

Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association

PRESS RELEASE

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11th March 2009

Mixed Marriage conference for Malone

The Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) hosts its 34th annual conference at St John's Church of Ireland, Osborne Park, Malone, on Saturday 21st March.

The theme of the conference is inter-church spirituality and guest speaker Fr. Tom Layden, who heads the Society of Jesus community in Belfast, will speak on the shared spirituality in mixed marriage.

NIMMA chairman Ken Dunn describes the timing and content of the 2009 event as "particularly relevant to this time of year".

He said: "We will have just celebrated St Patrick's Day and the saint's central role in the shared spirituality of all Christians on this island, so it appropriate that Fr Tom's talk will focus on the sharing of the roots of our faith and their importance in mixed relationships".

The conference, which is being held in St John's for the first time, features the main morning lecture and group discussions, but children from the Bright Lights dancing school will entertain guests with a display of Irish and Ulster Scots dance in the afternoon.

The conference is supported by the Good Relations Unit of Belfast City Council and starts at 10.30am.

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Notes to editors:

- 1) Attached is some background material.**
- 2) Children from the Bright Lights dancing school, in full costume, will be available for photographs from 1.45pm until 2.15pm on Saturday 21st March. NIMMA members will be available for interviews/photographs throughout the day.**

A love for diversity

Background to the NIMMA conference

by Chairman Ken Dunn

The Northern Ireland “Troubles” had already claimed their 1,000th 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.

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 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.

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 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 tremendously hard 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.

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 institutionalised 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.

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