

# **Everybody got a hug that morning...**

*from Desecration to Reconciliation*

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## **List of Acronyms**

AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernian
ARK	Access Research Knowledge website
CCWA	Churches' Community Work Alliance
CRC	Community Relations Council
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
HTR	Healing through Remembering
ICR	Institute for Conflict Research
ICTJ	International Centre for Transitional Justice
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
IRA	Irish Republican Army
ISE	Irish School of Ecumenics
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elem
NCFBC	National Coalition for Burned Churches
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PUL	Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
UDA	Ulster Defence Association
UDR	Ulster Defence Regiment

## **Executive Summary**

“Everybody got a hug that morning... it was all you could do!” was a comment made during an interview for this research. The person who shared it was reflecting on the experience of arriving at her place of worship one morning to find it had been destroyed with only the charred remains left. There was nothing that could be done at that point and those who had gathered shared the moment of pain, anguish and despair together in a hug as a means of offering some comfort to one another as they began to confront the enormity of what had happened to themselves and their congregation.

It is evident that in situations of conflict, religio-cultural places and symbols, which in ordinary circumstances would be considered as safe from damage and destruction, are frequently targeted for attack. Most recently, international stories have been carried concerning the destruction of places of worship and the desecration of graves in southern Somali and the killing of people in a mosque in Thailand. So also, in Northern Ireland, places of worship, Orange Halls, graveyards and graves have been, and continue to be, targeted. People have also been killed while attending their place of worship or on their way to or from it.

Again, most recently, the grave of loyalist leader, Ihab Shoukri was found by his fiancée to have been desecrated when she arrived to place flowers on it at Carnmoney cemetery, Newtownabbey. Shoukri’s brother, Yuk, has reportedly claimed he believed the attack was carried out by members of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) from North Belfast and despite this, the grave would be restored and his family would continue to visit it. In addition to this attack, the Republican Plot at Milltown cemetery was attacked and vandalised with paint and graffiti.

Attack on religio-cultural places, and symbols, is the focus of this research. In short, it is the contention of this paper that in times of socio-political stability and peace, expressions of the religiously symbolic are respected and to threaten or be seen to attack them crosses boundaries of regard and respect which otherwise holds such action as social taboos. On the other hand, in times of socio-political instability and conflict, these places and symbols find themselves more vulnerable to attack. As a consequence, when attacked in this way, boundaries are crossed which appears to evoke a different quality of experience and depth to the impact on those most affected.

The activity involved with crossing religiously symbolic boundaries through defiling, violating, dishonouring or polluting another's religiously symbolic is identified as being desecration. Here, then desecration is defined as that activity which divests of sacred or hallowed character or office; diverts from a sacred to a profane use or purpose; treats with sacrilege and profanes.

Thus, it is intended that this research would lead to a better understanding of desecration as a dynamic of conflict and violence in order that the conflict potential of its impact might be limited and any opportunity for furthering reconciliation might be maximised. That said, the focus here is singularly on Northern Ireland and has as its core academic objectives: 1. conceptualising desecration; 2. recording a small number of indicative stories of desecration during the conflict and violence in Northern Ireland; 3. considering the impact of desecration on individuals and communities as a dynamic of conflict and violence; and, 4. proposing a framework model of best practice for dealing with incidents of desecration.

Even though the research remains indicative due to the small sample of people interviewed, and the tiny number of incidents covered, it nevertheless breaks new ground in the awareness and analysis of desecration and offers an initial framework of response to incidents which has local and international implications and benefit.

The research set out to gain awareness of desecration and its impact by engaging in a qualitative social research consultation exercise. In this it was planned to interview three groups of people: namely, those who had specific experience of someone being attacked at place of worship, attack on their place of worship or attack on a cemetery or grave; secondly, representatives from organisations which would have some particular insight to offer on such attacks; and, thirdly, other civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives with an interest in this topic. Thus, by the end of the interview phase, thirty three people had been interviewed in twenty three interviews: twenty personal interviews and three small group interviews.

It is usually the case that research is underpinned by a review of the relevant literature on the topic under consideration. In this instance, that was found to be extremely difficult as very little appears to exist which considers the themes of desecration, conflict and reconciliation. This 'invisibility' is difficult to understand given the nature, type and scale of incidents in Northern Ireland and around the world. This is particularly hard to appreciate given that statistics show

that from 1994 – 2006, five hundred and sixty seven places of worship, two hundred and eighty seven Orange Halls and forty six GAA clubs (in years 1994 – 2002) have been attacked with 78% of the attacks on places of worship, during 1994 – 2000, involving a fire or petrol bomb incident.

The key findings from this research are:

### **1. Conceptualising desecration**

When drawing together the insights offered from all the interviewees, desecration is considered to be a complex phenomenon which is frequently found in conflict situations where boundaries and taboos are crossed that would not be in more stable times. Everyone interviewed could recognise desecration and talk about its place within conflict. As such, desecration is understood to be an attack on the treasured sacreds of an individual and/ or community.

These sacreds are thought to include places of worship, buildings, war memorials, memorials, cemeteries, religious artefacts, clergy, religious leaders, Orange Halls, GAA clubs, murals, civic and national symbols, eg flags as well as places of healing and safety. The sacred in community is recognised as hallowed ground and can develop as a result of atrocities and/ or historical events happening on the site. It was thought desecration ‘takes away a part of me and who I am meant to be’.

It is important to attend to the sacred in a community and all the more so during times of political conflict. As secularism increases and religious awareness and practice wane, so it is queried whether this will lead to a growth and increase in the development of other community sacreds, such as memorials. Community sacreds connect people, places, events, time and memory. It could be suggested hallowed ground is a place where people feel welcomed, valued and included.

The underlying dynamics of desecration are thought to include anger, exclusion, injustice, personal hurt, hatred, a lack of respect, reprisal, dissatisfaction with society and a wish to take away the ‘special’ from another, brain washing on behalf of the cause, a challenge to the powers, frustration, contempt and a drive for purity. It is considered to be symptomatic of a society where the ‘way of dealing with difference and hurt is through violence’.

## **2. Identifying incidents of desecration**

Every person interviewed was able to identify incidents of desecration which had taken place during the Troubles. A number, of course, had personal and direct experience. Thus, those churches named included: Harryville, Darkley, Randalstown, Fortwilliam Presbyterian Church, Springfield Road Methodist Church, John Knox Memorial Free Presbyterian Church and St Brigid's Church, Belfast. Incidents were identified as having happened in Milltown Cemetery, City Cemetery and Carnmoney Cemetery. Attacks happened to people at Mountain Lodge Mission Hall, Darkley and St Brigid's, Belfast. In addition, attacks on War Memorials, Orange Halls and GAA clubs were also identified, as was an attack on the Memorial Garden in Omagh.

The scale of the attacks needs to be appreciated with the likes of Whitehouse Presbyterian church experiencing some twenty seven attacks over the years.

The importance of having a whole community response is noted. Again, this has involved everything from neighbours coming with buckets and sponges to help clean up, to clergy making joint visible interventions.

## **3. Acknowledging the impact of desecration**

Quite apart from the physical damage done, desecration is recognised as being like a trauma with deep emotional and psychological effects on personal and community identity as well. These include the sense of outrage, upset, bewilderment, anger, fear, sadness, devastation and a questioning of faith; but a strong resilience to keep going was also identified.

A significant impact of desecration is the way in which it is thought it undermines security, while leaving people with a sense of hopelessness, despair, a lack of direction, increased suspicion, reduced trust, isolation and victimhood. It needs to be realised that the impact of an incident may not be immediately evident and could manifest itself years later. At the same time, if handled well, the situation may open transformational possibilities for reconciliation.

It is recognised that desecration is both influenced by conflict and is an influencer of conflict. Whatever the complexity of this relationship, and the possibility of retaliation emanating from an incident, it does not have to be a predetermined response. That said, desecration is thought to influence conflict by keeping it going.



The challenges brought by desecration are thought to include: bringing the conflict to an end, dealing with the financial implications of an attack, developing tolerance and respect, addressing the incident to limit conflict potential, protecting the site where it has happened, educating about sacred space, handling the hurt caused, preventing a victim mindset from taking hold, and seeking legal due process. In addition, there is a challenge in trying to find ways in which past incidents can be acknowledged while at the same time having hope that these things will never happen again.

#### **4. Responding to desecration**

A number of needs were identified as requiring attention. These included the need for affirmation from religious and community leaders, especially those from the other community; the need for accountability and understanding; the need for a co-ordinated, properly resourced, cross-community and cross-sectoral strategy; the development of tolerance and respect; loud, public and unequivocal condemnation of any incident from all sides of the community; empathy with victims; safe space for reflection; enforcement of Hate Crime legislation; to ‘make the place sacred again’; addressing the psycho-spiritual impact; and, keeping the community together.

From these needs, priorities were identified and included: meeting and continuing to meet those from the other community; developing and maintaining good community relations; managing incidents and their impact well; developing community education processes; dealing with the pain; bringing people to court for the attacks; and, consulting with all effected to find a way forward.

The research concludes by proposing that a framework for such a response needs to involve:

1. Preparing a strategic, coherent, resourced and co-ordinated plan of action developed by a range of concerned parties, including representatives from government, district councils, faith groups, denominations, criminal justice agencies, PSNI, media, youth and community work, victims/ survivors groups, other interested organisations eg Healing through Remembering and Journey towards Healing and those who have been victims of attacks.
2. Identifying a ‘lead partner’ who will own and remain accountable for the strategy’s implementation.

3. Ensuring the strategy is made available to all faith groups and those with responsibility for the care of graves and cemeteries at district council and local congregational levels.
4. Developing joint 'incident scenario' plans between local churches/ faith groups/ clergy forums which will include how a faith group will respond in the event of an attack, how faith groups not attacked will respond in support of those who are and how the media is to be briefed.
5. Making available affirming, appropriate and ongoing trauma support to any victims of an incident of desecration.
6. Developing 'accompaniment arrangements' to support those who have suffered an attack returning to the place of the incident.
7. Providing clergy and other faith workers, responsible for pastoral care, with specialist training and supervision in trauma, bereavement and mediation work.
8. Preparing and disseminating biblical, liturgical and pastoral resources dealing with the range of issues raised in this research for faith leaders, faith community members and victims. These resources would benefit the work of reconciliation if they were prepared and promoted in an inter-church/ ecumenical manner.
9. Encouraging appropriate pastoral responses to incidents of desecration by members of the community which the perpetrators of an act of desecration come from, eg visiting and letter writing to the victims.
10. Developing and sharing acts of 'reconsecration' which, as gestures of healing, would benefit from being designed and shared in an inter-church and cross-community way.
11. Handling incidents of desecration by the PSNI according to the legislative framework and process brought in under the 'anti-hate crime' Criminal Justice Order while also considering how to implement an effective restorative process.

12. Publicising widely prosecutions of people for acts of ‘desecration’.
13. Giving active consideration to the development of shared sacred spaces known within communities for their welcome, valuing and inclusion of people as well as being places of creativity, imagination, transformation and healing.
14. Accessing Good Relations programmes which focus on developing tolerance and respect for all that is considered to be sacred in community.
15. Encouraging reflective practice processes in order that practice can be continually improved and the strategy made more effective such that in time non-violent responses to conflict are seen as the only option.

## **1. Introduction and background to the research**

“Everybody got a hug that morning... it was all you could do!” was a comment made during an interview for this research. The person who shared it was reflecting on the experience of arriving at her place of worship one morning to find it had been destroyed with only the charred remains left. There was nothing that could be done at that point and those who had gathered shared the moment of pain, anguish and despair together in a hug as a means of offering some comfort to one another as they began to confront the enormity of what had happened to themselves and their congregation.<sup>1</sup>

Even though the building had been subjected to repeated attacks of various levels of seriousness over the years of the conflict, it was still a particular challenge to accept that a place of worship could be attacked in this way as people’s general sense would still indicate that such places should be off-limits to any attack.

That said, it does appear to be the case that in situations of conflict, religio-cultural places and symbols, which in ordinary circumstances would be considered as safe from damage and destruction, are frequently targeted for attack. Such activity can appear to focus on buildings like places of worship and/ or those identifiable as belonging to religious organisations. However, it does not seem to be limited to places of bricks and mortar as it can also include destruction of items such as scriptures, sacramentals and symbols of the other’s religion and culture. A particularly acute example of this activity is found in attacks on memorials, graves and graveyards and violation of the dead. In addition, incidents involving the attack and/ or killing of people while at place of worship or on their way to or from place of worship are also identifiable.

By way of brief reflection, it appears that such attacks are evident in every conflict whether in India, Kosova, the Middle East or the Sudan. Most recently, stories have been carried concerning the destruction of places of worship and the desecration of graves in southern Somalia<sup>2</sup> and the killing of people in a mosque in Thailand.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See p 71

<sup>2</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8077725.stm> - 8 June 2009

<sup>3</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8090107.stm> - 8 June 2009

Northern Ireland has not been, and is not, immune to attacks on religio-cultural places and symbols. Here places of worship, Orange Halls,<sup>4</sup> graveyards and graves<sup>5</sup> have been, and continue to be, targeted. People have also been killed while attending their place of worship or on their way to or from it.

Again, most recently, the grave of loyalist leader, Ihab Shoukri was found by his fiancée to have been desecrated when she arrived to place flowers on it at Carnmoney cemetery, Newtownabbey. Shoukri's brother, Yuk, has reportedly claimed he believed the attack was carried out by members of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) from North Belfast and despite this, the grave would be restored and his family would continue to visit it.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this attack, the Republican Plot at Milltown cemetery was attacked and vandalised with paint and graffiti.<sup>7</sup>

While trying to consider the impact of attacks on religio-cultural places and symbols, some incidents were the focus of a workshop held at the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) and facilitated under the auspices of this research project.<sup>8</sup> The stories were introduced by telling, for example, of two young people coming out of a building and being shot dead during some of the most difficult years of the violence. Challenging as this story was, the story was again told to the group but with the additional information that the young people were coming out the door from their place of worship and as such were identifiable as belonging to a particular group of the community. They were shot and died in a sectarian attack which took place at the door of their place of worship. On reflection, terrible as the first telling of the story was, the retelling of the story to include the details of the attack happening at a place of worship was recognised by the group as an incident that was even more difficult to understand.

But why should the response be different? What is the difference? Why should the place where an incident happens make it any less or more difficult to understand? What are the places that evoke this different level of experience? How is this difference to be described and understood?

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/Orange-hall-attacks-39are-hate.1636405.jp>

<sup>5</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4303692.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4303692.stm)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/shoukri-grave-smashed-14338631.html> - 15 June 2009

[http://www.irishnews.com/articles/540/5860/2009/6/15/620160\\_384598424601Vandalsat.html](http://www.irishnews.com/articles/540/5860/2009/6/15/620160_384598424601Vandalsat.html) - 15 June 2009

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/ira-graves-daubed-with-fascist-graffiti-14345952.html> - 19 June 2009

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ecumenics.ie/content.php?cid=952> - 12 November 2008

In short, it is the contention of this research that in times of socio-political stability and peace, expressions of the religiously symbolic are respected and to threaten or be seen to attack them crosses boundaries of regard and respect which otherwise holds such action as social taboos. On the other hand, in times of socio-political instability and conflict, these symbols find themselves more vulnerable to attack. As a consequence, when attacked in this way, boundaries are crossed which appears to evoke a different quality of experience and depth to the impact on those most affected.

The activity involved with crossing religiously symbolic boundaries through defiling, violating, dishonouring or polluting another's religiously symbolic is identified as being desecration. Here, then desecration is defined as that activity which divests of sacred or hallowed character or office; diverts from a sacred to a profane use or purpose; treats with sacrilege and profanes.<sup>9</sup>

While identifying desecration in this way, it is notable that given what appears to be the ubiquitous nature of attacks on the religious in contexts of socio-political instability, little research has been carried out, nationally or internationally, on its prevalence in, and impact on, situations of conflict and/ or violence. Indeed, as far as it can be ascertained at present, no research at all has been carried out in Northern Ireland on desecration and its influence on the conflict and attempts at finding reconciliation and peace.

Given the lack of research attention on this neglected yet important area, the Institute for Conflict Research (ICR)<sup>10</sup> was granted funding under the Community Relations Research Award Programme of the Community Relations Council (CRC)<sup>11</sup> to undertake a short piece of research into desecration and its relationship to conflict in Northern Ireland. By way of outcome, it was intended that the research would lead to a better understanding of desecration as a dynamic of conflict and violence in order that the conflict potential of its impact might be limited and any opportunity for furthering reconciliation might be maximised.

Thus, this research specifically focuses on desecration within the context of the Northern Ireland conflict and has as its core academic objectives: 1. conceptualising desecration; 2. recording a small number of indicative stories of desecration during the conflict and violence in Northern

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<sup>9</sup> Desecration. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc.  
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/desecration> (accessed: June 30, 2009)

<sup>10</sup> [www.conflictresearch.org.uk](http://www.conflictresearch.org.uk)

<sup>11</sup> [www.community-relations.org.uk/](http://www.community-relations.org.uk/)

Ireland; 3. considering the impact of desecration on individuals and communities as a dynamic of conflict and violence; and, 4. proposing a framework model of best practice for dealing with incidents of desecration.

Due to the nature of this exploration, a high level of sensitivity is necessary which begins with the realisation that some wounds remain very raw and care must be taken not to encroach or intrude into someone's story further than they are comfortable with. In acknowledging this, the researcher is profoundly grateful to those individuals, organisational representatives and clergy who shared some aspect of their story in order to better understand desecration and its impact on conflict.

These stories were offered by three sets of individuals: those who had specific experience of someone being attacked at place of worship, attack on their place of worship or attack on a cemetery or grave; secondly, representatives from organisations which would have some particular interest in such attacks; and, thirdly, other civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives with a concern about the issue.

Even though the research remains indicative due to the small sample of people interviewed, and the tiny number of incidents covered, it nevertheless breaks new ground in the awareness and analysis of desecration and offers an initial framework of response to incidents which has local and international implications and benefit.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **1. Research Design**

The letter of Offer and Contract with CRC outlined the agreed outcome, objectives, methodology and timeframe of the research project. Thus, the research sought to achieve the outcome of better understanding desecration, as a dynamic of conflict and violence, in order that the conflict potential of its impact is limited and any opportunity for furthering reconciliation is maximised. So as to gather useful data to facilitate this outcome, the research objectives were in turn used to develop a number of core questions including

1. What is desecration?
2. What are the stories of desecration during the violence in Northern Ireland?
3. What is the impact of desecration?
4. What should a good practice response to desecration include?

Each of these questions had, in addition, a range of sub-questions which were used to further explore the issues in semi-structured interviews.<sup>12</sup> Everyone invited to participate in an interview was informed at the outset that despite the number of questions, no one person was expected to be able necessarily to answer every question. The fact that so little work has been done on the theme was helpful here in that interviewees were assured that any insight they felt able to offer would be appreciated. As it turned out, over 90% of those interviewed offered answers to every question and from the information provided insight into the nature, form and impact of desecration was gained.

At the same time, however, the lack of previous studies has possibly also hidden something of the scale of the issue. It was recognised, when putting the research design together, that a study such as this one could only begin to scratch at the surface of the reality. Nevertheless, even with such limitation it was hoped that the issue could at least be highlighted and some parameters for further study suggested. That said, it was only through interviews that something of the real scale began to become apparent. Thus, when speaking with the group of members from

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<sup>12</sup>For the Questionnaire – see Appendix 2



Whitehouse Presbyterian church, it transpired that since the beginning of the conflict there have been some twenty seven incidents of daubing, vandalism and destruction, including three previous fires before a fourth fire finally destroyed the building. Such awareness raising served to further highlight the neglect of such an issue in the conflict and the increasingly limited nature of this study.

## **2. Methodology**

The research set out to gain awareness of desecration and its impact by engaging in a qualitative social research consultation exercise. In this it was planned to interview three groups of people: namely, those who had specific experience of someone being attacked at place of worship, attack on their place of worship or attack on a cemetery or grave; secondly, representatives from organisations which would have some particular insight to offer on such attacks; and, thirdly, other civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives with an interest in this topic.

In addition, it was recognised that despite the lack of other studies from which to draw any information, it would be helpful to place the study in some quantitative context. While it appears no denominations keep records of incidents such as those in which the research was interested, there were some statistics available from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)<sup>13</sup> concerning attacks on the property of places of worship. Again, however, useful as this information is, it is questionable as to whether it offers a whole picture. The issue of PSNI statistics is relevant here. Along with this, however, it is also important to note the issue of accuracy of the statistics is raised as well. Unfortunately, in depth consideration of their accuracy and any associated implications lies outside the remit of this study.

### **i. Primary Research**

A range of key stakeholders was identified, contacted and invited to participate in the research. As noted above, these stakeholders were representative of three broad groupings: namely, those who had specific experience of someone being attacked at place of worship, attack on their place of worship or attack on a cemetery or grave; secondly, representatives from organisations which would have some particular interest

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.psni.police.uk/>

in such attacks; and, thirdly, other civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives with an interest in this topic.

Meetings were set up with those who agreed to be interviewed. By the end of the interview phase, thirty three people had been interviewed in twenty three interviews: twenty personal interviews and three small group interviews (one with the three staff from the Churches' Community Work Alliance (CCWA),<sup>14</sup> one interview with a group of six members of Whitehouse Presbyterian Church and one with a staff group from Crossfire Trust, Darkley<sup>15</sup>).

In terms of representative grouping, one interview was held with a political party, two with academics, four with church representatives (two with church leaders and two with individuals who were involved in responding to incidents), eight with organisations and eight with people who had particular experience to share. Within this latter group of eight, four were interviewed on basis of experience of damage and/ or destruction being done to place of worship (Harryville, Whitehouse Presbyterian church, Springfield Road Methodist Church, Fortwilliam Macrory Presbyterian church), one due to damage at a cemetery (Milltown), two arising from attacks on people at a place of worship (Mountain Hall Lodge, Darkley and St Brigid's, Belfast) and one from a combined situation of attack on a place of worship and attacks on people at the same place of worship though from different times (St Brigid's, Belfast).

It was disappointing that only one political representative was found to interview; though, for the record, it should be noted every political party was contacted and invited to participate.

The time required to form a sample was relatively significant. The initial contact information was gained from personal knowledge, 'snowballing' and web based research. While it is true to say many of those contacted, and subsequently interviewed, did not initially see themselves as having much information to offer, all contributed some particular insight which the study would have been the poorer for not having.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ccwa-ni.org.uk/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.crossfiretrust.net/>

The data was collected largely through semi-structured interviews carried out on a one to one consultation basis and, in three instances, in small focus groups. Prior to meeting, a one page briefing paper about the research and the questions under consideration were sent out to the interviewees. Each interviewee was asked the same questions. The length of the interviews ranged from twenty minutes to approximately one hour and took place in a setting of choice for the interviewee.

## **ii. Secondary Research**

At the outset of the research, it had been hoped to make use of a broad range of literature relevant to the issue under consideration. This transpired to be more difficult than initially assumed due to the paucity of available literature dealing with desecration and conflict. As far as is understood, no prior research has been carried out in Northern Ireland by government, academics, churches, think-tank or individuals.

In addition, while in attendance at a recent Healing through Remembering (HTR)<sup>16</sup> conference, an opportunity was taken to inquire of the key note speaker, Dr Graham Simpson from the International Centre for Transitional Justice (ICTJ).<sup>17</sup>, about his awareness of any research being done on desecration either through his agency or any other with whom he was in contact. He could not refer to any. Further, a search of the Access Research Knowledge (ARK) website<sup>18</sup> for research on the issue did not result in a single match.

That said, however, the research did become aware of some academic work having been done on church burnings in the southern states of the United States of America and particularly as it related to the experience of churches and congregations belonging to faith groups from the Black community.

As it turned out, after a significant amount of web based research, only two direct papers on the theme of desecration and its relationship to conflict were found.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.healingthroughremembering.info/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ictj.org/en/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ark.ac.uk/index.html>

In terms of quantitative data, the only available information is that of PSNI statistics detailing attacks on church property, Orange Order/ Apprentice Boys'<sup>19</sup> Halls and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)/ Ancient Order of Hibernian (AOH) clubs.<sup>20</sup>

### **3. Ethical Issues**

As noted above, every person interviewed received a briefing about the research and a copy of the questions for consideration. In addition, prior to beginning the interviews, the purpose of the research was outlined again.

With the exception of one interview which was not recorded, all the other interviews were recorded with the knowledge and permission of the interviewee. Irrespective, every person was invited to contribute to a level with which they were comfortable. In addition, they were informed if they wished to say something 'off record' then the recorder could be switched off. Similarly, if they wished to make a comment that was not to be reported then they could indicate this and it would be respected.

Confidentiality was guaranteed within the parameters of good research practice.

### **4. Project Timeframe**

The project ran from January to June 2009.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.grandorangelodge.co.uk/>; <http://www2.apprenticeboys.co.uk/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.gaa.ie/>; <http://www.aoh.com/>

### **3. Research on Desecration and Conflict**

Ordinarily a research review is an opportunity to identify and reflect on other work which has been carried out on the theme under consideration. In this research project, however, it would appear that there is next to no literature available to review. After a significant number of hours spent on web based research, only two papers have been found that are concerned with the themes of desecration and its relationship to conflict; though not necessarily reconciliation. Ravindran<sup>21</sup> does not appear to be aware of Hassner's work<sup>22</sup> though, as outlined below, there is consideration given to some similar themes and contexts. The paucity of research in this area would indicate the invisibility of an important theme and influence in conflict and reconciliation.

It is also worth recording that in the course of this research, several academics were asked if they were aware of any work done on the theme of desecration and its influence on conflict. None were. In addition, Healing through Remembering held a conference at which the keynote speaker was Dr Graham Simpson, Director of ICTJ. The opportunity was taken to ask Dr Simpson whether ICTJ was involved in any research on the theme of desecration or if he knew of any such work. Again, the inquiry drew a negative response.

While acknowledging this lack of research, it is nevertheless worth noting some broader academic work which has been carried out on the themes of attacking the sacred as represented by religio-cultural places and symbols. Thus, incidents of desecration have been collated by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)<sup>23</sup> and highlighted in their Annual Reports on Hate Crime. Here, for example, it is recorded that in Serbia fifty seven incidents of desecration took place at religious sites.<sup>24</sup> In addition, incidents of desecration were experienced by the Jewish community as occurring throughout Europe. According to the report, 'Cemetery desecrations were one of the most frequent manifestations of anti-Semitism that occurred across the region and often targeted one of the few traces left behind from the communities that were

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<sup>21</sup> Ravindran, R. (2006) *Religious Desecration and Ethnic Violence*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Monterey, California, Naval Post-Graduate School.  
[http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/theses/2006/Dec/06Dec\\_Ravindran.pdf](http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/theses/2006/Dec/06Dec_Ravindran.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Hassner, Ron E. (2006) *Fighting Insurgency on Sacred Ground*. *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:2, pp. 149–166.  
[http://www.twq.com/06spring/docs/06spring\\_hassner.pdf](http://www.twq.com/06spring/docs/06spring_hassner.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.osce.org/>

<sup>24</sup> OSCE/ ODIHR (2007) *Hate Crimes in the OSCE Region: Incidents and Responses*. Warsaw, OSCE/ ODIHR.  
[http://www.osce.org/publications/odihr/2008/10/33850\\_1196\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/publications/odihr/2008/10/33850_1196_en.pdf) p 37.

killed during the Holocaust'.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, desecration was also experienced by the Muslim community with Mosques, graves and individuals being the focus of attack and desecration.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, it would appear there is a small but growing body of literature and information in the field as represented by the work of Jack Santino, and a range of contributors, on shrines and memorialisation;<sup>27</sup> Eriksen and Jenkins, and similar contributors, on flags, symbolism and desecration;<sup>28</sup> and, the National Coalition for Burned Churches and Community Empowerment (NCFBC) in the USA.<sup>29</sup>

In light of this research gap, the contribution of Hassner and, independently, Ravindran is important in trying to understand the relationship between desecration and violence in situations of conflict.

Hassner begins his paper with a story from Iraq that illustrates the conflict that arises over sacred spaces. On reflection he considers, 'conflicts at sacred sites mobilize tribal, nationalist, and ethnic sentiments, inciting violence that spreads rapidly beyond the structure's physical boundaries'.<sup>30</sup> While recognising the universal dimension of conflict and desecration at sacred sites, he is particularly concerned with the 'unique dilemma for US operations' in Iraq where service personnel have to choose in a conflict situation between 'desecrating a sacred space or restrict their fighting to respect the opponent's religious sensibilities'.<sup>31</sup>

For Hassner, sacred spaces are the places where heaven and earth meet and where the Divine is to be found along with blessings of 'healing, success or salvation.' As such there is a range of distinctive rules and guidelines that control how the space is to be used and who can use it for what purposes. Here, then, desecration becomes 'the transgression of the boundary between the sacred and the profane'.<sup>32</sup> Following reflection on a wide range of incidents from Iraq, India and

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid* p84

<sup>26</sup> *ibid* p86ff

<sup>27</sup> Santino, J. (ed.) (2006) *Spontaneous Shrines and Public Memorialisation of Death*. Basingstoke, UK, Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>28</sup> Eriksen, T.H. and Jenkins, R. (ed.) (2007) *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America*. Abingdon, UK, Routledge.

Also, for focused consideration of flag Desecration as it applies to the United States of America see also the Flag Burning Page website <http://www.esquilax.com/flag/bibliography.shtml>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.ncfbc.org/>

<sup>30</sup> Hassner p149

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* p150

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* p151

Israel, Hassner suggests four core lessons to be borne in mind when military personnel consider how best to respond to ‘insurgents’ strategic use of mosques’. These lessons involve:

1. Taking time to understand all the religious dimensions involved with any particular situation
2. Ensuring a full consultation process with religious leaders has been carried out
3. Recognising at the outset that any attack by ‘the other’ will be judged more harshly than one from the community itself
4. Laying siege to an area before deciding to engage in a military offensive is a preferable option

Ravindran begins his thesis with an itemisation of incidents of desecration in a number of conflict settings. He states that for him desecration is ‘is the profanation or violation of anything sacred’.<sup>33</sup> This he develops later to involve ‘the destruction, defacement, devaluation or defilement of sacred space, object or belief’.<sup>34</sup> The focus here is on exploring what desecration is and how it impacts the context wherein it happens.

The framework of analysis for him involves reviewing Gurr’s work on ethnic conflict. At the outset this suggests that desecration leads to greater group cohesion, grievance formation and conflict. Recognising the preconditioning factors and the precipitate factors in conflict, Ravindran suggests desecration can be a distinctive precipitate factor on its own. From this consideration of the impact of desecration, the paper moves on to consider the Concept of Sacredness; the Mobilisation Potential of Desecration; Desecration and the Indivisibility of the Sacred; Centrality and Exclusivity; How terrorists exploit the Sacred; and, Violence – a Product of Desecration.

In terms of the concept of sacredness, Ravindran refers to Eliade and suggests sacred spaces are the points at which ‘heaven and earth meet’.<sup>35</sup> Here the sacred is thought to have three important roles: to be a place where people meet their God; to be a place of divine dwelling; and, to provide meaning. Given these roles, it is thought that sacred space can be created or interpreted as being sacred. However understood, it is further suggested the importance of a sacred is defined by indivisibility (not open to reduction, substitution or sharing), centrality (the

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<sup>33</sup> Ravindran 2006 p1

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* p13

<sup>35</sup> p9

importance of the sacred within the whole understanding of belief and practice) and exclusivity (the controls placed on access to the sacred). The potential for conflict is thought to increase with the degree to which any of these boundaries are crossed, as to do this involves a desecration of the sacred.

In considering the mobilisation potential of desecration, Ravindran (as does Hassner) details the attack on the Golden Temple of Amritsar in 1984 to evidence his hypotheses: firstly, desecration leads to conflict and violence; and, secondly, it can act as independent and exclusive factors in shaping violent reaction.<sup>36</sup> From this case study, it is suggested the sense of the sacred is significantly involved with shaping personal identity to the extent that when the sacred is threatened it evokes a backlash. This form of attack influences the formation of a strong group identity which otherwise would remain less pronounced. In addition, it can lead to a strong reaction which resulted in the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and other leaders. A final interesting observation here is that of the role of the Sikh leader, Bhindranwale, and his supporters who it is claimed first desecrated the Temple with the arms they stored in its precincts. Here, in contrast with the Indian military, Bhindranwale was not criticised by the Sikh population.

In terms of desecration and the indivisibility of the sacred, Ravindran reflects on the outcomes of disputes that take place over commonly held sacred space. Here he concentrates attention on the conflicts between Jews and Muslims over the Temple Mount and Jerusalem. There is a sad irony noted here where Jews and Muslims can respect each other's religious traditions, yet still have bloody conflicts about the Temple Mount. A second example described here involves the violent conflict that has arisen between Muslims and Hindus over Ayodhya, the birth place of Ram, the most revered of Indian deities. From these situations, it is recognised indivisibility 'makes disputes over sacred spaces not only difficult and potentially unsolvable but fraught with the danger of acute grievance formation, often then leading to violence and brutalities'.<sup>37</sup>

In the chapter on centrality and exclusivity, Ravindran details the story of The Temple of the Tooth at Buddhism's most sacred site, Sri Dalada Maligawa, and the attack on it by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elem (LTTE). Other case studies discussed here include the theft of a lock of the Prophet Mohammed's hair, the more recent controversy of Koran desecration in

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<sup>36</sup> p15

<sup>37</sup> p34



Guantanamo Bay detention centre and the cartoons of Mohammed which appeared in newspapers. It is thought the importance of centrality and exclusivity can be significant influences behind the violent reaction following desecration of a group's sacred.

At the close of his case studies, Ravindran summarises that desecration can gather a group who express their sense of grievance by protesting, rebelling or engaging in violence depending on the degree of indivisibility, centrality or exclusivity of the sacred which has been attacked and the level of available opportunity as well as political acknowledgement. That said, he goes on to consider three situations where terrorists themselves desecrate the sacred of their own community, against mosques in Iraq, in Kashmir and returning again to the attack on the Golden Temple, Amritsar.

In drawing the study to a close, Ravindran concludes desecration is a factor which can:

1. Increase group cohesion and mobilisation
2. Cause grievance among the affected group
3. Cause grievance formation that could often lead to protests, rebellion and violence
4. Cause instantaneous violent reactions
5. Cause violence even in absence of other political, economic and ethnic factors.

Ravindran's work is an important starting point. However, it needs to be noted that while interested in trying to conceptualise desecration and gain an understanding of its impact it does this from the perspective of secondary qualitative sources. In addition, even though some dynamics involved with desecration are proposed, these are done to indicate the propensity of retaliatory reaction. Apart from two passing comments, speaking of grief and trauma, his study on the impact of desecration engages with the psycho-spiritual impact on individuals and communities in a very limited way. Further, Ravindran appears to give no attention to ways in which an incident of desecration can be managed such that its potential for further conflict may be limited and any potential for reconciliation may be facilitated.

With respect to Northern Ireland, it is noted that no research has been found that considers the themes of desecration and violence during the time of the Troubles. If desecration is thought to be something about attacking the sacred of the other, then perhaps it is necessary to begin with querying whether any such attacks took place and if they did what is known about their nature and scale.

That said, if deaths alone at places of worship and/ or graveyards are counted as indicators of desecration then it is important to recognise the fact that possibly twenty one of those who died during the violence were killed either at a place of worship or on their way to/ from place of worship.<sup>38</sup> The two places of worship most recognised here are St Brigid's, Belfast, where four people died in three separate attacks and Mountain Lodge Mission Hall, Darkley, where three people were killed in one attack. Five of the twenty one were killed in two incidents where one individual was using church premises as a spot from which to fire during trouble on the lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, and the other four were killed by security services in a church car park after they had been involved in an attack on the security services. One person was shot at her church on the Albertbridge Road, Belfast. As well as those who died following attack at a place of worship, Sutton also identifies nine people were also killed at funerals or in cemeteries.

Further to this, there are stark statistics available from the PSNI concerning the number of attacks on places of worship (and separately, Orange Halls and GAA clubs). These show that from 1994 – 2006, five hundred and sixty seven places of worship, two hundred and eighty seven Orange Halls and forty six GAA clubs (in years 1994 – 2002) have been attacked. It is particularly striking that 78% of the attacks on places of worship, during 1994 – 2000, involved a fire or petrol bomb incident; and, over 13% of attacks on Orange Halls, which have recorded the nature of the attack, show them to have been destroyed in the incident.

In the light of this quantitative data, it is thus suggested that there is a significant body of evidence to indicate the sacred of the other has been attacked in incidents of desecration during the conflict in Northern Ireland. At the same time, given the high percentage of attacks involving petrol bombing and/ or arson it is hard to believe how these incidents could reflect spontaneous unplanned attacks.

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<sup>38</sup><http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/>

Year	Places of Worship (Fire/ petrol bomb)	Orange / Apprentice Boys Halls	GAA/ AOH
1994	20 (19)	8	4
1995	52 (46)	42	6
1996	52 (41)	38	4
1997	41 (36)	41	6
1998	42 (27)	29	2
1999	15 (10)	26	1
2000	31 (19)	26	8
2001	30	16	12
2002	35	4	3
2003	59	6	N/A
2004	32	4	N/A
2005	83	14	N/A
2006	75	33	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>567</b> (1994 – 2008, 78% attacks by fire/ petrol bomb)	<b>287</b> (39/ 13% Destroyed)	<b>46</b>

Table 1 Attacks on Places of Worship, Orange Halls and GAA clubs, 1994 - 2006<sup>39</sup>

While this research began with an initial awareness of particular incidents of desecration, there was no recognition of the scale of attacks on religio-cultural places and symbols. Along with such a lack of awareness of the scale of the problem, there also appears to be a corresponding lack of strategic response. It is to be hoped that with the introduction of Hate Crime legislation,<sup>40</sup> there will at least be a quantitative underpinning of the problem that will require the development of a strategic response. At the same time, however, there is an issue here concerning how an attack is reported to the PSNI (if it is at all), whether it is perceived as

<sup>39</sup> Attacks on Places of Worship, Orange Halls and GAA clubs, 1994 – 2006. Unpublished statistics from Central Statistics Unit, PSNI.

<sup>40</sup> The Criminal Justice (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 <http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2004/20041991.htm>

having been ‘motivated by prejudice or hate’ and how in the light of this it is recorded, reported and followed up.

Though not focused specifically on places of worship, it is worth noting the early work following the Ceasefires by Jane Leonard on Memorials.<sup>41</sup> This report was produced as a survey of ‘the landscape of conflict commemoration in contemporary Northern Ireland’.<sup>42</sup> Quite apart for the helpful information and insights offered on commemoration and memorialisation, it is particularly challenging to acknowledge the number of incidents throughout the report where it is recorded that damage was done to a memorial. Specifically, she observes ‘Public memorials to the Troubles are regularly desecrated’.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, this statement would appear to be made without any attempt to reflect on what the dynamics behind these acts are or what the impacts of the incident on the bereaved and their communities are.

The following chapters outline the information gained from the direct interviews with the contributors. These are arranged in a way that clearly shows from which of the constituent groupings the information was gleaned on each of the four main themes (conceptualising desecration, describing incidents of desecration, the impact of desecration and a framework response to desecration). In each chapter, the stories of those with a direct experience of desecration is outlined first, followed by that of representatives from organisations with a particular interest in the attacks and then finally other civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives’ reflections are recorded. Additionally, the information given by each grouping is sub-headed according to the issue explored under the theme.

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<sup>41</sup> Leonard, J. (1997) *Memorials to the casualties of conflict: Northern Ireland, 1969 to 1997*. Belfast, Northern Ireland Community Relations Council.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* p5

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* p19

## **4. Conceptualising Desecration**

‘But what is desecration?’ was a question frequently asked by people in the course of outlining the focus of the research to them in the hope of eliciting their participation in it. Consequently, at the outset, it was important to acknowledge that trying to understand what desecration was actually constituted a dimension of the study. It was important to realise that a number of issues were of particular relevance here and so questions were posed that sought to facilitate some understanding of this core issue, including: *what images (and associated words) come to mind when thinking about desecration? What are the ‘sacreds’ in the community? How do things become ‘sacred’? What would you say desecration is? Why does desecration happen? Are you aware of any other work done on the theme of desecration in situations of conflict?*

### **1. Those with direct experience of desecration**

#### *Images and associated words*

With respect to images and associated words which came to mind for victims of incidents, the general picture is one of misuse of anything that carries a sacredness within the community. More specifically, this was seen as a particular issue involving places of worship and/ or sacred buildings. In addition, the image of cemeteries and war memorials was of foremost image rather even than church buildings.

Some of the words used to describe desecration included damage by graffiti, broken windows, disorder, disorientation, invasion, horror, unnecessary, serving no purpose and violation of the holy.

At the same time, however, the problem of the relationship with buildings in a community that can already look as if they are ‘crumbling’ may give the impression that no-one is looking after a building anyway and so opens it to the possibility of further attack.

One person was reminded of what it was like for them when their house was broken into and ransacked. The theme of violation was identified again by a clergy who named desecration as ‘any kind of violation of sanctity of such a building by shooting, killing, bombing or destruction anything of a sinful nature/ obscene action in a church.’

At the same time, however, another clergy person spoke of how for him the strongest images were actually some of the more minor offences that happened in his church. At one point he had allowed the sanctuary of the church to be used for a youth event only to discover that someone had 'poured Coke' into the baptismal font and five months later, behind a banner with the Lord's Prayer on it, which had been created and given by a family in memory of someone who had died, some of the young people had 'scrawled their names and obscenities'. In the scale of what happened to that church, he acknowledged these were quite minor incidents but he also recognised their catastrophic potential within the congregation.

#### *Community sacreds*

While recognising the initial understanding of desecration to be focused on the holy and sacred, it is helpful to realise that these are not always singularly identified with places of worship. A number of other examples considered to be sacreds in the community were shared. Thus, cemeteries, cenotaph memorials, bunches of flowers placed at the roadside where someone was killed in an accident. At the same time, religious artefacts such as prayer, prayer books, crosses and jewellery were also identified.

One person related how when growing up in England with the memory of the Second World War still very fresh, the local War Memorial was very much considered to be a sacred place. He remembers how one day he seemed to have stepped too close to it and a woman leaned out of her window and shouted at him to clear away. Consequently, for him war memorials have stood out as really held sacred within the community.

In addition, it was noted some countries place a sacred importance on special symbols of representation of their country such as their flags and places where government sits. However, here it was also noted that while these things may be sacred to the nation they are not at the same time necessarily sacred to God in the sense that they have been set aside for His purposes. Schools were also named as sacred in a community.

With this, an emphasis was also placed on the history of a community and/ or locality which is physically expressed through monuments and wall murals. The importance of the sacredness of history was suggested to be particularly important when it has developed through the divisions and experiences of conflict; though not all sacreds develop as a result of conflict as evidenced

by the growth in the number of shrines appearing following a death by traffic accident. While noting the importance of 'sacred' history, it is also suggested that it can function as 'a sacred cow in this divided community'

Nevertheless, the importance and implications of space being recognised as holy or sacred in the community but not necessarily a denominational space was highlighted by one clergy who spoke of the time following the rebuilding of the church after it was burned. The original sanctuary space had been much reduced in the new design which was focused on trying to develop a community facility as much as a worship space.

*It wasn't what they had before but they were determined to protect that space because it was to them a holy space set aside from the rest of that building ... and I think mentally in their heads set aside from the rest of that community ... that that was still their space and their space with the undertone that it was not just Methodist but Protestant space... saying that they were very welcoming to anyone who entered that space on their terms ... so negotiating that space for anything other than what they could comprehend to be worship or prayer was always very difficult because that was the last thing they had to hold on to... it was completely holy in the OT set aside sense of the word... and yet that communicated itself both in positives and negatives to some of the young people. For example, there were two tragedies in the local area: one a suicide and the other car accident. On both occasions the young people came to that building mostly of the Roman Catholic background in fact in both of those situations all of them were from a Roman Catholic background... in fact it was that sanctuary space they wanted to be let into because even though they were rarely in there that was the only holy space that they knew... in the area... that they could see any way vaguely theirs the space they wanted to pray in and be ministered to in... and that was very moving especially given the rest of the time they felt they actually disrespected because they also perceived it as the church being very standoffish towards them...*

#### *Creating the 'Sacred'*

An important dimension is to consider how it is that the sacred develops within the community. In some ways this might appear to be obvious in that where a building becomes sacred to a community in the way it is set aside for religious use through a formalised liturgy of dedication to the service of God. It is noted that every denomination has buildings especially consecrated to

God and thus anything that unofficially acts in a deconsecrating manner to the building may be seen as a form of desecration.

In the complexity of this process, it was further noted that the development of the sacred can be about the actions of the people within it and a gradual recognition of how others both regard the space and guard it. This in itself can set up the possibility of conflict where a space is recognised within the community as a sacred space but those who 'own' the space may feel a need to guard it from outsiders who may not necessarily share, or understand, all that believe and/ or practice.

At the same time however, it seems there is something much deeper at work in the creation of the sacred. Coming at the issue from a different perspective, it was also noted that the process can involve something of personal beliefs and the way in which these are expressed through the value placed on particular symbols. In this way, the 'relativity' of the sacred begins to become apparent where something may be incredibly important to one person and/ or community but not necessarily to another. In other words, it's a link to something or someone that's not tangibly there. Thus, the flowers at a roadside memorial, or even a photograph, can be acknowledged as sacred as they can link someone to a person, place, time or memory; and in this sense may well have nothing to do with any building or object that has been formally dedicated to God.

This was further developed where the creation of the sacred was seen in two dimensions. Firstly, there was the dimension of church which was recognised as containing a sacredness given to it by an external power and authority such as God. Then secondly, there is the dimension of the sacred which seems to come from an investment by the individual group or community. These secular things develop a sacredness when they 'need to be defended, or stood in awe of or provide identity'. There is an important process requiring awareness here which involves on the one hand, how the people view what is becoming sacred and on the other hand, what that sacredness contributes to them. The community dimension is remembered as being important in the recognition of the sacred and the requirement to treat with reverence.

#### *Desecration conceptualised*

In light of these considerations, desecration was understood by those with direct experience of it to be:

Mindless acts of attack with no respect

Damaging or destroying a Link



The distortion of the use to which a building has been put

The issue of intent was also raised here. Thus, the level of upset caused by an act of desecration was felt to be greater if it had been done deliberately as this would indicate the perpetrator would have a spite against someone and therefore made it more personal. At the same time, it was noted that desecration may not be easily defined as it can involve verbal and physical attack and how this is understood may depend on the victim's emotional resilience; especially where attacks have been happening time and time again. In short, it's important to note that desecration is 'nasty'.

The issue of intention was further highlighted when desecration was seen as 'an attempt to make a space no better than anywhere else'. In this way, when coke was poured into the font it wasn't just accidental; it was also about a setting down a marker of some kind. Quite apart from the fires, the church was broken into and people were found to have urinated and defecated in the sanctuary. This was thought to be a crude experience of laying down markers which were very earthly ones as opposed to sacred markers.

Desecration was further considered to be a 'destructive lack of respect which leads to further decay'. Again, the importance of recognising the aspect of 'attack' involved. Thus, here it could be suggested that intention and motivation are primary requirements in order for something to be seen as a desecration. Taking this further, the point was made that attention needs to be given to the impact on both the victim and the perpetrator as it is considered that an attack which is so 'disrespectful and sees no value in the other' has the consequence of also reducing the self-respect of the individual and/ or group responsible for the attack in the first place. In this way, threat and fear grow and influence further attacks not only as an attempt at destroying the other but also as a means of trying to protect and justify the sacreds of *my* community.

Finally here, desecration was also considered to be 'a deliberate assault on an object or a place regarded as sacred... like throwing paint at a church or war memorial or knocking over or disfiguring gravestones in a cemetery or something.

#### *Desecration rationalised*

If it is accepted that desecration requires intention, then it is helpful to understand why someone engages in this activity. Of course, it is acknowledged that motivation can be so complex and multi-faceted that it is never an easy aspect to fully identify and understand. As one interviewee

put it 'There is no accounting for human behaviour'. Nevertheless, he went on to comment on the influence of reprisal as a motivation for carrying out attacks on churches as he thought that had been one issue behind a number of the attacks on his church and congregation.

In other situations, it was thought to happen due to hatred or a lack of respect; but perhaps also because young ones think 'it's funny' to do something like this. One member of a group spoke of how they saw some guys walking down the road 'sniggering' after their church was burned. This image has stayed with them.

A different perspective saw desecration happening as a result of anger in a person where they want to hurt someone for some reason; possibly because they themselves have been hurt and find themselves on a particular place on their emotional and physical journey.

While not directly about an attack on the mission hall, a personal example was offered by an interviewee of a desecration experience involving a time when the house was broken into.

*The house was broken into and walked through in such a way as to leave footprints of destruction and they chose our bedroom and wedding photo for special attention... whoever did it was trying to say you are not important you don't matter... and the effect that has on you depends on your level of confidence cause if you're confident, if your form for any reason is low you might start blaming yourself; if confidence is high then probably ride over it... we chose to ride over it ... we did... but knowing the guy who did it and knowing how bad he felt about it later and why he came back to confess later... it was because we took him to a T junction in his life and he couldn't choose the way we were hoping so he continued in his hurt; and, hurt us who were helping him to make us back off...*

While the initial motivation may not have been thought to be consciously spiritual, a further perspective saw desecration 'as an act of spiritual violence' which happened when the sense of 'them' and 'us' built up particularly during the time of community tensions. As such, it is seen to be deliberately focused on showing that one community's sacred spaces are nothing special and have nothing special about them. So the special is taken away from them by an act of desecration.

However understood, there is a query as to the level at which ‘loss of the sense of self’ influences such activity due to the need to reduce the other to as small and weak state as possible so that the perpetrator can feel maintained in a place of power. This is also thought a need to reflect acts of desecration in as justified for the purposes of for example community self protection because it is hard to imagine someone would want to do desecrate something and feel proud about it if they don’t have a perceived reason for it.

Behind the desire to destroy or disfigure something held in respect by the society, it was further thought some level of dissatisfaction with the society was indicated. Following the paintball attack at Harryville, Jeremy Gardiner (then youth pastor of High Kirk Presbyterian church in Ballymena) came on the scene and it is remembered that independently of each other he and Paul Symonds, a priest of the parish, both said, whoever is responsible for this must be hurting. Thus, Paul Symonds felt it was important to ‘meet these people and listen and hear their grievance and see if there was anything we could do to address that’. In this, the point was made that desecration is a cry in some ways for help. Consequently, for him, it was so important at that time not to issue any words of condemnation but rather to approach the incident with a genuine desire to try to understand the depth of hurt and grievance being carried by someone such that it made them want to destroy the church.

### **Emerging themes from those with direct experience**

A number of themes emerge from these stories:

1. Everyone carries a range of words and images associated with what is desecrated and what has been done it. Thus, desecration can happen to places of worship/ sacred buildings, cemeteries, war memorials, religious artefacts and resources and the artefacts sacred to a community. The words that come to mind concerning what desecration involves includes: damage, destruction, disorder, disorientation, invasion, horror, serving no purpose and violation.
2. The importance of the sacred within a community is noted. This is important as it is a reminder how the sacred is not simply held to be about places of worship. It is also applied to cemeteries, cenotaph memorials, bunches of flowers placed at the roadside

and religious artefacts such as prayer, prayer books, crosses and jewellery. In addition, the sacred importance of national symbols and along similar lines, the history of a community and its physical manifestation through murals and monuments is recognised. Here also the conflict potential of the sacred is noted when different communities have a different view on what the other holds to be sacred.

3. In this regard, the way in which something comes to be considered sacred is important. From one perspective, it is quite straightforward where sacredness is believed to be 'God given' and this is formalised through a liturgical process of for example a building such as a place of worship. At the same time, however, it is notable that there is a 'sacredness' which is evoked from within individuals and/ or the community and given to the symbolically important things of a community such as its history and artefacts. In this, it is understood that those things and places which link to people, places, time or memory carry a particular value and can be described as sacred. These dynamics require particular attention when trying to appreciate the development, place and role of memorials in the community before, during and after socio-political instability and conflict.
4. Given these reflections, desecration may be considered to have a range of dynamics which require attention if it is to be adequately described. Thus, desecration is described as a planned and/ or spontaneous attack on the religious and/ or communal sacreds of an individual and/ or community in order that their 'holy' might be violated and they might be disorientated and disempowered (if not destroyed).
5. The reasons for such activity are thought to include anger and personal hurt, hatred, a lack of respect, reprisal, dissatisfaction with society and a wish to take away the 'special' from another.

## **2. Representatives from organisations with particular insight to offer on such attacks**

### *Images and associated words*

When asked about images and associated words, it was thought desecration had something to do with ‘the sacred being defiled’ though this opened the query about what the sacred actually is. While noting this, the issue of language was raised and how the word is not always used due to the level of ‘judgement’ it can appear to carry. Here, desecration was considered to be about death, body and memorial. The story was shared where a soldier was shot dead and before his body was taken away people ‘came out and danced in his blood’. Apparently, later the perpetrator was interviewed and made a statement ‘that that should not have happened’.

This celebration at the death of the enemy was commented upon again by another interviewee. In addition, attacks on those things identifiably religious of the other such as places of worship like churches, chapels and mission halls; or indeed clergy was named.

In addition, graffiti as well as damage to ornaments, property and memorials were also named. For one contributor, the association was particularly strong with sacred sites primarily focussed on cemeteries and graves. The range of activities here included malicious vandalism to perhaps just being inappropriately dressed at a ‘holy site’. Attacks on graves are thought to be ‘a very personalised form of desecration’ as it is a means of attacking individual families as well religious institutions.

Added to these obvious religious places, it was also believed attacks on Orange Halls should be seen as desecration as ‘they are considered by the Orange as a religious institution irrespective of what other people might think... to burn them is like a desecration as well...’

For another person, issues were raised concerning how the damage and destruction to places of worship related to that of memorials in the community such as ‘paint being thrown at hunger striker posters and memorials...’ The query was further raised as how to this relates to an attack on someone’s home where burglars come in and trash everything which wouldn’t necessarily be seen as desecration. So it was thought there is an implication that not only is something attacked but it is also ‘somehow lessened because an attack has happened on it... which presumably is part of the intent...’ Yet the realisation is also here that such action can lead to a cycle of conflict

where if the thing which ‘has meaning for me has been destroyed then I have to ensure it is put back or else the person who did it is winning’.

In another instance, it was considered that desecration goes much deeper than if it’s an attack on a space as it ‘takes away a part of me and who I am meant to be’. This exemplifies the intrusion into a safe space and as such is like an attack on a person’s integrity and their whole sense of being.

#### *Community sacreds*

With respect to sacreds in the community, the starting point is that churches are to be respected, ‘even though it is not of your own denomination’. This was thought to extend to the things that define a community and hold the memory of what a community has gone through. Memorials developed in this way are thought to be sacred. Referring to the Omagh bomb and the Enniskillen bomb, the creation of memorials in these contexts is considered ‘sacred to them because it’s how they reconcile themselves to what happened...’

For one interviewee, it was important to tease out the difference in perception or meaning between a gravestone, a memorial and something that is just a commemoration. However, understood it was realised that there is a complexity about the siting of these things either because of potential provocation to the other side or because of road layouts, etc. Nevertheless, it is thought to be an important issue due to the large number of memorials or commemorations going up since the ceasefires.

For another, the sacreds in the community quite simply were ‘things to do with death’. Yet in another interview, the issue of perception was raised when it was stated that the ‘whole sacred space just wasn’t observed by us as we didn’t see it as being that... to be honest it was the place wouldn’t go as far saying the enemy but the other we thought their religion was false...’ When a young person, this understanding led to him ‘having great pleasure in spitting into the holy water sitting at the door or just causing havoc in the building’.

The notion of the sacred in the community is widened further by one person who described the extra vulnerable such as people with a disability and the elderly in these terms. Also, socio-cultural traditions were referred to when sharing a memory of seeing a young person getting ‘whacked on the head during an Orange march with an ornamental sword because he crossed the

road during the march... the march is sacred so someone who breaks the sacredness has to be punished... there was no sense of revulsion about the blood that was running from the lad from the crowd because he shouldn't have done that... that was a sacred act and he transgressed...'

For another, there is a consideration that as well as churches, other community spaces such as Orange Halls and GAA clubs 'have something sacred about them'. The nature of this form of sacredness has to do with being 'handed on from generation to generation... and taken on a life of their own in the community'. As well as these community places, it was thought a site becomes sacred following particular events like atrocities such as the Ground Zero site, in New York, where the World Trade Centre stood; or noteworthy for some other historical significance. While applying the notion of the sacred in secular and religious terms, it is thought to be something about 'hallowed ground'.

The importance of being welcomed, valued and given a voice was considered the key to the sacredness of any place. Herein there is something about people being allowed to be themselves no matter who they are where they come from. This it is suggested is what underlies any notion of safe space in a community.

#### *Creating the 'Sacred'*

With respect to creating the sacred, it is thought that events are important markers of history which become 'culturally embedded'. At the same time there is a realisation that these sacreds may change over time but that there are fundamental sacreds shared by everyone such as religion. For others, there is something about how death is held and understood that makes it a sacred.

At the same time, the sacred was described as anything that means something to the community. However, a degree of uncertainty was expressed here concerning whether or not Orange Halls and/ or GAA halls could be seen as sacred rather than simply being 'about identity'. However, there is recognition that these places are seen as more than their normal range of meaning in conflict or post-conflict society. Yet there is a sense that the sacred should not be attacked because they do seem to have 'different resonance of meaning' for some reason.

In another instance, the point was made that depending on the religious tradition within which a person was brought up, the building would have more or less significance for the faith

community. The highest value was given to people; however, it is also thought there is something different about throwing paint at a house as opposed to throwing paint at a church. In this instance, desecration was thought to be about lack of respect in relation to the 'holy'. Yet here again, the separation between the sacred and the ordinary is hard for some to make.

In the first instance, it is recognised that society carries a range of norms as to what is acceptable and what is not. Thus, the sacred is created around what is treasured in society. As such, the sacred is that with which 'you don't interfere - whether it's out reverence or some other motivation... that you just don't go there'. In this, it is believed the community mindset 'protects that thing and maybe for reasons that can't be expressed... certain memorials in certain communities'.

A further reason was suggested by reflection on the relationship of death to the sacred where it is thought that 'something innate in human beings recognises that where people bury dead no matter who they are, it is a sacred place -- almost instinctively sacred...' But a challenge here is when in a conflict situation, memorials can become further resources in the struggle to win. Consequently, in such a situation 'sacredness is imputed because of political reasons'.

The point was additionally made that the characteristics of sacredness include the passing of time, an event out of the 'ordinary' of some description which happened there such as an historical event and/ or an atrocity.

One person's experience of understanding the sacred in community is remembered as a walk around the Memorial Garden in Omagh. Here the sacred was found in the dignity, awesomeness, respect, honour, beauty and simplicity of the place.

#### *Desecration conceptualised*

In light of the above, desecration is understood to be

- Attacking a person's faith, as something held dearly, through vandalism in order to aggravate or get a retaliatory response
- 'Walking over what someone considers precious'
- Harming the treasured... those people, places and things in which people invest their ideals



- Damaging, defacing and disrespecting a religious property, monument or graveyard
- Violating sacred space

Along with linking desecration to damage, the concept of disrespect opens up other possibilities of activity. Thus, one interviewee spoke of tourists taking photographs at Ground Zero which was, for him, like desecrating that space. He went on to state his belief that ‘there’s something ugly about our fascination with these sites...’ which in itself may be a form of desecration. However, getting away from this, it was considered that there is clear cut desecration in the form of ‘throwing paint around headstones’ and ‘violating tombs’.

#### *Desecration rationalised*

There is a complexity attached to trying to understand desecration. In this, there is probably no one reason why it is carried out. It is recognised that such activity has always been an aspect of conflict and warfare. There is very little physical benefit to the perpetrator but is driven ‘by some desire to cause hurt’ and in this becomes a challenge of ‘psychological strength’. This was further thought to relate in some way to a wish for ‘purification’ and the need to eliminate what is not sacred to one community. For some in a conflict situation, this action can be regarded as ‘an act of holiness itself’. As such, when considered in this way, desecration can be rationalised as both acceptable and expected. That said, the issue of co-opting ‘the holy’ on to one side or other of a conflict is a significant dynamic and would benefit from further consideration than what is possible here.

The most direct reason given for desecration is that by attacking the things that someone holds most dear then maximum hurt is able to be caused as ‘the fundamental core of their belief of who they are and their existence has been attacked’. That said, the comment was also made that there is an element of desecration which is just ‘vandalism’ by a teenager when nobody is around at two in the morning. Of importance however is the intention behind an attack on someone due to their beliefs or politics and the defensive response such actions influence by influencing ‘incidents of aggression that are part of leading to a conflict where we end up going out and killing each other’. Given this understanding, desecration becomes reflective of a society whose ‘way of dealing with difference and hurt is through violence’.

In another interview, anger, lack of self-respect and ‘brain-washing’ on behalf of ‘the Cause’ were thought to be influential. The issues of context are also noted in that during times of conflict, people allow themselves to go beyond boundaries which in ordinary circumstances would not happen. In this, the theme of retaliation is named especially when for example Orange Halls are burnt with drums and banners being damaged leaving people with a sense of hurt which can lead to similar attacks taking place at GAA clubs.

Despite all, it was thought there is still an innate respect for a graveyard or church building and that things could have been much worse in Northern Ireland. In saying this, however, some incidents were recognised as ‘acts of desecration’ such as incidents at Harryville, Mountain Lodge Mission Hall at Darkley and Carnmoney cemetery and even a situation in Glenavy where sectarian graffiti was daubed on the doors of the church and some damage was done to the graveyard. The dynamics driving these acts were thought to be hatred and politics. These were thought to be obvious at a memorial to soldiers at Narrow Water where the flowers at the memorial had been scattered. Yet whatever the rationale, acts like these were considered self-defeating and undermining to the Cause they were supposedly supporting.

Desecration is thought to come out of conditions of conflict arising from a sense of exclusion and injustice. Where such dynamics exist, one interviewee could understand how someone could carry out an act of desecration as a violent reaction against their lack of being valued.

### **Emerging themes from organisational representatives**

1. Desecration is considered to be about the ‘sacred being defiled’ and as such images here included actions involving death, bodily attack and memorials. In addition, places of worship such as churches, chapels and mission halls came to mind. So also did attacks on clergy. Graffiti, paint throwing, damaging and breaking religious ornaments, property and memorials were also named. The association was particularly strong with the desecration of sacred sites primarily focussed on cemeteries and graves. The range of activities here included malicious vandalism to perhaps just being inappropriately dressed at a ‘holy site’. Attacks on Orange Halls were thought by some to be a form of desecration. However understood, desecration ultimately ‘takes away a part of me and who I am meant to be’.

2. The starting point, for an appreciation of what is sacred in the community, is named to be places of worship. This is extended to include things that define a community and hold the memory of what a community has experienced. Thus, memorials are considered to be sacred. The issue of siting memorials raises important issues to do with where they are situated due to the potential for further provoking conflict. As well as sites, people and artefacts, some socio-cultural traditions, such as marches, were referred to as being sacred. Again, Orange Halls and GAA clubs were thought to have something sacred about them as being passed through the generations and having a life within a community. The sacred in community is 'hallowed ground'. It could be argued that key to such hallowing is the facilitation of safe space underpinned by welcoming, valuing and including all.
3. The sacred in community is created when events, such as atrocities, become 'culturally embedded' markers. Here there is something of especial note about death and the things attached to it and how these relate to the creation of the sacred. Despite such a context, the sacred can be found in dignity, awesomeness, respect, honour, beauty and simplicity of place. Thus, those things within a community that are 'treasured' are treated with respect and reverence and become sacred. That said, the promotion of socio-political narratives in a particular way can influence the creation of the sacred around maintaining and justifying the Cause.
4. Desecration is understood by these contributors, in summary, to be violating the precious and treasured in order to get a retaliatory response.
5. Desecration is a complex phenomenon which is frequently found in conflict situations where boundaries and taboos are crossed in ways that they would not be in more stable times. The drivers for it are also thought to include a desire to cause maximum hurt and to create a pure community that can be rationalised as an acceptable and expected 'act of holiness'. Other influences were considered to be exclusion, injustice, anger, hatred, lack of self respect and brain washing on behalf of 'the Cause' given the socio-political context of the conflict. As such, desecration is symptomatic of a society whose 'way of dealing with difference and hurt is through violence'. This, however, is thought to be ultimately self-defeating and undermining of 'the Cause' supposedly supported by the act.

### **3. Civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

#### *Images and associated words*

‘Sacred’ was one of the first words to come to mind for these civic representatives. As this was explored by one person, the notion of holy ground was raised and how this was understood from within a Judaeo-Christian context. In this regard, places, churches and even people’s homes were thought to be sacred; though especial consideration is given to graveyards and their connection to the Communion of Saints.

Graveyards in this sense were consistently named as one of the ‘first things that come to mind’. Stories from early childhood reminded one interviewee that these were the ‘most sacred of places we have where individuals can feel terribly pained were something sacred to them has been damaged and where communities can be hurt as well’.

The theological dimension to desecration was described by suggesting that it is a result of progressing from the Holy as that which is set apart for God, to the Clean before God to the Unclean. Desecration it was suggested is whatever causes people to move from one state to the other away from the Holy. A story from the Judaic scriptures was told to illustrate how desecration was actually used by the people of Israel, under command of God, to destroy a pagan site and take it over as a place belonging to God.<sup>44</sup> It was pointed out that the history of Christian missions is ‘peppered’ with examples of such actions where pagan sites were deliberately desecrated in this way by missionaries.

Other stories picked up on the Biblical theme which understood desecration to be a profane use of an item or something set aside for a Holy or sacred purpose. Here reference was made again to a story from the Judaic scriptures<sup>45</sup> involving a King and his profane use of the vessels set aside for worship in the Temple.

In another instance, an interviewee spoke of a story he had heard about where it is understood a corpse of a Muslim lady had been covered with bacon strips while laying in the morgue. This was considered to be a ‘very calculated’ piece of desecration. The action served as a reminder

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<sup>44</sup> Judges 6:25ff

<sup>45</sup> Daniel 5

that whereas acts of desecration are often thought to be mindless acts of violence, they are usually well thought out and the level of hurt and rage caused is ‘vastly disproportionate’ to the amount of effort and risk required. Along with this incident, other images associated with desecration included the burning of the Tricolour or the Union Jack on top of bonfires.

For another interviewee, desecration involved attacking property or symbols that have a sense of meaning for those to whom they belong. In teasing this out further, it was thought these things of importance may not be considered important to the attacker. Yet depending on how narrow or broad the understanding of religion is the meaning may well have religious and transcendent significance for the community. Thus desecration may involve an attack or vandalism on three things – a place of worship, a symbol or a memorial as representing the civic religious dimension of communities.

A final two perspectives considered desecration to involve depriving ‘something of its sacred character’; and, being a ‘disrespectful use of something sacred’.

#### *Community sacreds*

In terms of the sacreds in community, it was suggested that events are often what lie behind the formation of these. A clergy person reflecting on his time serving in Greysteel remembered how he ‘was part of the situation in Greysteel and Eglinton with the Greysteel massacre at the Rising Sun Bar and that little space outside the Rising Sun bar, and even within the bar, became a sacred place because people pilgrimage to it... we held vigils outside the pub... it just became very sacred... I remember we actually had a community of churches together very strong in that area which was one of big healing things... three churches all called Faughanvale – Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic. We had very strong bonds and together we arranged with a community association to have a plaque with names outside. Now that is a sacred place for thousands who gathered...’ In addition, it was suggested that other community sacreds include War Memorials and people with a godly presence.

Again in another interview, the place of buildings in the community such as churches were regarded as sacred; as were also, secular memorials like war memorials or memorials to the Republican movement. It was imagined that these may well be seen as sacred not because of the

political cause involved but in ‘recognition that someone who belonged to the community was involved’.

That said, there is a general understanding that in the community there ‘are things people ought not to touch and lines they should not cross’. Thus, it was still felt that if a church is broken into it represents a particularly notable offence, ‘It’s one thing breaking into business premises but I think in society there is still residual feeling on this level that if they are touching something dedicated to the worship of God, that’s nearly as low as you can go...’

It was also commented that as the context changes towards becoming more secular, the concept of the ‘sacred is being expanded and changed in some ways’. As evidence of this, it is pointed out that there appears to be a growing practice of turning sites where, for example, traffic accidents have occurred, into memorials where a plaque can be placed and fresh flowers regularly placed. These are interesting as they are examples of things which are not Christian, nor specifically religious, but yet still have some sense of the holy attached to them. In taking this thought further, the place of murals in the community was also considered to have a ‘certain sacredness’ attached to them associated with being set apart in some way that it creates a possibility of a desecration when they are painted over.

The place of flags in regard to community sacreds was further highlighted by the stark example of events in Istanbul several years ago when a Leeds United football fan was stabbed to death. At least part of what is thought to have influenced that tragedy was a Leeds fan treating the Turkish national flag with great disrespect. In this, the community sacreds are thought to include those things that are important to a people or nation which have a focus on faith, nationality or their dead.

The symbolism of the cross in public squares was noted, especially when it is incorporated in some way with the symbol of the sword. It is suggested there is something happening in the depth of people’s psyches in holding these symbols together while interpreting what they are portraying. The concern here is that there is a justification for the cause of war and violence being made. Thus, attention needs to be given to ‘the psychology of violence and the myths that

underpin this option’ as desecration becomes an attack on what is most ‘profound in the psyche’.

For a final thought, it was considered that the sacreds in community involved places of worship and places of burial like graveyards. However, on reflection this list was expanded to include ‘places of healing, of safety and hospitals and schools’.

#### *Creating the ‘Sacred’*

An important dimension spoken of here is an awareness of the presence of the divine within the earthly. Thus again referring back to Scriptures, there are stories where places became known as sacred due to being sites where the presence of God was made known and evident. The idea was raised that here there is something again of the sacredness of God meeting the sacredness of the human though it is recognised this is ‘almost contradictory because God has made the person sacred but it’s just a high awareness of that sacredness and if a life is taken it’s a violation of that sacredness...’ In another example, speaking about the importance of childhood places for the next generation, it was suggested the sacredness of place may also connect in some way to the important things of family and ancestry.

It was further identified that the stories we tell about the past have a power in how they are held within histories. The strength of relationship to these ‘myths’ is such that when questioned or challenged people can feel very ‘undermined’. In a different interview, a similar thought was applied to anything associated with the Hunger Strikes or Hunger Strikers which seem to have ‘assumed a holiness’. Thus, it is suggested that while members of the republican movement can accept critical comment on many things, they can’t on the Hunger Strike due to the sacrifices involved. At the same time it is observed that this ‘holiness’ also came about due to the way in which the story was used ‘in a calculated way’ over years by Sinn Féin. Thus, in the formation of the sacred, the place of context is considered important.

Whilst difficult to determine, it was thought some things and/ or people are ‘intrinsically sacred’ as they have been given to the world by God. Thus, for example, churches and holy people such as clergy and nuns are named here. At the same time, it is recognised the community itself can give ‘a holiness to a place or person’ such as Nelson Mandela.

In one sense, it can be thought to be quite straightforward in that the likes of churches have 'been set aside for the sacred purpose' of worshipping God; similarly, graveyards. At the same time however, it was believed that 'places where people come to be made whole again' could be included here as well and should be respected by people of violence.

*Desecration conceptualised*

From the experience of being involved in trauma and post traumatic stress, one contributor considered desecration to be violation of sacred space which can be seen as personal and/ or communal. It was believed there is a similarity between the experience of someone who has been violated and the experience of someone whose church has been desecrated.

Desecration was also understood to be what happens when the holy is deliberately insulted in such a way as to make it common or unclean. In the instance, the intent was considered to be of definitive importance.

A further understanding of the desecration saw it as a 'deliberate dishonouring of the sacred'. It was also thought the act required some physical dimension of attack. Thus, doing something offensive in a church could be the action of anyone. However, it was believed there was something quite different about a physical attack which 'smashed up the altar'.

It was suggested desecration is considered to be 'improper use of things dedicated to the service of God'. For one interviewee this needed also to recognise the misuse of the Sabbath and the taking of the Lord's name in vain. These for him represented the 'two most prominent items of desecration' found in today's society.

Desecration here was seen as 'destroying or wrecking something which is at the heart of the community'. An important point to note was that these attacks are not necessarily directed at one individual but rather they use a personalised attack as a means of attacking a whole community because they 'can't strike at every Protestant or Roman Catholic'. Thus, it is a statement which says, 'I can't get you but I'll get that which stands as a symbol of you...'



*Desecration rationalised*

A key rationale for desecration was thought to be a ‘deliberate challenge’ of a spiritual power. In other words, it is a confrontation of a power which aims to demean and reduce its significance by way of ‘insulting this religious place, person, activity, book or whatever...’ that is a manifestation of it. This is thought to happen in two ways: in one way by claiming to be the stronger and the second way by making the other ‘nothing... because I can do this and get away with it.’

While noting this distinction, a further distinction was made between those who carry out desecration against their own community as acts of vandalism due to alcohol and drugs and those who carry out acts of desecration against other communities. Along with this, the point was again made that this kind of desecration creates anger and great hurt with little chance of being caught as can usually be done ‘at night without being seen as no security guards around’.

In a further instance, it was clearly thought that the underlying dynamic influencing desecration was the loss of respect for the things of God. Here it was suggested that people ‘need to focus on the things spiritual and eternal and when lose sight of this, it becomes easy to treat the things of God with contempt...’

Here, it is thought those who carry out the acts know what they are doing and the effect and impact it will have. There are issues here of attack on honour, especially male honour, but it is also considered to be about ‘ethnic purity’ and the example of rape was named in this regard. Thus, given the targets, desecration is described as an attack on those things that are considered to be an embodiment of the other and ‘on what is deepest on the psyche...’

At the end of the day, however, the point was further made that desecration becomes a way showing both contempt and frustration. This is seen as ‘the last throw of people who can do nothing else’ as they are unable, for whatever reason, to dialogue or build bridges with the other community.

## **Emerging themes from civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

1. The notion of the sacred and holy ground as found in places, churches and even people's homes with special consideration being given to graveyards. In scriptural terms, desecration was thought to involve a process of moving away from the holy to the clean to the unclean. There has been a history of sacred sites being deliberately desecrated by Christian missions. Other forms of desecration include vessels set apart for service of God, and a religious office not being upheld with due integrity. Finally, civic and national symbols (such as flags) or memorials were also identified here.
2. The sacreds in community are often formed as a result of events such as atrocities at particular sites at which people hold vigils and to which people make pilgrimage. Again, places of worship were identified as were secular memorials. The influence of increasing secularism may cause the notion of the sacred to expand and change in society. The growing trend of roadside memorials/ shrines being created at places marking the death of someone is a case in point. In this regard, murals were also thought to have a 'certain sacredness' attached to them. Even flags are to be regarded as community sacreds as are those things which have a focus on a people or nation's faith, nationality or dead forebears. Places of healing, safety such as hospitals and schools are also added to this list.
3. The sacred in community is not only created but from a religious perspective is also given. Thus a number of stories were referred to from the Bible as examples of this. The relationship that grows between people and communities and the memory stories they hold and pass on about their history can become sacred to them and become almost 'holy'. This sense of holiness can also be given to people of note and places where healing and wholeness are to be found.
4. Desecration is understood to be violation of personal and/ or communal sacred space through deliberately insulting the holy in such a way as to make it unclean; a deliberate dishonouring of the sacred through improper use of the things dedicated to the service of God; destroying or wrecking something which is at the heart of the community.

5. Desecration is understood to happen as a deliberate challenge to power whether in someone's own community or someone else's community and is an expression of frustration and contempt. An underlying dynamic was believed to be the loss of respect for the things of God. In addition, the drive for ethnic purity and against those things that are deepest in the other's psyche are recognised.

### **Conceptualising Desecration - Summary of emerging themes from all groupings**

When drawing together the insights offered from all the interviewees, desecration is considered to be a complex phenomenon which is frequently found in conflict situations where boundaries and taboos are crossed that would not be in more stable times. Everyone interviewed could recognise desecration and talk about its place within conflict. As such, desecration is understood to be an attack on the treasured sacreds of an individual and/ or community. This conceptualisation of desecration fits well with the understanding of desecration described by Ravindran and Hassner, in the Literature Review, and the definition offered in the Introduction.<sup>46</sup>

These sacreds can include places of worship, buildings, war memorials, memorials, cemeteries, religious artefacts, clergy, religious leaders, Orange Halls, GAA clubs, murals, civic and national symbols, eg flags as well as places of healing and safety. The sacred in community is recognised as hallowed ground and can develop as a result of atrocities and/ or historical events happening on the site. It was thought desecration 'takes away a part of me and who I am meant to be'.

It is important to attend to the sacred in a community and all the more so during times of political conflict. As secularism increases and religious awareness and practice wane, so it is queried whether this will lead to a growth and increase in the development of other community sacreds, such as memorials. Community sacreds connect people, places, events, time and memory. It could be suggested hallowed ground is a place where people feel welcomed, valued and included.

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<sup>46</sup> See p14 note 9

The underlying dynamics of desecration are thought to include anger, exclusion, injustice, personal hurt, hatred, a lack of respect, reprisal, dissatisfaction with society and a wish to take away the 'special' from another, brain washing on behalf of the cause, a challenge to the powers, frustration, contempt and a drive for purity. It is considered to be symptomatic of a society where the 'way of dealing with difference and hurt is through violence'.

## **5. Identifying Incidents of Desecration**

This section is concerned with trying to identify specific situations which are recognised as incidents of desecration. An important issue here is that people have the opportunity to self define what they recognise as such an incident. Thus, the questions guiding the conversations in this section include: *are there any incidents during the Troubles that you would describe as examples of desecration? What can you remember about it? What was the response to the incident?*

### **1. Those with direct experience of desecration**

When asked about incidents, one of the clergy interviewed named several direct incidents that had happened either at his place of worship, St Brigid's, Belfast, or to people on their way to or from it. Although he was not serving in the congregation at the time, there was only one direct attack on the church when a bomb was left inside the porch of the building in 1972. According to him, this was not as big an attack as that which happened to other churches. In addition to this, however, were the murders of two students at the church doors when coming out of Mass on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1975, the assassination of Judge Doyle who was shot going out to his car in 1983 and a fourth murder where Mary Travers the daughter of another Judge was shot dead when walking home with her father after service in 1984.

The current parish priest, spoke of the depth of shock, anger and disgust at the three attacks. As it happens, the incidents were carried out by different groups. While the Kiely/ Ballantine murders were carried out by Loyalists, the other two murders were committed by the IRA who were attacking a court judge and magistrate respectively.

Another church to experience major damage was Springfield Road Methodist. In terms of fires alone, the church suffered four major attacks. One particularly serious incident left the building irreparably damaged. The church was rebuilt in such a way that the sanctuary area was reduced in order to maximise community space. Thus, one of the later fires during 1999, while doing lesser damage to the sanctuary actually affected the community more as it damaged the children's play area. According to the minister of the time,

*that affected people in the community group deeply as well because that was almost a sacred space; a space that had been carved out and purpose built for children and it was just a blackened hole...*

While the church building was never completely destroyed in the way that other churches were, it was later discovered that the church had been targeted due to a disagreement with the stance of the community project on the Whiterock parade. Apparently, the young people who had broken in, stole some equipment and laid ‘three fires’; one in the back hall which didn’t take; a second one in the sanctuary where minor damage was done as the seats which had been put together as a base for the fire were relatively new and therefore fire retardant; and, a third one, at the play area at the front of the building. The play area was completely burnt and resulted in £100,000 worth of damage to the building.

The experience was very disheartening for the congregation as they had thought ‘a new dawn’ was evident with the peace process and had reinvested in the community two years before when the building was redeveloped following a previous fire. As well as this, there was something particularly sad in that the attack had been directed at facilities which were for the children of the community. This fact ‘hurt deeply and probably more deeply’ than previous attacks on the building which had the effect of galvanising the congregation to stay on site and begin a new approach of trying to engage with the local community. It was further suggested, this attack ‘shattered their new emerging view of who they were in relation to the community and in many ways threw them back onto old models of us against the world’.

The response of the community was notable and positive. As the minister remembers there was widespread support from across the community, including within minutes of each other, the then Methodist President and Gerry Adams coming to ‘share sympathy and condemn what had happened’. Despite the range of support from the Roman Catholic community it was hard to deal with the perception from some that this was an attack aimed at finally forcing the Protestants out. This was probably particularly thought given the timing of the incident which took place during one the most contentious Whiterock parades of the Orange Order.

When speaking about Darkley, it was suggested that in terms of desecration it might be thought that it applies to damage to property but the suggestion was made that desecration applies to damage done to people as well and ‘in the grand scheme of things it doesn’t matter that there are

few bullet holes in the woodwork in the church. What matters is that lives were ruined so that's the real desecration ... lives were ruined...'

The attack on Mountain Lodge Mission Hall, Darkley, took place in November 1984 and left three people dead with a number of injured. Quite apart from the impact on the bereaved and those present at the time, the Darkley community had to begin coming to terms with the attack. It was thought 'local people found their childhood invaded'. The difficulty for many was that they had grown up together in a small village context and were left wondering whether it was neighbours who had been responsible or what had they done to warrant such an atrocity.

It was also highlighted that the pain was particularly acute as those who were gathered in Mountain Lodge that night were there in a safe space to worship and the consequence for many was that 'something was destroyed other than the physical hurts... some emotional thing was destroyed... and maybe spiritual...'.

A community leader went on to share...

*I remember one girl had said (during the attack)... 'OK, I've lived some of my life but that's it'. Others just wanted to warn others... The shock... apparently after it there was that stillness. When the police turned up there was a widow and her son and a daughter and she was standing outside holding her hand patiently waiting for the lift that was to come in no panic...*

*they patiently waited. Guess in the midst of the complete shock the nearest thing to normality was church and they waited to go home...*

In terms of community response, the memory is one of the village being 'horrified, shocked, embarrassed, disgraced'. People, from both sides of the community, came together to support the congregation. In the midst of all the difficulty was the wonder at why a small mission hall was targeted rather than one of the more established churches.

When reflecting on the community's response to the attack, the role of the media was highlighted. At the time of the twenty five year anniversary, a request to have a media interview about the event was agreed by the congregation. Apparently, the service was being taped by a member of the congregation for some who were sick and at home. Consequently, the attack and its immediate aftermath were caught on a tape recording. The first hymn was sung when the

attack occurred and the cries of the people are heard. The shock to a family who heard ‘the gunfire that killed their dad’ on the tape was spoken about. This made the community leader wonder how aware people were of the depth of invasion or the level of sensitivity required before playing the recording. For him, however, it was necessary to address the sense of devastation experienced at such an invasion of worship within the context and atmosphere of worship. Such a response was necessary if the emotional and spiritual damage was to have any possibility of healing. As well as this, the benefit of being able to move away from the place of greatest hurt for some people was noted.

Before talking about the direct experience of their church being burned down, members of the Whitehouse Presbyterian church group identified the Omagh bomb in particular but were of the opinion that desecration did not just occur with respect to those things that were specifically identified as sacred. The examples of homes being broken into and trashed were named as incidents of desecration as was life itself being destroyed. At this point, stories were shared about memories of times when the church building itself had been targeted in some way. Apparently, the church had been subjected to twenty seven different incidents over the time of the Troubles. The level of severity ranged from windows being broken to paint daubing on the front door to petrol bombings until finally the fourth fire resulted in the building being burned to the ground in 2002.

Nevertheless, the group remembered how numb they all felt on the morning of the attack. Despite this, the minister, Liz Hughes, had heard of a lady in the nearby nationalist Bawnmore area who had suffered a brick being put through her window and said they had to take flowers to her and pray with her. This reaction it was said helped them all to cope on the morning of the fire.

At the same time, it was thought the general response by the community, in the local vicinity, to the attack was one of disgust. It was remembered the older members of the community, who had been born and brought up in the area, had also worked together in the mills and had respect for each other’s place of worship.

One clergy person in north Belfast was able to relate a number of incidents involving attacks on several places of worship with which she has been involved. At the outset, she was going to note how the church had not had any incidents of graffiti but quickly realised that was not correct.



Indeed, 'there would be loads of graffiti over walls and doors' which she doesn't remember being anything other than sectarian. In addition, 'even on our prayer book last week someone had written IRA across a page on a note book sitting at the back of church so (we have) no idea where that came from or how someone was in to do that!!'

There had also been a lot of stone throwing and the congregation has had to spend 'thousands' on broken windows, window guards and security lighting. Due to this, it was stated, members of the congregation do recognise this as desecration in large part as they see much of this happening on the basis of a lack of respect for church.

The minister was further able to share incidents which had happened to another local Presbyterian congregation which has subsequently closed. Here, the windows had had to be bricked up; but even then bricks were thrown against the bricked up windows during services of worship. It was still broken into and on a 'few occasions setting a fire at the back of the church' which never came to be a big fire.

Her own church building had an experience in 2008 where a bunch of young people had been lighting paper and 'shoving it under the door until eventually it took, but thankfully with so much damp in the building the fire didn't spread. If the building had been ok the fire could have wrecked the place...'

The response of the local community was one of 'shock and dismay' and it was stated that this should not have happened. *The North Belfast News* ran a piece about it which was condemnatory and since then there hasn't been another attack – yet.

As an aside, it was commented how when the minister first had thought about this question nothing had immediately come to mind and she had not written anything down before the interview. However, it came as a sad surprise to her that on reflection there were actually so many incidents she hadn't acknowledged. As she put it, 'You know I had nothing written down there when I thought of stories of desecration but interesting how tolerant you become as well as desensitised'.

A further incident came to mind, when about seven years ago, the buildings were broken into with fire extinguishers being let off and the place was 'basically trashed'. At this time, gym

equipment was stolen and, as it was put, someone ‘must have looked a sight walking down the Antrim Road!’ It was notable at that time how the local people came round to help clean up when they heard about it on the radio. Nobody in the local community wants to tolerate such activity; however, ‘nobody hands anybody up for these kind of things.’

A very personal perspective on this was offered by Maura Kiely. Maura’s son, Gerard, was one of the young people shot dead coming out from St Brigid’s, Malone Road, Belfast, in February 1975. Among the important insights she shares, there is a reminder that care should be taken not to create another hierarchy of victims according to where the death took place. In this, then, it may be the case that she herself may not describe the attack as one of desecration due to where Gerard was whenever it happened. That said, the attack is seen as an act of desecration by those who now serve at the church.

As Maura tells it, ‘it didn’t matter where they (the 3736 people who were killed pre ceasefire) were killed... whether it was in a church, or pub or on road or on a bus... the loss in those houses it’s exactly the same. It’s dreadful... and I would try to say sometimes it was worse to be killed like that but suppose my next door neighbour’s husband had died leaving a wife, with four or five small children, the loss in that house, the loss in my opinion is the same as the loss in the next door where he was a policeman or Roman Catholic or whatever and was shot in his house and left a wife with four or five children. But the one added ingredient that we have to work through in terms of stages of bereavement and grief, is that we have to work through the one of injustice that somebody somewhere decided that you’re not going to live because you are a policeman or Prison Officer.’

On the night of the attack, Maura remembers she and her husband, Edmund, had friends in who left at about 11.00pm. She tidied up and went to bed leaving Edmund to listen to the news...

*‘in those days everyone was listening to the news to see how many more were dead... and he came running up the stairs to me. I had just dozed off... and I’ve never slept from that time to this... and he said, ‘Where did Gerard go to Mass?’ I said originally to Aquinas, then No, No. I said he was going to St Brigid’s. Edmund said ‘Two boys have been shot dead at the church.’ I said go to bed and he did about 12.30am.*

*We were in bed sound asleep when the door bell started ringing mad at about 1.45 and in those days people were going around shooting through the windows and everything. So I said to him, don't go near the door. He opened the blinds and looked out and saw police car and the minute we saw the police car we both knew. We started screaming and we forgot about her (Mary – Gerard's younger sister) and we ran down the stairs and Tony Farquhar (now Bp Tony Farquhar), Tony was there and another lovely man and it was pandemonium...'*

Fr Sean Murphy was the administrator of St Colmcille's at the time and Maura relates how 'he literally took over here organising the funeral because we were going about it in a daze'.

When the attack happened, the surrounding area was in darkness as it transpires that those who planned the attack had broken the street lights the previous day; and, according to Maura, 'Gerard didn't know what hit him in the dark.'

A further sad fact of the incident concerned the death also of his best friend, Kevin Ballantine. They had not been at church together but at the end of the service Gerard saw Kevin, who was sitting with his own family, and as they were talking they walked out the door with each other while Kevin's parents stayed with the rest of their children.

Again while reflecting on the incident, Maura relates how she was angry with God as another person there had been shot through the nose and lived, yet Gerard and Kevin died. She consoles herself with the belief 'when you get back to your senses again it wasn't his time to go... I truly believe that you die when it is your time to go under whatever circumstances...'

On reflection, Maura is still overwhelmed by the response from many people. She was the recipient of both positive and negative examples of this. On the negative side, Maura refers to the number of people whom she knew yet who crossed the road, or turned down an aisle in the supermarket so as to avoid meeting her; or trying to deal with a common perception that 'nobody was shot for nothing, they had to be in something – even though he was shot at a church'. Yet, on the other side, she still remembers that they received over four hundred cards and letters from people all over the world expressing their sympathy and condolences. These in particular became a challenge as it made her consider how she had responded to the loss and trauma experienced by so many in those days.

At Harryville, Ballymena, the most telling example to come to mind for a local priest concerned the paint bomb attacks at Our Lady's Roman Catholic Church in the parish. But even before that he recalls how the parish priest of All Saints' Church spoke from the pulpit about the 'unnecessary provocation' caused to Protestants in the town by new tricolours being placed on lamp posts at the Fisherwick area of town. The church had just recently been refurbished but before long it was attacked with paint bombs.

The most serious of the attacks however happened at Harryville. Apparently, one of his colleagues had been down to say mass before going off on holiday and told the priest about the attack with the suggestion he phone the PSNI to report it but not to bother doing anything about it as it will just happen again.

The priest remembers being contacted about a week later by the youth pastor at High Kirk Presbyterian Church, who said he would like to come with some people to help clean up the mess left by the paint bomb attack. Even though he had been told to leave it, it was felt that this was gesture that should not be turned away.

Thus, the youth pastor came with a group of adults from High Kirk and it is remembered how they spent an afternoon trying to clear up the mess as best they could. There was quite a mess with offensive words written across the doors of the church.

Of the many notable experiences of the time, it is recalled how a former paramilitary leader was standing around while the work was being done. According to the priest, this person had spent many years in prison and when he came out he wanted to do something to foster good relations in the Ballymena area. Previous to the attack, a relationship had started between this loyalist leader with some of his group and the priest with some of his local parishioners to engage in some facilitated conversations. It was some time later when it was realised that the loyalist leader had come to protect those cleaning up, in case some people came to attack them.

Following this, it was agreed with local church leaders to have a 'simple, little prayer service' but as there was serious concern about how this would be perceived, the arrangement was set to hold it on the steps of the church at 10.00 on a Sunday morning. It is remembered that the service was 'quite well advertised and was actually on the radio that morning. I'd said Mass at

9.00am at Harryville and then after 9.30 or so people came and sat in the church to stay quietly until 10.00. I could hear people just sat there when I stood up to go out there were people who were High Kirk people who had just come to sit in the church. I got an even bigger surprise when I saw a little tractor and a man in dungarees and in wellington boots from Clough... he heard about it on the radio and thought I must go and help and came all the way on a tractor with a power hose...’

At another time following this, the youth pastor had arranged for roses to be given to people coming out from Mass at All Saints’. There was some uncertainty concerning how they would be received so before the final blessing, the priest informed the congregation that ‘there will be a number of our Protestant neighbours giving you a flower that is offered as a gesture, an act of love, to compensate for the act of hatred you’ve endured and I’m sure you’ll accept it in the spirit it is offered...’ The impact of this gesture on the congregation was quite moving.

### **Emerging themes from those with direct experience**

From these stories, there are a number of emerging themes:

1. Every person interviewed recognized incidents of desecration during the conflict – quite apart from those of which they had direct experience.
2. The nature, scale and form of the attacks warrant recognition. While the research began with a basic awareness of some incidents taking place at churches, there was little realization of how much had happened. So, St Brigid’s experienced a bomb, two murders on the steps of the church and two murders of people on their way to or from worship; Whitehouse Presbyterian church experienced twenty seven incidents during the course of the conflict, including four fires, the last of which burnt the church to the ground; the three churches in the parish of Kirkinriola (of which one is The Church of Our Lady Mother of the Church at Harryville) experienced multiple attacks; and, a new church at Darkley Mission was also subsequently burnt down. The resilience and determination of people to keep places of worship open and available to the community is notable.

3. The response of the wider community has tended to be very supportive to individuals and congregations and has been greatly appreciated. This has been especially seen in the way in which people have gathered to help clean up after paint and other damage has been done.

## **2. Representatives from organisations with particular insight to offer on such attacks**

While it was not necessarily expected that the organisational representatives would have any direct experience of incidents of desecration it was thought useful to ask nevertheless as a means of facilitating a general baseline awareness of desecration.

At the same time, there was a consideration that some incidents may have simply been acts of vandalism, which if they hadn't happened at the church may well have happened somewhere else. While acknowledging the interpretation, it seems sufficiently significant that even with other targets being readily available the church and graveyard were still targeted. Without knowing the details, a definitive conclusion cannot be made; however, the question remains as to what dynamics and influences lay behind the attack. In other words, to what degree does sectarianism influence desecration even when an attack may be unplanned and spontaneous?

In another situation, the story was remembered of a time when during one of the loyalist strikes in the 1970's an interviewee was watching 'a group of men breaking into the Catholic church which was in the middle of this Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist (PUL) community and I can remember people that I knew by sight, if not personally, coming out of the chapel with statues of the saints... and throwing them up over the fence and watching them smash on the pavement'.

The Enniskillen bombing on Remembrance Day, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1987, was named as an incident of desecration. In this, the issue was not thought to be just the bombing or the deaths but of especial significance was the placing of the bomb at the cenotaph memorial and the timing of Remembrance Day. It was thought to have the same impact on the Protestant community as the incident of Michael Stone walking into Milltown cemetery and attacking people at a funeral, where three people were killed. A further comment was made concerning the mural at the bottom of the Newtownards Road in Belfast, which describes a number of incidents where Protestants were killed during the violence. Of note here, is the inclusion of Darkley with an

epithet, 'Killed while praying to God'. For one interviewee, this was not just about remembering the incident but it also seemed to be like a 'rallying cry'.

While recognising that this was not a direct example of desecration, nevertheless there was enough about the murder of a young woman, Anne-Marie Smyth,<sup>47</sup> for it to be described in the context of desecration. As the story was told, Ann-Marie found herself in the wrong bar one night in east Belfast. At some point in the evening, she was 'taken out and had her throat cut' and 'dumped on waste ground'. After the incident, the Bridge, a faith based community venture situated beside the place where Ann-Marie was murdered, wrote to the family and Ann-Marie's father came and met with the leaders. As a result of this, a special ceremony was arranged where prayers were read and a dove was released with Mr Smyth, Anne-Marie's father, and a number of women from the district in attendance.

Quite apart from the awfulness of the murder itself, what appears to have been sensed as a desecration, is the way in which Anne-Marie's body was treated afterwards by being dumped on waste ground. There is a particular importance of being able to respect the body which is religiously and culturally required following death, and this was thought to have been denied to the young woman. In this, the issue of how the dead have been treated in Northern Ireland was raised, especially with respect to those who were blown up, mutilated and 'disappeared'. Given such a context, the role of service providers, such as ambulance drivers and undertakers, through the time of the violence was commented upon. It was due to the need to respect the dead that Michael Stone's attack at Milltown and the protests at Carnmoney are thought to be so destructive. That said, the issue of a victim's hierarchy was further raised when it was queried whether the attack at Darkley was 'something worse than being shot at Sean Graham's Bookies'.<sup>48</sup>

The question took another contributor back to childhood when her father was a rector of a Belfast city centre church. She recalls that they used to get quite a lot of vandalism but knew that some of it wasn't just mindless 'as there was intent' as well. In one instance, during a break in, the robes and vestments were placed on the floor and the taps turned on so that they would be ruined. As well as this, some money was taken but things were targeted that 'represented that kind of churchmanship and defecated on'.

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<sup>47</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> February 1992 - <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/alpha/S.html>

<sup>48</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> February 1992 - <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/cgi-bin/dyndeaths.pl>

When speaking of the Carnmoney situation, an interviewee wanted to point out that while there was desecration of graves belonging to both communities, and ‘probably elements within both communities involved in that on a tit for tat basis’, it was not believed the protest at the cemetery was of itself a desecration. Apart from this, war memorials, churches and chapels were identified as being attacked generally during the Troubles. That said, it was also thought there are now more acts of desecration as there is still a vacuum of understanding between the communities. Consequently, it is important that consideration be given to ‘how we manage the situation when things are happening...’

A different respondent was able to speak of attacks on the grave of Raymond McCord’s son, Raymond, who was killed in November 1997.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the situation at Carnmoney was again raised where Roman Catholic graves had been attacked.

The same interviewee spoke raised the issue of sites of atrocity were becoming features of the growing political tourism aspect of Belfast. Here, the story was related how he had been asked to take part in a television programme on the bombing of a fish shop on the Shankill Road, Belfast, which left ten people dead, including one of the bombers.<sup>50</sup> He reluctantly agreed to do some filming outside the site where the bomb occurred. While there, a tourist bus came past with speakers and people on it started taking photographs, ‘You know for me that was a desecration.’

Apart from specific instances, attacks on Orange Halls and GAA clubs were recognised as desecration. His church, Antrim Road Baptist, was also petrol bombed and damaged in the 1980’s. He remembers that on the day of his wedding, the red carpet was rolled out for them; however it was not because of their importance. It was done rather because the steps of the church were still badly damaged and the carpet was put down to ‘take the bad look off the steps’.

While considering any kind of violence against human life a desecration, specific instances for another interviewee included Enniskillen, Loughgall and Darkley. In addition, it was remembered that the first Memorial Garden in Omagh ‘was ransacked’ shortly after it was opened. But when considering the thought of ransacking, the point was made that the way in

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<sup>49</sup> <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/cgi-bin/dyndeaths.pl>

<sup>50</sup> <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/cgi-bin/dyndeaths.pl>



which people's homes were entered and ransacked by the police during the conflict was like a desecration as well. In saying this, the point was also made that everyone needs to accept their own responsibility for how things were.

*The response of the community*

When incidents have taken place, communities would appear to have responded constructively to those who have been victims of desecration. Thus, it was reported a community felt affronted and upset when an incident happened in the village. Communities have responded with condemnation and an acknowledgement that 'this is crossing boundaries that should not be crossed'.

This sense of affront and upset was apparent when someone shared a story of what transpired after the murder of the five people at Sean Graham Bookmaker's shop on the Ormeau Road, Belfast. It was remembered that when an Apprentice Boys March was allowed to march along the Lower Ormeau some of the marchers raised five fingers when passing the area which 'was to suggest we got five of you'. There is a sense in which it is thought that 'desecration, whilst felt as a genuine hurt, also became part of the leverage in a political argument that was about contested space... so that the desecration became symbolic of all Orange and marching and all Apprentice Boys'.

When speaking of his indirect memory of the Harryville situation, it was remembered by an interviewee that 'a guy of my pipe band, a staunch Protestant, came in his tractor to help them clean the paint off because it wasn't right...' At the same time, though constrained from commenting on the Carnmoney cemetery incident, it was felt any desecration had nothing to do with the protest group. While acknowledging there was 'criminal damage done' it was not thought that it fitted in with any desecration story. When the situation appeared to be getting out of control, nobody had the right information, which didn't help, though it was further pointed out 'everybody has a responsibility for their own actions; as indeed do communities...'

Again, in another instance, it is remembered how the local Roman Catholic priest wrote expressing his regret to the pastor of the Antrim Road Baptist church following the petrol bomb attack on it. It is remembered that there was a lot of community support and people wanting to say 'Look this wasn't carried out in our name and we give absolutely no support to this kind of

thing'. It was also memorable that the people came round to the church with their 'buckets and sponges' to help clean up.

### **Emerging themes from organisational representatives**

1. Every person interviewed was able to relate to a range of incidents during the Troubles which they regarded as examples of desecration. These included the Enniskillen bomb, the Darkley mission hall attacks, the Milltown cemetery attack, incidents at Carnmoney cemetery, vandalism of graves, attacks on church and property and ransacking of the Memorial Garden in Omagh. In addition, other murders were raised in this context because of the way in which the body was treated after the murder as were the ways in which people's homes were treated during the conflict.
2. Communities have generally responded with condemnation, distancing themselves from the attack and providing general support in cleaning up any mess that has been the result of the attack. While this would appear to have been the norm, an instance was described where the victim community found itself being taunted during an Orange parade and where that 'desecration' was thus used as 'part of the leverage in a political argument that was about contested space...'

### **3. Civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

While a number of incidents were described, the point was made that the appalling things done during the Troubles were actually to individuals. The experience in Europe of Jewish headstones being smashed or having graffiti painted on them came readily to mind. This seemed particularly awful as 'in some way or other, the dead should be beyond assault'.

One contributor recalled the burning of the parish church in Randalstown, a small town north of Belfast. The attack actually began with an attempt to burn the parish church in nearby Antrim. Apparently, this was unsuccessful due to the fire station being within close proximity to the church. The people responsible then went to Randalstown, set the church there alight and when

the fire brigade was called to deal with this incident, they went back to the church at Antrim and set it alight. The response was one of sadness; though it was remembered there was no anger despite the church 'being burnt down for sectarian purposes'. On the other hand, another non-sectarian story was remembered where a church was broken into and a coffin toppled over and urinated on. This was seen as 'awful' and yet the bomb or burning of a church did not create the same reaction. The reason why this should be the case was not clear to the interviewee. Nevertheless, it may well be worth some reflection on why these different incidents drew differing responses from those impacted by them; especially in light of how desecration is conceptualised.

In other conversations, the attack at Darkley was named, though it was also considered this may just have been a murder carried out somewhere the attackers could make it happen. Also, the burning of Orange Halls was considered to be desecration. Here again, it was questioned how much of this desecration is carried out as sectarian attack as opposed to being 'plain vandalism'. It was acknowledged that there is probably a spectrum of incident that could cover the variety of attacks.

Another church named as being damaged was St Donard's Church of Ireland in east Belfast. Here it was not thought the attack was sectarian more to do with young people engaging in vandalism while 'essentially stealing lead off the roof'. In a sense, it is thought that this says more about the place of church in society generally that no longer is it seen as somewhere special but as somewhere so ordinary that it is also open to attack.

Few incidents were identified by the Free Presbyterian church. One involved a church over twenty years ago. John Knox Memorial had started out in north Belfast but as the Troubles flared, it became more vulnerable to attack with the demographic shift that had taken place. Thus, there were break-ins and damage done and paintball attacks. In the end the congregation 'felt compelled to move location' to the Shankill Road area of Belfast. The denomination felt sadness at having to move as they 'were basically forced and compelled against our will' to do it. In the end it was noted they moved their church to an area where it was felt 'you're going to be safe from that kind of attack'.

Other incidents offered as incidents of desecration included 'Cemetery Sunday', an annual Roman Catholic religious event, at Carnmoney cemetery. Here it is suggested the issue was not just about attacks on Roman Catholic graves but it was also an attack Roman Catholic tradition and in this sense involved a sectarian hatred due to fear of Roman Catholic symbolism. As well as these attacks, the attacks on the Jewish graves at the City cemetery, Belfast was also named. In light of this, the question was asked, 'What fear or hatred against Judaism or Jewish tradition leads to that kind of thing?'

In contrast to some of these incidents, a good news story was told about the War Memorial in Derry. Apparently, research was carried on the names listed on it as a means of trying to identify the religious and political backgrounds of those listed. Through this it was discovered most of those named (52%) were in actual fact Catholic and Nationalist while the minority (48%) were thought to be Protestant. Given this, it was decided to hold a commemoration that was inclusive rather than just belonging to one community as previously. After the commemoration, it was noted that the War Memorial was not attacked the way it had been, and the flowers and poppies were left untouched. It was considered this was an outcome of the whole community being able to share the commemoration together.

As well as naming Darkley, Harryville was very much in the fore front of another interviewee's memory as he had moved to Ballymena just as the incident was taking place. In addition to these incidents, it was recalled graveyards in north and west Belfast had been wrecked as well as some plots in Milltown cemetery. Also named were Whitehouse Presbyterian Church and Fortwilliam Presbyterian church where a smaller fire was lit.

With respect to Harryville, it was recalled, by the Protestant minister, 'the week-end I was installed, the next day I had to go across to sympathise with the priest at Harryville because they had not only daubed the chapel of the church but they had actually pushed a burning car down to the front door'

#### *Community Responses*

The unclear memory of the time suggests the response of the community to the attacks and moving of John Knox Memorial was one of 'being quite silent'. That said, it was also pointed out that this happened during the height of the Troubles when there was a lot of tit for tat retaliation happening as well.

When talking of Harryville, it was remembered that ‘one of first things that was good was that various clergy from various denomination, but by no means all of them... would have gone over to the Saturday night vigil mass just to stand in solidarity with the people of Harryville...’ Following this attack, there was a further one after which the youth pastor of one of the Presbyterian churches contacted the Roman Catholic priest and said they wanted to come round and help clean the place up. The distribution of roses to the congregation is recalled as well. At the same time, however, this response was by no means unanimous as those who got involved in this way ‘were less than praised’ in their own community because it was felt the side at Dunloy<sup>51</sup> was being let down. Nevertheless, some very good work developed from this time with High Kirk Presbyterian church and the priest was able to begin a working relationship with paramilitaries which resulted in offensive murals near the church being replaced.

### **Emerging themes from civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

1. Numerous examples of incidents were recalled including those of Harryville and Darkley. In terms of other churches, incidents of fires at Randalstown parish church, Antrim parish church, Whitehouse Presbyterian Church, Fortwilliam Presbyterian Church, John Knox Memorial Free Presbyterian Church were also identified as experiencing sectarian attack. By way of cemeteries, the City Cemetery in west Belfast and Carnmoney Cemetery were named as places where attacks took place on graves. Finally consideration was given to attacks on Orange Halls and War Memorials as exemplified by the situation in Derry.
2. The response of the communities ranged from ‘being quite silent’ to getting as fully involved with the situation as they could. Thus, clergy joining together to stand in solidarity with people was considered to be important as were innovative ways of reaching out to those hurt by any attack. It is recognised that good work done in this way can open the possibility of improving community relations generally; though it was also

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<sup>51</sup> Dunloy, a nearby village in County Antrim, was a very sensitive place at the time due to a contentious parading issue

acknowledged that this may have its cost to those involved with opposition from their own.

### **Incidents of desecration - summary of emerging themes from all interviewees**

Every person interviewed was able to identify incidents of desecration which had taken place during the Troubles. A number, of course, had personal and direct experience. Thus, those churches named included: Harryville, Darkley, Randalstown, Fortwilliam Presbyterian Church, Springfield Road Methodist Church, John Knox Memorial Free Presbyterian Church and St Brigid's Church, Belfast. Incidents were identified as having happened in Milltown Cemetery, City Cemetery and Carnmoney Cemetery. Attacks happened to people at Mountain Lodge Mission Hall, Darkley and St Brigid's, Belfast. In addition, attacks on War Memorials, Orange Halls and GAA clubs were also identified, as was an attack on the Memorial Garden in Omagh.

The scale of the attacks needs to be appreciated with the likes of Whitehouse Presbyterian church experiencing some twenty seven attacks over the years.

The importance of having a whole community response is noted. Again, this has involved everything from neighbours coming with buckets and sponges to help clean up, to clergy making joint visible interventions.

## **6. Acknowledging the Impact of Desecration**

As the previous stories were recorded, it was continually the case that comment was given on the effect and impact of the incident. It is important to pay due attention here not only to the incident itself but also to the way in which the experience affected the lives of the individuals and communities. Thus, in this next section, attention is paid to the impact of desecration through reflecting on: *what is the effect of desecration? How does this impact on the individual and/ or the community? How does desecration influence conflict? What challenges does desecration pose in conflict situations?*

### **1. Those with Direct Experience**

#### *The Effect of Desecration*

A very particular comment made concerned how when the damage was done to a building, there was of course physical damage that required fixing but along with this came a number of psychological effects of being upset and bewildered by an attack on a church. However, this needs to be kept in perspective as property can at least be rebuilt ‘but when someone is shot dead their lives cannot be rebuilt’.

When the people gathered after the fire which burned down Whitehouse Presbyterian Church, the immediate effect was one of anger, sadness and quietness. According to one member of the group, ‘Everyone got a hug that morning... it was all you could do’. At the same time, there was an almost immediate response that had the congregation commit to having their normal Sunday morning service of worship in the hall next to the church. Quite apart from the response by the congregation, the group remembers the support that was given to them by members of the local Roman Catholic community. This support was very important to the congregation as it gave a great sense of encouragement.

Another clergy person offered further reflection on the effect of the attack on his church. For him, it was important to note how an incident like that was actually a ‘self-defeating’ exercise on the part of the perpetrator. When the attack happened, it tended to reinforce the congregation’s sense of boundary between themselves and the local community because ‘in the minds of those whose sacred space it is, it’s our bit against the wider world’. In this it further reinforces a determination to stay and not be put out of the community.

This in many ways was summed up succinctly by another clergy person who simply noted how an attack like this, ‘really knocks the heart out of people... I think it damages your sense of safety very much and you know can have nothing that’s safe... ‘

In a further instance, it is remembered how at a mass, the lesson about Noah was being read and he was reminded in the story how God had reached a point where He regretted he had made Humankind. The verse reads something like ‘He was grieved in his heart’. On reflection, it seemed to him that those who perpetrated the act must be hurting so deeply it is as if they are ‘grieved in their hearts’. Even with this insight however, he realised there was a sense of apathy within his own church leaders because it felt to them like if they do anything to try and fix the situation, it would only happen again. That said, it was encouraging when a few people came to him after the visit of the bishop to inquire why more reference couldn’t be made of the help they had received from their Protestant neighbours.

### *The Impact of Desecration*

The undermining impact of an attack is noted. This can be particularly hard when a congregation has spent a lot of time, effort and finance on trying to get the place put right again only to suffer another attack within a short time after. In this situation, it is so easy to wonder why did we bother? When this happens, it can be accompanied with a sense of hopelessness, despair and a lack of direction. In short, the impact of such experience was well described as ‘undermining your whole sense of security’.

The impact of this is noted as being akin to a violation of something that is very special and sacred. Yet the note of resilient defiance was also heard where in a number of instances people ‘were going to remain forever and a day.’ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this was not always a negative determination but in some instances was very positive as members of the congregation believed they had a purpose in the community. However, given the difficulty of the context and the personal experience which felt like a persecution, it was recognised that there was a need to encourage people in being generous, open and welcoming as their experience could more often influence them to hold tightly ‘like a bird’s claws’ on a perch. The challenge of this was further described by a minister who pointed out ‘the community that’s experienced that amount of desecration requires a huge amount of work and grace to encourage them to be generous with their space and their time and energies in regards to the surrounding community...’



The openness and benefit of cross community relationships in dealing with the impact of desecration was further highlighted by those from Whitehouse. While acknowledging the impact 'was bad' there was no sense of trying to blame anyone for it. Instead support came from all sections of the community and particularly the fellowship of churches in the area of whom Whitehouse was a member. At the same time as trying to come to terms with the impact to themselves, the congregation was also aware of the fact that St Bernard's Roman Catholic church in Glengormley had been recently burned down before their own building. Also, the group was aware of some lesser incidents where St Mary's on the Hill 'had a lot of bother too' and the 'Star of the Sea had their doors done'.

Maura Kiely shares how her one 'big regret' was not including her daughter Mary, then aged ten, in the ceremonies and funeral of her brother. Quite apart from the fact that there was no other Victims' group up to the mid-1970's, she believes there was no recognition of the trauma and grief experienced by children.

According to Maura, 'There should be investigations done about children because children are so badly affected... Mary went off to Newry (to family) and when they came for the funeral... we must have been so demented she said can I stay with Mrs X next door, and the neighbours were all around and they kept her, which was one of the worst things that could have happened. We thought nothing more of it and we went off... The next year, less than a year, Mary took very ill... one of the doctors came out and said he thought she had Meningitis... She got worse I called them again... They came out again and there was a problem as she had been given a particular injection because it will mask the symptoms when doing spinal puncture. We were nearly demented and she was up in Purdysburn... her temperature was death rate and they couldn't get it down and all tests couldn't show anything... The doctor came eventually after three or four days...

'I'm ashamed of what I did then. We were seated at the doctor's big desk and she asked, 'We were just wondering if you and your husband were having trouble with your marriage...? Does your daughter get on with her siblings?' Maura retorted, 'She has no siblings... her brother was shot!' Up she ran. She said 'Nurse, keep them here'; and, we could hear Mary screaming out loud, and she said that's an awful thing that was done to your brother, and Mary cried and cried while telling the doctor about not going to the funeral.

Mary the next day was absolutely fine; no temperature and she put on a white apron and walked around and they kept her for four days to keep an eye on her...’

While speaking about her own personal experience, Maura also went on to describe numerous other instances where children and young people have been impacted by trauma and loss. In light of this experience, there is a query about the way in which children and young people are included in painful and difficult family and community experiences and supported through them. That said, it could also be noted that these are issues facing all who have experienced loss and trauma throughout the conflict and violence.

In Harryville, it was a surprise to the clergy involved, and the youth pastor from High Kirk, that the loyalist grouping took them up on their offer to meet and hear their issues. Both of them were invited to, and attended, the opening of the new Harryville Ulster Scots Advice centre. The transformation of relationships here is thought to be significant and has led to a number of initiatives in area improvements including the removal of certain murals and replacing them with cultural ones instead.

#### *The Influence of Desecration on Conflict*

A complexity was noted in these conversations in that an uncertainty was expressed as to whether the desecration influences conflict or conflict influences desecration. However this is approached, there is an understanding that places incidents of desecration within a framework of reprisal and attack and counter-attack. Here there is a close but undefined link in the relationship and it is hard to know which comes first.

The potential for retaliation was also noted by the Whitehouse group. Here, the focus expanded to consider the way in which Orange Halls have also found themselves under attack in various communities. The point was made that these are places of worship too; and, as such, an attack on them should be considered to be an act of desecration as well.

In the example of Forthspring, at Springfield Road Methodist church, it seems that the attack came as a result of local community tensions and in that sense it could be said conflict influenced desecration. The minister remembers that the new community project, Forthspring,<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> <http://www.forthspring.org.uk/index.html>

had been involved with the Cornerstone Community<sup>53</sup> in trying to find some resolution to the tensions that were building up in the area due to the Whiterock parade. Apparently, this work had led to some local graffiti being painted with the message, 'The Orange Order + Cornerstone + RUC equal the unholy Trinity'. Forthspring found itself dealing with an attack because Cornerstone was a partner in the project. A consequence of this attack was that for 'the next two years the church was very firm that we should not get involved in any negotiations as regards the Whiterock parade because they felt they had paid the price for trying to make some kind of resolution'. Thus, in this way, the church had to retreat from some of its engagement in the community as there was a sense again that the social and spiritual dimensions do not mix. Taking this approach, however, put the congregation and minster in a difficult situation as they found themselves being criticised by both communities for not doing enough to support either community. As remembered, 'It was interesting to be stuck in the middle!'

From Darkley, it was noted that at some stage the people managed to keep a hold of their beliefs and as they did so then 'the axe to grind got smaller' so it didn't in turn lead to further conflict, violence or bitterness. Thus, while of itself, it did not lead to peace-building initiatives, neither did it lead to 'rage on the streets'. However, it has been a frustration to find the incident being used by others to indicate the innocence of Protestants and to argue against prisoner release. At the same time, however, it was understood that the attack on the mission hall brought shame on the paramilitary groups which, apparently, were very quick to distance themselves from the attack.

The congregation at Darkley found itself having to deal with concentrated attention and this may have been a frustration for others who had suffered attacks as well. On reflection, it is wondered in what way does an attack in a sacred place make it different from an attack recalled where three young people coming home from a social night out were murdered. In light of this, the poignancy is noted in the reflection that what actually was desecrated was 'people's trust in God in a sacred space'. Here the people have to deal with a realisation that their God did not protect them in that place while involved in worship, and that 'love had turned sour' as it had been 'returned with the opposite of what we wanted them to have'

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.cornerstonecommunity.co.uk/>

A number of these themes were evident in reflections from others as well. If someone reacts to an act of desecration with the desire to reassert their place, then desecration can act as a ‘feeder’ for further conflict. At the same time however, it is important to realise that such feeding of conflict is not necessarily pre-determined. There are other ways of responding to the act that may facilitate a reduction in the level of conflict. That said, it was thought the natural human response to an attack on *my* sacred is to go into defence mode which in itself limit the capacity for reducing the level of conflict; especially where there has been a history of repeated and ongoing attacks. Here, it is suggested there are two key issues: one, the leadership of the community; and, two, the strength of community narrative regarding the need for defence of a separate identity.

Taking up some other experiences offered, it is important to remember also that in some instances, while acknowledging the destructive nature of the desecratory act, there is the potential for it to have a positive effect. As it was put, ‘Yes, bad things have happened, but that was the trigger for infinitely good things to happen as well’

#### *The Challenge of Desecration*

In light of this, it would seem the challenges posed by desecration in situations of conflict are significant. Here it is acknowledged that the main challenge brought to everyone in a context of conflict and violence is find some way of bringing an end to the conflict. How this is to be done, however, is of course possibly the single most significant challenge. A number of other challenges were also identified in the research.

Thus, for one person a major challenge is how to minister within a congregation such that the ‘fortress mentality’ is not reinforced and a ‘gracious engagement’ with the local community is maintained. The congregation where he now finds himself working is about to celebrate its fortieth anniversary. There is a resonance here for him as he reflects on a statement made by the minister in post at the time of the church’s opening. Apparently, even though the church is situated on the top of a hill like a castle, ‘it wasn’t to be in any way regarded as a fortress to be defended but as a base of operation to the wider community’.

In addition, the enormous challenge where desecration brings financial difficulties was identified on top of the emotional demands. It seems as though there were at least two sides to

this. On the one hand, the local congregation tends to run on a tight budget with almost all of its income being set aside for identified purposes. While most congregations can have a measure of flexibility in its financial expenditure, incidents such as the serious and significant damage related to an incident of desecration are not budgeted for. Given this, such incidents can therefore place a particular strain on the congregation's finances. Secondly, the role of the Northern Ireland Office is acknowledged with appreciation in covering cost when damage is done as a result of conflict. At the same time, however, the process is very long and drawn out and can create cash flow difficulties when trying to work a project schedule with planners, builders and fitters. The issue of finance aside, it would seem the general challenge here is one of trying to keep everything going as normal in a very abnormal situation. That said, the people of Whitehouse were determined that they were not going to be put out of their building and the congregation would stay in the area where it had been since 1866.

Again, the importance of the financial challenge to a community was noted by another contributor. This has particular impact when the congregation is already rather weakened through its urban context and thus has very little 'extra finance floating about.' While that may be a specific practical challenge, there is also the significant challenge to a group of people to believe they are going to remain in the local community for any further length of time. When putting together practical challenges and emotional challenges, it is suggested the core challenge of survival perhaps sums it all up best.

### **Emerging themes from those with direct experience**

In this section, attention has been focused on the impact of incidents of desecration. As such the emerging themes are:

1. The effect of desecration was noted as not just being about the physical damage done to a building. It also includes deep emotional effects of upset, bewilderment, anger, sadness, quietness, damage to the sense of safety and apathy. Despite this, it also led to a determination for many to keep going. In the midst of the difficult situation it was noted great encouragement was found in the support of the local community

2. The impact of such attacks can be undermining of people's and congregations' sense of security; especially when another attack comes soon after repairing the damage from a previous one. This can be accompanied by a sense of hopelessness, despair and a lack of direction. It is found to be like a violation and can result in boundaries being more tightly held and closed to the world beyond. That said, the openness and benefit of cross-community relationships in dealing with the impact is noted. However, appropriate care needs to be taken when dealing with victims, especially children, as the impact may not be immediately obvious, but manifest itself later in a whole range of distressing ways. These are issues facing many who have experienced loss and trauma throughout the conflict and violence. On another note, the impact of handling a situation with particular sensitivity can lead to broader and beneficial transformational possibilities.
3. The issue is raised whether conflict influences desecration or whether desecration influences conflict. While the tit for tat nature of attacks is acknowledged, a number of the incidents recorded here took place during a context of heightened community tensions. Thus, Harryville and Forthspring happened at times of contested parading situations; Gerard Kiely's and Kevin Ballantine's death following the murder of two soldiers; Whitehouse Presbyterian was burnt down following the burning of St Bernard's Roman Catholic church, Glengormley, during the Carnmoney cemetery dispute; and, Darkley mission hall murders took place in the month when Adrian Carroll, the brother of a previously killed Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) member, was shot dead in Armagh by four members of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR); and, the Ulster Unionist chair of Armagh District council was killed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). It is important here to realise that whatever the relationship, perpetuating the conflict is not necessarily pre-determined. There are other options for response though the influence of leadership and community myths about defence and separation are significant. In this, it is possible for desecration to lead to a positive reconciliatory approach.
4. However the challenges of desecration are understood, the most important one is named as bringing the conflict to an end. In relation to this, the challenges include sharing pastoral ministry in ways that maintain 'gracious engagement' with the community. At the same time, the very real and practical challenge of the financial implications of an attack can lead a community to see 'survival' as its core challenge.

## **2. Representatives from organisations with particular insight to offer on such attacks**

### *The Effects of Desecration*

A personal insight was offered by a former police officer who felt that when bombs were being left under cars, ‘nothing was sacred any more’. For him it was an understandable risk to be attacked when on duty but should not have been happening when off duty. In this, it was recognised that desecration is an attack on personal and community identity which is able to be used as ‘leverage against the enemy’.

The emotional upset of such an attack was considered to be significant. It was thought that this was because desecration is ‘so inappropriate’ in a hugely disrespectful way. So much so that it was hard for an interviewee to imagine a much more serious form of attack other than that on a person.

For another person, the first thing that comes to mind is the ‘hurt’ done first of all to the most directly affected individuals, and then to the wider community. It was recognised that this hurt was the purpose of the attack in the first place but then the effect becomes even more complicated when everyone begins to speculate on who did it and what their reason was.

That said, it reminded another of the determination people express when they try to get a memorial or grave back to the way it had been. There is an important principle for some people here in that if it is not immediately repaired then the person who has carried out the attack wins – and this cannot be allowed. There is a danger here of a cycle of conflict developing with attack and repair, attack and repair. Behind this need to keep repairing and not be defeated is a ‘need to show the desecration hasn’t succeeded in desanctifying or taking away...’ In identifying this, however, attention is also to be given to the emotional energy needed to cope and keep going.

Speaking about Raymond McCord, one person (who knows the McCord’s personally) commented on ‘how gutted’ he was at the destruction of his son’s grave. On reflection, this was like ‘trampling on the graves of the dead’ and this is so whether at a grave or memorial by a

place where someone has been attacked. 'It's as though they are not respecting the dead' and not letting them lie in peace.

By way of trying to understand the effect on someone, it was suggested Attachment Theory<sup>54</sup> offered some insights into the nature, depth and process of the experience. Thus, the greater the sense of attachment to a place, then the greater the pain when it is attacked. Nevertheless, and no matter how understood, it was concluded that the 'effect can be devastating'.

From the perspective of Christian theology, it is also suggested that the effect of desecration may be both positive and negative. Positive in the sense that maybe God is asking people to 'open their eyes and take some responsibility'. The effect can be negative in the way that an experience like this can make people fearful and withdrawn from each other. In this way, the whole community is affected as it declines.

#### *The Impact of Desecration*

The impact of desecration is thought to leave a 'sense of nervousness' because if boundaries of sacredness can be crossed then what does that say about the community and what other boundaries might be next for crossing.

Here, communities can be set back as desecration involves a 'hostility' which does nothing to bring about 'harmony into and between the two communities'. Of particular concern is the way in which this is experienced by young people who might interpret a spontaneous alcohol-influenced attack as a deliberate attack and respond to it in that way. Where this is the case it is quite possible that a 'snowball effect' might result and something which started out small just grows 'bigger and bigger'.

The emotional impact is also named as one of shock which leaves the victim feeling demeaned and treated with a 'total lack of respect'. Here again, however, it is a challenge to clearly identify what lies behind the different sense of impact of an attack on a priest as opposed to a

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<sup>54</sup> For an outline description of Attachment Theory and its implications for better understanding Loss, see - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attachment\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attachment_theory)



politician. As one individual put it, it's 'very difficult to love your enemy if you feel he has desecrated you somehow...'

The devastation on families is further noted and along with this the sense of loss and bereavement, the depth of which is influenced by the attachment to the site.

#### *The Influence of Desecration on Conflict*

The influence of desecration on conflict is thought to involve the perpetuation of conflict. When speaking of his experience on the Lower Ormeau, it was recalled that a plaque had been placed at the site of the attack on Sean Graham Bookmakers with the inscribed names of the five people who had been killed. The wording includes a statement of how those who died 'suffered for their faith'. In this there is a fundamental aspect of a story becoming a part of who you are and 'entrenches that a bit more'. Memorials thus have an importance in conflict not only as markers of history and identity but also because of their permanence in the community and its story.

The theme of memorials was further picked up with regards to whether desecration makes the conflict worse or not. The thought was expressed by one interviewee that no matter how much in disagreement he might be with a paramilitary grouping and the siting of a memorial, at the end of the day he wouldn't want to express his viewpoint 'by doing something' to the memorials set up by families or organisations, as this is an inappropriate response and that it is territory 'we shouldn't be in'.

From another perspective, it was thought that desecration may well influence conflict by making retaliation, easier on the basis that 'if they can stoop so low as to do that,' it makes it easier for leaders to respond in similar fashion. Here it was observed that in conflict, there are unwritten rules of engagement. Yet these are frequently broken where desecration is involved.

In addition, as well as retaliation from those directly involved with the incident, desecration can also make it easier to gain support from others who were 'not directly involved' in experiencing the desecration. As an example of this, it was thought that recruitment of new members to

loyalist groups was a consequence of the attack at Darkley; and similarly to republican groups following Bloody Sunday.

Again, the danger of escalation was considered to be an important influence on conflict where desecration has taken place. Here, it is noted that such an attack is not just about vandalism but it involves an intentional personal attack that is also seen to be an attack on the religio-political beliefs and identity of an individual and their community. As a consequence of the intent and hurt caused, it is thought that the victim's reaction, or that of their community, could lead to a further escalation of the conflict.

Desecration influences conflict ultimately by keeping it going. In particular, this is thought to be expressed in a tit for tat retaliation mentality considered evident in the burning of Orange Halls and GAA clubs today. In this, it is suggested that these attacks are also about an intolerance and lack of respect for someone else's story and history. The issue of memorials was noted here in the example of how they can sometimes be placed in controversial/ contested places. It was related that in Fermanagh, a memorial has been erected to three IRA volunteers who were shot dead. This has been placed very close to a Protestant place and it has been desecrated a number of times.

#### *The challenges posed by desecration*

The challenges posed by desecration in conflict situations were thought to include that of developing respect for what is different even if it isn't possible actually 'to embrace' whatever that difference is. Thus, the challenge is thought to be about life and human dignity. However, it was further thought that in order to do embrace difference, someone needs to be confident in 'recognising the sacred in the self and then in others and there needs to be a desire within people to see things differently.

There is a particular challenge in how desecration is to be addressed. It was thought that usual resolution processes would not work due to the level of hurt involved, and at the end of the day care needs to be taken that the perpetrator of the act is not given the opportunity to have the satisfaction of knowing they achieved their goal of causing such pain and distress. In addition,

there is a challenge in dealing with desecration in such a way that the conflict does not escalate out of control.

Again, the challenge was named as being one of how desecration in conflict is managed. There is a reality named here that it is hard to imagine it ever stopping completely. Yet for it to be managed effectively, it is stated the best way to do this is to have Protestant ministers and Roman Catholic priests join together in saying that a particular act is wrong. In this, the clergy must be seen to lead from the front.

By way of process, an important challenge was thought to focus on encouraging tolerance, collaboration and reconciliation. That said, however, it was also believed that bringing enemies together on the subject of desecration is not the best place to start, due the high level of contestation involved. It is acknowledged that this has to be faced at some appropriate juncture. An example of such sensitive development was described as happening on a project which brought together a group of Protestant young people from the Ballysillan area of North Belfast and a group of young people from the Lower Ormeau. At one point in the project, the group visited together the memorial plaque to the five people who died at the bookies on the Lower Ormeau in order to 'stand with 'that enemy' and consider the massacre in a new way'. This took place at the half way point of the project when they each had an opportunity to visit 'key markers' in the other's community. While there was no equivalent community marker in Ballysillan, the group visited some of the Ulster Division at the Somme murals and had the opportunity 'to wonder what that meant for the Ballysillan community'.

It was further thought that some of the biggest challenges actually result from the way in which Belfast was itself divided by planners along sectarian boundaries and the education system being 'so divisive'.

As the whole community moves into a new future, there is a need to find ways of developing respect and tolerance for people's stories and histories. This was named as quite a challenge especially when it seems at times politicians haven't yet engaged with the vision and language of a shared future.

In light of the Report of the Consultative Group on the Past<sup>55</sup> it was also felt there was a huge challenge for Northern Ireland in terms of how those who have been personally desecrated through the loss of loved ones are enabled 'to rebuild their lives and become an integral part of our society again'. However this is done it cannot be about denying the past, but finding some way in which the reality of the past can be acknowledged and at the same time hope be found for the future that this will 'never happen again'. This is thought to involve bringing the outsider in and creating sacred spaces in which people can gather to talk.

### **Emerging themes from organisational representatives**

1. Desecration affects personal and community identity and causes great emotional upset, hurt and withdrawal. It is considered to be 'hugely disrespectful' and runs the risk of furthering a cycle of conflict where the victim has to respond in some way so as not to let the attacker think they have won. This requires an enormous investment in emotional energy. In short, the effect 'can be devastating'. Also, there is a theological issue to consider where God may be asking people to accept responsibility for things that have happened in the history of the community.
2. The impact of desecration is thus considered to include shock, devastation, being demeaned, a sense of nervousness and accompanying hostility which has the potential to escalate. In addition, there is depth to the sense of loss and bereavement involved. At the same time, it is helpful to reflect on what lies behind the different experience in a clergy person being attacked as opposed to a non clergy person.
3. Desecration is thought to influence conflict through perpetuating and escalating it. The place of memorials in a community had particular pertinence, though it was considered that as they have a sacredness about them they should not be attacked. Retaliation becomes easier when the unwritten rules of conflict are broken and this is considered to be the case with respect to desecration. It may lead to the recruitment of new members to paramilitary groupings from those not directly impacted by the incident but who may see a desecration as an attack on the religio-political beliefs and identity of their community. In this, desecration is thought to influence conflict by keeping it going.

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.cgpnri.org/fs/doc/Consultative%20Group%20on%20the%20Past%20Full%20Report.pdf>

4. A major challenge is identified as developing tolerance for people's stories and histories, and respect for what is different. At the same time, there needs to be desire from within people to engage in this. While this may be more long term, there is an immediate challenge in addressing the incident in such a way so as to prevent the conflict escalating out of control. Specifically, it was believed, clergy should act jointly, name the desecration as wrong and be seen to be leading from the front. Additionally, there is focus required on encouraging collaboration and reconciliation; though the influence of town planning and education has to be taken into consideration. However things are progressed, it is useful to learn from the Eames Bradley report and find ways in which past incidents can be acknowledged and at the same time have hope that these things will never happen again.

### **3. Civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

#### *The Effects of Desecration*

From the outset it was believed the effect of desecration was personal and communal trauma which can be felt even to the far edges of society. This trauma is manifested as shock, fear, anger and the attempt to rationalise what has happened. Why did this happen to me? Why did God allow this to happen? Along with this, there is sleeplessness, flashbacks and huge sadness with a sense of depression about the situation. In the experience, the grieving process is thought to begin and it is helped by being able to talk about the incident and beginning to create one's own myth around it. If not processed then the experience, it is suggested, 'can fester' and create all kinds of troubles in people's minds. If this is how it is thought to happen personally then the process was described similarly for a community as it seeks to deal with the trauma as well.

In another interview the theme of loss was raised again where its pain can 'be compounded if others do not respect the loss you've suffered'. It was acknowledged that a practical dimension of the desire to respect loss has at times been controversial when for example, a Christian burial was offered to those involved in bombings or killed by their own devices. Nevertheless, reverence, or its lack, for the dead can have a deep effect on people and families in particular.

Hurt again was raised in another interview and thought to be the most apparent effect both at an individual and community level. Allied to this may be a sense of frustration for at least two reasons. Firstly, where it is believed that nothing is going to happen about the incident and no-one is going to be caught for having done it. Secondly, the more natural response may be a desire to find who did it and retaliate against them, but it is known from the Christian perspective that this is not how it should be handled. At the same time, it was thought a 'resilient determination' would have people rebuild, reconsecrate and return to the site.

The effect of outrage was also raised, alongside anger and 'a great sense of vulnerability'. Here it was recognised that there is actually no material gain to be made in the act of desecration. The cause can only be about 'pure vindictiveness and pointless aggression'.

The effect is also thought to be one of polarisation as boundaries of holiness have been stepped over in a way that they should never have been. In this, then disharmony is thought to be further heightened.

An insightful point was made by a contributor when considering whether the effect is different on a rural community to an urban one. It was realised that in a rural setting there was a form of ecumenism that was lived out in such a way that when people needed help it didn't matter to what church someone belonged as the whole community gathered around them. But when an attack takes place, it raises a level of suspicion and sadness that perhaps your 'neighbours had been involved in it'. In urban areas this may lead to a form of ghettoisation but this was not thought to be so possible in a rural setting.

When incidents take place in urban settings, the feeling of demoralisation may be particularly acute in line with the increasing age profile of many congregations. On the one hand there may be people wondering why they could not just be left alone to see out their day, and on the other hand, it may galvanise people who had never been in the building much but were left wondering what was happening that 'they' were burning 'my' church. The importance of memory being 'enshrined in bricks and mortar' was named and in this regard it was again thought that desecration is like someone breaking into your house and 'wrecking all around' it.

*The Impact of Desecration*

The impact of desecration then was thought to be one of grief. One interviewee's memory here suggested the experience had a big impact on people, with a feeling of disgust and one of challenge to the people who do it, labelling them 'the lowest of the low'. At the same time however, there is a concern about what the authorities are able to do about it. Is the answer to build more security walls? Or educating young people? Or is it just a sign of the times where society is becoming more and more 'Godless'? In terms of education and fostering respect for the sacred within a community, it was suggested by a Protestant minister that the Roman Catholic Church was probably ahead of the other Christian traditions.

The example of having a house break-in came to mind for another contributor. The point at issue isn't just the damage done but that 'something personal... some part of you was invaded by someone who wasn't welcome there' and that a deep experience of invasion and intrusion into personal space and integrity is known. This experience extends to other important connections in life such as graves.

Again, it was thought the impact might range across a spectrum. At one end, people decide that the incident will not break them; they will worship there again and 'make the place clean' while choosing not to retaliate in like manner. At the other end are those whose connection to the incident might be minimal yet give vent to their anger by seeking to take revenge through an act of retaliation.

It was noted however that acts of desecration can sometimes result in positive outcomes. Referring to the situation at Harryville, it was recalled how a youth group attached to a Presbyterian church in Ballymena got involved with trying to clean up after an attack and what a positive difference this made to the situation. That said however, it is also recognised that one of the most damaging things about desecration concerns the way in which it feeds the 'mutual suspicion' and reinforces the feeling that 'you can't trust them!'

It was further considered that people whose symbols of meaning have been targeted will feel under attack and threatened. The impact of this may be to create a sense of victimhood which puts people on the defensive in a 'walled society' thereby creating more division and a sense of isolation where 'there's no place for our tradition, faith or whatever...'; all of which has serious social impact.

Again, the Harryville experience was referred to where a good impact came from a negative event. The involvement of the clergy coming to clean up was considered to be positive and the impact was two-fold. Firstly, in letting the people whose church had been attacked see that they were indeed valued within the community; and, secondly, in helping people to realise that you cannot judge a whole community by the actions of those few who carried out the attack in the first place.

*The influence of desecration on conflict*

The immediate influence on conflict is found in a desire for retaliation as the perpetrators have 'brutalised space'. At the same time, however, it was also recognised that a 'more level headed approach and more patient approach' might involve education and trying to make sacred places be seen as even more sacred. Here, it was queried whether this might be a reason behind headstones and memorials appearing to become more personalised through the addition of photographs and personal verses.

A further influence on conflict is the way churches have to be so concerned about security and are now no longer able to remain open without somebody being present for fear of attack, vandalism or theft, or in other words, 'desecration of sacred space'.

One person recalled, 'I remember one Saturday morning working at the tower of the Church of Ireland church to bring down jackdaws nesting... they allowed us into the church but caught us running in church towards the chancel and the communion rail and he (Parent) gave us such a tonguing for doing that ... you do not run in church and you must not go into that area beyond the communion rail.... It literally was the Holy of Holies... this is a sacred place... he simply said you must not treat this building like that way – that's sacred space. This has stuck with me...'

Desecration has itself been used as a means of increasing tension and attacking other people. It is suggested that as well as attacking another community through language, sport and religion, desecration actually is another way of creating hurt through 'venting your anger'.

Here it was considered the influence of desecration on conflict could be seen as a reason for people to get involved in the conflict and also for sustaining the conflict while undermining initiatives focussed on trying to end it.



While acknowledging the number of people killed during the conflict, it was felt by some that the intensity of the conflict seemed to ‘be pitched up a level’ when someone was killed on their way to a place of worship or while at a place of worship. Generally it was thought the intensity of feeling when someone killed was lost as it became ‘so common place’. However, there was something different about the experience in the community when this happened to someone at worship that people thought, ‘Let’s re-engage with reality... this is so wrong’.

An important issue raised here concerns how desecration is actually part of the conflict. As such it ‘exacerbates and deepens’ the conflict through reinforcing a ‘them and us’ mentality. This may well polarise any possibility of relationships which it is noted has ‘serious community implications’ for prolonging and deepening the conflict.

The concern here is again about the potential of tit for tat reprisals. The importance of church to ‘folk memory’ is significant where suddenly those who don’t attend the church associate themselves with it because it is from their community. This can influence them to ‘get back at those’ who did it and also rebuild the church stronger.

#### *The Challenges of Desecration*

The challenges here include one of maintaining protection. The preference would be to leave the church open all the time but the reality is that this can’t easily be done. This was found to be the case even in Omagh where one clergy person wanted his church to be left open but the church leadership wanted it to be staffed so a rota had to be set up. Thus, for him, security becomes the first big challenge.

Another challenge concerns educating young people about the sacred space of church. As a means of facilitating this, time is given, in one instance, during a Confirmation class to talk about the nature of the building and the historical background to the sanctuary being identified as the Holy of Holies. How the layout of the church reflects that sacred space is also taught as is the expectations of behaviour while in it.

Another challenge concerns the handling of hurt caused by desecration. There is a coping mechanism that comes into play which sees someone as deserving and getting their just reward.

One person recalled how his father's generation told stories of people who cut down a mission tree at the local graveyard. They 'all died young or had tragic accidents' and ultimately, God will look after 'those infidels who did such an awful' thing.

At the same time the value of having people talk about how incidents affected them personally is important. In this the important feature is allowing people to have both their story and their pain heard. Here again, it is also important not to be held captive by the past but to find some way of moving forward. To this end forgiveness was named as a dynamic that 'doesn't take away the pain but enables the past to be seen in a different way'. The role of humour was also recognised such that apparently after the fire in the Randalstown church there was a joke around asking whether it was the work of the UDA or the parish priest. Again not taking the pain away nor forgetting about it but trying to look at in a new way so that it does not hurt so much.

The biggest challenge again was named as being that people get away with it. The question was posed, 'How many people have been prosecuted for something like this?' The reality is acknowledged that even though many are outraged by such acts of violence, vandalism or criminality, people are not going to bring their 'brother in for smashing up a statue'. Such actions don't have the same reaction when done to someone from the other side as opposed to ourselves. So one of the challenges is that people have to be caught and brought through the court process.

The challenge here was also thought to involve standing back and showing 'a little respect for the preferences and belief systems of others.'

The challenge of finding some form of mediation process was named as important in enabling the spiral of conflict to be broken. The task here is for a third party to become engaged to move the parties forward separately at first and then in a process of bringing them together. This also requires courage from the sides in conflict to step outside the cycle. The risk involved for those concerned that they then don't become a third-victim of both parties is acknowledged. So it is necessary for them to hold their confidence as well in working for some kind of 'engagement'.

The challenges were thought to include consideration of whether or not we should retaliate; and, secondly, to ask what does this church mean to us and our corporate identity anyway? Here again the importance of the wider community needs to be recognised. The story was

related of how an Anglican parish church in the south of Ireland was about to close through lack of attendance. ‘The rector thought he had got it sorted until one day he got a phone call from the local Roman Catholic priest. ‘What’s this I hear you’re closing this church. You can’t do that. We’re going to send you down £25,000. We’ve had a field day here – we can’t do without you here’.

There was a challenge in this story concerning how often anyone goes to a group from the other side and say ‘we can’t let you wind up here cause you’re part of this community.’ So when an attack takes place, can those from the offending community offer to be involved in the rebuilding because the community is ‘diminished’ as a whole if one part of it is left to suffer on its own. The point was made that following the burning of Whitehouse Presbyterian church, the minister is understood to have said normally the church goes to the community and here the community has come to the church. This is an indication of what the church has been in the community and the way in which other churches rallied to support the congregation is ‘what I’d love to see if someone comes in and desecrates my church or graveyard...’

### **Emerging themes from civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

1. The effects of desecration are thought to include a sense of personal and communal trauma manifested as outrage, hurt, shock, fear, anger, sleeplessness, sadness, demoralisation, depression about the situation and a sense of vulnerability may be manifest. Rationalisation is required, otherwise the experience ‘can fester’ in people’s minds. The experience can lead to a personal and/ or communal grieving process as a means of trying to cope. The attack on self respect is noted, as is the frustration of not having anyone caught and the potential for retaliation is real as boundaries become more polarised. Nevertheless, desecration is also thought to bring out a resilient determination to rebuild and reconsecrate. It is questioned whether the experience is different if a rural congregation is involved as opposed to an urban one.
2. Grief is thought to be the major impact of desecration on people. In addition, it is known as a deep invasion and intrusion into personal space and integrity. It was also considered that the impact might range across a spectrum of response from determination to keep

going, across to determination to get revenge through an act of retaliation. Thus, the general reaction is suggested to be one of increased suspicion of the other, a reduction in trust, and a growing sense of isolation and victimhood. In saying this, the response to desecration was also seen to have a positive reaction in the community such as at Harryville. This came about due to other clergy and the wider community being seen to work together at cleaning up.

3. The immediate influence on conflict was thought to include an increase in community tensions, a desire for retaliation and an undermining of peace initiatives, but it was hoped a more thought through response would not move in this direction. A sense was expressed that felt the intensity of the conflict was further increased when a person was attacked on their way to, or at, a place of worship. The question remains open as to whether desecration influences conflict or conflict influences desecration. The answer is most likely to be both/ and rather than either/ or. Nevertheless, the possibility of relationships becoming further polarised is real and this has implications for extending the conflict; especially through those whose connection to the site is through 'folk memory'.
4. Numerous challenges are raised including security to protect the site, education about sacred space, and dealing the hurt caused. Here the value is acknowledged of facilitating opportunities where people can have 'both their story and their pain' heard in a way that does not allow a victim mindset to take over but enables people to move forward. To this end, forgiveness 'doesn't take away the pain but enables the past to be seen in a different way'. Catching people doing the act and bringing them through the court process is thought to be a challenge. It is thought statistics should be published of cases taken against people being prosecuted for acts of desecration. It is thought finding a mediation process or using a third party helps in breaking the conflict spiral. There is a significant challenge for those directly affected by an incident and those from the other community deciding how they will respond to it. This is important because it has been noted that the community is 'diminished' as a whole if one part of it is left to suffer on its own.

## **Acknowledging the Impact of Desecration – summary of emerging themes from interviewees**

Quite apart from the physical damage done, desecration is recognised as being like a trauma with deep emotional and psychological effects on personal and community identity as well. These include the sense of outrage, upset, bewilderment, anger, fear, sadness and devastation; but a strong resilience to keep going was also identified. Other identifiable effects are thought to include trauma and the questioning of faith.

A significant impact of desecration is the way in which it undermines security, while leaving people with a sense of hopelessness, despair, a lack of direction, increased suspicion, reduced trust, isolation and victimhood. It needs to be realised that the impact of an incident may not be immediately evident and could manifest itself years later. At the same time, if handled well, the situation may open transformational possibilities for reconciliation.

It is recognised that desecration is both influenced by conflict and is an influencer of conflict. Whatever the complexity of this relationship, and the possibility of retaliation emanating from an incident, it does not have to be a predetermined response. That said, desecration is thought to influence conflict by keeping it going.

The challenges brought by desecration are thought to include: bringing the conflict to an end, dealing with the financial implications, developing tolerance and respect, addressing the incident to limit conflict potential, protecting the site where it has happened, educating about sacred space, handling the hurt caused, preventing a victim mindset from taking hold, and seeking legal due process. In addition, there is a challenge in trying to find ways in which past incidents can be acknowledged while at the same time having hope that these things will never happen again.

## **7. Responding to Desecration**

The consideration of desecration has progressed from trying to develop a conceptual understanding of desecration, to gaining an insight into the experience of some people who were direct victims of desecration and on to reflecting the effect and impact of such experience on individuals and communities. In light of this, there is now a need to consider what an effective response to such an incident might look like. As such, it is of interest here to explore: *what needs are evident from desecration? What should be the key priorities in responding to desecration? What would a 'best practice' response look like? How can the potential for further conflict be minimised? How can the potential for reconciliation be maximised?*

### **1. Those with direct experience**

#### *Needs evident as a result of Desecration*

A range of needs were identified in relation to incidents of desecration. Perhaps again the primary one is to have the violence, whether it is against buildings or people, stopped. For one clergy person this required a response that involved appealing, begging and praying that it would stop.

Further to this, the need for victims of desecration to receive affirmation that 'the wider community is not necessarily against them' was noted. In terms of those who are best placed to do this, it is important here to note the role of community leaders and spiritual leaders. When the attack took place on Forthspring, the minister remembers, as noted above, how Gerry Adams came to visit, yet at the same time the local parish priest did not. He thinks if the priest had visited then it would have helped 'to affirm the local congregation that this was not something that had any kind of sanction by the 'others''. As well as this, he contrasted his experience at Forthspring with that of his time when working as a youth worker in Holywood when the chapel there was burned down in a sectarian attack. At that time, all of the Protestant church leaders 'were there on the doorstep seeking to support the local Catholic community'.

The importance of understanding and accountability for healing was named by a community leader as he reflected on the experience of the people of Darkley. For him this involved a range of issues such as why the attack happened; a clear interpretation of what happened; and, what

was happening in the immediate context when the incident occurred. He recognised the difficulty this posed especially as no-one had ever been brought to court for the offences. There are yet so many unknowns with regard to the attack, but he believes ‘if healing is to happen, truth needs to be told, explanation needs to be given and understanding needs to be gained...’

The need for rebuilding was reported as important by a respondent. Such rebuilding is not only about property. It is also applied to worlds that people have to inhabit; especially someone’s internal and external worlds. This, it is acknowledged, is complicated enough. However, it becomes even more so when the problem is related to an urban setting where people are already emotionally weary. Strategically, it is considered important then to invest in the physical aspect of community through for example, planting trees, tidying up streets and face lifting buildings. Such positive changes, in the external world, while perhaps questionable by some because of expense, are thought to offer internal strength and hope. This approach cannot be an either/ or; it has to be both/ and approach which lies at the heart of a co-ordinated strategy.

Here, however, quite apart from the difficulty involved with this approach, there is a question as to who should (or can) take the lead in working to facilitate this approach. Recognising the challenge of trust, any response, it is thought, needs to be cross-sectoral and cross-denominational. In addition, as well as someone to co-ordinate and oversee, it requires an outside dynamic as well as an inside one, and also resources. In this, it would benefit from somebody being able to come in from outside and do the hard things that need to be done, ‘take the hits’ and let the locals get on with it.

#### *Priorities in responding to Desecration*

Whatever issues and needs are to the fore at such challenging times, it is suggested that a major priority in responding to the incident must include meeting with, or continuing to meet with, those from the community from whom it is perceived the attack came. There were numerous examples reported by the interviewees of communities coming together in a positive and constructive manner which by its very nature enabled people to be brought closer together rather than being pushed farther apart.

Indeed, the observation was offered that people generally from different denominations and communities have very often come to clear up the muck, and that in a strange kind of way brought them closer together.

For those from Whitehouse, there was an appreciation of the value of relationships with other churches and communities that had been built up over the previous years. The Moving beyond Sectarianism<sup>56</sup> process was named in particular as one which had stood them in good stead during the difficult times because of the friendships it had helped facilitate. Thus, there was a named priority of ‘getting together and talking with people and talking with the community’. At the same time, people were aware of the level of challenge this posed to members of the congregation.

#### *Towards a ‘Best Practice’ Framework*

So in light of these reflections, a number of pointers were offered by way of what might constitute a good practice response to an incident of desecration. In one situation, this began with an honest assessment of not being able to think of anything other than to ‘appeal and pray for an end to the violence that brought it about’. While recognising the difficulty of getting people to bring violence to an end, it was also suggested that a response has to involve a range of dimensions including the spiritual, political and psychological.

This was also picked up by a clergy person for whom it was important to be aware of the need for both external and internal supports. While on the one hand appreciating the benefit of affirmation coming from other communities there was at the same time a need to draw on the victim community’s own spiritual and scriptural resources. That said, a strong caveat was stated in that any of those resources that are used to reinforce an ‘us against the world’ mentality need to be ‘put at the very back of the cupboard’. In this, the benefit of having a biblical and liturgical resource was considered to be a need in order to show a response based on the grace of the cross where forgiveness was found, as ‘what more desecration could you have than the crucifixion of the Son of God?’

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<sup>56</sup> This was an action Research project of the Irish School of Ecumenics which ran between 1995 – 2001 and was co-ordinated by Dr Joseph Liechty and Dr Cecelia Clegg  
<http://www.tcd.ie/ise/research/funded-projects-past/Moving-Beyond-Sectarianism.php>



In addition, comment was made by the same minister on his experience of having to deal with the media at the time and the need to have a very careful message go out to them about what happened and how the congregation was responding to the incident. As he notes, the church was burned at a very sensitive time, between the Whiterock parade and the 'Twelfth'. The media, he felt, was particularly interested in trying to run a story about a Protestant church being attacked but they lost interest when they found that the approach being taken by the congregation was one of reconciliation. From his experience, he believes care must be taken with the media because whatever is said, or not said, in the immediate moments after an incident can take on a life of its own once it's out there.

He went further to suggest the absolute importance, when dealing with the media, of ensuring that the microphone is shared with people from the other community 'who are about to affirm your presence within that locality'. Quite apart from these points, he also offers the reminder that at the end of the day staying silent before the media is also an option.

Speaking about dealing with the aftermath of a particularly destructive break-in to Darkley House, the co-ordinator considered it necessary to make some kind of public statement concerning how what had happened would not be held against the individual (-s) who carried it out. The issue at stake for him was how to make positive choices in the midst of negative happenings in order that they did not get pulled down in to a negative spiral. In addition, it was useful to ask for help. After the house had been broken into, he phoned the pastor of the Mission Hall and twenty people turned up with cleaning materials. What struck him was the quietness with which they worked and the respect they showed to the house.

Even more impressive for him was that they cancelled their evening service and called to the house and made a prayer. It was in that prayer that he prayed a blessing on those responsible for the damage. Yet what he found so memorable was the fact that the members of the congregation considered helping their neighbour to be more sacred than going to evening service. Yet whatever such quiet and appreciated assistance, the congregation have a difficulty in trying to piece together a theology that enables them to understand where God was at the time of attack in the Hall. The understanding of God as Father is gone and a theology of forgiveness has yet to be discussed.

For those, from Whitehouse, a strong emphasis is placed on ‘talking with each other’. In support of this, they have attended services of worship in the other churches over the years and have shared a number of social events. This was found to have strengthened the bonds of friendship. Of note for the group was a memorable visit to St Bernard’s to talk about their experience of life for the community in the aftermath of St Bernard’s being burnt to the ground. The benefit of this was to reduce the sense of isolation felt after the attack. The connection has long remained and Whitehouse was included in an invitation to the opening the new chapel. As one member of the group remarked, ‘If you’re not talking to each other you’re never going to resolve anything ... talk calmly and sympathise with what has gone on in the area and people will see you’re not an ogre nor a threat to anyone in the area...’

Following the murder of Gerard, Maura Kiely became increasingly aware of the lack of support for those who had suffered so greatly in the violence. As mentioned earlier, the issue of injustice was a primary one for people as it ‘can eat you away’. In those early days, there were ‘people who were nearly completely mental over it’.

Perhaps, as a result of this lack of support, she committed herself to work for reconciliation and for all the bereaved families in Northern Ireland. Consequently, she formed the first victim’s group, The Cross Group, in 1976. It still meets monthly today sharing the same principles as it did then; namely, it had to be open to any and all who suffered because there is ‘absolutely no difference where the tears of one are absolutely the same as those of the other...’

When asked by people ‘Why the Cross group?’ she relates two reasons. After Gerard’s death, Maura tells of how she almost lost her faith in God; however, as time passed, she began to be aware of the deep faith she had and ‘realised then that sure God himself as He hung on the cross said, ‘Father, forgive them for they know what they do.’ As well as this, she says it was chosen because ‘I believed that nobody could have been asked to bear a heavier cross than the cross simply because they wore a uniform or like Gerard because they were a Catholic’

While reflecting perhaps more from the perspective of a victim’s issue as opposed to a specific issue of desecration, Maura can be frustrated with the way in which ‘victimhood is big business’ for lots of people who did not lose anyone. As well as this, there is an awareness that

many of the reports produced about victims are done again by people who didn't lose anyone either.

As well as remaining open to anyone who has lost someone, the meetings have remained informal gatherings so as to keep them as accessible to everyone both to attend and also to host. That said, if there is one piece of formality which the members of the group apparently observe, it is the anniversary of the death.

In terms of responses by the churches (and other individuals), Maura queries the extent of congregation's and clergy's knowledge of events that have happened within the parish. Thus, do congregations have a list of everybody who was shot and buried from the church? Do churches still go round and visit the bereaved and injured?

#### *Minimising the Potential for further Conflict*

It may be important here to begin with the realisation that there is always the potential for further conflict. However, as a community moves on, the sectarian dynamic may be added to by genuine urban decay. That said, while the potential is here for conflict so the potential is also there for reconciliation though everyone at all levels and strata of society need to be committed to it.

While acknowledging the importance of this, the weariness and emotional impact carried by people after so many years conflict were again commented upon. Thus, in terms of clergy, it is thought there is much unacknowledged traumatic impact of trying to minister in such a context for so long. Thus, it's not necessarily the case that people don't have the spirit, heart or will to work for rebuilding and reconciliation. Rather they may just not have the energy for it. Given this, it is thought to be very difficult to put together what that would all look like in a post conflict world; yet it does bear consideration.

As support came from both sides of the community following the attack, it is thought that there was the potential of bringing the Darkley community closer together. That said, the congregation has remained open and welcoming with republican prisoners being known to attend; though it is also known other former prisoners do not attend due to the wording on a

memorial plaque which speaks of the three members being murdered ‘by terrorists’. The Mission seems to have chosen not to get involved in direct reconciliation work. It is thought that while the potential is there to do this work, it is not right for them as different people are at different places in their ability to get on with life. Apparently, there was a suggestion to them that they could serve their religious mission by inviting the BBC in to the hall, telling their story and singing their songs to the world. This did not go down well; nor have other experiences with the media which has been like ‘a form of desecration of their feelings, their private devotion.’

*Maximising the Potential for Reconciliation*

The benefit of the communities working together to repair the damage is again acknowledged to be very important. There are two aspects of such engagement: firstly, is the actual repair of the damage caused; and, secondly, is to make a statement of opposition to what has happened. Yet there is also a reality to be borne in mind such that whoever is responsible for the actions may not listen or care. Nevertheless, it was suggested appeals should be made to anyone who has influence to help stop it. While believing the PSNI has the responsibility of ensuring it is stopped, one person also acknowledged they can’t be everywhere nor can they give any guarantee of being to able to end it completely.

Of absolute importance here, it is proposed, is the initial response of those who have been the victims of desecration. The options are always those of withdrawing and pulling up the drawbridge or in trying to remain open to the community. Thus, for one clergy, the more a group can remain open to the community through expressing, for example, forgiveness as an act of strength, the greater the possibility of affecting some kind of reconciliation process.

Nevertheless, it is also important to have a good sense of the impact of the incident on the congregation to assess how best, as a minister, to bring them forward. Yet it is further noted how supportive the church hierarchies were but also how little they knew about what to do or how to handle the situation. For him, this is reflective of the reactive rather than proactive nature of much of church life. At the same time, it is realised that ‘there will never be a programme you can follow that is if a. then go to b. then go to c... You can never have that as there always needs to be a certain practical, dynamic and organic response to this’.

In Harryville, it is thought there is no doubt that not speaking words of condemnation at the time of the attacks at Harryville was very influential in allowing relationships to develop and improve. It is believed that if the clergy had engaged in name calling, then the gap between the various parties would have been made wider and the conflict escalated. As it was, taking a pastoral approach allowed for conversations to begin when the priest was taken at his word and members of PUL groups invited him to meet with them. However, in this context it is thought affirmation from his church leadership would have been helpful as a means of support and encouragement.

### **Emerging themes from those with direct experience**

In light of these insights, the following themes begin to emerge.

1. The primary need named is to have the violence end. While recognising the aspirational nature of such a need, more immediate needs are also identified. Thus the need for affirmation from community leaders and spiritual and religious leaders; especially when it comes from the ‘other’ community.’ The benefit of having church leaders work together is valuable. Other needs named included those for accountability and understanding of an attack if healing is to be found. This was succinctly stated, ‘if healing is to happen truth needs to be told, explanation needs to be given and understanding needs to be gained...’ The need for rebuilding external physical worlds and internal psycho-spiritual worlds was recognised as well. However, this also brought with it a need for co-ordinated, properly resourced, cross-community and cross-sectoral strategy; quite possibly led by someone outside of the immediate community where an incident has taken place.
2. It is important to recognise the priorities for responding to incidents of desecration. Meeting, and continuing to meet, with those from the community from where the attack is believed to have come. The benefit of having, and contributing to, good local community relations were frequently named as helpful. These relationships often had real practical value when those from other communities came to help clean up after an attack. At the same time, it was acknowledged that this was not always an easy thing for all members of victim communities to accept.

3. Given these considerations, it is thought a best practice framework should pay attention to the psychological, political and spiritual dimensions and impact of an incident of desecration. Thus, internal and external support is required. Externally by way of affirmation from the other community and internally from the biblical and liturgical resources available to show grace and forgiveness. Communication with, and letters to, those who have been victimised in this way are recognised as being helpful. The role of the media was especially commented upon and it is thought to be helpful if there is one person with responsibility for dealing with it, while ensuring those from the other community are invited to share the platform. However this is done, it was also thought that making some statement about how this would not be held against the individual or community was necessary. Asking for, and accepting, help was also thought to be useful. The need to keep talking with those from the other community is essential while also including them in invitations to events and openings is thought to help strengthen bonds of friendship. Any response has to be timely, appropriate and available with an awareness of the long term nature of the impact.
4. There is always potential for further conflict and, because of this, every person and institution needs to be committed to the work of reconciliation. Here, however, care is expressed for clergy and other leaders who may just not have sufficient energy left following years of upheaval. Harnessing the support from both sides of the community can have very important benefits; especially where the congregation can remain open and welcoming. At the same time, it cannot be assumed that those who have been hurt by an attack of some description must necessarily take the lead in any reconciliatory response.
5. In order to maximise the potential for reconciliation it was again thought this would be best done by communities working together in at least two ways: repairing the damage and by making a statement of opposition to what happened. The value of encouraging a community to remain open to others and express forgiveness as a strength is noted. Yet, the value of assessing the impact on a congregation of an act of desecration is also vital though there is a realisation that there isn't a linear programme that can be followed as a means of working through the effect. Nevertheless, the support of church hierarchies important. The influence of taking a pastoral approach with the perpetrators was seen to

be highly effective. Thus not speaking words of condemnation, but reflecting on the hurts that must be known with an offer to meet to hear grievances, led to very real possibilities of transformation. Along with this, however, the importance of support from one's own church hierarchies was thought to be desirable.

## **2. Representatives from organisations with particular insight to offer on such attacks**

### *Needs evident as a result of Desecration*

The needs evident from desecration were thought by organisational representatives to be numerous. The importance of tolerance to those who are different was named. While recognising this is something a person learns as they grow older, it was also thought that the education system could do something that would help to foster tolerance within young people. It can be a 'frightening experience' for young people when confronted with someone who is perceived as different. Thus, the role of Religious Education (RE) is considered to have a major contribution to play in developing tolerance. In addition, an interviewee named his growing preference for integrated schooling because of the way in which religion and faith based practices are taught. Education shared in this way it is thought 'can alleviate fear' by taking away the 'bogey man'.

For another contributor, the needs were considered to be two-fold. Firstly, there needs to be condemnation of the incident from all sides of the community because when it happens 'every side of the community suffers from it'. The condemnation needs to be loud, public and unequivocal irrespective of the politics involved. The second need then is for practical action. Here there is something of the community saying this is wrong, it should not have happened and we want to help put it right again – even though it was not us who carried out the offence. The response of the Protestant community at Harryville was used here as an example of a response which was publicly seen trying to do something about the damage caused by an incident of desecration of another community's space.

In another interview, the primary need was considered to be one of developing a society where 'people don't feel other people's beliefs are a threat to them'. At the same time, the importance of 'empathy with the victims', irrespective of who they are or what they believe, was identified

as a need in this regard as well. The fact that it matters to the person is what is important not their position in the community. The danger here is that unless an incident is dealt with in an appropriate way then it can become part of the ‘fuelling of the conflict’

The need for ‘safe space’ is identified as important for enabling people to be exposed to difference. Such a space may be something sacred. It doesn’t have to be a building. Whatever form it takes, the requirements of ‘risk taking and investment at a whole range of levels to get any number of people in a safe space and collaborate and work together...’ is acknowledged. The very significant question concerning how this is to be done remains.

Another representative thought some work had already been done around facilitating needs, with for example East Belfast Mission on the Newtownards Road and its engagement with work on murals. However, it is to be noted that at the end of the day desecration is a hate crime and should be treated in this way by the PSNI. This gives a legislative framework which needs to be enforced so as to send out message that this is not acceptable. Whatever approaches are taken, the key thing is to find ways that foster tolerance and respect and support the official government policy of a Shared Future.

*Key priorities in responding to desecration*

Two key priorities in responding to desecration are named as management and education. With respect to management, it is important that an appropriate response happens quickly and good management is seen as the ‘first short-term thing’ which outlines how a response is to happen and is carried out in a holistic manner; and, secondly, education is a priority as a means of trying to eradicate desecration from happening.

The key priorities in responding to desecration involve

- a. Community leaders from the community where perpetrators come from issuing statements of condemnation which distance their community from the attack.
- b. People from the community need to come and show solidarity with the victims by helping in whatever way they can. The difficulty here is for this to happen without people feeling they have to take responsibility for what someone else has done. But



by providing support in this way, they are distancing themselves from the attack and saying that they have no part to play in this.

- c. Hate crime legislation needs to be enforced and stiffer penalties given to those found guilty of any such incidents.
- d. A community education response needs to be developed which identifies sacred sites and builds learning opportunities around them as opposed to simply letting them become tourist spots.

*Towards a 'Best Practice' Framework*

The concept of 'best practice' raised concerns for at least one interviewee that the terminology might be used to describe an academic exercise rather illustrating an effective response based on experience. Thus, when reflecting on an experience of a church where graves were vandalised, such an effective response following an attack was thought to include gathering the whole community, along with its leaders, and begin by acknowledging that the incident had happened.

This acknowledgement needs to include an open and public statement of condemnation delivered by 'representation from both communities' together and through the media. In doing this, not only are those who have been attacked offered support but it sends a 'message to... their community that you're ashamed of what some in your community have done'.

A best practice response here is thought to include finding some space where people can sit beside one another to work out a community response. It is most effective if this response includes political and church representatives visiting together and making a joint public statement of condemnation. That said, a concern is expressed that such a response could provide the perpetrators with the publicity they want so other ways of acknowledgement and recognition could be considered that meets the needs of those most affected. At the same time, there is uncertainty about how to engage with the perpetrators and enable them to realise they are actually devaluing their own beliefs and values while also laying themselves and their community open to retaliation and reprisal.

Of importance in any response is the way in which communication with the community is handled. In this, the first question is thought to involve whether or not to go public, as it might leave the property open to further attack. Due to the significance of the implications, it is thought that this can only be answered by those who have suffered the attack. That said, if it is decided to go public then the questions of how this is best done and by whom, need to be considered. To this end, it was thought helpful to have somebody who can ‘communicate with the media and represent your organisation’.

From a different perspective, the point was also made that a good practice response could actually include a plan of action being drawn up before hand between a group churches. So quite apart from deciding what the response would be if it was *my* church attacked, what would be the response of my church if another church is attacked in our area? If a plan like this existed then it would help in gaining a quick response. At the same time, it was thought any response requires ‘courage to be unequivocal’ in declaring the act of desecration to be wrong.

It was suggested that creativity and imagination are some of the first casualties when people get locked into conflict situations. Thus it was the hope of one interviewee that a place of welcome could be opened which has many doors and where people could simply come and be. It had been hoped that the planned Maze complex might allow for something like this as a symbol of transformation and possibility. Thus imagination and creativity have got to be found and facilitated.

#### *Minimising the Potential for further Conflict*

When reflecting on his memory of the Harryville experience (with which he had no involvement), one of those interviewed spoke of the impact on him of seeing the Church of Ireland rector in solidarity with the Roman Catholic congregation being photographed with his paintbrush in hand helping to clear up the mess. Along with this, the reconciling words of Fr Paul Symonds were thought to be influential. This was thought to be no less than ‘quiet heroism’ where people have gone out of their way to repair damage or spoken reconciling words, and by doing so, manage to ‘pour oil on troubled waters’. It was also thought important that this is seen as ‘not just rolling over but trying to reconcile’ the conflict situation.

In this, it was thought an engaged public debate would be of benefit, using desecration as a ‘tangible case study in the attacking of the other’s beliefs’ and how this can influence the escalation of further conflict.

Quite apart from a localised debate, the benefit of taking people away to other contexts where time can be given to considering other communities’ issues is believed to be worthwhile.

The role of advocates is considered to be important as well. The experience was remembered where following the burning of a Protestant place of worship, the local Roman Catholic clergy initiated a collective response that was gratefully received. But here it is acknowledged that there can be cost involved; thus if the local clergy had thought involvement carried too great a risk for losing parish members or getting hurt or insulted, it may not have happened. But when they decided and acted then ‘an icon for another possibility’ becomes real.

#### *Maximising the Potential for Reconciliation*

Realism was expressed by one contributor who believed there was potential for reconciliation; however, probably not within the ‘extremist element’. Nevertheless, when an incident happens it makes people begin to talk because they want to know ‘Why it happened? Who did it? Will it happen again?’ and it’s from these questions that a reconciliation response can begin that is concerned with not letting it happen again. The development of a peace programme in Enniskillen following the bomb was pointed to as an example of a reconciliatory response to an act of violence. It is here people can meet to hold discussions and then go on to develop structures that facilitate reconciliation. When these are in place, they can form a ‘model’ that can produce ‘a ripple effect’ throughout the wider community. If it is found not to work then there is a challenge to make it ‘better and stronger’. A significant way named as important to work towards, involves engaging with people and community so that a ‘non-violent response’ is seen as the only option.

## **Emerging themes from organisational representatives**

In light of these insights, the following themes begin to emerge.

1. The needs evident from desecration are thought to include the development of tolerance and respect for the other. This is something that primarily is seen to involve education and the value of Religious Education in school and integrated education were named as important means of helping to 'alleviate fear'. In addition, there needs to be a loud, public and unequivocal condemnation of any incident from all sides of the community which should be accompanied by a strong community practical action to 'help put the situation right again'. Ultimately there needs to be a society where 'people don't feel others' beliefs are a threat to them' and empathy with victims is evident, irrespective of what side they are perceived to represent. The importance of 'safe space' for exploration, facilitation of and risk-taking in relationships is named. In addition, it was thought that there needs to be enforcement of Hate Crime legislation so as to send out a message that this 'is not acceptable'.
2. The key priorities named here include management and education. Management of incidents is to involve responding to an incident in a timely and holistic manner. Education is important as a means of 'eradicating' desecration altogether. Thus, community leaders need to issue a statement of condemnation; people from the whole community need to offer practical assistance in whatever way they can. Also, Hate Crime legislation needs to be enforced; and, community education processes need to be developed around 'sacred sites'.
3. In terms of a good practice response, it was thought that this should include an acknowledgement by the whole community that the incident has happened. Again, this is thought to require an open and public statement of condemnation delivered by 'representation from both communities' together and through the media. The benefit of having a space where a community response can be worked out is helpful. It was stated that the needs of those most affected by the incident require consideration. Communication is important and the role of the media was raised. Thus, it was believed helpful to have someone involved who can 'communicate with the media and represent your organisation'. The important point was also made that it would be a sign of best practice if a group of churches already had in place a plan of action for what to do if one of them was attacked.

Space needs to be found that allows creativity and imagination to grow and contribute to future transformation.

It was suggested that creativity and imagination are some of the first casualties when people get locked into conflict situations. Thus it was the hope of one interviewee that a place of welcome could be opened which has many doors and where people could simply come and be. It had been hoped that the planned Maze complex might allow for something like this as a symbol of transformation and possibility. Thus imagination and creativity have got to be found and facilitated.

4. The potential for further conflict can be minimised by people going out of their way to repair damage or by speaking reconciling words. Also, it was thought incidents of desecration could be used as case studies to reflect on desecration as an attack on another's beliefs and how it can further escalate conflict. Taking people outside of their immediate context was considered to be a useful learning exercise. The role of advocates, especially from the churches, was believed to offer 'an icon for another possibility'.
5. At the same time, while there is the potential for reconciliation, there needs to be a realistic appreciation of the degree to which this is possible. That said, there is potential as people begin to question and engage in conversations about what happened. Again the value of having somewhere to hold discussions is noted. Following these conversations, structures that facilitate reconciliation can be developed and models formed to produce a 'ripple effect' throughout the community where in time non-violent responses to conflict are seen as the only option.

### **3. Civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

#### *Needs evident as a result of Desecration*

As so much of desecration is about driving people away from each other, the value of whole community responses is noted. Thus it is remembered how a 'big difference' was made to the situation when people from the Protestant community joined with their Roman Catholic neighbours at the reopening of Randalstown parish church following the fire. That said, it

appears that while members of the other churches attended, none of the clergy did, as ‘they all felt unable to come’.

On a personal note, when one interviewee’s mother died last year, the Anglican bishop of Connor made a very visible point of being in attendance and vesting up. This meant a lot as it was possibly one of the first times a Protestant church leader had come very publicly into Roman Catholic sacred space in that place.

By definition, it was thought that the primary need was for the place to be made clean again; in the sense of reconsecration. People need to feel that the place is the place where they can come and meet God again; albeit it can never be the same as it was before.

In addition, there is a need for the hurt and anger to ‘be addressed’ and the ‘need for hope to be re-established if it has been broken’. In addition, it is recognised that there is a ‘need for ongoing support’ for people where there has been a history of attacks.

The mutuality of this support is recognised as one of the issues arising from an incident because of the community dimension as attacks usually impact on groups. Thus, people are not usually left alone in their suffering while coming to terms with the incident or in trying to find ways of channelling their anger into something useful especially when the culprits aren’t known.

In a discussion on needs, another contributor identified the needs as being those of both the victim and the perpetrating group. His sense is that desecration is a reaction to fear and this is based on perception. Thus there is need for understanding what lies behind the incident and trying to develop an understanding of what the symbols actually mean to the community as opposed to what it is perceived they mean or represent.

Another primary need was considered to be keeping the community together. Many Protestant congregations are becoming more like gathering communities with fewer people attending the local congregation being from the immediate vicinity of the church. Thus, if the church has to close due to damage or an attack it becomes increasingly difficult to hold the congregation

together. While this represents a specific need, this might be an important time for families and congregations to consider what it is they are about and how important the congregation and the church building is. On the other hand, if a church has to be substantially refurbished it is also an opportunity ‘to rebuild in a different way’. Speaking of a church which had burnt down (due to fire which started in the boiler house rather than an attack), the point was made ‘You know while I never would have wanted to set the fire I knew what I would have done ... my worship centre would have been a small centre within a community centre... Sometimes this can have a phoenix effect... you now have an opportunity of building for the future...’

*Key priorities in responding to desecration*

As each local situation will have its own particular needs and experience then it is thought the priorities will vary accordingly. Thus, one community may feel able to respond straight away with a determination to rebuild but another may be so affected that it will not be able to consider such a response. It is recognised that you can repaint and rebuild but unless the pain is dealt with appropriately it will remain there; but it can only ‘be cleansed’ at the pace of those who have experienced it most directly.

A fundamental priority in dealing with desecration here has to be not letting people get away with the offence. While naming this for desecration, it was thought the same principle should hold true for interface violence or attacks on minority ethnic individuals or groups.

It was also suggested by one clergy leader the biggest challenge to society at the moment is the atheistic evolutionary agenda being promoted by the likes of Richard Dawkins. It was thus contended that the more un-religious society becomes then there will be a corresponding increase in the number of incidents of desecration taking place.

The first priority named by another clergy is to consult with the congregation and its leadership to explore whether or not the congregation is going to stay in place. If so, then it becomes necessary to find a place where the minister can gather the ‘flock around’. Having done this, a listening and learning process to discern how the congregation really feels about the situation and where they see themselves going in the future. While listening to each other, it is also thought important ‘to get to chatting with our Roman Catholic neighbours’ so as to find out

how they feel about the situation. Other questions need to be considered such as how are we going to do church in the future? What lessons have we learnt from this?

*Towards a 'Best Practice' Framework*

A 'best practice' response for some would involve a level of tolerance aligned with constructing a strategy based around the insights of trauma healing. It was suggested that in order for this to happen, it would be necessary 'to step back' and develop a strategy based on 'dialogue'. The issue of justice is thought here to be important and would benefit from focussing on the Biblical understanding of rehabilitation and restoration rather than one of retribution. The dialogue process would try to understand where the person is coming from, why this was done and why this space was so important to those who felt the attack had been a violation.

It was thought an opportunity to walk through the space again following an incident is helpful. The story was shared of how 'after the bomb in Omagh, the churches, especially the churches in the centre of the town... we had a Churches' Forum that was in place before the bomb and that Churches' Forum after the bomb was responsible for a lot of healing that took place. One of the big problems was that people who had been affected, who had been there and had lost loved ones... couldn't bring themselves to enter the space where the bomb exploded... just couldn't do it... so traumatised that to revisit was just out. So we recognised this as clergy and we said right how could we devise some way of helping people in this situation... and one of the things we did was we said 'OK, we'll have a prayer vigil...' a walk through the space... nothing said, a silent walk and because we would be walking with others we would hold onto them, we would hold hands and we'd carry candles. It was to be a night time walk at which we'll say prayers before we enter the space and we'll say prayers after we come out the space but we'll not invade with any words the space, we'll leave it sacred...'

It is remembered how moving and healing this event was for many who had found returning to the place of the bomb so difficult. This supported walk was about visiting the place, re-engaging with the holiness or with the feelings around the trauma which is considered to be very important for trying 'to dissipate the anger' and facilitate some 'healing of memories'. Here the benefit of involving as many people as possible who had a shared experience and were able to talk about this together was considered important



Desecration is considered to be a symbolic act which in itself may be a small physical act of vandalism. Thus, it is thought important that any response be in itself symbolic as this is very important in the healing process. Consequently, it was felt important to find liturgies that facilitate this as forms of 'healing gestures' which can make an enormous difference.

It was thought a tangible and visible marker was important as an indicator to all concerned that 'we have come through this and this place is reconsecrated'. However formally this is done or whoever is present whether bishop or simply the people on their own, it is the value of marking the beginning again. The issue here is not necessarily how it is done but that it is done. Again whatever the ceremony, it was felt it would be helpful if there was an order of service which could be distributed among everyone and kept. Or even a plaque on the wall. However the event is marked, it is important to show something that says this happened and it was a big event for the community. In this the pain and suffering is acknowledged but, at the same time, the marker indicates a moving forward and an overcoming of the desecration such that, for the people, God's sovereignty is re-established.

At the same time as making a marker, it is also important that ongoing support is made available though this must not be about allowing a victimhood mentality to be fostered. It is suggested the approach needs to be one that enables 'the transitioning of the position from victim' to being a person who has overcome the suffering arising from desecration. It is hoped that this way will allow the hurt and any desire for revenge to be dealt with.

A good response is also thought to begin with taking people seriously while finding ways of dealing with the anger, rather than just letting that 'bitterness' sit with them. In practice this means that the whole community needs to take the issue seriously and provide whatever assistance it can to the PSNI and providing statutory agencies with the necessary resource to deal adequately with the situation.

Also, it is often forgotten that the clergy of the church that has been burnt tend to be more 'distraught' than most. At the same time, they are often the ones who have to show leadership in moving things forward in the community while also dealing with the practical things like

insurance companies. Here there is a pressure for them to show leadership when they themselves ‘need leadership’.

Again the importance of education of the young was named if a different set of responses are to be engendered. In this, people need to be taught to respect things that may belong to another religious tradition. That said, it is also recognised that this is a long term solution.

The possible role for district councils to play was identified here. It may be that the Good Relations departments are able to develop ‘interventionist mechanisms’ in response to desecration incidents. It is recognised that this type of intervention may well require specialist training including conflict resolution skills, politics of identity and cultural awareness and traditions which would need to be broader than just Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions given the changing pluralist nature of Northern Ireland society.

The issue of forgiveness was raised and it was freely admitted by one respondent that this is where he comes ‘a bit unstuck’ in trying to put this into some framework. Several points were made however. Firstly, an attack on the church provides an opportunity to consider what church and the bricks and mortar are about. If the church is the people of God gathered, then ‘will God not be with us wherever we meet?’ Thus, does it matter where that gathering takes place whether in a sports hall or cathedral? Secondly, the process of forgiveness needs to include some attempt at understanding of why someone, whether vandals or paramilitaries, would want to commit such an attack.

Developing this, it would be helpful to ask about people’s first reactions when they heard of the attack. Was it one of ‘at least no lives lost’ or ‘if I could only get the guys who did this!’ Here, it was thought, an opportunity is provided to reflect on what a Christian response should/ could be and how this differs from a non-Christian response. So is the Christian response just a case of excusing what has been done by saying ‘poor lads – they didn’t know what they were doing’. Or is it asking what is society doing that has caused these guys to do this...? This process further opens up the question of how congregations ‘have modelled’ their faith and belief and what influence this has had on the community at large, especially if the buildings are only seen to be open on Sunday.

*Minimising the potential for further conflict*

Some time was taken by one person to reflect on the potential of differing styles of 'justice seeking' as a means of minimising conflict. In light of this, the most beneficial form is considered to be restorative rather than retributive<sup>57</sup> because it is based on: dialoguing with the offender rather than adversarially against them; sharing of information; focussing on the future rather than the past; and, denouncing the act rather than the offender.

The importance of local church leaders playing a visible role together is noted. The value of standing together, doing something together and visiting homes together 'can't be underestimated'. While believing in the value of this approach for attacks on religious symbols, it was also acknowledged that such a process may not be so straightforward following an attack of 'secular' desecration on for example security force or paramilitary memorials.

Here it was thought important that representatives from the community whose people were responsible for the desecration come to be part of any re-consecration and by doing so say, 'We stand with you in rejecting what has taken place'. Even though all the differences may still exist between the communities, it is necessary to recognise the other's sacred place and state 'We will have nothing to do with (any attack on) that'.

The fact that there don't appear to be any shared sacred spaces between the two communities was alluded to. Each community has its own and understands the importance of certain sacreds to the other community. Thus the Enniskillen bomb is recognised as an awful event not just because eleven people were killed but also because of the time and place of the attack being at the War memorial on Remembrance Sunday. Thus, to limit the potential for conflict it would be helpful to build a shared sacredness around some institution; though it is recognised this is not a short term project. Nevertheless, it is considered to be an important 'part of building a shared society that can develop as peaceful one in the longer term...'

Any best practice response, it was also suggested, needs to realise the high level of complexity any reconciliation process involves. Some of the steps include a movement towards mutual understanding, initial conflict resolution, cultural diversity, dialogue, confidence and trust building. When in place it is hoped these will go beyond the 'benign apartheid' it seems

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<sup>57</sup> Based on the work of Mennonite, Howard Zehr. <http://emu.edu/blog/restorative-justice/>

Northern Ireland has settled for. In turn these processes need to be engaged in by government, churches and educational institutions.

The challenge in any conflict situation, as summed up by one individual, is to get ‘people of good will to stand up and be counted’ while displaying ‘closer co-operation and dialogue’ and declaring clear condemnation of the acts but practically demonstrating a faith that matches the words.

*Maximising the potential for Reconciliation*

The Harryville situation was pointed to as an example of how any potential for reconciliation can be maximised. Of especial note, is the role played by those from the perceived ‘offending’ community in making the first step towards the hurt. At the same time it may be too much to expect such an initiative from the community whose place has been desecrated. There may be individuals capable of doing this, who are able to act out of a sense of goodness and forgiveness but for most people, it is thought not. That said, while it may be reasonable to hope for that, it is not reasonable to demand it of anyone.

**Emerging themes from civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives**

1. A primary need identified was to make the place ‘clean’ or sacred in order that people can visit to meet God again. In addition, needs for addressing the hurt and anger, hope, ongoing support and keeping the community together were identified. By way of processing the incident, it was thought there was also a need for understanding both on the part of the victim community and the perpetrating group.
2. Priorities were thought to vary according to incident and the communities involved. That said, a priority is dealing with the pain, though this can only be dealt with by proceeding at the pace with which the group feels comfortable. In addition, not letting people get

away with these attacks is considered a priority; as is consulting with the congregation, the leadership and the community to find a way forward.

3. A best practice response was thought to include constructing a strategic response based in the insights of trauma healing through stepping back, constructing a dialogue process and working towards a just response based on restoration principles. Finding ways to enable people to return and revisit the site of desecration is considered important for dealing with anger and facilitating healing of memories. Also, as the act of desecration is considered to be a symbolic act, a symbolic act or liturgical process can be a 'healing gesture'. It was considered important to lay 'tangible and physical markers' as a means of acknowledging the event, recognising the pain, moving forward and re-establishing God's sovereignty. At the same time, ongoing support is required. Likewise the community needs to give whatever assistance it can to the PSNI; statutory agencies need to have adequate resources; and clergy, in particular, need supportive leadership. Education of the young was thought to be important. District councils were identified as having roles to play in developing 'interventionist mechanisms'. Forgiveness was named as a theme for consideration and especially where this was understood in developing a Christian response to the incident.
4. Minimising conflict potential was aided by facilitating restorative justice processes rather than singularly retributive ones. Added to this, is the importance of local church leaders acting together and community representatives from the other community recognising their neighbour's sacred places and stating that their community wants nothing to do with such activity. The lack of, and possibility for developing, shared community sacred spaces was raised in the context of building a shared future, with government, churches and educational institutions playing their part and supporting co-operation and dialogue.
5. The potential for reconciliation is thought to be maximised when those from the 'offending' community take the first step towards those who have been hurt. At the same time, it is recognised that those who have suffered may not be able to make that first step. Nevertheless, it may be possible to be prepared within themselves for what they might do if an incident occurs against them.

## **Towards a ‘Best Practice’ Framework - summary of emerging themes from all interviewees**

A number of needs were identified as requiring attention. These included the need for affirmation from religious and community leaders, especially those from the other community; the need for accountability and understanding; the need for a co-ordinated, properly resourced, cross-community and cross-sectoral strategy; the development of tolerance and respect; loud, public and unequivocal condemnation of any incident from all sides of the community; empathy with victims; safe space for reflection; enforcement of Hate Crime legislation; to ‘make the place sacred again’; addressing the psycho-spiritual impact; and, keeping the community together.

From these needs, priorities were identified and included: meeting and continuing to meet those from the other community; developing and maintaining good community relations; managing incidents and their impact well; developing community education processes; dealing with the pain; bringing people to court for the attacks; and, consulting with all effected to find a way forward.

Thus, in light of the insights gained from those interviewed, the research concludes by proposing that a responsive framework to incidents of desecration needs to involve:

1. Preparing a strategic, coherent, resourced and co-ordinated plan of action developed by a range of concerned parties, including representatives from government, district councils, faith groups, denominations, criminal justice agencies, PSNI, media, youth and community work, victims/ survivors groups, other interested organisations eg Healing through Remembering and Journey towards Healing and those who have been victims of attacks.
2. Identifying a ‘lead partner’ who will own and remain accountable for the strategy’s implementation.
3. Ensuring the strategy is made available to all faith groups and those with responsibility for the care of graves and cemeteries at district council and local congregational levels.

4. Developing joint 'incident scenario' plans between local churches/ faith groups/ clergy forums which will include how a faith group will respond in the event of an attack, how faith groups not attacked will respond in support of those who are and how the media is to be briefed.
5. Making available affirming, appropriate and ongoing trauma support to any victims of an incident of desecration.
6. Developing 'accompaniment arrangements' to support those who have suffered an attack returning to the place of the incident.
7. Providing clergy and other faith workers, responsible for pastoral care, with specialist training and supervision in trauma, bereavement and mediation work.
8. Preparing and disseminating biblical, liturgical and pastoral resources dealing with the range of issues raised in this research for faith leaders, faith community members and victims. These resources would benefit the work of reconciliation if they were prepared and promoted in an inter-church/ ecumenical manner.
9. Encouraging appropriate pastoral responses to incidents of desecration by members of the community which the perpetrators of an act of desecration come from, eg visiting and letter writing to the victims.
10. Developing and sharing acts of 'reconsecration' which, as gestures of healing, would benefit from being designed and shared in an inter-church and cross-community way.
11. Handling incidents of desecration by the PSNI according to the legislative framework and process brought in under the 'anti-hate crime' Criminal Justice Order while also considering how to implement an effective restorative process.
12. Publicising widely prosecutions of people for acts of 'desecration'.

13. Giving active consideration to the development of shared sacred spaces known within communities for their welcome, valuing and inclusion of people as well as being places of creativity, imagination, transformation and healing.
14. Accessing Good Relations programmes which focus on developing tolerance and respect for all that is considered to be sacred in community.
15. Encouraging reflective practice processes in order that practice can be continually improved and the strategy made more effective such that in time non-violent responses to conflict are seen as the only option.



## **8. Concluding Comment**

Identifying desecration as ‘an attack on the treasured sacreds of an individual and/ or community’ allows for a broader typology of desecration to be proposed. Thus, when reflecting on such a desecratory attack, it can be asked whether the desecration was:

- spontaneous or planned;
- intentional or accidental;
- perpetrated by an individual or group.

While acknowledging the actual impact of the attack on a victim may be the same no matter what, it is possible that different strategies of response may be developed according to the way in which the act is understood to have been carried out. In other words, an attack which is believed to be a spontaneous act carried out accidentally by a single person may occasion one form of response. On the other hand, an attack believed to be a planned act carried out intentionally by a group from ‘the other’ community may call for a different response.

This research project was initiated as a result of an awareness of a number of attacks having been carried out on places of worship, graves and people at worship. It began with a pre-conceived notion that this kind of attack was identifiable as desecration. At the same time, however, and in light of the research to date, such a preconception is found to have substance. That said, while all interviewed were able to relate to the experience, concept and impact of desecration, it is notable that the language of desecration is rarely used. Why this should be the case is not clear.

At the same time, the scale of desecration is found to be significant. Further, incidents of desecration are still happening. In addition to the issue of scale, the research has found itself being opened up to, and opening up, a broader understanding of desecration in relation to the sacred in the community which is found to encompass substantially more than formally identifiable religio-cultural places and symbols.

There is a great deal of work to be done on trying to better understand the development of the sacred in a community; how it influences and shapes the identity of a community; and how that

sacred is symbolised, perceived and used by all sides in furthering the spiral of conflict and violence.

Given this situation, a society in transition from violence to peace is faced with the challenge of facilitating individual and community movement towards symbolic memorialisation and the development of the sacred in the community in ways which enable a shared future to become more of a possibility.

The reality for the time being, however, is one where community sacreds remain as potentially 'viable' targets of attack and desecration. Thus, there also remains a need for a responsive framework which will mitigate the impact of any such attack while promoting any potential for reconciliation. That said, this may possibly indicate the need for at least two types of framework: one focused on the identifiably religious and the other specifically concerned with responding to attacks on other community sacreds such as memorials, murals, etc.

While there is need for further work to be undertaken on trying to ascertain a responsive framework for attacks on community sacreds, this research was focused on developing a responsive framework for attacks on places of worship, on people at a place of worship and graves/ cemeteries. It is hoped this further work will be taken on as a priority.

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## Appendix 1

### List of Groups, Organisations and Agencies Interviewed

Interviewee	Victim	Organisation	Church	Academic	Political
Rev Dr Johnston McMaster				x	
Rev Prof Drew Gibson				x	
Most Rev Donal McKeown			x		
Rev Charlie Leeke		x			
Very Rev Ambrose Macaulay			x		
Fr Paul Symonds	x				
Jeremy Gardiner			x		
Rev Ian Brown			x		
Rev Roy Cooper			x		
Rev Dr Lesley Carroll	x				
Rev David Campton	x				
Helen Smith		x			
Eddie McDowell (+ 2)		x			
Kate Turner		x			
Alan McBride		x			
Earl Storey		x			
Syd Trotter		x			
Olive Hobson		x			
Senior Citizen's Group (6) Whitehouse Presbyterian Church	x				
Ian Bothwell	x				
Maura Kiely	x				
Gerry Lynch					x
Dara Barrett	x				

## Appendix 2

### **Desecration – Questionnaire**

#### **1. What is desecration?**

- 1. What images (and associated words) come to mind when thinking about desecration?*
- 2. What are the 'sacreds' in the community?*
- 3. How do things become 'sacred'?*
- 4. What would you say desecration is?*
- 5. Why does desecration happen?*
- 6. Are you aware of any other work done on the theme of desecration in situations of conflict?*

#### **2. What are the stories of desecration during the violence in Northern Ireland?**

- 1. Are there any incidents during the Troubles that you would describe as examples of desecration?*
- 2. What can you remember about it?*
- 3. What was the response to the incident?*

#### **3. What is the impact of desecration?**

- 1. What is the effect of desecration*
- 2. How does this impact on the individual and/ or the community?*
- 3. How does desecration influence conflict?*
- 4. What challenges does desecration pose in conflict situations?*

#### **4. What should a response to desecration include?**

- 1. What needs are evident from desecration?*
- 2. What should be the key priorities in responding to desecration?*
- 3. What would a 'best practice' response look like?*
- 4. How can the potential for further conflict be minimised?*
- 5. How can the potential for reconciliation be maximised?*