

The real peacemakers

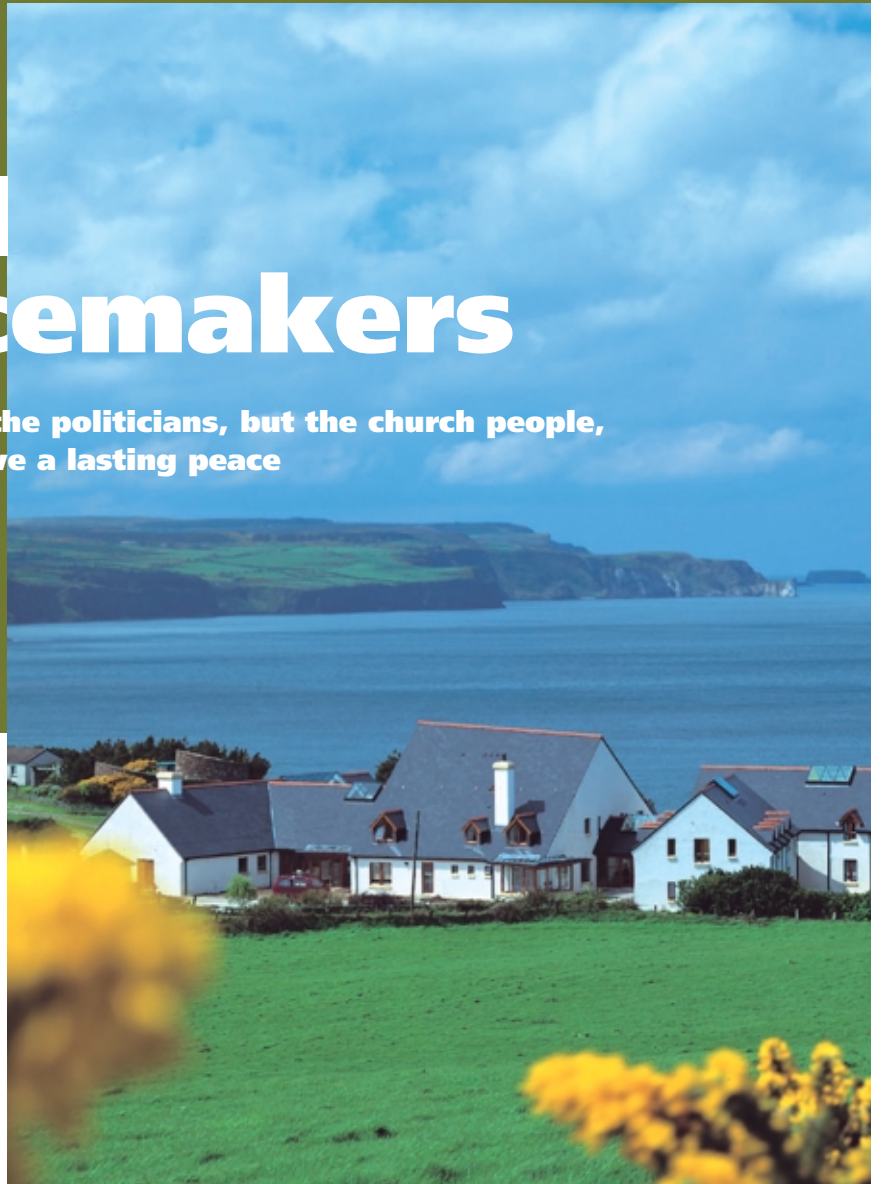
In Northern Ireland it is not the politicians, but the church people, who are most likely to achieve a lasting peace

BY MIRIAM SAULS

What happens if you throw 12 antagonistic young people in wet suits into the North Sea with nothing but some tubes and logs and no hope of getting to shore unless they can construct a raft? “Well, if they fight, they fail,” says James Gale, who for part of his time as a Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer last year worked at Corrymeela, a residential ecumenical center in the northern tip of Northern Ireland.

This variation on “sink or swim” is an exercise for Protestant and Catholic young people who are brought together to work on reconciliation issues in this small country plagued by years of political, cultural and religious conflict. “These were especially tough kids, who the day before arrived wearing their opposing favorite football teams’ jerseys so there would be no mistake about their loyalties,” Gale recalls. “And they immediately began hurling insults across the room at each other. It was like a scene from ‘West Side Story.’”

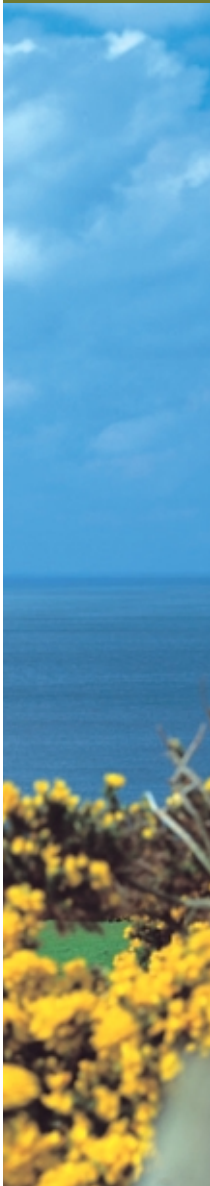
After kids arrive at Corrymeela (and not all are so hostile) for a day, weekend, or week-long program and have gotten a few things off their chests, the staff step in. “We always start off with an icebreaker exercise,” says Doug Baker, a mission specialist for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who has been in Northern Ireland working on reconciliation issues in



Setting for reconciliation: *the ecumenical Corrymeela center*

one capacity or another for 23 years, including 18 years (1979–1997) as Christian education coordinator for Corrymeela. “Only after they find what they have in common, through storytelling and sharing of experiences such as family habits or outside interests, and establish some identification with each other,” Baker says, “can we move on to questions where the kids will likely disagree. If they can develop some degree of relationship, the course will be different from that point forward. They can agree to disagree and begin to understand each other’s points of view.”

Baker’s work at Corrymeela is one example of the creative ways church people are leading the way toward peace in Northern Ireland. While a cease-fire in 1994 and a fragile shared government following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement have reduced violence and made a more normal life possible, much else still needs to be done to secure a lasting peace.



Teaching peace: Elaine Baker (in white), leading a children's program at Corrymeela, where she and her husband, Doug, are missionaries



Creative responses to conflict: Presbyterian mission specialist Doug Baker helping young adults from different backgrounds talk to each other

“The healing process will take many years, and the role of the churches and of special reconciliation groups in this process is vital”

DOUG BAKER
PCUSA mission specialist

Baker, who is a minister on the rolls of both the PCUSA and its partner Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), has worked with the Mediation Network of Northern Ireland for the past five years. The Network promotes third-party intervention in disputes and supports creative responses to conflicts. Baker now is co-leader of Partners in Transformation, a joint initiative of the

Mediation Network and the Irish School of Ecumenics aimed at equipping churches for peace-building activities. He is also the coordinator of the PCUSA Young Adult Volunteer program in Northern Ireland, through which some 38 American volunteers have worked with 16 different congregations or projects since 1993. “Sending a mission specialist like

Doug and assigning Young Adult Volunteers to Northern Ireland to work for reconciliation are ways we can show Presbyterians and others in Ireland we share common values,” says Duncan Hanson, the PCUSA’s coordinator for Europe. “Doug has been a tireless worker for peace, and our young people also have made important contributions.”

Baker describes one way of working for reconciliation at the grass-roots level: “We have groups envision the future they wish they could have, and then what their own contributions would be—what small way they could help individually—because peace will only happen if we all help. It’s not just up to the politicians. It must happen at a personal level. But after all our work in groups on cross-community understanding, realistically it must be said that if people go right back to the atmosphere of intolerance in their segregated communities, it’s hard to sustain the new understanding they might have gained.”

NORTHERN IRELAND

POPULATION just under 1.5 million.
RELIGIOUS MAKE-UP
Protestants, 57%*
Roman Catholics, 41%
Others, 2%

**(19.3% Presbyterians in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland)*

Politics and religion: a deadly dance

1172 Henry II of England arrives in Ireland with an army to show he is the supreme power in the land, beginning England's "civilizing" or "oppressing" presence in Ireland, depending on the point of view.

1366 A "separation" is proclaimed by the English as English and Irish intermingle on Irish soil; intermarriage is forbidden, and the English are forbidden to use Irish names, language, laws and dress.

1560 Elizabeth I tries to force the Irish to accept Protestantism, and the Irish turn to local priests for

support. The deadly dance of politics and religion begins.

1690 The Battle at the River Boyne takes place in which Protestant William of Orange defeats Catholic King James. The battle is still celebrated by the staunchly Protestant Orange Order and invariably causes trouble.

1847 The year of the great potato famine in which half a million Irish people die of starvation. There is still Irish bitterness that the British did not intervene to save lives.

1916 The Easter Uprising of 1916 occurs when a small group of Irish rebels take

control of parts of Dublin to fight for Home Rule. After the rebellion is put down, the execution of most of the rebel leaders leads to increased popular support for Republican leaders seeking independence.

1921 A treaty is signed partitioning

Catholic cause: mural advocating a united Ireland



Pro-Protestant mural: backing ties with the United Kingdom

Ireland, with the new Irish Free State made up of 26 counties in the south and Northern Ireland made up of 6 counties in the north.

1966 Inspired by the civil rights movement in the United States, Catholics/Nationalists who feel discriminated against in the Unionist/Protestant controlled north begin to agitate for change, some Unionists engage in a backlash, and law and order begins to break down.

1969 The British government orders troops onto the streets

of Belfast and Londonderry to restore order. Relations between soldiers and Catholic civilians gradually deteriorate and the "troubles" escalate.

1994 The paramilitaries on both sides declare cease-fires, allowing inter-party peace talks to begin.

1998 The Good Friday Peace Agreement is signed after nearly 30 years of civil strife and the death of more than 3,700 people.

2001 A "power-sharing" government is formed and a fragile peace is holding.



THE NEED FOR

PEACE

Thirty years of civil strife have claimed over 3,700 lives, and thousands more have been injured, bereaved, left unemployed or forced to move as a result of intimidation.

Trevor Long is a member of the Youth Board of PCI and chairman of Youth Link Northern Ireland, which is an ecumenical youth ministry and leadership training organization that runs youth clubs for informal gatherings. Telling about a visit from an elder of his Presbyterian church, he says: "He wanted to know what I was going to do since his son was going out with a girl from the youth club who was Catholic! They were 15 years of age! How sad that people are so fearful."

Long illustrates the ignorance that comes from cultural segregation with this

story: "In a cross-community group discussing their beliefs a Catholic girl asked, 'What do you Protestants believe will happen when you die—do you have heaven and hell like us?'"

Catholics and Protestants are largely segregated in Northern Ireland. Only 4 percent of children go to mixed schools, and there are only 45 such schools in all of Northern Ireland. Neighborhoods are largely segregated as well, and in particularly troubled areas of Belfast, neighborhoods are actually divided by tall concrete barriers. In parts of Belfast and Derry (Londonderry), in both Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods, vivid wall murals have

been painted with inflammatory slogans and threatening paramilitary images representing the terrorists on both sides.

These powerful and loaded visual images are constant reminders of the bitter struggle between those who want to remain a part of the British Isles (usually Protestants) and those who want to reunite with the Republic of Ireland (usually Catholics). Because “the troubles” in Northern Ireland are usually described in terms of Protestants versus Catholics, it is tempting to see the situation in terms of a religious conflict. But Baker explains: “These terms are used as shorthand for what is actually an ethnic conflict. The two sides have different cultural and historical backgrounds as well as religious ones. The political identities and differences are much more significant than the religious ones.”

David Smith, PCI's program officer for its Preparing Youth for Peace Programme, says: “The confusion surrounding how our layers of cultural, political and religious identity interrelate, and particularly how we should prioritize them as Christians, has created a scenario in which the majority of young Presbyterians do not socially engage with or relate to the Catholic community on any regular basis. Our program is specifically designed to enable young Presbyterians to think through their own identity and to instill self-confidence in them in their own religion. It is clear that self-confidence in personal identity breeds the feeling of security, and security breeds stability, and stability breeds openness. As we help them cut through myth and confusion, we hope to prepare them to initiate their own cross-community contacts.”

As politicians stagger toward peace, grabbing the headlines while they haggle over power-sharing and ammunition-dumping and police-reforming, we may not read the newspaper stories of the real peacemakers. But Protestants and Catholics alike, individually and in both religious and secular

Safe place for wounded souls

As the Presbyterian Church of Ireland tries to encourage young people to become leaders working for a peaceful tomorrow, others are working to heal yesterday's wounds. Ruth Patterson, the first ordained female Presbyterian minister in Ireland, established Restoration Ministries in 1988. The purpose of this program is to provide healing and reconciliation to those who have been diminished or trapped or victimized in their personal lives because of the troubles. Patterson served for years as a pastor in a working-class neighborhood where there were many paramilitary activities, and she saw firsthand the work that needed to be done.

People come to Restoration Ministries to tell their stories in a safe and hospitable place. They may be family members of loved ones who have been killed, from either side, or people who participated in the violence in some way, or those who have given care to others throughout the 30 years of violence and are now weary. “People can't lay down their burdens unless they have been truly heard,” says Patterson. A small, gentle woman, she has heard the worst and yet speaks of the future with great hope.

Patterson found that many in Northern Ireland coped well until the conflict cooled in the '90s, and then when some relaxation was able to settle in, their emotions would rise to the surface. “They wanted recognition,” she explains, “that their pain wasn't washed away in the euphoria of peace.”

“It is important that we not only help others, but that all of us make our inner journey of reconciliation, because only then is reconciliation in the outer world possible”



Healers: Ruth Patterson, center, with Catholic co-workers at Restoration Ministries

organizations, are working daily to bring about a longed-for, lasting peace.

“It is not grandiose acts by a few that will bring us peace,” says Ruth Patterson, “but everyone doing the small acts. And in the end, if we succeed, Ireland, in all its littleness, brokenness, stubbornness and division can be a light to other struggling nations and a sign of hope to a weary world.” □

Miriam Sauls, a free-lance writer and a member of White Memorial Presbyterian Church, Raleigh in N.C., participated in a study tour to Northern Ireland sponsored by the Youth Board of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland.