallenge.com

Contemporary Christianity has a series of fifteen short booklets on forgiveness in the Bible, various Christian traditions, psychology etc.
www.contemporarychristianity.net/website/resources/



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.





IRISH CHURCHES PEACE PROJECT



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