

Towards a Shared Future for Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey:

Some personal reflections

Participants from various faith backgrounds came together to participate in leadership training course of the CAN Faith Communities Programme. The course provided a safe space to examine sectarianism and the role Christian based groups have in dealing with this very important issue. They were provided with the opportunity to look in greater detail at the issues which contribute to sectarianism in Northern Ireland the effect this has on various communities across the social spectrum. Participants were also challenged to look inwardly at their own prejudices and stereotypical views and how we must all work together to change society for the better.

They recognised that each community's traditions and values should be celebrated but that this should also be complemented by a mutual respect, tolerance and above all understanding of others. For participants this programme signalled the beginning and not the end of a journey of discovery and one which participants were pleased they had embarked upon.

The following personal reflections arose out of that journey and are not meant to present any definitive theological view on sharing, but are offered, in humility, as the basis for further consideration.

Five Personal Reflections

1. Bob

The land is a gift from God. We are trying to create a place where we can work, play and worship together:

- In peace
- Respecting differences
- Looking forward in joy

2. Roisin

This programme has allowed me a safe space to examine sectarianism, to be with people from different Christian groups and to hear their stories. It has helped me recognise my own prejudices and importantly thrown some light on why those from a different faith tradition may have negative feelings and assumptions towards me. It has given me a confidence to be at ease and reclaim my roots, traditions and beliefs which I have often set aside in many situations to enable me to feel as if I am 'fitting in' or being accepted.

I recognise why others enjoy their beliefs and traditions, but I can see the danger in believing that your way is the only and best way. A personal journey has begun.

3. Roy

I really enjoyed the safe space to meet as a mixed Protestant / Catholic group in which we could share our life journey experiences and different faith perspectives. I also recognised my Protestant theological prejudices and understand better the diversity of Catholic views, faith and culture that enables me to better relate to and accept them within my Christian family. Thanks to all for an enjoyable journey.

4. Martin

I learnt that:

- The strength of sectarianism lies in its ability to convince us that it does not exist, apart from in its most extreme forms, and certainly not within ourselves or the institutions to which we belong.
- Sectarianism, by definition has religion as a key component, and as such must be addressed by people of faith and faith communities.
- The refusal or inability of faith communities to cross boundaries, allows sectarianism to survive and thrive.
- Bad theology gives rise to and supports sectarianism.

5. Leslie

I found there was 'space for me at the table' in terms of this kind of forum discussion when I felt there may not be. I enjoyed the opportunity to think – in community – about these things that have and continue to, fuel the fires of sectarianism especially here in Northern Ireland.

I feel challenged to continue to wrestle, pray and work out what it means to be a 'peacemaker' in keeping with the call of Christ upon his followers.

Reading and thinking around this whole issue, I am challenged by the following words...

'If you do not look, act, worship or believe as I do, but your heart beats in love for Jesus then regardless of our differences, we can and must fellowship with one another'.

