
**Attitudes to
Faith, Church & Sectarianism
In
Co Sligo**

Report prepared by

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for

**Riverbrooke Cross Border Initiative
Inter Faith Programme 2010**

Foreword

I am grateful for the opportunity to write this foreword to the Report on Attitudes to Faith, Church and Sectarianism in County Sligo prepared by Mary Daly on behalf of the Riverbrooke Cross Border Initiative Inter Faith Programme. It also provides an opportunity on behalf of the Steering Group, to commend Mary for the considerable time, effort and expertise which have been put into the Report.

The report itself makes it clear that it is not intended to be a definitive work on attitudes to faith, Church and sectarianism in County Sligo today. It is rather a collection of views and attitudes identified in the research which was conducted across a wide spectrum of society. Many of the views expressed are challenging and should provide a valuable springboard for further debate.

I commend this Report as a focus for further study, discussion and debate in the Churches and in the wider community in County Sligo.

Derick Swann
September 2010

Acknowledgements

The Researcher would like to acknowledge the time given so generously by all the people who assisted in this research project. Research participants gave openly of their thoughts and experiences, sometimes on difficult and sensitive areas of their lives, and it is their contribution that brings this document to life.

Special thanks must go to the Steering Group of the Inter-Faith Project who have guided and steered this work from its beginning. Thanks also to the staff and students of both the local schools who engaged in focus groups that ensured we maintained a perspective that included younger people in the research.

Mary Daly

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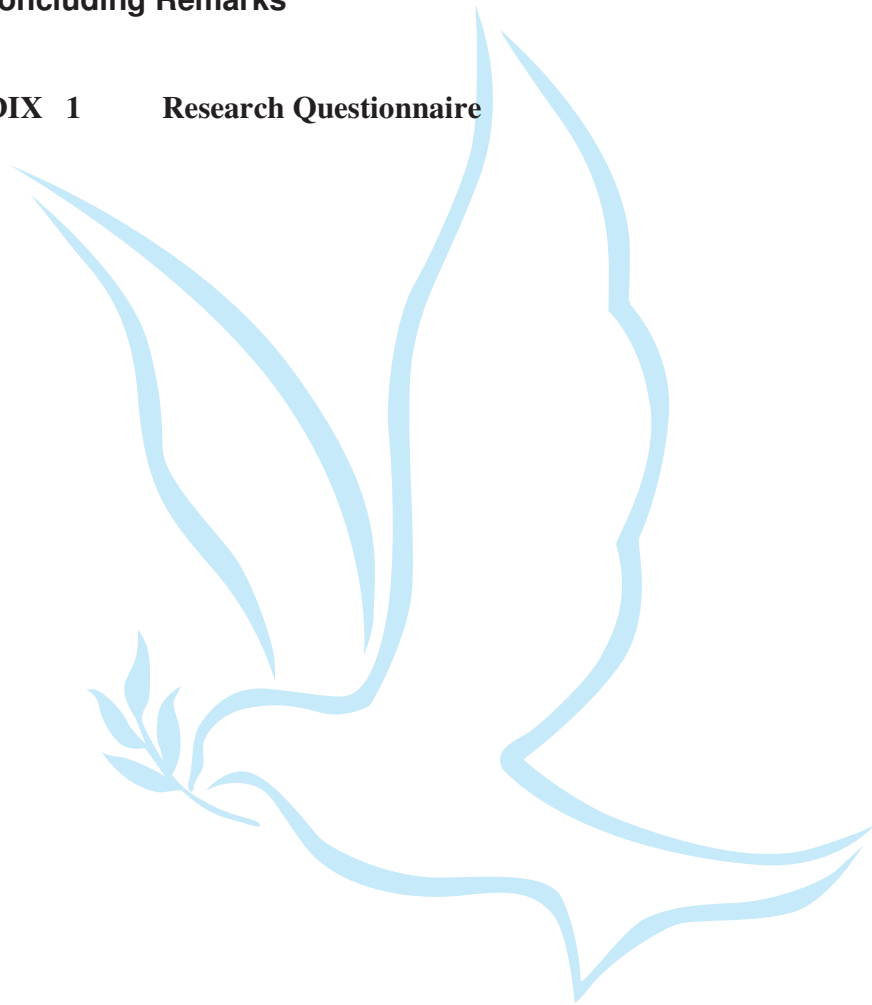
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SECTION A INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT & METHODOLOGY

1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the research and sets it in context within the work of the Riverbrooke Cross-Border Initiative. It outlines the aims and objectives of the research and the report structure.

1.1 Context: The Riverbrooke Cross- Border Initiative

The overall aim of the Riverbrooke project is *rural communities working to break down barriers and build trust and friendship*. The Riverbrooke Cross-Border Initiative is a longstanding peace project and the work of a partnership that has been in existence since 1995. The partnership is between Riverstown Enterprise Development (Sligo) Ltd and Brookeborough and District Community Development Association, Co Fermanagh. The two groups originally came together through a shared interest in vintage. Since then the project has grown from a tentative relationship between two groups with a few casual exchanges to a full-time project since 2002 with a dedicated programme of cross-community/cross-border activity.

Currently there are two projects being run under the auspices of Riverbrooke. One is the Inter Faith Project “Moving Beyond Sectarianism” which has this research as one of its elements and the added distinctiveness of a cross-border link with Churches in the Dungannon area. There is also a much larger project supported by the International Fund for Ireland which works in a variety of ways with all age groups in Brookeborough and Riverstown. The two discrete projects hold in common the objectives of Riverbrooke Cross Border Initiative among which are:

- To create a space for people where integration and dialogue on ‘difference’ as well as common concerns and shared interests can happen, a space where we can begin to acknowledge the past and work towards resolution at local community level.
- To recognise that peace building is a process and that people are at different stages within the process and have different needs and to provide a range of activities to meet those different needs.
- To create opportunities for inter-cultural experiences where we can come to a greater understanding of our own cultural Traditions and identify as well as that of others
- To ensure participant ownership of the process.

1.2 The Inter Faith programme within Riverbrooke Cross Border Initiative

The Inter Faith programme is a stand alone project within the Riverbrooke Cross-Border Initiative. The Directors of Riverbrooke decided that a separate pilot programme was the most effective way to run this project, which widens the Cross-Border element to include members from different Churches in Dungannon, Co Tyrone and to include a whole county focus in Sligo. The project is funded at local level through the Sligo Peace 3

Partnership and is delivered on a contract basis by two part-time freelance staff. It is overseen by a steering group of the Riverbrooke Cross Border Initiative set up solely to manage this project.

The programme was inspired by and builds on the initial work of the Riverbrooke Cross-Border Initiative Churches Programme undertaken with the support of the Peace 2 Programme.

The project actions include a research element, local and cross-border discussion groups, and production of a Sligo Churches booklet, cross-border exchanges and inter-school arts activities. This project engages with people from Sligo, Fermanagh and Tyrone and aims to provide an opportunity to explore, through facilitated discussion, the challenge of reconciliation and dealing with our past as members of Churches and Faith Groups.

The Inter Faith Project seeks to deepen our understanding of one another through relationship building, exploring difference in a facilitated, respectful and safe environment, gaining knowledge about each other's Traditions, and celebrating the many expressions of faith that enrich our local communities. The project hopes to provide a focus for people in Sligo from different Traditions to meet and discuss the things that are of concern to them regarding faith and Church.

“It is the belief of the Riverbrooke Interfaith Project that sectarian and racist attitudes and perceptions continue to cause hurt and pain to people in our communities and we want to support one another to recognise and name sectarianism and racism where it exists and find other ways to think about one another in our differences so that future generations are not blighted by the legacy of conflict in Ireland.”

1.3 Aims and objectives of the research project

It is important to state at the outset that this research was never envisaged as a quantitative piece of work and it would be a mistake to regard it as such. Rather it was designed to prompt discussion and promote debate among people in Sligo about the meanings of Faith, Church and Sectarianism in the county today. It is a small project that could best be described as a ‘snapshot’ of attitudes to Faith, Church & Sectarianism in Sligo in 2010. Its value lies in the insights it documents on the views and attitudes of people from a variety of Churches and none. Those experiences and perspectives together make up a rich tapestry, a patchwork that helps us to understand some of the concerns of a range of people about Church, Sectarianism and Faith in Sligo today.

Aims

The overall aim of the project is to explore attitudes to and awareness of faith and Church in Sligo today, with a focus on identifying sectarianism where it exists, noting the impact of it and considering how we might tackle it in our communities and Churches.

Objectives

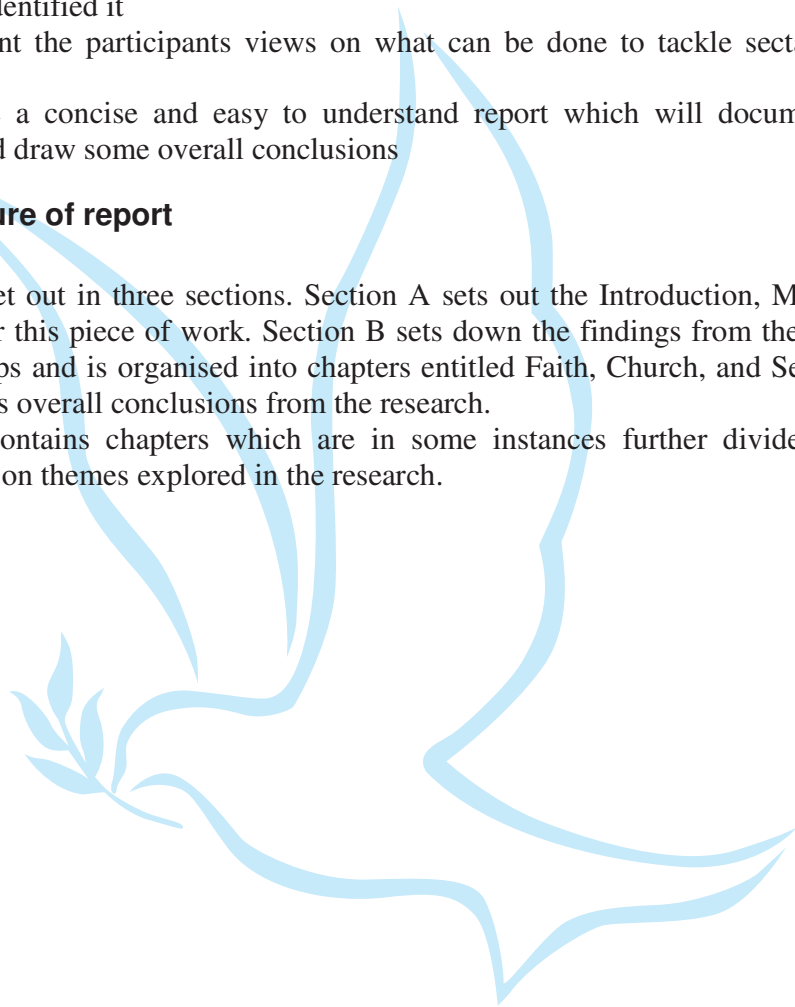
- To listen to and explore the experiences of 15 people from a cross-section of Sligo society and to document their experiences and perspectives as fully as possible.

- To listen to and explore the experience and perspective of two groups of young people and to document this as fully as possible.
- To collect information from participants on their attitudes to and experiences of faith and Church
- To collect information on perceptions of the interviewees regarding sectarianism including their understanding of the term itself, their own experiences (if any) in relation to it, and their view on the nature and extent of sectarian attitudes and behaviours in Co Sligo today.
- To document the views of the participants on the impacts of sectarianism Sligo where they have identified it
- To document the participants views on what can be done to tackle sectarianism as identified
- To produce a concise and easy to understand report which will document all the findings and draw some overall conclusions

1.4 Structure of report

The report is set out in three sections. Section A sets out the Introduction, Methodology and Context for this piece of work. Section B sets down the findings from the interviews and focus groups and is organised into chapters entitled Faith, Church, and Sectarianism. Section C draws overall conclusions from the research.

Each section contains chapters which are in some instances further divided into sub headings based on themes explored in the research.



2 Research Methodology

This chapter describes how the research was managed, carried out and why these methods were chosen.

2.1 The Steering Group

The members of the Steering group of the Inter-faith project are:

Mrs Hilda Shaw, Knockroe, Riverstown (Chair)
Mrs May Kelly, Taunagh, Riverstown
Canon Derick Swann, Branchfield, Ballymote
Mr Martin McAndrew, Belleek, Co Fermanagh

Their role was to direct and support the research. This included identification of potential participants for the research, consideration of questions for interviews and considering and commenting on the draft report.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Target population for the research

Participants were selected so as to include a balance in terms of gender, geographical location, urban and rural dwellers, age spread and including people considered to be representative of a range of life experience. In particular people from the clergy of each of the main Churches were invited to participate as were a number of local representatives in public life and people involved in Peace funded projects. Attention was paid to achieving a balance in terms of perspectives and faith affiliations. It was not possible for all in the initial group to participate, for a variety of reasons, so a second list was developed.

2.2.2 Conducting the interviews

Fifteen people were interviewed for this research. It was decided at the outset that fifteen informal interviews would be undertaken using a semi-structured interview questionnaire. The rationale for this was to allow the interviewees as much scope as possible to express their views so that the picture that emerged would not be too constrained by the questions asked.

A set of broad questions was used for each interview (Appendix 1) and then various issues were explored as they arose in the course of the interview.

Interviewees were assured that the write-up of their interview would be made available to them for editing so that they could clarify any points or add anything else that they wished. It was also emphasised that all tapes would be erased and no sight of the interview

material would be given to anyone other than the researcher who conducted the interview. When the interview material was being written up all efforts possible would be made to ensure that the people who had contributed were not easily identifiable in the report. All interviewees were sent a copy of the interview for comment and their permission requested to use the material. Some added to the notes while some edited out areas they were unhappy about. The amended material is the basis for the findings section of this report. One participant was unable to give their permission for use of the interview material in the final report. No material from the interviews has been used without the permission of participants to whom a transcript of their interview was supplied for comment prior to the report being written.

2.2.3 Issues arising with interviewees

A number of concerns were identified by research participants, chief among them being the reluctance to discuss openly attitudes to and experience of sectarianism. There was a level of apprehensiveness around this issue and some fear about being seen as a 'troublemaker' or 'bitter' as a result of speaking out about impacts and experiences of sectarianism. Most participants were initially slow to acknowledge the existence of sectarian attitudes, deeming them to be a 'thing of the past' but when the discussion deepened there was for many another layer below the surface within which there were hurts, questions and a sense of distance between those from the Roman Catholic Tradition and those from the Protestant Tradition.

2.2.4 Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held in two schools with young people aged 15+. The focus groups were informal and all participants were assured that they would not be identified in the report findings. In all twenty two young people participated in discussions around the broad areas of Faith, Church and Sectarianism, their understanding of these terms, the relevance of each in Sligo today and their own observations and experiences in these areas.

Initially these focus groups were not planned as part of the research but there was concern that the small number of respondents might not capture fully enough changes across time in attitudes towards Faith and Church or differing perceptions of sectarianism. There was also a concern that the number of respondents-fifteen interviewees-did not allow sufficiently for significant participation by young people. Consequently the Steering Group added these to the original target population.

3 Context

This chapter outlines the broad range of faith communities in Sligo; it outlines current thinking about the way forward for supporting the minority Protestant community through the peace programmes and puts forward a framework for understanding Sectarianism that has guided this research.

3.1 Faith and Church in Sligo

The majority of people in Sligo who profess a faith adhere to the Christian Faith. In recent years Sligo, like the rest of Ireland, has become more diverse. We have seen an increase in people arriving in the county from other world faith groupings. Among the faith groups informally identified by this research in Sligo are Muslims, Buddhists, Hare Krishna followers, Hindus, Bah'ai, followers of the Kabbalah Tradition, Jews, Wiccans, Celtic Pagans. Within the Christian spectrum in addition to the four longest established Churches there are people who are Quakers; Free Presbyterians; Pentecostals; members of the Redeemed Church of God, Maranatha; Seventh Day Adventists; Baptists; Plymouth Brethren; Orthodox Christians; and no doubt others we did not come across yet in our work. No-one from outside the Christian Tradition was interviewed for this research, apart from within the focus groups, although some people were interviewed who described themselves as having no faith.

At present there are four main Christian Churches in the county: the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church. There is also a Baptist congregation in Sligo Town and an Elim Pentecostal Church. Along with these are a range of small Churches that may have a meeting place or may congregate informally in halls and in people's homes to worship and connect with each other. Kingdom Halls of Jehovah Witnesses are also to be found in the county.

The research also came across a small number of people who are allied to no faith, some of whom describe themselves as agnostic, some atheists and some as humanists.

What became clear from the outset of this small project is that faith is at once a deeply personal matter and a public statement. It may well be argued that in Ireland faith is indeed a political statement in the sense of the intersections that historically exist between Church and political and cultural identity in the border counties of Ireland.

3.2 Sectarianism

This is an area in which there are a range of definitions, some of which rest on a legal premise and others on a premise that examines perceptions and attitudes as well as actual behaviours. For the purposes of this project our understanding of Sectarianism is best described by Joseph Liechty, a historian and a Mennonite living and working in Northern

Ireland who describes four main characteristics of sectarianism and how we can work to tackle it:

(1) Nothing raises the emotional tension in a room quite the way that mentioning sectarianism does, especially in a mixed group of Protestants and Catholics. For the most part, therefore, sectarianism is not discussed, and when the word is used, it is often among our own, talking about them, or, if in public, it is hurled as a harsh accusation.

We must create situations and approaches in which sectarianism can be analysed and discussed in a positive, hopeful, and fruitful way.

(2) At the heart of sectarianism is a distorted and destructive way of dealing with difference.

We need to learn to see difference in general as a richness and not a threat, and to deal constructively with all difference even difference that we find difficult and obnoxious. The latter is the crucial challenge: can we deal constructively even with types of difference difficult for us to stomach?

(3) Sectarianism involves a blaming mechanism, whereby each person can identify people who exhibit sectarianism of a more blatant and destructive nature than anything he or she is involved in, so those people out there are identified as the real sectarian problem, and no one ever takes responsibility.

The challenge is to move from a culture of blame, which sectarianism both generates and feeds on, to a culture of taking responsibility. This will involve learning to recognise and address the ways in which we are complicit in and responsible for sectarianism not because ours is the worst form of sectarianism, but simply because it is ours, and therefore the one kind we can do something about.

(4) The sectarian system works most smoothly and effectively when it is largely hidden from view, accepted as normality, and simply assumed to be the way things have been, will be, and must be.

The power of sectarianism to perpetuate itself lies in part in the sense of hopelessness it creates. Thus even the simplest ways of exposing the sectarian system to scrutiny can be liberating and rewarding for those involved.

This definition makes dealing with difference positively central to the task of moving beyond sectarianism.

3.3 Border Protestants and the Peace Programmes

3.3.1 Findings to date

In a report commissioned by the Peace II Monitoring Committee, published in 2007¹, the authors set out to:

- Identify the amount of PEACE II funds that went to the Border Protestant community;

¹ Logue Paddy, McGillion Karen and Shirlow Pete. The Border Protestant Community & the EU Peace Programmes. May 2007

- Assess the impact of this funding on the Border Protestant community
- Make recommendations on how future funding programmes could contribute to addressing the needs of the Border Protestant community.

Among the findings of the study were the following:

1. Border Protestants have suffered a dramatic drop in their numbers since partition. Since then the literature shows that Protestants have:
 - Learned to keep their heads down and keep to themselves.
 - Have a sense of not being listened to or valued in society. As a result some have reached the conclusion that they are not entitled to equality of funding opportunity.
 - In recent years, however, there are signs that confidence is growing.
2. It was not possible to arrive at an accurate quantification of the PEACE II funds that went directly to the Protestant community.
3. Protestants engaged with work via the peace programme in the area of Human Rights, positive relations and dealing with hurt.
4. The main lesson from this work with the indigenous religious minority is that it is a slow process which can also be painful.
5. The main need of the Border Protestant community that emerges from this engagement is to:
 - Build the capacity and confidence of this minority community
 - Alert the majority community to the responsibility to recognise the different identity and culture that lives alongside it.
6. Needs identified for future funding were:
 - support for funding cross-community activities;
 - support for single identity activities when considered necessary especially around confidence and capacity building;
 - support for the refurbishment of halls as being of great symbolic significance and morale boosting;
 - support for dedicated and specialist support for community development;
 - the importance of official recognition of this community by naming it as a target group of the PEACE III Programme
7. Focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders among PEACE II projects, Churches, schools and members of Loyal Orders reinforced the findings in the literature review and the experience of PEACE II projects and elaborated the survey results about:

- Cultural and social exclusion;
 - Difficulties of being a small and until recently, dwindling population;
 - The negative aspects of being a distinct, indigenous, minority community;
 - The experience, although declining, of being victims of sectarianism and the obstacles, some of which are recognized as self-imposed, to full political and community participation.
8. The EU PEACE Programmes were cited as one of the important engines for community development and building capacity and confidence. It was clear from the meetings that those who were involved in a funded project were much more likely to have the confidence and capacity to engage. It was also said that the PEACE programmes helped their Catholic neighbours to openly show support for them.
9. The overall aim of the Protestant community that emerged from these meetings was to achieve an equal partnership with the majority community in building the capacity of the entire community to deliver a genuinely shared and pluralist society.

3.3.2 Relevance to this Sligo research project

As part of this research the issue of support for the Protestant community in Sligo was raised when an invitation to participate in this research was responded to by one potential interviewee in a particular way and it was indicated that this view was representative of a wider constituency. The view put forward was that what was needed in Sligo was that Sligo Peace Partnership and the EU should ‘listen and take action’ given that the needs of this community have been well documented to date and there was a perception that real needs were being ignored at local level.

It would be remiss not to include this perspective in this report.

As part of the roll-out of the Peace III programme in some Border counties there has been a dedicated stream of funding for Protestant Support. All county Peace plans are determined by public consultation. When the public consultation took place in Sligo the feedback was that there was no demand for a Protestant Support programme because Sligo ‘was different’ i.e. there was no significant issue in the county regarding sectarianism.

SECTION B RESEARCH FINDINGS

4. Faith

The findings in this section are drawn from both the focus groups and the interviews. They are arranged under a set of themed headings.

4.1 Personal Belief in God

This is an area of deeply held personal conviction both for those who adhered to no faith (6%) and for those who were believers. 94% of those who gave individual interviews described themselves as having faith which is important in their lives and impacts on decisions they make. When it came to describing their faith and its development and influence in their lives a number of different factors emerged.

4.2 What faith means to me

Faith was described in a number of ways. One was that it provides comfort in times of trouble, when people feel they can turn to God who will give them strength to deal with difficulties. Another was that gives people a set of values which can act as a compass in life, for instance the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. Others said they adhered to the principles of the Ten Commandments and that this helped them when it came to making decisions and guided the direction of their life-their sense of what is right behaviour and what is wrong behaviour. It also helped people to endure in times of difficulty and remain hopeful in the face of despair.

People need something to hold onto. Some guidelines, something wiser and bigger than ourselves to follow.

Faith gives strength to overcome problems and obstacles

The faith that tomorrow will be better gives one optimism.

My religion is a real comfort to me. I find meaning in anything that I see and do and I believe God is in everything

I could not live my life without the grace of God to help me every day

Faith is what you believe and the expression of it is religion in practice

For some people Christian faith was characterised by a belief in the afterlife and in a benevolent God who is involved with humanity and is a force for good in the world

My faith now is characterised by a belief in a God of love, forgiveness, gentleness, who is offended and hurt when we transgress. I believe in a God who uses people and ministers to people in pain through human encounter.

Faith was the single most important influence in the lives of three interviewees who ascribed it as a guiding light in their lives and something they could not get through the day without.

From I get up in the morning till I go to be at night I am not trying to rejoice in the great powers of autonomy I have exercised today and will tomorrow. I judge my day on how well I have depended on him. It's a very simple philosophy.

This life is God given-the spark of life is a gift of God and without it we are nothing. All life must be treated with respect and dignity.

The view that religion develops conscience gives one morality and that it acts as a brake on selfish impulses was expressed.

Without it there'd be such a high crime rate

It doesn't make people good or moral but yes it does offer a moral framework-but fear of punishment is a factor

4.3 Development of faith

Prayer is a consistent feature of daily life for a number of respondents while for others it is more sporadic. Some turn to prayer in times of sadness and loss and for others it is a consistent feature of daily life.

I have a strong belief on God and in spirituality and I pray regularly

Faith is not difficult-I have belief, I pray every day, many times a day

My prayers are now and then-not all the time - I tend to turn to prayer when things are a bit pear-shaped

4.4 Prayer

Some people described their faith as a growing and living thing. They traced the development of their faith from childhood starting with their mothers passing their faith on to them at a young age and learning about their faith at school and through the Church community.

My mother has a very strong faith so I was brought up like that.

I was raised to believe in God.

I grew up in the usual way - faith was taken seriously, simple faith and prayer services and all the other Church associated activities. I always prayed and made an effort to be disciplined. Faith has always been central in my life.

I grew up in a society where we had a belief but it was not Christian. Now I am a Christian and I believe in a God, that's how I was brought up.

From a young age I would find myself transfixed listening to the local priest who was a very fine preacher. At school I was always interested in the religious education e.g. inspector explaining a point would be very important to me- and deeply interested in matters related to faith so it has always been important to me.

Faith changed over the years which for some people meant a loss of faith while for others it meant a deepening of faith. For a number of people this change was characterised by a more intellectual stance with regard to the Church and its teachings which led them to reject Church and retain faith as a personal belief system. For those whose faith deepened, it was characterised by a move away from a simplistic faith (such as asking God to find them a parking space/pass an exam/get them a raise at work) towards a more mature faith that was able to embrace universal questions such as: If God loves us, why do good people suffer?

God gave us free will. The suffering in the world does not come from God.

For me everything works to good for them that belong to God, even suffering. I believe there must be something good behind the suffering. Sometimes it comes to make me strong in my faith sometimes the suffering is there for me to see the power of God, sometimes the suffering is there because I deserve it, I have erred

Expressing faith within their own Tradition was more important to those who did not have that opportunity very often.

I pray and go the Church but the denomination I belong to is not here so that is creating a problem but I pray on my own. Its very hard not having a community of my own Church around me

Church isn't important to me at all-its part of the community I live inbut I don't go the Church. If there was a Quaker meeting I would go to that.

4.5 Sustaining faith

Sustaining faith was considered to be a challenge mainly because of what one person termed '*the assault on our faith from a growing secularism*'. Above all else respondents attributed their faith to the grace of God. Faith was seen as a precious gift from God.

..I couldn't do it without depending on God. Its not about me, you are just an empty vessel for God's grace. I depend on his grace. As St Paul said 'when I am weak then I am strong'

How do people sustain their faith in the face of dwindling Church attendance, competing priorities in families and communities, and loss of respect for Church leadership? The scriptures are an important source of sustenance of faith as is Church attendance along with other activities such as bible study or prayer meetings.

Church is very important to me and faith and Church are connected for me because when we go to Church we help each other that company is really important. We edify each other by discussions and bible studies where we can discuss controversial issues where everyone's views and what you think about Christianity. You are able to iron out some of the things that you don't understand

Some were critical of those who said they don't have time to go to Church.

People say they don't have time to go to Church what with working so hard and all that ...but you make time for what is important...you can always get excuses....we used to be a religious country here when we had nothing

While for others the most important thing was the practice of faith and of the Christian values that they live their lives by.

For me the most important thing in my life is love, hope and faith. I try to stick with that but sometimes when it's very hard you just have hope that it will be better.

You have to be a strong person to live a good life and have to find the resources to do it.

4.6 On not having faith

6% of those interviewed said they had no faith whatsoever. They expressed the view that they experience intolerance from those with faith who feel unable to accept their choice as atheists. Those with no faith felt that there was no incompatibility with living a moral life and making good moral choices and decisions outside of the framework of a faith. Most had come to their unbelief after a deep questioning of faith and its role in life.

People do not need the Church to make them moral. I don't accept original Sin and so I find all of that not good

No I don't have a faith and have not had one since I was 12. Faith plays no part in my life except through people close to me

If I say I don't go to Mass they assume I am a Protestant so you have to make a decision about whether you clarify that or not.....and say that you have no faith of any sort

For a majority of people I think they would find it much easier to deal with you if you had any sort of faith than no faith. It's beyond their understanding that for some of us it is just not a feature of life and we are still able to be moral and good people without faith

All of those without faith were interested in religion and clear about their reasons for not engaging with faith and the Churches. All had come from a Christian background and had some religious education as children whether through the Anglican, Roman Catholic or another Christian Tradition. Some had firstly left their Church and then progressed on to atheism following exploration of other creeds while for others their exit from their Church and from faith coincided.

Like many of those with faith, they felt their conviction had deepened over the years as they found less and less reason to engage with any type of faith. Some had explored religions other than Christianity and this was part of their journey to unbelief while others had rejected faith per se.

None felt any need for faith in their lives despite having undergone all the usual life events including illness, bereavement and raising a family as unbelievers.

All were tolerant of those with faith and attended events in Churches associated with their families such as marriages and funerals. They were very aware of the influence of Church on life in Sligo and some wondered if faith is really expressed by people going to Church in this society as it's so culturally conditioned to Christianity and in particular the Roman Catholic 'brand' of Christianity.

Do people really have faith in God or are they just 'going through the motions' because it's what is expected of them in society in order to belong?

There occasions are a rite of passage-its an externalisation -see the big weddings-its some kind of statement of prestige or something....I don't think its about faith I don't think when they are trotting off to Church on the few Sundays before they do it, its anything to do with faith.....what with the bouncy castle and cash and the wedding dresses, all that stuff! No I don't think its anything to do with faith. This is a cultural identity

Some held the view that faith as organised religion was not attractive, particularly for younger people who felt they had little choice when it came to being exposed to faith based education.

religious people are too pushy - religion divides

I hate it when they shove religion down your throat-Jesus loves you kind of stuff. There's too much of it. It's off-putting

They tell us we are all the same and then we are divided for religion classes...what does that say?

Overall there was a sense of relaxation about being without faith and most expressed relief at having arrived at a place in their lives where they had worked out a moral stance and a set of values that did not rely on any religious faith for sustenance. The question was posed as to whether the real function of religion is to help us face the inevitability of our own death and make sense of it.

if we truly consider that we are like the lilies of the field that wither away and die and that's an end to it, and learn to accept our place in that natural cycle, then we will find tremendous peace with ourselves and the rest of the planet...the need of the human ego to believe itself transcendent is very strong

4.7 Faith without Church

The question of the connection between faith and Church was one that provoked a strong response among interviewees. Over 60% of those who considered faith to be important in their lives did not consider Church to be important. There appeared to be a significantly higher level of criticism of their Church by those from the RC Tradition than among those from other Traditions. Among those from Churches not represented in Sligo there was higher loyalty to their Church and less criticism of it.

There was strong belief that people could sustain a Christian faith without adherence to the institution of any Church.

Faith is something I follow personally

if you don't have a particular faith it's seen as though you don't believe in anything whereas I think you can be a very spiritual person and not align yourself to a faith

I would be agnostic-I don't believe in the Church but I do believe in the Higher Power

I feel no real need to feel part of a community of believers

You can be a good Christian and not go to any Church - I would put Christianity first, before Church

Reasons given for this were to do with a sense of hurt and betrayal particularly among ex-Roman Catholics who felt their Church had behaved in such a bad way over the handling of the clerical child sex abuse issue that they could not in conscience support the institution any longer.

people are still drawn to the Church to pray and for spiritual reasons but also because of a loyalty to it and that they are often conflicted in this loyalty when Church teaching says one thing and the reality of their lives is different.

Events like Corpus Christi Procession are there to demonstrate respect for the Church but this is getting less and less especially since the clerical child sex abuse revelations and subsequent manner in which the Church has dealt with this and evaded responsibility

The way the RC Church is set up it seems to facilitate silence and denial about a great deal of human suffering.

There was a sense of genuine struggle and sadness among a number of people who had a long history of attendance at and activity within the Church who now felt so disenchanted that they no longer attended. Some attended other denominations but more withdrew into their personal faith and sought to live the gospel values outside the confines of the institutional Church.

For others with a strong faith who were unable to remain within the Church a key reason cited was the attitude to and treatment of women in all Churches but especially the RC Church. There was a perception that the Church's view of women is such that they are good enough for cleaning and doing flowers but not good enough to be priests within the RC Church. There was a perception that women are not good enough to hold high office within any of the Churches. The argument over the ordination of women as bishops within the Church of Ireland was cited here, as evidence of an attitude towards women in all the Churches, which means they are not regarded as equal and that their contribution is not valued sufficiently.

Why would I go? To support an institution that is run by and for men and that regards women as less-those days are gone

Where would they be without us-that's what I would like to know-who would do the cleaning- I can't see the men at it!

Why are women so complacent and accepting of their second class status in the Church? It really maddens me

Another key reason given for exit from the Church was the attitude to sexuality and its regulation. This included attitudes to and teachings about homosexuality within all Churches, abortion, contraception, divorce, sex before marriage, and priestly celibacy within the RC Church.

This question of attitudes to Church will be explored further in the next chapter.

4.8 Faith as a cultural expression

The perception was put forward that for many people the practice of attending Church is primarily about asserting both a cultural and political identity and that faith was a secondary motivation.

Faith practice is so intertwined with being a community member that by not going to Church one isolates and excludes oneself from all sorts of important community events for which the Church may still be the focal point. The example given was funerals in rural areas.

What do I do when I die if I don't have my funeral in the local Church like all my family before me? Does it matter that I have no belief in an afterlife? What alternatives are there in any case?

A number of respondents described those people who attend Church and do not uphold the Church's teaching in their lives as 'cultural Catholics/Protestants'

The approach to RC Church is not enthusiastic-people go because that is part of the Tradition rather than for any spiritual or religious reasons.

I think it is when people are at different stages of their life: the one I find galling is when people get married so you get this whole emphasis on these lavish weddings and they go to Church even if they never go before that but then when they have kids they think about that whole thing about being baptised and confirmed and holy communion and all that...

where I live nearly everybody has kids the same age as ours and they have just had the first communions etc and its like mini weddings....and you suddenly see the parents go to Church...well I don't know if you'd call that important...its a milestone but whether faith is important or its just doing what everyone else does...

4.9 Relevance of faith in Sligo today

It would seem that faith in the broadest sense of belief in a being that is greater than humans is highly relevant to people who participated in this research. Even the 6% who had no faith found they could not live their lives without as one person put it 'bumping up against the God thing' on a regular basis. Society in Sligo is still very influenced by faith, which finds its strongest and most public expression through the Churches. The loss of loyalty to the individual Churches has not resulted in people drifting away from faith or prayer but rather from the institutional Church. This would seem to indicate that faith and matters spiritual continue to have relevance for people in the Northwest, even as people turn away from Traditional Church membership and move either into the newer more evangelical Churches, or are attracted by other religions such as Buddhism. Faith remains constant but there are changes in how faith is being expressed.

Religion is always going to have a hold on people's consciousness - it appears to be a human need to want to believe in something greater than ourselves

I still believe there is a God somewhere, things just didn't exist that's what I believe there must be someone behind whatever is in existence so there must be something higher, someone higher, some spirit higher what I am

It's hard to think of faith as relevant without getting stuck with what the Church is up to- all this stuff about clerical child sex abuse...I think this issue is causing a huge crisis of faith

At my work we are all very interested in religion and I was totally surprised to find this out as not all of us are practicing Christians

..there has to be something beyond science -how we came to be here-how we moved from a single cell amoeba to a human being is a huge leap and there is a lot of genetic variations along the way so maybe I just have a belief that that is not necessarily an accident. Whether we have a predefined destiny and whether he looks over every one of us-well I'll leave that to the religious zealots to argue about! I simply believe that there is a higher cause of it all, more than evolution but can I define that? No.

There was a perception that faith was mainly the preserve of the older generations.

It's mainly older people attending Mass now, very few younger people

Older people go to Mass and the young ones are enjoying themselves so the need for religion is just being eroded.

It's only relevant when you're old and dying - it's an insurance policy

There was however also an awareness of the lessening of relevance of faith and this was seen by some as a good thing while for others it was seen as a loss. Loss of faith was associated more with a fast urban lifestyle with little room for stillness or reflection on spiritual matters

Church was very important to me at one time but in the last 20 years I have questioned many elements of the RC Church

Yes faith is relevant to communities-but much less so than two generations ago but it is still relevant to a significant amount of people. It appears to be less relevant in urban areas

It seems people are rushing about looking for money and that idea of a God seems to be being washed away because people are very busy. Sometimes there is no time even for prayer or to go to Church

The view that people need a spiritual outlet was expressed again and again and there was frustration with the Churches and what was described as their lack of spiritual leadership and moral values. It was difficult for people to discuss faith without getting caught up in the issue of the behaviour of the Churches. This will be explored further in the following chapter.

5 CHURCH

5.1 What Church means to me

There were various understandings of Church ranging from the actual buildings and architecture to the idea that Church is wherever ‘two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name’. One thing was certain: everyone had something to say about Church which has had such a deep effect on the lives of respondents to this research.

Church is community, it’s about people coming together in the presence....

We can see how the early days the Christians went every day to the synagogue-which is extraordinary-the synagogue -in those early days where this was a new ideology and their master had been put to death by the same people who went to the synagogue. They went to each others homes and broke the bread. Church is of the essence-Church and faith is linked in this way

Churches are repositories of history, identity and culture which includes political affiliations

Church is understood as the people of God doing the work of salvation

Church is a community that cares and shares and is the body of Christ. Church is a warm place, family, fun, community, music, enjoyment, beauty.

The distinction between faith and Church is not straightforward - for some people their faith has nothing to do with Church while at the same time Church is perceived by them as the most obvious and public expression of faith in our society.

For others to even think of Church apart from faith is erroneous: they draw the distinction between the Church as ‘the people of God’ and what they describe as the Institutional Church. Again this distinction is not straightforward as it’s difficult to separate faith and Church, yet that is exactly what significant numbers in this research report are doing in their faith practice. This rejection of the institution of the Church is laced with a strong emotion that makes it difficult for some people to contemplate staying within the Church and trying to make changes from the inside. Some have tried to reform from within and reported their sadness and sense of failure at the final decision to withdraw.

I can't believe I have been part of an organisation that has done this to children and I have upheld that organisation and worked for it and supported it

5.2 Attitudes to Church

Attitudes to Church varied depending on the experience of the individual. For some the Church was simply 'the people of God' while for others it was a high-handed institution of oppression that had been allowed a privileged place in Irish society to the detriment of that society. Some loved their Church and had a deep and genuine respect for its Traditions and personnel while recognising that certain things were a problem that needed to be set right.

One thing that holds me in the Church is the sacrament of Holy Communion and the cross as symbol and centre to Christian faith

All Churches are rattled at the moment. The Catholic Church is rattled and there are an awful lot of people I know that I feel sorry for with the clerical abuse issue.

All are questioning their Churches --even Church of Ireland, Methodists and Presbyterians in their own Churches.

What was noticeable was that those who came from the Roman Catholic Tradition were the most critical of and disappointed in their Church.

As a child I felt the power and control of the Church in my life very strongly and did not like it, the priest being given such respect regardless of how he behaved to people

I question the power and control of the RC Church in Irish Society - my own work and life experiences have made me do this

The RC Church in Ireland is very conservative in matters to do with sexuality and this has been a major problem/detriment to sections of Irish society.

As result of certain experiences in my life, my faith in the Church is very diminished and I am disappointed, but I can't say I don't believe at all

Others expressed the view that the Church is a fallible organisation, made up of human beings with all our frailties and so we needed to be forgiving of its failings and continue to work within the Church to right the wrongs that had been done.

There is a lot of suffering. There are many good people within the Church who feel utterly betrayed and ashamed and tainted by what has happened. I feel for them and respect their holding to a different vision of what is possible from within the Church in terms of transformation

There's a kind of denial I think, a double standard that goes on.... I accept people doing wrong stuff-we are human but it's the denial of it that gets to me.

That there was role for Church in society was recognised by most people-it was the nature and extent of that role that was in question.

I think the Church has a place regarding teaching morality-the ten commandments and what is acceptable behaviour in human societies-across all the main religions I think its there e.g. thou shalt not kill; be kind etc. It can have that role in a child's life-especially if they are not getting moral guidance elsewhere but other than that, no.

Some had an ambivalent relationship to Church, rejecting some parts of what it stood for and embracing others. While some believed and stayed within their Church and the majority involved in this research believed and left their Church, there was a minority who did neither but just stayed with what they were used to without getting too exercised by it.

I don't go along with what the RC Church does at all but I have not felt the need to leave either, I like being with a crowd of people thinking about faith in whatever way they understand it.

Don't know if Church is a good thing...I'm not sure...I love the beautiful side of Church architecture...

I know the problems that are going on but this is where I was baptized, got married and hopefully will be buried from and all belonging to me for generations back in this area. I could not imagine our community without the Church-all the Churches'

5.3 Relevance of Church to communities in Sligo today

To those who are involved in Church it is highly relevant but to those who are not it is also relevant but in a different and not a positive way. Church communities are reported as being close knit:

For Protestant Churches there is a strong role for Church -it plays a positive and relevant role in people's lives. Their identity is strong in terms of faith and Church affiliation

Those I am aware of include Church of Ireland, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Church plays a significant role in their lives.

I love my Church and it has supported me throughout my life

Also observed by respondents from all Church backgrounds was that the Protestant Churches are perceived generally as being more democratically organised than the RC Church so it is easier for lay people to participate.

Strong feelings were expressed by those for whom Church is not relevant.

It's not relevant at all to people's lives.... I have nothing to do with it, no, not in any way shape or form, by choice

sit in a room for a half hour and give money to a priest so he can update his car every two years? Give money to a religion that is among the richest organisations/companies in the world-no

I don't know if meltdown is the right term and I think the time is approaching when people will no longer take orders from it (RC Church) and will be able to make their own decisions about personal morality and all sorts of other personal issues which the Church would still feel they have a right to dictate to them about.

Faith is important but Church is not. The only time I go is to weddings and funerals.

Here again the impact of the clerical child sex abuse issue was felt. Clergy from a variety of denominations reported experiencing hostility from the public when wearing the collar which is seen as a symbol of Roman Catholic Priesthood.

Because of the action of these men (clerical abuse) the 'Church Catholic' is stamped by it

what about all this stuff about sexual abuse in the RC Church and all the hypocrisy surrounding it-I think that is alienating people more and more why don't they just go 'yes this has happened and lets now look at it and try to work it through' rather than saving the institution at the expense of the victims?

There was a widely reported sense that the Churches are not keeping pace with the times we live in and the many demands made on families today. A small number of people saw the Churches as more interested in making money than in matters of faith.

They have made no effort to modernise in the last hundred years. There has been a huge leap forward in technology and everything else-the modern day person is in a hurry-even the family-family values have changed, both parents are working and I don't think the Church has made any changes to accommodate that at all.....

Church is relevant to that one section of society which is established and often powerful and maybe it's more about Tradition and networks than faith...about work and business and making money...

5.4 Challenges facing the Churches

When interviewees were asked about the challenges facing the Churches today there were a number of recurring themes. One such theme reported across all the Churches was the decline in attendance. All cited it as a challenge but not everyone felt it necessarily reflected a loss of faith or was a permanent decline.

For younger generations it's not as important. Over the next 20 years the numbers attending Church services will drop dramatically

I do not go regularly to Mass and would go more because of my daughter than anything else. I think many people are like this who have children at school

Now I would go at Christmas sometimes or weddings and funerals but no Traditional religious practice at all.

Lack of attendance at Church is not understood generally among the interviewees as a reflection of a lack of spiritual practice and values. Neither is attendance at Church understood by others as an indication of faith but rather of what is expected especially in a small rural community. The view was posited too that some people exclude themselves rather than being excluded.

I think there is only one Church and we are all in it by virtue of baptism -the Christian Church. That's the reality-that is Church and this incessant and intense preoccupation with attendance at Church services-of course it is a sign of commitment to a lot of people but it could be quite blind too

although people have turned away from the Churches and are voting with their feet faith may be flourishing and belief and Christian values still something they live their lives by

The family did go to Mass each week growing up but that was nothing to do with faith-we were in the community and that was what was expected of the community so we therefore did it.

Attendance is not necessarily a sign of authenticity. Nor is non-attendance. Sometimes people exclude themselves by not attending- rather than being the subject of exclusion by the Church.

Attendance was seen as more important to the older generations.

there is a dearth of people aged 17-18 to 35 in attendance at Church services

Yes the older generations Traditionally have a very strong rooting in the RC religion in Sligo or the Protestant religion in Sligo depending on their affiliations

Another issue cited as a challenge by the Protestant Churches only was the financial burden of upkeep of their Churches which are in need of maintenance and most are listed buildings. There is help available from the State but it is a small amount when distributed among the many Churches that have a call on it, and congregations are generally small so this puts an inordinate financial weight on Protestant communities.

As a congregation gets old and there is less money coming in and the younger people they don't look on the Church in the same way and attend the same way they would be Christians and they have their belief but they do not always attend regularly

Churches are not just places of worship for the minority Protestant community but are also a means by which they express their Traditions, heritage and culture. The memorials to the great families and those who gave their lives in the First World War are all part of this Tradition and culture. The Churches were described as *'the only opportunity others have of seeing how we do our business'*.

Common to all Churches were the challenges associated with secularism. It was suggested that this was a call for the Churches to work together and strengthen the Christian Church overall.

There was a charge of hypocrisy made against Church leaders and personnel by a significant number of respondents although interestingly nuns were seen as exempt from this by two people. Clergy were viewed as too remote from their people especially Roman Catholic clergy who cannot marry and have families which was widely seen as detrimental to the well being and future of that Church. It was strongly expressed that priests need to be allowed to marry if that Church is to have any future.

The lack of people coming forward to take on the ministry in Churches was seen as a challenge, particularly for the Roman Catholic Church. There was a sense that the role of the laity needed to be acknowledged in all Churches and strengthened, and especially the role of women.

personally I can see -in the Catholic Church as well - that laity is going to have to step in and be able to go and take a service that people can come and worship even if its only prayer, otherwise they will be closed.

The clerical child sex abuse issue was seen as a breach of trust for members of the Roman Catholic Church who felt that the Pope and Bishops had let the people down in what was unanimously seen as their attempts to protect the institution of the Church rather than the victims of clerical child sex abuse.

Christian Brothers had an awful cruel streak. Altar boys and girls also were too easily accessible to those who wanted power over them

The need for a clear separation of Church and State in Ireland was seen as a challenge that the Churches needed to lead on. The area of education was cited here a number of times, as was regulation of sexuality and laws pertaining to family and marriage.

5.5 Perceptions of relationships between different Churches and Faith groups

5.5.1 Contact between Churches

The overall perception was that there was not much contact between the different Churches that involved the congregations although there was a perception of generally cordial and warm relationships between individual clergy. There was also a very real and

genuine appreciation expressed by a number of people from the minority Protestant Tradition that without their RC neighbours assisting them their Churches would not be as well maintained as they are and their communities would be worse off.

Every Church of Ireland Church in the west of Ireland has been roofed by the catholic community and enough of credit isn't given to it, if there's fundraising in the morning in X the Catholics will all buy the tickets

The non-recognition of Anglican Priestly orders by the RC Church was raised. This comes up sometimes when the issue of officiating at a mixed marriage arises-which is now very commonplace. It was noted that while some RC priests do not recognise Anglican Orders, when it comes to practice on the ground a great many RC priests do not have any problem with this.

There was an awareness of the tensions that can happen when the Churches try to build relationships. One viewpoint was that there was more likely to be contact between the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland than between the different Protestant Churches. Another view was that the push for ecumenism is *'no longer a novelty or new and fresh so people do not have the same level of interest enthusiasm or excitement in it'*.

Baptists were one of first of newer Churches to come in during the last 10-15 years to Sligo and there are Pentecostals, seventh-Day Adventists, African Church Groups.....

There is not much contact. The exception in this area was the Memorial Service for Lord Mountbatten and the blessing of the boats.

It can bring tension. When we look at the old testament that is where the tensions start. If people would just meet as Christians and followers of Jesus and concentrate on what we all believe then there is no problem with that.

People mix more in the golf club than in the Churches so its not that they don't mix at community level-it's just in the context of Church

From my own studies in the bible there is a lot I feel they are in error about which is not even biblical so I would not find myself attending a Roman Catholic Church. As for the other Protestant denominations I am not comfortable to go to their Churches either.

Personally I would say that there is nearly no relationship. We would have Harvest Thanksgiving and one time a Church would be full for the Harvest thanksgiving of a Sunday and all you'll get now is your own. We used to go to all the different Churches round about but that has nearly died out now. You get a bit of it still in the country areas.

People whose parents came from two different Churches reported that there was a high value placed on tolerance of different expressions of religion within their immediate family but also cited that there was much strife involved within families on all sides where

interchurch marriages were involved, although this was seen as less problematic today than in times past.

In my household a specific religion is irrelevant its much more of a respect thing-you respect what people think and the choices they make-Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Baptist.

The rise in interchurch marriages was seen by some as a development that would ‘*change the whole face of things when it happens on such a grand scale as it is happening*’. The majority of respondents expressed the view that it would be better for the Christian Churches to work together, even to share Church premises. The lack of Christian unity was seen as a negative especially in a country like this where religion and conflict have had their connections for so long.

They need to get off their high horses and stop all this competing and say ok at the end of the day we are here for the good of the people, we are preaching about tolerance and respect and working towards a common goal so why not unify instead of segregating?

There is no mixing in Sligo town. When I was a child we didn't talk about it-we didn't need to: everyone knew who was who-we knew that the Model School was the Protestant School without ever being told as such.

The disunity that is in existence between Christians is a scandal because there should be no issue- but there is an issue and you find the parents deciding we will bring up the boys in this faith and the girls in the other faith -that's what used to happen years ago but that's less so nowadays.

This issue ...is part of the hypocrisy which has come from on high because it is not the wish of ordinary people. It's the posturing and the pomp from on high.

5.5.2 Contact between different religions/faith groups

The presence now of different religions within County Sligo was seen as a step forward in terms of developing a shared society that is moving away from sectarian modes of thinking to one where diversity is seen as enrichment rather than a threat. Few respondents had any contact with people from other religions but were aware of their presence.

'there is a growth in the Muslim population in Sligo-there is now a greater diversity in terms of faith options and it is great to see this'

I don't know if there are any others than Catholics and Protestants but I suppose there must be because so many people are living here from other countries now.

There would be no sense of awareness of a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Bah'ai, Jewish community in Sligo.....

Not all viewed this as a positive however and there was some level of fear around the arrival of different faiths:

There is a growth in Islam here all right and I hear of Mosques going up round about-even in Mayo! I'm not sure how great a thing this is-maybe it will just give us even more reasons for bigotry and its not like we don't have enough already. I would worry about that.

The lack of places for non-Christian groups to meet for worship/prayer in Sligo was noted. The only places respondents were aware of were Globe House and Sligo General Hospital. Respondents expressed a curiosity about other religions and a significant number said that they would welcome the opportunity to learn about other religions from those who practice them, demonstrating a level of openness.

Some newcomers observed that Irish people are drawn to what is perceived as new and exciting and that this is reflected in faith choices but does not impact significantly on relations between faiths at local level.

I feel that Irish people like what is more exotic and different so they are drawn to gurus and Buddhism etc but I don't think there is much mixing at all

5.6 The Churches and social issues

This area provoked much discussion with the key issues being cited repeatedly as reasons why many who have faith want nothing to do with Church and may even regard Church membership as counter to being a Christian.

some in my family are massively involved in the Church and yet they are very bigoted but seem to manage to justify that by saying it's on religious grounds that they hold certain opinions and views but that's not what Christ was about! He was really revolutionary.

5.6.1 Education

This is an area that has Traditionally had a lot of Church involvement and some respondents felt that the education system should not be the place where faith is taught but that a secular system would be preferable and allow more room for choice. There was unhappiness about the lack of choice in education in Sligo both from people of no faith and those whose Churches/faith groupings were not available locally.

dealing with the kids in schools as a parent-there are a lot of assumptions about parents and what their experience is...in one particular RC School there was no reference or acknowledgement that quite a few of the boys going to this school did not share a catholic faith such as was being promoted. In other countries at the least the insensitivity of this would be recognised and in places not allowed.

I feel school should be secular and faith should be done outside of it but I don't think I am winning that argument

It's difficult if a person wants to not attend the Roman Catholic school in a rural location in Sligo -issues to do with transport and lack of choice mean you go to the nearest school which is usually a catholic school and just accept those bits that you don't necessarily feel comfortable with

I would have preferred my children to go to a secular school but there is no choice here and in the Protestant school they were much more sensitive about it, much more inclusive, maybe because they are always in the minority faith they have to be a bit more wised up about it and my kids really noticed that. There was no mention of being a Protestant; the emphasis was on being valued, and everyone having their own niche. I thought that must be because they know what it's like not to be in the majority.

Well you are an outsider definitely. I mean I am English so I am an outsider anyway. I went to a Quaker School as I am from a Quaker family. For hundreds of years from 17th century Quakers were not allowed to educate their children in the mainstream schools because they were dissenters.

The question of Roman Catholic Church schools being able to opt out on equality legislation was raised with regard to the employment of Gay teachers.

...is this a manifestation of sectarianism? Discrimination against Gay teachers on grounds of religion....its ok for a school to say you can't be openly Gay because you are employed by a school with a Catholic ethos... there is an assumption that there is something wrong with that person that they are going to taint children or turn them or commit a crime....

The approach of some schools as very open and supportive was acknowledged but it was seen as problematic that it all depends on what an individual school Principal is like.

things like in primary school 1st holy communion and if you are not a catholic you spend quite a lot of that year just watching from the sidelines and obviously some schools approach that in different ways and some do better than others. Some schools have made a real effort to include people and ensure they feel part of the day bit there is no requirement to do that.

5.6.2 Position of Women

There was consensus that women are treated badly within the Christian religion Traditionally but here again the RC Church came in for the loudest criticism.

Women have changed too and have come on so much: 50 years ago I would have been at home with the family and raising the kids and in the kitchen.....religion would have had much more of a social function in women's lives but now well, why would we go to Church to be ruled over and dictated to by men?

When people follow the letter and not the spirit it does not breed compassion and that was a central thing that Christ taught. It breeds intolerance and hatred and bigotry and all

those things because you are doing it unconsciously so you go to Church and then go out and beat your wife and its ok.....that's why I have never liked Church...

Some of this centered on the lack of women's ordination and recent pronouncements by the Pope about this had caused a lot of anger among respondents, male and female alike.

Look at the latest he's coming out with-I thought I was hearing things, that anyone with any hand, act or part in women's ordination would risk excommunication-pity he wasn't as quick off the mark on sexual abuse by his male clergy

(Having) no female priests is a big deal now-the segregation of the sexes is outmoded and excluding women is unacceptable ...things have just changed so much in all countries

There was a perception that for many people the lack of Christian unity was also linked to the ordination of women within the Church of Ireland.

Essentially there is more uniting us than dividing us. The ordination of women arose when unity was within our grasp and set back ecumenism in that sense-that is a common perception. It is an impediment to unity.

The view was expressed that while matters of dogma around Mary could be dealt with both the ordination of women and the debate concerning the open presence of Gay people in the Anglican Ministry was more problematic. The two issues were often linked in people's minds.

The ordination of women and more recently the Gay thing, with the Bishop in America-that caused many ripples. These issues are very problematic within the Anglican Communion worldwide

The overall perception was that the Churches all remained largely a male dominated bastion within which women were excluded from positions of power. While the Protestant Churches were seen as less backward it was thought that they too had room for improvement as regards their treatment of women especially at local level in rural areas. The view was that women within the Protestant Tradition were more visible as women through associations such as the Mothers Union but that was boundaried by a clear role dependent on the a view of women's place in the Churches as mothers.

Of course we have the Mothers Union which is full of fine women but sometimes I ask myself if they are a bit wasted as the MU is never going to rock the boat in terms of women's equality within the Churches and in many ways this is a safe and non-threatening thing for the men

The research was peppered with examples of and references to how the Churches have been guilty of keeping women in a lower place than men-this was a consistent theme, with many people referring to personal experience either first hand or of daughters, mothers, wives, sisters and grandmothers.

When people follow the letter and not the spirit it does not breed compassion and that was a central thing that Christ taught. It breeds intolerance and hatred and bigotry and all those things because you are doing it unconsciously so you go to Church and then go out and beat your wife and its ok.....that's why I have never liked Church...

5.6.3 Priestly celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church

This was seen unanimously as a mistake by the Roman Catholic Church. Reasons given were that a celibate priest has a life that is too lonely for him to be a good Minister; that enforced celibacy has no real use and is a leftover from an era when property was being protected and the Church did not want their wealth to move away from their control through progeny. It was believed that a priest is better able to understand the world his parishioners live in and the struggles they have if he too has a partner and a family. It was claimed that this would make for a less remote clergy and a more 'human' Church.

I think it would be a major plus if there was a change around celibacy for secular priests-its Dickensian, it's archaic and it's actually an infringement of the human person

Celibacy for secular priests is about control. It's the ultimate instrument of control. The Church in a certain sense likes to control its priests, its ministers.

5.6.4 The role of the laity

A combination of the decline in people coming forward to train for Ministry and the need for the Churches to be more led by their members meant that an increasing role for the laity was envisioned in the coming years. There was a perception that in the RC Church the role of the priesthood had been elevated in a way that was not helpful or in line with gospel values or the example of the life of Jesus.

If you elevate the ministerial priesthood to the detriment of the priesthood of the laity -of all God's people - then you are dealing with pride and pride is the most destructive thing in a priest's life - humility is the guiding principle for all Christians.

If you elevate the ministerial priesthood you are running into problems because Jesus came and was born in a stable. Mary could have been seen as an unmarried mother-they were not well heeled or well to do.

Some also expressed dismay at what they saw as the passivity of the laity within all the Churches and found their inability to speak up against injustice shocking.

the passivity from the laity astonishes me all these kinds of terrible things that go on and people just shrug their shoulders

I have asked my friends why they still go to this Church which treats women, Gay people with a total disregard at best or actively campaigns against them

People I know who are involved or don't oppose this are still allowing themselves to be denigrated by being part of an organisation that thinks its ok to say those sorts of things (Gay people are the destruction of God's work)

That the role of the laity had expanded in the RC Church since Vatican all was acknowledged but people felt this progress was now being rolled back and the only reason lay involvement was being encouraged was because of the decline in vocations to the priesthood.

The observation was that those within the Protestant Tradition have a structure within their Churches that is more democratic and better facilitates the role of laity. Laity were considered to be more visible in assigned roles such as wardens and vestry members,. However the view was also posited that while the laity seem to have a bigger role there was in reality still a large amount of power resting with local clergy and consequently each Church was dependent on the attitude of the clergy member leading it and of the Bishop.

5.6.5 Sexuality

This was raised many times in this research. Primarily it was about the Churches treatment of Gay people but also about the whole approach to sexuality within Christian teaching, especially in the RC Tradition. The relationship of religion to education was of concern.

A small minority of respondents expressed strong views about homosexuality as not acceptable for Christians and also held strong views about the public expression of any sexuality outside marriage.

There is a Gay couple which has been sentenced to the maximum sentence 14 years in prison because they are Gay. Men. It's not allowed, they are a disgrace to the community and when they were coming from the courts there was a crowd outside the courts jeering and shouting at them.

This is a disgrace, it is unheard of.

We are not supposed to be hugging or kissing in Public, only married adults can do that.

This area was clearly a cause of hurt and bewilderment for a significant number of respondents who spoke of the suffering of friends and relatives while for others it had fuelled their opposition to and non-participation in their Church.

There is a split between sexuality and spirituality and I think that people suffer because of this-celibacy, sex outside marriage etc. How can young people relate to a Church that does not speak to them about anything?

If every time you used the word Gay you substituted it with the word Black you would not be able to publish that

when you have a leader of the Church saying things like 'Gays are the destruction of God's work' then does that mean it makes it ok to beat them up? Maybe even essential to beat them up? That sort of thing makes me troubled...

I don't care what people think as long as I have protection under the law from being harmed by them, but when you have a very strong faith based constitution and well, politicians may say they have no truck with that sort of stuff but still its out there and allowed to be out there in the sense that this sort of bigotry is acceptable to be held even by a small section of the overall population

Particular attention was paid to the detrimental impact of the Churches attitude on young Gay people.

What does that do to younger Gays who hear it and what it does to parental reactions to people coming out -it adds another layer of difficulty to what is a very difficult thing for younger people coming out -they have to take on board all that stuff instead of having a Church that supports them and values them which would be doing a very helpful job to people who are Gay

Because of the Church influence in schools there is little discussion around sexuality although there was discussion about it in one session in Transition year in one school locally

As I see it they have a responsibility to support people who are Gay and yet they do the very opposite which makes it more difficult for parents who get conflicted when they have a Gay child who they feel they have to maybe hide and who would not be welcome to be 'out' within the Church community. It's a whole other area of shame; it's awful, absolutely awful.

What was described as the State's slowness to progress the expansion of the curriculum to include exploration of a variety of sexualities was seen as a source of frustration and a block to progress.

The State should be saying we want this (education around sexualities in school) covered but so far they won't push the issue

There was a view that progress in these matters was contingent on the presence of progressive people within positions of authority in schools and Churches who could open the door to embrace all God's children as worthy of full respect and participation in the structures regardless of marital status, sexual orientation or any other sexuality related matter. This was not regarded as ideal but better than nothing.

There is progress but like on sectarianism it is contingent on there being a Principal in a school who places value on this. Without that, it just does not happen.

Another view was that the Churches preoccupation with such matters was largely irrelevant and antediluvian.

are there not more things to be worried about that whether a Gay man or woman is ordained in the Church? Like the state of the world?

5.6.6 Relationships, Marriage and Divorce

A small minority held Traditional views on this subject.

We value the family unit and we believe marriage is very important. There is no way you can be a single person and also live with a partner.

We see marriage as so sacred that it should not be tampered with. Divorce is out. We will try by all means to make people stay together even if there are hardships or there are problems religious people would intervene to help a couple.

The majority felt that an anti-divorce stance was inappropriate and caused unnecessary hardship to families. What was clear from responses was that people do not follow the Church teaching on these matters but have developed individual conscience around them. They are aware that they are in conflict with Church teaching but feel able to stand their ground. Where this becomes really problematic is where a clergy member upholds Church teaching strictly and the examples were given of people having been refused communion because they were divorced which caused both hurt and anger. The overall sense was that the Church was too concerned with these issues and not sufficiently engaged with issues that are more pressing relating to social justice, the environment and world debt and hunger.

5.6.7 Abortion

This was raised by a small minority of respondents who held strong and opposing views.

I did not like and still I do not like attempts to manipulate people through the Church, where policy issues concern the protection of the unborn child. This is a political matter, separate from Church.

For me, abortion is a subject that makes me mad-why should priests decide whether you will have baby or not! It's bad because sometimes it's a very difficult situation and priests they don't have wives, they don't have children and they are men so why do they need to make decisions about women and babies? My view is that each person should have their own choice and no priest should decide about that.

...abortion - the idea that it is teenagers is so wrong-its all women in their 40's. That's moral panic and the Church and media feed into each other on this.

There was a view that this was another example of the Churches inability to relate to modern life. The fact that so few people mentioned or responded to this indicated a

discomfort about the topic and an unwillingness to offer an opinion one way or another-it is seen as a private and hidden issue.

The view was also presented by a very small minority that abortion was an undesirable thing and that the Churches and that State were leading well in their opposition to it and in protecting the unborn child.

It's wrong. It's always wrong and as Christians we cannot let it happen.

It was only women who spoke about this matter and they were drawn from all Church backgrounds.

5.7 Levels of satisfaction with Church

A number of respondents reported dissatisfaction with the Church they were brought up in. Sometimes this was directed at members of the clergy or Church leaders and sometimes it was to do with moral issues or matters of doctrine. Others found the lack of participation by everyone in ritual a disappointment.

Priests are not very inspiring- maybe it's just the priests in this are-they are not very interesting or stimulating. Bishops don't even think of people.

I have given up-I am disillusioned and not enthusiastic about it. I don't feel that I belong to the RC Church here and I don't feel the lack of it in my life. I couldn't say I respect the Church-I don't: I just count them out of my life

people don't sing, they are passive and not enthusiastic

For others attendance at Church and being part of a community of believers was very important.

When it comes to Church attendance atmosphere is important to me along with the need to be with other people.

Others were critical of the Church getting involved in political affairs and social policy.

When I was in (another European country) I stopped going for Sunday mass, I do not want to listen to the order of who I should vote for in the election and how to make decisions for the convenience of the Church. The Church began to excessively use its authority which I think is not going to the right direction. Church is not for that- to build in the politics side, they should be talking to people about faith and belief

The involvement of the State in the cover up of clerical child sex abuse and abuse and neglect in Institutions run by religious orders also came in for criticism.

State responsibility...yes because they used court orders to have children admitted to these homes...the State does have a stake in it whether they like it or not.

5.8 Perspective of newcomers on the Christian Churches in Ireland

A small number of respondents to this research had come to Ireland from another country in the last 15 years. They noticed certain things about faith and Church in Ireland, some of which are positive and some of which are critical. The strong faith aspect of Irish society was mentioned as a plus but there was a belief that a double standard operates too:

One thing I really liked when I came to Ireland is that Irish people are very religious. They know there is a God who exists but they are not strong in their faith I can see some loopholes here and there because for me if you are a religious person you have to show it

'Irish people they are on both sides: they want to enjoy their life and they want to be religious. Irish people they talk of God, they talk of Mass, they talk of morning prayers but they don't respect the values or the ethos of what it is to be a religious person'

I hear of a lot of people writing to the Bishop to defect from the Roman Catholic Church-its interesting because even that means that religion is very important to them!

Some noticed that Irish RC's are highly critical of their Church and profess to hold views that are contrary to its teaching yet still remain within that Church without actively trying to create changes and are reluctant to explain why.

I have asked people if it's Christianity that's the important thing why don't you go to a more progressive Church and why not pursue that in a faith that's more respectful of the person you are or of the people you know and love are. But I think people are very uncomfortable so I don't ask that very often now

Another perception is that there is a social embarrassment involved in admitting to being a person of faith because the tide in the country is so against this.

My best friend is Irish and a catholic and she was really embarrassed to tell me she was christening her child. She was really embarrassed to go back to Church because her faith was becoming important to her and this was embarrassing as she had always shunned it. She played it down and was reluctant to invite people to the 'do' because she was afraid people would laugh at her for doing it.....

I think people are afraid to talk about faith...we can talk about sex but we can't talk about faith

I think people feel embarrassed to say that they have faith or are even interested in it

There was a perception that the exception to this was members of the Traveller Community who were seen as unashamed of their faith and deeply interested in religion.

I have had more religious discussion with them than any settled person. Their faith is alive and real in the everyday and they are not ashamed of it.

It was understood by those not from Ireland that people seem to have suffered a lot at hands of the Church in Ireland and it was felt that this had caused them-especially those aged forty or over- to mix that up with Faith and think the two are the same.

...people are alienated from Church and they therefore think they cannot have faith...I think of a friend I know who has been married twice and she is a very spiritual person to my mind but she says she is an atheist

It was reported that matters of religion here are perceived to be particularly sensitive and newcomers were quickly given to understand that faith and Church have political connotations and that there were Traditionally divisions among people from the RC Tradition and the Protestant Tradition.

I still do not understand the difference between Protestant and Catholic in Ireland, I spoke about religion in the pub once with my friend but he told me no, you don't touch this subject here in Ireland. He wanted to make me aware you had to be careful what you say on this subject-I was not aware of this danger and thought it could be talked about openly.



6 Sectarianism

6.1 Understanding of Sectarianism

Sectarianism was not a word that was new to anyone who gave an interview. It was an uncomfortable subject for some and for others, notably those who were not natives of Sligo; it was something they associated with an attitude that made you feel 'agin' anyone not from your own group-whether it is race, gender or faith based.

Conflict, hatred, violence it destroys communities and it's based on distrust

Sectarianism is about division, the nonsense of one crowd against the other. It's still around in many countries, not just Ireland.

It is certainly around in the North but also here in North Sligo but these days its more against people who are not Irish.

A common view was that it is not talked about openly, and the reasons given were fear of upsetting or offending people from a different Traditions and fear that by talking about it something would be created that might prove unmanageable and would disrupt what were termed good existing community relations. Sectarianism was thus manifested in silence.

It is not talked about openly as such. There is tension and everyone knows it. We stay apart.

I don't ask about that very often now-I did when I first came here to live but now I understand that its one of those o don't ask that kind of things, you don't understand, and of course that's part of my questioning -I am trying to understand.

..it would be very much keep your head down and say nothing. I find this-people are afraid

Most respondents readily associated sectarianism with the Northern Ireland conflict.

I have heard of Sectarianism in relation to the Troubles in the North

People do not use the term sectarian here - it's just a posh word for bigot. People tend to talk about the 'Troubles', the 'war' 'them down there'. When the term Sectarian is used its like one size fits all and it refers to what goes on in the North.

Some felt that it was not an issue in Sligo at all and had no relevance in Sligo. Their definition of sectarianism tended to favour the legalistic one which understands

sectarianism as discrimination on grounds of religion. They felt that this was no longer an issue in Sligo.

To me it has no relevance...if I was blocked on grounds of being a Protestant or discriminated against then that would be sectarianism - not someone calling me a Protestant.

Religious discrimination is not significant in Sligo at present. There is a lot more of an issue around racial discrimination and discrimination on grounds of ethnicity.

Its not in Sligo...it's in the North all right but not here

6.2 Relevance of Sectarianism in Sligo

There was an immediate reaction to questions about sectarianism with almost everyone from the RC Tradition initially denying it was relevant to Sligo, while some, but not all people from the Protestant Tradition felt differently. Almost all associated it readily with Northern Ireland and were more reluctant to see it as currently relevant in the Republic.

There is an undercurrent of sectarianism yet but not in the south. Or certainly much less.

I would say no about sectarianism here but I have no doubt that there are families who would feel differently

There is no sectarianism in Sligo, our problems are more to do with ethnic differences

It exists. It manifests itself at times like weddings if its an Inter-Church marriage where is it going to be held and how the families feel about it and next thing then is where is the child going to be baptised?

It hasn't gone away.....these days some people are still asked to promise even though the Ne Temere is gone

I know of ...an interchurch marriage. Now, under the Ne Temere decree that was a Protestant farm that then became a Roman Catholic far...maybe two generations back.....the mother of the bride to be said 'so now it's going back to what it was, a Protestant farm' so it's there a bit under the surface. It's very interesting that this was how it was viewed. I have not heard that sort of thing for a while now.

The question of what constitutes sectarian behaviour was viewed in different ways. For some it included name calling, jeering, joke telling, sniggering, passing remarks in pubs/school/public places while for others those types of behaviour were seen as 'a bit of craic' not to be taken seriously or associated with youthful exuberance. It was seen as of no consequence and ascribed to some people 'taking themselves too seriously'.

There is no sectarianism in Sligo-it's a matter of personal point of view -whether a person regards certain things as sectarian or not

Some people blame everything on the fact that they are a Protestant-overlooking that things may be happening to them for other reasons that are nothing to do with their religion.

For those on the receiving end of such behaviours, with little exception, the story was different. They reported feeling diminished, disrespected, isolated, humiliated and having a strong sense that they and their opinions and contribution were not welcome. This was mainly -but not solely -the view put forward by people from the Protestant Tradition.

Just wearing the school uniform and going down town is enough for some people to have a go at you. It's terrible to be shouted at and called names like that-everyone looks at you. I try to hold my head up but my heart sinks.

I have met Protestant people through doing work with the peace programme in Sligo and have heard them say they feel isolated, they don't speak up and they don't say how much they feel ostracised as a minority.

The majority RC population don't think it's (sectarianism) a problem by and large because of course it's not a problem for them....this is to do with minorities and how they experience life because they are in a minority.

No-one felt that there was discrimination in the legal sense against anyone on grounds of religion anymore but many felt that people of both Traditions tended to give work to 'their own', or sell land to 'their own'.

that will be always the case you select who you sell your land to-on religious grounds there are still some practices of that kind still in existence, from both sides... it would be a "mortal sin" for someone to sell land to the other side a number of years ago

The view was expressed that since the decline in farming this was less of an issue and that during the boom times the most important thing across the board was selling at high prices, but that the tendency to favour one's own still persisted.

Yes of course it is sectarian, but now in a sense holding on to the land and farming is not now seen to be an advantage at all.

They would sell to a fella in Dubai if he had the cash.

Deep down I think there would be a preference for one's own.

Some felt that marrying only within one's own Tradition was an indication of sectarian tendencies while others felt it was important to be able to be different and have that

difference valued positively in society and that each Church had the right to its own distinctiveness.

There was a discomfort about interchurch marriage on all sides. It was a source of anxiety because of the threat of loss of identity. People from all Traditions gave examples of how it had been problematic in their circle. Others gave examples of how it was no problem and believed that the problem lay in the fear of each other and a fundamental lack of respect coupled with competition between Churches for numbers.

It is worth noting that the initial reaction of most respondents when we began to talk about Sectarianism tended to shift as they explored the subject more.

The more we talk about this issue the more I realise how much there actually is to talk about.....

6.3 Experience & impacts of Sectarianism in Sligo

Ways in which sectarianism manifests were described as ‘*mainly subtle and underhand*’ by older interviewees.

I don’t know when I’ve heard an ‘in your face’ comment -that has changed.

But interestingly the younger groups had something different to say.

She would be judged as a ‘prod’ get a bit of a slagging, get jibed, get called a prod and would retort ah go on ya redheaded fenian ya-that’s a joke. But one boy was giving her a hard time calling her a prod all the time so she turned round and called him a taig and this really upset him-they haven’t spoken since-and these are young people in their 20’s at College

There was a sense in which for those from the minority Tradition felt they were ‘different’ and were treated differently as a result. That was not a problem except when the ‘different’ treatment meant being treated as less or in a cruel way related to that difference. Clear examples of reported sectarian behaviours in the past included mocking children, calling them derogatory names, or treating them less favorably on grounds of religious affiliation.

Division and segregation was real, expected and mostly accepted.

People described how being different permeated ‘their’ childhood and among stories recounted were those that showed that the children themselves understood this difference and that a time would come as they got older when it would become more marked.

There were reports of less interest being taken in the children from the minority religion or from a non-faith background which left those children with a strong sense of being outsiders.

not being part of things in the same way as the others were.

Vatican Two was considered to have shifted attitudes for the better in regard to how Roman Catholics thought of Protestants.

Vatican Two was like a reformation within the RC Church-we were all changed by it. Prior to that Protestants were seen as heretics but John 23rd changed that to 'separate brethren'

Those whose parents came from different religious backgrounds recalled a number of examples of the impacts of sectarianism for them.

My mother was not allowed to stand for me at my confirmation because she is a Baptist and the local priest knew this. She was never allowed to take communion in the RC Church when we were growing up because she was not RC and this was despite the fact that she took us to Mass every Sunday for years.

We engaged in cultural Catholicism, my mother would have played an active role the community and the school but we knew we would never be anything other than blow-ins even though a lot of the family has been in that area for 30 years now.

Here again the unspoken norms and practices were prevalent.

It was not talked about openly but you knew fine well when you should say certain things and when not depending who was there

I suppose if we are honest there are jokes and conversations that we all have within our own group that we would not feel comfortable having if members of the other group were present

There were also reports of being excluded from job networks on religious grounds and mention was made of notices being put up encouraging members of one particular religion to apply for positions as evidence for this.

Some argued that there was less sectarianism in rural areas because the nature of farming as that people had to depend on their neighbours and work together.

Less sectarianism in rural communities that in towns-farmers would have worked together and helped each other out

Others described what they called the 'hidden interface' of rural sectarianism which included who land was sold to, where business was transacted and which vet or doctor was called.

There is a hidden interface which could be described as Sectarian e.g. the issue of land and how it is distributed at point of sale -do RC's sell to Protestants and vice versa without a care in the world.....no they don't.

Some talked of being 'quietly excluded' from local social events which they simply were not told about.

I suppose for a small community it has been a bit threatening and if there's any signs of being omitted or left out or anything like that Protestants would be very sensitive about it.

Some people said that there was plenty of mixing between people of different Traditions socially but that it tended to be confined to the professional and middle classes.

I'm sure they mix at the golf club etc and Rotary, RNLi etc and sporting events-increasingly at sporting events. Rugby was a 'Protestant game' associated with the Protestant schools but now there some of the big Public schools are heavily involved and very rugby

People readily associated sectarianism and Northern Ireland and saw it as overt and disturbing-certainly not a desirable trait in a culture.

One thing I couldn't believe is that they still have segregated childcare settings in the North...they don't have that even in Israel...its incredible!

There was a perception that being a Protestant or a Roman Catholic in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were significantly different.

They are a different breed completely in the North

The reality is that Protestants down here would not be entirely accepted by Protestants in the North and there's no point in saying otherwise.

I have been hurt by my relative's attitude to my neighbours here-they assume we are all under the thumb and it's just not the case. My friends and neighbours have saved my life and none of them shared my religious persuasion. Try telling that to the Northerners.

getting back to Sectarianism its only the grace of God that with the statements that were made up there and the comments that we weren't burned out down here. There was statements made that only there were level headed people here that knew us and accepted us for what we were a lot of Protestants would have beenover that 30 years. There was tension and people had their heads down but personally I never got hassle

We had a school project when we went to Belfast and the kids in Belfast mixed better as Catholics and Protestants than they did with the kids from the South

Overall the sense was that the Republic had progressed beyond violence and sectarianism that expressed itself overtly.

As people explored this issue some reconsidered their initial assertion that sectarianism is non existent in Sligo.

6.4 Reasons for persistence of Sectarianism

Having identified that sectarianism exists in Sligo mainly in a subtle and covert way a number of reasons were put forward to explain its persistence. The history of Ireland and the influence of religion on politics and vice versa were seen as a continued reason for persistence of sectarian attitudes related to division.

It's in the culture the Church and the state and the education system-the main things have been played out through this division and its still there

Perhaps there is a sense of the RC's now having the 'whiphand' and there is still a fading awareness of 'old grief's' against the Protestant minority because of historical legacy associated with the colonial enterprise in Ireland. Upon the establishment of the Irish State rulers in the South did not avail of the opportunity to be as inclusive of all faiths as they might have been. There is still a lingering resentment-that their gain was made on the backs of our Grandfathers...

Catholics can't see that they are now doing it to Protestants because they had it done to them and they are now re-visiting the trauma onto another group

We are wide open to it because of our history of not understanding each other.

Take the death of Lord Mountbatten: no one will openly say it but at the time they were glad-how can anyone be glad about the death of a child? This point of view in Sligo is there covertly and has significant support in some communities.

There is also the 'old enemy' the old English thing - its amazing when you see intelligent and educated people at this type of thing, the fact is that if we had been in their shoes would we have done any better. Brutal and dehumanising behaviour has been on all sides.

Fear was seen as a root cause and a significant number of respondents felt that as long as that fear persists then so does sectarianism in some form and to some degree.

ignorance and fear, lack of vision, lack of lateral thinking, lack of hospitality. Fear of something that's different. We want to stick with what is familiar.

People are afraid of what they don't know

The influence of home and culture was also cited because of the historic and cultural divisions between those from the two main Traditions and the rivalry that has existed.

Parental and cultural input; where you grew up; what involvement you and your family had in this that and the other-GAA, Rugby; where you went to school. Segregation. It's like gangs - there's a sort of gang mentality.

You hear stories - I was only six in 1998 when the Agreement was signed in the North -but parents pass their prejudices down and I wish they didn't. I don't think difference matters, we are all human.

There was also a view that some things were done under the guise of religious identity that had more to do with greed and personal advancement.

How many things happened in the name of religion that are very much to do with personal gain? Things are designated a religious dispute when people are doing it for personal gain.

Respondents from all Traditions agreed that there are certain assumptions made and that these do not help in ridding Sligo of sectarian attitudes and myths. Assumptions cited were those relating to political views and affiliations and belonging to a particular denomination. Coupled with assumptions were tendencies to 'put down' cultures that are different.

Yes there is that assumption and it may not always follow at all.

it's not easy or relaxed.....particularly if people know what each others Church background is....and if they don't know they make assumptions.....

I have a friend who is into Ulster Scots culture and he feels he is treated as a joke and his language and culture is treated as a joke and as not authentic

Lack of contact and knowledge was believed to lead to assumptions which in turn fed myth and stereotyping and helped sectarianism persist. Alongside that some felt it was a legacy of the colonial experience

Maybe it's a thing about groups needing to assert themselves to feel ok.

Fear and narrow mindedness. Ignorance and fear. Lack of contact and fear, how we're half normal at all after 30 years of what went on is a miracle. It's a miracle we have come out of it as well as we have. I'd say things are much better in the south. But it was traumatic.

Some felt that it was seen as part of cultural belonging and that to challenge the jokes, to marry outside one's group or allow one's children to be baptized into another Tradition were experienced as signs of disloyalty. There is a price to be paid for deviating and many therefore go along with the status quo despite their discomfort with it.

Because people have a cultural faith...its all about being seen to be a good community member and conforming to be accepted even if in their hearts they do not feel what they appear to be practicing on the outside...

It's all very well saying that it's so common now to intermarry but in reality it still causes trouble on both sides and is not universally seen as a good thing. You hear of people not attending weddings and fall outs for years in families-on all sides. You hear of people being shunned.

An awareness of one another as 'different' is very persistent. What makes this troubling is that this type of difference is characterised by suspicion, distance, fear, and mistrust beyond a superficial level. Being different is not the problem but rather it is the value placed on that difference.

People are very much still aware of who each other are in terms of their denominational background.

Sectarianism was not especially connected in people's minds with either the Churches or religious congregations but was viewed as being part and parcel of community identity.

Most religious people are just going about their business and want to get on with life without hurting anyone, able to go to Mass, Meeting, Service or whatever.

Several respondents said they felt that as secularism became more prevalent this might bring an end to sectarianism. Some viewed the increase of secularism positively but for others it was not so.

I don't honestly know what makes sectarianism persist but unfortunately I think what will make it disappear in time if it ever does will be secularisation...

Overall there was a sense that sectarianism is linked to how we manage difference and the perception was that we are not particularly good at this. Treatment of Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Travellers was cited as evidence of this.

6.5 Perspective of newcomers on Sectarianism in Sligo

The perspective of newcomers tended to be more open and objective as might be expected given their distance from our lived history. As is often the way with those we might accuse of 'not understanding us' their insights can be sharp and a valuable mirror for reflection.

When I built my house the guys were, as it turned out an exclusively Protestant crew ...I talked to the younger fella-maybe in his early twenties and we were just taking about whether he would like to be married to a catholic and he said no, that would be a step too far, its ok to go out on a date as long as it doesn't get serious.

It was very interesting talking to the young Protestants about this question of identity and they definitely felt they were Irish but felt they were perceived as being less Irish by the Catholics and socially they only really socialised within their community and sought to marry each other.

Immigrant people are not really interested in this-they are here to work, they have their families and communities and they don't realise about the history of Ireland or this type of thing-they go to shop and know Enniskillen is ruled by England but that's all, that the signs on the street are different.

One thing I found out is that there's the good old IRA which people tell jolly stories about-it's like a golden era-and then there's the modern stuff which is so dark and unspoken.

In my area in the last 10 years there was still a Protestant shop and a Catholic shop - the division is totally embedded in the culture

One newcomer to Sligo gave an account of being asked many questions regarding their name which is 'unusual and not clearly either Catholic or Protestant' and they realised a long time after this event that it was because people felt uncomfortable until they knew the person's religion.

Because of my name people don't know what box to put me in and they feel unsettled by that-they really like to put you in a little box and don't feel comfortable until they can do it

When I came to Ireland 15 years ago the first stop I made off the ferry was X and I went into a shop and they refused to serve me. To this day I don't know was it because I was English or for some other reason.... attitudes here are coloured by the Catholic/Protestant thing in how we approach people who are different to us. For years I did not like X because of that experience and it left me afraid to open my mouth for quite some time.

As an English person I have a whole guilt thing going on about Planter mentality.....people in Sligo say quite rude things to you all the time and sometimes they say it's a joke but it does not feel funny when you are on the receiving end and say things like "oh you are only English and you can't help it"

what I would say is that it is nearly always pointed out-people let you know you are different and you know that is not a plus that you are. They seem to feel the need to let you know you are an outsider

6.6 Tackling Sectarianism

The consensus among those interviewees who were aware of Sectarianism was that attitudes are changing slowly for the better in this regard. A major barrier to be overcome is the ending of silence around the issue. Silence facilitates denial, which in turn allows festering and covert prejudices to thrive under its cover.

The only way with these things is to sit down and talk

It's true that people are getting on well with their neighbours as long as it's at a certain level-as long as it's never talked about.

Attitudes are changing slowlytry and bring the community together in prayer -all sides. I celebrate the progress we have made; young people won't tolerate this anymore.

There has been such silence about the experience of the Protestant minority in the Republic - it is good to talk about these experiences now

Talking and not being afraid to ask questions for fear of offending or worrying that after the event what you have said will be held against you or you will be cast in a certain light when in fact you are trying to work out how you feel and move forward

It was reported that fear of disrupting existing cordial relationships was underpinning reluctance to get involved in any discussions around issues to do with sectarianism.

Interestingly enough I think that's what will be most difficult - getting people to talk together about these matters. I am aware of some attempts being made and people do not want to get involved for fear of fighting with their neighbours with whom they get on very well.

I have never talked about it. It was something we were never encouraged to do, to talk about your experiences outside your family or your group or whatever and I don't know if that was fully understood.

You see you wouldn't talk much with your Roman Catholic neighbours at all and I had one or two contacts or colleagues through work and no matter what I would say to correct misconceptions or misperceptions I would hear them coming out again months later

(they) said there's no sectarianism in Sligo and I said yes there is. If people go to events that are put on, you know, from all Churches and all clergy go then there is no sectarianism is how they see it.

In addition to talking openly and honestly in a safe and facilitated environment, people felt that mixing together and modelling non-sectarian behaviours in communities, schools, Churches and workplaces was crucial. Young people were very strong on this - they believed that we learn our attitudes and values primarily from our parents and where there are sectarian ways of approaching difference we are handing the legacy of conflict down to the next generations.

It's a terrible thing. Mindsets have to be changed...people have to change their mindsets.

Having programmes of education in schools around diversity so that the next generation grow up with a different attitude to those who are different from themselves and have respect for everyone was seen as key, again especially by young people.

The Churches were seen as having a central role in working to build relationships in communities.

What the Church really needs is for people to build relationships, spend time, have a coffee with each other. There is too much concern with money and life so busy....

Share the Churches-if some small village would get together and try it-share resources: have a Protestant service one week and an RC the next week and maybe then the two would combine

It was said by several participants that the Peace Partnership's work in the county has facilitated them to engage with this topic with people from all backgrounds and expand their understanding to include developing a better understanding about racial and ethnic bigotry and the view from the Traveller community. Having the opportunity to talk and be heard was very important as there has been so little of this in Sligo.

The peace process has been seminal in allowing people from the minority religions to express their culture. The peace programme in Sligo is helping people to name and tackle sectarianism and racism.

We need space and time to build relationships and we need funding to support this to tackle the difficulties and differences that do exist.

In relation to levels of awareness of sectarianism some identified the Peace Programme as the only place they were encountering any examination of the issue.

It's on the agenda because of the Peace III Programme - It makes people aware of it. For me working on the Peace Programme I have been super aware of it and it is there but without the peace programme people maybe would not be aware of it.

Others took a more skeptical view of peace work in Sligo and its potential to bring positive change.

We have lovely words; 'peace' 'reconciliation' 'moving on' yet the peace walls in Belfast continue to get higher. Progress is only in pockets-maybe in the long term it will have an impact on this side of the border.

I wonder if Sligo is really ready to see the bigger picture in terms of peace work-do they even want to see it or is it just about what they can get out of it for Sligo?

In some instances there are people just going after the money and not especially interested in peace work -these projects are driven by money/funding and not content

Community development groups were cited as a valuable space for those wanting to learn more about themselves and others with whom they do not otherwise mix.

community activism will help people to see each other as friends and allies despite their differences-this is a long term project which may show its usefulness in next and subsequent generations

The media including local papers and radio and Church and community leaders were seen as important in speaking out against sectarianism and racism and modelling open attitudes and willingness to explore the subject. Consensus was that they are currently mainly falling down in this task.

Community leaders and people of standing can help too when they take a stand and defend minorities-there is a role for the Church here-they should be participating but they are not.

On the radio Marian Finucane, Derek Mooney and Pat Kenny do a good job to name and tackle issues and get things talked about in public which prompts discussion and that helps us to move forward

I would like to hear the Church prompt people to think about racism and attitudes to people who come here. The media-especially (local radio) also perpetuate stereotypes-this is especially true of racism against Travellers. We have the idea of superiority-that we are somehow better than others but think of the recent case of the woman battering the child in Cork-where's your actual Jesus there for the Catholic who goes to Mass-how does the Church lead by example?

If there could be some interchurch groups and that sort of thing to just talk about these things as an information thing that would help. I can't speak for the RC community but there is definitely a huge reluctance on the side of Protestants to do this

There was a sense that for some communities in Sligo this work had to be done slowly and carefully. Pushing agendas even if they were well motivated would not work. Who headlined an event, how a message was put across, who was involved in delivery-all of this was sensitive.

For a community like ours you have to build it up gradually

SECTION C CONCLUSIONS

In this section conclusions from each chapter of the finding will be dealt with first, followed by overall concluding remarks.

7 Conclusions from Findings

7.1 Faith

- There are a variety of faiths in Sligo today, both Christian and drawn from other world religions
- There are a number of people who live their lives without Church or faith and feel no anxiety about it
- People in Sligo are very interested in faith and spirituality and many are engaged in searching for an alternative to the Traditional Christian Churches
- There is a prevalent view that it is possible to have faith without Church
- Faith is a comfort and gives people strength
- Faith is seen by some as a way of cushioning life's suffering and facing death
- Prayer, Church attendance and scripture help to sustain Christian Faith
- Faith does not necessarily need Church
- The place we learn faith is our family, especially our mothers
- Faith remains constant but there are changes in how faith is being expressed
- Christian faith is the single most important aspect of life for some respondents
- Faith can offer a framework for moral living
- Faith is deeply personal
- Faith is embedded in cultural practice and sometimes when people engage in faith related activities it is more to do with culture and community identity than faith
- Faith creates a moral framework and guides decisions for Christians

7.2 Church

- Church is defined in a variety of ways ranging from the people of God to the buildings
- Options regarding Church are no longer confined to the four longest established Churches as there has been a flowering of different Churches in the county
- A deep faith and a spiritual searching leads many out of the Church they were raised in, due to teaching and attitudes regarding social matters including wealth, politics, homosexuality, family life, the position of women in society, priestly celibacy, relationships and marriage, divorce, abortion and clerical child sex abuse
- For a number of people their Church is extremely central to their lives
- People from the Roman Catholic Tradition expressed most disappointment with their Church

- Trust in the Roman Catholic Church has been eroded because of what is widely perceived as collusion by the Church authorities in relation to covering up clerical child sex abuse.
- The issue of women's lack of equality within the Churches is a source of discontent, especially in relation to ordination in the Roman Catholic Church.
- Church is at the heart of many small rural communities and an extremely important part of the social fabric
- The role of clergy at local level determines how the Church is perceived and related to by its congregation
- That there is a role for Church in society was recognised by most people-it was the nature and extent of that role that was in question
- There is little overall sustained contact between the Churches
- There is little contact between the Churches and other Faiths
- Warm relationships often exist at local level and offer people a chance to mix and learn from each other
- People adopt an ambivalent attitude to Church: they take some things and leave others
- Challenges facing the Churches include the fall in attendance; shortage of people coming forward for Ministry; financial burdens associated with small congregations and expensive buildings; perception of the Churches as hypocritical; the need to modernize in line with social change; attitudes to social issues; the relationship between Church and State; the fall out from the clerical child sex abuse issue in the Roman Catholic Church; priestly celibacy and the increase in secularism.

7.3 Sectarianism

- Everyone interviewed was aware of the concept of sectarianism in an Irish context
- At first, most respondents readily associated it with Northern Ireland
- There is a significant divergence of views on what constitutes sectarianism
- Views about the existence, nature and extent of sectarianism in Sligo are related to the individual's understanding of what constitutes sectarianism.
- As discrimination on religious grounds is outlawed some people conclude that sectarianism is non-existent
- For others sectarianism does exist and expresses itself through cultural practices and customs that are a legacy of living historically in a religiously segregated society
- Levels of awareness are higher among those from the Protestant Tradition
- Manifestations of sectarianism cited include use of language and jokes, separation and ignorance of each other's customs and Traditions and the 'hidden interface' i.e. the practices associated with mixing predominantly with one's own religious group and favouring one's own when it comes to sale of land and property, employment opportunities, important purchases, schooling, marriage.
- Examples of sectarian behaviours and attitudes are not confined to the past but there is a perception that they are not as widespread as in times past
- Making assumptions and stereotyping are unhelpful.
- Home is the most significant place for the perpetuation of sectarian attitudes
- Sectarianism is related to how we manage difference: is it a positive or a negative?

- Communities are already working well together and supporting one another e.g. helping with upkeep of Church buildings, holding cross-community Carol services at Christmas, engaging in cross-community and cross-border activities animated by the peace programmes in Sligo and in local community development and enterprise initiatives.
- Alongside this there is still a distance between the religious minority and majority Traditions in Sligo
- Individual clergy drive contact at local level and where it is fostered it has been beneficial in the experience of respondents but it is dependent on the support of individuals rather than being mandatory or a deliberate approach.
- For those who have been impacted by it, Sectarianism in Sligo is characterised by silence
- There is a fear of opening the subject in case it brings division where there is currently a level of harmony and peaceful co-existence
- The silence sustains ignorance about one another's Traditions and there is little opportunity for people to meet on a cross community basis to talk, listen and learn about one another and build relationships that can acknowledge and celebrate difference without being threatened by it.
- There is a role for Church and civic leaders as well as Media in tackling sectarianism.
- There is a role for schools and colleges in tackling sectarianism.
- The main barrier to tackling sectarianism is fear which manifests in silence
- People who are interested and concerned with how we shape our society are open to talking about issues in a safe setting



8 Concluding remarks

As stated at the outset this is a snapshot of the views and attitudes of a randomly picked group of people in Sligo in 2010. Undoubtedly, had a different group been selected for interview, a different weighting may have been given to some subjects and a different point of view arrived at. However what is notable in this document is the broad range of views presented.

Clearly there is a challenge presented here for the Churches but also an opportunity in that there is a deep and genuine interest in, and practice of, faith in Sligo. There is also a challenge to the Peace Partnership regarding their work in tackling sectarianism and how to best proceed in supporting the minority Protestant community. Alongside that there is encouragement to be had from the identification by participants that the work of the Peace Partnership has pushed the agenda forward in terms of tackling sectarianism and racism in Sligo.

Community activists who are working on peace projects are challenged to go ‘that little bit deeper’ and to find ways to engage with people in the minority Tradition that will create a space for silence to be broken and the old attitudes finally put to rest.

Above all, each one of us are challenged as members of a community which aspires to cherish all its children equally, to work to eradicate the attitudes and behaviours that lead to minorities in this community feeling that they are valued less than equally and that their contribution in terms of diversity is regarded as less than enriching.

What kind of future do we want? Do we really want to move beyond sectarianism? Are we prepared to face our fears, open up and talk to one another about what is holding us back from a better future where the concept of sectarianism will have no currency in our communities? The opportunity is here and now: let’s continue to move beyond sectarianism.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

Research questionnaire

- 1 Is Church and Faith important in your life and if so, how?
- 2 To what extent do you think Church and Faith are relevant to communities in Sligo today?
- 3 What are the main challenges that face the Churches?
- 4 What is your perception of relationships between the differing faith/Church groups in Sligo?
- 5 What is your understanding of sectarianism?
- 6 Do you think the term has relevance today in Sligo-does it impact on communities and if so, how and to what extent?
- 7 Have you had experience of sectarianism in Sligo?
- 8 Why does sectarianism persist? (If it does exist)
- 9 Are you aware of any strategies that currently tackle sectarianism locally?
- 10 What would you like to see being done to tackle sectarianism?



