



Holy Cross

When you listen to the community voices, what are some of the themes that jump out at you?

Have these any relevance or connection in any dispute in your own country, or school, or family situation?

In this section we list a few themes. Are they the most important, or what others do you think are better? With each theme we ask some key questions. Are there ways in which you can use these questions in your own context?

Theme 1: Moral issues

1. Some people said that Holy Cross was a particularly immoral dispute because children were being used.
2. Catholic parents said it was outrageous that their children were abused on their way to school.
3. Some Protestants said the children would not have been abused at all if the parents had taken a different route to school.
4. Protestants also said they had no problem with the children. It was the parents they were opposing, and their reasons were that they believed some of these parents were in the IRA and were threatening their community.

Questions

1. Is it ever moral to use children in a conflict? Think of young suicide bombers or stone throwers in Palestine.
2. If you say no, does that mean you have to give in to the other side, for instance by bringing children to school by a different route?

Theme 2: The Wider Picture

At one level, the Holy Cross conflict is just about children going to school by a particular route. But it's also part of the wider Northern Ireland, British - Irish conflict. This conflict went through a major change in 1985 when the British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Under this, they both agreed that the problem was one of two minorities: nationalists/Catholics were a minority within Northern Ireland, whilst unionists/Protestants were a minority on the island of Ireland as a whole.

The new relationship between the two Governments slowly made an impact on the groups within Northern Ireland - so much so, that nearly all the parties were able to accept the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Under this, both Unionists and Nationalists were given an effective veto within a devolved government. This meant they had to work together.

However, there were still problems over issues like the early release of prisoners, the disbandment of paramilitary groups and symbols.

One of the 'symbol conflicts' was over Orange (Protestant) marches going through Catholic areas. The Orangemen resented it when their marches were re-routed. For them, this was a symbol that their religion and way of life was being threatened. Nationalists objected when marches were put through their area – they saw it as triumphalism.

All these pressures were felt very strongly in North Belfast where there is a growing Catholic and a declining Protestant population. One way of looking at the Holy Cross conflict is to see it as a battle for territory.

Questions

1. Why do people struggle over territory? Is it always about something tangible or can it be about fear of their future, fear that their way of life or their people are threatened?
2. Many Protestants have said: 'If Orangemen can't walk their traditional routes, why should Catholic kids be allowed to go through our area to their schools?' They have also said to Catholics: 'Why don't you go into your houses for 15 minutes while the parades go past? Then you won't be insulted'. In the Holy Cross dispute, Elaine Burns says the Protestants could pick '23 other hours in the day when Catholic schoolchildren were not going to school'. Who is right? Do people go out of their way to be insulted?
3. If people are afraid, what can you do to help them deal with their fear?
4. The principals of the Protestant and Catholic schools said that they had excellent relations in the recent past. Is there any way to protect the value of such work when the wider world impacts on the local area?

Theme 3: Piggy in the middle

Both sides blamed the police. Some people in the nationalist community said they did a good job, but others in both the nationalist and unionist community said they were heavy-handed. The police said they were 'piggy in the middle', getting it from both sides.

Questions

1. Is the 'middle' a good place to be? Is this where bridge-builders should be? Or can you build a bridge if you stand in the middle? Do you not have to start at each side and start reaching out to the other?
2. One man said the Government should build a new school for the Catholics. Then they wouldn't have to come near the Protestant area at all. Is separation the answer?

Theme 4: The past

The past dominates conversation when people from different communities in Northern Ireland come together to talk about the conflict.

Questions

1. How do we listen to the pain different people have experienced in the past?
2. Is listening enough? Are there ways of helping people move beyond talking about their past pain?
3. At what point, and in what ways can people be encouraged to listen to the pain of the other side as well as their own?

Theme 5: Forgiving

In one interview, Shannon Irvine says 'But whatever they do, I'll always forgive them'. The issue of forgiveness is hotly discussed in Northern Ireland. Is this relevant to your own context?

Questions

1. Christians emphasise the need for victims to forgive because of the example of Jesus. Many Jews see this as 'cheap grace' - it somehow pretends the wrong done was not all that bad. Do Jews understand Christian forgiving correctly? Does forgiving let the guilty party off the hook?
2. Is forgiving necessary in order to move on from the past? Or can we say we will deal with our enemies, just as you would with a government department, but we won't have any relationship with them?
3. Is the language of 'forgiving' appropriate in political conflict, or is it only appropriate at an interpersonal level?

Theme 6: Peace

'My four-year-old was skipping up the road to school'. Is this what peace looks like to you?

Questions

1. What would peace look like in your world?
2. How could you ensure that it lasted and was not torn apart again by wider influences?

Theme 7: Institutions

In any conflict, the territory of the different groups is clearly marked out. People associated with different traditions also mark out their own territory. In a conflict, symbols and flags are often used to mark territory and show boundaries. Associations might be made with different sporting teams or different groups might assume distinct dress codes at public events. Attendance at ritual events are taken as marks of support for causes, and absences are noted.

Look at the Streetscape activity, then read Karin Eyben's article in Holy Cross Perspectives and discuss the following:

1. What role might public bodies have in dismantling sectarian interfaces.
2. List other conflict situations where communities live in separate neighbourhoods.
3. Why do you find symbols, flags and political graffiti in some working class neighbourhoods but never in middle class ones?