Reconciliation: time to grasp the nettle?

In 2003/4, *Brandon Hamber and Gráinne Kelly* carried out research motivated by the observation that reconciliation was ill-defined in Northern Ireland to the detriment of reconciliation practice. They revisited the issue for a recent report.

A NEW SET of challenges is now evident in 2007, and particularly whether the definition of reconciliation we posed in the earlier research is impacting on reconciliation practice.

Our research showed that while all respondents were open to having a frank discussion about reconciliation, most were vague on what the process entailed. This lack of clarity was interesting given that many of the interviewees worked in projects funded by the Peace and Reconciliation Programme or were involved with Intermediary Funding Bodies.

Reconciliation was perceived by many as an 'imported' term, viewed through the prism of the EU Peace Programme. Many struggled to relate the concept of reconciliation to their own practice and felt uncomfortable using the term to describe what they did or wanted to achieve. Although some viewed it as a 'soft' concept originating from a religious perspective, we were surprised to find that others were reluctant to use the term because they felt it had a 'hard' edge. Reconciliation implied a deep and challenging process that required a level of community integration which some felt the communities with which they worked were not prepared or willing to grasp.

One of the outputs of the research was a working definition of reconciliation. This was devised as a tool which would provide a focus for discussion, and to help identify the elements of reconciliation and frame the concept in a practically accessible way. The definition assumes that building peace requires attention to relationships. Reconciliation is thus understood as the process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships. This means not only reconciling broken down relationship as the term confusingly implies, but building new relationships in some cases. It is a voluntary act that cannot be imposed, and it involves five interwoven strands:

- developing a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society;
- acknowledging and dealing with the past;
- building positive relationships;
- significant cultural and attitudinal change;
- substantial social, economic and political change (or equity).

Many in the community and voluntary sector will recognise this definition as an addition to the funding criteria for the PEACE II+ extension. We obviously welcome the more concrete definition being taken on board, but it also poses new challenges.

Firstly, the SEUPB adopted a simplified version of our working definition. Under the current arrangements, applicants have to argue how their project furthers reconciliation in relation to at least three of the strands which are scored. The risk of this approach is that a dynamic conceptualisation of reconciliation could become mechanised and compartmentalised, and another 'tick-box exercise'. We envisaged the five strands of reconciliation as being deeply interdependent and any reconciliation process should consider how it furthers reconciliation holistically and not based on a selection of the strands.

Secondly, core to the definition is that the process of reconciliation, as John-Paul Lederach notes in his work, is deeply paradoxical. The strands of our working definition can themselves create tensions. For example, reconciliation requires dealing with the past but at the same time participation in developing a shared vision for the future. The process of reconciliation is concerned with not only how each individual strand is operationalised, but how they relate to one other.

Reconciliation is the *process* of addressing the five strands in a dynamic and interconnected way rather than simply defining the outcome of each. For instance, for communities at loggerheads, it may be difficult to share a common view of the future or past, or to reconcile all attitudes, causing continual ruptures and contradictions in the process of rebuilding or building relationships. The process of reconciliation is thus by its nature conflictual and always changing. It is measured not by a simple outcome such as communities meeting in the same room, but by the ability to deal with and manage the complex tensions of relationship building over time.

The question therefore is how the voluntary and community sector can find ways to embrace the paradoxical nature of reconciliation. Can models of reconciliation and community practice be operationalised in a way that recognised the complex nature of the reconciliation process, and accommodate this?

But does a society moving out of conflict and wanting to shape a shared future have a choice? In our view, relationships matter, whether between large groups (societies and countries), small groups (communities) or individuals. There continues to be an onus on both the voluntary and community sector and the influential funding bodies, such as the PEACE Programme, to clarify their understandings of what they wish to achieve and the process by which they aim to achieve it. This needs to move beyond a didactic cross-community model, to something infinitely more complex and substantially more challenging.

For a full explanation of the research see Hamber B and Kelly G (2005), *A Place for Reconciliation? Conflict and Locality in Northern Ireland*, Democratic Dialogue. It is available from www.brandonhamber.com. Or contact the authors, email: mail@brandonhamber.com and grainnekelly@gmail.com.