

Inquiry into Building a United Community Terms of Reference
The Inquiry will:

Explore perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations including:

Thanks for the opportunity to make contribution to this Inquiry
The BTUC paper when launched contained really pragmatic opportunities to do real work that I felt would make a difference.
I could identify with what would work - because in a community like ours we were already doing some of this. We have since 2001 a Cross community playgroup and for 22 years cross community summer schemes (each just after Twelfth). across the divide for the past 22 years in what often were difficult times.
And in 2014 notable for having NO Summer scheme due to lack of funding.
And we had over a 100 children attending.
That summer scheme was the basis for starting a community group here at a rural interface area. So hopes raised and big disappointment on many fronts but most notable unable to access funds for type of programme needed to meaningfully engage Protestant and Catholic young people.
And will this lead to winding down our cross community endeavours.
Thought the BTUC paper in 2013 was there to make it happen for communities like ours.

Context and experience

My experience is based on 'lived experiences' -was 18 years old in 1968.
So all my adult life has been in the context of 'troubles' and since 1994 involved in a voluntary way in rebuilding community here.
I live in a rural interface area in Armoy North Antrim.
I live in the same place - same land as my ancestors lived when that 'agricultural census' of 1803 was carried out - post 1798!

Politics and division - pulling together and being pulled in different directions has been part of the dynamic of this area for generations.

In 1911 Armoy ward was one of the very few wards in the whole of non divided Ireland that was 50% Protestant : 50% Catholic.

We have and live side by side and know about what that reality is.

Back then...

Not much of substance has been written about Armoy.

But it was important in the old Kingdom of Dalriada; the Round Tower signifies an importance back then of place and the people ; the Cairn of Peace to commemorate the 1959 World Ploughing contest was a great event;

the old Hump Back Bridge was built around the time of the Battle of the Boyne and still looks old and beautiful!

The new Bridge was added just 150 years ago;

the Narrow Gauge Railway to connect Ballymoney and Ballycastle and us was closed in July 1950;

our connection with Motorbike racing is legendary- Joey Dunlop and the Armoy Armada ..

All of this and more is shared history and shared appreciation...

Mixed community - who cares?

But there is a greater reality that not much happens here; two sides can create difficulty - the historical mistrust, lack of representation , being labelled etc in a mixed / interface area can create apathy, indifference , resignation, acceptance and blame culture ?

The alternative that creates an energy at interface areas is often conflict, contesting space, disputes etc and if they are packaged in a political divisive manner then the profile of the area and needs etc are raised and addressed?

But who needs to or wants to speak for 'the needs' of both Protestants and Catholics? Even real common needs - an equality unfortunately often determined by lack, deprivation etc is ignored. And that is largely our continuing experience here. There is no given constituency of people to back a few volunteers who step out into that sort of work. And do politicians and their departments want to back those doing real work that applies across the interface?

Indeed what degree of understanding is there after all these years of what it means and the challenges to building neighbourliness across the divide with those local people who share the same place? It is really fine doing programmes, projects and publicity with interested people but building community with those who are different - where one lives is the acid test. This tests tolerance and overcoming some of the obstacles is not easy - extremely difficult - similar to what happens in the professional arena of politics.

And this area knows about the division, segregation, sectarianism etc and what it is to live at an interface area. But we have strived and ran with an alternative which changes things. But the real work is hard and at present very undervalued.

Inspired by our own politicians

Armoyn has seen progress over the past 20 years in rekindling the decency of neighbourliness that was once the hallmark of this rural area.

We also know the realities and resistances - from 20 years experience.

And how was this possible? Simply of what happened in August / October 1994.

And we applaud all our politicians who have taken the brave steps to create circumstances that inspired a small place like us here on the 5th October 1994 to form a cross community group to address real needs of this community.

Since 2001 we have a shared facility literally at the crossroads where one community ends and the other begins. A shared facility used daily for the shared needs of Protestants and Catholics. A shared facility directly opposite where Mervyn Storey MLA was reared. And his journey from here to his political position is important to us.

And in terms of being a mixed community we feel that there is currently a lack of political willingness to help a rural area like this. Yet this is working in spite of having the thinking applied to support places like this build a united community.

The support both financial and moral in the period ~ 1994 to 2004 allowed us to access funds to build a shared community building in contrast to the apparent pulling back in support since the Executive became operational.

We are left to our own devices to run a shared community centre without financial assistance from any government agencies. There is now a distinct lack of interest - even a reluctance - distaste from agency staff etc to hear or mention this Protestant and Catholic thing. Our political stagnation, polarisation appears to have taken the 'shared' emphasis into something not for now but for the future.

If you talk for the Catholic / Nationalist or Protestant / Unionist side you can be taken seriously but the mixed area is pushed to the margins.

Shared space

It appears that we have a more favourable climate towards acceptance of single identity areas. We accessed capital through IFI /DSD to build a shared space. Single identity areas and facilities are backed on either side of the divide. However a single mixed identity group with a shared facility that carries all the overheads etc operating at an interface does not have the luxury for volunteer support similar to the social capital existing in a single identity community.

This community facility is used by both sides but to take on the responsibility etc to run with a cross community agenda is still out of kilter with the political context currently operational. So volunteers running with this shared agenda are very few.

This facility was jointly proposed at an open community meeting in 1995 by both a DUP and SF councillor - and at a time when they allegedly were not speaking to one another. Their willingness to see the real needs of this community was and is still an inspiration that 'needs' can be common despite divergent party political allegiances. So at our interface area - Armoy there is a litany of neglect - of being bypassed.

Yes this mixed area offers the potential to do a lot to show that ordinary people with a great diversity of difference can unite around common needs. Good groundwork has been done on which we could propel this community forward.

Our Centre Tilly Molloy's has allowed the playgroup to operate in a shared centre, allows Surestart to do wonderful work, provides space for a Community pharmacy, cafe, 2 rented flats, rented out public toilets, hairdresser's, Mother and Toddlers group etc

In this shared space people get to know what unites them rather than divides them .

All of this managed voluntary.

We have been Building the United Community for 20 years .

We are grateful to agencies , government bodies who helped us.

And we are Grateful to a whole range of unlikely people who bought into what they could see we were doing. Through use of the facility relationships have been transformed.

And the shared conclusion or shared consensus just hours ago with someone from well across the divide is that this community is ignored because there is not enough trouble here!

Yes it appears that there is a continuing penalty or lack of real interest in a mixed and rural interface area for going about it in a peaceful way?

But the real and enduring legacy here is around relationship building.

Shared space, shared facilities , shared needs etc allows ordinary people to get to know one another and they personally value getting to know and even like people across the divide.

Yes there is a shared pride in belonging to a small place that is diverse - has 3 Orange Lodges, 3 Church Halls, GAA club, Rugby Club, Masonic Hall, 2 primary schools and a shared community facility - Tilly Molloy's .

As we reach 20 years of doing this there is a great yearning and confidence that our politicians can start to bat together to give this mixed area a real lift by directing resources here to show that the alternative peaceful way is a viable option to follow.

Many thanks - for what this is worth

Gerry Burns

Sec Armoy Community Association