

What do we mean by Reconciliation?

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You will have guessed from my accent that I am not from the Mid-lands. Nor Northern Ireland. Some might wonder if I am Canadian. I am not. I am American. Which may help to explain the toxic blend of arrogance and ignorance that would lead me to talk about Reconciliation in this place. Here to Newcastle I bring coal.

Not that I have nothing to offer on the topic. I am the Leader of Corrymeela, after all: the 'oldest peace and reconciliation organisation' in Ireland. Before the Troubles, during the conflict, and in the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, Corrymeela has been advancing the essential Christian principles of peace and reconciliation wherever we live, work and worship. We talk about reconciliation a lot. We talk with others who talk about reconciliation a lot.

However, I have noticed that we at Corrymeela talk about reconciliation so much and have for so long that we rarely explain what it is we mean *by* reconciliation. We assume everyone else knows what we're talking about. And some do. But the people who don't are often too polite and peace-loving to ask. Again, this is when it's helpful to have an American, whose ignorance is obvious and whose arrogance to talk about what he doesn't understand forces us to reset the conversation and review some basics.

A Working Definition

To be fair, I wasn't the one who forced my most recent reset. It was the Tory government. With the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act of 2023, Parliament brought the concept of Reconciliation back into the public eye.

If you don't know, the Legacy and Reconciliation Act is about

establishing an Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, limiting criminal investigations, legal proceedings, inquests and police complaints, extending the prisoner release scheme in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, and providing for experiences to be recorded and preserved and for events to be studied and memorialised, and to provide for the validity of interim custody orders.¹

The Act has already done a great deal in Northern Ireland in bringing divided parties together because everybody hates it. In limiting criminal investigations, it smells strongly of

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/41/enacted>

the British government wanting to sweep things under the rug before some very dirty laundry gets discovered.

The Act refers to 'reconciliation' 57 times – 55 of those times in reference to its own name. Twice it uses 'reconciliation' in an actual sentence and there says that the act would lead the government to promote 'reconciliation' and work with 'relevant organisations' to encourage 'reconciliation'. It never says what reconciliation means.

Ha ha, he said: silly Parliament. Silly politicians.

But soon after the bill was passed, I attended a meeting with other peacemakers in Belfast and we talked about how silly it was that Parliament would enact a bill about reconciliation without explaining what reconciliation was. And then, someone put up on a slide a 'working definition of reconciliation' and ALL of us stared at it as if we had seen an oasis in the desert. We slipped out our phones and took pictures of it. We hadn't seen a definition of reconciliation for so long we had forgotten what one looked like.

Now some of you may be well familiar with Graine Kelly and Brandon Hambur's definition, which is now 20 years old – and which grew out of the Northern Ireland experience. But I'll assume most of you haven't, so I'll read it to you:

'Reconciliation is a necessary process following conflict. It is a voluntary act and cannot be imposed. It involves five interwoven and related 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.'*²

(Let me repeat that.)

Reconciliation in this sense is the movement from passive peace (the cessation of violence) to active peace: living well together, living for each other's mutual benefit.

Voluntary, significant change

A few things that stick out for me from Hambur and Kelly: necessary but **voluntary**. Here is the key reason why reconciliation is so hard and slow and fragile. It has to arise from the willing rather than be imposed as a solution from above. Reconciliation may be borderline unnatural because it means we have to think as a species rather than as individuals or tribes. As unnatural as it may be, a working definition of reconciliation that speaks of it being necessary *and* voluntary gets my head nodding vigorously. I know it's right.

Because one thing I can tell you from our experience at Corrymeela is that imposing solutions upon a conflict (no matter how good they may be) will only push people away. The

²https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/files/76832671/Paper_A_Working_Definition_of_Reconciliation_HAMBER_KELLY_2004.pdf

reason the Reconciliation and Legacy Bill failed so spectacularly is that it was imposed from above. The reason 'building positive relationships' is so important is that focusing on relationships may be the only way to develop a shared vision of an interdependent and fair society. That is to say that only way to bring about cultural and attitudinal change – and therefore social/economic/political change – is to allow us to be changed by relationships with people whose experiences and needs are very different to our own.

And although this definition does place a premium on building positive relationships (the sort of thing that will keep Corrymeela in business for decades to come) I *think* it also goes a considerable way in avoiding the stupid and outdated concept of reconciliation that would have us return to an earlier pre-conflict setting; to 'restore' or 're-friend' divided peoples without first addressing the brokenness that caused the harm in the first place.

Reconciliation can't be about getting us back to a time when people like me didn't feel guilty. Calling for significant cultural and attitudinal change as well as substantial social, economic and political change points us in the direction of liberation theology and womanist theologians like Chanequa Walker-Barnes who argue that racial reconciliation in particular is not about 'friendship or proximity or building bridges' so much as it is about justice and the dismantling of white patriarchy.³

Or in the context of Northern Ireland: dismantling the systems of inequality, power, and access left over from at Protestant empire. Or in the context of Gaza, it doesn't mean going back to Oct 6th. Conditions on October 6th were grotesque and unsustainable. It means moving forward toward a fair and interdependent future. It is coming to accept that neither Palestine nor Israel can be safe or free unless both Palestine and Israel are safe and free.

Whose Forgiveness?

The thing that strikes me most about this working definition of Reconciliation in reading it today in this context is that it does not name **forgiveness** as a necessary component to reconciliation (an omission that may raise eyebrows particularly in Coventry where the concept of reconciliation is tied up so clearly in the story of the cathedral, the vision of the provosts and the language of the cross and nails). Hambur and Kelly suggest that acknowledging and dealing with the past will include something like forgiveness – but forgiveness is not mentioned.

This may be a good place to point out that in naming this talk of mine 'What do we mean by reconciliation?' the key word is '**we**'. What do WE mean by reconciliation? It seems pretty obvious that if reconciliation is desired, it would be good for those we imagine to be part of that project can agree on what it is being sought.

I've told you about a recent meeting with other peacemakers in Northern Ireland when we were reminded of this working definition of reconciliation. Perhaps even more fascinating was a conference where I was asked to speak at on the subject of 'therapeutic forgiveness'

³ <https://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/youre-doing-racial-reconciliation-wrong/>

in contrast to 'Biblical forgiveness.' The audience was mostly victims and survivors of the conflict in Northern Ireland – people too often forgotten as well-intentioned programmes and government policies are put into place. And again: the given here is my own ignorance. I am not a victim or a survivor of the Northern Ireland conflict, and therefore not an expert in what the needs of the individual will be for genuine healing to take place, for freedom from hurt to be found. Moreover: I had never heard of 'therapeutic forgiveness' with or without 'Biblical forgiveness'. And so I had to do some research pretty darn quick. Hello Google.

Now. My understanding of therapeutic forgiveness is that it is a technique for victims to find freedom from their hurt and their anger through an active practice of compassion. As popularised by Robert Enright and others, forgiveness therapy acknowledges the pain that is there; it dignifies it by taking it seriously; but it seeks a way for the victim to move on beyond that pain and anger -- by having them view their perpetrator through a lens of curiosity, respect, generosity, and love.⁴ By trying to figure out how and why someone would do what they did – even if we will never be able to agree with or condone the action, even if reconciliation is not possible or even desirable – the victim becomes empowered enough through compassionate understanding to move on, disentangling themselves from a trap of demand they would never otherwise escape. Instead of 'If you do this and only if you do that...then I might forgive you' it is 'help me understand why this happened' so that we might separate ourselves far enough to see the other not as an enemy but as a someone else who is caught up in our human brokenness and in our common need for love.

I find that challenging assignment to give to a victim. But I also find forgiveness therapy to intersect a great deal with what I see as a biblical based forgiveness, with a God we find in scripture who is all about compassion and relationship and restorative justice, and not about cold corrective punishment.

It became clear that those who had invited me to speak about the contrast between therapeutic forgiveness and Biblical forgiveness had a different sense of what the Bible was saying. Biblical forgiveness in their mind was the idea that God promises to forgive you IF you really repent -- and if you really repent then maybe, maybe your victim can find the grace to forgive you, too. 'Therapeutic' had a pejorative connotation here, the sense was that it was a little light and new-agey and from California and was about making people feel better without actually forcing wrong doers to be confronted and corrected as a prerequisite for forgiveness.

As to whether there can be forgiveness without remorse/repentance, whether a victim could move on without their perpetrator acknowledging their guilt, I am not in a position to say. But I am struck by a few biblical passages in particular.

The first is the parable of the Lost Son, which echoes quite closely the reunion of Esau and Jacob years after Jacob tricked Esau out of his birth right. The son is repentant. He knows he has done wrong. He wants a new relationship with his father. He comes home humbled and seeking forgiveness, willing to take a demoted place within the household. He practices his

⁴ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1chrw1w>

speech of penitence on the way home – yet before he can get a word out of his mouth, his father has already run down the lane to greet him, to embrace him. As the son is rightly full of remorse, the father is filled with compassion – as any loving father would be. No need to confess before forgiveness takes place.

A lovely story. But key for me in understanding the question of remorse and repentance, of compassion and healing – and whether one must come before the other -- is Jesus in the garden and Jesus on the cross. ‘Forgive them, Father; they know not what they do.’ We love because God loved us first. We were saved not because we came to God with penitence first, but because God had compassion on us while we were still sinners.

And for that reason, when I talk about reconciliation, I wonder if a way of freedom for victims and survivors is along this path of curiosity and compassion (tell me why, help me understand how you could have done this), rather than through demand and conditional contract (if you do this, then I might do that). I see in Jesus a God who does not wait for us to do something to receive forgiveness, a God whose love has come running out to us in our brokenness with the power to transform and heal through kindness, respect, generosity, and compassion.

To Build a Kinder, More Christ-like World

But that’s me. (And I think Coventry.) (And I think the Multi-faith chaplaincy.) But what do ‘we’ mean by ‘reconciliation’ if our ‘we’ includes those who may not share these concepts of forgiveness, are not going to go to the parable of the Lost Son or other religious sources as a proof text, who stress that reconciliation is about an overdue change to our systems rather than the repair of personal relationships, justice rather than friendship.

Again: I think it is striking that the working of definition of reconciliation that Hambur and Kelly offer is void of any forgiveness language; there is no sacred text underpinning the argument.

And yet, in this secular space there is room for us. And others. ‘Acknowledging and addressing the past’ (as the definition puts it) leaves space for all the forgiveness we can manage. ‘Significant cultural and attitudinal change’ provides room for a whole lot of repentance. And the development of ‘a shared vision of an interdependent and fair future’ could be translated into Provost Dick Howard’s words: a kinder, more Christ-like world.⁵

As a Christian community, Corrymeela sees peace not as a product to deliver or a status to achieve but as a practice to carry out together. We seek not only a passive peace (the absence of violence), but an active peace: true reconciliation where those who have been divided can commit to each other’s wellbeing. That’s what we mean by reconciliation: a life together where even those coming out of harmful conflict can commit to each other’s wellbeing.

⁵ <https://www.coventrycathedral.org.uk/uploads/media/Provost-Howard-1940-12-25.mp3>

This reconciliation is an essential but voluntary aspect of any post-conflict society. It cannot be imposed, either by governmental acts, by internationally mandated (and necessary) ceasefires or by forced conversion. It's hard, slow and fragile. But in this new voluntary way of being, we live not in rivalry with each other or with the threat of violence, but with respect for our differences – allowing conflicts to lead us to greater understanding rather than to harm. Together we can address the pain of the past and we can develop a shared vision for a fair and interdependent future.

In this pursuit of reconciliation, Corrymeela relies on something greater than any of us. Our members do not need to identify as Christian to belong, but as a community we continue to follow the way of Jesus, convinced that the forgiveness and self-giving love he embodied are necessary for true peace, real freedom, and a new life together.

But that's us. The question is who are 'we' in this pursuit of reconciliation and how we can do it together.

Thank you.