

What does it mean to be a reconciling community when everyone seems to be getting along?

As a Diocese, we've committed to create Reconciling Communities – it's one of our strategic objectives, alongside new communities, eco-communities, intergenerational and intercultural worshipping communities. But compared to those four, Reconciling Communities can feel trickier to pin down. Of course, the members of your PCC might not always see eye to eye, but you might feel that it hardly calls for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And although we long for an end to the wars which plague the international stage, it's unlikely that any of us are equipped to moonlight as UN Peacekeepers. So, what exactly does reconciliation look like in our churches, fresh expressions and schools?

It is helpful to start by asking what is reconciliation for? Pictures of conflict resolution and peace treaties spring to mind, but theologically, reconciliation goes deeper. It's the restoration of the fault-lines which emerged through the Fall between humanity and God, between individuals and people groups, and between humanity and the rest of creation. So what reconciliation brings forth is shalom – commonly translated peace, this Hebrew word refers to not just an absence of violence, but to wholeness.

That wholeness has to be experienced collectively. For if St Paul is right to imagine the Church as one body, with all of its parts mutually dependent and equally valuable, and to infer that 'if one part suffers, every part suffers with it' (1 Corinthians 12:26), then a reconciled community is one where all aspects of God's creation are able to flourish.

That means becoming you don't have to wait for conflict to break out to become a reconciled community. Nor is it an objective distinct from those concerning Intergenerational, Intercultural and Eco-Communities. Because by seeking greater harmony with our natural environment, and greater understanding, inclusion and equality between people of different backgrounds, those efforts will inevitably add to our mission of being Reconciling Communities as well.

Similarly, reconciliation isn't an add-on to the life of worship in our churches, given it is embedded in our communion liturgy. Before we are able to receive the bread (representing the body of Christ), the congregation declares itself to also be a representation of the same Body – first, through the sharing of the peace and then through the affirmation, 'Though we are many, we are one body because we all share in one bread'.

This pattern of being reconciled to one another before we seek oneness with God is drawn from Jesus' own teaching. He asked His disciples to make peace with anyone who "*has something against*" them before offering their gift to God (Matthew 5:23–26). Similarly, several of the New Testament epistles argue against allowing differences in wealth, spiritual maturity (see 1 Corinthians 8), or legal disputes disrupt the worshipping community.

Part of the reason for doing so, I think, is because it is by being one body that we witness to the nature of the Triune God – diversity in loving unity – and to achieve

that unity, we have to recognise our dependence on each other, and the unsurpassable worth of each limb and ligament.

Being a reconciling community also means attending to the divides and the divisions in our neighbourhoods and beyond. Nationally, we are becoming more segregated, with a growing proportion of people reporting that all their friends are of the same ethnicity, religion, age, and have the same level of education as them.ⁱ There are widespread fears that we are also becoming more politically polarised and less tolerant.ⁱⁱ More locally, Leicester and Leicestershire police force area has one of the highest hate crime rates in England.ⁱⁱⁱ So while being reconciled with each other is crucial to the integrity of our worship, becoming a force for reconciliation in our wider communities is one of the ways we can lovingly serve our world.

That doesn't have to involve wading uninvited into local disputes, or setting up your vicar as a clerical Judge Judy. You might have heard the phrase 'prevention is better than cure' in the context of health but it can also be applied to reconciliation. It is better (and easier) to build positive relationships and inclusive communities before conflict arises than try to repair them after it has. According to the Contact Hypothesis, interpersonal contact, especially spending time together regularly over an extended period, can reduce prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination.^{iv} These effects are best achieved when groups come together as equals, working together towards a common goal.

To think about what this might look like practically in your context, here are some prompts for reflection:

- Is the exchange of peace in your communion service experienced as meaningfully as it could be? Is it an opportunity for congregants to recognise their mutual need for each other and to appreciate their oneness in Christ? Is there support and encouragement for community-members to seek forgiveness of those they have wronged in thought or action and to make amends?
- What fractures are present in your local area? Are these affecting life in the schools, community organisations or other churches with which you are connected? Are there any other organisations or leaders seeking to address them, and do you have any skills or resources in your worshipping community to support them to do so?
- How might you create, support or build on opportunities for people from different backgrounds to spend time together, cooperating to achieve a shared goal? By doing so, likely you'll also be working towards becoming an intergenerational and intercultural community too. Framed in this way, the strategic objective which seemed impossible (how is little old me supposed to bring about world peace?) or elusive proves to lie not only behind our other missions as a Diocese, but also our callings as followers of Christ, His hands and feet on earth.

ⁱ Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Oct 2021) Community Life Survey. Online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-202021>

ⁱⁱ Edelman (2020) 2020 Trust Barometer UK Results. Online at: www.edelman.co.uk/research/2020-trust-barometer-uk-results

ⁱⁱⁱ Allen, G. and Zayed, Y (2021) Hate Crime Statistics. London: House of Commons Library. Online at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8537/CBP-8537.pdf>

^{iv} Pettigrew, T. F.; Tropp, L. R. (2006). "A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 90 (5): 751–783. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751. PMID 16737372.