

**Conference Special April 2009**

# Sharing begins at Home

**NIMMA's dream of shared social housing being made available throughout the Province for which it has lobbied for years, is fast becoming a reality, as the latest shared development was unveiled near Lisburn.**

Visiting the 22 house, £4.6 million development at Causeway Meadows, Housing Minister Margaret Ritchie described them as "an important route to a Shared Future in Northern Ireland" and said that it was "rewarding to meet families committed to securing a shared future for their children".

She said: "The New Housing Agenda is not simply about increasing the supply of good quality, well-designed, energy efficient homes. It is as much about creating sustainable communities that welcome diversity in whichever form that

exists. In Causeway Meadows we have private tenants co-existing with social housing tenants, as well as with people from different cultural and social backgrounds. This is what sharing our future is about."

There has been a 100 per cent sign-up to the Shared Futures charter by Causeway tenants who are all committed to living together in a mixed neighbourhood. NIMMA's representative on the NIHE Housing Advisory Committee, Anne Odling-Smee, who attended the Causeway launch said:

"Progress is being made and we will continue to work with the NI Housing Executive and the housing associations to ensure the future of shared social housing."

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Venue: St John's church, Malone.

# Need for NIMMA as great as ever

**The need for the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association as a support and information provider for those couples either in or contemplating mixed marriages has never been more apparent, according to NIMMA Chairman, Ken Dunn.**

Speaking at the 34th annual conference, Ken said that Northern Ireland society remains divided along religious lines and the traditional difficulties of mixed marriage and the baptism of children – more often than not difficulties imposed from outside the relationships in question – will be with us for a long time to come.

**Pivotal**

He said: "Enquiries to our office about mixed marriage and baptism are on the increase and as mixed marriages now make up more than one in ten of all marriages and young people begin to meet socially as never before in the past 30 years, it is to be expected that this figure will increase substantially."

"NIMMA's main role has been to share the experience and knowledge that we have

gained over the years with those in need of information and support. It remains pivotal and that sense of sharing just as vibrant as in the dark days of the 1970s."

The theme of the conference was inter-church spirituality and guest speaker Fr. Tom Layden, who heads the Society of Jesus community in Belfast, gave an educational and entertaining talk on the shared spirituality in mixed marriage.

**Shared**

NIMMA chairman Ken Dunn described the timing and content of the 2009 event as "particularly relevant to this time of year". He said: "We had just celebrated St Patrick's Day and the saint's central role in the shared spirituality of all Christians on this island, so it was appropriate that Fr Tom's talk focussed on the sharing of the roots of our faith and their importance in mixed relationships".

The conference, which was held in St John's church, Malone, for the first time, featured the main morning lecture and discussion, but children from the Bright Lights dancing school lightened the proceedings with a display of Irish and Ulster Scots dance in the afternoon.

The conference was supported by the Good Relations Unit of Belfast City Council.

## Membership

**Interested in joining or rejoining NIMMA? Simply complete and return the enclosed form or e-mail us at [nimma@nireland.com](mailto:nimma@nireland.com)**

## Accord Courses

**Interchurch Marriage Preparation Programme**

**26th & 28th April 2009**

venue

**Comfort Hotel, Antrim**

Contact Accord at 028 90233002

e-mail [MPC@accordni.com](mailto:MPC@accordni.com)

## Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

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*(Evening appointments available, 24 hour answer machine service)*

Tel- 028 9023 5444





**From the Chair...**

## **“Blessed with a love for Diversity”**

The Northern Ireland “Troubles” had already claimed their 1,000<sup>th</sup> victim when the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association was formed in 1974.

The country was in despair and hope for the future in short supply when a small band of men and women, all of them either in or hoping to be in mixed marriages, made time to get together to share friendship and offer support to others. Ordinary people in extraordinary times starting a journey of many milestones.

### **Lobbying**

In the intervening years, there have been significant successes for NIMMA during years when bombs sounded louder than wedding bells, as well as in the post-conflict period after 1998. Undoubtedly, NIMMA lobbying dramatic changes to many of the restrictions that hampered these marriages, as requirements were dropped and promises removed, and, although the areas of “shared” Eucharist and Baptism remain contentious, the work to change rules and minds continues apace.

NIMMA’s prime function has been to provide pastoral care for its members and to impact on the religious and

## **“It is about changing society as a whole to enable those who wish to marry to meet with less and less resistance”**

community understanding of intermarriage. It has always recognised that the need to change attitudes in this society and within the religious communities of our country will allow it to weave a network of relationships that can provide a voice and support for full integration.

### **Changing**

It is not simply about changing the minds of clergy and family members regarding mixed relationships, it is about changing society as a whole to enable those who wish to marry to meet with less and less resistance as the years go on. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland remains rife with sectarianism and NIMMA knows only too well that there is still a long way to go before a real sense of normality can be achieved.

Social housing is proving a crucial area in which the association is helping to tackle

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sectarianism head-on. There have always been areas where, because of economic conditions, both communities have been able to live in harmony, but these have been few and far between. NIMMA is working with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ensure that its visionary plan for shared neighbourhoods, inspired by the residents themselves and supported fully by the housing authorities, can make that a reality for people in the social housing sector.

### **Resolved**

NIMMA remains unique among the family of inter-church organisations. It seeks to address community and segregation issues that simply do not exist in other countries and, while there appears to be a general perception with Northern Ireland society that the mixed marriage issue has been resolved, day-to-day experience tells us that it has not.

The nightmare stories that came to NIMMA at the height of the Troubles have certainly subsided, it is easier to get married than it once was, but there is still the reality that some clergy and parishes are opposed to mixed marriages. It is clear that not everything has been resolved. Segregation is insitutionalised in a variety of areas and NIMMA’s work is still needed and relevant to address it. Ten years after the Good Friday Agreement, there is a tendency on the part of many who would revitalise the Northern Ireland economy to believe that multi-million pound, shared, shopping malls can somehow foster integration better than organisations like NIMMA. It is a short-sighted solution that owes nothing to vision.

NIMMA has been described as “a courageous, tenacious, prophetic and capable organisation”, but we must never lose sight of our original vision for the association.

Our founders identified the needs of those who wished to enter into mixed marriages to get the advice, encouragement and support they needed. As many of these trailblazing couples have lived out their mixed married lives in the years since 1974, they have borne witness to a division that has been bridged in a loving, yet differentiated way. There are more bridges to build and more trails to blaze, but long may we be blessed with that love for diversity.

Ken Dunn  
Chairman.

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