

NIMMA News

Email- nimma@nireland.com
www.nimma.org.uk



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Irish Government confirms its commitment to reconciliation

‘NIMMA will actively seek funding from the DFA’

The Republic’s Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFA), Charles Flanagan T.D. has reaffirmed the Irish Government’s determination to help civil society groups in Northern Ireland to build reconciliation here and allocated more than two million euro of grant aid.

He addressed around 200 delegates representing more than 130 civil society organisations dedicated to furthering peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, at the annual Reconciliation Networking Forum in Dublin Castle.

Speaking about the current political situation in Northern Ireland, he said: “We are at a critical moment for politics in Northern Ireland.

“Just over a week ago, the two Governments announced a fresh round of intensive talks with a view to finding a way through the issues of trust and confidence arising from the legacy of paramilitarism, as well as the ongoing political impasse in regard to the implementation of the wide-ranging Stormont House Agreement.

“The issues are complex and affect all communities. I am determined to find resolutions.”

NIMMA has been funded by the DFA in the past and will seek further funding for the running of its Belfast operation within the next few weeks.

NIMMA Chair Ken Dunn said; “Minister Flanagan has consistently emphasised the importance of civil society groups that promote reconciliation having a strong voice in Northern Ireland. We in NIMMA have worked hard to have our voice, a voice that advocates compromise and tolerance, heard over the years and are thankful to the DFA for its support in the past”.

Minister Flanagan told delegates: “Individuals and groups across the community working on reconciliation must do everything possible to make their voices heard and help



Minister Charles Flanagan TD repeated his commitment to reconciliation.

create the momentum for positive change.

“This will be critical to the success of the political process.

Today is about recognising that while achieving complete and genuine reconciliation may be the work of generations, there is so much more that we can do together to bring this about.”

Joined-up

Speaking after the Forum, Ken Dunn said: “The Forum gives us all a real opportunity to get together, to share ideas and to learn from one another. We need to communicate, to collaborate and to produce a joined-up approach to battling sectarianism and building real reconciliation.

“Arguably the best suggestion from today’s Forum was a call for a Department of Reconciliation – on both sides of the border – with the clout to legislate real change in our society. We would give such an innovation our overwhelming support”.

Minister Flanagan added: “The community must always be at the core of politics and this Forum had provided the Irish Government with a valuable opportunity to meet grassroots activists promoting reconciliation on the ground.”

“This year, my Department’s Reconciliation Fund will provide •2.7 million in grants to organisations working to eliminate sectarianism and to further peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, on a cross-border basis, and between Ireland and Britain”.

NIMMA seeks funding for new mixed marriage book

Shortlisted for a major charitable grant in the late Autumn, NIMMA will continue to seek funding for the publication of its third book, according to Chairman Ken Dunn.

He said: “We have laid the groundwork for the book, ‘Exiles for Love’, about couples who left Northern Ireland after making mixed marriage, but we are having difficulties putting the necessary finance in place.

“We are delighted to have been shortlisted for a grant that will make that situation possible, but wait with fingers crossed for the final decision in late November. “We have done a lot of preparation work to show we are tackling intolerance and division on a daily basis and we also have a number of other funding irons in the fires.

“These are challenging days for all of us in the voluntary sector, but

I am confident that our hard work will pay off in the long term.

Meantime, Development officer Bernie Kells from the Northern Ireland Council on Integrated Education has confirmed that copies of NIMMA’s second book., ‘Both Sides Now’ have been distributed widely throughout the integrated and shared campus sector.

She said: “We have taken every opportunity to ensure that the book has been made available to as many teachers as possible.

“ NIMMA’s first book has been used extensively to spark debate and discussion about diversity and difference and the second book can reinforce that success”.



New York academic Aakaash Varma’s

latest project about reconciliation boasts input from both NIMMA books and a one-hour interview he recorded with the group at its Belfast office.

Aakaash, pictured back home in his native city, whose grandparents fled to the United States from India during its partition was particularly interested in the ‘Irish question’. “Diversity has helped enrich our country and it is clear that NIMMA is striving to create tolerance and acceptance of such diversity on the island of Ireland”.

Faroe-way Fields are green



The Faroese Wave: Soccer stalwarts, Canon Edgar Turner and daughter Kate . Pic courtesy of William Cherry PressEye.

The Vikings considered them the edge of the world, getting to them can still be the equivalent of a three-day camel ride, but the Faroe Islands held no fears for the Northern Ireland football team’s oldest supporter and NIMMA Church of Ireland chaplain Canon Edgar Turner. Seasoned soccer fan Edgar belied his 95 years to cheer on the boys in green to a three-one victory in their Euroean Championship qualifier in the heart of the Faroes Islands - a 1,000 mile round trip on a wing and a prayer.

‘Inter Church Families are a tremendous gift to the Church’

NIMMA’S sister organisations in the International Association of Interchurch Families (AIF), are lobbying the Vatican for changes in Roman Catholic restrictions that are causing ‘embarrassment’ to mixed marriage couples. In a document that is being presented to the 2015 Synod on the Family this month, the IAIF has pulled no punches when demanding movement on Baptism and Eucharistic sharing. American theologian Greg Hillis personalises those difficulties in his family’s story to NIMMA News.

“Every Sunday I see the same people at 8:30 a.m. Mass: this is the Mass I almost always attend alone.

At the end of Mass, I drive home to pick up my wife, Kim, and our three boys for the 10 a.m. liturgy at the Episcopal parish we attend as a family. Like my Catholic parish, this church is thriving, filled with young and old from a variety of backgrounds. There are cradle Episcopalians, ex-evangelicals who found life in the beauty of Episcopal liturgy and disaffected Roman Catholics. Because this is my family’s parish, I know these parishioners more deeply than the ones at my Catholic parish. My children play with their children, and our families regularly hang out together. During the liturgy I sit with Kim and my oldest son while his two brothers are downstairs for Sunday school. When it comes time for the Communion, we process to the altar rail where my wife and my son take Communion together. I cross my arms and am blessed by the priest. Apart from a few children, I’m the only person who does this.

We became an inter-church family on Pentecost 2007. On that day, after a long period of personal and familial discernment, I was received into the Roman Catholic Church. This was not an easy step to take. Up until that point, Kim and I were active members of the Anglican Church of Canada. In 2005, our first son was baptized in our Anglican parish, and as a lay reader commissioned by the bishop to preach, I was honoured to give the homily. We loved our parish, and I loved the liturgical beauty of Anglicanism, as well as the richness and depth of its theological tradition.

The problem was that I had ceased to identify with the Anglican tradition. In the years before my reception into the Roman Catholic Church, I gradually came to the realization that I was theologically, sacramentally, spiritually Roman Catholic.

The difficulty was that Kim did not, and she still doesn’t feel any need to be anything other than what she is—a Christian in the Anglican tradition. For me to cross the Tiber would be to introduce an ecclesial disunion into our family that neither Kim

nor I were sure we wanted. Yet Kim demonstrated unwavering understanding and love during this time of discernment, and we finally agreed that I should become a Roman Catholic, even if the rest of the family, including our three sons, remained Anglican. Practically speaking, this meant that I would become a Roman Catholic, while still continuing to participate with my family in worship at their parish, and that they would participate monthly with me at my parish.

I don’t mind attending church twice each Sunday. Nor do I mind belonging—albeit in different ways—to two communities of faith. When we moved to Louisville, our family found an Episcopal parish that has welcomed us, though some of its members are confused about why I don’t take Communion, and I found a Roman Catholic parish that has been similarly welcoming.

But neither Kim nor I anticipated just how complicated and painful our situation would be. We both knew that my transition to Rome would put us in two different communions, but it was another thing entirely to experience this separation. And as our oldest child grew old enough to take Communion, a whole new level of complexity set in.

We want our children to be exposed to the fullness of the truth, goodness and beauty of each of our traditions, but this raises practical questions with no clear answers. Where should first Communion and confirmation take place for our children? Can they experience these sacraments in both traditions? Can our children participate in the sacramental life of the Roman Catholic Church in a way that still honours and respects their roots in the Anglican tradition, but also allows them to experience what it means to be Roman Catholic? I strive to teach them about my faith, but don’t want such teaching to be mere catechesis. Kim and I want to give them a full immersion into the Catholic faith, but it is hard to escape the feeling that my church prefers to keep them on the outside looking in until they’re fully willing to commit to Rome.

What is needed is a church that is willing to envision pastoral responses to inter-church families that move beyond the tired narrative that the choice is necessarily between a narrow reading of canon law and indifference. Neither of these options adequately addresses the communion that exists in my family and in families like mine. What we had prior to my conversion, we continue to have—a shared devotion to Christ and his church, a shared desire to raise our children to love the God who is love and a shared experience of prayer and worship. It seems to me that families like mine are a tremendous gift to the church. We experience the unity for which Jesus prayed and therefore have something worthwhile to contribute to the church’s ongoing ecumenical dialogue. To open the door to eucharistic sharing among those who experience a profound communion of persons in inter-church families acknowledges that such communion truly exists, and would provide a foretaste of the unity toward which we as Christians, and as Roman Catholics, strive”.



Comment

From the Chair



Let's have a harvest worthy of hard work

We're into the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, better known in these parts as wet and windy, after a summer during which NIMMA didn't take time for a holiday. We've been busy trying to put together sufficient finance to see us through another year – our forty second - making applications to charitable trusts and foundations and networking across the island of Ireland. The result of all that hard work is still undecided and it will be late into this season before we discover if all our efforts have borne fruit.

I returned from Dublin last week after taking part in the Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Forum. Nearly 150 groups from Northern Ireland attended and it was good to hear the Minister Mr Charles Flanagan TD reiterate his government's determination to continue to support the work of reconciliation in the Province. Speaking to other groups, I quickly realised that even E2.7 million on offer by the Department will not be enough to fund everyone. NIMMA will certainly be looking for a slice of that anti-sectarian investment and our application was being finalised as NIMMA News went to press. NIMMA is the only provider of support and information about mixed marriage on this island and my colleague and I were determined to get across that message. We are a totally cross-community organisation that was working quietly behind the scenes long before the reconciliation industry was even thought of and we have a pivotal role to play in building a shared future. Our mission statement, which includes the highly unusual aspiration of reaching a stage of reconciliation where we can actually shut up shop, caught the attention of a number



Dublin Castle which hosted the Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Forum.

of delegates and I am sure focussed the minds of those who heard it and those diplomats from the Department. We do not only concern ourselves with money of course, although it sure comes in helpful. Vital pastoral work continues on a daily basis by letter, telephone and e-mail, while our educational strategy has been promoted and strengthened through correspondence with all of the major theological colleges on the island. We want to play a part in spreading the message of tolerance and compromise, particularly among student clergy. That correspondence has been encouraging, as has the reply from the Vatican to our letter concerning the Synod on the Family. . . . Progress is indisputably slow and it is frustrating that commonsense does not prevail to prevent civil disturbance and the perpetuation of sectarianism and that political leadership is almost nonexistent. Nevertheless, nothing worthwhile ever gets done without a lot of hard work and, thank goodness, the worthwhile struggle of many decent folk will outweigh the destructive efforts of the highly publicised few. We look forward with hope to a harvest worthy of hard work.

Ken

Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

**Bryson House
28 Bedford Street
BELFAST
BT2 7FE**

Telephone 02890 235444

