

“God in the Fog”: Reflections on the Irish Inter-Church Meeting 2024

The Thirty-Fourth Irish Inter-Church Meeting (IICM) took place in the Dromantine Retreat and Conference Centre near Newry on 12th-13th November 2024. The IICM is the body made up of the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) and the Catholic Church whose co-chairs are Moravian Bishop Sarah Groves and Catholic Bishop Brendan Leahy. Amid the gathering fog outside, the Meeting explored the theme, *Finding the Face of God in One Another*, viewing reconciliation in its many dimensions.

The fog became a recurring metaphor for me while considering the challenges of reconciliation. Much like the mist obscures clarity, divisions in society, whether rooted in history, race, inequality, or polarization, cloud our ability to see the divine image in others. Yet, the faint light of the sun, breaking through even the densest fog, reminds us of the hope that reconciliation offers: a higher calling to heal, restore, and connect in a fragmented world.

The keynote address by **Professor Martin Leiner**, Director of the Jena Centre for Reconciliation Studies in Germany, offered a compelling examination of reconciliation as both a theological and practical discipline. Drawing on global experiences, including his work on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and peacebuilding in the Middle East, Prof. Leiner provided a robust framework for understanding the transformative power of reconciliation. He described reconciliation as a dynamic, unfinished process that balances theological ideals with practical applications. He emphasized that reconciliation is not merely a conclusion to conflict but a way of being, an ongoing relationship between God, humanity, and creation. Drawing on Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*, he likened reconciliation to the struggle against the “gravity” of retaliation and division, calling on participants to embrace the grace that transforms broken relationships into opportunities for healing.

Key Insights from Prof. Leiner’s Address

1. **The Centrality of Trust:** Reconciliation requires building trust to transcend conflict and prevent its recurrence. Examples included post-election disarmament efforts in Colombia and Georgetown University’s acknowledgment of its historical ties to slavery, which initiated a process of institutional reconciliation.
2. **Global Networks of Reconciliation Studies:** Prof. Leiner shared his efforts to establish international collaborations, such as the Academic Alliance for Reconciliation Studies in the Middle East and North Africa. These networks aim to bring together scholars and practitioners to create systemic approaches to peacebuilding.
3. **Creative Practices for Transformation:** Citing initiatives that use education, such as analysing schoolbooks for peace-promoting narratives, he stressed the importance of practical tools for fostering reconciliation.
4. **Reconciliation as a “Toolbox”:** Prof. Leiner urged participants to view reconciliation practices as adaptable tools, capable of addressing a wide range of conflicts. These tools, he suggested, can be tailored to local contexts while drawing on universal principles.

Through his address, Prof. Leiner underscored that reconciliation is both a spiritual calling and a practical necessity in a fractured world. His insights resonated deeply with the Irish context, offering a way forward for communities still grappling with the legacies of violence and division.

The next morning, building on the theological underpinnings of reconciliation, **Rev. Karen Campbell**, Good Relations Officer of the ICC introduced *Peaced Together*, a grassroots programme started by **Heidi Singleton** who was born in Northern Ireland, that uses arts and crafts to promote healing and connection. Originating in East London, the initiative has gained popularity across Ireland and beyond, offering a unique, non-verbal pathway to reconciliation. *Peaced Together* encourages women to explore themes of restoration, hope, and love through creative projects. The programme’s practical activities, such as mosaic making, weaving, and journaling, provide a space for women to process their personal experiences, find beauty in brokenness and build community connections.

The programme has expanded to diverse contexts, including prisons, trauma recovery groups, and migrant communities. It has been translated into multiple languages and adapted for settings as varied as Sierra Leone, the Caribbean, and inner city Ireland. Karen and Heidi shared stories of transformation, such as a participant who overcame deep personal struggles to become a trainer, spreading the programme’s message of hope. Alison from Willowfield Parish in inner East Belfast shared profound stories of personal and community transformation. By bridging the spiritual and the practical, *Peaced Together* exemplifies how reconciliation can begin at the grassroots level and ripple outward into broader communities.

Our discussions then turned to societal reconciliation. Theologians like **Rev. Philip McKinley**, **Dr. Kevin Hargaden** and **Prof. Suzanne Mulligan** explored issues such as racism, environmental justice, and economic inequality. Their reflections underscored the interconnectedness of social and ecological crises, emphasizing the need for an integrated approach rooted in faith and justice.

Rev. McKinley’s presentation centred on reconciliation as a lived experience, particularly in the context of **social inclusion**. As the co-founder of the Discovery Gospel Choir and a long-time advocate for intercultural and faith-based reconciliation, he drew on rich personal experiences of fostering dialogue and collaboration among diverse communities.

One of the most compelling aspects of his input was his emphasis on how churches can proactively address racism and xenophobia. He highlighted creative ways to engage with Ireland’s growing multicultural population, particularly through music and storytelling, which serve as universal languages for building understanding. His reflections on the symbolic significance of the Magi—representing different continents and peoples—challenged attendees to think globally about inclusion while acting locally to dismantle divisions.

Dr. Hargaden brought a prophetic voice to the Meeting by framing reconciliation within the broader context of **environmental justice**. As the director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, he explored the intersection of faith, ecology, and social transformation, offering a compelling theological vision for addressing the intertwined crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. He emphasized the urgency of ecological reconciliation, noting that the rapid

degradation of natural systems threatens the very fabric of human and non-human life. He warned that Ireland, despite its relatively temperate climate, is not immune to these crises, highlighting alarming trends such as the decline of native species and the impact of global warming on ocean systems. What set his contribution apart was his theological framing. Drawing on Pope Francis's concept of *integral ecology* from *Laudato Si'*, he argued that the divide between social and environmental concerns is artificial. True reconciliation, he contended, must address the ecological wounds that mirror humanity's spiritual and social fractures.

Dr. Mulligan challenged participants to confront **inequality's** corrosive impact on democracy and community, urging churches to foster proximity, both to the marginalized and to nature. This perspective echoed the Meeting's theme: recognizing God's face in others, including those deemed "other" by society. Her presentation began with an exploration of how inequality manifests across generations, affecting not just material well-being but also the human spirit. Drawing from the work of philosophers like Michael Sandel, she argued that contemporary societies are overly reliant on economic indicators to measure progress. While metrics such as GDP or employment rates may appear positive, they often mask deeper social fractures, including feelings of exclusion and disempowerment among marginalized groups. Her critique extended to the cultural implications of inequality. She highlighted how economic disparities fuel a sense of loss and nostalgia, which political actors often exploit to stoke fear and division. This "politics of fear" creates a fertile ground for xenophobia and racism, transforming economic grievances into hostility toward migrants or other perceived "outsiders."

The final session adopted the *Conversations in the Spirit* methodology, mirroring the synodal approach championed by Pope Francis. Guided by Julieann Moran, General Secretary of the Irish Synodal Pathway, participants engaged in mutual listening and discernment, seeking to identify what the Holy Spirit might be calling them to do in this *kairos* moment for Irish society.

What a great 24 hours! Apart from the enthralling content, there were fascinating conversations around the table, in the coffee dock, during short walks outside, over meals, at the evening reception. An enjoyable interlude was the workshop with on Saturday evening. Approached by some with a bit of scepticism, we all soon joined in the fun and discovered profound insights as Carol Kane guided us through a collective exercise in painting allowing us to view things from different perspectives.

A different perspective is presenting itself to the IICM as the last morning was the opportunity to express our gratitude to **Damian Jackson**, who will be leaving his position as General Secretary at the end of the year. Bishops Groves, Leahy and Forster were superlative in singing Damian's praises, knowing full well he is not a man who likes centre stage. Damian has made a very significant contribution to the work of the Churches in Ireland, to their unity and to their voice in the public domain. His sound counsel and humble wisdom will be greatly missed. We wished him and his family well in the next stage of his life.

Shortly after the event, I came across an interview with **Margaret Karram**, President of the Focolare Movement, who highlighted reconciliation’s potential to foster hope and collaboration across divides. Her reflections, coupled with the Meeting’s closing synodal conversations, pointed to a future where reconciliation extends beyond church walls, offering pathways for healing in every facet of society. She said, *“I think it is better to talk about reconciliation rather than forgiveness. Forgiveness is a very strong word and few are able to forgive, to feel free with the feeling of having had social, human and political justice. I am convinced that peace will not come from above, from the government and politicians. Peace will come from below, it will come from personal relationships with people, to be built one step at a time. In moments of tension, if I do not go beyond my feelings, I risk continuing to create hatred. It becomes a chain that cannot be broken”*.

As the Meeting concluded, we reflected on the work ahead. Reconciliation, as Prof. Leiner reminded us, is not linear but iterative, a journey requiring trust, creativity, and faith. Programmes like *Peaced Together* demonstrated the power of grassroots efforts to transform lives, while theological insights emphasized the need to integrate reconciliation into both ecclesial and societal frameworks.

The persistent fog outside Dromantine was a poignant reminder of the obstacles to clarity and unity in today’s world. Yet, the Meeting also highlighted the enduring presence of God’s light, calling all to rise above division and strive for a higher goal. *Finding the Face of God in One Another* is not just an aspiration; it is a practice that, when embraced, can illuminate even the foggiest paths.