

A SHORT RECORD

ICEFI/ICRFI

INTER-CHURCH RECONCILIATION FUND FOR IRELAND

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**FORMERLY
INTER-CHURCH EMERGENCY FUND FOR IRELAND**

1974-2006

Inter-Church Reconciliation Fund for Ireland formerly Inter-Church Emergency Fund for Ireland

Summary

The Fund operated for 33 years, a third of a century, distributing what was primarily European church money in Northern Ireland to assist peace, reconciliation, and community development. This short report is intended to look back over that history and acknowledge both the funders and those who received funding, following the winding down of the Fund at the end of 2006.

In concrete terms, if the current value of money disbursed is taken, the Fund gave out at least UK£1.3 million (£810,797 in absolute terms), and more depending on how inflation is calculated, in 1,083 individual grants. In addition, another £509,000 came through the Fund in designated money to projects; working out the current value of the latter is difficult because some is recorded in its currency of origin rather than the sterling equivalent at the time. But it is safe to say that, in current values, over “a couple of million pounds” passed through the Fund either directly or indirectly; as much of this was going to small groups and organisations, a little went a very long way.

Origins

The early 1970s were a grim time in Northern Ireland as its society moved into freefall with the Troubles; some of the markers of the decline included internment, Bloody Sunday, the Ulster Workers Council Strike (which was instrumental in the ending of power-sharing government at Stormont for three decades), and sectarian killings galore. While the Fund formally started in 1974, its genesis dates back a couple of years beyond that, certainly to 1972 and an appeal launched at the end of that year. ‘Terms of reference’ for the Fund were agreed in July 1973 at a consultation in Belfast which sought to pull together various strands of funders and funding in relation to Northern Ireland, and to put the Fund on a fully ecumenical basis.

Particularly instrumental on the European side of developing the Fund was Welshman Dr Glen Garfield Williams who was general secretary of CEC, the Conference of European Churches. CEC became both sponsor and fundraiser and was joined by CCEE, the European Catholic Bishops’ Conference, and both remained as sponsors of the Fund to its end. Instrumental at the Northern Ireland end in the formation of the Fund was the General Secretary of the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) at the time, Canon Bill Arlow. In 1975, the year after the Fund started giving grants, Dr David Stevens became its secretary or ‘projects officer’, passing this task over to Rob Fairmichael in 1993 after he became ICC General Secretary himself.

The significance of the Fund also has to be assessed in the light of its formation before there were many charitable funds grant-aiding in Northern Ireland, e.g. the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (now Community Fund for Northern Ireland) was only founded in 1979, while the Ireland Funds had their beginning in 1976.

In its early days, partly enthused through its European connections, the Fund’s committee and staff had other involvements, including processing holiday offers from abroad for children in Northern Ireland. The committee also investigated other possibilities such as setting up an ecumenical conference centre in Northern Ireland.

How it worked

Decisions on grants were made by a committee of a dozen people who were appointed by the Irish Council of Churches or the Catholic Church in Ireland. The projects officer visited new projects, assessed and processed applications and made recommendations to the committee who were free to make their own decisions, and were able to use their own local and specialist knowledge to assess applications. While in the first couple of years grants were limited by how much money had come in, subsequently some money was held in a reserve to help in the event of a major emergency developing; this ‘nest egg’ allowed a smoother exit strategy towards the end of the Fund’s existence.

Who was funded

All those who received funding have been listed in ICC annual reports from the start and, later on, also in ICEFI/ICRFI annual reports; these are all available for consultation on request at or through the Inter-Church Centre in Belfast. Those funded included youth and reconciliation centres, community and youth groups, churches and church bodies involved in diaconal or cross-community activities, and sometimes other NGOs who fitted the Fund's cross-community, reconciliation, community development or peacemaking criteria.

Towards the end of the Fund's existence, it was a major source of money for summer schemes in local areas; these were important not just in providing an alternative to violence or 'recreational rioting' in the summer (or, indeed, a black hole where more affluent people might have had a holiday) but were also a key feeder into youth club regular activities when the autumn came. Some projects, particularly for summer scheme funding, were regular customers and others came and went and maybe came again.

Typical grants in the early years included funding towards the renovation of a community house, training for peace and reconciliation groups, a building grant for a reconciliation centre, a cross-community youth conference, general funding for youth and community work, a contribution to the salaries of youth workers in areas of social need and sectarian strife, money towards holiday schemes, contributions towards community service projects, set up costs of youth drop-in centres, equipment for youth clubs, money towards minibuses for youth clubs, and towards employment projects.

As the Fund developed, various exclusions were operated to target the money and to avoid the funding all going in one direction. Salaries became excluded and later on building work, though funding was still given for equipment. Typical grants later on included equipment and furnishings for youth clubs and after schools clubs, summer scheme grants, and contributions towards reconciliation and community relations programmes. Annual reports showed a map of grant recipients and, with limitations due to the Fund's size, 'all areas' of Northern Ireland received funding.

The funders

Funds came primarily from churches and church agencies in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, as well as through CEC and CCEE (where the country of origin of the donor might be hidden). A major sum of money came from an ecumenical collection in Switzerland in the mid-1990s. Occasional funding came from other sources and countries including Canada and Belgium. It is probably fair to say that funders saw the transmission of money as a way of providing practical Christian solidarity to an area in dire distress, and as a way of directly assisting peace and reconciliation in that society. Some funding was earmarked by certain funders for particular projects and in other instances the Fund's staff were able to initiate specific funding for projects; in both these cases the money passed through the Fund but the Fund committee was not responsible for disbursing it.

Smaller sums for the Fund came from churches and other bodies in Britain where there had also been a separate but parallel British Council of Churches (BCC, now Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) Community and Race Relations Unit Fund for Ireland before the Inter-Church Emergency Fund was formed. This closed in 1976 and was followed by another BCC 'Fund for Ireland' which operated for another few years. For a few years in the 1970s there was also parallel funding coming through the National Council of Churches in the USA. All donors are listed in the Fund minutes and also in ICC annual reports (though later on it tended to be only donors of designated monies who were listed in the latter), as well as in the Fund's annual reports when these were produced in later years. Audited accounts were produced annually and these were included in the accounts presented at the ICC annual meeting so there was full financial accountability.

As the servicing of the Fund was paid for by inter-church funds, all the money which came for disbursement by the Fund was actually given to projects; no money was deducted from contributions for costs or salaries.

Emergency/Reconciliation

The Fund changed its name in 1995, as after twenty years it was difficult to justify the name 'Emergency'. The new name emphasised its 'reconciliation' ethos and purpose.

Why the money stopped

With the ceasefires of 1994 and the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, Northern Ireland was seen as 'solved'. A few funders continued for a while after this but the Fund began to dig into its reserves which were all used up by the end of 2006. There is still considerable social need in Northern Ireland, and there is a huge amount of work to do at the level of cross-community contact, understanding and transformation, but it would be rather difficult to go to a church funder and say, effectively, "Give us the money, don't give it to Albania". As new vistas opened up in Europe, more church money was going to Eastern Europe and even central Asia, and it is also true to say that Christian churches frequently did not have as much money to spare as they had previously.

The inter-church structures (Irish Inter-Church Meeting) now have a funding policy in place so that, if in the future, significant funds come its way to support work in the community it will continue to have a way of distributing the money in a fully professional manner. The Inter-Church Centre is also continuing to act as local agents for a Dutch fund (Stichting Het Solidariteitsfonds) which, among other things, gives designated money to projects working with children in conflict situations.

The ICRFI chronicles: Lost in Larne

Rob Fairmichael, the Fund's projects officer for 13 years to closure, shares why he will miss wandering the highways and byways of Norn Iron on ICRFI business

It was only three times a year initially, and later two, that I had to wander to visit projects. I suppose the main impression I would have is of the huge range of work being done, frequently with very little in the way of resources. But I looked forward to being surprised by people, places – and getting there.

Some may find it difficult to believe but the worst time I got lost was actually in Larne, visiting two projects associated with the one community worker; I had made the assumption I was visiting the projects in a particular order – but the community worker preferred the other way round. I didn't notice and managed to take down the directions to one project when they were for the other. Trying to get to the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong directions is difficult. After driving up and down the road a few times, I realised I was at 'the other' project. A quick phone call to the community worker and I knew where I was heading – late, but the universe was no longer such a strange place. That will Larne me.

Directions varied from the excellent to the not so excellent. Miss a turn you weren't told about and suddenly all could be Lost. I have the vivid memory of heading down a boreen [a small and narrow, poor road] in early summer, presumably the start of June, with the verdant hedgerows gradually getting nearer and nearer the centre of the road and the feeling that this would end in a very dead end. It didn't and my sense of direction got me to somewhere which got me to somewhere else which brought me to the project, late, but better late than never.

A short paper from one rural project proudly proclaimed the features of the townland, which included a Victorian post box as one of the most significant features; Victorian post boxes are not to be knocked, even if they are not always something to write home about. In urban Belfast, travelling the short distance from one project on one side of the sectarian divide to another, close by, on the other, and in the middle of the day, concern was expressed for my well being – I hope, some years on, that the said projects, while not necessarily the best of buddies, at least have some meaningful contact and the barriers are less visible.

The ingenuity of some projects impressed me. It may have been partly accidental, but a community festival associated with one project had Irish dancing in the Orange Hall and a magician in the Masonic Hall....

Like most funds, this one had grey areas, in fact because of its evolution by adding 'exclusions', we probably had more expanses of grey than an Irish sky in February. If there was a chance of getting a project in then I did, well, I saw my task as getting people in rather than keeping them out. But very occasionally there were warning signs; stories that indicated there was a child protection issue (just once we heard of a tendency to be physical to the extent of being violent); money that had gone missing from a project before we paid out our promised grant (if there was likely to be a delay we only paid out when a proposed project was actually

about to start); a propensity to evangelise rather than do youth work; an inability despite repeated requests and returns to actually fill in our 2-page application form fully (we often made excuses for bad or sloppy handwriting – the end of typewriter era made it difficult for people to type in the spaces provided), or a failure to provide basic information required to assess the application. In these cases we made our excuses and metaphorically left.

Being a small operation we did not have the capacity to do much research on projects or follow up. But we kept our eyes and ears open and read reports and accounts sent in; trust was the other guarantee we had that the money was used as specified – and the fact that if they touched us for money again it would likely be obvious if it had not been used for the designated purpose. Some projects were non-starters – one of the more ingenious of these was for “cross-community car parking” for a graveyard which was mixed Catholic and Protestant.

Most projects were regular community and youth groups but, naturally enough, we often had groups applying with a religious basis. We were very happy with this though on occasions there was the difficult call, mentioned above, of whether a group’s project was more interested in evangelism than youth work. This is a difficult one for religious groups, and for the Fund, but it depended on the priority in the project applied for. Of course religious groups may have had a ‘knock on’ effect from their youth or community work, and that is certainly more than fair, but as a Fund we were not about evangelism. In the funding world in general many religious groups found getting finance more difficult than most because of the suspicion by funders that it was evangelism that was their main goal but, given the fact it was church money, we were keen to be more than fair.

We were planning our exit strategy as internet working became mainstream, so we did not move more of the operation in that direction. We operated a gatekeeping policy which meant projects only received an application form if we knew they potentially fitted the criteria and this entailed the need for initial control but this policy saved endless hours of work both on our behalf and projects involved. So we were in the happy position, both for ourselves and for applicants, that most projects getting as far as the committee received funding and the question was usually “how much?”.

Misunderstandings happen in any area of work. One exchange I did have by e-mail was from someone involved with uniformed youth work, and I wrote back explaining that uniformed youth work was, unfortunately, one of our exclusions. I received a reply thanking me but asking what I meant by stating that ‘uninformed’ youth work was excluded....the mistake was actually theirs as I had spelt the word correctly.

Sometimes meetings with projects were good craic, sometimes very informative about the whole locality as well as the project, sometimes a bit more formal though I tried to keep it all informal (we didn’t have a million pounds to give away anyway). But while by definition I was visiting places where things were happening, or trying to happen, and not where nothing was stirring, I felt impressed by the range of responses people were making to their situations and problems. Some people worked full time hours on a voluntary basis, or long hours unpaid on top of their employment elsewhere, some people were employed but gave it their all.

To community groups and projects I would say - It was a pleasure to meet you all. Sorry we won’t be around any more and I wish you all the best for the future, a future which you are and have been instrumental in shaping, and in helping to keep Northern Ireland from falling off the edge of the universe. I hope we played our small part in assisting you to achieve your aims. To the funders I would say a big THANK YOU; I feel that we distributed the money fairly and professionally including as regards the sectarian divide and geographical distribution within Northern Ireland. Perhaps I could say we finally got stuck in that boreen which really was a dead end. But if there was a choice between an ongoing little war in Northern Ireland with money still coming into the Fund, or ‘peace’ and no money, well, there is no real contest.

Slán agus beannacht*
Rob Fairmichael

*Farewell and blessing

