

# FRIENDS ACROSS THE DIVIDE



Friends and classmates, but can you spot the difference? Apart from the rather obvious ones, these teenagers look pretty normal. What makes them different from many other kids in their home country of Northern Ireland is that they go to the same school. Thirty years ago that would have been impossible because some are Catholic and some are Protestant.

Northern Ireland, a direct neighbour to Ireland, yet part of the United Kingdom, is a region where the two main religious communities remain divided. On the one hand there is the Protestant community, who mainly identify themselves as British, and on the other hand there is the Catholic community, who identify themselves as Irish.

This divide between the two communities led to what is known today as *The Troubles*. Over a period of thirty years, beginning in the late sixties, *The Troubles* cost the lives of between three and four thousand people. Today, Northern Ireland is a peaceful place to live but the tensions of the past have resulted in segregated communities where Protestants and Catholics lead separate lives and where their children go to separate schools. The majority of children in

Northern Ireland go to a faith school. Faith schools are either Catholic or Protestant controlled.

In 1981 the first multi faith school, Lagan College, was opened. Here students from all religions were welcome. When it started, many members of the local community were against the idea of a mixed school. Lagan College has grown in size from just twenty eight students to over one thousand. Sara, a pupil at the school, thinks that integrated schools are a big stepping stone to progress in Northern Ireland, and Michael adds, *“You learn about everyone’s culture and learn to respect them. Nobody says, ‘You’re a Catholic, you can’t be my friend’, which can happen when you meet people outside school. Here, we don’t even have to state our religion. We’re just friends.”*

## Background information

The first integrated school, Lagan College, opened in 1981 in Belfast with 28 pupils. Lagan now has 1,250 pupils drawn from 128 feeder primaries. As a whole, Northern Ireland has more than 50 integrated schools, with over 20,000 students enrolled, accounting for only about five per cent of pupils.

**I Test your understanding**

**1** Which of these countries is not part of the UK?

- Wales
- Scotland
- England
- Ireland

**2** Northern Ireland is right next to which country?

- Wales
- England
- Ireland
- Scotland

**3** Generally speaking, the Catholic community in Northern Ireland wants:

- The right to rule themselves
- To be part of the UK
- To be part of Ireland
- To be able to speak their own language

**4** Protestants in Northern Ireland want:

- To remain part of the UK
- To be part of Ireland
- To govern themselves
- To be able to speak their own language

**5** When did The Troubles take place?

- Between 1980 and 1990
- Before 1960
- From 1968 until 1998
- 20 years ago.

**6** How many people died during The Troubles?

- Over four thousand
- Under two thousand

None

About three and a half thousand

**7** What does the word “segregated” mean in line 20?

- mixed
- together
- different
- separate

**8** What does the word “faith” mean in line 23?

- religious
- trust
- confidence
- dedication

**9** In Northern Ireland, most children go to:

- either a Catholic school or a Protestant school
- a mixed school
- a community school
- a private school

**10** Lagan College is a

- Catholic school
- Protestant school
- Church school
- Mixed school

**11** What does the word “integrated” mean in line 31?

- together
- mixed
- different
- apart

**2 Can you solve the Unsolvable?**

Having read this article you may be left wondering: Can there really be such a big difference between young people who live in the same country and who are both Christians? Can it really be so difficult for Catholics and Protestants to live together?

In order to answer these questions you need to know more about the two faiths. And, if you want to better understand why these two groups of Christians are still divided, then you need to know about Ireland's history, Northern Ireland and The Troubles.

Use the Internet or your school library to research the following topics. Use the key words to help your search:

- The Roman Catholic Church: *The Pope, the seven sacraments*
- Protestants: *The Church of England*
- Ireland and Northern Ireland's history: *William of Orange, Easter Rising, Michael Collins*
- The Troubles: *Bloody Sunday, Irish Republican Army, the Good Friday agreement*

You can also get a short explanation of Ireland's history from the following BBC Children's homepage:  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid\\_1610000/newsid\\_1613000/1613043.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_1610000/newsid_1613000/1613043.stm)



### 3 The Dilemma Discussion Exercise

When you have built up a more complete picture of the situation in Northern Ireland, you can perhaps begin to understand the reasons why the two groups of people live apart from each other. Each group believes that they are right. In reality there is no real answer because neither side can accept the other's solution. It all depends on which side of the fence you stand.

This is what is known as a *dilemma*. A dilemma is a problem which has at least two solutions, but neither is acceptable to all parties. Being in a dilemma can be described as *being between a rock and a hard place*. Try this exercise, where you might have a point of view that is completely the opposite of others in your group. Use your skill at presenting your argument to persuade the others that your way is the only solution.

Read the dilemma out loud to the group. Make sure that everyone has understood it. Discuss and try to agree on solutions to each of the dilemmas below:

- You see your friend cheating in a test.
- Someone is bullying you.
- You've been invited to two friends' parties on the same night.
- You lose a special present your mum or dad has given you for your birthday.
- You are given too much change in a shop.
- You find £10 on the pavement.
- Someone is saying unkind things about your friend behind their back.
- Your mum has left a cupboard door open and you see the bag with your birthday presents inside. They haven't been wrapped yet.
- You see a copy of the next day's maths test on the teacher's desk and you are the only one in the classroom.



And finally:  
Try and solve this classic problem in your class:

John borrows a weapon from his neighbour. John promises to give it back to his neighbour when he asks for it. One day the neighbour asks for the weapon back. He is very angry and you are frightened that he will use it to hurt someone.

John is faced with a dilemma – if he keeps his promise, then he will be an accessory to a murder. If he refuses to hand over the weapon, then he breaks his promise. What would you do?