

2000

Annual Report of the Irish Council of Churches

Submitted to the Annual Meeting
of the Council
March 2000



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INTRODUCTION FROM THE GENERAL SECRETARY

A new millennium provides an occasion to review the past, assess the present position and attempt to discern what the future might bring. Three volumes of essays: *Religion in Ireland. Past, Present and Future* (Ed. Denis Carroll, Columba Press), *A Time to Build: Essays for Tomorrow's Church* (Ed. Stephen White, APCK) and *New Century, New Society: Christian Perspectives* (Ed. Dermot Lane, Columba Press), and the current work of the two Irish inter-church bodies provide much material for reflection.

Particular forms of church emerged in the 19th century, which remained intact into the 1960s and later. At the same time, linkages between Catholicism and Nationalism and Protestantism and Unionism developed. The churches provided much of the framework in which social and personal life was lived but it was a framework of separation and segregation - worlds apart. They also gained considerable social power and prestige. A particular and late flowering form of Irish Christendom developed with informal establishment. There were, of course, other themes playing as well, North and South: counter-themes of anxiety, pressure, vulnerability, marginalisation and exclusion.

The coming of partition in 1920 - one of the key political events in the 20th century - put a very considerable strain on the Protestant churches, marginalising as it did for a long time the position of Protestants in the South. Church experience in both parts of the island has been very different and that has had its impact on the kind of churches that have emerged, North and South. The troubles of the last 30 years have accentuated the strains.

The experience of the Roman Catholic Church, North and South, has also been very different. The Catholic Church in the Republic gained a special position in the Irish polity. The Catholic Church in the North became the key institution in Catholic nationalist society but had a very marginal position in the Northern Ireland State.

The Northern Ireland conflict has meant that socio-political matters have consumed a vast amount of energy in the churches over the last 30 years. It has also consumed a vast amount of necessary pastoral care. Particular parishes and congregations have been profoundly affected by conflict and violence. The troubles and a widespread insecurity have contributed to a general conservatism of church life in the province, for churches have provided safe spaces. A new situation for the churches is opening up; one which will bring far reaching challenges.

The churches were one significant factor in preventing the society from going over the brink into chaos. The church opposed those who espoused violence and the gods of nationalism. However, churches themselves have benefited in some ways from conflict and violence. The connection between religion and ethnic identity in Northern Ireland may have inhibited secularisation. The effect of an end to violence and of a political settlement on religious participation is worthy of thought. Many people have had a link with the church as a mark of tribal allegiance, to show clearly what they are not. Peace and stability will accelerate rapid cultural change.

Concepts of Britishness and Irishness and their links with religion have been transformed as the 20th century has gone on. An idea of Britishness compounded of empire, Protestantism, monarchy and industrial revolution is ending. The vision of a separate, self-sufficient, Irish nation-state has been abandoned. The linkage between Irishness and Catholicism is breaking down. Worlds are coming to an end.

The late 20th century has proved to be a chastening time for the churches in Ireland. The Catholic Church in the Republic has been humiliated by successive sexual scandals. The Church of Ireland has had to face anguish over marches to Drumcree Parish Church. The careful examination of the issue of sectarianism, which has taken place in the 1990s, has shown that the religious capacity to develop and sustain community is not without its shadow side; and that concern for truth can lead to the negative evaluation and treatment of others. There is a humbling and a winnowing going on. The many hurts caused by dominant churches over the years have come to the surface. There is a general decline in numbers and attendance. There is a rapid move going on from a situation of social prestige and influence to one where churches increasingly receive substantial criticism and have their views ignored.

There is a growing alienation from the churches, sometimes taking the form of anger but often of apathy. This is particularly acute among the young and in some urban areas. Weekly mass attendance is as low as 6% in some Dublin working-class parishes. The conclusion of a recent North Belfast survey was that:

...the vast majority of Protestant people in the urban community simply have not come to church on a regular basis for years.

It is in this context that the Belfast Churches Urban Development Committee has been writing up case-studies of seeking to develop connections between church and community.

The gap between the emerging dominant culture and the faith community is becoming huge. While there are continuing enormous strengths there is a sense of 'end-times' approaching for particular forms of Irish religion.

The crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic goes far beyond recent scandals. It is fundamentally related to a deep and far-reaching revolution which has been taking place in Irish society over the last 30 years. It is, in fact, difficult to think of any country in which so many and so great changes have taken place within such a short period.

The well-known religious commentator Seán MacRèamann says in his essay:

Clearly, the cultural scaffolding - of habit, assent, consensus, obedience, tradition or whatever - within which Irish Catholicism flourished for a century and a half, has collapsed.

The new culture that is emerging makes it difficult for religious faith to flourish. The sheer rapidity of the revolution leaves all the churches uncertain how to respond. Ireland's particular form of Christendom is disappearing. It is a much more complex Ireland that is emerging.

All through the 20th century there has been a decline going on in the number of people attached to the mainstream Protestant churches. This has been due to the effect of secularisation on the one hand and a drift to more conservative churches on the other. Our religious situation is one of increasing pluralism with no serious interest in church union.

Pluralism within denominations is also increasing. There is a vast difference in outlook, tradition, understanding and experience between one congregation and another within the one denomination. It may also be that the significance of the denomination itself is declining; for some people being Presbyterian, Methodist, Church of Ireland, or whatever is simply not that important. It is belonging to a particular expression of 'church' that they feel comfortable with which is important.

Divisions which cut across denominations are of huge importance, the most important of which is the liberal/evangelical one. Irish evangelicalism is a diverse and fragmented phenomenon but it is absolutely central to the Protestant churches. How it interacts with politics continues to be important. It has to be engaged with. There are people and bodies within it who have traditionally been suspicious of, and even hostile to, ecumenical organisations but who are increasingly prepared to reach out and co-operate with other Christians, and to engage constructively with the realities of a divided society. In the Ireland that is emerging there are new possibilities of engagement - the recent 'On the Edge' Conference is one example of some of the diversity of Ulster Protestantism coming together.

We should also note the significant growth of Pentecostal churches and of the house church/charismatic movement (this has been expressed in the Lifelink Network of Churches which recently joined the Council). There is a yearning for a vibrancy of worship and a demand for a depth of religious experience among some that we ignore at our peril.

People are searching for spirituality but this search is increasingly dissociated from clearly defined belief systems or corporate loyalties. In a consumer and individualistic world people shop around for answers to religious and moral questions; the attitude is one of 'pick and mix', of what is good (and true) for me. The spirit of the age is profoundly suspicious of institutions, particularly those that appear to be telling people what to do and how to live their lives. The world of options and preferences that we increasingly inhabit makes long-term commitments to anything odd and counter-cultural. How are we to engage with this emergent world?

Economic success has brought unprecedented prosperity to the Irish Republic. But it has brought new problems. The gap between rich and poor is widening. The evidence of social alienation is made manifest in the poverty of the inner cities and the growing number of homeless people in the streets. The economic boom has also brought an increase in the number of refugees and economic migrants. Thus, as we enter a new millennium the questions arise: What sort of society is emerging? Where are the necessary civic values to come from, particularly in the context of the revelations of how politics have been conducted?

The Irish Catholic Bishops in their Letter *Prosperity with a Purpose: Christian Faith and Values in a Time of Rapid Economic Growth* - the latest in a line of significant documents going back to *The Work of Justice* - have raised important questions concerning human flourishing in the new Ireland that is emerging. In particular, does prosperity produce gratitude that leads to generosity, or does it produce selfishness that leads to exclusion? All of these questions are framed within the context of a wider world of want which laps at our shores.

The arrival for the first time in the history of the Irish State of increasingly significant numbers of non-nationals from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural and racial backgrounds is launching the Republic on the path to a pluriform society. In a European context perhaps the only surprising things are how long this has taken to happen and how quickly the changes are taking place. In a globalising world the trend towards ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is unlikely to be reversible. 1999 has seen the appointment of a Refugee Projects Officer by the Irish Catholic Bishops and the formation of a Churches' Asylum Network. 1999 has also seen the inauguration of the first black-led church in Dublin. One of the new members of the Council, the Greek Orthodox Church, has seen its church in Dublin grow a hundred fold. It now caters for 18 nationalities, including Russians, Serbs and Romanians.

Ireland will be facing in the new millennium the issues that are being faced on a global scale: how to combine growth with equality and a sustainable environment; and how to face the issue of ethnic, racial and religious diversity. In the Ireland of the future we will have to be much more sensitive to minorities than heretofore. The recognition and negotiation of

difference are skills we are going to have to learn.

The possibility of a fuller ecumenism opened up by the Second Vatican Council and the onset of the Troubles in Northern Ireland almost exactly coincided. Thus the developing relationship between the churches has interacted with how the churches have responded to socio-political problems and issues raised by the Troubles. Peace-making, community relations and ecumenism have been tangled up. In a new context in Northern Ireland whither ecumenism? Ecumenism is above all honest and truthful conversation between churches and we had that at a seminar in November on *One Bread One Body* - the teaching document on the Eucharist produced by the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of these islands.

Relationships between the churches have been transformed over the last 30 years but it is clear that in the Protestant churches there is significant opposition to structured relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, and, indeed, that there is a deep seated anti-Catholicism. This is not just a reality within one church. Ecumenism is a potent source of division within the Protestant churches. New possibilities are accepted by some and rejected by others.

1999 was decision time in regard to re-constituting Irish inter-church structures. It proved impossible to move forward to the formation of the Conference of Churches in Ireland because of its rejection by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. We are left with an untidy and unsatisfactory situation which we have to make the best of for the time being. Churches have to honestly face the question of what sort of inter-church relations do they want, and, in particular, what sort of relationship do they want with the Roman Catholic Church?

There is more going on at local level than ever before. In some places in Northern Ireland this has led to the development of inter-church fora which seek to concentrate on local social problems, bypassing some of the traditional divisive issues. The Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster describes some of these developments in Appendix Two. The challenge is to deepen these relationships and find new ways of belonging in patterns of reconciled diversity.

Insecurity, fear and anxiety have permeated the Protestant churches in Ireland. They have been a particular feature, at various times, in this century. They have frozen traditions, produced a culture of suspicion, put an emphasis on sharp distinctions of doctrine and led to the search for theological formulations to bolster up communal identity. They have found an outlet in negative energies and negativity: the Northern Irish novelist, Brian Moore - who died in 1999 and who was utterly obsessed with religion - begins one of his novels by saying, "In the beginning was the word and the word was 'No'". They have put a premium on internal peace in some churches and encouraged factionalism and disputation in others.

The temptation has been to long for everything to remain the same or to seek to return to imagined yesterdays. We want to extend our yesterdays and todays into tomorrow in order to defend what we have - our identity, our attitudes, our ethos. The danger is we retreat from a future which looks as if it will be uncomfortably unfamiliar from the present and from the past.

There is a danger that we will get religious communities of withdrawal. In Northern Ireland there are many battered, bruised and hurt people who are deeply unhappy about the way the province is going and fearful about the future. There could also be a hardening of confessional identity into defensive attitudes and self-justification. A duality could open up within the Protestant churches: into those willing to engage with a new political and social dispensation and those wishing to withdraw from it, or to oppose it.

If a new kind of politics for Northern Ireland is to become firmly established, it will need to be accompanied by movements toward a new kind of society. Without an effort to build relationships and repair the social fabric there is no basis for a healthy society or a better future as a community. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, political developments challenge the churches as to what kind of role they are going to play.

For the sake of church and society alike, the churches could offer no greater contribution than to redouble their efforts to address the legacy of sectarianism, a contributing factor in the conflict we have suffered and a potential stumbling block and pitfall on the road to a new society. For the churches themselves, such efforts enhance - in fact they may well be essential to - the credibility and vibrancy of our witness to the gospel in new political circumstances. For the churches' contribution to society as a whole, the stakes are equivalently high: if new social relations are to take root and flourish, we must ensure that they are not undercut by a continuing sectarianism. Issues of separation and segregation are part of the reality that must be dealt with. Tackling sectarianism and seeking to find "a possible land" - a place of abundance - beyond it are suitable millennium projects for the churches in Ireland.

Drumcree has forced the issue of sectarianism onto the agenda of the Church of Ireland and 1999 saw a serious discussion at the General Synod. In the cautious words of Bishop Richard Clarke:

Perhaps the Church of Ireland General Synod of 1999 showed glimmerings of reluctant willingness to face the tyranny of our past with some honesty.

Resolutions were passed, but what is needed is not the passing of resolutions but the transformation of cultures.

Part of the price of creating and maintaining a political settlement in Northern Ireland may be the development of a civic amnesia about the past

- for the past is a dangerous country - combined with a search for suitable scapegoats to blame for the last 30 years. The churches may be expected to fulfil this latter role. We should recognise that there will be a necessary judgement for what has happened, and the churches will fall under that judgement. We should also recognise that there will be scapegoating as well.

At issue is also how we promote an appropriate remembered sorrow, lament and repentance for what has happened and for lost lives. Truthful living requires this. We can too easily seek to draw a line and move on with timid expressions of official regret, while disregarding hurt, pain, anger, grief and continuing grievance.

When we view the Ireland at the end of the 20th century it is with a sense of surprise. All that is solid is melting into air, the old maps do not do any longer. There is a possibility of a new situation in Northern Ireland. Southern Irish society is being transformed.

What does it mean to be church in a new millennium? The Department of Theological Questions of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting has attempted to raise some of the questions in a book to be published in the spring with this title. One thing is sure: we are moving into a post-Christendom millennium. What will it mean to be a post-Christendom church? Bishop Richard Clarke says that:

Our problem in Ireland is that we do not know what a non-Christendom church would be like from inside. We are not sure how to express membership of such an institution, and even less sure if we would actually like this sort of community which will inevitably have an acute vulnerability about it.

The temptation is to turn inward and away from risk. Whatever happens we are likely to be smaller, more marginal.

How can we be in full engagement with the realities of the 21st century and yet be distinctive faith communities that have Christ at their heart? The Building Bridges of Hope Project of the Churches' Commission in Mission has an Irish component and is trying to develop ideas of how local faith communities can be missionary congregations in their setting. How can we be signs of transcendence and points of contradiction to the worship of consumerism and globalisation? How do we reflect biblically and theologically in a rapidly changing context? There is a clear need for a recovery of imagination, out of which the Christian story might be attractively shown, and told in words of significant speech. We need, as we enter a new millennium, to be in a listening and learning mode so that we can find our way round this new Ireland.

Death of the Rev. Dr. R.D.E. Gallagher C.B.E.

The Rev. Dr. R.D.E. Gallagher died in December. Eric Gallagher had been involved in the Council from the 1940s until the early 1990s. He helped to revive the Council after the Second World War. He was Chairman at the onset of the troubles in 1969 and he sought to promote a positive response from the churches as the crisis evolved. The relationship which has developed between the member churches and the Roman Catholic Church since the late 1960s owed much to his influence and guidance. Eric Gallagher was an ecumenical pioneer and statesman and we give thanks to God for his life and witness.

Rev Canon Robin Richey

The Rev. Canon R. Richey retired from the Council during the year. He was Secretary and Organising Secretary to the Council 1965 to 1968, Records Secretary 1968 to 1972, Treasurer 1972 to 1984 and Secretary of the Inter-Church Centre Company 1977 to 1992. In addition, he was a long term Treasurer to the Irish Ecumenical Church Loan Fund. We would like to thank Robin for all the work he did for the Council over the years.

MEETINGS

The Annual Meeting was held in March at the Emmaus Conference Centre, Swords, Co. Dublin. On the Friday evening there was a report on the World Council of Churches Eighth Assembly given by the Rt. Rev. Dr. John Neill, the Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster and Mrs. Janet Unsworth. There was also a presentation on the Irish dimension of the Bridges of Hope Project given by the Rev. Dr. Gordon Graham on the Saturday.

The Autumn Gathering was held in McCracken Memorial Church Halls, Belfast, and Mr. E.R. McDowell, Development Officer of the Belfast Churches' Urban Development Committee, spoke on 'The Challenge of Being Church in Urban Society in Ireland Today'.

MEMBERSHIP

Following an affirmative resolution at the Annual Meeting the Coptic Orthodox Church in Ireland became a member church. There has been contact with the Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Dublin about becoming an observer church on the Council. The Rock of Ages Cherubim and Seraphim Church is the first black-led church in Ireland and had its inauguration service in July; the General Secretary took part.

THE ROLE, STRUCTURE AND FUTURE OF THE COUNCIL

Following the various decisions of the member churches on the proposal regarding the future of the Council and the Irish Inter-Church Meeting (see the section on the Irish Inter-Church Meeting) a special meeting of the Executive Committee was held in September. Following that meeting the

views of the member churches on the way forward were sought. The Executive Committee considered these views at its November meeting and a submission was made to the IICM Review Group. The Committee following the deliberations of the Review Group, and the decisions of the Inter-Church Committee, has set up its own ICC Review..

INTER-CHURCH CENTRE

Further work was carried out to the Inter-Church Centre in 1999. Christian Aid has indicated its intention to move to new premises towards the end of March.

COMMUNITY ISSUES

Meetings of those people in the member churches concerned with peace and political developments have continued through the year. The General Secretary has continued his active involvement in the Church Initiative Group which brings together, on an informal basis, people from the churches and Christian groups concerned with political developments. The Group has met frequently during the year because of the many recent political developments. One of the issues it gave a lot of attention to was church involvement in the proposed Northern Ireland Civic Forum. It has been agreed that there will be five church places in the Forum. Following discussion with civil servants and church leaders a mechanism has been agreed for the establishment of a Church Consortium to select the church places.

BOARD OF INTER-CHURCH AFFAIRS

The Child in the Church Group

Representatives from the churches have continued to meet and keep each other informed about the latest resources in regard to children's work. There were no specific events organised during the year.

Women's Link

The Annual Fellowship Day was held on April 17 in Taney Parish Centre, Dundrum, Dublin, with the theme 'Forward Together with Hope'. The main speaker was Mrs. Yvonne Naylor, the schools worker of the Corrymeela Community. The Fellowship Day for 2000 will be on April 8 in the Methodist Church, Omagh. The Rev. Dr. and Mrs. Norman Taggart will be the keynote speakers.

The first news-sheet 'Women's Newslink' was well received and two editions were published in 1999, the autumn one included information on millennium events taking place in the member churches.

Mrs. Gillian Kingston replaced Mrs. Marian Woods as President in September. The new President and the Secretary, Mrs. Joan Kirk, attended the Four Nations Link for women's work in Wales in early October.

The Women's Desk in the Inter-Church Centre now has seven helpers and operates on Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

Evangelism

The Moderator continues to attend meetings of the Four Nations Forum on Evangelisation and the Management Committee of the Building Bridges of Hope Project. There are five local churches in Ireland involved in the Britain and Ireland project which seeks to focus on what it means to be a missionary congregation. The Project is coming to the end of Stage B and is seeking to move to a new stage. What this might mean in Ireland is currently being discerned.

Black Christians in Dublin

Discussion took place at the March meeting of the Board on the increasing presence of black Christians among refugee communities in Dublin. Out of this came contact with the Rock of Ages Cherubim and Seraphim Church - the first black-led church in Ireland. The Board is seeking to encourage the Dublin Council of Churches to make contact with these groups.

The Rev. Dr Colin Davey

The Rev. Dr. Colin Davey, outgoing Church Life Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, gave his reflections on ecumenical developments over the last thirty years at the Autumn meeting of the Board. Dr. Davey has been a frequent visitor to Ireland, both for the CTBI and the British Council of Churches. We wish him well in his retirement.

Exchange of Information

One of the functions of the Board is to provide an opportunity for member churches to exchange information of inter-church interest.

BOARD OF OVERSEAS AFFAIRS

World Mission Committee

A joint Study Day with the Irish Missionary Union was held in November on the theme of 'Sharing a Vision in Mission: Listening to the Two-Thirds World'. There were speakers from India, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and upwards of seventy people attended.

The Committee continues to provide a forum for the member churches to exchange information and views on mission issues.

The Churches' Commission on Mission

The Very Rev. David Godfrey and Mrs. Maureen Irwin represented the Council at the ninth meeting held in Belfast in September. The President of

the Council was responsible for the worship and Dr. Cecelia Clegg of the Irish School of Ecumenics for the bible studies.

The Rev. Dr. Gordon Gray was appointed to the Middle East Forum of CCOM.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Ireland

This is an issue which continues to be of concern to the Board. A poster on refugees was produced. Following the appointment of Sister Joan Roddy as Refugee Project Officer by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, a Churches' Asylum Network for people in the churches based in Dublin has been established. The Secretary of the Board, Mr. Rob Fairmichael, keeps contact with the Network. (This section should be read in conjunction with the report of the Department of Social Issues of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting)

Kosovo and Kosovan Refugees

The Board at its April meeting expressed its disappointment at the hesitancy and lack of urgency of the British Government in facilitating the entry of Kosovan refugees into the United Kingdom. It also asked people in local communities throughout Ireland to urge their public representatives to take action to facilitate the reception of Kosovan refugees within Irish society and to indicate their willingness to welcome and care for such refugees within their local community.

Crisis in the Moluku Islands

The Board at its January 2000 meeting expressed its concern about the situation in the Moluku Islands in Indonesia.

Exchange of Information

One of the functions of the Board is to provide a forum for an exchange of information on various international situations and issues of church interest. During the year these have included: Sri Lanka, Sudan and the Middle East. The Board continues to hear reports about the work of Christian Aid in Ireland. There have been visiting speakers from Tanzania and Mr. Paul Renshaw, International Affairs Secretary of CTBI, attended the September meeting of the Board.

Christian Aid

Mr. Rob Fairmichael was appointed the Council's representative on the Irish Committee of Christian Aid in succession to Mrs. Muriel Gallagher.

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES

Dr. Kenneth Milne attended the first meeting of the new CEC Church and Society Commission in May in Finland.

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

A WCC team visit to Ireland took place in April. A lunch meeting was arranged with members of the Executive Committee.

The Rt. Rev. Dr. John Neill was elected to the WCC Central Committee.

INTER-CHURCH RECONCILIATION FUND FOR IRELAND

The following grants were agreed in 1999:

	£
Out and About, Londonderry - seeding grant towards detached youth work project	1,500
Conway Youth Centre, Belfast - for summer scheme	500
Creggan Pre-School and Training Association, Derry - towards cross-community women's programme	1,200
Carntogher Community Association, Maghera, Co. Londonderry - towards equipment for new youth and community centre	2,000
Beragh Youth Centre, Co. Tyrone - towards summer scheme	700
Roden Street Festival Committee, Belfast - towards summer programme	750
East West Foyle Youth Group - towards cross-community work	500
Bangor YMCA PAKT Project, Co. Down - towards summer and autumn programme	750
Donaghcloney Youth Centre, Co. Armagh - towards summer programme	600
Pop Bar Drop-In Centre, Belfast - towards summer scheme	600
St Oliver Plunkett Youth Development Scheme, Belfast - towards summer scheme	400
Alliance/Ardoyne Playscheme, Belfast - towards summer scheme	750
Corpus Christi Youth Centre, Belfast - towards summer scheme	750
Wishing Well Family Centre, Belfast - towards summer scheme	500
Ardoyne Youth Centre, Belfast - towards summer programme	700
Grosvenor Youth Club, Belfast - towards summer scheme	400
Ballynafeigh Community Development Association, Belfast towards summer scheme	500
Holy Trinity Youth Club, Belfast - towards summer scheme	750
Zero-8-Teen, Brownlow, Co. Armagh - towards summer scheme	750
Vine Centre, Belfast - towards equipment	1,500
REACH Across, Derry - towards cross-community programme	750
National Peace Council, London - towards schools information pack on Northern Ireland	500
Unity Trust, Rathcoole, Co. Antrim - towards equipment for after-schools club	1,200

Saints Youth Club, Belfast - towards equipment	2,000
Corrymeela Centre, Ballycastle, Co. Antrim - towards playground	1,800
Community Restorative Justice, Belfast - towards photocopier	2,000
Dromore Youth for Christ, Co. Down - towards equipment for drop-in centre	1,000
Tar Isteach, Belfast - towards essential security provision	2,000
Sydenham Cross-Community Group, Belfast - towards new centre	1,500
Primetime and Aquinas Group, Belfast - towards inter-church residential	250
Grosvenor Environmental Society, Belfast - towards cross-community children's programme	1,000
Newcastle YMCA - towards equipment for out of school club	750
Islandmagee Young Person's Group - seeding grant	700
Newtownabbey Clergy Fellowship - towards publication on local church history	800
Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland - towards costs of a publication	800
Foyle Women's Information Network - towards activities	1,000
Belfast Cathedrals Partnership - seeding grant	1,000
Belfast Central Mission - towards cross-community children's programme	700
Poleglass Residents Association, Belfast - towards fencing	1,500
PAKT, Lurgan, Co. Armagh - towards computer equipment	1,500
Committee on the Administration of Justice - towards conference on policing	800
John Paul II Youth Club, Belfast - towards summer school	750
Ballymoney Youth Outreach Trust - for youth outreach work	500

The following monies were designated by donors:

From Stichting Het Solidariteitsfond -	
Community Relations in Schools	2,760
Churches' Peace Education Programme	2,484
Speedwell Trust	5,797

Mr. Eddie McDowell was appointed to the Committee in succession to the Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster.

IRISH ECUMENICAL CHURCH LOAN FUND

The Fund provides low interest loans to peace and reconciliation, church and community projects. The Committee agreed the following loans in 1999:

Coa Community Group, Co. Fermanagh - £8,000 for 4 years at 4%
Share Centre, Co. Fermanagh - £10,000 for 4 years at 4%

During the year the Committee has been discussing the future direction of ECLOF Ireland because of a declining number of groups seeking low interest loans. It is anticipated that decisions will be taken in 2000.

The Director of ECLOF from Geneva visited Ireland in March. He visited projects which had been given loans and met members of the Committee.

BELFAST CHURCHES' URBAN DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

(The Committee operates in association with the Council, but is appointed by member churches in the Belfast area to encourage their social and community out-reach. It is funded by Making Belfast Work.)

Funding was extended for a three-month period from the end of December 1998 so that the Committee could work on a new funding proposal which would involve intensive work for a three-year period with a number of local churches in the Belfast area, plus a research element to establish the role that Protestant churches could play in the regeneration of their communities. In the event funding was only for a one-year period and the research element was reduced to the writing up of a number of case studies of good practice.

The Development Officer, Mr. Eddie McDowell, has worked intensively with a limited number of local churches, particularly in the North and East of the City. Significant funding was secured for two particular projects in East Belfast. The writing up of a number of case studies has proceeded and this was finished in January. It is intended to circulate this material to clergy in the city.

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 further developed the cross-border primary schools project with funding from the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. There were three groups of four schools in the Fermanagh/Donegal and Cavan/Leitrim areas. The project continued with its cultural traditions emphasis and with both curriculum and contact elements. In three cases there were concerts at the end with parents and relatives attending. An evaluation of the project was commissioned, the outcome of which was very positive.

In 1999/2000 the Programme is again working with three groups of four schools in the Fermanagh/Donegal and Cavan/Leitrim areas. Further funding has been received from the EU Special Support Programme.

Using the insight developed from the cross-border project, the Programme has begun to develop a similar cultural traditions project in the Belfast area. Two pairs of schools were involved. It is planned to expand this to four pairs of schools.

During the year Ms Elaine Hall, the Peace Education Officer with responsibility for primary schools, finalised the materials for Primary One and Two. 'Getting to Know' and 'The Zig Zag Carpet' became available in September. They are currently being promoted in primary schools throughout Northern Ireland, together with the Pathways Programme for the upper primary age group. Ms Hall has begun work on materials for Primary Three.

The full-time Administrator, Miss Roz McAuley, had to be made redundant at the end of June due to reduced funding. She was replaced on a part-time basis by Mrs. Anne Stewart at the beginning of September.

The Resource Centre in the Inter-Church Centre has continued to receive a considerable number of orders.

'What the Bible Says About the Stranger' was produced during the year as part of the 'What the Bible Says ...' series.

IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING (IICM)

(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 Sixteenth Meeting took place on 23/24 April, 1999, when the issue of sectarianism was the main subject under discussion. It was led by Dr. Joe Liechty and Dr. Cecelia Clegg of the Moving Beyond Sectarianism Project of the Irish School of Ecumenics. There was also a presentation on Refugees in Ireland. The next Meeting will take place on November 10, 2000.

Irish Inter-Church Committee (IICC)

The Committee met four times during the year. Proposals for a restructured and legally constituted IICM were put to the churches during the year. They were accepted by all the churches except the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. At its meeting in September the Irish Inter-Church Committee reviewed the situation and asked the IICM Review Group to see if it could chart a way forward. The Review Group brought proposals to the IICC meeting on January 31 2000, which are being acted on.

Sister Roisin Hannaway, Administrative Officer for the last seven years, left at the end of August. She was not immediately replaced because of the discussions of the IICM Review Group. Roisin made an enormous contribution to the efficient working of the IICM during her seven years.

Further meetings continued to be held of people from the churches concerning plans for the millennium. The IICC is recommending that in the year 2000 the Pentecost season be made as a time of celebration by the churches together. Worship materials for Pentecost and other occasions in the year 2000 have been produced by a special group. National Services were held in Belfast and Dublin on the afternoon of January 2. The IICC

encouraged the National Bible Society of Ireland to produce study materials called 'Restoring Justice, Living the Jubilee' which are particularly appropriate for use in Lent.

Department of Theological Questions

The study document on the church 'Being Church in the New Millennium' was finalised and will be published in 2000 by Veritas.

A Seminar on 'One Bread One Body' - the teaching document on the eucharist of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Ireland, Scotland and England and Wales was held in November. The document was introduced by the Rev. Bernard Longley who had been involved in its drafting and there were Methodist, Presbyterian and Church of Ireland responses.

Department of Social Issues

The Department provides a meeting point for social responsibility (or equivalent) people from the member churches. Information sharing is an important part of the Department's role. Issues of aging, victims of violence and tackling domestic violence have been some of the issues under consideration. A memorandum on the problems of migration, refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland was produced (see Appendix One) and submitted to the Irish Government. A member of the Department, the Rev. John Brady SJ, spoke on Sunday Trading to an Oireachtas Committee, following a submission being made.

The Chairperson of the Department, Mr. Gerry Martin, is representing the Department on the CTBI Church and Society Forum and its Agenda Committee.

Mr. Rob Fairmichael was appointed to service the Department on a temporary basis following the departure of Sister Roisin Hannaway.

Local Ecumenism

A weekend for local groups was held on 30 April/1 May at the Dromantine Conference Centre, Newry. There were 53 participants. As a follow-up a training course for those working with groups in an inter-church context is being held in conjunction with the Irish School of Ecumenics, the Mediation Network for Northern Ireland and the Moving Beyond Sectarianism Project.

The number of local groups continues to grow. One development to highlight is the growth of inter-church Fora. Appendix Two is an extract from an article by the Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster which describes this development.

The newsheet 'Irish Ecumenical News' continues to be sent out to groups.

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

The sub-committee produced the Irish Order of Service for 2000. With the departure of Sister Roisin Hannaway discussion is taking place about whether to produce an Order of Service together with the churches in Britain. This has been agreed on an experimental basis.

APPENDIX ONE

MEMORANDUM ON THE PROBLEMS OF MIGRATION, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN IRELAND

The Department of Social Issues, having been asked by the Irish Episcopal Conference to examine the possibility of a joint submission from the Christian Churches on current attitudes to the problems of MIGRATION, REFUGEES and ASYLUM-SEEKERS in Ireland, is pleased to reply.

Christian Response

The churches are very aware of the social and community implications of the recent increase in applications from refugees and asylum seekers in the Republic of Ireland - an increase in the period 1991 to 1998 from 31 to 4626 applications.

Early this year, Fr. Martin Clarke, in a reaction to correspondence in the *Irish Times*, outlined the efforts of various Roman Catholic agencies in responding to the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers. Additionally, religious and missionary groups - such as Conference of Religious of Ireland and the Irish Missionary Union - have addressed, through seminars and reports, the phenomenon of an influx into the country which has, in the past, generally experienced emigration rather than immigration. The churches in Ireland are clearly doing what they can, with limited resources, to support migrants and asylum-seekers, and the public will be aware of the hostel accommodation, educational facilities, pastoral care and guidance, which are being provided.

The evidence that the churches are already responding together is evidenced by schemes such as 'Project Karibu' in Dun Laoghaire, where decent rental accommodation is provided for refugees and asylum-seekers - living as a community/family on a basis of sharing and interdependence. The managers of this project, an inter-church group, challenge us when they state '*our commitment to our Christian principles will be tested when images [of starvation or ethnic strife in far away places] come out of the television box and knock on our front door*'.

Rev. Bob Hanna in the *Church of Ireland Gazette* [April 10th, 1998] drew attention to the work of the congregation at St. Columba's Church, Ennis, Co. Clare, in supporting a Nigerian citizen who was seen as a 'valuable

facilitator' among other asylum-seekers by the staff of the Ennis Refugee Centre. Rev. Hanna pointed out that most asylum-seekers in Ireland are highly skilled and well educated who want to be self-sufficient. *'If given an opportunity they will make a valuable contribution to Irish society'*.

The Christian Churches in England and Wales have, some years ago, contributed to a document on racial justice. This paper, *The Churches' Charter for Racial Justice in Europe*, was revised and updated in 1996 in response to the European Union Inter Governmental Conference 1996-97, the World Council of Churches Year of Uprooted Peoples 1997, the European Year Against Racism 1997, and the Second European Ecumenical Assembly 1997. The Charter, which enunciated seven principles as a basis for a Christian approach to the situation of ethnic minorities and to racial justice in the EU, has also been taken up by the European Councils of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and more recently, a specialist Conference [branch] of the SSVP in Brussels has been identified as a model for the organisation's work with displaced persons in Europe.

Other relevant movements in Ireland include the work of the Irish 'Vincentian Partnership' and that of SPIRASI [Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers].

The British 'Charter', referred to above, may well be very helpful in formation of any joint enterprise by the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, as will be the recent joint statement of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Connell, and the Dublin Council of Churches, on racism and asylum-seekers, published during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity - a further welcome initiative.

A proposal requiring urgent consultation and debate has now come in a paper written by Bill Toner SJ, significant in drawing attention to the need for long term policies as well as short-term solutions.

It is worth remembering that U.N. High Commissioner, Mrs. Mary Robinson, has affirmed that Ireland needs a policy infused with generosity.... each asylum seeker being an individual with his or her own hopes and dreams. Any joint submission from the churches must emphasise this continued respect for the intrinsic dignity of the individual and the sanctity of the family, and for the churches to work in concert with government to demonstrate, not only the hospitality of the Irish nation, but her fundamental Christian principles.

Lessons learned from the recent response of local communities to the programme refugees from Kosovo suggest important points that need more public recognition and exploration.

Basic Concerns

We are specifically asked by the Irish Episcopal Conference to consider the basic concerns of the church in relation to:

- (a) joint E.U. action on the temporary protection of displaced persons.
- (b) legislation by the E.U. Council on the elaboration of an agreement regulating the admission of nationals coming from third world countries.

Since these points should be addressed within a national framework, as well as within the wider European context, we believe that the following should be considered:

In the EUROPEAN context, it is the view of the Department of Social Issues, that the Christian churches should now -

1. **ENTRY** - continue to press for a uniform legal basis for entry to E.U. countries for non E.U. nationals.
2. **SHARING** - promote legislation for an equitable sharing between member countries of the responsibilities created by refugees and asylum seekers.

In the IRISH context -

1. **AMNESTY** - seek an 'Amnesty' to coincide with the Millennium. This would demonstrate in a real way the Biblical tradition of the Jubilee when debts were forgiven and the marginalised reinstated. This would mean treating all current asylum seekers (apart from those with criminal records) as legal immigrants. Such an amnesty would not only benefit the immigrants but would avoid costly legal proceedings and painful deportations over the coming years.

There is also a case which demonstrates that these immigrants would contribute to the economic well being of this country.

2. **RESOURCES** - seek to have maintained or increased the personnel and finance necessary for the processing of refugees and asylum-seekers, especially where it concerns appeals.

We believe that those persons given official refugee status must be afforded support in their integration into Irish Society, while recognising and respecting their own distinctive culture.

3. **LEGAL AID** - seek to have provided the promised Legal Aid for refugees and asylum-seekers, and to have developed the skills of those who have been given this task.
4. **WORK** - seek to allow applications for work after 6 months residence.
5. **FAMILIES** - seek to have particular attention paid to legislation which concerns the reunification of families so that spouses and children will

not suffer unduly from separation.

6. **DEPORTATIONS** - seek to stop all deportations until there is a proper assessment of recent legislation [Immigration Bill 1999] and a complete implementation of the Refugee Act 1996.
7. **IMMIGRATION POLICY** - seek to have initiated a full discussion of the policies which underlie the current legislation. The legislation would seem to suggest a policy of exclusion in order to maintain a monocultural society. In the next millennium Ireland is more likely to be a multicultural society and policies which promote this ideal would seem more appropriate. [For a full discussion see 'Wanted: An Immigration Policy' in *Working Notes*, December 1998.]

APPENDIX TWO

CHURCHES WORKING TOGETHER

The following is an extract from an article published in the April edition of the Methodist Newsletter by the Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster.

The New Context

After the 1994 ceasefires signs of new confidence began to appear. Even though the ceasefires were broken and later restored, the confidence level was appreciably higher. It was in this new context that Christians in Armagh began a process of meeting and exploration, which included strategic planning and which led to the formation of the Armagh Church Forum. The concept of a local churches forum with a 2 - 3 year development plan had arrived. Not surprisingly the model encouraged others and soon church people from Omagh were engaged in a similar development process. The process itself, which involved a number of interactive and facilitated sessions, was not merely about defining local identity and purpose and creating a development plan. It was essentially about encounter and building of relationships through trust and understanding. Eventually the Omagh Church Forum came into existence, going a step further than Armagh obtaining funding and appointing a part-time development officer.

When Omagh Church Forum was established no one saw the tragedy which would devastate the town. Yet when the terrible event did happen last August, the Forum had been in existence for eighteen months, relationships had been strengthened and the Forum members were able to act together in a visible and remarkable way. The structures and relationships were already there, enabling a significant response and a continuing contribution towards healing.

The 1998 Belfast Agreement has changed the context yet again. No one ought to have been naive enough to imagine that the Agreement was going

to resolve all the problems overnight. Nor was it ever going to eliminate all violence in a short time. We have been building a culture of violence for at least thirty years, with violent roots going back long before 1969. The Agreement provided a framework to begin a long process towards normalisation. Things have changed since last Good Friday. We are definitely not where we were nine months ago. The proliferation of local inter-church fora since the Agreement was signed indicates the rising grassroots confidence.

Creative Developments

Partnership is a key word and describes the approach to local developments. The Community Relations Council had held a number of regional one-day conferences on Churches and Community Relations. A region usually includes 5-6 Local District Council areas. The District Council Community Relations Officers have been active, each within their Council area, encouraging local initiatives. The regional conferences are facilitated by the northern staff of the Irish School of Ecumenics and explore issues of sectarianism, forgiveness and reconciliation, faith and politics and possible ways forward for local churches together. Conferences have been held in the north-east, Tyrone and the north-west.

The last conference held for the north-west in Coleraine trebled the number of participants from previous conferences. What is significant is that participants, ordained and lay, are drawn not only from four larger churches, but also from a number of the smaller denominations. For many these are encounters, taking place across traditional divides for the first time. To be in the same room and to make eye contact immediately begins to change the relationship. At the very least each other becomes human!

As a result of the north-west conference, five towns have indicated a desire and a willingness to explore the possibility of developing a local inter-church forum. Planning meetings will be held in two of these towns during March.

It could be said that Co. Tyrone is 'sewn-up' in terms of establishing local inter-church fora. Some of these are initially clergy with the intention of finding ways to include lay participants. Other models are already inclusive. Development pays attention to local sensitivities and needs. Some have 2-3 year programmes planned, while others are almost ready to put plans in place. Development happens at a different and appropriate pace in each area.

Based mainly within Local District Council boundaries, there are now local inter-church fora in the following areas, all of which have developed since the Belfast Agreement: Strabane, Cookstown, Clogher Valley and Dungannon.

Development meetings during March will, it is hoped, create possibilities in Coleraine and Limavady. There are other models of

cooperation which have also developed since the Agreement, some predate the Agreement, but have found new impetus since last Good Friday. Clergy in Newtownabbey area have contributed questions and concerns towards a forthcoming Newtownabbey Council Community Relations Audit. Future development is being explored by church representatives in the Greencastle, Whitehouse, Rathcoole areas, and there are journeys in understanding being undertaken by Christians together from east and north Belfast and Mossley. A journey in understanding, very much pioneered by Catholics and members of the Christian Fellowship Church in Carrickfergus, continues into its third year and at a deeper level.

All of these creative developments are post-1994 and most of them are post Agreement.

Final Reflections

The development of local inter-church programmes and local inter-church fora is set to continue. It is one of the positive and hopeful signs of the present. The nervousness about, and even antipathy towards, inter-church cooperation is being overcome as local Christians take creative and courageous steps. Relationships, trust and understanding are being built and a positive contribution is being made to the well-being of civil society.

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