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News

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Big Lottery backs Mixed Marriage book



A paperback book telling the story of mixed marriage couples in the Province has been given the green light, thanks to a publication grant from The Big Lottery Fund.

At least six couples will get the chance to tell their stories – in their own words – as the book, with the working title “Mixed Emotions”, seeks to tell the real story of those who have put love before tribal allegiances.

NIMMA Chairman Ken Dunn said, “This is a project that has been close to our hearts for a number of years but, only now, is the funding in place to do it justice.

There is already a great demand for information about both the logistics of mixed marriage and the actual experience itself from prospective couples, the press, the churches and community groups. It is a demand that has not been met – yet - because the individual stories have yet to be recorded.

By definition, any Mixed Marriage scenario is totally cross-community, but we intend to advertise widely for participants and to organise group sessions where couples can talk through their experiences.

We will choose as broad as possible a cross-section of contributors to the final publication from the many who take part to reflect a selection of true stories that form a composite of the Mixed Marriage experience in the Province.

The entire project and the eventual publication are designed specifically to highlight the mixed marriage experience in Northern Ireland and thereby encourage more people to talk about it, to tolerate it



Artist's impression of NIMMA paperback

and to hear first hand from couples, who themselves are being encouraged - for the first time - to speak out.

It is about bringing together couples to share their experiences of putting love first and to show how their example can make a real difference to so many in our community, particularly our young people.

The project is also about increasing awareness, promoting inclusiveness and heightening self confidence. Our volunteers will also be encouraged to play their part.

The couples concerned will have shown real courage to take part, courage that will inspire others to see mixed marriage as a reflection of a healthy society.

We trust that the resulting book will be entertaining as well as educational and our target audience includes just about everyone in these islands”.

Copies of the NIMMA's report -Celebrating the Work - Evaluating the Impact” - priced £3 each - are available. Contact NIMMA on Belfast 90 235444 or e-mail nimma@nireland.com



“A positive of change

Service of healing marks centenary



Healing is about creating a salve that will take way hurt and the service held recently in a church at the bottom of Belfast’s Shankill Road certainly did that, according to NIMMA Chairman Ken Dunn.

“A group of Protestants and Catholics came together in a spirit of love and reconciliation to recognise the terrible hurt that Agnes McCann suffered 100 years ago.

“She was certainly the victim of tragic circumstances, used and abused by both sides, but, in revisiting that tragedy, in our joint worship, we celebrated the fact that such an occurrence could simply not happen today”.

This happy fact was echoed by both guest speakers; Canon Brendan Murray from the Roman Catholic Church and Rev David Lapsley from the Presbyterian Church.

Canon Murray, an old friend of NIMMA, went on to say about mixed marriage that, thankfully, “Most of the battles are in the past and things have changed for the better. I find NIMMA a source of great influence and most priests regard its mixed marriage booklet as very useful.”

Rev Lapsley, a former minister at Fisherwick Presbyterian Church in the city, said that the power of all the churches had greatly diminished since the days of Alexander and Agnes and that today’s young people would not be dictated to by clergy. That was a good thing, he said, but went on to ask how the churches would deal with the new morality that exists today. NIMMA members read the prayers of intercession during an ecumenical service that featured hymns as well as readings from the Psalms and the New Testament.

Healing



A service of healing and reconciliation took place this month to commemorate and ameliorate the controversy that dogged a mixed marriage couple in Belfast one hundred years ago. The service was held in Townsend Street Presbyterian Church in Belfast. In May 1908, Agnes Barclay, a Protestant, married Alexander McCann, a Catholic, just a few weeks after the introduction of the new Roman Catholic decree “Ne Temere”.

Under the terms of the decree, the marriage was regarded as invalid in the eyes of the Roman Catholic Church, although this was hardly noticed at that time.

Exactly one hundred years ago, however, in October 1910, the marriage broke up in tragic circumstances and a controversy that fostered hurt and division ensued.

The facts of the case were argued at Westminster, more violently on the streets of Belfast and its legacy has been one of difference and division.

This service was designed to help heal those divisions, reconcile those differences and celebrate the fact that there has been positive change and progress in the intervening years. The service was the brainchild of Cistercian monk Fr Eoin Waldron from Bolton Abbey in Kildare who has been a friend of NIMMA for many years.



Fr Gerry Lennon, Dr Ken Dunn and Fr Eoin Waldron.

celebration and progress” of tragic mixed marriage breakdown



Canon Edgar Turner, Rev David Lapsley and Dr Paul Darragh.

“Radio Two”



What Happened?

Some time in the Autumn of 1910, Alexander McCann left his wife Agnes and took their two children with him. Later, he took most of the furniture.

Agnes had been nursing one of the children, so, in great distress, she walked around the city searching for them. When she eventually met Alexander, he refused to give her the children.

Her plight was brought to public attention by the Rev William Corkey, who was minister of Townsend Street at the time.

It was a particularly sad case of marriage breakdown, but the difference was that some Roman Catholic clergy claimed that the marriage had been invalid because of the Ne Temere (1908) decree.

Ne Temere declared those marriages not made before a Roman Catholic priest to be invalid and the children to be illegitimate.

It also forced the Protestant partner in a mixed marriage to make a written promise that all children would be raised as Roman Catholics.

Alexander McCann and his two children disappeared and were never traced. It is believed that Agnes was taken in by a former missionary and his wife, but we do not know how she fared after that.

The Rev Jack Lamb, who facilitated the event at his home church, is pictured with Barbara Collins who recorded the service for BBC radio.

“It was a pleasure and a privilege, on behalf of the Kirk Session and Congregation of Townsend Street, to welcome everyone to the service of healing and reconciliation.

In preparing for this service, I was indebted to Brother Eoin Waldron from Bolton Abbey and Ken Dunn of NIMMA.

I am also deeply grateful to Rev David Lapsley and Rev Canon Brendan Murray for sharing their reflections on a significant afternoon.

I hope that everyone who attended sensed God’s presence and blessing”.



From the Chair.....



Making time for History



This month's column definitely has a historical feel to it. Recently, we in NIMMA were privileged to be part of a Service of Healing and Reconciliation to mark the centenary of the Ne Temere controversy. The McCann marriage was torn apart by an over-strict application of the changed Roman Catholic marriage laws. Subsequently, the case was used to further a political cause and the plight of Mrs McCann seems to have been ignored. There were riots in the streets of Belfast, questions in the House of Commons, and a debate in the House of Lords. Large meetings were held to protest about Ne Temere in Belfast, Dublin, Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, and in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Before the McCann case 30 per cent of the Presbyterian General Assembly were Home Rulers, but after, this dropped to 4 per cent.

Ne Temere was enthusiastically applied in Ireland, even retrospectively in some places contrary to Roman Canon Law. This resulted in marriages of 20 years standing being broken up. The accumulated result of this marriage decree was to demonstrate how Protestants would be treated in a united Ireland. As Professor Oliver Rafferty SJ, in his book *Catholicism in Ulster 1603-1983*, put it 'the effect of the decree in Ireland was to provide ammunition for the more politically intransigent unionists, who saw it as further evidence to justify the maxim that Home Rule would be Rome Rule'. Despite a great deal of effort by NIMMA, many think that Ne Temere is still in force. It was replaced in 1970 by *Matrimonia Mixta*, which was reinforced by the Irish Roman Catholic Directory on Mixed Marriage 1983. This now allows the marriage to take place in the bride's church with both clergy present and the couple are jointly tasked with the upbringing of the children.

The couple are to decide if all, some, or none of the children are raised as Roman Catholic. In other words the couple have equality within their marriage to live as they so desire.

These are busy times for NIMMA as we head toward the end of the year. We continue to provide information and support on a daily basis, while our outreach programme last month saw me give a talk about the history of mixed marriage in Ireland to the West Belfast Historical Society (WBHS). I find that the success or failure of any talk can be quickly gauged by the quality of the questions that follow it. Well, if that is anything to go by, this one went well, as the WBHS audience set some really searching questions. The WBHS was set up in 1974 – around the same time as NIMMA

Finally, great news last month that we have got the funding in place to publish the story of mixed marriage. We have been talking about and planning for this book for several years – more in hope than expectation – so our thanks go to The Big Lottery Fund for making it possible at last. The hard work starts now, but it will be well worth it and perhaps, our own little piece of history in the making.

Here to Help
 You can contact NIMMA by telephoning Belfast 90 235444 or e-mailing nimma@nireland.com
 Our website is ww.nimma.org.uk and our office is open five mornings a week at Bryson House, 28 Bedford Street in Belfast

Obituary

Rev Professor J J McEvoy
 1943-2010

Older NIMMA members will be saddened to learn of the death of Fr Jimmy who was a good friend to NIMMA in our early days. He took a personal interest in mixed marriage and how it influenced community relationships. He was always available to give pastoral care to couples wanting marriage, baptism, or how to deal with parents.

NIMMA lost touch with him in 1988 when he was appointed to a Chair at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. He subsequently moved in 1996 to Maynooth and then back to Queen's University (2004) to a part-time post in Scholastic Philosophy. Maura and I represented NIMMA at his Requiem and conveyed NIMMA's sympathies to his family.

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