

NIMMA News

July 2019

TIME CALLED on NIMMA HQ

NIMMA will struggle to relocate its Belfast office when it has to vacate its current base, Bryson House, next Spring, according to Chairman Ken Dunn.

He told NIMMA News; “Bryson House is being sold to allow the Bryson Group to develop bigger and more suitable premises to continue its growth, but for a tenant such as NIMMA, which has been housed here for nearly 25 years, the news has come as something of a shock.

We have learned from other charities that city centre premises are extremely hard to come by and agents demand signed leases of up to three years.

That would be impossible to commit to for a charity like NIMMA that operates on a shoestring from year to year.

The Bryson Group, which hopes to finalise any deal by the end of this July, has given us plenty of notice and we will be spending the coming months seeking new premises”.

It Says on the Tin

The ‘Everyday Objects transformed by the Conflict’ exhibition at Stormont features a wide range of ‘artefacts’ from milk bottles to bin lids .

NIMMA’s contribution is a humble tobacco tin, bought in Switzerland during the honeymoon of a mixed marriage couple from Northern Ireland in 1975.

Its little label tells a proud story of how a local clergyman, who made that union possible, kept it close all these years.

That man, NIMMA’s Church of Ireland chaplain for more than 40 years, befriended the couple in those difficult days and the tobacco was a gift from them.

Today it sits as an ordinary



reminder of extraordinary times, a trophy in the battle against sectarianism and a symbol of a friendship cherished.

Kate Turner, pictured with the tin, is the director of the Healing through Remembering charity which developed the exhibition. Her late father was that devoted chaplain.



BELFAST learners from USA

A congregation from Colorado USA got a two-hour crash course in the complex problems of religious and tribal division in Northern Ireland when they visited St George’s Church in Belfast.

Fr William Odling-Smee, a veteran of NIMMA for decades, is the curate at St George’s and led a lively discussion that

included the once taboo subject of mixed marriage.

The parishioners from St Matthew’s in Grand Junction enjoyed the cake, the craic and the chat and issued an open invite to their Belfast counterparts to go West.

Charity Foundation JMF delivers £5,000 backing

NIMMA Chair Ken Dunn has hailed the backing of the John Moores Foundation after it pledged £5,000 toward the Association’s running costs.

“We are delighted that the JMF has once again recognised the value of our work”, he said, “Our efforts for reconciliation and tolerance continue apace and this generous support will help us maintain our pastoral care of individuals and couples throughout the island”.

This is the second time in three years that the Liverpool-based funder has supported NIMMA.

Mr Dunn said: “We have built a good relationship with JMF that augurs well for the months ahead. We have a peace of sorts in Northern Ireland at this time, but, sadly, we appear light years away from the reconciliation to which we aspire. There is still so much work to be done before we can fulfil our own mission statement of winding up the Association when NIMMA is no longer required.

Meanwhile, we will continue to work to advocate mixed marriage as a blueprint for a truly shared future in Northern Ireland, to challenge sectarianism and prejudice and to do all



that we can to foster reconciliation through example and education.

Mr Dunn stressed that the support of the John Moores Foundation was vital to NIMMA’s work of reconciliation.

“We in NIMMA know all the problems we face in this Province, how self-interest among political parties reinforces division and how mixed marriage is viewed with suspicion, disapproval and often contempt, particularly in those sections of our society which continue to suffer from social deprivation, but we remain confident that we can address all these redoubtable challenges with the help of funders like the JMF.

Mixed relationships are on the increase, it is now easier to make a mixed marriage – thanks to the work of NIMMA – and there is a substantial ‘mixed community’ out there that needs a strong voice to fight its corner”.

NIMMA partner supports association’s Irish grant bid

NIMMA’s application for core funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin has been reinforced by our partners in the charity umbrella group Healing through Remembering.

Writing in support of the grant, HTR Charity Director Kate Turner, whose late father was the Association’s Church of Ireland chaplain for forty years, said,

“I am writing in support of the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association (NIMMA) project offering pastoral care to mixed marriage couples.

As the only organisational offering support and accurate information in a sensitive and often ill-informed area of personal and family difficulty related to the conflict NIMMA plays a vital role. The understanding of the situation across the denominations regarding marriage, baptism and even funerals is unequalled.



They also help out with more secular issues such as housing and day to day family issues. Unfortunately the very nature of the work means that thanks and credit expressed to the organisation are often not able to be made public. Like HTR NIMMA aims for the day when its services are no longer required, unfortunately that day is not yet here.

NIMMA has been associated with Healing Through Remembering (HTR) since the early days of HTR. In particular NIMMA is currently a member of the Stories Network, a networking initiative of HTR. The network consists of several dozen organisations and individuals interested in how we gather stories from the conflict in order to help build peace”.

‘It’s All about Love’

The Observer

Michael and Shirley, pictured below, live in a quiet cul-de-sac in Glengormley on the northern outskirts of Belfast. It is a mixed area. They are an outgoing, friendly and fun-loving couple, now retired, who worked as psychiatric nurses in the community. They featured in NIMMA’s first book, ‘Mixed Emotions’ and just recently in a spread in the Observer Newspaper.

“No matter what, if you really love each other, that love will conquer all”, says Shirley when asked what advice she would give to couples contemplating making a mixed marriage. Michael echoes those sentiments, but says that hard talking has a major part to play in making any relationship, particularly a mixed one. “Talk to each other, talk to your peers, talk to everybody openly and honestly”, says Michael, “And that openness will pay dividends”.

Shirley was born in the tiny County Antrim seaport of Portballintrae and raised in Bushmills.

“My father would have regarded himself as a very loyal Protestant. He was member of the loyal orders, the Orange and the Black, as well as the Freemasons but, as he worked in the retail trade, he had many dealings with Roman Catholics and would have been tolerant enough of them in his own way.

Michael jokes that he was born on the ‘wrong’ side of the Newtownards Road in Belfast. His father ran a grocer’s shop across the road from St Mathew’s Roman Catholic church on the edge of a strongly Protestant area.

“A few Catholics lived on our side, but trade was very scarce during the marching month of July”, he says, “And redevelopment came at a good time in the early 1960s when we moved to another shop in the Clonard district of the city. We were happy there, my two brothers and I served on the altar in the local monastery while my father, who could be described a true social democrat, was well respected.

Michael married his first wife Theresa at 22. Sadly, Theresa died at just 37 years of age and Michael was left alone. Well, not quite alone as he says, “I always had good

friends and I remember at some of the darkest times before Theresa was so ill, Shirley and her sister would take me out for the evening and, better still, make sure I got home okay. They were true friends.”

Shirley remembers. “I was at Michael and Theresa’s wedding all those years before and also at her funeral. Michael came to my father’s funeral just six weeks after Theresa passed away and I appreciated his support despite his own pain of bereavement. We were there for each other”.

Michael and Shirley’s relationship developed over time

and they went on to get engaged, courtesy of a champagne and roses’ proposal on both knees after Michael had first asked Shirley’s mother for her daughter’s hand in marriage. His father had called it ‘observing the proprieties’.

“We were open with everyone once we had decided that we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together. That meant my family, Michael’s family and, importantly, Theresa’s

family”.

So it was that six months later, all three families were present when Church of Ireland rector Rev Oliver Thompson, assisted by Roman Catholic priest Fr Dan Whyte, celebrated their marriage in Shirley’s home church. Fr Dan was invited to share in the marriage by Rev Thompson.

“We are older and hopefully a little wiser than many young people who contemplate mixed marriage and our openness with each other and other people, which can probably be attributed to both our upbringing and our professional training stood us in good stead”, says Michael.

Neither Michael nor Shirley is complacent about how things have turned out.

“We have been lucky because of circumstances. Our age, our friendship, even our families and a shared sense of humour as psychiatric nurses must have helped us get through. We want other couples, maybe younger, maybe not, to see that, at the end of the day, a mixed marriage like any marriage is all about love and that”, as Michael says, ‘sometimes, there’s too much religion and not enough Christianity.’”





Adapting to change - as always

Each year I speak in financial terms of the challenging 12 months that has gone before as if that has become the norm for NIMMA. Sadly, it has.

I would much rather begin my report with an outline of how we continue, as the only provider of information and support about mixed marriage on this island – to make pastoral care of couples and individuals our priority. We do of course do that and there are all the inherent challenges that mixed marriage can still bring in this part of the world, but money remains a major obstacle to our work and securing it a major challenge as always.

Our funding partnership with the Esme Fairbairn Foundation came to an end after four years when it changed its application criteria to exclude small charities, such as NIMMA, with an annual income of less than £50,000. That could have been a devastating blow to us as their support represented around 70 per cent of our total annual income, but we met the challenge and managed to broaden our income base across a number of charitable trusts and foundations. There are, however, only so many charitable wells to which we can go, before they run dry.

So it was timely that better news came at Department of Foreign Affairs forum in Dublin recently, when the Department announced an extra one million Euros to support core funding for Northern Ireland groups. We have, of course, already applied for a share of this.

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, the total lack of political representation, 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 the continued suspension of the Northern Ireland Executive and fears that polarisation of our people will continue.

Recent history of disputes, parades and overt sectarian hatred show us that while Northern Ireland has a peace of sorts, it is a fragile one and one that is light years away 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.

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, education and even identity.

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.

We look forward to the 12 months ahead, to continuing to provide the very best services we can for the people who need us most, to lobbying for greater availability of shared social housing and integrated education, the publication of our book about couples that left Northern Ireland - perhaps even to seeking out more funding channels to make all of that possible.



It would be very remiss of me not to say a few words about the closure of our Bryson House office. The building, seen above, is currently up for sale and we have been advised that we will have to vacate by the end of March next year. It's a surprise to say the least after nearly 25 years tenancy, but we will have adapt to this major change, as we always do, and I'll keep you posted about any developments.

Ken