



NIMMA NEWS

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NIMMA gets timely core funding boost

NIMMA has received the backing of a leading UK philanthropic trust.

A two-year deal will see the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation fund the Association to the tune of £10,000 a year. And the funding could not have been more timely, according to NIMMA Chair Ken Dunn.

Welcoming the partial core funding, he said: “We were in real danger of going out of business all together. It was a frightening prospect after 40 years battling for the rights of mixed marriage couples, but the Esmée Fairbairn Trust has ensured that our work can continue and that real reconciliation can replace the ‘absence of violence’ situation that pertains at the minute.

“We still need further funding to maintain our current profile and are actively seeking finance from the office of the First and Deputy First Minister.

The people at Fairbairn have shown their faith in our work and our plans for the future and we trust that the Northern Ireland government will echo that support with, at least, matching finance over the next 24 months”.

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation’s Senior Grants Manager John Mulligan said: “I very much look forward to the next two years and hearing how the work progresses.

“ I’m pleased the funding came at the right time. The hope is that a new generation will be given the opportunities to come to different conclusions than their parents. An absence of violence helps, but is but just one of the components necessary.

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, established in 1961, is one of the largest independent grant-making organisations in the UK.

Rave reviews for “Book People” at QFT



Play about mixed marriage gives two NIMMA couples the chance to take centre stage. Full story on Page 5

Let's have the toleration and acceptance we deserve

One in ten Northern Ireland marriages is mixed.

Today, it is easier to make a mixed marriage and the increased availability of integrated education and mixed social housing is providing a backdrop that bodes well for the future.

But there is much still to be done to ensure that couples who put love before tradition receive the toleration and acceptance they deserve, writes NIMMA Chairman Ken Dunn.

NIMMA was formed in February 1974 after a number of people in mixed relationships got together at the ecumenical centre at Corrymeela in Co Antrim to create a social and self-help group.

It is a registered charity that has been funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin for the past seven years, yet survives hand-to-mouth due to severe cut backs in recent times.

The Northern Ireland 'Troubles' were, arguably, at their worst at this time, but NIMMA took a stand to represent people in mixed relationships and since then has worked to be an advocate on behalf of diversity and to help build a united community.

Providing support, advice and information to thousands of couples, raising public awareness and understanding of the experiences of couples and families involved in mixed marriage/relationships and lobbying policy makers, churches and organisations to address the needs of those couples have provided milestones along a 40 year journey.

Challenge

And, today, if the Association had a mission statement, it would probably read; 'We have done well, but our aim is to put ourselves out of business' as we continue to challenge sectarianism and to change attitudes to and repressive regulations against mixed marriage. A recent showing of the movie 'A Love Divided', as part of the Queen's Film Festival' highlighted the impact of the Fethard-on-Sea boycott of the 1950s on religious attitudes on both sides of the border and focussed on the mixed marriage that was at its core. The film chronicles the aftermath of a mixed marriage in Co. Wexford, where a Protestant-raised wife refuses to send her children to a local Catholic school. She flees with her two young girls, leaving her husband confused, frustrated and totally under the influence of his parish priest.



The wife had signed the Ne Temere contract, which obligated her to raise her children as Roman Catholics. In the film, the local Roman Catholic priest ratchets up his outrage at her non-compliance, instructing his parishioners to boycott all non-Catholic business, which leads almost inevitably to more 'base' actions like burnings, beatings and daubings.

After the showing, there was a panel discussion chaired by Claire Hackett (Falls Community Council), Geraldine Smyth (Senior Lecturer, Irish School of Ecumenics) and myself which gave us a chance to open up the subject further.

It is remarkable how much we all claim to know about Irish history and how little we actually do and it is that little knowledge that has proved a dangerous thing in our society for generations.

Ne Temere

I contrasted the story we had just viewed with one from Belfast over 100 years ago, when a Presbyterian woman, Mrs Agnes McCann, was told that her mixed marriage was not recognised; it had been made in a Presbyterian church, and the recently passed Ne Temere Decree dictated that it should have been made in a Roman Catholic church. Agnes' Roman Catholic husband, Alexander, later absconded with their two children.

Mrs McCann never saw her children again. It was suspected that the Roman Catholic church had assisted with the relocation of Mr McCann and the children, through New York then Philadelphia. NIMMA recently tracked down their descendents, the parents' grandchildren.

The Ne Temere Decree and the subsequent Protestant political backlash against it, with 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' et al were to have catastrophic effects on community relations and the geopolitical make-up of this island. We are still trying to shake off those effects more than a hundred years later.

“mixed marriage can be the model for all our futures”



Much has been made recently of how the foundations of Northern Ireland society will be transformed over the next ten years. The talk is about equality and sharing the future.

I've listened to the talk and, fundamentally, I like what I hear. But, such fine words about sharing and diversity and tolerance and learning to live together are not just the lofty ideals of the policy makers. They are already being put into practice by thousands of mixed marriage couples across the country.

Mixed marriage has been with us since the Reformation itself. In Northern Ireland, it accounts for an estimated one-in-ten marriages and is on the increase. I say 'estimated' because, despite its obvious significance to many, government doesn't even recognise the importance of capturing this statistic. No wonder there remains much to be done to ensure the acceptance of mixed marriage in a divided society.

Divisive

NIMMA has enjoyed many successes during the four decades of its existence. Lobbying of the Churches brought dramatic changes to many of the restrictions that hampered these marriages in the past, as requirements were dropped and divisive promises removed. Our work to change rules and minds continues on the religious front in areas such as shared Eucharist and Baptism and we remain committed to ensuring that toleration and acceptance of mixed marriage become building blocks for the future.

The shared present that is the reality of mixed marriage today can be the model of the shared future of tomorrow. A little of that combination of compromise, toleration, understanding and humility that make for successful mixed marriages, in which couples put love before traditional tribalism, can go a long way to shaping our society for the better.

Psychologists tell us that a sound attitude to mixed marriage is the barometer of a healthy society, but 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 has helped 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 has worked 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, has been made a reality in areas right across the Province.

NIMMA is considered unique within the family of inter-church organisations around the world. 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.

Baggage

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 'marrying out' brings with it the baggage of fear, suspicion and a degree of secrecy that make a mockery of 'normality'.

Fifteen years after the Belfast Agreement, the First and Deputy First Minister's "Together: Building a United Community Strategy" has identified housing and education as areas of particular importance. I make no apology for including mixed marriage in a trinity that holds the key to stability and sustainability and I envisage NIMMA playing a pivotal role in building trust and real reconciliation in the years to come. Perhaps, from a base at the Maze complex.

Talk today is about a united community, based on equality of opportunity, the desirability of good relations and reconciliation. That community already exists in the homes and hearts of those who have built bridges between the traditions by finding love in diversity, accommodation in compromise and the courage to follow their convictions.



AGM Comment

From the Chair.....



Working for a healed and ‘normal’ society

A challenging 12 months has seen NIMMA battle for funding with at least partial success, enjoy a fruitful partnership with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) and manage to clock up 40 years in the service of mixed marriage.

Sadly, NIMMA’s work is ongoing, given the institutionalised sectarianism that is rampant in Northern Ireland, and, although our ultimate aim is to become unnecessary and redundant, the lack of political will for a truly shared future makes this a very long-term ambition.

Political posturing by parties in power, that see little elective value in promoting the middle ground, has led to a suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly initiative, “Together Building a United Community”, as well as the proposed Peace and Reconciliation Centre at the site of the former Maze prison. NIMMA was and is keen to take a buffer position at that centre to balance the extremes and to tailor its services to meet the needs of a united community. We await developments, but fear even greater extremism will continue to see us marginalised.

Unique

Recent history of disputes, parades and overt sectarian hatred show us that while Northern Ireland has a peace of sorts, it is as far away as ever from reconciliation. NIMMA is the only organisation providing support and information on mixed marriage on the island of Ireland, the only organisation that lobbies on behalf mixed marriage couples and children and the only organisation that is actively working to put itself out of business. Those are unique selling points in anyone’s book and we will strive to continue to fund our work. The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation has come on board with £20,000 of funding over the next two years and we are most grateful for their generous support, but we will have to find matching funding on this island to ensure our survival in the longer term.



“We look forward most of all to continuing to provide the very best services we can for the people who need us most”

Marriage is at the centre of people’s lives, it connects or divides families and communities and it brings to the fore fundamental issues such as where to live, baptism and education for children and even which music is ‘acceptable’ and which sports can be played. Couples in mixed relationships and their children have learned ways to address these issues, to conquer divisions and derive richness from diversity. These are issues that need to be shared if Northern Ireland is to become a healed and normal society. Reconciliation has become an industry in Northern Ireland, but NIMMA has the wit, expertise and experience, garnered over five decades, to realise that the personal impact of mixed marriage and its acceptance can act as a blueprint for a shared future for all.

Book

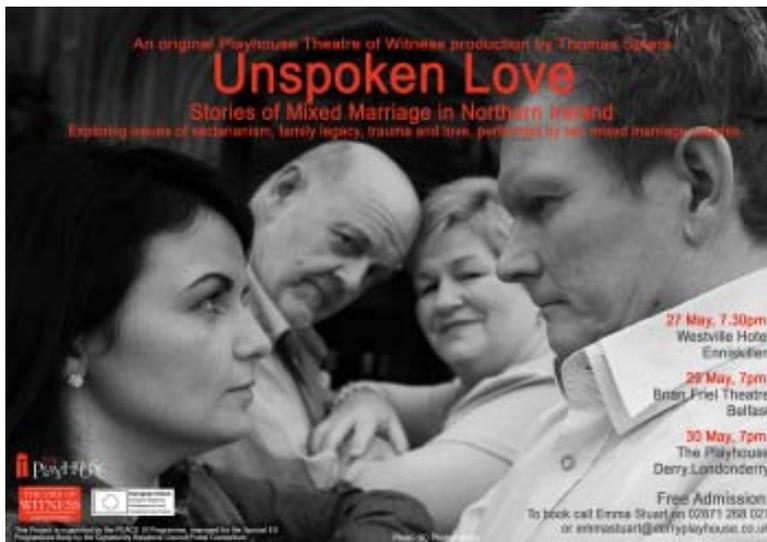
We look forward to the 12 months ahead, to our new partnership with the Esmee Fairbairn Trust, the Autumn publication of our book about the children of mixed marriage, ‘Both Sides Now’, our continued support from NICIE and its direct link to the school-age teenagers who are our future, but, perhaps we look forward most of all to continuing to provide the very best services we can for the people who need us most.

Plenty to say about “Unspoken Love’ success



Two of the couples that featured in ‘Mixed Emotions’ have opened their hearts about their mixed marriages and much more in a Theatre of Witness production that played to rave reviews in Enniskillen, Derry/Londonderry and the QFT in Belfast.

Director Thomas Spiers said: “The stories are strong and the people are stronger and that makes for life-changing drama. My fascination with these stories of ‘Unspoken Love’ arose from a personal experience of seeing the exclusion of mixed faith couples in my own family and community; a love shut out either harshly by violence or subtly cold shouldered through an equally savage and hurtful silence.



Working with Roley, Jo, Sharon and Stephen, I have learnt so much about the nature of love and the art of loving. They have taught and inspired me, helped me recognise how love is at its best when fully surrendered to, against hard odds and uncompromisingly followed to its fullest end. They have known and have walked the precarious yet sure way of love.

Embrace

I am thankful that I had a good guide to help me in my journey with these honourable people as we created this piece. My mentor, Teya, has shown me that to direct in the Theatre of Witness requires a moment by moment behold-ing of experience, no matter in how beautiful or grotesque a form it appears, to embrace what only life can teach and feel the depths of my own and others feelings.

The Theatre Of Witness mentoring programme, set up by Derry/Londonderry’s Playhouse Theatre in 2009, has established itself as a means of expressing true, unheard stories through the mouths and motions of those who experienced them....

I owe my gratitude to NIMMA for its help in connecting me with these wonderful people. I think in part they were able to trust this process and begin working with me because they knew and trusted NIMMA from their book experience. The outcome was an amazing experience for everyone involved”.

“To Tom Spiers, the director of Unspoken Love, “love” is remote; that is, until we experience it ourselves or see its kindness, generosity and courage in the lives of others. For that, we turn to two mixed marriage couples; Roley & Jo McIntyre and Stephen & Sharon Gault. The quartet of two Protestant men and two Catholic women walk onto centre stage in loving synchronicity, immediately establishing a strong emotional bond with the watchers. It is the ideal set-up for an intimately authentic reflection on love and marriage”