

Ireland, Ulster and the Ulster Project

In 1171 King Henry II of England landed in Ireland at Waterford and declared himself Lord of Ireland. During the next 700+ years the English crown claimed a right to govern Ireland. The relationship between England and Ireland was often strained and over the centuries occasional movements to assert Irish independence erupted into violence. Following the Great Potato Famine from 1845-49 the movement for independent governance of Ireland rose up again.

Starting with the Fennian Uprising of 1867 there was unrest in Ireland. On January 21, 1919, a revolutionary government met in Dublin and declared Ireland free of British rule. Finally on December 2, 1921, the Anglo-Irish Treaty recognized the independent Free Irish State.

Prior to the enactment of the treaty the people of Ireland voted in a referendum as to whether they wanted independence for Great Britain. The country was partitioned in four regions. Each region voted as a block. Six of the nine counties in the north of Ireland, comprising the region known as Ulster, voted to remain part of the United Kingdom. When the Free State was declared Ulster remained part of the UK.

Throughout the 20th century various factions in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland remained divided as to whether Ulster should remain part of the UK or be reunited with the South. In August 1969 violence erupted again and the period of history known as “The Troubles” followed.

The Ulster Project began in 1975 in the midst of the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. The fighting pitted Loyalists who were loyal to the British Crown, and generally Protestant, with the Unionists who advocated for the return of Ulster to the Irish Republic. The Unionists were generally Roman Catholic. The violence continued throughout the 70s and 80s.

The Ulster project began when an Anglican priest from the Church of Ireland, the Rev. Kerry Waterstone, had the opportunity to participate in a pulpit exchange with an Episcopal congregation in Connecticut. Following that exchange he started to formulate a plan to possibly help ease tensions within Northern Ireland. Waterstone believed that the attitudes of teens from Northern Ireland might be changed if they could experience the way that Americans have learned to live together in their “melting pot” society.

41 years later the Ulster Project continues. More than 30,000 youth have participated. Protestant and Catholic Northern Irish teens continue to come to the US and spend an intensive month with their American counterparts. They participate in service work, joint worship, lots of fun and intense, highly facilitated conversations about history, justice, sectarianism and reconciliation. Today the Ulster Project has a 14 active chapters in the U.S., including Milwaukee. Since 1974, not a single Ulster Project participant is known to have joined one of the paramilitary groups at the center of past violence.

On Good Friday 1999, an agreement was struck between the Loyalist and Unionist factions to share in the governance of Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Accords are still in force to this day. Part of the success of this is attributed to the fact that so many Northern Irish youth have participated in the Ulster Project. Many of these now find themselves in positions of leadership and influence.

The teens in this year’s Ulster Projects have not witnessed the violence that their parents and grandparents did. However occasional skirmishes still arise and the scars of the past violence continues to be felt throughout Ulster. There is still a high degree of segregation between the Catholic and Protestant populations, especially in schools and neighborhoods. Hopefully the participants in the Ulster Project can be catalysts for peace, justice and reconciliation in that part of the world.

