Consultation on inter church and church community relations in the Ards Peninsula

Final Report

September 2010

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East Down
Rural Community Network

Peninsula
Healthy Living

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1.   Introduction

Research in relation to inter church and church community relations in the Ards Peninsula was commissioned by The Link (Newtownards) in conjunction with East Down Rural Community Network (EDRCN) with funding secured from the International Fund for Ireland's Community Bridges Programme.

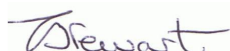**Research commissioned by The Link and East Down Rural Community Network**

Following on from research in Newtownards a number of meetings took place with The Link and East Down Rural Community Network leading to a decision to start the process of exploring and auditing the relationship between the churches and between the churches and the community in the Ards Peninsula.

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 Ards Peninsula? If so, what are the causes and consequences of these barriers and divisions for community engagement and peace-building in the Ards Peninsula?"

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

This report sets out the research findings in relation to inter church and church community relations and considers "what next."

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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, Newtownards 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 commenced discussions with East Down Rural Community Network in regard to conducting similar research in the Ards Peninsula 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.
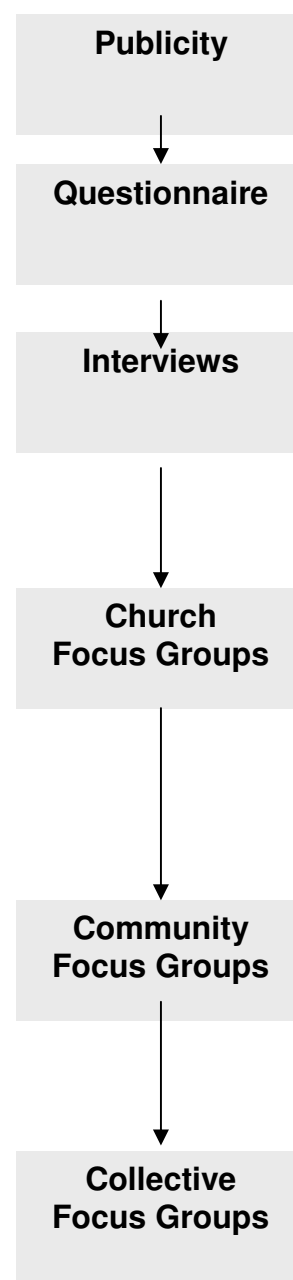
3. Approach

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.

3.1 Methodology

Following discussions with the research group we:

a) Publicised the research through local media and community networks;

Publicity

↓

b) sent a research questionnaire to all clergy (Appendix B) in the Ards Peninsula;

Questionnaire

↓

c) conducted one to one and telephone interviews with identified clergy, staff and laity from churches across the Ards Peninsula;

Interviews

↓

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;

Church Focus Groups

↓

e) conducted meetings with community and voluntary sector representatives to understand their perception of the role of church in community;

Community Focus Groups

↓

f) facilitated collective workshops where church and community representatives had the opportunity to come together to consider how

Collective Focus Groups

church can contribute to wider community development and peace – building.

3.2   Engagement

During the period of research (April – August 2010) every effort was made by the research team and the steering group to engage all known churches on the Ards Peninsula.

In some cases engagement proved difficult. Some churches did not respond to a series of invitations to be part of the research and in one case a representative of one denominational grouping made it clear that they did not want to be contacted further about the research.

Early in the process the original two partners to the research, The Link and East Down Rural Community Network, decided that they wished the research to be a holistic as possible. To broaden the width of the consultative process they asked Peninsula Healthy Living to be a research partner and were delighted that they chose to do so.

4.   Inter Church Relations

4.1   Assessment

As a means of gaining an initial assessment of the views of church leaders the steering group gave guidance on the nature of a questionnaire that was then sent to all clergy in the Ards Peninsula. Every effort was made to encourage full participation of all Christian denominations and groups in the Peninsula however not all chose to contribute their thoughts towards the survey.

From the response received to our survey sent to 19 identified clergy /church leaders:

(i)   33.3% believe that relations between church leaders in the Ards Peninsula are very good, 55.6% believe they are good and 11.1% believe they are neither good nor poor;

Perception of relationship between church leaders in the Ards Peninsula

11%
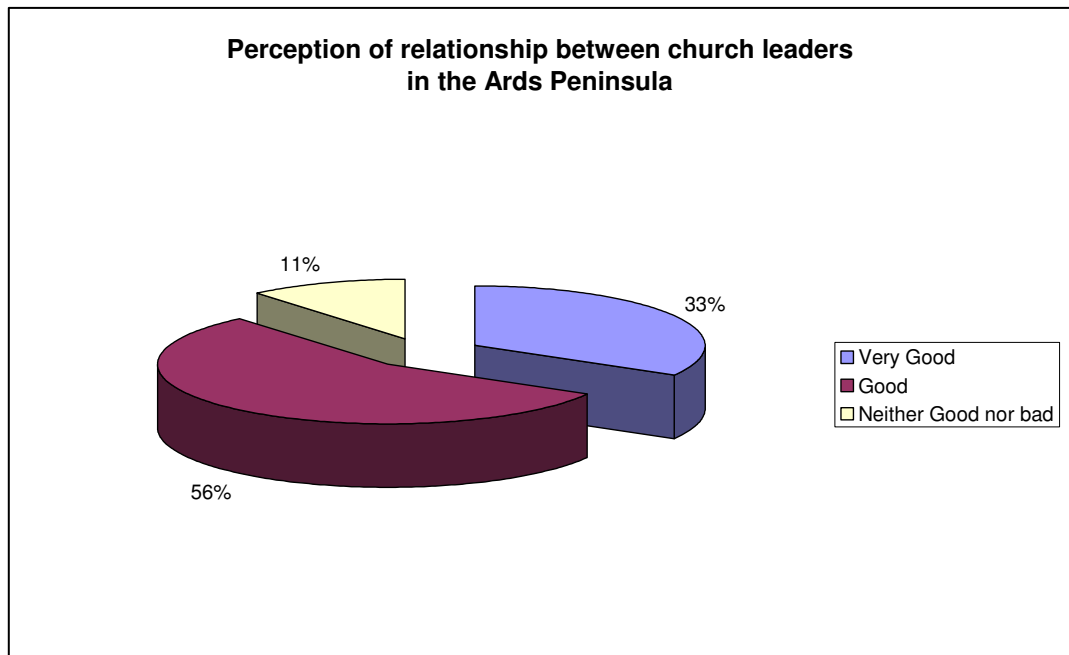
33%

□ Very Good
■ Good
□ Neither Good nor bad

56%

Chart 4a

(ii)   11.1% believe that relations between church congregations in the Ards Peninsula are very good, 77.8% believe they are good and 11.1% believe they are neither good nor poor;

"I am impressed by the way we have moved forward, there seems to be an intentional working together."

Local Politician

(iii) 55.6% meet with other churches from their own denomination in the Ards Peninsula at least once a month;

(iv) 44.4% of Protestant churches meet with other Protestant churches in the Ards Peninsula (other than their own denomination) at least once a month;

	No Contact	Once or twice a year	Once a quarter	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Every Week
Protestant Congregation – own denomination	11.1%	22.2%	11.1%	22.2%	22.2%	11.1%
Protestant churches – other denominations	11.1%	33.3%	11.1%	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%
Roman Catholic churches	66.7%	22.2%	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%
Other churches	62.5%	0.0%	12.5%	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%

Chart 4b

(v) 66.7% of Protestant churches have no contact with Roman Catholic churches in the Ards Peninsula.

Responses from clergy would show that the main opportunities to meet with each other are through:

- Joint services;
- Special services (Christmas and Easter);
- Civic services (Perhaps organised by Council);
- Denominational groupings;
- Joint outreaches e.g. Alpha;
- Peninsula Clergy Group.

> **"We are in regular contact with most other ministers and have developed some positive friendships."**
>
> Presbyterian Minister

The 'Peninsula Clergy Group' was formed in January 2009. Prior to that contact between clergy would have been less structured and less frequent.

The Peninsula Clergy Group was formed following conversations that a few clergy had had with each other separately since the previous summer. These discussions were based on each individual's growing conviction that they were being prompted by the Spirit to work more closely with other congregations to promote a united Christian witness in the Peninsula. As a result of these informal discussions, invitations went out to as many reformed clergy / pastors as possible and 11

ministers met in Trinity Presbyterian Church, Greyabbey during the week of Christian Unity.

Membership of the group now includes clergy from the Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of Ireland, Baptist, Elim and, occasionally, the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church. Meetings are held monthly for prayer, mutual encouragement and to see / plan how, together, the members can better 'equip God's people for works of service' (Eph 4: 12) within the Peninsula, with a particular view to stimulating evangelistic outreach (See Case Study in Appendix D).

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. From its origins, the Peninsula Clergy Group is open to reformed ministers / pastors and is evangelical in its ethos. To date representatives from Brethren congregations and some other reformed churches have not engaged with the group.

This ethos of the Peninsula Clergy Group also means that it cannot be said to be fully inclusive of all forms of Christian expression on the Peninsula. As a result there is currently no forum or grouping that creates a space for friendships to develop between Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy.

Within the Protestant church community there does seem to be an ongoing level of inter church activity e.g. joint services, special events at Easter and Christmas. Some churches will engage in joint worship with Roman Catholics but this is not common practice.

> **"The Peninsula Clergy Group has created new opportunities for fellowship and joint witness."**
>
> Group Member

When asked the reasons for current levels of co-operation / partnership with other churches in the Peninsula Clergy Group representatives responded:

- as a united witness to the Lord Jesus and the gospel;

- to have more involvement at a local level through co-operation on local issues;

- to be a community - "Bringing About God's Kingdom - reaching out to others".

4.2   Barriers / Divisions

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

(i)   Time Availability

Most churches in the Peninsula have only one paid staff member and indeed some clergy pastor two or more congregations e.g. the seven ministers listed in Chart 4c have charge of 16 congregations.

Church	Denomination	Clergy
Christ Church Carrowdore	Church of Ireland	Rev. Colin Davis
St Patrick's, Millisle		
Church of Ireland, Greyabbey & Kircubbin) (St Saviours is the church name of the Greyabbey Parish church; The Kircubbin church is a separate congregation in the united Greyabbey / Kircubbin parish.)	Church of Ireland	Rev Gill Withers
Church of Ireland, Ballyphilip/Ardquinn		
Church of Ireland, Ardkeen		
Glastry Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Bill Cameron
Kircubbin Presbyterian Church		
Portaferry Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev David Gray
Cloughey Presbyterian		
Glastry Methodist	Methodist	Rev Nick McKnight
Portaferry Methodist Church		
St Patrick's Church, Portaferry	Roman Catholic	Fr Patrick Mulholland
St Patrick's Church, Ballygalget		
St. Cooey's		
St Joseph's Church, Ballycran	Roman Catholic	Fr Neeson
St Mary's Star of the Sea, Kircubbin		

Chart 4c

As a result clergy 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 they are unable to commit sufficient time to it.

> **"I am committed to developing and growing relations with other churches but I am very busy."**
>
> Local Minister

(ii)   Theology Position

Inter church activity tends to occur:

- within denominations e.g. at Presbytery level among the Presbyterian churches;

- between denominations with similar doctrinal positions e.g. reformed ministers meeting as part of the Peninsula Clergy Group.

Theological differences appear to restrict contact among some 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.

(iii)   Geography

The Peninsula is a sizeable elongated geographical area that is characterised by a considerable number of village communities (mostly coastal) with each village, town or area having differing demographic characteristics.

- The distance from Millisle in the North East of the Peninsula to Portaferry in the South East of the Peninsula is 20 miles;
- The towns of Kircubbin and Portaferry would have the highest concentrations of Catholics in the Ards Peninsula;
- Towns like Millisle may have more of a geographic pull towards Donaghadee and onwards to Bangor rather than towards the administrative centre of the Ards Peninsula which is Newtownards town;

- Some perceive the east of the Peninsula to be conservative in its theology and the West of the Peninsula to be liberal;
- There would appear to be good inter church connections and church and community working in Portaferry;
- Churches in Portavogie no not seem to have much inter church connection;
- There is evidence of churches in Kircubbin area seeking to engage in wider community life;
- The east coast from Portavogie to Millisle tends to be almost exclusively Protestant.

(iv)   Engagement of Laity

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The evidence presented would suggest that whilst there is a degree of inter clergy contact there is not so much interaction between laity (other than for joint services and 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.

> **"*There's a need for the Laity to take up the mantel to make this happen, showing the leadership that's needed within the local area.*"**
>
> Member of the Presence Group

The only exception to this would appear to be the Presence Group in Portaferry which provides opportunity for up to 40 people from varying Christian traditions to meet together for fellowship, prayer and bible study.

The group is now in its sixth year and originally came about through connections between Church of Ireland and Methodist laity. The group now has membership from all four main denominations.

(v) Loss of Identity

A final barrier identified in relation to inter church relations can be the fear of loss of identify. For many living in the Peninsula religious identify and cultural identify are closely linked and held as important both for the present and for the future.

A high percentage of people living in the Peninsula have been associated with the area and / or with their local church for many generations. Inter church activity in this context can only be promoted on the basis that there is no threat apparent to the identity of the individuals or churches who participate in it.

4.3   Consequences of barriers to inter church activity

Inter church activity is restricted and the results of this impacts upon all residents of the Peninsula. 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 or all parts of the Peninsula;

- The only cross denominational clergy network is not inclusive of all expressions of Christian faith;

- No one network currently has the ability to bring together all church / faith groups in the Peninsula (whether that be clergy, laity or both);

- Inter church activity is largely limited to special services and joint outreaches;

- 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;

> **Inter church activity is restricted and the results of this impacts upon all residents of the Peninsula.**

- Limited resources mean that churches have to focus on their own survival;

- 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;

- Theological differences are evident in different parts of the Peninsula and it is unlikely that one model of inter church work will fit all parts of the Peninsula;

- Inter church activity may need to be planned on an area basis.

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Report: Inter church & church community relations in the Ards Peninsula

5. Church – Community Engagement

5.1 Churches understanding of the term community

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

a) A church community where the members are committed to one another;

b) The parish community;

c) The interaction between churches;

d) The immediate area surrounding the church;

e) The worshipping community;

f) Those who belong to a particular denomination.

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

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.

- Youth work
- Youth outreach activities
- Inter-church services
- Civic Services
- Members of community associations
- Chair of community associations
- Governorship of schools

- Provision of clubs
- Member of Ards Seniors Forum
- 'Christianity Explored' courses
- Parent and toddler group
- Membership of PTA's
- Community usage of Parish Centre
- Link to Peninsula Healthy Living Partnership

The survey of church leaders showed that 88.9% of respondents believe that their church makes a positive impact on community with the same percentage also believing that their members make a positive impact on community. 66.7% believed that they make a positive impact on community through joint initiatives with other churches.

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

88.9% are aware of individuals in their congregation who either as individual or

collectively work in partnership or co-operation with individuals from other local churches to make a positive impact on community. This included engagement via:

- Community groups;
- School Boards;
- Helping in community centre;
- Volunteering in hospital;
- Working with Homestart.

Within the two Roman Catholic parishes in the Peninsula, Parish Councils have been formed in recent years. We understand that a Parish Council has been developed for some time in the Ballycran Parish and that the Parish Council is currently being developed within the Ballyphillip Parish. It is hoped that the Parish Council in Ballyphillip Parish will have 12 members and will provide guidance and support to a range of matters including a wide range of community based initiatives and programmes. It is hoped that the Parish Council, when fully developed, will provide a further positive boost to local community relations and community development.

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 the Ards Peninsula 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 33.3% felt relations between their congregation and community were very good and 66.7% felt relations were good. When asked about relations between churches in general and the community 11.1% of clergy responding felt that relations were very good, 55.6% felt relations were good and 33.3% felt relations were neither good nor bad.

	Very Good	Good	Neither Good or Bad	Poor	Very Poor
Relations between the local community and your congregation	33.3%	66.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Relations between the local community and churches in General	11.1%	55.6%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Chart 5a

Chart 5b shows that 42.9% of churches had monthly contact with community associations / networks but only 14.3% had weekly contact. However 57.2% only had contact with community associations or networks once or twice a year.

> **"A growing involvement in community matters is being well received by the community."**
>
> Presbyterian Minister

Similar percentage responses were reflected when asked about church contact with voluntary groups.

Generally churches had less frequent contact with councillors and statutory bodies with the majority having contact with statutory bodies and councillors no more than once or twice a year. Only 14.3% had engagement with statutory bodies monthly.

	No Contact	Once or twice a year	Once a quarter	Once a month	Once a fortnight	Every Week
Community associations/networks	14.3%	42.9%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%	14.3%
Voluntary Groups	14.3%	42.9%	28.6%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Local Councillors	14.3%	57.1%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Statutory Bodies	16.7%	50.0%	16.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%

Chart 5b - Contact church has with others

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

Some positive examples of church members engaging in community do exist. In Portaferry members of local churches are actively engaged in the Portaferry Community Collective and Portaferry Regeneration Group. In Millisle there are four church members who participate in the Millisle 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 local community network;
- a Peninsula wide network;
- the views of local community groups;
- a voluntary programme addressing community needs;
- those community groups who attended open focus groups with clergy.

At a meeting of community groups from across the community, members suggested the church had a role to play in terms of:

a. Allowing buildings to be used for community work;
b. Providing youth activities e.g. a drop in centre;
c. Promoting reconciliation at a local level;
d. Showing leadership for the rest of the community to follow.

> **"Churches are not proactively involved in community development."**
>
> Community group rep

The overall view of the community sector is that churches are not proactively engaged in community development. With the exception of a few churches (Greyabbey Presbyterian being cited as an example) the community sector does not believe that the churches in the Peninsula have any real interest in the work of the community sector. Most would welcome the participation of church in community development 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 felt that churches had been absent from community engagement and social action for many years and as such if they wished to get involved in the community sector they would need to regain 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 not seem to have the time available;

b) **Resources**: most churches have very restricted finances and would find it difficult to invest heavily in community engagement;

c) **Capacity**: lack of understanding or knowledge of how to engage in the community and voluntary sector or of how the community and voluntary sector functions;

d) **Ethics**: concern for some that if they engage with community projects that may be engaging in projects that have been supported through funding from the National Lottery;

e) **Mission**: churches are firstly focused on the mission within their own congregations and may not be able to see how engagement in wider community development activity fits with the 'mission' of the church;

f) **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;

g) **Perception**: church members need to see themselves as both church members and community members and respond responsibly to both roles.

> There was some discussion re what constitutes 'church involvement in the community' at both a Clergy focus group and a Community focus group. Church leaders are keen to promote 'Every Member Ministry' i.e. it is not the sole prerogative / responsibility of the clergy to be directly involved in community engagement. Community leaders, however, do not necessarily see 'ordinary' church members involved in community development as being indicative of 'church' involvement. (i.e. if it's not the minister it's not the church)

h) **Geography**: geography of the Peninsula prevents some churches from engaging widely in community activity;

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) **Age**: it is recognised that the age profile of many churches is getting older and a result there may be less people with the energy and vision to take forward community engagement.

Whilst we can appreciate these 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 planned, undertaken and reviewed together."

5.5 Consequences of barriers to churches engaging in community

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

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

- Mission of the church in relation to community is unclear;

- Much potentially good community work goes unrecognised and the community impact can be limited;

- Lack of clear vision from church leaders for community engagement;

- No clear or agreed perception among churches of the role they should play in the community;

- Churches are less likely to invest in communities;

- Church is unable to speak the language of the community and voluntary sector;

- Church interventions into community work can be difficult to sustain;

- Community can see church as irrelevant;

- Role and mission of church not understood by its neighbours;

- Church 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;

- 'Them and us' culture can develop;

- Church does not give strong leadership to the community;

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

- Some churches do not provide a positive role model of good relations to the community;

- Church does not have strong moral influence and community connection should situation of conflict arise;

- Information about community activities, programmes and opportunities not often disseminated to church members;

- 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 whom 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."[1]

Whilst the role and influence of the church may have arguably declined in recent years, in communities such as the Ards Peninsula 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 Peninsula.

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	Presbyterian	Church of Ireland	Methodist	Other Christian	Other religions and philosophies	
Ballywalter	3.91	38.35	26.58	4.21	8.69	-	18.25
Carrowdore	1.86	44.93	17.74	4.26	8.92	0.20	22.09
Kircubbin	58.89	14.57	7.88	1.50	2.39	0.14	14.64
Millisle	1.89	44.78	17.11	5.54	9.41	0.12	21.16
Portaferry	80.52	3.71	3.59	0.33	0.76	0.12	10.96
Portavogie	9.90	33.93	15.44	4.99	16.81	0.23	18.69

The actual number of residents of each religion was:

	Persons stating religion as:						Persons with no religion or religion not stated
	Catholic	Presbyterian	Church of Ireland	Methodist	Other Christian	Other religions and philosophies	
Ballywalter	131	1284	890	141	291	-	611
Carrowdore	55	1330	525	126	264	6	654
Kircubbin	1726	427	231	44	70	4	429
Millisle	62	1471	562	182	309	4	695
Portaferry	2646	122	118	11	25	4	360
Portavogie	347	1189	541	175	589	8	655
Total	4967	5823	2867	679	1548	26	3404

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[1] McAllister 2005

6.2   Impact on Peace Building

In a recent Northern Ireland wide research[2] 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 restricted level of interaction between clergy of the four main denominations in the Peninsula. Interaction tends to be primarily in regard to seasonal and civic services. Clergy from most of the reformed churches do meet together for fellowship but this is not inclusive of clergy of all expressions of the Christian faith, and in particular it is not inclusive of the Catholic clergy.

In the area of study[3] the denominational affiliations at the time of the 2001 census were:

Denomination	%
Roman Catholic	31.2%
Presbyterian	36.5%
Church of Ireland	18.0%
Other Christian	9.7%
Methodist	4.3%

Of particular note is that 9.7% 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.

Whilst there is a degree of opportunity for people to meet with each other in the

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

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[2] Faith in a Plural Society

[3] Ards Peninsula District Electoral Area + the ward of Millisle

Peninsula 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 the Ards Peninsula we believe that opportunities for relationship development are limited:

a) 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.

b) relationships between members of the 25+ churches / church groups on the Peninsula are not well developed. Perhaps due to resource and time pressures many churches appear insular

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

c) 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.

Without relationship it is difficult to build trust. One writer has said:

"Open communication, trust, and honesty are the most important ingredients in a relationship"[4]

As a result of our analysis of relationships we believe that the levels of trust in the Peninsula 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 Catholic churches;

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[4] Source unknown

- between the church sector and the community 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:

- Clergy are not all engaged in inter church relations and often find it difficult to engage in such activity as they are very busy due to their own ministry commitments;

- There is no clear good relations leadership being shown and hence good relations is not modelled to church members;

- Due to low capacity and resources restrictions churches often do not provide a role model example of good relations to the wider community;

- Peace building/capacity building training is required before many churches would feel able to act as a role model for peace building;

- Often churches are unaware of the policy or social context in which good relations work 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 an advocate of good relations.

6.26 Responses Required

The nature of response required to aid the church to become a peace builder and to aid the church contribute to peace building will differ depending on the area of the Peninsula being considered. Demographical and religious profiles differ considerably across the area. e.g. the largest percentage of the Catholic population live in SW of Peninsula and hence the approach there may be different than on the Eastern side of the Peninsula where the population is predominantly Protestant.

In the section that follows we consider the way ahead for Inter Church and Church Community relations in the Ards Peninsula. 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. Recommendations

7.1 Background

In terms of considering recommendations the research team has, in conjunction with the steering group, considered a number of steps that we believe can help advance inter church and church community relations in the Ards Peninsula.

In essence the issues raised by the research do not differ substantial from issues raised by other comparative research in Bangor and in Newtownards i.e.

- Divisions within the church sector in Northern Ireland create communities within communities;

- Addressing sectarianism is not central to the churches mission;

- Churches often engage with an increasingly aged and middle class group;

- There is a leadership and skills deficit in the church sector;

- Church and community sectors are distinctly separate;

- Churches can make a significant contribution to the future of communities;

- Churches and the community sector working together can make a significant contribution to community planning for a stable and peaceful future.

Within the context of the Ards Peninsula we have identified a number of steps to take forward these issues. Resourcing of projects 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.

> **"Society is impoverished when religious perspectives on life are excluded or marginalised."**
>
> Statement on Inter Religious Relations in Britain

7.2 Recommendation for Next Steps

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

'Peninsula Churches, Communities and Relationship Building'

We believe that this provides the breath 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 envisage churches and communities collectively contributing to and embracing a healthy, harmonious and shared future for the Ards Peninsula.

Mission

To enable churches as part of their wider community to contribute to a healthy, harmonious and shared Peninsula through developing understanding, skills and trust.

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	Share 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	- Improve understanding between churches (clergy and laity) - Create opportunities to develop discussions on inter church relations, theology and difference - Enable the church sector to have an opportunity to collectively respond positively to good relation issues - Improve understanding between the church sector and the community sector through awareness sessions and through development of an understanding of the language used by each sector

Aim 2	Develop Skills
Objectives	- Develop the skills base of clergy and laity to engage with people who express their Christian faith differently - Develop the skills base of the Christian community to engage with those of other faiths - 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	▪ 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 sector to meet and support each other ▪ Provide opportunities for communities to build teams that are representative of the community, business and church sectors.

Aim 4	**Share Development**
Objectives	▪ 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 healthy, harmonious and shared future ▪ Develop collective projects / activities where church and community sector jointly deliver positive outcomes

7.6   Enabling the correct response

In the words of John Stott we would suggest that:

"Evangelism and social action need to work hand in hand like a pair of scissors"

Therefore, in order to enable the response suggested there must be:

▪ Individual and collective sense of responsibility;

▪ Public acknowledgement of each others role in peace building;

- 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;
- Demographic and geographical proofing of all actions;
- Resources to enable the work to be achieved.

In conclusion we would quote a well respected Australian Church leader[5] who said:

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

---

[5] Brian C Houston

Appendix A   Steering Group

Name	Organisation
Frances Hughes	East Down Rural Community Network
Sandra Henderson	East Down Rural Community Network
Sheila Bailie	Peninsula Healthy Living Partnership
Rev. Mark Welsh	Presbyterian Cleric
Father Neeson	Roman Catholic Cleric
Cllr Joe Boyle	Elected Member for the area
Gareth McCluskey	The Link Family and Community Centre
Diane Holt	The Link Family and Community Centre

Appendix B   Ards Peninsula Churches

Name	Denomination	Clergy
Christ Church Carrowdore	Church of Ireland	Reverend Colin Davis
St Patrick's, Millisle	Church of Ireland	Reverend Colin Davis
Church of Ireland (Ballyeasboro))	Church of Ireland	Rev John Hemphill
Church of Ireland, Greyabbey/Kircubbin	Church of Ireland	Rev Gill Withers
Church of Ireland, Ballyphilip/Ardquinn	Church of Ireland	Rev Gill Withers
Church of Ireland, Ardkeen	Church of Ireland	Rev Gill Withers
Holy Trinity, Ballywalter	Church of Ireland	Canon J R L Bowley
Ballywalter Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Alan Russell
Carrowdore & Ballyfrenis Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Bobby Stevenson
Trinity Presbyterian Church, Greyabbey	Presbyterian	Rev Mark Welsh
Glastry Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Bill Cameron
Kircubbin Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Bill Cameron
Portaferry Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev David Gray
Cloughey Presbyterian	Presbyterian	Rev David Gray
Millisle and Ballycopeland Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Helen Boyd
Ballyblack Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Rev Simon Henning
Portavogie Presbyterian	Presbyterian	Rev. Maurice Wade
Glastry Methodist	Methodist	Rev Nick McKnight
Portaferry Methodist Church	Methodist	Rev Nick McKnight
St Patrick's Church, Portaferry and St Patrick's Church, Ballygalget	Roman Catholic	Fr Patrick Mulholland
St. Cooey's	Roman Catholic	Fr Patrick Mulholland
St Joseph's Church, Ballycran and St Mary's Star of the Sea, Kircubbin	Roman Catholic	Fr Neeson
Cardy Gospel Hall	Brethren	Not identified
Ballyhalbert Gospel Hall	Brethren	Not identified
Carrowdore Gospel Hall	Brethren	Not identified
Portavogie Free Presbyterian Church	Free Presbyterian	Rev. John Armstrong
Millisle Elim Church	Elim	Ivan Roberts
Millisle Baptist Church	Baptist	Vacant
Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church	Non-Subscribing Presbyterian	Rev Brian Cockroft
Kircubbin Community Church	Non Denominational	Derek Reid

Appendix C   Interviewees / Focus Groups / Workshops

Interviewees

- Jim Murdock (Good Relations Officer – Ards Borough Council)
- Rev Gill Withers
- Fr Neeson
- Councillor Angus Carson
- Councillor Robin Drysdale
- Councillor Kieran McCarthy MLA
- Captain Eddie McGee –(Ballyphillip Parish Council)

Focus Groups

i) Peninsula Clergy Group

ii) Peninsula Community Network

iii) Portaferry Community Collective

Workshops

(i) Issue Paper Workshop June 2010

(ii) What's Next Workshop August 2010

Appendix D   Case Studies

To inform discussions in regard to the role of church in peace building and in the wider community we have provided in this section a number of case studies identified during the research in Ards Peninsula and during similar research in Newtownards and Bangor. 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:   Peninsula Clergy Group

Established January 2009 during Week of Christian Unity

Churches / Groups Involved

Presbyterian Churches in Greyabbey, Ballywalter, Carrowdore, Glastry & Kircubbin. Church of Ireland churches in Kircubbin, Ardkeen & Portaferry. Kircubbin Community Church and Millisle Elim

Nature of Activity and Purpose

Monthly Clergy Meetings for prayer, mutual encouragement and planning of united praise, fellowship and service opportunities. Our desire is to encourage and equip our members to be a united Christian witness in the area.

Challenges Experienced

Drawing the clergy / pastors of the gospel halls and some congregations belonging to the main denominations on board with the concept of a united Christian witness.

Outcomes Achieved

Greater level of co-operation / support between clergy & churches in the Ards Peninsula area. Folk encouraged to be Christians / live out their faith in the places God has put them.

Learning for others

Start small with defined aims. Ensure all clergy are kept informed / invited to be part of the group. Allow membership to 'work itself out'.

Key Point

"Start small … keep all informed"

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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.

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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 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".

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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

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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.***

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