

Briefing on Rev Dr Gary Mason MBE

BIOGRAPHY:

Rev Dr Gary Mason MBE is a Methodist minister and internationally recognised expert in conflict resolution who has played an essential role in the Northern Ireland peace process. Born in Belfast in 1958, he holds a PhD in Psychology from the University of Ulster, a Diploma in Theology from Queen's University Belfast, and a BA in Business Studies from the University of Ulster. He was also awarded an honorary Doctorate in Divinity from Florida Southern College for his peacebuilding efforts.

For 28 years (until 2015), Mason served as a Methodist clergy person in Belfast, including as Superintendent/CEO of the East Belfast Mission from 1999 to 2014, one of the largest Methodist missions in Europe. In 2015, he founded Rethinking Conflict, a Belfast-based conflict resolution organisation that applies lessons from the Northern Ireland peace process to other global conflicts.

WORK ON PEACEBUILDING IN NORTHERN IRELAND:

Facilitating Dialogue with Paramilitaries

Mason engaged directly with both loyalist and republican paramilitary groups, acting as a “critical friend” and trusted advisor to Protestant ex-combatants. In the late 1980s, he started meeting with loyalist paramilitary fighters in pubs and community spaces to understand their views and provide compassionate alternatives to violence. He acted as the Methodist representative on the Loyalist Commission, which included paramilitaries, community activists, and church representatives.

In June 2009, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Red Hand Commando announced the decommissioning of their weapons at Mason's church after nearly 35 years of armed conflict.

Cross-Community Projects

From 1992 to 1999, Mason collaborated with a Catholic Dominican sister to develop the Forthspring Community Project, a £1 million centre on the peace line in West Belfast. This facility united Catholic and Protestant communities around shared concerns during some of the darkest days of the Troubles, including after the Shankill bombing and Greysteel tragedies. Mason played a key role in establishing the Skainos Centre, a £30 million urban redevelopment project in East Belfast recognised as the largest faith-based redevelopment initiative in Western Europe. Designed as a model of coexistence and shared space in a post-conflict society, it continues to function as a hub for reconciliation work.

Role of the International Fund for Ireland

The International Fund for Ireland (IFI), established in 1986, was described by UK Chief Negotiator Jonathan Powell as “the great unsung hero of the peace process.” The IFI invested over \$1.5 billion in direct funding for more than 6,000 peacebuilding projects across Northern Ireland.

The IFI's vital contribution was its long-term investment in grassroots civil society, which created the conditions for political negotiations to succeed. By pooling resources from multiple international donors, the IFI transformed the civic landscape. It supported economic development, youth programmes, cross-community contact, and reconciliation efforts that fostered trust between nationalist and unionist communities.

Projects like Mason's Forthspring and Skainos received substantial support from the IFI. The fund's approach demonstrated that sustainable peace requires addressing the root causes of conflict through community-level engagement rather than top-down political agreements.

WORK ON ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACEBUILDING:

Mason has become a leading voice in applying lessons from Northern Ireland's peace process to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Advisory Role to the US Government

Mason is part of a small organisation that helped facilitate the strategic plan for implementing the Nita M. Lowey Middle East Partnership for Peace Act (MEPPA) of 2020, passed by the US Congress. He has advised both Republican and Democratic administrations on strengthening civil society and developing grassroots peacebuilding.

International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (IFIPP)

Mason has been a leading supporter of replicating the IFI model in the Middle East by establishing an International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace, asserting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, like Northern Ireland before 1998, lacks the grassroots civil society infrastructure needed for sustainable peace.

He has facilitated Zoom dialogues bringing together Israelis, Palestinians, and Northern Irish people to share experiences and build common understanding.

Mason emphasises five key lessons from Northern Ireland:

- (1) The need to address the root causes of conflict, not just its by-products.
- (2) The unfeasibility of military victory and the necessity for diplomatic resolutions.
- (3) The crucial importance of dialogue.
- (4) Genuine security comes from resolving underlying mutual grievances.
- (5) The critical role of civil society actors, especially intersectional participation, with the inclusion of women, in peacebuilding.