



## **Irish Council of Churches - 30 Years of Peace? A resource for schools**

© Irish Council of Churches 2024

### **Overview & Purpose**

One of the biggest changes in life in Northern Ireland over the last 30 years has been the way our society has worked to develop more peaceful ways of living together. This does not mean that life here has been without violence.

Organisations which had been involved in bombings and shootings as part of what was called The Troubles have not disappeared and are often involved in events which are reported in our news as paramilitary activity. While some have argued that these organisations now exist to help their local communities, others point to figures which show these same organisations still target young people in these same communities as a way of using violence and intimidation to control others and dish out their own kind of justice. In 2023 the PSNI recorded 31 casualties as a result of these kinds of assaults which was an increase from the 25 casualties in 2022.

<https://www.psni.police.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/Security%20Situation%20Statistics%20to%20December%202023.pdf>

This resource has a complete school assembly to use during the month of September (the month in-between the two ceasefires of 1994) and 4 activities designed to provide a platform for KS3 students to engage with some of the issues around this context and allow them space to build their own foundations for a peaceful future for all in Northern Ireland. If you use any of these activities, we would be grateful if you could submit a feedback form to us and let us know your comments.

---

## Objective

To present human factors in understanding the impact of paramilitary violence and the ceasefires of 30 years ago and use student outcomes to explore a contemporary response to give hope for the future.

## Activity 1

Starting point - 'Headline' game - have a range of newspaper stories presented separate from their headlines. Pupils should try to link the correct headline to the correct story. Group feedback on what factors were behind the decision to match.

---

Headline example - Super Sprinter aiming for Gold Rush

Story detail

- 18 year old about to represent their country in athletics
- They have spent their whole school life working on running skills for sprinting
- Teachers from the school say that their student is a great example of what is possible

---

Headline example - Climate Crisis focus for Conference

Story detail

- Schools in poorer parts of big cities have been forced to close in hot weather because of a lack of equipment to keep the classrooms cool
- Surveys have shown that both staff and students in these schools want to keep the schools open to help offer the right education for kids during the day and adults in the evening
- Students from these schools have come together to do something about changing their school buildings for the better

---

Headline example - Train Toils in the Heat

Story detail

- Changes in our summer weather has meant that the machines we use to travel in have to work harder in warmer weather

- 
- The tracks used by trains are made of metal and can be easily damaged by too much heat
  - Trains in the summer often have their journeys cancelled since they cannot travel safely on tracks which are too hot
- 

#### Headline example - Scoping for the Stars

##### Story detail

- New plans from space agencies around the world want to place humans on the planet Mars by the year 2030
  - Preparations for getting into space safely require that we gather more accurate information on what other planets might be like
  - New telescopes are being developed to make sure that we can find out as much as we can about other planets
- 

#### Headline example - Titanic effort to bring it home

##### Story detail

- Belfast City Council is always working hard to provide attractions for tourists to come visit
- The divers who discovered the wreck of the Titanic have developed new submarines to be able to get to the ship more safely
- Belfast City Council have tried to set aside a large amount of money to be able to purchase some of the items brought back from the Titanic so that they can place it in the Belfast Titanic attraction



---

## Activity 2

Developing understanding -

Use the same format as the initial headline and story activity to move into a focus on paramilitary activities in Northern Ireland over the last 10 years.

These stories are based on: <https://www.endingtheharm.com/real-life-stories/> - video source for reflection on the real life aspect of these story headlines

Present Story Examples about paramilitary violence but work this time on creating their own headline. In order to do this, divide each group into perpetrator/victims and observers and reflect on the questions before coming up with the headline.

Each group should give feedback on the factors explaining why they made the decision about the headline they used.

---

Story Example -

- A single parent is struggling to pay bills for food and heating until they can find a better job
  - The single parent looks to borrow some money for a short time from someone in the local community since they know they won't get a loan from a bank
  - The only person locally with access to that kind of money is a member of a paramilitary organisation who asks for further payment with threats if these are not met
- 

Story Example -

- A young man is looking for a relatively small loan but since he can't get it from one of the local banks, he gets involved in helping to deliver drugs with a local gang
  - He realizes he can make a bit of money on the side by selling on some of the drugs to other friends
  - The paramilitary group finds out about this and issue threats to the young man's parents that unless they repay the debt, their son will be found and killed
  - The demands for repayment keep coming even though the original amount has been repaid many times over
- 

Story Example -

- A widow is struggling to pay her bills after the death of her husband since his job was the main way of bringing money into the home

- 
- In the winter the heating bills were too much for the widow to pay and she goes to the local paramilitary group for help
  - They get her son to do deliveries in the community to pay for the loan
  - When she tries to get out of this arrangement they threaten her by saying her son could go to prison for criminal activity
  - She now feels trapped as she cannot go to the police to get help
- 

In each group divide into: perpetrators, victims and observers - then try to answer the following question from each perspective:

Perpetrators:

- Why did you get involved in this?
- How did you feel before you issued the threat?
- If you felt someone was going to get hurt, what led you to cause harm regardless?
- Who did you think it would affect?
- Has it affected any others?
- How has it affected you?
- If you had thought about the consequences would you have acted the way you did?

Victims

- What happened to you?
- How have you suffered?
- What are the effects on you and your family from the threats?
- How do you feel about the person who injured you?

Observers

- How did you react when you witnessed this in your community?
- Were you involved yourself?
- What action did you take?
- Did you help the victim?
- Did you just disappear and ignore the whole thing?
- How were you affected by what you saw?

Given all these stories and headlines - what are some of the situations that push people towards paramilitarism?



## Activity 3



Begin this section by asking the group what they know about ceasefires in Northern Ireland. Also ask them to define what a ceasefire is.

The picture above is deliberately shaped to make it look like the child has used this wall to write their message. What happened in 1994?

- On 31st August 1994, the Irish Republican Army declared a complete cessation of military operations from midnight onwards
- In October, the Combined Loyalist Military Command made a statement saying they would cease military operations. This was on behalf of the UDA (Ulster Defence Army), the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) and the Red Hand Commando.
- After over 25 years of the Troubles, and over 3000 deaths, these statements were welcome
- The challenge is that many of these organisations from the Troubles continue to exist in some shape or form

Looking back over the stories you've looked at in the group work session, put yourself in the position of that child.

- What would lead them to write this on a wall in Belfast in 1994?
- What would have made it a brave thing to have written this message on a wall at this time?

Pivot to looking forward:

The language of ceasefires in 1994 from the paramilitaries spoke of their intention to stop fighting and look for a 'just settlement' instead as part of a 'true peace'. Martin Luther King Jr worked for peace and a just society in America. He said that 'true peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice'.

---

A peaceful world is one where there is justice; where everyone is treated fairly, where there is no violence, no fear, no hatred.

Martin Luther King Jr also said 'peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal'. If we want peace, we need to be peaceful. If we want justice, we need to treat each other justly.

If justice is the payment given to the perpetrator when someone has been wronged there needs to be a system which decides how to arbitrate justice consistently. Often justice is decided in the courtroom. Paramilitary forms of justice happen outside of this justice system and occur when paramilitary groups take matters into their own hands and decide on how extreme the form of punishment should be. Paramilitary forms of justice operate on fear.

Jesus came to bring justice by choosing the path of peace. When he was arrested on the night of his betrayal, he went freely without having to be forced and challenged Peter for choosing the sword. He said 'those who live by the sword, die by the sword' Matthew 26:52. If you live by violence, it will surely follow you. Peace was so important to Jesus that he said those who are peacemakers are children of God. It is easy to retaliate, and want to punish those who have hurt us but it takes self control to break this cycle and choose to walk away. Maybe it is learning to listen to someone who has a different opinion to yours without diminishing them.

After the ceasefires of 1994, sadly it would be another 4 years before there had been enough progress to create the talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement. In the 30 years since these first ceasefires we have learned a lot about how precious these ideas of justice and peace are.

Follow up question:

- What are some of the reasons that groups take matters of justice into their own hands?



---

## Activity 4

### Hexagon Exercise

- If you took a video/photo of your home street or school that demonstrated what peace and justice looks like ... what would be in that picture. Or, if you were to make a TikTok video of what peace and justice looks like, what would be in it? Discuss your answer in groups
- In each group try to identify 6 keywords or themes that are common to all the answers
- Each student receives a wooden hexagon
- On that hexagon they will write their response to the central question of how to describe peace
- Have every student write the words 'Peace is ....' then either finish the sentence in 6 words or use 6 words to describe qualities of peace
- For example: Peace is .... Listening, caring and helping each other  
Peace is ..... Changing out of love for others  
Peace is .... No to violence yes to love
- The final display will put all these hexagons together in a giant causeway on the floor







**Churches  
in Ireland**  
Connecting  
in Christ