

PAPER TO IICM, 20.10.2023

Positive Impacts of IICM.

The question I've been asked is how the IICM has contributed to the development of inter-church relations and the witness of the churches in Ireland? That's obviously a fairly broad remit, so I want to limit my comments to the period I know best which is from around about 2002 to 2017. It was actually quite a significant time in the development of the ecumenical landscape and structures in Ireland. Further, I want to make clear that I am not attempting to give a definitive, well-researched history of those years, but rather a more personal memoir, I suppose, of what was going on and the reasons for it. Some of you will tell me that my memory is flawed or coloured by my own perspective – which I'm sure it is in places. So for those of you who don't know me, let me say I am a life-long, unapologetic ecumenist, believing that good relationships among the churches is a gospel and missional imperative. It has always therefore been an important aspect of my ministry. That probably does colour what I have to say, but I say it as someone who was intimately involved in the discussions of that period.

I also need to make clear from the outset that while I will try to concentrate on the work of the IICM, it is not possible, or even helpful, to entirely separate out IICM initiatives from the broader work of all the ecumenical structures which are in place in Ireland. There are those who argue that we have too many such structures and at a time I might have agreed, but as I travelled around I realised that we are not out of line with everybody else. Many countries have more than one ecumenical body doing different but complementary things, as indeed does continental Europe as a whole. The important thing is to be sure that each one knows its own focus and how they relate together, but more of that later.

To begin to understand church relationships in Ireland during the first 2 decades of the 21st century, we need to understand the changing context in which the witness of the churches was taking place. The pace of change in Irish society, both South and North, although for different reasons, was faster than perhaps it has ever been. Politically, the Good Friday/Belfast

Agreement was established – sort of – and central. To be fair it was making a difference. In the North the promise of investment was beginning to show signs of progress and while economic growth in the South may have slowed a bit from its “tiger” years it was still strong, in both cases with the support of Europe. Brexit then was a dream for some people, a nightmare for others, until towards the end of this period when it led to political confusion. Ireland was becoming a place for young people, for whom many of the old issues were increasingly irrelevant – as were many of the questions churches tended to ask. Accepted norms were being ignored, or sometimes deplored. Add into the mix the growing number of migrants who came to this island, some legally some not, some Christian some not, and it will I hope become clear that the work of the churches, including their relationships with one another, could not be static in this rapidly changing scene.

Of course the churches themselves were also changing, as was their relationship to government and established power. I think it’s fair to say that during the period under review most of the major historic churches were going through crises of confidence to a greater or less degree, for reasons which it wouldn’t be helpful to go into now. I do think, however, that it wasn’t just that their influence in general was waning and church attendance going down, there was something much more fundamental going on. The churches were being forced to ask the question, “Why are we here?” and perhaps the supplementary question, “Why are we here together?” At the same time many new expressions of church life and Christian faith were being established on the island and there was the question of how the existing churches would relate to their new-found sisters and brothers in Christ.

I’ve been asked to share positive impacts of the IICM, but as I said earlier the various bodies cannot be neatly separated. One positive impact, I believe, was the ability of the ICC in the early years of this century to establish relationships with the newer, often migrant led churches and that then filtered through to the broader network of IICM. I say “newer”, in reality some of these groups represent very historic traditions of Christian faith which simply haven’t had a presence in Ireland before. It probably proved easier, in some ways, to welcome these churches and fellowships

into the inter-church family and to build up networks in that way, than it was for individual denominations to take the initiative, although of course I would want to acknowledge that much good work has been and continues to be done at an individual level. While the new churches' membership would be of the ICC, that membership then filtered through to the IICM and it's good to see some represented here. I'm not suggesting that the arrangements for welcoming our new friends into the ecumenical family were ideal – it was a time of flux and sometimes creative ambiguity. In many cases the leadership of these fellowships was part-time and leaders, who had other work, found it difficult to get to meetings. What impressed me at the time was the length to which some would go to make sure they were present when invited.

Interestingly, and unintentionally, the positive impacts I am identifying can each be roughly placed within the tenure of office of a different ICC General Secretary and therefore IICM joint secretary. The success in welcoming new fellowships was largely, certainly in the early days, due to the commitment of the then General Secretary, Michael Earle - indeed it was something of a passion of his and he may have been frustrated at times by the need to keep some of the rest of us on board. It was an important witness of welcome.

Also important, during the early years of this century, was the work, commissioned by the IICM on migrants and asylum-seekers, undertaken at various times by people like Adrian Christea and Damien Jackson, among others. This was an important exercise of networking and research which produced helpful reports, not least as the basis for discussion within the churches and with government. I don't think any individual church would have had the resources to do that, although I suppose neither did we. I say that because I always feel it unfortunate that so often these initiatives depend on external funding which to a degree dictates what can or cannot be done. However, the work undertaken in this area was important and timely research which informed the work of the churches and is still relevant today.

In 2010 there was a significant change in personnel. Michael Earle, whose wife Anne had sadly passed away, decided to return to his roots in New

Zealand and so there was a vacancy for the post of General Secretary of the ICC and, by definition then, joint secretary of the IICM. This was filled by Mervyn McCullagh whose particular skills, I think it's fair to say, are in organisational change and communication. He is a force to be reckoned with, but unquestionably – to me anyway – was the right person in the right place at the right time.

The structures of ecumenical endeavour in Ireland had grown somewhat like Topsy. They worked – sort of; most of the time – but no-one was quite sure how they worked. So at the risk of stating the obvious for some, let me quickly run through the central ecumenical bodies that are in place in Ireland. Understanding how they fit together is not helped by the general ecumenical tendency to refer to everything by its initials!

The IICM is the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, which we are at. It used to meet every 2 years but more recently every year, or possibly 18 months. Its on-going work is then carried out through the IICC, the Irish Inter-Church Committee, which meets about 3 or 4 times a year and to which the member churches of the IICM appoint members. To make it more confusing the IICM and IICC are actually joint meetings between the IEC, the Irish Episcopal Conference, which I will probably for convenience refer to as the Catholic Church, and the ICC, the Irish Council of Churches, on which protestant, orthodox, reformed and some newer churches are represented. I said earlier that this was a time when the churches were somewhat losing confidence in themselves and with that came a reasonable, perhaps commendable tendency, to re-examine the value of the programmes they were supporting, including naturally their inter-church relationships. It led to an element of fractiousness – not serious but it was evident at the time. I must admit that I myself was becoming a bit frustrated in the middle of the '00s at what seemed to me to be endless, futile discussions without any clear outcome.

The relationships between the IICM, the IICC and the ICC are as I've just them, but the weakness of that structure, certainly from the ICC churches point of view, was that the same issues became replicated on both, or perhaps all, agendas, with no definitive decisions being taken and certainly

no clear responsibility for the implementation of any decisions that were made.

There was another factor in all of this, and I have to be careful now what I say! I have described the official ways in which the churches related together – and still do – but there was another body which probably was better known than any of the others and that was the “Four Church Leaders” meeting. This was an informal meeting which had emerged during the troubles in the North and let me immediately say that it was very useful, perhaps even essential, at that time. But it had no official recognition that I could find within the church structures. So far as I am aware it didn’t report to any of the churches’ governing bodies. Yet it was to the four church leaders that the media turned for comment at a time of atrocity or political crisis. They quite rightly then issued a statement condemning violence or calling for reconciliation, but were they speaking as individuals or on behalf of the churches? No-one was quite sure. The leaders also became the conduit used by government, particularly the Northern Ireland Office, for sounding out the mind of the churches, but was it the mind of the churches, or of the Church Leaders? Now it’s true that their very existence made an important statement about working together, so I’m not minimising their importance in any way. But, by the early years of this century the scene had changed. Groups and individuals with particular agendas were asking the Church Leaders to comment on issues, or to endorse programmes, which really should have been the work of this organisation (the IICM/ IICC). To make matters even more difficult not all the church leaders were members of the IICC, which would in fact have been doing any detailed work on behalf of the churches. I know I was not the only one who, shortly after his appointment, told Mervyn that something needed to be done to bring clarity to the situation and of course Mervyn went about that task with alacrity.

His approach was to undertake a strategic review of what we were doing and what we should be doing. If you like the organisations were invited to deconstruct themselves in order to construct themselves again, but with more intentionality. It was hard work and took many meetings. Eventually we came up with a **Vision Statement**. I must admit that at the time and still today I wonder if we weren’t over-selling ourselves a bit, but I suppose

vision is always broad and stretching in its scope. **Our vision was: “To be a bench-mark of unity in Christ for churches and communities globally”**. We looked at that yesterday and I agree with the suggestion that “parable” would be a better word than “bench-mark”.

That led to what was called a Proposition, or, I suppose, a **Purpose: “Developing and providing a channel for Ireland’s churches to connect through a common belief in Christ”**. That, I believe, was a crucial statement. It didn’t refer to static structures, although some structure obviously is needed, but rather suggested a fluid channel through which the churches may connect through our common belief in Christ.

From there the **Values were identified – Faith, Holiness, Respect, Hope and Witness**. That took time and each is important, though the results are too easily filed away and forgotten. The churches have a habit of focussing on structure, as though it was the most important thing. In fact ecumenical contacts are about developing relationships in Christ, as he himself said we should. The real question then is how effectively the structures are fulfilling the purpose and reflecting the values for which they were brought into being.

The review then went on to ask “What is the task of ecumenism today?” I won’t give the answers of that time because it seems to me to be a question which needs regular review. Only when all that had been discussed was the issue, “What is a workable structure?” raised.

This was a really interesting part of the exercise because Mervyn insisted on bringing in consultants, particularly to work on a logo and strapline. I must admit I’m always sceptical of consultants, who often seem good at giving you back what you first told them, but we were assured that out of this consultation clarity would follow! I still remember the first meeting where we all sat around in a circle, in a not particularly comfortable office, writing key phrases onto yellow post-its and sticking them on a wall. It wasn’t a way of working with which most of us were very comfortable, but it did what I expect couldn’t have been done any other way. It helped us to realise that what we are involved in is a dynamic movement; a development, as I said earlier, of relationships. So the structure became secondary to the purpose.

In discussion the strapline beside the logo became almost self-evident: we are Churches in Ireland – Connecting in Christ. Some thought, initially, that perhaps it should be “connected in Christ”, but quickly it became obvious that it has to be on-going; the work is not complete. So we are quite happily two organisations – IICM, ICC – but under one umbrella – “Churches in Ireland – Connecting in Christ”. There was a lot of detail then needing to be worked out – like how the church leaders fitted in – but I won’t bore you with all of that. What I would say is that after that review the ecumenical relationships in Ireland, which had been struggling a little bit, took on a new shape and dynamism. That’s another of the positives I would share.

One thing that naturally developed, following on from the other work, was a fresh look at what the IICM, through the IICC, really wanted to be doing. It had operated for a long time through two main fora - one on theology and one on social issues. The problem was – and this is not to show any disrespect to those involved at the time – the fora had taken on a life of their own. The IICC didn’t commission work, it was informed what the fora were doing – which was often very useful work, but at times was lacking in coherence and co-ordination. The radical, and somewhat controversial step was taken to do away with the fora and then when the IICC itself saw an area on which the churches wanted to work together it would bring together a group to do that. In my experience that worked effectively, although I have one niggling reservation. It seems to me that serious theological reflection is not to the fore in the way it should be. Serious commitment to ecumenical relationships means that we need to tease out our theological differences not hide them away.

However, I’m here to talk about the positive and I believe the changes did begin to work effectively following that decision. I offer a couple of early examples; I’m not actually sure which came first and perhaps inevitably both my examples come from the North. I apologise for that. The fact is - and here I know I’m being controversial - there was at the time a northern bias to the work that was being taken on. That may have been inevitable, coming out of the years of conflict, but hopefully there is now a better balance.

My first example was when the Churches held an evening consultation on Education and invited all the main stakeholders to the event, which was held in Assembly Buildings. It attracted the attention both of the media and politicians, some of whom, in both categories, were surprised at the churches working together, especially on this topic. It showed the Churches had a seriously thought out position which they wanted to share.

My other example is from the time when the UK government decided to change the welfare benefit system. Universal credit is just coming in now but the initial discussion was a long time ago. The new plan was clearly going to affect detrimentally the poorest and most vulnerable in society, but rather than simply say “we don’t think it’s a good idea” the churches did a piece of serious research and then took it out to the political parties. I remember sitting at one meeting with Sinn Fein, who had also done their homework, and being amazed at how much detail we actually knew – I’m using “we” in a loose sense!

My point is that the changes made to IICM structures were beginning to work in practice. We had become much more nimble, if you like; we could identify issues of common concern to the churches which needed to be challenged and then do the work. Where once the churches acted individually it is pretty well the norm now for them to at least discuss things together, even if, on occasion, they cannot come to a common mind.

When I say “do the work”, in my experience that rested on one or two people and one in particular – Dr Nicola Brady. Nicola was working then for the Episcopal Conference. She is, as many of you will know, an academic researcher who doesn’t let anything pass her by. I’m not sure that the change in gear I have outlined for our ecumenical activities would have been possible without Nicola and so, when Mervyn decided to move on, it was a great delight and relief to some of us when Nicola applied for the job as ICC General Secretary and therefore joint secretary of IICM. I have two things to say – one is that when I phoned Maynooth to tell them of her appointment they were very gracious; and the other is that I didn’t hear a murmur about the fact that the ICC was appointing a member of the Catholic Church to be its General Secretary. Both I see as positive signs of a growing maturity in inter-church relationships in Ireland.

If I can add a little addendum, which may be beyond my remit as it's not entirely positive. During this period the churches at a central, denominational level discovered new and vital ways of working together in relationship and that is great. I'm not sure that is true at a local level. Certainly, in my experience there was much more intentional working together 40 years ago than there is today. Some will say there is less of a distinction now between the churches and a more natural coming together, but I wonder. Could this be the next challenge for "Churches in Ireland – Connecting in Christ"?