

Consultation on inter church relations and relationships between churches and the community in Bangor



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funded by



Community Bridges Programme



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1. Introduction

Research in relation to inter church and relations between churches and the community in Bangor was commissioned by The Link (Newtownards) in conjunction with Churches Community Work Alliance (CCWA) and North Down YMCA with funding secured from the International Fund for Ireland's Community Bridges Programme.

**Research
commissioned by
The Link,
North Down YMCA
and Churches
Community Work
Alliance**

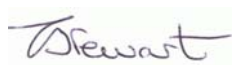
A series of meetings with clergy in Bangor led to the decision to start the process of exploring and auditing the relationship between the churches and the community in the Bangor area.

The purpose of commissioning the research was to pose the question:

“Are there barriers and divisions between the churches, and between the churches and the local community in the Bangor area? If so, what are the causes and consequences of these barriers and divisions for community engagement and peace-building in the Bangor area?”

The research was conducted during Spring / Summer 2010 with guidance for the research being provided through a steering group of local church and community leaders.

This position paper provides a summary of research findings, to date, in relation to inter church and church community relations and invites response to the emerging issues that the research is raising.



Tommy Stewart
Research Team Leader
Summer 2010

**Research funded by
the International
Fund for Ireland's
Community Bridges
Programme**

2. Context

During the course of its work The Link has increasingly identified the relationship between the local churches and between churches and the local community, as being an important issue in relation to barriers to community development and peace-building.

In The Link's experience, the apparent limited contact and understanding between these groups appears to have had a negative impact on:

- Intra community relationships between the Protestant community.
- Inter community relationships across the political/religious divide.

Research in Newtownards commissioned by The Link suggested that the divisions between the Protestant churches and the sense of alienation of socially deprived communities from the churches seemed to contribute to a lack of cohesion and weak community infrastructure within the Protestant community. This contributed to reduced levels of networking, low community confidence and a lack of trust, all of which are required for engagement in community development and cross community activity.

The Link was also interested in how perceived barriers to cross community contact between the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic parishes also impacted on wider community relations, particularly in an area where the Catholic population is very much in a minority.

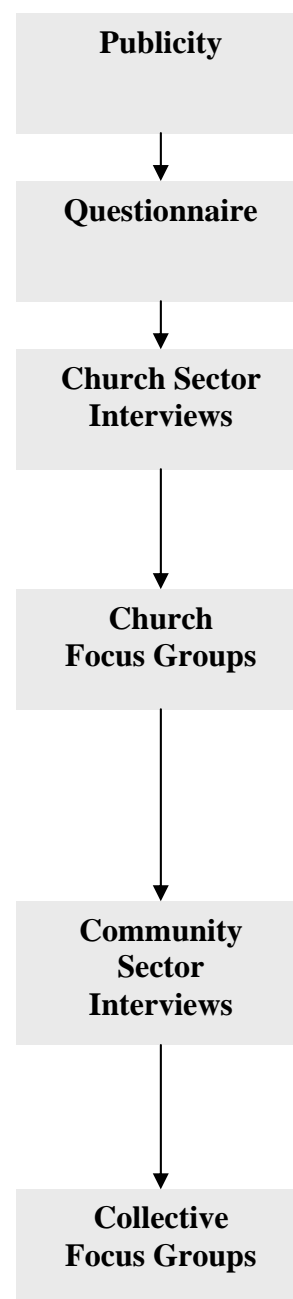
In 2009 The Link was approached by the Churches Community Work Alliance in regard to conducting similar research in Bangor with a view to considering church / community relationships, highlighting the main issues and providing a foundation for developing a strategy to reduce barriers and contribute to peace-building.

3. Methodology

Our approach to the research has been to engage locally identified church / community representatives as members of the research steering group (Steering Group Membership – Appendix A), with the steering group meeting monthly during the research period.

Following discussions with the research group we:

- a) Publicised the research through local churches and community organisations;
- b) sent a research questionnaire to all clergy (Appendix B) in Bangor;
- c) conducted one to one and telephone interviews with identified clergy, staff and laity from churches in Bangor;
- d) held focus group meetings with representatives of the church community to allow reflection on the blockages and challenges to inter church relations and to churches contributing to community development;
- e) conducted meetings with community and voluntary sector representatives to understand their perception of the role of church in community;
- f) facilitated collective workshops where church and community representatives came together to consider how church can contribute to wider community development and peace – building.



- (i) 81.8% believe that relations between church leaders in Bangor are good, with the remaining 18.2% believing they are very good;

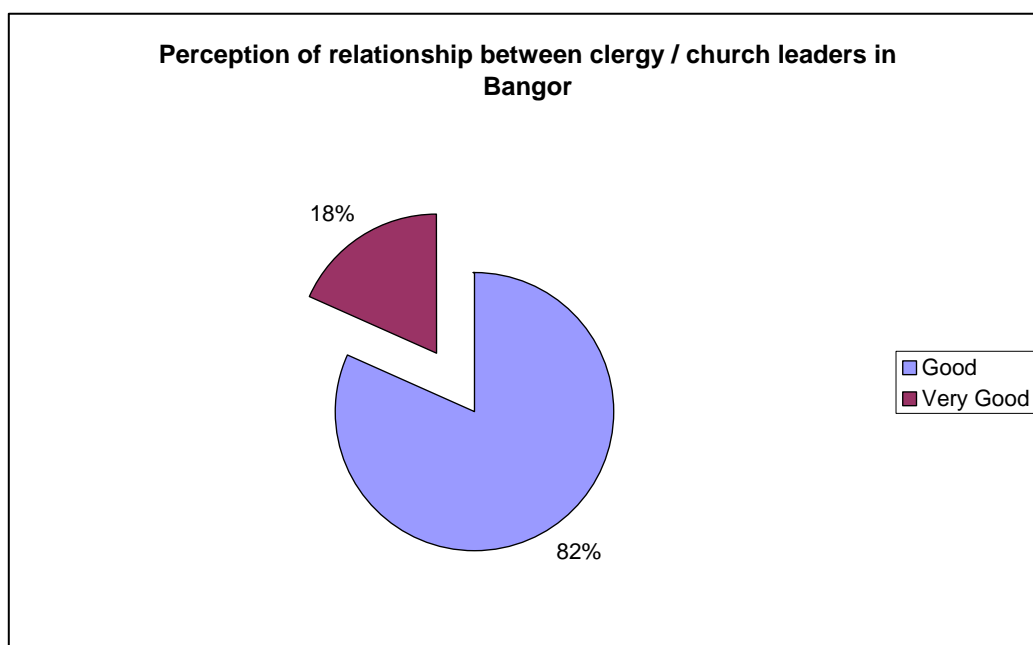


Chart 4b

- (ii) 18.2% believe that relations between church congregations in Bangor are very good, 63.6% believe they are good and 18.2% believe they are neither good nor poor;

“Relationships appear to be good among the churches. Although there is always room for improvement”

Local Minister

- (iii) 77.2% meet with other churches from their own denomination in Bangor at least once a month;
- (iv) 27.3% of Protestant churches meet with other Protestant churches in Bangor (other than their own denomination) at least once a month;
- (v) 10.0% of Protestant churches meet with other Roman Catholic churches in Bangor at least once a month;
- (vi) 20.0% of Protestant churches responding have no contact with Roman Catholic churches in Bangor.

	No Contact	Once or twice a year	Once a quarter	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Every Week
Protestant Congregation – own denomination	0.0%	11.1%	11.1%	55.6%	11.1%	11.1%
Protestant churches – other denominations	0.0%	18.2%	54.5%	27.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Roman Catholic churches	20.0%	50.0%	20.0%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Chart 4c

Responses from clergy would show that the main opportunities for clergy and churches to come together are through:

- Joint services;
- Special services (Christmas and Easter);
- Working together for Christian unity;
- Civic services (organised by Council);
- Rotating evening services in summer;
- As part of denominational groupings;
- Combined Alpha events;
- Bangor Clergy Fraternal;
- Ballyholme Clergy Group
- Working as part of Safezone

“There is a greater sense of working together within our denomination and we have good relations with the other main churches in the area.”

Presbyterian Minister

The Bangor Clergy Fraternal has met for a number of years. Membership of the group now includes clergy from the four main denominations plus a number of other churches. Meetings are held quarterly for friendship and information sharing.

“The Clergy Fraternal provides a useful opportunity to meet with colleagues from differing traditions to share with each other.”

Fraternal Member

For those who participate in, or are invited to participate in, the group it appears to be a useful vehicle for developing good relations between clergy and it creates opportunity for clergy to discuss and develop common views on many of the things which are of public concern.

However some respondents did not regard the Bangor Clergy Fraternal as being fully inclusive. Other respondents did not see the group as being of interest to them or as something they would not participate in due to the inclusion of Roman Catholic clergy.

Ongoing contact between churches does seem to occur in some parts of Bangor either as a means to maximise impact, where resources are limited, or due to recognition of similarity in mission and purpose. Joint initiatives also take place between some churches during holiday periods. Such contact may be within or cross denominations with a few examples existing of churches participating in each others services even when theologically they appear to be distinctly different.

Less frequent contact occurs, primarily between the four main denominations, in regard to joint services at Easter and Christmas.

4.2 Barriers / Divisions

Analysis of interviews with clergy and laity would indicate that there are six key issues that cause barriers to inter church relations:

(i) Time Availability

Most churches in Bangor have one or at most two staff members who tend to be overstretched within the ministry and life of their own congregations / parishes.

This often means that although they might desire to engage in inter church activity it is not a priority for them. The result is that even when there are events or activities of an inter-church nature they do have time to attend or participate. This then means that they do not have the opportunity to develop established relationships with other clergy or between their church and others.

“Many of us "suffer" from being large under-staffed congregations which means having to look after our own 'patch first'.”

Local Minister

This in itself raises a barrier in that a minister can appear to not be interested in inter church relations and can then become disconnected from plans for future relationship building.

(ii) Theology Position

Inter church activity tends to occur:

- a. within denominations e.g. between the Church of Ireland parishes and between the Presbyterian churches in the area;
- b. between denominations with similar doctrinal positions e.g. some ministers meet as part of the Bangor Clergy Fraternal and some as part of the Ballyholme Clergy Group;
- c. among youth workers within the reformed church sector;
- d. among a small number of lay people e.g. Ploughshare
- e. in one or two specialist projects e.g. Safezone

“All things considered, relationships are good. It is said that the more 'literalist' Protestant churches don't want to engage.”

Local Minister

However inter church contact involves a minority of church leaders and a much smaller minority of church members. Theological differences appear to restrict contact among many of the churches including:

- between reformed church ministers and the leadership of some other Protestant expressions of faith e.g. we saw no evidence of the Gospel Halls or the Free Presbyterian church engaging with other reformed churches;
- between some of the ministers of reformed churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

“We show respect to others but find it difficult to work together as the fundamentals of our faith are quite different.”

Local Minister

Within the Bangor area there are as many as 17 churches that are not part of the so called 'main denominations'¹. Few of these are engaging with each other and most of them do not have direct inter - church connections with the 23 mainstream denominational churches in the area of study.

(iii) Mainstream / Emerging

Existing inter-church groups tend to be at either clergy or laity level (with no forum appearing to connect clergy and laity) they also tend to involve primarily the mainstream and longer established churches.

¹ The largest four denominations in Northern Ireland are regarded as Church of Ireland, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist

Small churches and non denominational churches do not seem to be as well connected to inter church relations. One member of the clergy, from a smaller church, suggested that he and his church did not feel accepted by the mainstream church family with there being a sense of 'being equal but not equal'.

“We are not accepted by the mainstream church family.”

'Non mainstream'
church leader

(iv) Engagement of Laity

The evidence presented would suggest that whilst there is a degree of inter clergy/staff contact there is very limited interaction between laity (other than for joint services or one off training initiatives). Therefore a barrier to inter church relations is the absence of opportunities for laity to meet, form friendships, develop trust and allay fears and misconceptions of each other.

The only exception to this would appear to be the Ploughshare Group which provides opportunity for people from varying Christian traditions to meet together for fellowship, prayer and bible study.

(v) Lack of Inclusive Forum

There is no inclusive forum that creates opportunities for church leaders and / or laity to engage with each other from across the width of the diverse church family in Bangor. This is barrier to the development of inter church relations and is something that may be difficult to achieve given the barriers identified above. The diverse church sector in Bangor appears fragmented.

(vi) Communication

During our research it was often stated that a barrier to inter church understanding and relationships was the lack of communication. This often means that churches are unaware of each others mission plans, activities, special services etc. As a result leaders who might support activities in another church, and might encourage their members to do so likewise do not have the opportunity to do so. Additionally, lack of information can mean that there are 'diary clashes' can lead to confusion and duplication.

4.3 Consequences of barriers to inter church activity

Inter church activity is restricted and the results of this impacts upon all residents of Bangor. We would conclude this section by noting a

number of consequences that follow on from their being such barriers to inter church activity:

- Inter clergy contact is limited and not inclusive of all denominations and those churches of no denomination;
- The cross denominational clergy networks are not inclusive of all expressions of Christian faith;
- Smaller /non – denominational churches may not be able to see how they 'fit' within existing networks;
- Some churches may not be invited to participate in inter church activity;
- No one network currently has the ability to bring together all church / faith groups in Bangor (whether that be clergy, laity or both);
- Inter church activity is largely limited to special services and joint outreach;
- Most inter church activity tends to be seasonal;
- Quite a number of reformed churches will not engage in inter church relations if it involves engagement with Roman Catholics;
- Limited resources mean that churches often focus their own mission to their regular and non attending members;
- Opportunities for laity from differing Christian perspectives to meet, develop friendships and engage in dialogue on matters of faith and social action are limited;
- Churches tend to lack understanding of each others ethos, mission and programmes;
- There is little opportunity to develop inter church projects that can have a social impact.

Inter church activity appears restricted and the results of this impacts upon many of the residents of Bangor.

5. Relations between Churches and the Community

5.1 Churches understanding of the term community

The understanding of the term 'community' varies among churches. Some definitions of the term provided by Bangor clergy include:

- a. Immediate area around church;
- b. A vibrant church community open to others;
- c. Everyone in the Bangor area and beyond - wherever we link with people;
- d. The people of Bangor;
- e. Congregation with a concern for surrounding area;
- f. Our local congregational area and interaction with civic society.

Churches do not have a common or shared understanding of "community"

All churches participating in the survey believe they are involved in community engagement. In terms of engagement with community, clergy provided a range of ways by which they feel their church engages with community. These included specific projects, liaison with agencies and indirect engagement by members of the church with wider society e.g.

- Work in Local Schools;
- Youth outreach activities;
- Inter-church services;
- Civic Services;
- Safezone;
- Parent & Toddler group;
- Over 50's club;
- Christmas Family Appeal;
- Food parcels;
- Provide facilities for FASA² ;
- Praying on the streets once per week;
- Alpha Course;
- Hall is used by village groups;
- Uniformed organisations;
- Lunch Clubs;
- Abba Trust;
- St. Vincent de Paul.

² Forum For Action On Substance Abuse & Suicide Awareness

The survey of church leaders showed that 72.7% of respondents believe that their church works in partnership with other churches to make a positive impact on community.

Clergy believe there are a number of reasons for partnership working between churches. Reasons given included:

- It is standard Christian practice;
- Nature of Bangor area - need to have strong working & workable relations;
- It is good for Christian witness;
- We work where mutually helpful i.e. school projects and where we can demonstrate our unity on essential doctrines;

Clergy believe they and their churches are making a positive contribution to the community

Most of the clergy who responded were aware of individuals in their congregation who, although not church organised, work in partnership or co-operation with individuals from other local churches to make a positive impact on community. This included engagement via:

- Womens World Day of Prayer;
- Salvation Army Home League;
- Ploughshare;
- St. Vincent De Paul;
- Safezone;
- Choral Society;
- Sporting activities.

“The gospel is for all - anything we can do to foster this inclusiveness has got to be part of our wider ministry.”

Local Minister

5.2 Relation and engagement with wider community

To ensure that clergy were responding to the research from a common understanding of the term community the researchers suggested that:

Definition of community

“A community may be a geographic location; in this case the immediate area around your church or organisation or Bangor town as a whole. Community may also be defined as a group of people with similar interests or a group who share a distinctive identity; in this case community may mean your congregation or parish, or may represent groups of people outside of the church or organisation such as a resident’s group, sporting club or community forum etc.”

We also defined the term community engagement as meaning:

Definition of community engagement

“A planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest, or affiliation or identify to address issues affecting their well-being.”

Based on this understanding clergy were then asked to reflect on relations between their church and the local community.

Chart 5a shows that 27.3% felt relations between their congregation and community were very good and 45.5% felt relations were good.

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good or Bad	Poor	Very Poor
Relations between the local community and your congregation	37.3%	45.5%	18.2%	9.1%	0.0%

Chart 5a

Chart 5b shows that 18.2% of churches had monthly contact with community associations / networks and 27.3% had weekly contact. However 27.3% had no contact with community associations or networks at all.

“I feel it is better if churches in a locality work together rather than generally - if genuine interest is to be maintained.”

Local Minister

In terms of contact with voluntary organisations 9.1% of churches had monthly contact with such groups and 27.3% had weekly contact. 9.1% had no contact with the voluntary sector.

	No Contact	Once or twice a year	Once a quarter	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Every Week
Community associations/networks	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%	18.2%	0.0%	27.3%
Voluntary Groups	9.1%	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%	9.1%	27.3%

Chart 5b - Contact church has with others

Respondents identified links that their church had with a range of organisations including:

- Age Concern
- Fold Housing
- Women's Aid
- Simon Community
- YMCA
- Positive Futures
- Croft
- Over 50's Forum
- Harbour Ward Residents Group
- FASA
- Safezone
- Groomsport Evergreens
- Groomsport Village Association
- Women's Aid
- Simon Community
- Council Good Relations Officer

None of the churches who responded had established any formal partnerships with the community / voluntary sector.

Some positive examples of church members developing responses to community need do exist e.g. a number of churches have provided English language classes for migrant workers. One such example is 1st Bangor Presbyterian who has developed a wider programme of practical support for migrant workers from East European countries (see case study in Appendix D). Much work of this nature tends to be volunteer led and supported through special appeals / fundraising.

In some of the residential areas of Bangor there are good examples of churches working in conjunction with the local community. A specific example is in Kilcooley where the Pastor of Shiloh Fellowship is also the Community Development Worker who leads the work of Kilcooley Community Forum.

5.3 Community View

The terms of reference for the research did not specify the inclusion of a community perspective however as the research continued we felt it important to understand how the wider community perceive the role of the church in community. In doing so we sought views from:

- a faith based community programme
- a voluntary programme addressing community needs
- a community network organisation
- a local community association;

In our discussion with community representatives a number of suggestions were made in terms of how the church sector could engage with the community sector including:

- a. Encouraging their members to get involved in local community and voluntary groups;
- b. Encouraging church members to volunteer in ongoing activities or one off events
- c. Coming to AGM's and considering getting involved in local committees;
- d. Connecting with inter agency partnerships and becoming partners in positive change;
- e. Offering resource support in terms of use of buildings and contributing to costs of local community activity;
- f. Being physically visible to the community throughout the week not just on a Sunday;
- g. Showing leadership in the community.

“We rarely ever see the church engage with us in our work in communities.”

Community group rep

The overall view of the community sector is that churches are not currently proactively engaged in community development. With the exception of a few churches (Shiloh Fellowship being cited as one example) the community sector does not believe that the churches in

Bangor have a real interest in the work of the community sector. Most would welcome the participation of church in community development, provided there are no hidden agendas, but do not have high hopes of their involvement. Many have lost their faith in church having any impact for good.

Many have lost their faith in church having any impact for good.

Some community sector representatives feel that churches have been absent from community engagement and social action for many years and as such if they wish to get involved in the community sector they need to gain the respect and trust of the existing groups who have been working hard to develop the local area.

5.4 Barriers to churches engaging with community

Participants in the research noted a number of potential barriers to churches engaging in community work:

- a) **Time:** some churches would like to be more involved in their local community but clergy and members do seem to have the time available;
- b) **Resources:** most churches have very restricted finances and would find it difficult to commit their resources to community engagement;
- c) **Capacity:** many church leaders and members would feel that they did not have the right skills set to start engaging further in community;
- d) **Knowledge:** most church leadership teams have little or no knowledge of the existing community networks or inter agency partnerships operating in Bangor;
- e) **Ethics:** concern for some that if they engage with community projects that may be engaging with those who have had / still have links with paramilitarism;
- f) **Mission:** churches are primarily focused on the mission within their own congregations. Often the mission of the church is first to the regular attendees and then to the many families who are connected to the church but do not attend on a regular basis;
- g) **Theology:** for some churches they would need to consider each community engagement opportunity as it arises and ensure that it was not ecumenical in its nature;
- h) **Perception:** many church members are involved in wider community life. However until now there has been a tendency to not see the connection between what they do in their community life and their church life;

“My observation is that as much of a ministers & church leaders time & energy is expended in trying to fulfil the existing church involvement / organisations etc that there is very little time/energy left for anything else”

Local Minister

- i) **Relevance:** churches may not engage in community projects as they would not be sure if it were their role. They would not wish to engage in community projects that were the remit of another group or indeed the remit of the statutory sector;
- j) **Fear:** many within the church community may have concerns or fears about churches engaging in wider social / community programmes. These fears may be driven by a range of factors but collectively they serve to reduce the impact the church is having on community;
- k) **Judgementalism:** there is a degree to which some parts of the church family can be judgemental towards those who live in estates that need their love and compassion. People in some of these area may not fit the 'church mould.'
- l) **Apathy:** consultees suggested there can be apathy in the churches in Bangor in terms of local community need. While some churches were seen to engage in small scale community projects some consultees felt that churches found it easier to support the needy overseas rather than the needy at home.

5.5 Consequences of barriers to churches engaging in community

The level of involvement of church in community development has been low and as a result community sector confidence in the church is low.

From our research it is clear to us that the level of involvement of church in community development has been low and as a result community sector confidence in the church is low. The consequences of this are numerous:

- Mission of the church in relation to community is unclear;
- There is a lack of clear vision from church leaders for community engagement;
- Much potentially good community work remains undone and the community impact is limited;
- There is no clear or agreed understanding among churches of the role they should play in the community;
- Churches are less likely to invest in community development;
- The church is unable to speak the language of the community and voluntary sector;

- Church interventions into community work can be difficult to sustain as the church is largely unconnected from the mainstream community sector;
- Community can see church as irrelevant;
- Role and mission of church is often not understood by its neighbours;
- Churches can appear to have an insulated mindset;
- The community can think that the church doesn't realise there is an issue (or accept that there is an issue);
- Church appears to be apathetic;
- Church members can appear 'aloof' to local residents and the division between church and community widens;
- 'Them and us' culture can develop;
- Community leadership vacuums can be filled by people church leaders may not feel comfortable partnering with;
- There is often no role modelling of good relations by local churches;
- Churches no longer have strong moral influence and community connection should a situation of conflict arise;
- Information about community activities, programmes and opportunities often does not reach the church community;
- Community are scared that the church will only wish to engage so they can 'preach at them'.

Community are scared that the church will only wish to engage so they can 'preach at them'.

6. Peace Building

6.1 Churches and Peace Building

Why is the role of church so important to peace building?

“Christian churches together make up a majority population in Northern Ireland. Most people (85%) have Christian religious affiliation, over 90% of who affiliate to one of the four largest churches. With around half of the population attending church at least once a week and a further third attending less often, Northern Ireland remains a place where churches play an important role in the lives of individuals and society.”³

Whilst the role and influence of the church may have arguably declined in recent years, in communities such as Bangor, church is still central to the lives of many people. As a result the actions taken, or not taken, by the church can have a significant influence on the people who live in the area.

The actions taken, or not taken, by the church can have a significant influence.

In 2001, the year of the last Census, the religious profile (by %) of each of the wards included in the area of this study was:

	Percentage of persons stating current religion as:						Percentage of persons with no religion or religion not stated
	Catholic ¹	Presbyterian	Church of Ireland	Methodist	Other Christian	Other religions and philosophies	
North Down	10.00	30.52	19.16	6.19	8.60	0.41	25.12
Ballycrochan	6.70	31.50	18.52	7.79	9.42	0.14	25.93
Ballyholme	7.74	26.63	22.94	7.08	7.78	0.47	27.37
Ballymagee	7.04	34.55	17.84	7.56	9.61	0.38	23.02
Bangor Castle	6.37	32.98	19.94	7.05	8.73	0.61	24.32
Bloomfield	5.18	31.66	20.64	8.43	7.94	0.35	25.79
Broadway	7.09	34.50	20.21	8.23	7.66	0.30	22.01
Bryansburn	24.96	25.58	16.58	4.79	6.60	0.15	21.34
Churchill	6.29	36.74	19.90	7.25	9.95	0.28	19.58
Dufferin	4.52	37.34	18.91	6.25	7.11	0.20	25.67
Harbour	12.63	22.05	14.47	4.88	7.86	0.99	37.12
Princetown	13.42	32.03	18.68	8.00	6.32	0.11	21.45
Rathgael	7.95	33.60	16.74	5.77	11.05	0.36	24.53
Silverstream	9.16	31.54	19.88	6.05	6.59	0.18	26.61
Springhill	9.06	37.09	18.08	9.13	8.43	0.17	18.04
Whitehill	10.03	35.69	17.95	3.40	8.43	0.44	24.06

The actual number of residents of each religion was:

³ McAllister 2005

	Persons stating religion as:						Percentage of persons with no religion or religion not stated
	Catholic ¹	Presbyterian	Church of Ireland	Methodist	Other Christian	Other religions and philosophies	
Ballycrochan	337	1585	932	392	474	7	1305
Ballyholme	199	685	590	182	200	12	704
Ballymagee	261	1280	661	280	356	14	853
Bangor Castle	167	865	523	185	229	16	638
Bloomfield	180	1100	717	293	276	12	896
Broadway	213	1036	607	247	230	9	661
Bryansburn	688	705	457	132	182	4	588
Churchill	177	1034	560	204	280	8	551
Dufferin	115	950	481	159	181	5	653
Harbour	357	623	409	138	222	28	1049
Princetown	359	857	500	214	169	3	574
Rathgael	200	845	421	145	278	9	617
Silverstream	253	871	549	167	182	5	735
Springhill	262	1073	523	264	244	5	522
Whitehill	251	893	449	85	211	11	602
Total in Area	4019	14402	8379	3087	3714	148	10948

6.2 Impact on Peace Building

In a recent Northern Ireland wide research⁴ Fran Porter of the Centre for Contemporary Christianity says:

“Conversations are needed within congregations, at various church organisational levels, on a local church network basis, with members of minority populations and interested bodies in civic society. Within the sector there is a need for wider understanding of the civic values and statutory measures that are shaping Northern Ireland and for discussion of Christian frameworks and theological, ecclesiastical and religious traditions that facilitate, inform and help (and those that hinder) Christian civic engagement.”

We believe that unless the church engages in such a way it will not be an effective contributor to peace building.

6.21 Inter Church Relations

There is a limited level of interaction between:

- clergy of the four main denominations;
- reformed clergy from non mainstream churches;
- reformed clergy and Roman Catholic clergy;
- laity at all levels.

⁴ Faith in a Plural Society

In the area of study⁵ the denominational affiliations at the time of the 2001 census were:

Denomination	%
Roman Catholic	9.0%
Presbyterian	32.2%
Church of Ireland	18.7%
Other Christian	8.3%
Methodist	8.3%
None stated	24.5%

Of particular note is that 8.3% of Christians do not affiliate with the four main denominations. These people are most likely to belong to a range of churches including Gospel Halls, Elim, Baptist, Free Presbyterian and independent fellowships.

Another issue of particular note is that a significantly high proportion of people (24.5%) did not state any religious affiliation⁶.

Opportunities for all ministers of the 'gospel' to meet together to help shape a cohesive, shared and integrated future for Bangor do not currently exist.

Whilst there are some opportunities for people to meet with each other in Bangor there is very little evidence of the churches promoting such interaction. This means that many church goers develop circles of friends within their own congregations and most often within either the Protestant or Roman Catholic community.

As a result there are few opportunities for people to develop an understanding of their shared values and beliefs. Consequently perceptions, right or wrong, of the other community are often re-enforced without question.

There are few opportunities for people to develop an understanding of their shared values and beliefs

6.22 Development of Relationships and Trust

Developing relationships within and between communities is central to peace building. In Bangor, we believe that opportunities for relationship development are limited:

⁵ As defined at section 4.1

⁶ This may mean they have no religious affiliation or may have chosen not to declare it on the electoral form

- outside of their particular denomination or grouping, clergy may not know each other or may only have a professional knowledge of each other. Relationships are largely underdeveloped;
- relationships between members of the 40+ churches / church groups in Bangor are not well developed. Perhaps due to resource and time pressures, many churches appear insular;
- relationships between churches and local community groups are limited. Neither churches nor the community sector seem to have been proactive in developing relationship with each other.

Overall there is a sense that the church family in Bangor is disjointed and is disconnected from the wider community sector.

Without relationship it is difficult to build trust and mistrust is re-enforced. One writer has said: "Open communication, trust, and honesty are the most important ingredients in a relationship"⁷

As a result of our analysis of relationships we believe that the levels of trust in Bangor could be much higher. Peace building would be much easier if trust levels were higher. Trust building needs to be supported:

- between churches within the Protestant family;
- between Protestant and Roman Catholics churches;
- between the church sector and the community sector and
- between the community sector and the church sector.

6.23 Modelling Good Relations

The result of the barriers and divisions identified is that there is a negative impact upon peace building as the churches are in a less than effective position to model good relations.

Opportunities for the church sector to model good relations are restricted as:

- Not all clergy are engaged in inter church relations. Many find it difficult to engage in such activity due to the busyness of their own ministry commitments;
- Clear good relations leadership is not being shown and hence good relations is not modelled to church;

⁷ Source unknown

- Due to low capacity and resource restrictions church often does not role model good relations to the wider community;
- Peace building capacity building training is required before many churches would feel able to model peace building;
- Often the church is unaware of the policy or social context in which peace building needs to occur;
- Lack of relationship with the community sector means that the church needs to rebuild its relationships with community before it can be respected as a modeller of good relations.

“Peace building needs to be able to develop without threatening doctrinal positions.”

6.26 Responses Required

A multi faceted approach will be required to aid the church to become a peace builder and to aid the church contribute to community development in the Bangor area.

In the section that follows we consider the way ahead for Inter Church and Church Community relations in the Bangor area. However in concluding this section we would draw reference to a quotation from Debra Green who leads the Redeeming Our Communities project. Redeeming Communities support joint initiatives, across the UK, between churches, community groups and statutory agencies seeking to work together for a better future for their local area

In her book “Redeeming Our Communities” Debra says:

“What’s needed is not just a new reformation that makes the Word of God more accessible, we also need a revival of faith fuelled activism that makes the heart of God more visible.”

7 What Next?

7.1 Background

In terms of considering 'What Next' the research team has, in conjunction with the steering group, considered a number of steps that can help advance inter church and church community relations in the Bangor area. We perceive there is opportunity for the churches to work collectively on issues that are for community, social and civic benefit.

“Society is impoverished when religious perspectives on life are excluded or marginalised.”

Statement on Inter Religious Relations in Britain

The steps are not seen as prescriptive but rather suggestive. However we believe a forum, more inclusive than those already existing, could be developed from a civic leadership perspective that would help develop inter church relations. Without such, the diverse church sector in Bangor appears fragmented.

Resourcing of any projects or activities that may emerge has yet to be secured but we believe that the vision, mission, aims and objectives set out below provide the foundations of a firm approach to advancing inter church and church community relations in the area.

7.2 Suggested Working Title for Next Steps

In order to provide focus to the work that needs to be done we would suggest a working title of:

'Churches and Community Together'

We believe that this provides the width necessary for the work that will include a range of aims and objectives that will position churches and communities to contribute to peace building.

7.3 Vision and Mission

Vision

We see a new Bangor where churches and communities together help shape a positive future for all the peoples of Bangor, regardless of background.

Mission

To enable and empower churches leaders and members to engage with each other and with local communities so they can contribute fully to the development of a cohesive, shared, integrated and peaceful Bangor.

7.4 Values

In taking forward the vision and mission we would propose that the work be founded upon a number of core values:

- Accountability
- Tolerance
- Respect
- Sharing
- Cohesion
- Collaboration
- Partnership working

7.5 Aims

In order to take forward the vision and mission we would envisage future work seeking to:

Aim 1 Improve Understanding:

Aim 2 Develop Skills

Aim 3 Build Trust

Aim 4 Integrated Community Development

7.6 Objectives

We believe that under each of these aims objectives can be developed that can lead to the achievement of a set of outcomes that will help advance inter church and church community relations.

Aim 1	Improve Understanding:
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improve communications between churches (clergy and laity) in Bangor ▪ Create opportunities to develop discussions on inter church relations, theology and difference ▪ Enable the church sector to have a opportunity to collectively respond positively to good relations issues ▪ Improve understanding between the church sector and the community sector through awareness sections and through development of an understanding of the language used by each sector

Aim 2	Develop Skills
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop the skills base of clergy and laity to engage with people who express their Christian faith differently ▪ Develop the skills base of the church sector to engage in community activity and community development ▪ Develop the skills of the community sector to engage with the church sector ▪ Develop the ability of each sector to understand what is being said and meant by the other

Aim 3	Build Trust
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop opportunities for members of all denominations to share their faith journeys ▪ Develop opportunities for members of churches to explore the history and culture of each others traditions, particularly on a cross community basis ▪ Create opportunities for the church and community

	<p>sector to meet and support each other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide opportunities for communities to build teams that are representative of the community, business and church sectors.
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Aim 4	Integrated Community Development
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support churches to develop congregational level approaches that aid the development of a healthy, harmonious and shared future ▪ Enable the church sector to consider how it can engage in existing community programmes ▪ Support the church sector to consider new and creative approaches to community development ▪ Develop opportunities for the church sector and the wider community to see each other as critical to the development of a cohesive, shared, integrated and peaceful Bangor. ▪ Develop collective projects / activities where church and community sector jointly deliver positive outcomes

7.6 Enabling the correct response

In order to enable the response suggested there must be:

- Clear leadership and vision provided by church leaders in both the Protestant and Roman Catholic community;
- Engagement of clergy, laity and the wider community sector;
- Individual and collective sense of responsibility;
- Public acknowledgement of the roles of the church and community sector in the development of Bangor;
- Resources to enable the work to be achieved.

Whilst we can appreciate barriers to community engagement we do believe that it is important that these barriers be addressed. The Inter Faith Network in the UK says that:

“Whilst affirming the value of meeting and listening, it is also our belief that common action, grounded in religious commitments, adds a valuable dimension to relationships. Truly common action requires sensitive consultation at all stages and needs to be planned, undertaken and reviewed together.”

In conclusion we would quote a well respected Australian Church leader⁸ who said:

“YOUR community / village / town / city, desperately needs YOUR church. It needs YOUR church to be strong, healthy, & unified!”

⁸ Brian C Houston

Appendix A Steering Group

Name	Organisation
Major Judith Daniels	Salvation Army
Andy Frame	Church of Ireland Youth Worker
Diane Holt	The Link Family and Community Centre
Ken Humphries	Churches Community Work Alliance
Glenn Jordan	Skainos Project + Ballycrochan Presbyterian
Dr. John Kelly	Fingerprint Learning
Robert Mahaffey	NIHE
Kevin Metcalfe	Church Army
Ivor Mitchell	North Down YMCA
Rev. Francis Rutledge	Church of Ireland
Cllr Anne Wilson	North Down Borough Council
Gareth McCluskey	The Link Family and Community Centre

Appendix B Bangor Churches

Title	First Name	Surname	Denomination	Name of Church
Rev	Nigel	Parker	Church of Ireland	St Comgalls
Rev	Michael	Parker	Church of Ireland	St Galls (Carnalea)
Rev Canon	Ronnie	Nesbitt	Church of Ireland	Bangor Abbey
Rev	Francis	Rutledge	Church of Ireland	The Primacy
Rev	Simon	Doogan	Church of Ireland	St Columbanus/Ballyholme Parish
Rev	DJM	Pollock	Church of Ireland	Groomsport
Rev	Ricky	Montgomery	Presbyterian	Trinity
Rev	Douglas	Bradley	Presbyterian	Ballycrochan
Rev	David	Johnston	Presbyterian	Hamilton Road
Rev	Sam	Castle	Presbyterian	Lisnabreen
Rev.	Gary	Aitcheson	Presbyterian	Kilcooley
	Vacant		Presbyterian	St. Andrew's
Rev	Charles	McMullan	Presbyterian	West Church
Rev	WT	Cordner	Presbyterian	First Bangor
Rev	Peter	Lyle	Presbyterian	Ballyholme
Rev. Dr.	Roger	Purce	Presbyterian	Groomsport
Rev	Roy	Stirling	Presbyterian	Conlig
Dr	Lee	Glenny	Methodist	Queens Parade
Rev	Colin	Meneely	Methodist	Hamilton Road
Rev	Peter	Murray	Methodist	Ballyholme
Rev	Peter	Murray	Methodist	Primacy (Christ Church)
Rev	Philip	Agnew	Methodist	Carnalea
Very Rev	Joe	Gunn	Roman Catholic	St. Comgall's
Ft	Joe	Rooney	Roman Catholic	Most Holy Redeemer
Pastor	Adrian	Judd	Baptist	Hamilton Road Baptist
Pastor	Leslie	Hutchinson	Baptist	Ballycrochan Baptist
Pastor	Steven	Curry	Baptist	Bethany Baptist
Mr	J	Fisher	Brethren	Bethesda Gospel Hall
Mr	R J	Johnston	Brethren	Church Street Gospel Hall
Majors	Graham & Judith	Daniels	Salvation Army	Salvation Army
Pastor	Davy	Beckett	Elim	Bangor Elim
Rev	David	Priestley	Free Presbyterian	W.P. Nicholson Memorial
FAO	The Minister		Congregational	
Rev	Eric	Moore	Ind. Methodist	
Rev	Jeremy	Forsythe	Free Methodist	
Mr.	Jeff	Ballentine	Evangelical Presbyterian	
Rev	Kenneth	White	Church of the Nazarene	
Mr	Geoff	Chad	Non Denom	Kings Fellowship
Pastor	John	Nabi	Non Denom	Bangor Community Church
Mr.	Colin	Lockheed	Non Denom	Silverbirch Evangelical Church
Evangelist	Colin	Graham	Non Denom	Church of Christ
Pastor	Mark	Gordon	Non Denom	Shiloh Christian Fellowship

Appendix C Interviewees / Focus Groups

Interviewees

- Rev. Roger Purse – Presbyterian Minister
- Rev. Dave Leech – Associate Presbyterian Minister
- Rev Joe Rooney – Catholic Priest
- Rev. Lee Glenny – Methodist Minister
- Rev. Philip Agnew - Methodist Minister
- Pastor Gary Beattie –Elim Pastor
- Pastor Mark Gordon – Pastor and Community Worker
- Captain Judith and Graham Daniels – Bangor Salvation Army
- Robert Larke – Presbyterian Elder
- Buddy Kirwan – Presbyterian elder and staff member East Belfast Mission
- Christine Stevenson – Presbyterian Youth and Community Worker
- Representative - Kings Fellowship and Safezone
- Helen Sloan – Ethnic Minority Project – 1st Bangor Presbyterian
- Aisling Quinn – ASCERT/FASA
- Lynette Mahaffey (North Down Community Network)
- Catherine Mallon (Good Relations Officer – North Down Borough Council)

Focus Groups / Workshops

- Church based Youth Workers Workshop – April 2010
- Issue Paper Workshop - June 2010
- What's Next Workshop - August 2010

Appendix D Case Studies

To inform discussions in regard to the role of churches in peace building and in the wider community we have provided in this section a number of case studies identified during the research in Bangor and during similar research in Newtownards and the Ards Peninsula. In addition we have cited a number of other case studies from elsewhere in order to inform discussion and stimulate further action.

Case Study 1: Bloomfield Church and Community Network

Creating a model for consideration

Churches /Group(s) Involved

The ministers of Lisnabreen Presbyterian, Primacy Methodist, Christ Church Primacy (C o I) meet with representatives from Elim, Church Army, YMCA, Bloomfield Community Association and Bloomfield Primary School.

Context

For many years a considerable number of churches have been working in the Bloomfield area but often with little or no direct contact with local community representatives. Following an initial meeting it has now been decided that it would be beneficial to form a network which will meet 3-4 times a year so that all groups working within the area are aware of what each other are doing. It is hoped that in doing so overlaps will be minimised and that high quality work can be done to improve the quality of life for families living in the area.

Helping Churches identify what is their role

As part of the process of taking forward the Bloomfield Church and Community Network it is hoped that churches can be supported as they seek to define what their role is in Neighbourhood Renewal. The Forum recognises that as they grow and develop it will be important to remain flexible so that members can explore where this may go. The initiative has already seen some good fruit which it is hoped will continue to grow.

Key Point

***Church and community sectors can achieve more when
they talk to each other!***



Case Study 2: Greyabbey Church-Community Engagement

Putting church back in community

Churches /Group(s) Involved

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Greyabbey and Greyabbey Community & District Association.

Getting involved.

Church has formal representation on Community Association.

Challenges Experienced

Making sure that the community is aware that the Church wants to be involved with the wider community simply because it's part of the wider community. While the Church has a Gospel message that it wants to share verbally, it also needs to be a 'good neighbour' and demonstrate God's love unconditionally.

Outcomes So Far

- Hosting Community Christmas Tree / Lighting ceremony and Community Carols;
- Better publicity / promotion of community initiatives within the congregation
- Learning from others;
- Time spent simply chatting with community leaders is time well invested;
- Make sure folks are aware that you're interested in community transformation;
- It's not about how the church might benefit but about how the church might be part of the community.

Key Point

Be 'intentional' about asking members to serve in 'community' roles.

Case Study 3:

Coleraine Borough Churches Forum

Established after a CRC Conference in 1998

The need for the project:

A conference of church representatives was arranged in Coleraine by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council in September 1998. By March 1999 the Coleraine Borough Churches Forum was in being, aiming 'to build a community of openness and acceptance by enabling people to discover who they are, through understanding the richness of their diversity'.

Specific objectives of the Forum:

- Exploring and understanding identity;
- Relating to the local congregation;
- Relating to the wider community;
- Inter-church relationships (understanding diversity etc.).

"The forum has been a great success...as a means of meeting people across the community and learning about their culture and learning about the variations within churches as well as between churches. It is also a medium through which we are able to relax with one another, which is very important."

Number and type of participants:

30 plus participants from a wide range of Christian denominations within the borough.

Key Activities

- Regular meetings of the Forum to discuss selected themes
- Recent conference on "Community Relations and The Churches"

Included consideration of:

- Community Relations and the Churches;
- Exploring Mediation Techniques;
- Exploring the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness;
- Moving beyond Sectarianism.

"The forum has more lay members than clergy members and at this point, this is an advantage. That can be good because sometimes the clergy have a lot to lose if they step out and say things, whereas lay members have nothing to lose."

Value each person

The forum values each individual's right to come to the forum as an individual. It took a crucial decision at one stage that members were not representatives in the sense of being delegated by their own churches ...members simply came with their own views and by doing so gave themselves the freedom to be open, which is very important.

Sharing of spiritual experience

The sharing of faith journeys played an important part in building relationships within the forum.

Respect for Other Traditions

There is a clear respect for the beliefs and views of other faith communities. The forum is not designed to make everyone uniform or come together or to make someone who is a Catholic into a Protestant or someone who is a Methodist into a Presbyterian, but it is to allow everyone to be where they are and to say it is “OK”.

Case Study 4: Carrickfergus Borough Church Forum

Supporting Churches in Reflection and Engagement

Background

Carrickfergus Church Forum meets monthly and is representative of many of churches in the Carrickfergus Borough. Members of the the forum were present when President Mary McAleese recently met church leaders in Carrickfergus.

Reflection

The Forum hosts an annual “Day of Private Reflection”. This is an initiative supported by ‘Healing through Remembrance’ and seeks to provide space for private reflection on the conflict in Northern Ireland. The event acknowledges the deep hurt and pain caused by the conflict and allows time for reflection on personal attitudes by asking: “what more might we have done or might we still do, to make sure such loss is never be allowed to happen again.” Through this event the Forum aims to be respecting of differing views, political aspirations and perspectives on the conflict so as to encourage a positive and respectful way of reflecting on the past, that will bring healing for the future.

Engagement

Carrickfergus Borough Church Forum recognises that there is a growing awareness among churches of the need to engage more positively and respectfully with local communities of which they are a part. In light of this the Forum is a member of Carrickfergus Community Forum, with that membership being open to all churches in the borough as a way of connecting with the many community and voluntary groups in the borough.

Key Points

The forum is seeking to help churches reflect on the past and move forward into the future

Case Study 5: Newtownards Churches Community Forum

Background

In 2003 The Link commissioned research in regard to inter church relations in Newtownards town. Following on from the publication of this research in 2004, 20 clergy came to an initial meeting to consider how churches could work together on social, civic and community issues. From this first meeting came the formation of what was then known as Newtownards Churches Forum.

Participation

Over the initial years on average 13 clergy attended regular meetings of the Forum. Meetings were attended by a broad section of the churches in the town including participation by some clergy from the Inter Clergy group and by other clergy who would not have been member of the Inter Clergy group. A decision was made at the beginning that the focus would be on social, civic and community matters and the clergy decided, for example not to pray together at forum meetings, but to have a time of reflective silence.

The Forum was very much a place where clergy could share information about what their church was doing and also listen to the work of public and voluntary sector agencies. Often those agencies conducting public consultation come to the Forum as it provides a focal point where a cross section of churches can be consulted.

Challenges

In more recent times it became clear that some clergy where increasingly finding it hard to commit to the Forum meetings. A decision was reached that the Forum could be opened up to laity who are nominees of their church. This has brought renewed life to the Forum and as a result of discussions members decided to re-name the forum as the Newtownards Churches Community Forum and have now formally constituted.

In recent months the Forum has publicised a churches directory which provides contact information on all churches in Newtownards along with information on the services offered by each. This includes all of the churches in the town and not just those who are active members of the Forum.

Going forward the Forum recognises challenges ahead including how the Forum empowers and enables churches to be active in social, civic and community matters and how the work of the Forum is filter down into local congregations.

Key Point

Focus on matters of common purpose and be prepared to change structures if required.



