



Everybody Hurts: Vying for Victimhood in Northern Ireland

Project Goals

- ◆ Gain a better understanding of the Troubles and their impact on current Northern Ireland society, from both perspectives
- ◆ Experience the challenges and rewards of working with single-identity and cross-community victim and survivor groups during this exciting and critical time
- ◆ Become a friend and role model to the other residents of Mount Zion House, a home for troubled youths ages 16-25

Key Dilemmas

- ◆ What can I, an American Jew, contribute to the alleviation of violence between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland?
- ◆ How can I develop a framework to accommodate, recognize, and respect each side's "truth"?
- ◆ Can the "victim" label be applied only to individuals who have suffered innocently, or do those who have turned to violence as a response to their own pain, and that of their communities, fall into this category as well?

Personal Goals

- ◆ Listen, non-judgmentally, to the tragedies of all those who have been affected by the Troubles
- ◆ Befriend and derive inspiration from the coexistence practitioners I encountered
- ◆ Experience what is beautiful, as well as what is conflicted, within Northern Ireland

Activities

- ◆ Helped to develop liaisons between FACT and other community organizations
- ◆ Attended conferences and workshops on a range of Troubles-related topics, including funding issues for community groups and lessons from other international regions of tension
- ◆ Participated in a three-day retreat for Protestant and Catholic children who had never before encountered members of the "other side"



Miriam with Tommy and Connor, two eleven-year-olds, and Gillian, a youth volunteer, on a retreat at the north coast; Tommy, a Protestant, and Connor, a Catholic, had never before encountered members of the "other side".



Important Learnings

- ◆ Protestant and Catholics in Northern Ireland view the Troubles as the result of racial rather than religious differences.
- ◆ The Good Friday Agreement, in which the paramilitary organizations of both sides renounced violence, is a step forward rather than a total resolution of sectarianism.
- ◆ The question of Northern Ireland's identity is not a simple one of British imperialism versus Irish nationalism, but rather an 800-year-old debacle that can be resolved only by taking into account the needs and concerns of every member of society.



Top— A mural in the Protestant part of Belfast: It says "UFF" which stands for the Ulster Freedom Fighters, a paramilitary group. It also depicts the red hand of Ulster and the six pointed star, with one point for each county.

Bottom left— Plaque erected in honor of the brother of FACT's coordinator: As an Ulster Defense Regiment volunteer on behalf of the British Army, he was gunned down by the IRA at age 20.

Bottom right— A Lambeg drummer: These drums are associated with Protestant culture.



One aspect that makes football contentious in Northern Ireland is the question of which team to support. The first time I met Philip, a Loyalist Protestant, I broke the ice by asking whether he was watching the World Cup. It was a rhetorical question, because absolutely everyone follows the World Cup. By that time, both England and Ireland had advanced to the final sixteen teams. England was slated to play Denmark that week, and Philip admitted that he was planning to take the day off work to watch the match. I asked whether he would also take a day off to watch Ireland play against Spain. Quickly I realized that I had asked the wrong question! He snapped back, "We're part of Great Britain. Why should I care about Ireland's football?" On the other hand, many of the Catholics I met identified strongly with the Irish quest for the World Cup trophy.

Miriam highlighted in the local newspaper

