

Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association Report

Foreword to Report

More often than not, the fact of not being able to see the wood for the proverbial trees is all about perspective. Those of us who formed the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association all those years ago and the many hardworking volunteers who have sustained it ever since can vouch for that.

We all knew that an urgent need was being continually addressed, that a catalyst for change had been set in motion that would make a real difference to the lives of many people, but standing close meant that sometimes we could lose our focus on the bigger picture.

So, it was pleasantly revealing when this report by American academic Jayme Reeves transformed the random series of slightly smudged snapshots that was the NIMMA picture into a clearly-defined photographic exhibition worthy of the work it portrays.

NIMMA's prime function has been to provide pastoral care for its members and to impact on the religious and community understanding of intermarriage. We have always recognised that the need to change attitudes in this society and within the religious communities of our country will allow us to weave a network of relationships that can provide a voice and support for full integration. This report, after more than 30 years, outlines how we are doing just that.

The challenge could not be clearer, as the report states: "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".

We in NIMMA continue to bear witness to division that is bridged in a loving, yet differentiated way. There are always more bridges to build, but long may we be blessed with our love for diversity.

The preparation of this report has been a long and co-operative process to which many have contributed. We gratefully acknowledge funding from The Anchor Foundation for this project. NIMMA member Anne Odling-Smee deserves great credit for her contribution as research liaison throughout the production, as does Hugh Nelson for his work with her at the early planning stages of the project. Our thanks also go to Meryl Spiers for coordinating its administration and to all of the academics and researchers who gave of their time and resources to facilitate this publication. Finally, a very special thank you to all the couples whose interviews put a face and a heart to the reality that is mixed marriage in Northern Ireland today.

Compared with 1974 the picture is much brighter today, but in a society where segregation is institutionalised, this report, a validation of what has been achieved, remains a vivid reminder of what still needs to be done for a shared future.

Ken Dunn
NIMMA Chairman
March 2009

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Blessed with a love for Diversity

The Northern Ireland "Troubles" had already claimed their 1,000th victim when the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association [NIMMA] 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.

Recent research by American academic Jayme Reeves has identified many successes for NIMMA during years when bombs sounder louder than wedding bells, as well as in the post-conflict period after 1998.

Undoubtedly, lobbying by NIMMA brought 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.

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As Jayme Reeves puts 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.

Jayme Reeves describes NIMMA as “unique among the family of inter-church organisations. She writes, “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 within Northern Ireland society that the mixed marriage issue has been resolved, day-to-day experience tells us that it is not.

“The nightmare stories that came to NIMMA at the height of the Troubles have certainly subsided, it is easier to get married that 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.

“Institutionalised segregation is still rampant 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”.

Jayme Reeves describes NIMMA as “a courageous, tenacious, prophetic and capable organisation and we must never lose sight of our original vision for the association.

“NIMMA’s founders identified the needs of those who wished to enter into mixed marriages to get the advice, encouragement and support they needed to live healthy lives. 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, NIMMA

17th September 2009

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