The beginnings of NIMMA – a reflection by Jenny Meegan

In the late autumn of 1973, I was up at Corrymeela, I think with a group of girls from Glencairn school in Belfast where I was a youth tutor. I'd been involved in Corrymeela since the autumn of 1969 and a member since 1970.One evening after dinner I remember sitting at a table by the window looking out towards the village, maybe with two or three other people. I was having a conversation with Harold Good the Centre director and Derick Wilson and in my mind, I see them standing with their backs to the window. I had just become engaged to Brendan and mentioned how we were grappling with the practicalities of a mixed Methodist/Catholic marriage. What started off that night as a general conversation somehow turned in to a 'good idea'. What about getting together at Corrymeela couples who were in or thinking of entering a mixed marriage. Derick and Harold knew of couples through Corrymeela, we could contact sympathetic clergy, and so we came up with the idea of holding a conference at the centre.

So the first conference, which was organised by Corrrymeela, was held on the 8th to 10th of February 1974. 11 couples in or planning a mixed marriage attended for at least part of the weekend, including myself and Brendan. Eight ministers from; the Presbyterian (2) Methodist (2) Anglican (1) and Catholic (3) Church, Including Ray and Harold were at the conference. Three people and a Catholic priest were from the South of Ireland and were involved in the Association of Inter church families based in Dublin. It is interesting looking back at the names of the 11 couples who attended, three of whom went on to later become very involved in NIMMA, for others they had received what they needed from the one conference.

A document with 11 points arising out of the conference was circulated to attendees. Points made were ;mixed marriages could be happy and need not be a problem, Tolerance and understanding were needed where one partner had a stronger Christian commitment than the other, Pressure was greatest on the mixed marriages who did not accept traditional attitudes of church and society, the churches had failed in pastoral care, difficulties for those desiring an ecumenical marriage service, bitter criticism of the Irish Catholic hierarchy interpretation of the rules, The churches failure to agree on intercommunion was a source of division, problems of a segregated education system, need for couples to agree on fundamental values, the greatest and most urgent concern was from present community problems in Northern Ireland of intimidation and the churches didn't help this, proposals for a follow-up meeting. (full document on document site)

Although NIMMA later became an independent organisation the personal and pastoral, financial (enabling the conference for participants at a small fee) and organisational support by Corrymeela were really crucial in these early days. On the 18th of February 1974 a letter I still have was sent (and I can see my name on the typed letter filled in Mathilde's handwriting as she would've been Rays secretary!) on Corrymeela community headed notepaper to all participants at the conference inviting them to a follow-up meeting on Sunday, March 3. The agenda was to be election of chairman, discussion of the conference, talk by a guest from the English association of Inter church families and proposals for future action. I note that the joint convenors of this group were myself (J Sutton) and Mr C Bradley.

The next record I have of the activities of NIMMA is for December 1975, Brendan and I were married in August 1974 and did not come back to Belfast until the following

September. In the intervening period the group initiated by Corrymeela was joined by another small group under the care of the Rev Edgar Turner of Saint Georges in Belfast. And these groups came together in NIMMA. For many years the annual conference was held at Corrymeela, and a really crucial role was played by Corrymeela House in acting as a mailing address and a point of communication for anyone enquiring about mixed marriages. These years were right in the midst of the Troubles! To have a neutral venue for an address and for meetings and to receive phone calls was critical to the development of the organisation and to allow confidential help to be given to couples seeking advice.

Between December 1975 and August 1976 my handwritten notes record 14 contacts made by couples for help via Corrymeela House in response to an advert in the paper or referral by sympathetic clergy. In the following six months there were another 16 contacts, These were followed up either by phone or, more often meeting the couple in Corrymeela house, there was a rota of NIMMA members to respond to the contacts. In late 1975 a couple in a mixed marriage from Twinbrook came for help as they were very frightened and with the help of Corrymeela and contacts in England they were moved to Shropshire.

The annual conferences at Corrymeela were very important and couples could come just on a one-off basis. In 1976 Fr Adrian Hastings was the guest speaker and in 1977 Fr John Coventry SJ. In 1978 April 21-23 Fr Joe Laishly SJ of Heythrop College spoke about ecumenical sharing. The fee was £10 per person illustrating the generous support from Corrymeela, and Family rates were available with children being looked after during the main conference. In 1979 April 20-22 ‘Living in a Mixed Marriage, problems of conscience’ speakers Rev Tony Baggot SJ and Rev Alan Falconer. Over 20 couples attended. In 1980 11-13 April, the speaker was Rev Michael Hurley SJ and Rev John Greer from the Church of Ireland.The topic was ‘What about the children.’ In 1981 May 1-3 the speakers were Rev Jim Hartin, Warden of the Church of Ireland Divinity hostel Dublin and the Rev Gerard Clifford Armagh. diocese advisor. The cost had risen to £15 per person or £35 per family. In 1983 Prof John Barkley and Fr Brian Lennon spoke at the conference on ‘Unity or Tradition’.

Newsletters were sent out by NIMMA three times a year which contained updates and information about any publications or latest developments in terms of mixed marriages in Ireland and elsewhere. There were monthly meetings in Corrymeela House with speakers. In May 1980, a group of NIMMA members travelled to Rydal Hall in the Lake District to join the English Association of Interchurch families conference. Over the years, in addition to meeting with couples asking for help, the group responded to different statements by the churches about mixed marriages and lobbied and met relevant clergy. In 1983 NIMMA ran a workshop as part of Summerfest.

Due to other commitments, we were not involved with NIMMA after 1981. Today it has an employed worker and has several publications describing the stories of those in mixed marriages. But the contribution of Corrymeela to its founding and growth has been a crucial part of its success and story.

Jenny Meegan, March 2021