

Dialogue For Diversity

Brian Lennon is a Jesuit living in Armagh. His most recent book, *Mary Magdalene and the Gardener: Women Leaders in the Church*, is published by Messenger Publications.

Dialogue For Diversity was set up by Jesuits in 2009 to bring together nationalists, republicans, unionists, loyalists and people in the South for difficult conversations about divisive issues. It was painful at times and also very fruitful.

We were carrying on a process that had been developed in another group, Community Dialogue. I was one of its founding members in 1998. Many Jesuits were involved in difficult roles: helping refugees, lobbying with governments, and struggling for justice, all of which was very intense.

I remember not being keen on the proposal. The meetings turned into real conversations about what mattered to us. That strengthened our faith and encouraged us.

Political dialogue about the Northern Ireland conflict seemed a completely different prospect. However, it turned out that there were many similarities in the process.

Many participants had lost loved ones in the conflict, and many of these had been killed by organisations to



which other participants belonged.

There was a lot of anger, blaming and suspicion. Yet, as time went on, and as we focused on one really important question, things began to change. That question was: what is it that really matters to you?

In our dialogues we offered no answer: it was up to each person to find out what mattered most to him or her.

Gradually, and often very slowly, people began to hear each other. Sometimes that meant realising that another person had kids, and they were the same age as your own.



Murals in Belfast that tell the story of the sectarian conflict.

Sometimes it meant hearing a story about someone's suffering: losing a loved one, permanent pain as a result of a car bomb, the fear of being attacked, or discrimination.

Over time, and it often took several overnight residentials, people began to relax. They realised that they had something in common: both republicans and loyalists said they had been badly treated by the RUC. (Both of course had also been engaged in murdering others). They also found that the other side had their own divisions, and that they were not some kind of

amazingly bright group: they made the same mess-ups as one's own group. Further, when people talked about some atrocity it sometimes turned out that the people committing it were really trying to defend themselves.

The outcome of these dialogues was not agreement but understanding. But that was crucial in enabling people to work together across divided communities to calm down conflict.

Dialogue For Diversity has other projects, but dialogue is important in all of them. One is community-support for ex-prisoners. This involves meeting

men on a weekly basis for support. Many come out of prison with a very low self-image, often with broken family relationships, housing and finance problems (opening a bank account can be really difficult), and addiction issues.

A second project is chaplaincy work in Maghaberry jail. Over the past few years we have run a spiritual exercises course in which we offer parts of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises to small groups. So far nearly 200 have done these, and the vast majority found them helpful. Recently Martina Killeavy, who co-facilitated the processes, published a series of reflections based on them in a book called *Freedom From the Prison of Addiction: Spiritual and Secular Wisdom*. Recently published by Messenger Publications, it is described by Ciarán Enright, former head of the Irish prison chaplains, as 'A wonderful book for anyone involved in pastoral care or in recovery programmes ... a really beautiful piece of work'. Peter McVerry SJ, sees it as 'a powerful tool which can transform people's lives and deserves to be widely distributed'.

A third, more recent project is ACRE (Active Communities Restoring the Earth). This received a start-up grant from the Irish Jesuits and supports and encourages working-class groups to develop climate projects to save our planet from catastrophe. It is run by Ciarán McLarnon.

He is currently working alongside a large housing association to develop a pilot project to retrofit people's houses.

Ciarán is a gifted musician and uses his skill to teach people the ukulele as a way to gain their confidence. Re-

cently he composed an 'ACRE climate song' which he played for primary school children. They then asked if they could tweak the song, and also if they could make up a dance to go with it! Ciarán said, 'Fine'.

Incredibly, climate does not seem to be on the core curriculum of schools in N. Ireland, so Ciarán hopes to sit down with principals and devise one.

Dialogue, of course, has been at the centre of another recent project: the synodal process started by Pope Francis. In this he wanted the whole Church, to discern together what really mattered to them in the Church. The results have gone to Rome and will be part of an international Synod in 2023.

As Catholics we are divided about some important issues: ordaining married men, women and LGBTQ+ people. Dialogue can help us understand how others feel about these. Tim Kinahan, a Church of Ireland rector, told me that when they discussed similar issues in their annual Church of Ireland synod there were bitter exchanges. But a year later, the same issues were discussed in a much more respectful way. The difference was that in the intervening year many had come together to pray and dialogue about these issues.

Dialogue is not always a good idea: dialogue with the Nazis, for example, didn't work. We need to decide in advance if the other participants will be open to real dialogue or will use it as a pretence to continue murder.

Yet there are many times, often when communication seems impossible, when in fact real progress can be made through dialogue by asking that very simple, but central question: What is it that really matters to YOU?