



Peace walls should be torn down instead of going up

Far from coming down, the towering 'peace' walls which criss-cross Belfast continue to be erected. The churches need to be involved in efforts to build trust across interfaces and make sure the walls are dismantled, says **Tony Macaulay**

I GREW up at the top of the Shankill in the 1970s. The so-called 'peace walls' went up all around me. The nearest one was at the Springmartin. For every inch I grew, it grew six feet. It made me feel safe but it obviously didn't work. People from either side crossed the interface to kill people on the other side.

In the 1980s, while working across the sectarian divide in north Belfast, I lived right on the peace line. I will never forget feeling so vulnerable to attack every single night, the insecurity and the lack of sleep.

I no longer live there but for the past 25 years I have worked with hundreds of groups who are tackling sectarianism and trying to improve the quality of life in our most disadvantaged communities.

Many of those groups are doing courageous work across the interfaces and in the past few years I noticed a change in their conversations about the peace walls. People started to talk about 'when' rather than 'if' the walls come down.

Research carried out earlier this year reflected this change. In January the US-Ireland Alliance engaged Millward Brown Ulster to ask residents of a sample of interface areas in Belfast for their views on the 'peace walls'.

The survey found "strong agreement that the walls serve to help residents feel safer by keeping the communities separated".

However, when asked if they would be in favour or opposed to the walls coming down, 81 per cent of the residents polled were in favour:

- 21 per cent said now
- 60 per cent said yes, when its safe enough, but not at present
- 17 per cent said they didn't care if the walls never come down
- 61 per cent agreed that local politicians should be doing more to create conditions for the walls to come down.

"The historic cultural barriers between the two communities here are slowly coming down and the sooner they do and the sooner the physical barriers come down as well, the sooner the flood gates of private investment will open," New York mayor Michale Bloomberg said during the investment conference in May.

Later that month, speaking in the Assembly, the then first minister Ian Paisley responded positively.

"But when those on both sides of the wall mutually come to agreement and say we are taking down these walls, then we will have won a great victory and I look forward to that victory being sealed over and over again in these areas where there has been great trouble in the past days," he said.

However, in spite of these changes, walls continue to go up, most recently in the grounds of Hazelwood Integrated Primary School and as part of some new private developments.

In 2005, a mapping exercise carried out by the Belfast Interface Project and the Institute for Conflict Research identified 83 barriers in Belfast alone.

Outside of Belfast, ask any 14-year-old boy and he will tell you where the sectarian interface is, the line he doesn't feel safe to cross in his own town, whether it's Lurgan or Lismavady, Cookstown or Killeel.

The erection of peace walls has been sustained through the ceasefires, the 10 years since the signing of the Agreement and the establishment of a devolved government.

However, in recent years, community initiatives have resulted in a decrease in the number of serious violent interface incidents.

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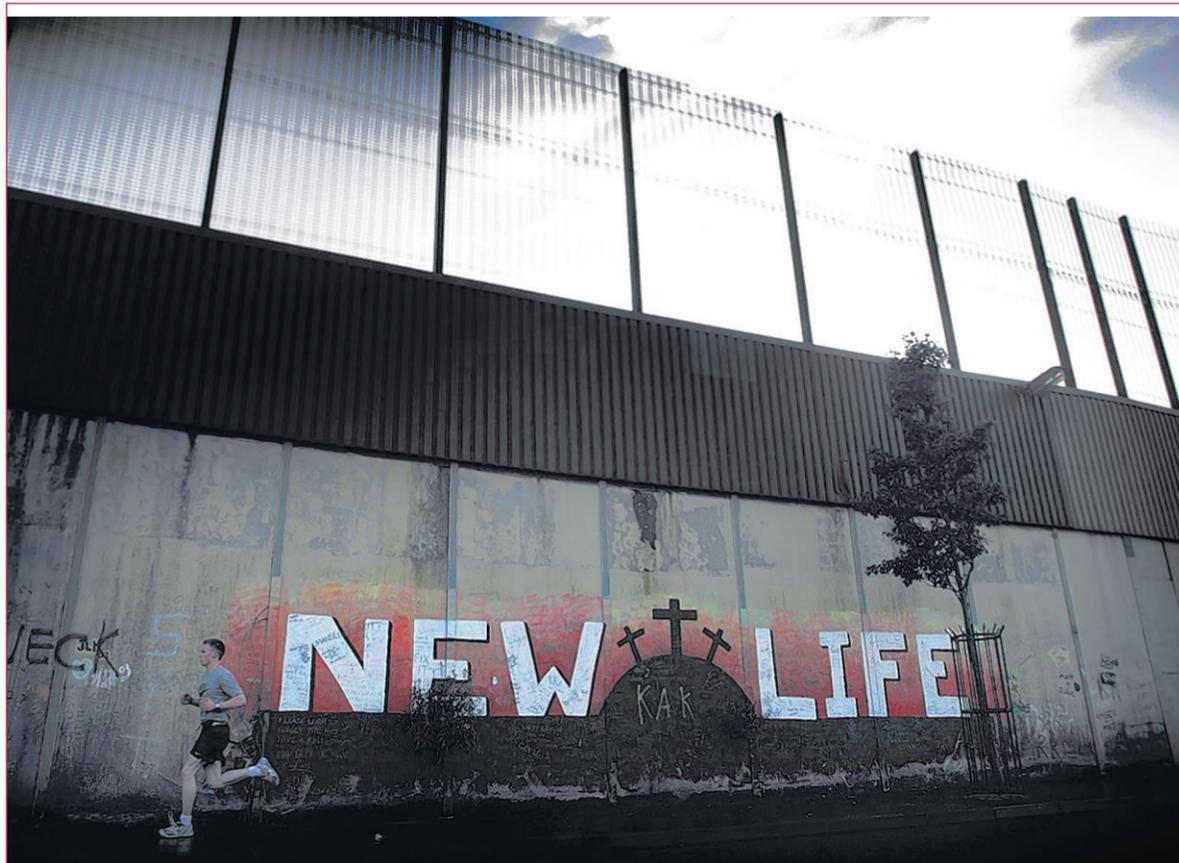
organised by cross-community texting and in other places there are now more tourist visits than violent incidents.

As a result of this changing context, I decided to write an independent discussion paper, 'A Process for Removing Interface Barriers', to stimulate discussion about the sort of process that needs to be put in place to make it safe enough for the walls to come down.

The paper highlights the conditions required such as reaching a tipping point, when the benefits of removing interface barriers, such as economic regeneration, outweigh the benefits of maintaining them.

It also identifies the essential characteristics of the process such as the safety, wellbeing and quality of life of interface residents being of paramount importance.

The proposed process has five main phases to be carried forward within the context of community, social, educational and economic de-



■ **WRITING ON THE WALL:** Above, the scene yesterday at the 'Peace Wall' between the Falls Road and Shankill Road in west Belfast while below, Tony Macaulay at a peace wall **PICTURE:** Hugh Russell



velopment in interface areas.

This involves mapping all of the interfaces in Northern Ireland, a major consultation with people living in interface communities, developing local interface development plans, implementing and supporting these plans and moving to 'normalisation' without barriers.

The initiation of the overall process would be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive.

The community/voluntary sector,

local authorities, police, youth service, schools, businesses, elected representatives and churches within interface areas would all play a part.

For example, I believe the churches have an important role to play in symbolic public events, youth work and pastoral support.

The process would be community driven and government supported both bottom up and top down.

Local people living beside the peace lines would decide how and

when a barrier should be removed, with the full support of government to plan and support the changes.

Since circulating the paper in July, the response has been overwhelming. People really want to talk about this.

There has been a lot of interest from community groups, churches, statutory agencies, elected representatives and the media. It seems it is the right time for this discussion.

Most people have welcomed the discussion and are supportive of a process of this kind.

Speaking on BBC Radio Ulster's *Talkback* programme, Junior Minister Gerry Kelly said the paper was "important" and supported the idea of both a strategic approach and the involvement of local communities.

Other MLAs and Belfast City Councillors have been keen to discuss the ideas further. I believe this is a very positive sign.

If our political leaders can agree on launching an initiative that will result in the peace walls coming down they will have made an enormous step forward, not just for the wider economy, but more importantly, for the people living in communities that have suffered so much in the past.

Removing the peace walls will be an enormous challenge but I think we can do it. I firmly believe that the peace walls that went up in my youth will come down in my lifetime.

■ **A copy of the full discussion paper can be downloaded at www.macaulayassociates.co.uk/pdfs/peace_wall.pdf**

■ **Tony Macaulay is an independent consultant who has worked in community development and conflict transformation in Northern Ireland for the past 25 years.**