

ECUMENICAL AND OTHER ADDRESSES

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE IRISH COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
SUBMITTED TO THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE COUNCIL
APRIL 1997

1997

Introduction from the General Secretary

1996 was a terrible year in Northern Ireland, the end of the IRA ceasefire, the creation of the loyalist paramilitary resistance and the events surrounding Drumcree and its aftermath. We have witnessed broken dreams and hopes, an atmosphere marked by anger, hurt, resentment, displacement, homelessness and deeper community relations in many places have never been worse. 1997 promises little better.

Our churches do not stand apart from all of this. Some of the dark shadows continue through Northern Ireland and have been exposed to view and they are in the consciousness of our churches as well. Many members of churches in the South have also been affected by the violence of the

Annual Report of the Irish Council of Churches

Northern Ireland's participation in the violence of the past years of the island still lurks about. Our churches have been involved by the Churches Peace Initiative Programme during the past year in a pilot project under primary school projects. We hope to develop this initiative in the year to come. The Peace Programme has also continued a search for reconciliation and completed the first module in the Pathways programme for the upper primary school.

Ireland, South and North, is changing rapidly. TV, the internet, mobile phones and other modern communications are changing the way we live. The religious world is also changing. People are seeking new ways of living and new ways of thinking.

Submitted to the Annual Meeting
of the Council
April 1997



**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE IRISH COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
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Introduction from the General Secretary

1996 was a terrible year in Northern Ireland: the end of the IRA ceasefire, the erosion of the loyalist paramilitary ceasefire, and the events surrounding Drumcree and its aftermath. We live amongst broken dreams and hopes, in an atmosphere soured by anger, hurt, resentment, disillusionment, helplessness and despair. Community relations in many places have never been worse. 1997 promises little better.

Our churches do not stand apart from all of this. Some of the dark realities coursing through Northern Irish life have been exposed to view and they are in the bloodstream of our churches as well. Many members of our churches in the South have watched aghast. The limitations of some of our talk of reconciliation and our pretensions as peacemakers have been cruelly revealed. We stand chastened and convicted. As churches we need to reflect on our role in Northern Irish society.

The picketers of the Roman Catholic church in Harryville; those who damage churches, schools, orange halls, and homes; the instigators of boycotts and the paramilitaries: all act out the feelings of large numbers; in them the secret thoughts of many are laid bare (Luke 2:35). We all have to acknowledge and share responsibility for a deep rooted sectarianism and turn and be healed. We simply have to find another way or the dynamic of conflict, division and separation will overwhelm us.

At the Autumn Gathering the Irish School of Ecumenics 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism' project helped us to face some of the issues relating to the subject and we are continuing the discussion at the Annual Meeting. We held a seminar on the issue of parading in October for people from the member churches. The passions which the subject can arouse were amply present.

North/South misunderstandings continue to grow - as the two parts of the island drift further apart. One interesting initiative developed by the Churches' Peace Education Programme during the year was a pilot cross-border primary schools project. We hope to develop this initiative in the years to come. The Peace Programme has also produced a module on sectarianism and completed the final module in the Pathways programme for the upper primary school.

Ireland - both North and South - is changing rapidly. This has enormous implications for our churches. The religious worlds we have known, and people were socialised into, are facing many challenges. Churches have been responding by seeking renewal. The Presbyterian and Methodist Churches are holding special conferences in 1997. One of the key areas is renewal at local level. The Churches' Commission on Mission has been sponsoring a Developing Missionary Congregations Project (now renamed Building Bridges of Hope). A number of Irish parishes and congregations

are involved. Perhaps some clues as to how local churches can constructively respond to new realities will come through this project.

Irish cities are very different places today. Cities are places of opportunity but they can also be places of exclusion. The Belfast Churches' Urban Development Committee, which is associated with the Council, has been seeking to help the churches in the Belfast area to be better neighbours. A couple of important resource publications were produced during the year by the former Development Officer, Maurice Kinkead, before he left. Maurice also helped us to face the issue of how churches are to be partners with local communities, and this will be an issue that the Committee will be actively pursuing in the next two years.

The position of women in society is changing rapidly too. It is not changing so rapidly in the church. The team visit to Ireland in connection with the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women caused us to reflect on this issue. One response was a letter to the churches (see appendix). Another was to cause us to look at our own structures.

One important change in the church scene during 1996 was the retirement of Cardinal Cahal Daly as Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh. Cardinal Daly's intellectual abilities and his spiritual presence made him a formidable foe of those who advocated or used political violence. He was a significant factor in the delegitimisation of such violence. Cardinal Daly was also a pioneer ecumenist. We wish his successor, Archbishop Brady, well as the Roman Catholic Church, along with the ICC Member Churches, face the challenges of a changing Ireland.

A step forward was taken during 1996 in terms of looking at the structures of inter-church cooperation. The Irish Inter-Church Committee has established a review group to look at the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. The outcome of its deliberations will enable the future of the Council to be shaped.

Ecumenical bodies throughout the world are changing. There is an increasing Roman Catholic involvement. There is also growing awareness that their key task is to facilitate their member churches to meet and cooperate together, not to pursue agenda of their own. The World Council of Churches may well be transformed into a very different body as it faces a financial crisis, and an awareness that it needs, not only to relate to the Roman Catholic Church, but also to the large number of evangelical and pentecostal churches which are unrepresented in its membership. The latter is also a challenge to this Council.

MEETINGS

The Annual Meeting was held in March in the Dromantine Conference Centre, near Newry, Co. Down. The evening session looked at 'Issues in Evangelism' and was led by members of the Four Nations Forum on Evangelisation.

The Autumn Gathering was held in Dublin and dealt with the subject of 'Understandings of Sectarianism' and was led by Dr. Joseph Liechty and

Dr Cecelia Clegg of the Irish School of Ecumenics' 'Moving Beyond Sectarianism' Project.

OFFICERS

The Rev. David Nesbitt and the Rev Edmund Mawhinney became President and Vice President respectively at the Annual Meeting. We express our thanks to the outgoing President, the Rt. Rev. Joseph Cooper, for all the time and commitment he gave to the activities of the Council during his term of office.

MEMBERSHIP

Following an affirmative resolution at the Annual Meeting the Greek Orthodox Church became a member church. The Coptic Orthodox Church has become an observer.

We record with regret the death of Mr. Jeremy Johnston, a Lutheran member of the Council, in November.

We express our best wishes to Pastor P.G. Fritz on his retirement as Lutheran pastor in Ireland and departure from Ireland to live in Germany.

Mrs Elizabeth Parkin, Secretary of Women's Link, became a co-opted member during the year.

75th ANNIVERSARY

January 1998 will mark the 75th anniversary of the first meeting of the Council. Planning is under way to mark the anniversary in appropriate ways.

THE ROLE, STRUCTURE AND FUTURE OF THE COUNCIL

This has been an issue of debate for the Council over the last number of years as the agenda of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting has grown. Following consultation with the member churches a submission was made to the Irish Inter-Church Committee at its September meeting outlining what the Executive Committee saw as the key issues in inter-church relations at the present time and proposing a review of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. The Irish Inter-Church Committee agreed to this and a review group has been set up and has commenced its work. When this group has completed its work the Executive Committee will then consider the position in the light of the review group's recommendations and prepare proposals regarding the Council's future. The IICM review group is hoping to bring forward its recommendations in early 1998.

GENERAL SECRETARY'S CONTRACT OF EMPLOYMENT

The Executive Committee agreed to extend the General Secretary's contract of employment for a further minimum period of three years, but not exceeding five years, from May 1, 1997.

INTER-CHURCH CENTRE

The Inter-Church Centre Company Ltd. which held the property was

wound up during the year. The Ulster Bank Ltd. now acts as the holding trustee. The Very Rev. Brendan Murray has been appointed to sit with the Managing Trustees in making decisions about the property in order to reflect its ecumenical use.

A conditions survey was carried out during the year which recommended that somewhere in the region of £75,000 needed to be spent on the building over the next five years. The first part of this work was completed in November.

COMMUNITY ISSUES

Sunday Trading Legislation

Cooperation has continued throughout the year on this issue with the Northern Ireland Evangelical Alliance. A submission was made on the proposed Northern Ireland draft legislation.

Peace and Political Developments

Meetings of those people in the member churches concerned with peace and political developments have continued throughout the year.

A seminar was held in October on the report 'Parades and Protest: A Discussion Document' and representatives from some of the Member Churches attended. The General Secretary made a submission to the independent review body on parades and a response to the review body's proposals.

The Churches' Media Council for Northern Ireland

The Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church and the Religious Society of Friends were invited to nominate one person each to this new body and have now done so.

INTER-CHURCH AFFAIRS BOARD

The Child in the Church Group

During the past year the Group has welcomed two new members, Rev. Ian McKee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and Mrs. Marion Woods of the Moravian Church. They succeed Rev. Roy McMullan and Rev. Len Broadbent respectively.

The Group continued to share resources and insights, and to monitor the implementation of the Children Order (Northern Ireland).

In November a One Day Workshop was organised on the theme "Children Grieve Too". This was facilitated by a team from Treetops, a bereavement counselling and training group associated with Corrymeela. As well as representatives from member churches, most of the major bereavement counselling agencies were represented. It is especially pleasing to report that these included members of the Roman Catholic Church.

A booklet giving details of the various organisations, guidelines for bereavement counselling and resources for use with the various age groups of children and young people was compiled by the Group's Chairman, Rev.

Canon H. McKelvey. This was launched at the workshop; each participant receiving a copy.

The booklet may be obtained from the Church of Ireland Education Centre, 1-3, Cadogan Park, Belfast, BT9 6HE, (telephone 01232 682946), at the price of £1.50 or £2.00 for postal copies.

Women's Link

To mark the 30th Anniversary of Women's Link a residential meeting was held in April for the first time in the Benburb Centre.

Women's Link has been involved in the Women of Faith initiative organised in September by Lady Mayhew - wife of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The Women's Desk has continued to operate in the Inter-Church Centre bringing together women from a variety of Christian traditions in Ireland.

Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women

An ecumenical team visit to Ireland and Scotland took place in February 1996 as one of a number of visits that have been taking place throughout the world as part of a process of marking the middle of the Decade. The report was received in September and suggested "some important questions for the churches :

- why do many women have low self-esteem? What is it about the churches which holds them back from recognising, exercising and celebrating their wholeness?
- why do many women of intelligence and love have to move outside the churches to find value, worth and purpose?
- why do the churches tend to compartmentalise fundamental gospel concerns (such as those raised by the Decade), rather than seeing them as central to the way the whole church lives and works?
- where were, and are, the young people?
- are those in positions of authority really listening to and hearing the voices of women, who have been the silenced majority for too long?
- how men listen to and nurture one another within the church?
- are the structures simply 'letting women in' rather than engaging in a fundamental process of changing ways of being the church?
- do you recognise the masks which conceal the need for, and the fears which inhibit the commitment to, transformation as individuals and communities?
- what is the source of your nourishment, passion and energy?"

The Executive Committee is considering how best to respond to the issues raised in the report. One of the things it has highlighted is the relative lack of numbers of women on the Council and the particular paucity of women on the Executive Committee - the member churches appoint both the Council and Executive members (except for a few co-opted places). Three women were subsequently co-opted onto the

Executive Committee. A further response has involved a letter to the churches being sent on 'Women and the Church' (see appendix).

Mrs. Maureen Irwin, President of Women's Link, is a member of a planning group for a Four-Nations Event to mark the end of the Decade in 1998.

Evangelism

The Moderator of the Board, the Rev. Canon David Godfrey, attended the Conference of World Mission and Evangelism gathering in Brazil at the end of November. The theme was 'Called to One Hope - the Gospel in Diverse Cultures'. The Rev. Gary Mason of the Methodist Church was also there and he gave a case study on sectarianism in Ireland.

The Moderator continues to represent the Council on the Four Nations Forum on Evangelisation. A meeting of the Forum took place in Ireland in March 1996.

OVERSEAS AFFAIRS BOARD

World Mission Committee

The Committee has been reconstituted as a sub-committee of the Board following a review of its work and purpose. Mr. Rob Fairmichael has become secretary. The possibility of a more active link with the Irish Missionary Union is being explored.

The Churches' Commission on Mission

The Rev. Canon David Godfrey and the Rev. Paul Kingston represented the Council at the Commission's sixth meeting which was held in September in Durham on the theme 'Partnership Today'.

Climatic Change Petition

The international petition on this important subject was promoted in the churches. The completed petitions will eventually be presented to government.

Overseas Aid

Correspondence took place with the Irish Government concerning overseas development aid and with the Irish MEPs - both North and South - concerning European Union cuts. A resolution concerning UK and Republic of Ireland overseas aid was passed at the 1996 Annual Meeting.

Irish Government's Policy Paper on Foreign Affairs

Ms Mary Purcell and the Rev. Michael Begg of Christian Aid spoke to the Board about the Irish Government's Policy Paper.

Situation in the Sudan

Concern about the situation in the Sudan has continued during the year. The Board has continued its link with the NI Sudan Support Group. A lunchtime meeting was held in June with the Rev. John Gatluok Chol, vice-chairman of the Sudan Council of Churches.

Sri Lanka

The Rev. Dr. Norman Taggart of the Sri Lanka Relations Committee spoke to the Board about the situation in that country. He has become a co-opted member of the Board.

CCBI International Affairs Liaison Group

The Moderator continues to attend meetings of the Group.

Christian Aid

Income from Ireland for the financial year ending March 1996 (£1,362,996) held up well. However there is no complacency about the future.

The Department of Foreign Affairs contributed IR£353,000 towards projects and disaster relief. Christian Aid welcomes increasing cooperation with the Department and the introduction of a block grant towards the work. This has been enhanced by the work of Mary Purcell, co-financing officer in Dublin.

The year also saw the Irish Presidency of the EU, and Mary also worked with DOCHAS in making sure that development issues were kept to the fore. Michael Begg leads all the work in the Republic.

Christian Aid Week, promoted in Northern Ireland by Margaret Boden and Ian McDowell, continues to be a major focus (£340,372). Many other efforts swell the total income, including the Dean of Belfast's annual Christmas sit-out (£40,000 in 1996).

Youth work has been promoted by Tim Magowan, often working with the support and encouragement of churches, seeking to raise awareness among younger people.

The large support given through the Church of Ireland Bishops' Appeal (£127,127), the Presbyterian Church World Development Appeal (£161,278) and the Methodist World Development Appeal (£12,579) continue. The Moravian Church, the Religious Society of Friends and the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church are adopting a special fundraising project for Nicaragua.

In response to our partners, Christian Aid is increasing its campaigning role starting the new 'Change the Rules' campaign. The Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist world development committees are approaching Irish supermarkets encouraging the adoption of a code of conduct for their buyers, to ensure that the food we eat does not come from the exploitation of workers abroad. The mass support of church members is being sought for this.

Much thought has been given to the best way of promoting Christian Aid in the Republic where it is less well known, and organisational changes are being considered to maximise efficiency. Specific actions suitable for Christian Aid Week in the Republic are being implemented.

COUNCIL OF CHURCHES FOR BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Mrs. Fee Ching Leong has been reappointed to serve on the Commission for Racial Justice and it has been agreed to appoint someone to the Commission for Inter-Faith Relations.

EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL COMMISSION FOR CHURCH AND SOCIETY

The Rev. Samuel Hutchinson and Dr. Kenneth Milne attended the Annual Meeting of the Commission held in the South of France near Montpellier in September. It has been agreed to integrate EECCS into the Conference of European Churches as from 1998. The Executive Committee, while welcoming the proposal, emphasised that it was important in the new arrangement for smaller churches and countries to be able to retain their involvement.

The Rev. Samuel Hutchinson and Dr. Kenneth Milne were reappointed to represent the Council on EECCS for a further two years to see in the integration.

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES SECOND EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL ASSEMBLY

The General Secretary was appointed to represent the Council at the 11th Assembly of the Conference of European Churches in July 1997 and at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly preceding it. Mrs. Maureen Irwin will also be representing Women's Link.

INTER-CHURCH RECONCILIATION FUND FOR IRELAND

There has been an increasing demand on the limited funds available to the Committee. Consequently the guidelines were revised during the year.

The following grants were agreed in 1996:	£
Shantallow Ballyarnett Cross Community Group, Londonderry for their residential and general programme	800
Away from Home and Safe - for local 'training for trainers' workshops	1,000
Women's Link of the Irish Council of Churches - for 30th anniversary residential event	464
Passionist Youth and Parent Resource Centre, Belfast - for refurbishing and equipping their new premises	1,200
Frontier Youth Trust - to purchase resource materials	600
Beacon North Interchurch Development Group, Belfast - for office equipment	1,200
Roden Street Festival Committee, Belfast - for their community festival involving all the different groups in the area	400
'Summer with a Difference' Project, Belfast - for programme involving three different areas in Belfast	668
Faughanview Park Residents Association, Claudy - to purchase equipment for work with young people when they have a community house	800

Templegrove Action Research, Londonderry - towards the costs of their 'minority experience' public hearings	£ 1,000
Positive Ethos Trust, Londonderry - towards costs of producing a manual on peer mediation in schools	1,200
Greater Shankill Community Festival, Belfast - for cross-community workshop for boys	300
Maguiresbridge and District Community Development Association - for office development	1,700
Lisburn YMCA - towards repair and refurbishment work	1,000
Riverside Youth Club, Ballyclare - towards setting up a non-alcoholic bar in the club	800
Go-Kidz, Shankill Road, Belfast - towards equipment for work with 11-16 year olds	300
YMCA Employment Services, Newcastle - towards equipment for setting up a job club based there	800
Inter-Church Group, Larne - towards work	300
Riverside Drop-In Centre, Annalong - towards the purchase price and renovation costs of their premises	1,000
Alliance-Ardoyne Play scheme, Belfast - towards summer scheme	1,000
Nativity Youth Club, Poleglass - for cross-community programme for 8-13 year olds	500
123 House, Cliftonville Road; Belfast - for summer scheme	700
REACH Across, Londonderry - towards their cross-community teenage programmes	800
Ardoyne Youth Club, Belfast - for a local cross-community project	400
City Church, University Avenue, Belfast - a once-off grant for their cross community youth club costs	300
John Paul Youth Club, Ardoyne, Belfast - for their summer programme	700
Brownlow Play Association, Craigavon - towards their summer programme	800
PAKT, Lurgan - towards the summer programme of this cross-community project in Lurgan	800
Derrybeg Community Association, Newry - towards their summer scheme	500
Bridge Community Trust, Ravenhill Road, Belfast - towards its publishing programme in support of community development and church-community links	1,000
Wishing Well Family Centre, Belfast - towards their summer scheme	700
Larne Community Care Centre - towards renovation costs	1,000
Lisburn Downtown Centre - for computer equipment	800
Pop Bar, Ardoyne, Belfast - towards summer scheme costs	700
Footprints Womens Centre, Poleglass - for play equipment for their after schools club	700
Corpus Christi Youth Club, Ballymurphy, Belfast - for their summer programme	700
Eskra Development Association - towards their summer scheme	350

Christian Education Movement (CEM) - towards equipment for the programme organiser	£ 800
Trillick Enterprise Group, Co. Tyrone - towards their new community facilities	2,500
Pax Christi, Britain - towards a conference on Northern Irish issues	600
Churches in Cooperation, Londonderry - seeding grant	2,000
Woodvale Resource Centre, Belfast - for equipment	2,000
Trust, Craigavon - for equipment for this cross-community group working with children and young people	2,000
Belfast Central Mission - towards their cross-community reunion programme	600
Gillygooley Youth Club, Omagh - towards facilities for older teenagers	1,500
St. Peter's Immaculata Youth Club, Divis, Belfast - towards repairs and decoration	600

The following monies were designated by donors:

From Methodist Relief and Development Fund - Christian Renewal Centre, Rostrevor £4,000

IRISH ECUMENICAL CHURCH LOAN FUND

The Committee agreed the following loans in 1996:

Riverside Drop-In Centre, Annalong, Co. Down - £10,000 for 4 years at 4% - towards purchase of property
 Guysmere Youth Centre, Castlerock, Co. Londonderry - £15,000 for 1 year at 4% towards construction of multi-purpose hall
 Kindertee Cross-Community Playgroup, Derrylin, Co. Fermanagh - £15,000 at 4% for 1 year - towards work on premises
 174 Trust, Belfast - £15,000 for 5 years at 4% - towards development of premises
 Christian Renewal Centre, Rostrevor, Co. Down - £15,000 for 5 years at 4% - towards repair work

At the Annual Meeting in March the Treasurer of the Committee, the Rev. Canon Robin Richey indicated his intention to resign in 1997. Robin has been Treasurer of the Committee since its formation in 1977. He has made an enormous contribution to the success of the Committee's work.

BELFAST CHURCHES' URBAN DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

The Committee, under the chairmanship of the Rev. Norman Hamilton, operates in association with the Council, but is appointed by Member Churches in the Belfast area, in order to encourage their social, community and economic outreach. A Development Officer, Mr. Maurice Kinkead, took up appointment on April 1, 1995, funded by Making Belfast Work.

He provided advice and support to churches as well as supporting a number of significant projects and running a number of seminars. Mr. Kinkead left at the end of August and was replaced by Mr. E. R. McDowell who took up appointment on January 1, 1997, after new funding for a two

year period had been negotiated with Making Belfast Work.

Two publications written by Mr. Kinkead were published during the year - 'Resources for Responding to Social Need' and 'Developing Church Buildings for Community Use'.

A number of priority issues have been identified for the new Development Officer: facilitating church involvement in the emerging Partnership Process in Belfast; addressing policy and theological issues; a major conference on church involvement in urban issues; and improving church/local community relationships - alongside the ongoing provision of advice and information to churches.

THE CHURCHES' PEACE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

(The Churches Peace Education Programme is the legal entity which runs the joint peace education programme of the Council and the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace).

During the year Mrs. Brigid Lenane, the Peace Education Officer responsible for Secondary Schools, completed her visits to secondary schools in Northern Ireland to promote the use of the modules 'Power to Heal' and 'More Power to Heal'. A module for sixth formers on sectarianism has been completed.

Mrs Lenane also spent considerable time researching the possibility of a cross-border schools initiative. Eventually it was decided to concentrate on the upper primary sector and four primary schools on the Co.Donegal/Co. Fermanagh border were identified and agreed to take part in a pilot cultural heritage project. The project has been developed in conjunction with the Western Education and Library Board and Co-operation North and funding has been obtained under the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. The project has a mixture of curriculum and contact elements. If this pilot project is successful it is intended to expand it to include a greater number of schools. Mrs. Lenane has also been involved in exploring the possibility of cross-border contact between secondary schools in the area of civics, social and political education for lower sixths in Northern Ireland and transition year and above in the South.

During the year Ms Sarah Bennett - the Peace Education Officer with responsibility for Primary Schools - completed the final part of the new Pathways Programme for use at the upper primary level. This module was called 'Granny Meg's 100th Birthday Bash' and joins 'The Batzwa Files' (1996) and 'People Who Need People' (1995). 'Granny Meg' examines our roles and responsibilities within the various communities to which we belong. Efforts are now under way to ensure that the Pathways Programme gets used as much as possible in schools. Materials are also being prepared for the lower primary level so that there will be a comprehensive programme for the whole of the primary level.

The Resources Centre Catalogue has been revised and is in the process of being distributed to schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Mrs.

Claire Geoghegan - the Resources Centre Assistant - left during the year. It was decided not to replace her but to instead upgrade the Administrator post.

A review of the Department of Education for Northern Ireland's funding programme for reconciliation bodies is currently being carried out and this has implications for the future of the Programme, which are as yet unclear. Uncertainty about future funding has been a continuing issue which the Programme has had to deal with throughout the 1990s.

The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace appointed a new Peace Education Officer at the end of August to deal with work in the South. All the Peace Education Officers work together on a variety of activities, including the promoting of the Programme's resources in schools, North and South.

IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING

(The Irish Inter-Church Meeting is a relationship between the Irish Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church and the member churches of the Irish Council of Churches. The President of ICC is Co-Chairman and the General Secretary is Joint Secretary).

The 15th Meeting is to take place in November 1997. It has been agreed to carry out a review of the IICM (see section on 'The Role, Structure and Future of the Council' at the beginning of this report). A review group has been set up and has commenced its work.

Irish Inter-Church Committee

The Committee met four times during the year. There has been continuing concern about Sunday Trading - both North and South. A letter was sent to the Government in the Irish Republic concerning a proposed casino in Dublin.

Another meeting between members of the IICC and representatives from British Churches is to take place in April 1997.

A meeting of church representatives attending the Second European Ecumenical Assembly was held in November in order to meet the Rev. Rudiger Noll, the joint organising secretary of the Assembly. A series of visits and meetings was also arranged so that he could meet other people and groups interested in attending the Assembly. Another meeting of church delegates is to be held in May. It is planned to offer a hearing on 'The Churches and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland' at the Assembly.

Two consultations of representatives from the member churches were held during the year to find out what the churches are doing to mark the end of the millennium and see what it might be possible to do together. One suggestion is to make Pentecost 2000 the focus of inter-church activity.

A document on baptism of children of inter-church couples was considered during the year and suggestions and comments were passed on to the Standing Committee on Mixed Marriage.

In 1994 the Committee endorsed the idea of an Irish dimension to the Developing Missionary Congregations Project of the Churches' Commission on Mission. There were exploratory visits to Ireland in 1995. The Project has been renamed Building Bridges of Hope and five parishes and congregations, both Protestant and Catholic, are participating in its next phase.

Department of Theological Questions

The study on 'Freedom, Justice and Responsibility in Ireland Today' was finalised and it has been published by Veritas. Fresh membership is currently being sought before new work is begun.

Department of Social Issues

Sunday Trading has been on the agenda of the Department during the year. The Department has also been involved in an EU survey on poverty and exclusion, on producing material on community development in a Christian context and in making plans for a poverty hearing in Northern Ireland. The chairperson, Miss Pamela Lockie, resigned and was replaced by Mr Gerry Martin.

Local Ecumenism

A weekend for local groups and communities was held at the end of February 1997 at the Dromantine Conference Centre near Newry, with the theme 'Together with Purpose'. The news sheet which is sent out to local groups twice a year has been revamped.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

The sub-committee produced the Irish Order of Service for the fourth time.

APPENDIX

WOMEN AND THE CHURCH - A LETTER TO THE CHURCHES

The Team Visit to Ireland as part of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) in February 1996 and the subsequent report have sharpened reflection within the Council on the issue of Women and the Church. It has been suggested that one response might be a letter to the churches outlining some of the issues.

Women are of key importance in the transmission of faith and they are more likely to be church attenders than men. However, leadership and decision making have been traditionally in the hands of men and the participation of women in the life of the church has often been limited to certain activities closely related to their traditional social roles, e.g. in serving, and in nurturing children.

The position of women in society is changing rapidly, however. The raised expectations of women, improved education and, above all, women's increasing participation in employment have big implications for churches. But women's position is changing more rapidly in society than in the church. This has caused frustration, even anger, among some.

Of course, there is a diversity of views, perceptions, expectations and

experiences of women's position in the church. Many women (perhaps even most) remain happy with things as they are. But some are not and dissatisfaction is on the increase. Churches in Ireland tend to be conservative and they do not change easily. Nevertheless they are not immune to what is happening in the rest of society, nor to what is happening in churches in other parts of the world. All of this creates a context where women's roles within the churches in Ireland need to be re-examined.

Issues of women and men are arguably some of the most sensitive and difficult in the life of the church; they touch every person deeply, raising issues of personal and sexual identity, of law and who exercises power and authority, and of cultural and religious status and function. Thus the issues raised in this letter are not just for women; they have implications for the whole church.

Sensitive and difficult issues can give rise to strong emotions, including anger. They can also be dealt with by denial, defensiveness and avoidance. Those who raise them can often be marginalised. In this issue, along with many others, there is a challenge to real listening.

II. Issues

1). Dignity and Worth

How the dignity and worth of all persons, men and women, are affirmed and nurtured within the church is a primary challenge. Specifically this means:

- how people, particularly women, are esteemed, heard, recognised and taken seriously;
- how the variety of experiences, insights, talents and gifts of men and women are expressed in the life of the church, in the doing of theology and the creation of liturgy and worship.

The work of women in the church cannot fail to be seen as important to the functioning of the church, as many practical areas are entirely dependent on it. However, is there not a lack of recognition of skills and gifts, experiences and insight outside the traditional areas?

2). Equality

All churches would affirm the equality of men and women. How this is to be understood in the life of the church is another question:

- there are issues of biblical interpretation and teaching and how these relate to culture and contemporary experience and practice, e.g. over who can exercise leadership in the church;
- there are issues of Christian and Church tradition;
- does equality mean (i) equal value, but different functions; (ii) participation on equal terms with men; or (iii) an equal voice; or (iv) what?

3). Decision Making in the Church

Some issues to be faced are:

- how leadership is exercised and by whom;
- the involvement of significant numbers of women in decision-making;
- how business is done, i.e. thought is given to procedures and processes which enable everyone to participate in a creative, positive and active way;
- the empowering of people to participate; people may require encouragement and, where appropriate, training.

4). The Importance of the Local Church

The attitudes of individual ministers and/or decision making bodies in the local church are crucial for the involvement of women in leadership and decision making roles. How can change be encouraged at grass roots level?

5). The importance of Language

Language shapes how we see ourselves and others. The language of public worship is important for how we see ourselves reflected and valued and how we feel part of the faith community. Therefore, it is a significant matter if the language used makes some of us feel invisible or excluded. The English language is changing in its usage and words like 'mankind' decreasingly include both 'men' and 'women'. Does the public language of the church not need to change too?

6). Women Clergy

In most of the member churches of the Council women can now be ordained to the full-time ministry. The challenge now is to ensure that women clergy have the opportunity to use their gifts and to exercise their full potential in ministry, in equality with their male counterparts.

7). Violence Against Women

The hitherto often invisible issue of violence against women has come increasingly into view. It has been found that many abused women first approach clergy, so how clergy respond is a matter of considerable importance.

As with sectarianism, overt violence can be seen as the top of a pyramid relying on layers of opinion, attitude, custom, teaching, language and acceptance. We in the churches are challenged to look at these things and our part in them. However, violence against women is not something 'out there' in society; there is evidence in other countries of violence against women in the church. There is no reason to think that Ireland is any different.

8). Appointments to Ecumenical Bodies

Appointment to the Council and its Executive Committee is in the hands

of the member churches. Is there not need for a better balance in the representation, while avoiding tokenism? Is this not also true of appointments to the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and other ecumenical bodies?

III. Conclusion

Many of the matters raised in this letter have major implications for the whole church. However, the fundamental issue is this: How do we envisage the church as a community of men and women journeying together - worshipping, working, making decisions, mutually responsible to each other?

IV. Response

We hope that the issues raised in this letter will receive widespread discussion throughout the churches. The Council would appreciate comments and reactions to what has been said.

February 1997

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