



RethinkingConflict

Meet Gary Mason

International Peace Practitioner



Gary being honoured by Queen Elizabeth II for his work in conflict transformation, and peace building.



Gary, with President Bill Clinton, when he was one of five people selected in Ireland to meet privately with the President on the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.



Gary hosting Queen Elizabeth II at his church.



Gary, with a Professor colleague and students at the Arab American University in Ramallah.



Gary pictured with leading ultra-orthodox rabbis in Israel.

Gary Mason MBE, BA, Dip.Th, D.D. (Hon), PhD.

Rev. Dr. Gary Mason is a Methodist minister and the Executive Director of *Rethinking Conflict*, a conflict transformation organization in Belfast. Formerly, he spent 27 years as a Methodist clergy person in parish ministry in Belfast and has played an integral role in the Northern Irish peace process. He had a key role in establishing the Skainos project, a \$30 million urban center developed in a post conflict society as a model of co-existence and shared space. It is acknowledged as the largest faith-based redevelopment project in Western Europe. Mason is a close advisor to Protestant ex-combatants and was instrumental in facilitating negotiations with paramilitaries and government officials in Northern Ireland. In 2007 his contribution to peace was formally recognized by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In March 2008, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh visited the East Belfast Mission to see Gary's work first hand. In March 2014, Gary was one of five people from Northern Ireland asked to hold a private briefing with President Bill Clinton on his visit to Ireland to discuss the Northern Ireland peace process.

In the course of his ministry Gary has been involved in what has now been called the Irish Peace Process. Behind the scenes he has taken part in discussions with those wedded to violence in our society, trying to present an alternative way to resolve the differences on this island. Over the years, Gary, has worked with Republican and Loyalist communities in peace building and reconciliation and has facilitated dialogue between these groups on a number of occasions.

In 2009, Mason's church was the stage from which Loyalist paramilitaries announced their weapons decommissioning. Mason has lectured in political and academic forums throughout Europe, South Africa, the Middle East and the United States on lessons from the Irish peace process. He has been interviewed on CNN, BBC, ITV and various radio programs. In 2018 the BBC made a documentary about Gary's peace building work in the Irish context and also in the Middle East.

He holds a PhD in Psychology from the University of Ulster, completed his theological studies at Queens University and has a Bachelor's in Business Studies from the University of Ulster. Gary was awarded an honorary doctorate from Florida Southern College for his work in peace building in Ireland. Gary is a Senior Research Fellow at the Edward Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention at Maynooth University in Ireland. He is an Adjunct Professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, lecturing on Christian Nationalism, White Supremacy, Reconciliation, Peace Building and the history of the Northern Ireland conflict, Racism, Sectarianism, and Conflict Transformation. Gary is an affiliated expert and partner to the Negotiation Strategies Institute, a Harvard University program on negotiation for Israelis and Palestinians and international diplomats. Gary is an international advisor at the European Wasitia Graduate School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at the University of Flensburg in Germany. Gary is also a visiting academic at the University of Central Florida in conflict transformation, political violence and negotiation. Gary is an advisor to the Wolff Institute at the University of Cambridge and a consultant to the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

Gary has travelled widely in the US and spoken in a number of faith and academic settings across the United States. Academic lectures include Harvard, Boston College, Boston University, Tufts, Emory University, Duke University, University of Alabama, Florida Southern College, Birmingham Southern College, Fairmont State University, Wesleyan WV, Rollins College, St. Cloud, St. John, Hamline University, University of California, Chapman University,

University of South Carolina, Valencia College, Bethune Cookman University, University of Central Florida, George Washington University, University of Florida.

Gary has spoken at political and religious gatherings across the island of Ireland, the Middle East, South America, the United States, South Africa, and Europe seeking to engage others in lessons to be learned from the Irish peace process.

Rethinking Conflict

Gary founded *Rethinking Conflict* in May 2015 as an organization that seeks to model the principles of the historic Good Friday Agreement, by building peace and reconciliation at the sharper, more fractured edges of society.

One theologian made the statement, “That weapons win wars, but it takes ideas to win peace.” Gary firmly believes that civic leaders need to introduce ideas of reconciliation into conflicted situations, both post conflict in the Irish theatre and other conflicted zones globally.

The American senator George Mitchell, who chaired the talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement in the Irish context, rightly commented after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, “That if you think getting this agreement was difficult, implementing it will be even more difficult.”

There is no question in the Irish conflict a number of key leaders from respective faith traditions, in the Catholic tradition and the Protestant tradition in the Irish context have been involved in what could be termed hard core peace building. Gary Mason of Rethinking Conflict has been involved in this work from the late 1980’s. The vast bulk of this work was back channel work, facilitating difficult conversations in the lead up to the Good Friday agreement and working tirelessly to be the social glue in both a local context and national context; a presence, that keeps that peace process from unravelling after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Even twenty-five years after the signing of that momentous peace accord, relationships in the Northern Irish peace process with Brexit have been difficult, and the hard work that George Mitchell spoke about has been made even harder.

One of the ironies of this work post conflict is, that if truth is the first casualty of war, perspective is often the first casualty of peace. As an organization, Rethinking Conflict firmly believes that civic leaders can hold the ongoing tensions together and allow people to disagree well, despite our competing perspectives and narratives, we believe in order to disagree well you must understand well.

As well as continuing his work in the Irish context and continuing to be a peace maker in that post conflict society, Gary is working internationally sharing the lessons learned on the journey towards the Irish peace process within the international field.

Middle East

Many efforts to end Israeli-Palestinian aggression have failed due to a flawed methodology pursuing a peace process; where the conflict is dealt with as if it were a technical problem that can be resolved by a selected and exclusive leadership. Such a strategy fails to address the complex entanglement of grievance, belief and ideology which characterize the region’s context, and which are at the root of this conflict. An inclusive peace process is therefore required – one of societal shift, where senior and mid-level political leaders, community

leaders, religious leaders and civil society all have a role to play in communicating the need for real, difficult action in pursuing peace.

In the last thirteen years Gary has been increasingly working in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and is regularly hosting groups from this conflict in Belfast. In the last eleven years a number of key groups and individuals from the Middle East have spent time in Belfast alongside Gary learning some of the lessons from the Irish peace process in a community, religious, political and psychological setting. Over 1000 key individuals have been to Belfast and have been exposed to the painful, difficult journey to peace in the Northern Irish context. These people are key opinion makers and leaders across all sections of society. Participants learn and experience how de-militarization and conflict resolution has occurred in Ireland between warring religious factions. As a result, they can begin to have hope and believe in the potential for peace in the Middle East because other groups have achieved this goal. These experiences offer a shift in mindset from one of despair to one of hope this, combined with practical tools, allow a realistic and fruitful dialogue between Jews and Arabs.

Gary has lectured in a number of academic settings in the Middle East from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, the Arab American University in Ramallah, Ben Gurion University in Beersheba, Sapir College in Sderot, the American University in Cairo, Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv, the University of Hafia as well as at a number of academic think tanks in the Middle East.

Gary was also part of a group of people internationally, whose goal was to facilitate the creation of a strategic plan for the US administration in implementing The Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) of 2020 which was passed by the US Congress with bipartisan support. In this role he will advise and guide the MEPPA Board made up of both Democrats and Republicans in strengthening civil society and developing grassroots peace building in the Israeli/Palestinian arena. In this advisory role he will be drawing on the lessons he has learnt as a religious and civic leader in N. Ireland over the last thirty plus years, as well as his ongoing work in the Middle East region.

United States

Civil Dialogue

Gary has been increasingly approached to facilitate groups in the US to initiate civil conversations within the current climate of political and social division. Because of his work in Northern Ireland and other challenging places in the world, Gary has expertise in dealing with conflict in constructive ways that allow people on either side of the spectrum to hear, listen and understand each other. Gottschall, the American scholar, comments that science backs up the long held belief that story is the most powerful means of communicating a message. It has been rightly commented that we are creatures of story and the process of changing one mind or the whole world must begin with, "Once upon a time..."

Gary encourages the hearing of our stories as we tell them to each other and listen intently to what we are told – which involves hearing beyond the words - feeling the pain of the other as transmitted through the ‘memory’ of their community. This is feeling the painful history from the side of the "other." It is called a “deep remembering.” Honest discourse about the past – particularly in the presence of the other – does allow rebuilding for a more hopeful future.

Gary notes that the American Mennonite scholar John Paul Lederach underlines the need for spaces to be “provided for people to express to and with each other the pain and injustices

experienced. Acknowledgement and mutual recognition of the legitimacy of their experience is decisive in the reconciliation dynamic”

Gary underlines that if hurt, pain, anger, guilt, and loss are not dealt with effectively they will be driven underground. Simply put, what cannot be talked about gets acted out, many times in destructive ways. Forgiveness and acknowledgement of wrongs and the powerful mechanism of saying sorry are interrelated ways of dealing with what has happened which can be deeply transformative.

Civic leadership needs to create contexts and spaces for people to find eventual healing; we need to rise above political partisanship. There are no solutions in the comfort zone of one’s own absolutist position. There is no single narrative solution here, there is no victory for one side or the other. We need to beware of the danger of the single narrative.

Racism

Gary has been involved in academic and community settings and with local church leaders exploring programs around racism that are approached from a theological and psychological framework. Gary is regularly hosting groups from the US in the Irish context theologically looking at dealing with the past, legacy and the role of memory.

As a noted South African leader has said,

"Reconciliation is no cheap matter. It does not come about by simply papering over deep – seated differences. Reconciliation presupposes confrontation. Without that we do not get reconciliation but merely a temporary glossing over of differences. The running sores of society cannot be healed with the use of a sticking plaster. Reconciliation presupposes an operation, cutting to the very bone, without anesthetic. The infection is not just on the surface. The abscess of hate and mistrust and fear, between black and white, nation and nation, rich and poor, has to be slashed open."

As Gary highlights in the Irish context, we have struggled for centuries with the legacy of sectarianism, destructive politics and a toxic theology that’s created immense pain, bloodshed and profound division. The legacy of slavery still looms large in the United States and like the legacy of sectarianism it has to be confronted in an open transparent manner to allow society to find eventually healing and reconciliation.

Gary often refers to a ‘warm peace’, that does not mean the outbreak of agreement. Warm peace recognizes there will be continued disagreement. What matters is that disagreement is pursued non-violently and that mechanisms are built to ensure all voices are at the table and recognized. The burning question is - how do we disagree well?

For Gary, important in all of this, is how people remember and deal with the past. How people remember profoundly affects how they behave in the present and significantly affects their politics; thus in Northern Ireland the politics of historic grievance and the politics of siege loom large. He believes the way we handle memory and the past have a significant role to play in our Irish context and the lessons we have painfully learned over the years can be helpful in other contexts such as the Middle East where toxic religion and destructive politics at times looms large. To a greater or lesser degree, most conflicts have land, identity and religion in the melting pot.

For too many people in conflict situations and post conflict situations we are surrounded by the ghosts of the past and we are unable to imagine a different future. There are two haunted houses in Ireland and both need to be exorcised from the bloodstained ghosts who would hold them in the past. We need to expunge the stereotypes and mythologies that have dogged our understanding and take our cue from the spirits of peace, mutual understanding and respect.

Rethinking Conflict as an organization believe these conversations are particularly pertinent today. Globally we have the rise of religious extremism on a number of fronts, as well as the rise of political populism, linguistic violence in the public space and, the rise of nationalism.

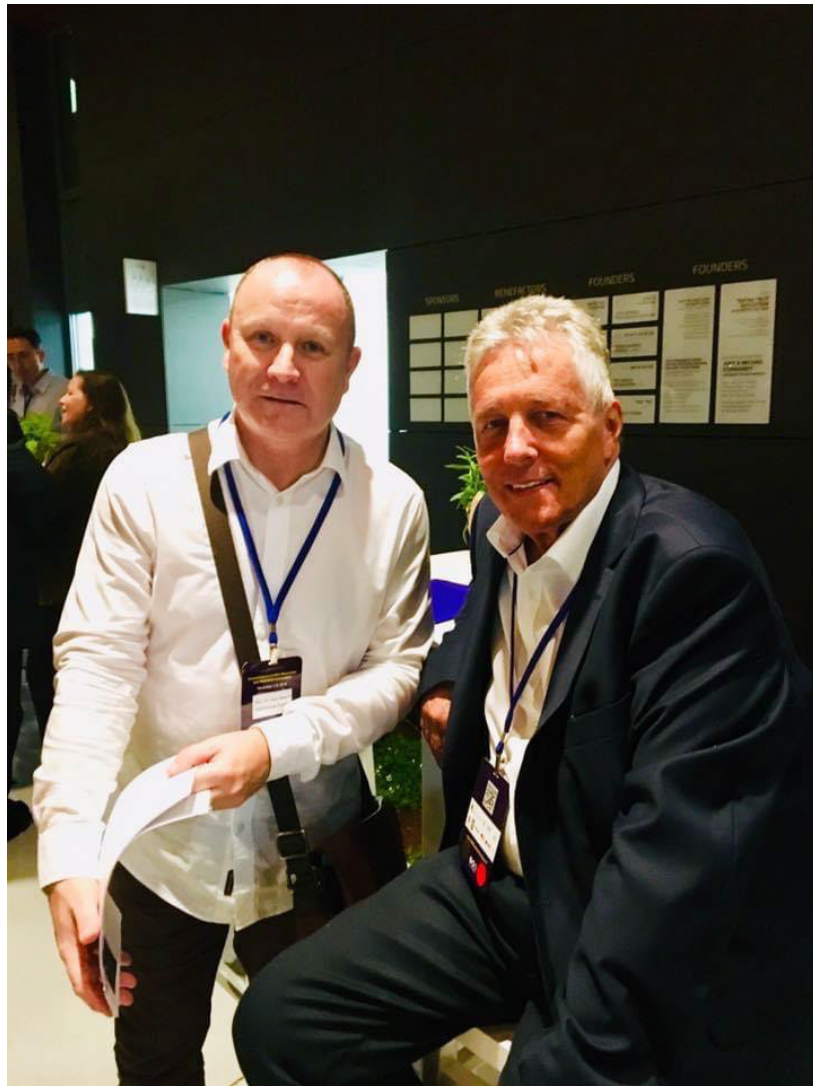
Despite the fragility of times of the Irish peace process, it is still one of the most successful peace processes of the last 70 years. One of the reasons for this has been the role of key civic leaders in negotiation, mediation and facilitating difficult conversations and ensuring that an inclusive view of humanity shapes the public square.



Gary Mason alongside the former Prime Minister of Ireland Bertie Ahern who was the co-signatory of the Good Friday Agreement with the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.



Women Wage Peace join the Irish Ambassador and Gary and Joyce Mason in Tel Aviv



Gary alongside the former First Minister of N. Ireland the Right Honourable Peter Robinson lecturing at Tel Aviv University on the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement 2018.

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