

PURSUING THE COMMON GOOD: AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROMOTING RECONCILIATION WITHIN THE YOUTH SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND / THE NORTH OF IRELAND

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Abstract

Envisioning a future to which all can aspire is integral to building a peaceful and thriving society. However, with the current Brexit negotiations taking place, society is standing at a crossroad of an uncertain future. This has the potential to negatively impact on building the confidence of young people to deal with the legacy of the past and build their view and hope for the future. As Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland continues to deal with the legacy of the Troubles, and in the interests of building a shared and peaceful future in which all the members of the society can flourish, there is a need to keep a spotlight on reconciliation within the youth work sector and explore the question of where to next for reconciliation within the youth work sector. Using the common good as an ethical framework, this paper draws on the voice of young people to set an agenda for reconciliation in youth work practice.

KEY WORDS:

Common good, reconciliation, youth work, Northern Ireland/north of Ireland

Introduction

Envisioning a future based on the common good to which all can aspire is integral to building a peaceful and thriving society (Lederach 1998; Jaede 2017). This is well illustrated in South Africa, where a vision of the 'Rainbow Nation' not only played a significant role in shaping the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it also worked to unite the nation and inspire hope in the future at the time of its transition (Isaacs-Martin 2012; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa 1998). In Northern Ireland/the North of Ireland (NI)¹ the 1998 Good Friday Agreement played a similar role in uniting the society towards a peaceful future. However, over the last 20 years, both in South Africa and NI, this has been eroded by persisting inequalities and failures to address the legacies of the past. Both societies remain deeply divided. In NI, this has been exacerbated by Brexit and the uncertainty of Northern Ireland's

1. The name of Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland carries political significance and is what is referred to as the 'Constitutional question': Unionist and Loyalist communities tend to refer to the constitutional jurisdiction of Northern Ireland, whilst Nationalist and Republican communities tend to refer to the North of Ireland. For this reason, this paper is inclusive of both terms.

position in the United Kingdom, and by the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive (2017–2020) which left the society without a government for three years. It is likely to be further exacerbated by the economic impact of the current COVID-19 lockdown measures. In the absence of a vision for society based on the common good, this has the potential to negatively impact on building the confidence of young people to deal with the legacy of the past, actively participate in society and build hope for the future.

In the interests of building a shared and peaceful future in which all the members of the society can flourish, this paper argues there is a need to keep a spotlight on reconciliation and explore the question of where to next for reconciliation within the youth work sector. Moreover, it argues that this requires developing a vision of the common good and reflecting on what it means in NI.

Finally, the recommendations in this paper have been informed by research carried out by Youth Link: NI with almost 200 young people and youth workers in post-primary schools and youth groups across the society². The sample group included equal representation along gender lines and across both Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities.

What is the 'common good'?

The common good is a term that has been used throughout history significantly shaping both religious and Western political thought. Underpinning the pursuit of the common good is the question 'what kind of society do we want'? While the concept can be traced back to Aristotle who first used it to conceive of the political conditions required for living well and leading a good life, more recent and robust thinking on the common good is found within Catholic social teaching. It defines the common good as 'the whole network [or set] of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales 1996, 15). In other words, the common good is about a vision of society in which all humans can flourish and live up to their full potential. However, it also provides the framework in which to articulate how far a society must go to reach their vision of a shared and flourishing society and what elements are required to implement that vision (Volf 2011; O'Ferrall 2012). There are four key principles underpinning the concept of the common good.

The first relates to **human dignity** which recognises the equality of all humans and that every human life is worthy of respect.³ In this way, the common good becomes a recognition of our common humanity. Intrinsic to this principle of human dignity

2. This paper draws on research carried out with Youth Link: NI in the period 2017-2019. The research formed part of a project entitled 'Remembering the Past; Shaping the Future' funded by the NI Community Relations Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Republic of Ireland.

3. Some would extend this definition to also include animals and plants

is the notion of *equality and justice*; to be treated justly acknowledges a person as a member of the community. Thus, the common good includes looking after the social wellbeing of individuals, especially the most vulnerable in (social justice). It also includes ensuring that goods and services, such as access to health care and education, which makes people's lives possible, are equitably shared across in society (distributive justice) (Hollenbach 2002, 197). Consequently, the common good requires that social structures (such as those that promote classism, poverty, sexism, racism, sectarianism and other forms of discrimination and inequality) are reformed in such a way as to respect the human dignity of all. This should include the promotion and safeguarding of human rights which are fundamental to establishing stability in divided societies recovering from the gross abuse of human rights. Significantly, implementing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which was part of the Good Friday Agreement, has yet to materialise. With Brexit underway, and with the Conservative Party seeking to withdraw from the European Convention of Human Rights, Smith and McWilliams (2017) argue this is a particularly crucial matter as it risks securing fewer rights for fewer people in the UK.

The second principle underpinning the common good relates to understanding our human **interconnectedness** and interdependence. It recognises that as humans we are dependent on others and the accomplishments of our ancestors for our wellbeing; alone we can do very little (YOUCAT Foundation 2016). This sense of interconnectedness is well-expressed in the African philosophy or worldview of *uBuntu* which shaped the proceedings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa 1998; Krog 2008). Essentially, the philosophy encapsulates what it means to be human and speaks to an identity that only makes sense in relation to others; it recognises that one's wellbeing is inextricably linked with the wellbeing of one's community and the broader society (including our perceived enemies). It encourages people not just to look at what their group is getting (or not getting) from social and political institutions, but to look at the needs of the whole society. Consequently, strong emphasis is given to placing communal interests above individual interests. This contrasts with individualism (dominant in Western societies) in which the individual is the primary entity and the interests of the individual are placed above the interests of the collective.

This leads to the third principle of the common good: **solidarity**. Sandel (2009) argues that the conditions for pursuing a good life cannot be achieved through justice and equal rights alone but can only be achieved if people see themselves as members of an interconnected community. Recognising that our lives are deeply intertwined with the lives and wellbeing of the 'other' (whether it's another person, group or nation) the pursuit of the common good commits us to show compassion and empathy, and to be responsible and work for the good of all individuals (and not just those with whom we perceive to share similar ideologies). Moreover, it obliges us to consider the impact of our actions and decisions (socially, economically, and politically) both in the present and on future generations (YOUCAT Foundation 2016).

Giving expression to common good is the principle of **civic participation** and taking an active role in society. Hollenbach (2002, 196) argues that the common good requires citizens to act justly and in ways that help meet the basic needs of other members of the society by, for example, creating employment opportunities and overcoming discrimination and exclusion. Actively participating in civil society through both formal and informal political processes can contribute to this and influence the way in which a society's institutions, such as health care, are made available to all the members of the society.

From these principles it is notable that the common good is an extremely relational concept which seeks to place human dignity and the wellbeing of every individual at the centre of the social and political sphere. Moreover, it reflects the fundamental principles of good youth work including equity, diversity, and interdependence (Wilson 2016) and Northern Ireland's Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy (Department of Education 2011). Significantly, the common good is not an imposition of a single view of 'the good life' on individuals or a society (which can lead to oppressive systems such as Apartheid in South Africa). It also goes beyond simply thinking about the good for the greatest number of people. It requires us to ask about the impact that public policy has on the most vulnerable groups and on how we live and relate to each other (including across historic lines of division).

Challenges to the common good

In reflecting on what the common good means in the context of NI, there are several debates and challenges that need to be explored.

First, the common good is often shrouded in **suspicion**. This stems from the way it has historically been (ab)used both religiously and politically. For example, from a religious perspective, the Reformation led to competing visions of 'the good life' that resulted in lethal and bloody conflict that continues to keep churches and societies divided. Similarly, competing political traditions and visions of the good life, such as those outlined in the 1916 Easter Proclamation and in the Ulster Covenant, have also often led to oppressive and repressive regimes, and violent bloodshed. With growing debate around the Constitutional Question (whether NI should remain in the UK or be united with Ireland) a vision of the common good risks being sabotaged by competing political agendas that keep people polarised (as illustrated in the Brexit debates). To transcend this, a deeper understanding of the common good needs to be fostered and embraced.

Suspicion surrounding the common good has contributed to a second challenge, namely, **diversity** and difference being seen as a threat rather than something that can enrich society. Indeed, competing visions of a good society make it difficult to achieve a strong sense of unity, community and social cohesion. Despite the seemingly

incompatible goals a diverse (and divided) society encompasses, Hollenbach (2002, 13) argues it is reasonable and possible to identify aspects of 'the good life' that are common to all humans regardless of their different religious and cultural traditions. However, if the hope for a vision of what a shared and united society might look like is lost, Hollenbach further argues that the best that can be hoped for is that differences will simply be tolerated. Consequently, the challenge for policymakers (including those in the youth sector) is to create an environment in which differences enrich society rather than cause anxiety, and in which diversity can contribute to the common good (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life 2015).

This leads to a third challenge for pursuing the common good, namely **individualism**. This school of thought sees a person's individual freedoms, independence and autonomy as some of the most important values within a society. Significantly, it moves away from an understanding of human interdependence and collective responsibility without which the common good cannot be achieved. As Hollenbach (2002, 27) cautions, it can lead to a lack of concern about the quality of life in a society. Individualism can also raise leadership challenges for the implementation of human rights if, indeed, the needs of all who live in the society become less important than the needs of one's own group or even nation (Kellerman 2004).

In a globalised world we cannot escape that humans (and the natural environment) are increasingly deeply interconnected with each other. This is exemplified by the challenges surrounding Brexit; including the rights of EU citizens to remain in the UK; the complexities around the Irish border; and whether to leave or remain in the single market and customs union. It is further evidenced in the global impact of ISIS and the threat of extremism, climate change and the impact this is having on our weather systems, migration and what has been dubbed the 'refugee crisis', the rise of a xenophobic and racist right-wing nationalism in many European countries, and more recently in the impact of the COVID-19 global health emergency. Significantly, these global challenges, which bring with them the threat of terror attacks, coupled with concerns around economic wellbeing, and the environmental sustainability of the planet, are contributing to a strong feeling of insecurity among young people. Arguably, this sense of insecurity (and associated anxiety) will erode their sense of safety and wellbeing in the present day (both physically and mentally). Indeed, Northern Ireland has one of the highest suicide rates in Europe, particularly among young men. Recognising that youth work has already begun focusing on young people and their mental wellbeing, there is a need for a deeper understanding how this converges with what many perceive as growing global insecurity. Youth work that can engage with such complexities surrounding mental wellbeing will be integral to promoting human dignity and pursuing a society based on the common good.

A further challenge to pursuing the common good in NI is the **legacy of the past**; NI remains a highly segregated society where very little is shared, including its history, which remains deeply contested. Different communities continue to be referred to in binary terms i.e. Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) or Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL). Not only does this exclude new communities coming to Northern Ireland from being able to participate in the society, but it also entrenches fixed notions of identity

making it almost impossible to move beyond the past into a more diverse future (Bollaert 2019). Recognising that funding bodies use these terms for equality monitoring purposes, arguably, they are no longer fit for purpose, particularly among young people. The youth sector needs to find more meaningful ways of engaging young people that transcends the language of the two communities.

Significantly, within the youth work sector there is acknowledgement that the legacy of the past is an area it struggles with (see also: Morrow 2019, 45). In part, this could be due to a perception among many young people that they are not impacted by the Troubles. While this underscores how violence has become normalised within the society, it also raises the question as to how youth work can help young people recognise the legacy of the Troubles in their own lives.

The common good: Towards an agenda for reconciliation in youth work

A recent Young Life and Times survey indicates that young people are less optimistic about the future of community relations than adults (Schubotz 2017). Moreover, for many young people, reconciliation and dealing with the past can often seem both irrelevant and somewhat passé. Indeed, histories of conflict and their legacies can often be (over) prioritised when dealing with the past, to the detriment of envisioning the future. The common good provides a framework for overcoming that dichotomy. It does this by creating and inspiring hope in a shared and inclusive vision of the future; a future in which one can actively participate in building. In postconflict societies, this might include dealing with legacies of conflict. In a society where optimism for positive community relations among young people is diminishing and there is a growing sense of insecurity, maintaining an agenda for reconciliation in youth work that is based on a vision of the common good becomes crucial. Moreover, this could provide the anti-sectarian education framework for promoting reconciliation within the youth work proposed in the Sectarianism in Northern Ireland review (Morrow 2019). In working towards such an agenda several recommendations can be made.

First, a deeper understanding of the common good that transcends divisive politics needs to be fostered and embraced. Youth work can play an important role in educating young people about the common good and helping them to explore the kind of society they want to live in, understand the interconnected nature of society, and move it towards a positive peace.

To do this, the youth sector needs to create spaces for meaningful conversations. These spaces need to encourage critical thinking around the principles of the common good, what we understand about community, and how we look after our environment and each other. They also need to be secure enough for people to feel free to explore their concerns and aspirations, and other questions raised by the common good, without feeling compelled to jettison their tradition. Crucially, they need to extend a generosity towards the 'other' that shows that each of their futures is equally important and connected. Moreover, in a society in which violence has become normalised, these spaces need to equip people with skills that promote non-violent transformation of conflict. In the current decade of centenaries, which includes the 100th anniversary of Ireland's partition, and as Brexit forces the constitutional question into the open, these

spaces will take on greater importance. Youth work can help provide the space in which young people can talk together about their fears, anxieties, hopes and aspirations, and about political and civic frameworks for the future that may or may not be within the DUP or Sinn Féin narratives.

With young people struggling to identify how they are impacted by the Troubles, these spaces can become difficult to navigate.⁴ This requires a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how young people are impacted by the Troubles and how this intersects with the additional insecurities (such as Brexit and the sustainability of the planet) they are facing. The learning from such research needs to raise awareness among young people about how they have been affected by the complexities of the past in a way that equips them with skills to navigate the future and pursue the common good.

Second, cross-community youth work should consider shifting its focus from identity-based work to addressing issues of shared concern (such as the environment, equality issues, employment and mental health). This is not to diminish the contribution youth work has made towards fostering positive intergroup relations. However, one of the challenges associated with cross-community work is its tendency to focus on narrow and fixed interpretations of identity which can act to reinforce polarised identities. By shifting that emphasis towards engaging in shared issues, youth work would not only foster positive crosscommunity relations in a way that transcends historical lines of division, but it would also enable civic participation towards the common good. Indeed, mobilising youth towards increased civic participation was one of the recommendations to the youth sector put forward in the 'Sectarian in Northern Ireland Review' (2019, 45). Not only is the youth sector well-placed for mobilising young people but it has already begun to do this through its engagement on social issues such as mental health, LGBTQ+ rights and other equality issues. However, to bring about this shift, the youth sector will need to work closely with funding bodies and community relations' policy makers.

Third, the youth sector needs to consider implementing more structured training (either formal or informal) for youth workers on the issue of reconciliation and what it means to live in a deeply divided society. Such a training would need to increase understanding surrounding different perspectives of the past; address traditional understandings of nationality and competing nationalisms; engage with how the past can be remembered and commemorated in a way that promotes the common good (and does not entrench division); explore the transgenerational impact of the Troubles and increase understanding on how young people experience trauma, and promote civic participation among young people (for which the youth sector is well-placed). Importantly, it would also need to engage with the definition of reconciliation, and the value of the common good in youth work and in society more widely. Moreover, it would need to include skills training on how to manage and engage in controversial topics and on how to communicate and promote change using non-violent means.

4. For research on the transgenerational impact of the Troubles see: Commission for Victims and Survivors (2015).

Conclusion

Do we want a society that remains segregated and separated or one that is integrated, inclusive and welcoming of people with different nationalities, political persuasions, race and ethnic backgrounds, and sexual orientations, to name a few? In NI, such a vision raises important questions around inclusion and how we work and live together, even with people with whom we hold deep disagreements and radical differences. It also raises concerns around how to build a future that goes beyond being 'equal but divided' but that is interconnected so that everyone can reach their full potential together and not at the expense of one community over another. Moreover, the common good encourages us to hold a sufficiently plural vision of Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland that rejects violence and does not forget the real needs of people around joblessness, mental illness, and homelessness. Indeed, a society can only flourish when the needs of all are met. The common good provides an ethical framework for the decisions we make and the policies we support. In a diverse society, where there is no single vision of the good life, such a framework becomes particularly important.

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