



The Junction
Derry/Londonderry
12-14 The Diamond
Derry/Londonderry
BT48 6HW

City of Sanctuary Project

An introduction to the concept and context of Sanctuary

Seamus Farrell

The concept of Sanctuary has its origins in Christian Europe dating back to the Middle Ages. In the first instance it means a sacred place – or shrine. So the place around the altar in churches is, in our own times, often referred to as “*The sanctuary*”.

By extension the term came to be used to refer to a designated place of safety. Historically throughout Europe, such places were invariably churches. If someone fleeing from an enemy were fortunate enough to make it into a church designated as a place of sanctuary, that person could expect to remain safe and protected there.

The term is now also used in Europe to refer to refuge centres for abandoned animals and in the context of the threatened loss of original plant varieties on account of genetic modification, places where original seeds are preserved. But our concern here is **Human Sanctuary** rather than Animal or Plant Sanctuaries.

You may be aware of the “*Sanctuary Cities*” movement in the United States that began in the 1980s in reaction to US foreign policy in Central America. Migrants from civil wars in countries in Central America in which the United States was implicated, were granted sanctuary in several hundred sites in the United States – which often included university campuses – organized by anti-war activists.

In modern times throughout Europe the concept has been adopted specifically in the context of efforts to support **asylum seekers** and **refugees**.

This is **one** sector of the current population of Northern Ireland whose needs – for acceptance, inclusion, and safety - any “*City of Sanctuary*” initiative very emphatically **should** seek to meet.

But I’d like to share with you how in Derry/Londonderry we are seeking to pursue a more holistic and encompassing vision than **only** paying attention to the needs of a **particular** sector of our population – however great and urgent that sector’s needs might be. We are trying to locate the project in the context of what is characteristic

of any urban setting anywhere in the Western World today – namely its pluralism of both **identities** and **social circumstances**.

A: Our pluralities of **identity**.

- Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist; Roman Catholic/Nationalist/Republican.
- And there's more! (*Some people though still seem to get it difficult to think outside the "2 tribes" box!*)
- There's ethnic diversity - Travellers, Asiatic peoples, African peoples, and other European peoples.
- And beyond race/ethnicity/cultural diversities there's age diversity, gender diversity, sexual orientation diversity, and diversities around levels of ability/disability, diversity with respect to religious or humanist belief systems.
- And there are more.

B: But beyond identity diversity there is also diversity of **social circumstances**.

- Rich, poor and in between - affluent, not so comfortable, decidedly uncomfortable.
- People with a stake and an engagement in society, and people alienated from society.
- People with opportunity for increased well-being; and people with no opportunity.

Offer 'cruciform graphic'.

- *Horizontal plane. Identity diversities. These are inherited – a given.*
- *Vertical plane. Diversities of social circumstances – These are 'of human doing' - inequities.*
- *And people of all identity diversities can be anywhere on the 'ladder' of social circumstances.*

We live in a place in the world where for 40 or more years a **single** issue - one specifically to do with (what for shorthand I'll call the Orange and Green identities), has been utterly dominant – almost to the exclusion of every other social or political issue. And we now live in a time in this place when, while we carry a colossal legacy of hate and hurt and damage arising from the bloodshed of The Troubles, a modicum of peace has been achieved. There has been a basic agreement to provide a framework to enable the society to try to move away from that violent period and ensure that there is no repeat of it.

But even if that Agreement was proving effective in helping to create a shared and peaceful future – and frankly it isn't – there would be need to keep on dealing with the Orange/Green 'thing' – to deal with the convulsion that arose out of it, to enable those who lost loved ones to recover their lives, to bring perpetrators to justice, to achieve reconciliation and healing, to enable the truth to be told about what happened.

And that's the stuff of much engagement by community relations agencies throughout Northern Ireland.

But

- there are more issues in this society that, on account of the focus on the Orange/Green issue, have lain at least somewhat neglected – poverty issues, gender issues, marginalized, alienated, the vulnerability of the elderly, domestic violence, other ethnic or religious diversity issues etc. etc. etc.
- And frankly there is a danger that giving to the single (orange and green) issue anything like an exclusive emphasis, will **guarantee** it **continued** dominance.

Without denying the need to pay continued attention to it, it is no help to this society to allow the issue of conflict between the Protestant/Unionist/loyalist community and the Republican/Nationalist/Roman Catholic Community to continue to dictate the social and political agenda. I fear it is.

So, the Junction, located in Derry Londonderry and **very much** engaged with the traditional sectarian conflict in terms both its roots and its legacy, also recognizes that ours is a city and society of more than two tribes - a city and society the ENTIRE population of which has the need and right to feel included, equal to everyone else, with the same rights to recognition and protection and safety.

The elderly, those with disability, women, alienated youth - of EACH of the two main communities. Moslems and Jews and Sikhs as well as Christians. And the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community. And people who have come to live in our city more recently, for whatever reason – whether by choice or forced out of where had been their home and country.

And so, alongside paying due attention to a problem that has gripped this society for decades and that could, if NOT paid attention to, RETURN to plague us, we at The Junction recognize that **as** a COMMUNITY RELATIONS agency, we need to be helping to provide a space or junction or intersection for ALL of the people who live here. We need to operate from a definition of Community Relations that is not limited to a single issue. NO society in the world has only a single issue.

Just to mention that Derry/Londonderry also has a specific problem in that as well as people who have recently arrived as refugees TO this city, there are young people FROM this city who are refugees FROM this city – driven out by self-appointed guardians of the society – some at least of whom are doing so to protect their own illicit drug businesses.

At any rate this is why at The Junction we are so excited about the City of Sanctuary concept and have offered ourselves as the lead agency in the City in moving it forward – an offer that has been accepted. But we are insisting on hastening slowly – because we want the project to have what you might call “*the shape of the place*” - a

city needing to operate now from a wider definition of community relations than the traditional one, a city with specific dimensions of need in terms of the safety, inclusion and well-being of all its inhabitants. That means that it can't have the shape of the City of Sanctuary of let's say Leeds or Sheffield. We want to **customize** the project to suit the place where it is located – just as I'm sure Leeds and Sheffield are trying to do with their project.

Now it's a project that, no matter where it is, needs to involve not just individuals who are that way inclined, but all the individuals who occupy a space in the city – and not alone individuals but also all the institutions, businesses, churches, social services, health, education etc. etc. And it is about much much more than getting individuals and institutions to endorse the project by signing up on a website. I'd see it rather as individuals and institutions that do sign up on a website, signing up to a commitment to seriously consider two questions.

A: At the level of individuals,

1. In what way through my attitudes and practices might people who live in this city right now, be lacking in safety and inclusion and well-being?
2. How might I need to change my attitudes and practices so that all those who live in this city right now can be and feel safe, protected, and included?

B: At the level of institutions, (businesses, churches, social services, health, education etc. etc).

1. In what way through our policies and practices might people who live in this city right now, be being deprived of safety and inclusion and well-being?
2. How might we need to change in our attitudes and practices so that all those who live in this city right now can be and feel safe, protected, and included?

Questions that deserve to be **asked** of individuals and institutions require to be **answered** by individuals and institutions. It is in responding to these questions that the process of **moving towards** Derry/Londonderry **BECOMING** a City of Sanctuary can **begin**.

Begin I think is the operative word. For me this is a long-haul project.

- It is not about BEING a City of Sanctuary – of 'having arrived'.
- But about working towards BECOMING a City of Sanctuary – of work to be done, a lot of work.
- It is not a LABEL but a TASK.
- Of creating a place where the issues that deprive any individuals or any groups of safety and protection ARE being DEALT with – on an on-going basis.

1. It seems to me then that the first task is to try to secure interest on the part of the individuals and institutions that make up the city IN GETTING INVOLVED IN A JOURNEY. And that should be clear.
2. The next stage is for signators (individual or institutional) to be asked to submit a statement indicating: What specifically they COMMIT to DOING so that the City moves closer TOWARDS being a City of Sanctuary.
3. It seems to me that any City's entitlement to registration as a City of Sanctuary should be assessed on the basis of there being adequate declarations of commitment from the people and institutions that make up the City.
4. That brings me to point out that it's not primarily about getting Travellers, Refugees and Asylum seekers, Ethnic minority and multi-cultural organisations and Disability agencies – getting individuals and agencies such as these involved. The 'target groups' for the project in the first instance are individuals and institutions whose actions or inactions can result in such individuals or members of such groups feeling not welcome, not included etc.

There have been some interesting discoveries about pre-Christian traditions in Ireland that were like a forerunner to the Christian-era concept of Sanctuary. I cannot vouch for the Celtic heritage outside of Ireland but I would not be surprised if pre-Christian history on the rest of these islands had similar traditions.

Let me refer first to Termon (or Tearman). There are at least half a dozen townlands by that name all over Ireland (one in Donegal) and there are other townlands that have the word Termon in them – for example Termonbacca on the outskirts of Derry. Also in the maps of the 19th and early 20th century you will find reference to "Termon lands" or "Termon fields" and the term features in current land records. In early Christian times they were the lands attached to monastic settlements, but prior to these, they were places designated as 'buffer zones' or places of refuge between competing/conflicting groups.

In many traditions (not least Irish and Indian) the confluence of rivers was regarded as places for dealing with conflicts between warring factions. One such was at the confluence of the Finn and the Derg – becoming the Foyle – at Strabane/Lifford. They were places where it was agreed that no one was to get hurt. But they weren't places of tranquillity as much as places where conflicts were to be addressed.

The old Irish (Brehon) Laws identified your house as a termon, a place to which you had a right to feel safe and protected.

Uisneah

The **Hill of Uisneach** or **Ushnagh** (Irish: Uisneach or Cnoc Uisnigh) is an ancient ceremonial site in the Barony of Rathconrath in County Westmeath. The site consists of a set of monuments and earthworks spread over two square kilometres. Around and upon the hill are the remains of circular enclosures, cairns and a holy well. But of particular interest to us here is an oddly-shaped limestone rock inside a circular enclosure. It is almost 6 metres tall and thought to weigh over 30 tons. In Irish it is called the *Ail na Míreann* ("**stone of the divisions**"), as it is said to have been where the point of intersection of the four provinces of Ireland - Ulster, Leinster,

Munster and Connaught. In mythology it is identified as the mystical navel of Ireland. It seems that this Hill, and specifically the rock, was the place designated for the resolving of conflict between the provinces.

The Fifth Province. Cúige. Coigead. “ the fifth part”

Ireland has historically been divided into four provinces: [Connacht](#), [Leinster](#), [Munster](#) and [Ulster](#). These are the physical reality. Beyond these there is an invisible reality. First of all it is in the heart of each person. It is where peace and harmony reigns – and it is from there that peace and harmony in the physical space can be available. But it must begin from the heart of each person – in a spirit of empathy, compassion, reconciliation in each individual.

But the Fifth Province is also seen as the spiritual world existing alongside the physical one. In this connection there were particular places where the boundary between the physical provinces and the Fifth Province or spiritual world was described as THIN. And these were very special places for dealing with conflicts – places where the ‘hedge’ between the spiritual world and the physical world was thin and so one could more easily access the guidance and help of the spiritual world in dealing with whatever conflicts were needing to be dealt with in the physical world.

My Reflections

- What occurs to me is that the traditional concept is far from one in which there is TRANQUILITY, where everyone is safe, protected, included – which is maybe the connotation of sanctuary.
- Indeed in a sense it is the opposite of tranquillity. It is about conflict being an (ever present) reality in human relationships; there are disputes; there are inequalities, exclusions, alienation; and in consequence there is a lack of safety. Everyone does NOT feel safe, protected, included.
- And therefore the function of Sanctuary – Termon – Uisneach - Fifth Province etc. is for DEALING with these conflicts. It is a facility, an opportunity, a context in which conflicts, inequalities, exclusions, alienations are ADDRESSED, on an on-going basis, so that everyone can feel safe, protected, included.

SEAMUS FARRELL
The Junction