

## Nonviolence: A common good framework for transforming Northern Ireland's culture of violence

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*An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind [Mahatma Gandhi]*

*If you want to reap the harvest of peace and justice in the future, we will have to sow seeds of nonviolence here and now, in the present [Mairead Maguire]*

Why is there so much violence in the world today and why do so many ordinary people turn to the use of force and violence, especially when considering its negative return, the longer-term impact it can have on people's health and mental well-being, and the ineffectiveness of violence to achieve a positive peace and build a flourishing society. Underscoring the futility of violence Martin Luther King Jr. [1964] exclaims:

Violence as a way of achieving racial [or other kinds of] justice is both impractical and immoral. I am not unmindful of the fact that violence often brings about momentary results. Nations have frequently won their independence in battle. But in spite of temporary victories, violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.

Despite the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and several consultations aimed at addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland's past, violence in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland (NI) continues to undermine the building of peaceful future based on the common good. For those living in this society, the legacy of the past remains palpable and is exacerbated by persisting levels of poverty and inequality which only add to the hardships many people are experiencing.

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\* This working paper is intended to inform a Youth Link project entitled 'Remembering the past; shaping the future'. It is the second of four papers that speak to key themes of the project: Pursuing the common good, civic participation, mediation and conflict transformation; and shared and ethical remembering. The project is core funded by the Community Relations Council and supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Special thanks is extended to those I interviewed and the contribution they have made to this paper.

Underpinning the pursuit of the common good is the question ‘what kind of society do we want?’ It is based on four key principles namely: human dignity (which recognises the equality of all humans and that every human life is worthy of respect); interconnectedness /interdependence (which recognises that our well-being is dependent on the well-being of those around us); solidarity (which commits us to show compassion and empathy, and to be responsible and work for the good of all individuals); and civic participation (which commits us to act justly and in ways that help meet the basic needs of other members of the society). The values underpinning a society based on the common good include equity and equality, diversity and interdependence (core youth work principles) as well as relationships and principles of nonviolence. However, the legacy of violence in NI brings into question the approach to peace-building which has been taken. It suggests emphasis was given to the *resolution* of the conflict rather than its *transformation*. Looking at how the two approaches differ Lederach [2003] explains that conflict resolution tends to be limited to looking for a ‘solution’ to end the experience; whereas conflict transformation goes further than conflict resolution in that it tries to envision a new society in which all can flourish. It is around such a vision that conflict transformation strategies are designed. So, not only does conflict transformation engage with ending the conflict, but it also engages with the underlying social conditions and structures that create and foster violence. Linking conflict transformation to pursuing the common good, Lederach further explains that conflict transformation promotes non-violent means to address the underlying causal factors of conflict and promote social structures that meet basic human needs.

Against this backdrop, this paper forms the second working paper in the series relating to the project entitled ‘Remembering the past; shaping the future’. It argues that to promote an inclusive society in which all can flourish peace-building in NI needs to adopt a more transformative approach to conflict. Recognising the ambivalence in this society towards violence and the way it destroys relationships and goes against the values of respect, Derick Wilson [2016] argues that the rejection of violence and a focus on nonviolence must be central to youth work practice. In developing the question ‘what kind of society do we want?’ which lies at the heart of envisioning a shared future based on the common good this paper will:

1. Map out how violence has become embedded and normalised in the society; and
2. Introduce the principles of nonviolence as a framework for transforming conflict and building a thriving society based on the common good in which all can flourish.

## Northern Ireland: A culture of violence?

In thinking about the extent to which there is a culture of violence in NI a couple of points for clarification need to be made. Firstly, a culture of violence does not mean that everybody in the society is violent or engaging in violent activity or that physical violence is accepted. Rather, as Darby and McGinty [2000: 260] point out:

It means that violence and its effects have worked their way into the very fabric of society and become part of normal life so that they become accustomed to the routine use of violence.

Secondly, a culture of violence doesn't simply refer to the physical use of violence but includes structural and cultural forms of violence, as depicted in Galtung's triangle of violence [in Ramsbotham et al, 2011]. He argues that to build a positive peace in which all can flourish approaches to conflict transformation need to address each of the three forms of violence. Consequently, Galtung's triangle of violence is useful for mapping out the different kinds of violence and how they are expressed in the society as set out below:

Direct violence or physical violence, as the name suggests, refers to acts of violence which are physically carried out but that may find their roots in structural and cultural violence. Examples of this in post-Troubles NI include, but are not limited to: paramilitary punishment attacks/beatings experienced by children and young people, racist and sectarian attacks, and the use of petrol bombs by rioters in Derry / Londonderry during the 2018 12<sup>th</sup> fortnight. It is also illustrated in the rise in racism and xenophobia, which is seen to be exacerbated by Brexit, as expressed in the group of people dressed as Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members posing near an Islamic prayer house in Newtownards, County Down.

Structural violence refers to those social structures and institutions that indirectly cause harm to people and which undermine a person's human dignity and ability to meet their basic needs. Examples of this in NI include those structures and policies that support classism and poverty, and which work to restrict the educational opportunities of young people. Structural violence also underpins the continued segregation of communities and the increased number of 'peace walls' (at least 32) that have been built since ceasefire (Belfast Interface Project, 2017). Inequalities such as the current legislative challenges around equal marriage and the Irish language among other rights-based issues are also forms of structural violence. The persistence of educational under-achievement, particularly among working class Protestant boys and Traveller children is also underpinned by inequalities regarding the structure of education in NI and by underlying issues of poverty (Gray *et al.*, 2018). Although controversial, these issues and how people are treated differently (and often unequally) have been raised as forms that of structural violence that need to be discussed.

Cultural violence refers to the myths, narratives and beliefs that are used to justify violence (direct and / or structural). Perhaps one of the most consequential examples of cultural violence for Northern Ireland (and for Ireland and the UK more widely) is the way in which a theology of violence underpinned both the Ulster Covenant and the Easter Proclamation [McMaster, Higgins & Hetherington, 2011]. Both documents make claim to God being on the side of their own political and nationalistic agendas. As McMaster *et al.* point out, the way in which God is associated with guns and violence and the certainty with which God was seen to take sides raises critical ethical and theological questions, especially given the active involvement of the clergy. Even though churches have largely moved on from this theology, these myths continue to permeate society. This can be seen in the way Biblical texts have been used by both Loyalists and Republicans to justify violence and oppression of the 'other' is also a form of cultural violence. Indeed, in South Africa Biblical texts were also manipulated to justify oppression of 'black' South Africans and the Apartheid state. The difficulty with this is that such theologies forget that '[all] humanity is created and loved by God and that [all] human beings are equal in dignity and are entitled to the same fundamental human rights' [WCC, 2018].

Having outlined the different forms that violence can take a culture of violence can be said to exist when this becomes a part of the everyday and seen as almost 'normal' and even valued. Moreover, there is evidence to show that young people sometimes feel that acting violently is what is expected of them by their friends and those in their community [McAlister, Haydon & Scraton, 2013]. This is particularly so among young men in which violence is strongly linked to masculinity [Harland, 2011]. However, when it becomes entrenched in the fabric of society the 'abnormality' of such a culture can become very hard to see.

In NI the culture and normalisation of violence is demonstrated in different ways. For example, it is evidenced in the range of murals that give prominence to (and reify) the gunman and the society's violent past [Ganiel, forthcoming]. Following the violence that ensued in Derry / Londonderry during the 12<sup>th</sup> fortnight (2018) Fealty [2018] points out how the mural of the petrol bomber in the Bogside gives young people the message that 'street violence is a heroic act'. Related to that, Gladys Ganiel [forthcoming] also points out how violence risks being glorified in the way different wars and battles are commemorated including, for example, in the blood sacrifice and heroics of WW1, the Battle of the Boyne and the Easter Rising. Films made about the Troubles also contribute to this [McAlister, Haydon & Scraton, 2013]. Further to this, the society's response to paramilitary attacks on young people also points to a culture in which violence has been normalised. Not only do a significant number of people within these communities condone paramilitary attacks but it is only now that the issue is beginning to be seen as a violent form of child abuse and a violation of person's human rights. Furthermore, as Wilson [2016] points out, the normalisation of violence is also evidenced in the way that the use of violence by one's own community is seen as provoked by the other side and therefore justified, while the use of violence by the 'other' is strongly condemned.

In Western societies more broadly, the way the military is perceived as a key state actor and the priority that is given by the State to maintaining a strong military capability is further evidence of the way in which violence has become normalised [Ganiel, forthcoming]. As Ganiel observes, it is also seen in the way the UK's strategy for recruiting and increasing support for the military among young people remains largely unchallenged. For young people this risks the potential of serious life-changing disabilities, long-term trauma and possibly even death, should they find themselves on the frontlines. However, the difficulty is that support for the military is supported by liberal peace-building theory which gives legitimacy to the military and the use of violence in state security forces [Ganiel, forthcoming]. However, perhaps more challenging is the way in which these militaristic ideals are also supported by the widely accepted theory of 'Just War' which has a theological underpinning to it. In Northern Ireland, this is reinforced in the symbol of the Bible and crown and in the slogans 'for God and for Ulster' and 'God save Ireland' which conflate Christianity with military conquest and which claim the different groups claim God as their own.<sup>1</sup> Such thinking is not peculiar to this part of the world. Indeed, Christian militaristic thinking informed much of rhetoric around the 'war on terror' and the 'axis of evil' promoted by the Bush administration in which America was positioned as good and pure and its enemies as evil [Lock-Pullan, 2010]. In doing so, a theology of evil and sin was successfully used to justify the US military response to the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless, using theology to justify violence and military conquest brings into question grave ethical concerns relating to the right to life (and who has the right to take away

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<sup>1</sup> See Ganiel [forthcoming] for a more detailed analysis of how cultures of militarism is supported in Northern Ireland

someone's life) and the Biblical injunctions not to commit murder, to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, and to pray and work for peace. As Mairead Maguire (peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner) (1988) laments, in the NI nationalism and our willingness to die and kill for our flags are put before human life.

As well as reinforcing structural injustices such as classism, sectarianism and racism, violence in NI has had a significant impact on people's health and mental well-being. As research by McAlister et al [2013] shows 'this is directly seen in suicide rates [which have increased since the end of the Troubles], disability, unemployment among youth particularly in those areas most affected by the conflict'. Even though direct violence might have decreased since the Troubles, structural and cultural violence continues to negatively affect people's mental health. Moreover, it raises the question as to the extent to which Northern Ireland has had (or is able to have) an in-depth discussion on the issue of violence (and alternatives to violence) at a political, theological and ethical level. Surrounded by continuing threats of terrorism, ethnic, religious and political motivated violence and economic crises, there is a need for strong ethical thinking that lives up to the principles of the common good and on how we interact with the 'other' in a way that doesn't promote further conflict and advocate the use of violence [Jahanbegloo, 2013]. It also suggests we need a new way of looking at conflict transformation i.e. that of nonviolence.

## Considering nonviolence as an approach to transforming conflict

Not only is nonviolence a core value and approach in conflict transformation it is also a central value to pursuing the common good. It is seen as both a way of life and as a tactic that can help shape how we respond to the culture of violence in NI in a way that promotes the common good. History shows how nonviolent action has been used to transform numerous conflicts across the globe including in Ireland. Its power and success as a tool for transforming conflict is perhaps best known in the civil rights movement in the USA, led by Martin Luther King. A particularly famous example is of Rosa Park whose nonviolent protest changed the discriminatory nature of seating on buses. The nonviolent movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi which led to India's independence from British rule is another important historical example of the transformative power of nonviolence. In Ireland, Daniel O'Connell used nonviolent principles to campaign for the liberation of Irish Catholics in the 1800's. Famous peace groups across the island of Ireland including the Quakers, the Hibernian Peace Society, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and Corrymeela have also been promoting nonviolence. Since the start of the Troubles this includes the Peace People, Witness for Peace, Women Together, Peace Point and Glenree [Mitchell, 1978]. The Northern Irish civil rights movement also sought to adopt the nonviolent tactics espoused by Gandhi and Martin Luther King. John Hume, the founder of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and former Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, is well known for his nonviolent approach to finding a peaceful solution to violence that claimed so many people's lives during the Troubles.

Despite the success of nonviolence in transforming conflicts across history, today it is not something that is much talked about. Moreover, it is not usually presented as an alternative to violence and the use of armed force as a means of transforming conflict. Indeed, Derick Wilson [2016] asserts that

nonviolence (in youth work) needs to be explicitly revisited. However, to do so we need to understand a little more about what we mean by nonviolence, how it is practiced, the challenges facing the practice of nonviolence in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland?

Sometimes called 'love in action' nonviolence refers to a commitment to civic activism and participation 'that employs social, economic, and political forms of power without resorting to violence or the threat of violence' [Nepstad, 2011, p. xvii]. Nonviolence is about transforming structural violence and social injustices in a way that honours the humanity of the 'other' and treats them with respect and dignity [Wink, 1987: 32]. It is based on the principle of the sanctity and dignity of human life. This requires finding a means to addressing social injustices and inequalities in a way that does not demonise or humiliate the perceived enemy; in doing so, one's own humanity and sense of dignity and self-respect is lost. From a Christian faith perspective nonviolence is about loving our perceived enemy (who might be those from different religious persuasion or from a different racial or ethnic background). This requires recognising that God is also in our perceived 'enemy' and is also a child of His. Consequently, the fundamental question is 'how can I find God in my enemy?'. Indeed, Jesus says: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; that you may be children of your Father in heaven (Matthew 5: 44-45). Therefore, nonviolence is not just about fighting and standing up for the rights of our own community but the for good of the whole community, which is what a vision of the common good seeks to pursue. Related to this is the principle of human interconnectedness. This is well expressed in the African philosophy of *ubuntu* which recognises that our humanity and well-being is dependent on the humanity and well-being of the wider society. Unlike violence, which is based on fear and anger and the idea of division, nonviolence is based on ideas of unity and an understanding of human interconnectedness [Gregg, 1966]. Significantly, both the principle of human dignity and interconnectedness are core principles of the common good.

One of the challenges surrounding nonviolence is that it can be perceived as a 'soft' option that avoids suffering and hardship. This is because violent approaches to conflict are often perceived as virtuous and engaging in violence as proof of courage (and masculinity). However, to think about nonviolence as a passive and soft option is flawed as it one of the most active and successful forms of civic participation. This is because it moves the balance of power to the people and empowers those at a grassroots level to challenge injustices and inequalities. Furthermore, unlike violence which has a massive human and financial cost to it, nonviolence not only costs less financially but it has much lower human cost to it i.e. it has a less detrimental impact on people's physical and mental well-being and fewer lives are lost through nonviolent activism.

How then does one begin to use nonviolence to build a culture of peace? For Mairead Maguire [1988], it needs to start in the home where respect for life (including the life of little insects) is taught. This includes thinking about how we violate the environment in which we live such as through our consumer culture and wastefulness. Therefore, building a culture of peace includes respecting the environment and adopting environmentally friendly and sustainable practices. Nonviolence and building a culture of peace also grows out of a life grounded in spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation; this helps to strengthen one's mind and build resilience. It can include daily practices such as asking oneself 'how can I be a better person today'? Arun Gandhi [2016], Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, also talks about the importance of being able to channel ones' anger which can develop through what he refers to as passive forms of violence. This includes a

sense of anxiety and lack of competence, feeling unsupported and misunderstood, and through the lack of respect, courtesy and helpfulness. If not channelled correctly, Gandhi argues this can be reproduced through prejudice, different forms of oppression, and actions that seek to deprive and harm people (physically, emotionally and mentally). Therefore, this requires asking whether my actions are hurting someone else. Furthermore, a culture of peace can develop from being involved in projects that contribute to the well-being of one's community and learning more about the philosophy and practice of nonviolence [Nagler, 2014]. These practices nurture one's sense of dignity and self-respect, which is foundational to promoting nonviolent culture of peace.

## Conclusion:

Nonviolence as a way of life, practice and tactic is a form of civic participation integral to pursuing the common good in society. It recognises that violence (physical, structural and cultural) are an affront to society and to the dignity of humans and the environment. Applying nonviolent principles to transforming conflict requires us to treat our perceived enemy with dignity and to seek to transform violence in all its forms so that the well-being (including mental, physical, social, economic, and spiritual) of all the society can be nurtured. This is the bedrock upon which a society based on the common good can be pursued.

Nonviolence was widely discussed during the Troubles by peace activists and organisations such as the Peace People, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA), and by some political parties such as the SDLP. However, since then it has received very little attention. In the current political vacuum and in the context of Brexit which is seen to be exacerbating sectarianism, racism, xenophobia, populist nationalism and violent extremism embedding the principles of nonviolence into the society's moral fabric is becoming increasingly urgent. Unless the culture of violence here in NI is challenged Deborah Irwin [2016: 11] cautions that without an alternative young people may continue to see violence as a legitimate way of handling conflict. Youth workers have an important role to play in this. Firstly, while the use of violence in any form needs to be condemned youth workers need to understand and empathise with why young people feel the need to turn to violence in the first place. Recognising there are various factors that might influence a young person to participate in violence Irwin urges youth workers to explore alternatives to violence with young people and nurture their nonviolent communication skills and practice. Secondly, it is imperative that youth workers understand how structural and cultural violence impacts on goals of youth work and on the personal, social and educational development of young people and their ability to influence the common good and reach their full potential. Thirdly, and most importantly, youth workers need to model nonviolence in their own lives if indeed a nonviolent way of life that has the capacity to transform our societies is to be cultivated among young people.

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